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Discerning divine will is an adventure for everyone

God talks to us, to every one of us. He is trying to communicate with us all the time.

Throughout the Bible, God communicates to groups of people and to individuals. Sometimes this is done through Jesus, sometimes through the Holy Spirit, sometimes through angels, sometimes through disciples, sometimes through dreams. While we should all know that God constantly sends us messages, we are all like Gideon in the Old Testament, who asked the question, "God, how do I know it's you?"

Hearing God's voice, discerning His will, can be a complicated matter. I mentioned in my last column that God's will is objective in the sense that we should all follow God's commandments, the Bible and the teachings of the Church. In this column, I want to explain just a few basic principles of the subjective part of God's will for us, the direction from Him that is unique to each one of us.

First of all, God's will for our lives is never going to go against the Bible or the teachings of the Church. Except where a properly formed conscience would indicate otherwise, God's will is also not going to go against civil authority. So that red traffic light is intended by God just for



you, my friend.

Second, we need to develop a contemplative approach to life. This doesn't mean we should all retreat to a cave. It means that all of us should pay very close attention to everything that happens in our lives. Our spiritual antenna should always be functioning, seeking to detect if God is revealing His will for us in our dreams, in events that happen, in things people say, even in thoughts that seem to randomly appear in our heads.

If we pay attention to all these things, we begin to see patterns, and as patterns develop, we ask Gideon's question, "Is that you, God?" We then begin to pray for discernment, asking God to help us identify whether this pattern of events is a sign of His direction for our lives.

As Bishop Slattery has often said, "God initiates, then we respond." Discerning God's will, then, may require patience, as we wait for Him to lead the way. In my own life, for example, I had an intense experience in 1990 of sensing the anguish of the poor, the oppressed, the abused people of the world. For a long time, I wondered what this experience meant for me personally. In the summer of 2000, when Bishop Slattery asked me to be the executive director of our Catholic Charities, my waiting was over.

Because our own will can interfere with what God wants, it

is important to pay special attention to developments over which we have no control. There are obviously a place and time for using our intellect, but sometimes we just have to let God decide for us. For example, in the Old Testament, Abraham and Lot were working the same land, and they decided to split up. Abraham allowed Lot's choice to reveal God's plan for Abraham, saying, "If you prefer the left, I will go to the right; if you prefer the right, I will go to the left."

Another principle is that the thing you least want to do is often what God asks you to do. As Jesus told Peter, "Someone is going to put a belt around your waist and take you where you don't want to go." The Bible is full of stories about people who were taken way out of their comfort zone, and it shouldn't be any different for the rest of us.

The bottom line to all this is believing that God knows better than we do what is best for us and surrendering to His will for our lives. This is the most important decision in human life. God is full of surprises. He will never let our life be boring. With Him in control and sustaining us by His grace, life becomes an exciting adventure.

Our closing verse is from Psalm 139: "Your eyes foresaw all my actions; in your book all are written down; my days were shaped, before one came to be."