

A STORY IN DISCERNING GOD'S WILL

By Deacon Tim Sullivan



This is the account of how I discerned God's will in deciding to leave a rewarding position as Executive Director of Catholic Charities of Tulsa and to move to Newark, New York, east of Rochester, to work for Catholic Charities of Wayne County, an opportunity that became a great adventure for my wife and me. My goal is to provide an example of how discernment works in a real life situation. It's not the job change that's important. It's the process I followed. I'm confident in sharing this experience because I received dramatic confirmation from God that I had accurately discerned His will, at least in this instance.

I dedicate this exercise to Jack Balinsky, who was a key figure in opening the door for us to relocate to upstate New York. After we arrived in Newark, Jack proved to be a constant and reliable friend and mentor, whose support and advice were invaluable. My wife, Connie, and I would have been lost without him.

INTRODUCTION

My name is Tim Sullivan. I'm a married father of six adult children. I practiced law in Tulsa, Oklahoma for 18 years. After a conversion experience in 1988, for the first time in my life I began to pray with an expectation that God would answer. I learned that God communicated to every person all the time, and that if we were attentive we could discern His communications and be guided by them.

Eventually, I left the practice of law and became employed by the Catholic Church. I served as Family Life Director of the Diocese of Tulsa and, beginning in 2000, as Executive Director of Catholic Charities of Tulsa.

During the period from 1988 to 2007, I learned and experienced a great deal about discerning God's will. In the process of spiritual discernment, I relied heavily upon three primary resources: Mass, Eucharistic Adoration and our Blessed Mother. When confronted with an important decision or when seeking confirmation of the direction I thought God wanted for me, I would regularly access all three of these resources.

In February of 2000, I attended a five-day silent retreat at the Spiritual Life Center in Wichita, Kansas. Conducted in accordance with the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius Loyola, one of the principles of such a retreat is that silence magnifies God's voice. During the five days, I had the experience of receiving words from our Blessed Mother. Mary's sentences were not audible, but they came to me with perfect clarity. Her inspiration and guidance continued to provide valuable support for me even after the retreat.

My purpose in sharing the discernment process I utilized in deciding to move from Tulsa, the place where my wife, Connie, and I had spent virtually all of our adult life, to upstate New York is to help people understand that God does truly communicate His will to us in a specific way. I'm hoping to give those who read this a practical, real life example of a successful process in discerning God's will.

A NEW, SURPRISING PLAN

On Tuesday, October 9, 2007, I had a meeting at 1 p.m with Matt DeWeese of Catholic Charities of Tulsa and a young woman named Lea from KOTV television to discuss the upcoming Coats for Kids Program, a joint effort of KOTV, Catholic Charities and Yale Cleaners. During the meeting, Lea, who was from a small town in Oklahoma, spoke about life in rural Oklahoma. At one point, I mentioned that if I weren't doing what I was doing at that time in my life, I would be promoting economic development in small towns and rural areas.

Immediately upon making this statement, I heard an internal voice say, "Why don't you?" I immediately prayed, "Is that You?" Was God telling me He had something else for me to do? We had raised over \$20 million for the new campus of Catholic Charities of Tulsa and were meeting with architects and contractors to move forward with construction plans for the campus. It did not seem like a logical time for me to leave Catholic Charities.

After work that day, I went to Mass at Holy Family Cathedral, with a strong focus on asking for the grace to discern whether God was in fact leading me in a new direction. After Mass, as I was sitting in my car, I asked our Blessed Mother if she was okay with my leaving Catholic Charities. I still recall what I believe to be her response, "More than okay." I wondered at that time if the National Catholic Rural Life Conference might be looking for a new Executive Director, as a big part of its mission was promoting economic development in rural areas.

From Holy Family I went to the Adoration Chapel at St. John Hospital, again seeking further clarification as to the message I had heard earlier in the day. I was especially sensitive to whether I could detect some anxiety as I prayed and reflected on the message. There was no indication of anything negative. On the contrary, I experienced a peace, a deep sense of rightness, about this new direction for my life.

That night, I discussed with Connie the prompting that I had received about a change in employment. After all that I had experienced since 1988, Connie was not as surprised as one might expect by this latest development. She had developed a significant, if not complete, trust in my experiences of receiving direction from God or one of His agents. On this occasion, she believed that my discernment was worthy of her support.

Believing that my instructions were to leave Catholic Charities of Tulsa promptly, I prepared a very short and clear letter of resignation to be delivered at a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Catholic Charities board, which was scheduled for the next morning at 7:30. As planned, I presented my letter to the Executive Committee and then excused myself from their meeting.

The way I handled the decisions and actions of October 9th and 10th may seem unreasonably abrupt. As further explanation, I have always understood that, with respect to God's will, timing is just as important as content. With many decisions, I have had to be patient in their implementation. There might be a great deal of waiting. In this instance, however, the content of the message included a timing component. I was to act immediately and await further instructions on subsequent decisions.

This began a process in which my discernment was greatly assisted on a daily basis by prayer in the middle of the night. The typical experience during this period was to awaken at 2 or 3 in the morning and begin saying the rosary. While saying the rosary, my mind would be filled with the details of directions for that day and only for that day.

As the days went by and I was considering what else I would do, I thought perhaps I could serve Catholic Charities of Tulsa in a new way, and I even talked to the Bishop and our Board Chair about assisting Catholic Charities by

developing satellite offices in rural areas in Eastern Oklahoma. It did not take long before that seemed unworkable.

It's a bit difficult to describe my emotional state while all this was happening. There were moments of peace and clarity, despite the rapid pace of developments. I never felt anxious or insecure about the decisions or events as they unfolded or even about what I would do in the future. There was a sense of being constantly in the flow of God's grace, of being swept along, of excitement in finding out what God was going to do next.

THE ROAD TO NEW YORK

I had to start looking for new opportunities. Connie wanted me to stay in the Tulsa area, so I regularly checked on openings with other agencies in Tulsa. At the same time, I monitored websites which listed available positions with Catholic organizations around the country.

One of my first thoughts, as previously indicated, was that it would be a perfect match for me to work for the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, based in Des Moines, Iowa. That organization offered the strongest connection to the message I had received at lunch on October 9th. I knew a Brother Andrew who had been the Executive Director there for many years and was very impressed with the work he had done. We had exchanged correspondence on occasion.

On the night of October 15, Connie and I were talking in my office at home about my resignation and employment possibilities. As we talked, I was sitting at the computer, checking the usual websites for job openings. I thought, "Why don't I see what's going on at the National Catholic Rural Life Conference?" I turned to their website and was shocked to see that Brother Andrew was retiring. The NCRLC was seeking a new Executive Director. The stars seemed to be lining up very clearly.

I applied for the position at the NCRLC. The response was favorable from the very beginning. I thought we might well land in Des Moines, Iowa, where the NCRLC had its offices.

I also applied for a position for religious education and evangelization in the Diocese of Raleigh, North Carolina. That diocese had a new bishop. I had a very positive conversation with the staff person there who supervised the hiring.

My last day at Catholic Charities was November 9th. We had a going away luncheon with the staff of Catholic Charities on Wednesday, November 7th. Everyone shared stories of events that had taken place during my days there. It was very sweet. That night, Connie and I hosted the staff for dinner at our home. There were no speeches. It was just a final opportunity to be with people that I had grown to respect and love.

November 10th was the saddest day during this entire period. Connie and I loaded up my belongings from the Catholic Charities office and took them home.

I'll never forget staring at the empty office just before we left, recalling so many great memories and reflecting on how I had identified so passionately with the mission of the organization.

On November 16, 2007, I had lunch in Drumright, Oklahoma with my good friend, Jack Forsyth, who lived and worked as an attorney in Cushing, Oklahoma. My conversation with Jack proved to be a key link in my process of discerning where God wanted me to go.

As Jack and I were discussing the general issue of discerning God's will, Jack stated, and I'll never forget this, that "Sometimes the door that opens isn't the door you end up walking through." I had the strong sense that this statement was going to be true for me.

Earlier in the fall of 2007, my oldest son Dan and his wife Christie had moved to Cortland, New York, where Dan was studying for a master's degree. One day, I would guess in early November, I found a notice for the position of executive director of Catholic Charities of Wayne County, based in Newark, New York. I took the initiative to look up the location of Newark, situated in the Finger Lakes area of upstate New York. To my surprise it wasn't that far from Cortland. So I sent in my application. The location in the Finger Lakes is important for something that was to happen later.

On Saturday, December 1, I got a phone call from Jack Balinsky, the Executive Director of Catholic Charities for the Diocese of Rochester. He told me that the HR director for Catholic Charities had mentioned to him that the job notice for the Wayne County position must not have been worded accurately, as she had received a few applications from people who were very much over-qualified. Jack asked her to show him an example, and she handed him my letter and resume. Jack told her that some diocesan Catholic Charities operated differently than Catholic Charities of Rochester and were much smaller. Like me, Jack had gone to Notre Dame, which contributed to his interest in my application.

We had a long and very positive conversation. Jack explained the decentralized structure of Catholic Charities in the Rochester diocese, the programs of Catholic Charities of Wayne County and some of the history of that agency.

Early the next week, Jack Balinsky called me back and asked if I could be present in Newark for an interview on Friday, December 7th. Connie and I made quick arrangements to fly to Rochester on the evening of December 6th.

December 6th was a Thursday. After landing in Rochester, we met Jack Balinsky and Fr. Jim Hewes for dinner. Fr. Hewes had been pastor of a Wayne County parish and had advocated for a separate regional office for Catholic Charities of Wayne County. We had a relaxed evening with lively conversation.

Fr. Hewes gave us a CD, "Songs of the Promised Land," by John and Nancy Bryan, who were the music ministers at St. John Church in Clyde, one of the Wayne County churches. This seems like a small thing, but as we drove around upstate New York the next few days, we listened regularly to the CD. The music created a sensitive, spiritual mood that helped set the tone for our weekend in New York.

On Friday, we met with Bishop Matthew Clark of the Diocese of Rochester, who was very personable. He seemed very interested in my description of my conversion experience and my history of ministry in the Catholic Church. I asked for and received his blessing before we left his office.

We then participated in a meeting at a clothing center in Wolcott at which was discussed the possibility of Catholic Charities of Wayne County taking over the clothing center. Following that meeting, Connie and I were interviewed together by the board of directors of Catholic Charities of Wayne County. The interview was conversational and positive. After the interview, we had dinner with Jack Balinsky, and then Connie and I walked around Newark. It was a crisp, cold evening, and the village was having a Christmas tree lighting at a local park. It was so different from Oklahoma and was something of a postcard moment for us.

It's important to note that Connie actively participated in everything that had taken place that Friday. From the beginning to the end of our discernment process, she played a very active role. Connie and I both wanted everyone connected with the position in New York to know that we functioned as a team.

On Saturday, since it was the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, we went to Mass at St. Michael's Church in Newark. There was a very slim crowd. The pastor was ill, so a visiting priest presided. He gave an emotional, highly political homily. Then something very unusual happened.

After the consecration and just before distributing Communion, the priest knocked over the chalice holding the Precious Blood. The Blood was pouring off the altar. The priest saw what he had done, but, with a strange grin on his face, came forward to distribute the hosts. Some women came forward to address the problem of the Blood spilling onto the floor.

For me, this was a very significant event. Without going into detail, the Blood of Jesus had become a major theme in my life. It reached the point that I had written a booklet on the power of the Blood of Jesus. Seeing the Blood of Jesus flowing off the altar disturbed me a great deal.

Later, I wondered why this had happened during the short time we were in New York for the interview. What did it mean? Was it a warning? Was it an invitation of some kind? I wasn't sure.

After Mass, we drove to Cortland, New York, to spend a day and a half with our son, Dan, and his family. Dan and I were both aware of how unforeseen it was that we might move to New York and live only an hour and a half from him.

A few days after we returned to Tulsa, Jack Balinsky called to offer me the position as Executive Director of Catholic Charities of Wayne County. He told me I needed to respond by January 11th.

In early January, I also became a finalist along with two other people for the position of Executive Director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference. A date was set for me to travel to Des Moines to interview in person for that

position. Arrangements were also going to be made for me to interview in Raleigh, North Carolina for the diocesan position there.

On Monday, January 8th, I attended the noon Mass at Holy Family Cathedral in Tulsa. There was a specific moment during Mass when I had the sense that our Blessed Mother was giving me the go ahead for the job in New York. Immediately after that, I glanced up and saw her image on a stained glass window at the highest level of the Cathedral, a window that I had never noticed before.

Connie and I set the night of Wednesday, January 9 to discuss the different options and to decide specifically about the Wayne County offer. While it wasn't entirely logical, there was a mood, a momentum, about the Wayne County position that I thought was special. I was very impressed with Jack Balinsky, his friendly, direct manner, his enthusiasm, and the idea of living in a small town in upstate New York had an attraction. I told Connie that I wanted to be part of a community where I could network and develop strong relationships. It also meant a great deal to me that my great-grandfather, Jeremiah Sullivan, had settled in Addison, New York when he came to America from Ireland in the 1850's. Addison was located in the Rochester Diocese. After prayer and discussion, we decided to accept the offer to work in Newark, New York.

The next morning, before she left for work, Connie said, "Let's be positive. No apologies. No looking back." After we attended Mass together that evening, she said, "Let's celebrate!" It was amazing to me that this decision, which meant leaving our family and friends in Tulsa, leaving a place that had been our home for 32 years, and moving to a place where we knew virtually no one, a place where we had never dreamed of living before, could be embraced so fully by Connie.

We informed our adult children of our decision, which was very painful, despite our enthusiasm for our new plan. On Saturday, January 12th, all of the children joined Connie and me at Cooking Up Compassion, the annual fund-raising event for Catholic Charities of Tulsa. While there were some difficult moments, the evening was almost supernaturally joyous. We were genuinely excited to tell so many of our friends about our decision to move to New York.

What a year 2007 had been. Our daughter, Katie, graduated from college. Our daughter, Sarah, graduated from high school. Our first two grandchildren, Mara Sullivan and Ford Smolen, were born. Connie and I had a memorable vacation in Ireland, something we had always dreamed of doing. And then there was the resignation from Catholic Charities of Tulsa and the search for new employment.

On January 31st, the night before I was to leave for New York, we had dinner over at our daughter Anna's house. I will never forget hugging Anna, Katie and Connie in Anna's front yard when it was time for me to leave. Since Connie had some health issues which needed attention, and she was going to continue working in Tulsa for a while longer, I was going to drive to New York by myself.

CONFIRMATION

Because we had for many years kept our expenses to a minimum while we were helping our youngsters get through college, in early 2008 we had two old cars, a 1992 Saturn which had belonged to my father and a 1994 Nissan Pathfinder. The kids were curious which car I might choose to get me to New York. I chose the Saturn.

On February 1, the day I had chosen to leave Tulsa, all the electrical components on the Saturn stopped functioning. Every instrument on the dash failed to work. Instead of getting an early start, I drove to the Saturn dealership in Tulsa to solve the electrical problems.

The service advisor listened to my explanation of the problem and directed me to the waiting room for service customers. As I walked to the waiting room, I began to pray. I said, "Lord, I thought this New York position is what you wanted for me. But if it's not, if this car trouble is an indication that New York is not the plan, then please let me know. We're running out of time."

As I entered the waiting room, I saw a long row of chairs against a wall, with a coffee pot at one end and a tv set at the other end. The room was unoccupied, except for one elderly gentleman sitting in the middle of the row of chairs. He was wearing a black sweatshirt, and on his sweatshirt, in big, white letters, were the words, "FINGER LAKES NEW YORK."

I started laughing. What were the odds that that man wearing that sweatshirt would be sitting there by himself at the exact moment when I had asked God whether moving to the Finger Lakes area of New York was what He wanted? There aren't very many people in Oklahoma who have ever even heard of the Finger Lakes. I talked to the man, who lived in a rural area west of Pryor, Oklahoma. He had a daughter in Moravia, New York, a village in the Finger Lakes which we would eventually drive through many times on our way to and from Cortland to visit Dan and his family.

In addition to the confirmation received at the Saturn dealership on February 1, there were numerous other events which reinforced our decision to move to New York. The most important involved Connie's health. After Connie had a hysterectomy in Tulsa and before she joined me in New York, she was told that there were cancerous cells in some of the tissue that had been removed. A cancer specialist in Tulsa told her that she should have additional tissue and numerous lymph nodes removed.

Two of Connie's sisters who were nurses highly recommended that the proposed surgery be done laparoscopically. After investigation, Connie discovered that no doctor in Tulsa did the procedure laparoscopically. She went about finding a surgeon in the Rochester, New York area who could perform the surgery using that method. Two different people recommended Dr. Brent Dubeshter, who coincidentally was a neighbor of one of the new friends we made after arriving in New York.

I joined Connie for her initial appointment with Dr. Dubeshter. He told us that he had studied Connie's medical history and that he strongly disagreed with the recommendation of the cancer specialist in Tulsa. He did not believe that surgery would be necessary. He handed us a medical journal article that he had recently written that dealt specifically with the treatment for Connie's condition. Instead of discussing the type of surgical procedure which would be used on Connie, we received the exhilarating gift of discovering that the proposed surgery could be completely avoided.

From the beginning of our time in upstate New York, Connie and I approached our life there as a great adventure, one that we should experience as fully as possible. We wanted to experience everything that was new and unique about our new home. We took many day trips, exploring in every direction within 2 or 3 hours of our home in Newark. Our work turned out to be very fruitful, and we developed many good friendships. I especially enjoyed the mentorship and friendship of Jack Balinsky, whose support and good advice helped me in both my work and my personal life.

BACK TO TULSA

By early 2013, everything was going well for Connie and me. My investment in relationships in the Newark and Rochester areas was really paying off. Connie, however, became focused on our moving back to Tulsa. She said I probably would not agree to move back unless I saw someone in New York wearing a sweatshirt that said "TULSA" on it.

In the spring of 2013, I asked Connie if we could table any discussions about moving back to Tulsa until 2014, though I added the phrase "unless something unusual comes up." To my surprise, she agreed.

A few weeks later, on a Thursday night, we were sitting in our living room in Newark when a text message was received on Connie's phone. The message read, "Car dealer ministry opportunity available. Call me. Rich." We laughed, not sure what the message meant or who had sent it. We called the number, and the source of the message was Deacon Rich Bender, a friend of ours in Tulsa. He had been asked to be a chaplain at a large car dealership in Tulsa. However, he had just taken a position at a parish in Tulsa, so he declined. He told the owner of the dealership that he knew of a deacon in New York who would be well-suited for the chaplain position and might be willing to move back to Tulsa.

While I had wanted to stay in New York, I could not deny that God might be using this clearly "unusual" opportunity to let us know that it was time for us to return to Tulsa. I called the owner of the car dealership, Greg Kach, the day after we received the text message from our friend, Rich. Greg was Catholic, and he stated that he had strived to create a family environment in his car dealership, which had approximately 250 employees. He articulated his vision for a chaplain, which consisted primarily of providing spiritually-oriented counseling and support for the entire staff.

In early July of 2013, I met with Mr. Kach at his office in Tulsa. I was very impressed with the culture he had fostered in his dealership. I met his key managers, who clearly shared Greg's vision and values. We agreed to the terms of my employment, which was to start in November.

Once again, it might seem to many that, with respect to the employment opportunity in Tulsa, I moved too hastily. For me, however, I had left the door open to leave New York if an unusual opportunity presented itself. No one could question that serving as a chaplain at a car dealership was an unusual opportunity. Despite my reluctance to leave New York, I had to respect the manner in which the path back to Tulsa had been made available.

There were many events which confirmed the rightness of our decision to move back to Tulsa. I will mention two of them.

One Tuesday night after we had made the decision to move to Tulsa but were still living in New York, Connie and I spent several hours on the internet looking at houses to rent in Tulsa, a process which left our minds dazed and exhausted. The next evening, when I came home from work, Connie told me that she had received a call that day from a woman in Tulsa named Marcie. Marcie had found out from a mutual friend that we were moving to Tulsa. She and her husband were looking for a responsible couple to house-sit the residence of her husband's parents, who had moved to an assisted living center.

Marcie described the home as quite large, in an attractive neighborhood, with a beautiful swimming pool. We would be expected to pay the utilities, but maintenance of the yard and the pool would be covered by the owners. We quickly agreed to Marcie's proposal, and the home became a great blessing to us and to our family.

That leads to the second event, another extraordinary blessing. When Connie and I decided to move back to Tulsa, two of our six children were residing in Tulsa. By the time we made the move in October of 2013, our youngest daughter had relocated to Tulsa, giving us three children there. Within a year and a half of our presence back in Tulsa, two more of our children and their families also moved to Tulsa. While they looked for housing in Tulsa, they stayed for extended periods in the large home which we were watching for Marcie's family. As of this writing, Connie and I have five of our children and eleven grandchildren sharing life in our city.

EPILOGUE

Before we left New York to return to Tulsa, one more development took place that should be mentioned. I had thought that at some point in my time in New York, the Holy Spirit would orchestrate some dramatic event which would be connected to the spilling of the Eucharistic Blood of Jesus at the Mass we had attended in Newark on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, which I

described earlier. As the time drew near to leave New York, I had the sense that there was some unfinished business relating to what happened at that Mass, that maybe I had missed an opportunity or that the intended opportunity had not yet presented itself.

At the last Sunday Mass that I attended at St. Michael's Church in Newark, while I was distributing the Eucharistic Blood as I always did at the Masses at St. Michael's, I discerned the voice of Jesus saying to me, "Is this not enough for you?" I immediately broke into tears. I thought of all the Sunday Masses and all the weekday Masses at St. Michael's at which I had offered the cup of Jesus' blood to the communicants. There would have been close to 2,000 Masses at which I shared the blood of Jesus with the people at St. Michael's. Jesus was letting me know at that last Sunday Mass that my serving as a cup minister on so many occasions was the way God used me to respond to what had happened on December 8, 2007. He communicated to me in a general way that many graces had been received by all those people who had received the Blood of Jesus from my hands. It was very, very humbling.

Well, that's it. There is so much more, of course, but I'm hoping from the story I have told that you get an adequate understanding of how God communicated His will for my life in our move from Tulsa to New York. I can also add in closing that our move back to Tulsa was equally filled with grace, as so many details fell into place.

In early 2013, I attended a retreat in New York on discerning God's will. During a break, I approached the presenter, Fr. Timothy Gallagher, and asked him to come to the Rochester area. I said, "People need to know that God is always communicating to them. You need to tell them." Without hesitating, Fr. Gallagher looked me squarely in the eye and said, "No, you tell them." And so I am.

Painting on cover page: "Like a Sunday Morning," by Anna Sullivan Kallstrom