

## Discerning a Religious Vocation

by

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One of the words used most often by vocation directors is “discernment.” Discernment is central to the process of choosing religious life. In fact, discernment should be a major component of the life of any disciple of Jesus. It is crucial for a healthy spiritual life. But what do we mean by discernment?

First of all, it is important to distinguish between “discerning” and “deciding.” Deciding is part and parcel of our lives. We make multiple decisions every day: what to eat, what to wear, what to watch on television. The decisions we make are based on what is appropriate for a particular moment. Sometimes our decisions are based on personal preference. But decision-making is a process that is largely about actively choosing for ourselves what is needed or wanted in a given situation.

Discernment, on the other hand, is far more than that. Discernment is as much about listening as it is about choosing and acting. In the process of discernment, we listen for the voice of God in order to live in accordance with His will for us. And, as we know, God’s voice usually doesn’t come to us as a booming voice from Heaven. We have to listen carefully.

So, for those who are discerning a religious vocation, how do we listen to God? How do we know if God is calling us to serve as a priest, brother, sister, or lay minister? What follows is a few practices we can incorporate into our daily lives to become more discerning people.

- **Silence.** How often do we give ourselves the gift of a few moments of silence? Is it possible that each day, we can take a few minutes to sit still, clear our thoughts, and simply be present to God? Often our prayers take the form of telling God what we think should be done...and what usually happens is the only voice we hear is our own. But maintaining a stance of silent openness to the presence of God in our moments of quiet can help us to become better aware of His presence throughout the rest of the day.
- **Lectio Divina.** *Lectio Divina* is an ancient prayer form that means “holy reading.” The practice of *lectio* is nothing more than sitting down for a set period of time each day (perhaps fifteen minutes) and asking the Holy Spirit to guide us as we slowly and prayerfully read the Scripture. If a word or phrase touches our heart, we sit with it, slowly repeating it in our heart like a mantra. During this time, we adore the presence of God in His Holy Word. If we feel compelled to speak to God about what we have read, we do so; otherwise, we simply allow the words to sink into our soul. When it feels natural to continue, we begin to read again. How much we read isn’t important. (I try to use the daily Gospel from Mass during my fifteen minutes of *lectio* each day, and I often don’t go beyond

the first sentence or two.) *Lectio* helps us to develop hearts that truly listen to God in a spirit of prayerful discernment.

- **Spiritual Direction.** When we are discerning a religious vocation, it is important to find a spiritual director with whom we can meet periodically (usually monthly) and discuss how our spiritual lives are going. It is a confidential meeting that focuses on what is happening in our hearts. To truly discern God's call, we need to seek feedback from someone who is trained in spirituality and who can give us encouragement and support. There are many priests, sisters, brothers, and lay-people who serve as spiritual directors. If you don't know of any, contact a vocation director. They usually know of spiritual directors who are willing to work with persons in discernment.
- **Journaling.** For some, keeping a journal is an excellent way to reflect on where we are headed. Over time, as we explore our thoughts and dreams, we begin to get a sense of the rhythms and pattern of our life. And we get a better sense of what might be our ultimate vocation.
- **Vocation retreats.** Various religious orders sponsor vocation retreats (sometimes called "come and see" weekends). These retreats provide an opportunity to meet vocation directors, ask questions, and take time for prayer and reflection. Even if your schedule doesn't permit you to go on the regular "come and see" weekend, it is still possible to contact the vocation director of a particular community and make a private retreat. Most priests, brothers, and sisters are more than willing to take some time to meet with a person who is visiting their community to discern a vocation.
- **Parish Involvement.** One of the most valuable ways to discern a vocation is to get actively involved in a local faith community. Whether it is a Just Faith group, a Bible study, liturgical service, young adult ministry, or religious education, there are many opportunities to share our faith with others. By interacting with our brothers and sisters in Christ, we get a better sense of how we might be called to serve others. What's more, we'll find persons who will support us as we continue our discernment.

Discernment is a process that takes time and patience. It is also a process that never really ends. Throughout our lives, we must continue to cultivate a spirit of prayerful listening if we are truly to follow Christ as his disciples. But the more we discern, the better we become at doing it, and the more we grow in the knowledge that we are never alone as we journey through life.