

**DISCERNMENT OF GOD'S WILL:**  
*SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES*

**By Deacon Tim Sullivan**



## 1. The Promise of Christian Life

This is a series on discerning God's will, not a study that would be completely comprehensive, but one which would get people thinking in a constructive, positive way about what God's will for each of us might be and offering some general principles of discernment. The study will focus on key scriptures and some insights from reliable sources. The goal is that we will have a better sense of how God communicates to us and will be guided to additional resources as we work out the specifics of God's will for ourselves.

Many people do not understand that God communicates to each of us all the time. I have had people tell me that God is too busy to worry about them. God is not too busy to be thinking of you every moment of your life!

Just a few years ago, a group of people in a small town in upstate New York began meeting once a week for nine months to learn and utilize the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius Loyola. As a result of this experience, the members of this group became on fire with their faith. They realized that God was communicating to them in a personal way, that His communication was loving and constant and that the Spiritual Exercises provided very helpful guidance in discerning what God was telling them. Their faith blossomed tremendously as they discovered the adventures that God had prepared for them.

We will begin by encouraging you to read several scriptural passages. It is very important that you read these passages slowly, taking time to meditate on each phrase. These words from the Bible describe for us the potential of our Christian life, a life that so many of us don't fully realize is available to us.

Ephesians 1:16-20

Therefore, I, too, hearing of your faith in the Lord Jesus and of your love for all the holy ones, do not cease giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, **may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation resulting in knowledge of him**. May the eyes of [your] hearts be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are **the riches of glory** in his inheritance among the holy ones, and what is **the surpassing greatness of his power** for us who believe, in accord with the exercise of his great might, which he worked in Christ, raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens...

Have we received a spirit of wisdom and revelation giving us a comprehensive knowledge of God? Have we experienced the riches of His glory and the surpassing greatness of His power? Our study is aimed at helping us find such riches and power.

Colossians 1:9-12

Therefore, from the day we heard this, we do not cease praying for you and asking **that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding** to live in a manner worthy of the Lord, so as to be fully pleasing, in every good work bearing fruit and growing in the knowledge of God, **strengthened with every power**, in accord with his glorious might, for all endurance and patience, with joy giving thanks to the Father, **who has made you fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light.**

Similar to the first passage from the Letter to the Ephesians, the language above from St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians describes in a slightly different manner the kind of Christian life that is available to us.

### **PSALM 139**

LORD, you have probed me, you know me:  
you know when I sit and stand;  
you understand my thoughts from afar.

You sift through my travels and my rest;  
with all my ways you are familiar.

Even before a word is on my tongue,  
LORD, you know it all.

Behind and before you encircle me  
and rest your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,  
far too lofty for me to reach.

Where can I go from your spirit?  
From your presence, where can I flee?

If I ascend to the heavens, you are there;  
if I lie down in Sheol, there you are.

If I take the wings of dawn  
and dwell beyond the sea,

Even there your hand guides me,  
your right hand holds me fast.

If I say, "Surely darkness shall hide me,  
and night shall be my light"—

Darkness is not dark for you,  
and night shines as the day.  
Darkness and light are but one.

You formed my inmost being;  
you knit me in my mother's womb.

I praise you, because I am wonderfully made;  
wonderful are your works!  
My very self you know.

My bones are not hidden from you,  
When I was being made in secret,  
fashioned in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes saw me unformed;  
in your book all are written down;  
my days were shaped, before one came to be.

Each of us was created for a special purpose by God. It's not just a cliché to say that God has a plan for every one of us. It's in the Bible, in Psalm 139. The secret to life is believing that the meaning and purpose of our lives is planned before our birth by God, finding out the details of that meaning and purpose and then having the courage to trust God by obediently living out His will for each of our lives.

Wisdom 9:9-11

Now with you is Wisdom, who knows your works and was present when you made the world; who understands what is pleasing in your eyes and what is conformable with your commands. Send her forth from your holy heavens and from your glorious throne dispatch her that she may be with me and work with me, that I may know what is pleasing to you. For she knows and understands all things, and will guide me prudently in my affairs and safeguard me by her glory...

This passage from the Book of Wisdom contains a prayer that we will receive the spiritual wisdom referred to in the passages from Ephesians and Colossians, above.

## 2. How God Speaks

Now we'll look at a few Bible passages that shed light on how exactly God communicates to us mortals.

Deuteronomy 30:10-14

...because you will obey the voice of the LORD, your God, keeping the commandments and statutes that are written in this book of the law, when you return to the LORD, your God, with your whole heart and your whole being. For this command which I am giving you today is not too wondrous or remote for you. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who will go up to the heavens to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may do it?" Nor is it across the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross the sea to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may do it?" No, it is something very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it.

In our attempts to discern God's will, we do not have to be impatient or anxious. We just need to be trusting and attentive. God knows our weakness. He knows the limits of our perception and our reasoning. Discerning His will requires openness, stillness and sincerity, not mental and emotional grinding.

1 Kings 19:11-13

There was a strong and violent wind rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the LORD—but the LORD was not in the wind; after the wind, an earthquake—but the LORD was not in the earthquake; after the earthquake, fire—but the LORD was not in the fire; after the fire, there was a tiny, whispering sound. When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. A voice said to him, "Why are you here, Elijah?"

God might use something dramatic to get our attention and communicate to us, but we would be unwise to always be looking for lightning and thunder. God can use any means He wants to. We might want Him to be more emphatic, to provide perfect and easy clarity, but He uses methods that will help us grow in our trust in and dependence on Him.

Genesis 13:8-9 So Abram said to Lot: "Let there be no strife between you and me, or between your herders and my herders, for we are kindred. Is not the whole land available? Please separate from me. If you prefer the left, I will go to the right; if you prefer the right, I will go to the left."

What's this all about? Abram and Lot and their families were both flourishing, to the

point that they were getting in each other's way. So they decided to split up. It's interesting that Abram does not get out a sheet of paper and analyze the situation by considering the relative strengths, weaknesses and preferences of the two families. Abram simply wants to do God's will, and he lets Lot's decision determine what God's will is for Abram and his family.

In discerning God's will, we are so often tempted to use our brain to come up with a decision which we are comfortable with and then use a process of rationalization to conclude that this must be God's will. We can so easily talk ourselves into doing something that we want to do and somehow find God's blessing of our decision. The process Abram used to decide where he and his family would go took his brain, his ability to analyze the situation, out of the process.

The apostles followed a similar process in choosing a successor for Judas. As described in Acts 1, they proposed Joseph and Matthias, then prayed and chose lots, and the lot fell to Matthias.

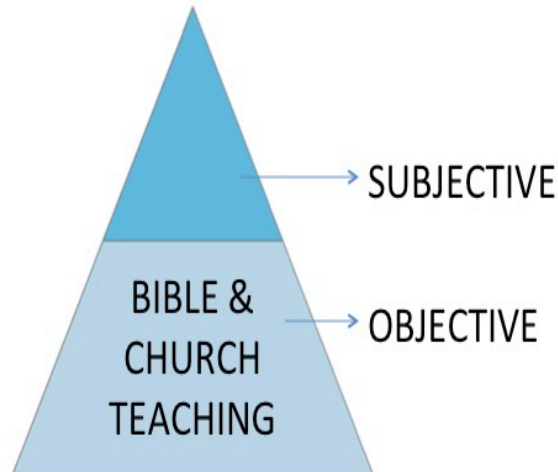
I'm not saying that we don't use reason in making decisions. However, we need to examine ourselves carefully to make sure that we're truly open to what God wants and not imposing our will on God. There are some situations in which, like Abram and the apostles, we might follow a neutral, objective process in determining what God wants for us. God might reveal His will for us through another person or through circumstances over which we have little if any control.

I attended a retreat once at which there were 11 other persons in attendance. At the beginning of the retreat, the primary spiritual director, Fr. John, asked that one of 7 attendees who had selected him as spiritual director agree to obtain spiritual direction from his assistant, Kathy. I had signed up for the retreat based entirely on the reputation of Fr. John. However, I thought of the passage about Abram and Lot. I said to myself that if no one else switched to Kathy, I would. Well, no one else switched, so I did, and Kathy turned out to have a special sensitivity to the issues which developed for me during the retreat. She was a great gift. Abram's process worked.

### 3. God's Will in Simple Terms

What is a basic way to understand the elements of God's will for each Catholic? Well, there is an objective dimension of God's will, which is binding on all Catholics, and a subjective dimension, which is unique to each of us. Here is a diagram which illustrates the basic components of God's will for us.

# GOD'S WILL



The objective dimension of God's will consists of the authoritative teachings of the Catholic Church and the Bible. These 2 sources make up the foundation of God's will for each of us. God is never going to ask any of us to disobey the teachings of the Church or the Bible. We all have that in common. Obeying the objective sources of God's will, rather than being a burden, frees us to discern and obey the subjective aspects of God's will for us.

So, in addition to following Church teaching and the Bible, what is God's will for each of us? What does He want each of us to do that is unique to our lives? Whom does He want us to serve?

With respect to the subjective dimension of God's will, the process is completely different. Unlike discernment of the objective dimension of God's will, discernment of the subjective dimension requires openness and flexibility. We have to remain humble. We must maintain a spirit of surrender. But when it comes to what God might ask us to do subjectively, we have to give Him a full deck, a full keyboard. He might want us to do something quite conventional. He might want us to do something that is frighteningly unconventional. He might ask us to give a speech. But then again, in the same setting, He might want us to serve beverages and clean the bathrooms. It shouldn't matter, as long as we are faithful to His will for us in every situation.

Next, we'll look at how to break down the subjective element of God's will for us in terms of content and timing. After that, we'll focus more attention on how God communicates His subjective will to each of us.

#### 4. God's Will: the Importance of Timing

In the last section we looked at the objective and subjective elements of God's will for each of us. Now we will look at the what and the when, the content of God's will and the timing of each action God wants us to take.

When we think of God's will for our lives, most of us think exclusively in terms of content. We focus solely on what God wants us to do. However, the timing is just as important as the content. So we'll focus first on timing.

Because we're only human, we have to have some way of putting in human terms the way God relates to us. So, with respect to God's timing, a man with great spiritual wisdom and experience once told me, "It's as if God is always testing us, to see if He can trust us. And one of His favorite questions is, 'Are you willing to wait?'"

So, before we get the content of God's message, we may have to be very patient. We'll look at this in more detail later, but it's important to know that we have to wait for God to lead, and then we follow. And God might ask us to wait a lot longer than we would prefer. He might even give us a small piece of the content to see if we will then go charging off, when He really wants us to wait longer to get more of the details of His plan.

Even after we have the details, we might need to wait before we start the implementation. Again, timing is just as critical as the content. When does God want us to start? And for how long does He want us to act on a specific element of His will? Ten minutes? Ten years? We have to leave the timing completely up to Him.

I had a powerful experience in September of 1990 when, in something of a mystical experience, I heard deep in my soul the anguished, shrill cry of the poor. In August of 2000, my bishop called me to his office, for a reason completely unknown to me. When I entered his office, I knew before he said a word that he was going to ask me to be the Executive Director of our diocesan Catholic Charities. I thought to myself, "I've been waiting 10 years to see how God wanted me to respond to that cry I heard in 1990. Now I know."

Of course, we can't procrastinate, either. The point is that we have to pray as much for God's timing as we do for the content. And we have to be open to God's timing, not ours.



I came up with this saying, “Every yellow light is just for you.” Here’s what it means. Say you’re late for work. You’re approaching a busy intersection. The light turns yellow. You’re far enough away that you know if you keep going the light will be red when you get to the intersection. But you’re late, so you hit the accelerator and zip through the intersection. You glance around to see if there are any traffic cops, you don’t see any, and you’re relieved. You made it. You may not be late for work after all.

Well, here’s the point. What if by blasting through the intersection, you are on time for work but you are 45 seconds ahead of where God wanted you to be and you miss an opportunity that He set up just for you? I’m not talking so much here about an absolute rule so much as the attitude we should have. We should trust that God has orchestrated every detail of our lives, including the timing, and so we should trust that God is in charge even of the timing of the events that take place in our lives.

That’s enough on the subject of timing. Next week we’ll focus on content.

## 5. God’s Will: the Substantive Content

In the previous section we looked at timing issues relating to God’s will for each of us. Now we will focus on the content, what God wants us to do that is subjective and unique for each of us.

I didn’t know until I was 40 years old that God is communicating His will to each of us all the time. God, through the Holy Spirit, is a micro-manager. As I have previously mentioned, sometimes people tell me that God is too busy to worry about the little details of their life. I tell them that they’re wrong. The Bible says that God counts the hairs on our head. He is in control of every aspect of our existence, and His love is so great, so real, that no detail is too small for Him.

What we’re talking about here is contemplation. Contemplation does not mean moving to a cave or a hut in the forest. It simply means being attentive to all that is happening in our lives, random thoughts, dreams, events, things people say, reading the Bible, and so on, all the time wondering and asking, “God, is that You?”

Here’s a definition of contemplation by the renowned spiritual writer, Thomas Merton:

“Contemplation...is awakening, enlightenment and the amazing intuitive grasp by which love gains certitude of God’s creative and dynamic intervention in our daily life.”

Here’s another statement, again from Merton, which captures quite poetically the reality of God’s constant communication to each of us:

“For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because men are not prepared to receive them: for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love...We must learn to realize that the love of God seeks us in every situation, and seeks our good.”

In addition to Merton, we will look at some principles from the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola.

## 6. The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius

In the last section, we read a description of “contemplation” from Thomas Merton. Merton refers to contemplation as the process for being attentive to God’s communication to each of us, which is virtually constant.

A comprehensive process for discerning God’s will can be found in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. St. Ignatius developed a system for the discernment of spirits, to help us discern what is coming from God and what is not. St. Ignatius found that a communication from God gives us a sense of lightness and peace, which St. Ignatius called “consolation.” On the contrary, if something that prompts us to act in a specific way is accompanied by a heaviness, a burdensomeness, St. Ignatius referred to this as “desolation” and not likely from God. Of course, the full Spiritual Exercises are much more detailed and thorough.

St. Ignatius, like Merton, emphasized that God is frequently communicating His will to each of us. As described by Fr. David Fleming, S. J., an expert in the Spiritual Exercises:

God is an active God. He is ever at work in people’s lives, inviting, directing, guiding, proposing, suggesting. This understanding of God animates Ignatian spirituality and gives it its internal cohesion. The techniques and practices associated with Ignatian spirituality are all designed to help us be more attentive to this active God. Ignatian spirituality can be described as an active attentiveness to God joined with a prompt responsiveness to his leading.

The full Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius occupy 30 days. There are resources to help people apply the Spiritual Exercises in a less intense manner, as most people are unable to set aside an entire month to go through the Exercises. Most Jesuit retreat centers around the world, including the United States, offer abbreviated silent retreats which utilize the Spiritual Exercises in a modified format, presented over 3 days, 5 days, 7 days or another reduced time period.

To promote an individual's spiritual growth, I would recommend an Ignatian retreat more than any other resource. For those who are uncomfortable with the requirement of silence, the principle underlying the requirement is that silence magnifies God's voice. I can tell you from my personal experience that this principle works. Don't let the idea of silence keep you from participating.

## 7. Discernment: An Example

Here's an example of how discernment of God's will works in a specific situation. The whole thing worked out well, and there was clear affirmation from God that the discernment was on target, so I am confident in sharing it with you. I'll keep it as short as I can, leaving out many details.

In October of 2007, I was having lunch with a co-worker at Catholic Charities in Oklahoma and a person from a local tv station to talk about promoting our efforts to collect coats for the winter to distribute to the poor. The tv person, a young woman, spoke at length about growing up in a small town. At one point, I said, "If I weren't running Catholic Charities, I'd like to do development work in a small town or rural area." Immediately after I said this, it was as if I heard a voice say, "Why don't you?" This shook me up. I said, internally, "Is that You, Lord?"

I went to Mass that evening, then from there went to a chapel at a local hospital that had Eucharistic Adoration around the clock. It seemed very clear that God wanted me to resign my position as Executive Director of Catholic Charities. This was not logical for a number of reasons. However, the next day I resigned. I had no idea what I would do next.

I started looking for a job. Interestingly, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference was looking for a new Executive Director. I applied and was a finalist for that position. It seemed like a perfect fit based upon the conversation that precipitated my resignation.

At lunch one day, a friend told me, "The door that opens may not be the one you end up walking through." Something told me that this principle would apply in my case.

I had also applied for a position as Executive Director of a regional Catholic Charities program in Wayne County, New York, which is located in the Finger Lakes area of upstate New York. I interviewed there, was offered a position and, in consultation with my wife, I accepted that offer before the final interview with the National Catholic Rural Life Conference.

On the day I was to leave to drive to New York, I had serious car trouble. This forced me to take the car in for servicing. After I checked in with the service advisor, I headed for the waiting area. I prayed, "Lord, I thought you wanted me to take this job in New York.

If this car trouble is a sign that I'm wrong, that I'm supposed to go somewhere else, please let me know. We're running out of time."

The waiting area had a long row of chairs with a coffee pot at one end and a tv at the other end. The room was empty, except for one elderly man sitting in the middle of the row of chairs. I looked at him and could hardly believe what I saw. He was wearing a black sweatshirt. On the front of the sweatshirt, in big white letters, were the words, "Finger Lakes New York."

It's hard to express how much this meant to me. God virtually never makes discernment a crystal clear process. He wants there to be some level of doubt which leaves room for us to have even greater trust in Him. You couldn't begin to calculate the odds that this man wearing a Finger Lakes sweatshirt would be sitting in the car dealer waiting room at just that moment. Very few people in Oklahoma have ever heard of the Finger Lakes.

## 8. Discernment and the Holy Spirit

The Bible is filled with examples of God speaking to people, to Adam, to Moses, to Abraham, to the prophets of the Old Testament, and so on. In the Acts of the Apostles, we have numerous examples of the Holy Spirit giving specific instructions to the disciples in the earliest days of the Church.

In Chapter 8 of Acts of the Apostles, Philip is directed by an angel to get on the road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza. So Philip does so. On the road, in a chariot, was an Ethiopian eunuch, reading the words of Isaiah, the prophet. In verse 29, we read that "The Spirit said to Philip, 'Go and join up with that chariot.'" Philip follows the Holy Spirit's instructions, ministers to the eunuch and baptizes him. After the Baptism, the Bible says, at verse 39, as follows: "When they came out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, but continued on his way rejoicing.

In Acts 10, Peter has a dramatic vision involving Gentiles. When he awakens, it says in verse 19: "As Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said [to him], 'There are three men here looking for you.'" Peter meets with the men, and, as he explained to other disciples in Acts 11:12, "The Spirit told me to accompany them without discriminating."

In Acts, Chapter 13, there is a description of a meeting of the church in Antioch, including Barnabas and Paul. At verse 2, the Bible states: "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'"

The point of these examples from scripture is that the Holy Spirit is active, directing the evangelization efforts of the disciples in a very concrete way. However, the text of the Acts of the Apostles does not tell us **how** the Holy Spirit communicated to the disciples. Did they actually hear words? Did thoughts attributed to the Holy Spirit just enter their brains? How did they know it was the Holy Spirit and not their imagination? We don't know.

Here's a statement about the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola that addresses the difficulty of discernment:

“However, Ignatius was not so naïve as to think that all of our thoughts, feelings, and desires were caused by the Holy Spirit. Some indeed are holy desires that come from God, while others come from other sources – negative spirits ultimately from what he called “The Enemy of our Human Nature.” So, the trick is to figure out which of our inner desires, thoughts, and feelings are from God, and which are not. To help us with this, Ignatius over time developed his rules or guidelines for the discernment of spirits.”

If you're reading this, the Holy Spirit speaks to you, too. Just like the early disciples, you just need to know when the message is coming from the Holy Spirit and how to decipher the message. As previously mentioned, the best way to do this is go on an Ignatian retreat in which the rules of Ignatius for the discernment of spirits will be explained. Books written on this subject by Fr. Timothy Gallagher are also an excellent resource.

## 9. The Role of Silence

To listen to God, to hear His voice, it is extremely helpful to be silent, silent in the sense of there being absolute quiet, but also silent in the sense of being still, of being content to simply be in God's presence without having conscious thoughts. The goal is to be receptive and not to interfere with God's communication with our own activity.

Retreats which employ the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius are silent retreats. The principle is that silence magnifies God's voice. This principle is true. It works. A priest friend who has spent a lot of time in Rome reports that there is a church in Rome on which can be found the following inscription, in Latin: “Silence is the mother of prayer.”

Maintaining silence likes this, at least for most of us, takes practice. It requires that we learn to shift our mentality away from doing, from achieving, to simply being, to empty our mind so that it is completely open to what God wants to communicate to us.

I have found that it helps to be in a natural setting, which is not only quiet but is also less likely to involve any interruption. It also helps to be physically comfortable, with the goal of being physically still for an extended period of time.

In Luke 5:15-16, we read: “The report about him [Jesus] spread all the more, and great crowds assembled to listen to him and to be cured of their ailments, but he would withdraw to deserted places to pray.”

I have also found that Mary, our Blessed Mother, can be a great asset in helping us be still. To enlist her assistance, I recommend meditating on the following passage from Psalm 131:

“Lord, my heart is not proud;  
nor are my eyes haughty.  
I do not busy myself with great matters,  
With things too sublime for me.  
Rather, I have stilled my soul,  
hushed it like a weaned child.  
Like a weaned child on its mother’s knee,  
so is my soul within me.”

As part of this meditation, try to be on Mary’s lap, so to speak, try to be with her, like a weaned child, desiring nothing, being completely content to just be in her presence. She will bring Jesus to you. She will help you hear and discern God’s will for you.

In this regard, I strongly encourage you to use the following prayer, which can be found on the website of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Saint-Hyacinthe:

#### Our Lady of Silence

Oh! beloved Mother,  
I come to you, tonight,  
Seeking for rest.  
To find, in silence, the serenity  
For which my heart thirsts.  
After the weariness of the day,  
And the fever of action,  
I come to you, Our Lady!

Haven of silence  
Fountain of peace,  
Abyss of gentleness!  
I come to you, to renew my soul  
To forget my cares,

To flee from speech  
And to escape from the hectic life  
Of which, tonight, I am weary.

I come to you, Our Lady  
Teacher of silence and of shaded retreats,  
Of wisdom and of joy, I come to You!  
I want but one thing:  
To remain in your sight,  
To think of You, Virgin of silence.  
And if I am too broken to think,  
And too weary to pray,  
Too wounded even to smile,  
To simply be there at your feet,  
In your silence.  
To savour your silence, your calm,  
To plunge into it, to quench my thirst in it!

To be at your feet, O Mary!  
To love you with all my heart,  
Without words, without discourses,  
In silence!  
Oh! Our Lady, I come to you.  
May my heart contemplate  
In your silence  
The silence of adoration!

## 10. Surrender

To discern and obey the will of God, each of us needs to surrender, which is an action but also an attitude. We must be like Mary, the Mother of God, who said “May it be done unto me according to your word.” This is not a one-time event but a way of life.

Here is a quote from a commentary on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius:

We must approach the decision in question with an open mind and an open heart. We cannot find God’s will for us if we enter into the decision-making process with a pre-conceived outcome based on our self-will, biases, and what Ignatius calls “attachments,” that is, an attitude of “I already have my mind made up, so don’t confuse me with the facts!” “Attachments” refer to areas in our lives where we limit freedom and put conditions on a decision. An example could be: “I’ll go to college anywhere *as long as* it’s within a day’s drive of my parents’ home.”

Thomas Merton has an even stronger way of expressing this:

“Desire not to be exalted but only to be abased, not to be great but only little in your own eyes and the eyes of the world: for the only way to enter into that joy is to dwindle down to a vanishing point and become absorbed in God through the center of your own nothingness. The only way to possess His greatness is to pass through the needle’s eye of your own absolute nothingness.”

As John the Baptist said, “He [Jesus] must increase; I must decrease.” The goal is to be completely taken over by the will of God. Merton, again, describes those who are able to completely surrender to God’s will:

“Less and less conscious of themselves, they finally cease to be aware of themselves doing things, and gradually God begins to do all that they do, in them and for them, at least in the sense that the habit of His love has become second nature to them and informs all that they do with His likeness.”

In a powerful passage at 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, St. Paul describes how the process of becoming nothing, becoming weak, makes room for God’s power to work in and through us:

7b Therefore, that I might not become too elated, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated.  
8 Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, 9 but he said to me, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”**  
I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. 10 Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; **for when I am weak, then I am strong.**

For most of us, we have to learn to surrender in bits at a time. Gradually, our trust in God grows and grows, and we ask for God to reveal His will in even minor matters. And God answers. The key is to remember to ask, with an attitude of expectation followed by an attentiveness to how God might respond.

## 11. Humility

While I have separated the principles of surrender, humility and detachment into 3 separate sections, they obviously have much in common. In this installment, we’ll focus on humility. Next, we’ll look at detachment.



It might seem difficult to say, “I’m nothing, absolutely nothing, without God.” Yet, as we mature spiritually, we realize that every breath of ours is a gift from God. We are truly helpless without Him.

In his beautiful book, *Beginning to Pray*, Anthony Bloom instructs us that prayer starts with complete humility. We must, he writes, become like Bartimeus, the blind beggar in the gospels. Imagine yourself blind, begging by the side of a road. The day is hot, dusty. People walk by and either ignore or heckle you. Then you hear that Jesus is passing by. You don’t know him, but from what you have heard, you believe that he is the only person on the face of the earth who can heal you. So, letting go of any sense of propriety or self-respect, you call out, “Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!” You know that if Jesus gets past you, the rest of your days will be sheer misery. You cry out from total desperation. This is the attitude we must have for prayer and for discernment.

There is also the story of the pupil who goes to the master to learn how to discover God. The master takes the neophyte down to a stream, holds his head under water until the student thinks he will surely drown and then, at the last second, pulls the pupil’s head out of the water. The master says, “As much as you desire to breathe at this very moment, that is how much you must desire God.”

Here are a couple of quotes on humility from Thomas Merton:

“If you were truly humble you would not bother about yourself at all. Why should you? You should only be concerned with God and with His will and with the objective order of things and values as they are, and not as your selfishness wants them to be.”

“For a humble man is not afraid of failure. In fact, he is not afraid of anything, even of himself, since perfect humility implies perfect confidence in the power of God, before Whom no other power has any meaning and for Whom there is no such thing as an obstacle.”

In his book, *Tales of Saint Francis*, Murray Bodo tells us St. Francis’ definition of perfect joy. St. Francis tells Brother Leo that when they come to the friary on a cold, snowy night when they are wet to the bone and weak with hunger, and they pound on the door and Brother Porter refuses to let them in, the endurance of Brother Porter’s rejection without becoming angry but instead accepting in humility and love that God has allowed them to be refused admission to the friary, that is perfect joy.

## 12. Detachment

If we truly want to be open to God's will for our lives, we need to give God a full deck, a full keyboard, so to speak. This means we must be detached from our own wants, our own desires, our own priorities and preferences. Here is how Fr. David Fleming has expressed the need for detachment, based upon the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius:

“Jesus challenges the [rich] young man—and us—to be free of what we claim as our own. This may be our material or worldly possessions. It may be our ideas and our desires. God calls us to be free of these things, claiming them as our own. Will we offer them to God and to God's shaping and forming and using them? He looks on us with love. What more can we do to respond to this love?”

With respect to detachment, Thomas Merton offers this perspective:

“You will never be able to have perfect interior peace and recollection unless you are detached even from the desire of peace and recollection. You will never be able to pray perfectly until you are detached from the pleasure of prayer...If you give up all these desires and seek one thing only, God's will, He will give you recollection and peace in the middle of labor and conflict and trial.”

St. Paul describes his view of detachment in his Letter to the Philippians 4:10-13:

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that now at last you revived your concern for me. You were, of course, concerned about me but lacked an opportunity. Not that I say this because of need, for I have learned, in whatever situation I find myself, to be self-sufficient. I know indeed how to live in humble circumstances; I know also how to live with abundance. In every circumstance and **in all things I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of living in abundance and of being in need.** I have the strength for everything through him who empowers me.

This is the attitude we must have if we wish to do God's will in every circumstance. We have to be free to be in the front of the room giving a presentation, seated in the middle of the room listening to the presentation, or cleaning the floors in the bathroom as our way of supporting the presentation. We have to be open to serving the poor in their own homes or ministering to the rich at the country club. God chooses the content and the circumstances, not us.

## 13. Dreams

We'll close our discussion of discernment of God's will with some information about dreams.

My experience, to generalize, is that there are basically two kinds of dreams. One variety does not seem to have much significance and does not stay in our memory for any length of time at all. I pretty much disregard those.

Then there's the second kind of dream. These have a much different quality than the first type. When we wake up after having the second category of dream, we just seem to know intuitively that the dream had some important meaning, though we may not have the foggiest idea what the meaning might be. And the second type of dream can stay in our memory for a long time. This type of dream should be recorded in a journal.

Here are a few comments about dream interpretation. Generally speaking, dreams are benevolent, even if they involve conflict that may or may not be resolved. Even if they serve as a warning, they serve a useful purpose. There are dreams that are meant to guide us, if we just knew how to interpret them.

With respect to interpretation, it's important to know that just about everything in a dream is symbolic. A person whom we know that appears in a dream most likely symbolizes something. Colors can have meaning. So the dream should not in most cases be taken literally.

The Bible is full of dreams, many of which have critical importance, especially if we include visions and conversations with angels. You might study Abraham's dream in Genesis 15. The Lord tells Aaron and Miriam in Numbers 12:6, "Now listen to the words of the Lord: 'Should there be a prophet among you, in visions will I reveal myself to him, in dreams I will speak to him.'"

Joseph of the Old Testament, in Genesis 37 to 41 had dreams and interpreted the dreams of others. In Joel 3:1, we are told, "Then afterward I will pour out my spirit upon all mankind. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your old men shall dream dreams." I refer you also to Solomon (1 Kings 3), Daniel (Chapters 2 and 7) and, of course, Joseph, the husband of Mary (Matthew, Chapters 1 and 2).

Here's our closing verse, from Psalm 16:7: "I bless Yahweh, who is my counselor; even at night my heart instructs me."

## 14. Conclusion

I hope this brief commentary on discernment of God's will is helpful to you. As I have stated, I strongly recommend as a resource a silent retreat utilizing the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius. Books on the Spiritual Exercises by Fr. Timothy Gallagher are a reliable guide.

It would also be helpful to have a spiritual director, a consistent listener who can help you figure out what God might be telling you. A good spiritual director can also recommend books and other resources to help you mature spiritually.

I once attended a retreat in New York City presented by Fr. Timothy Gallagher. At the conclusion of the retreat, I encouraged Fr. Gallagher to come to the area of upstate New York where I lived. "So many people don't know that God is communicating to them all the time!" I exclaimed, "You need to tell them that!." He looked at me and said, clearly and a bit forcefully, "That's what you're for."

I know this short treatise is only a modest summary of the principles of spiritual discernment. I could say a lot more about my personal experiences. However, I will close by saying that for the last 28 years I have experienced God's communication to me in a whole new way. No one ever told me that life could be like this. God's plan for my life is so much better, so much richer, than anything I could have come up with on my own. In addition to my own experience, I know of many Christians who also have discovered how real and frequent God's communication to them is. It is a true joy to meet them and to sense the joy that characterizes their dynamic relationship with God.

We will close with this prayer from Saint Ignatius Loyola:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,  
my memory, my understanding  
and my entire will,  
all I have and call my own.

You have given all to me.  
To you, Lord, I return it.

Everything is yours;  
Do with it what you will.  
Give me only your love and your grace.  
That is enough for me.

*Cover painting: "Pacuare," by Anna Sullivan Kallstrom*