

The Art of Discernment

Making Good Decisions in Your World of Choices

Stefan Kiechle

We all want to make good decisions. However, decisions are risky business. Obstacles from within and without can prevent us from seeing the best decision from among the many options we have. Here, Stefan Kiechle presents the essentials for coming to a good decision via a spiritual process. This spiritual process drawn, from Ignatius of Loyola, can inform all of our decisions, helping to more fully integrate our interior spiritual life with our exterior life along the way. With clarity and insight, Kiechle examines the barriers to good decision-making while presenting the basics of Ignatian discernment.

Ignatian spirituality is rooted in the belief that we are created to praise and serve God; this is our heart's deepest longing. In every act of free will, in every choice that we make, we have the opportunity to follow Jesus. That means making the choice for the greater good and rejecting lesser alternatives. As Christians, we must judge our decisions by the central teachings of Jesus—peace and justice—the nonviolent love of all of God's children. We must choose what is moral, but beyond that lies freedom.

Ignatius identified methods and criteria for making spiritually sound decisions. The first step is to make oneself "indifferent," free from self-centeredness and fear. For this we must put our full trust in God. Three methods to help us make sound decisions are: 1) direct intuition—a gift of direct divine guidance, 2) inclinations, decisions based on feelings observed during honest, prayerful meditation, 3) rationality.

You may find that the criteria presented appear simple yet remain difficult to follow. An Ignatian retreat using *The Spiritual Exercises* takes thirty days to begin to begin to show a path; allow yourself adequate time spent in prayer, which makes us more receptive to hearing the will of God. Use all the tools at your disposal, including daily reflection on scripture and the life of Christ, the listening ear of a trusted friend or spiritual director, and attend a retreat. Follow the steps of discernment enumerated: prayer and quiet time to listen to God, achieving greater freedom, and the practice of imagination. *The Ten Guiding Principles of Discernment* serves as a summary of the book to turn to for each difficult decision you encounter. Particularly useful in this book are the author's advice for situations not addressed by classical Ignatian discernment. Here we are taught to embrace our positive goals and motives.

The question, what would Jesus do, has become a cliché; but Ignatius encourages us to walk with Jesus to better discern the will of God. We are called to follow God's will to live in the fullness of life, always focusing on the positive and the greater good for all God's children. From this will flow fruit and consolation on the way to building the kingdom of God.

Questions and Considerations

- Identify and understand the external pressures that weigh on you as you make your decisions. Our individualistic society urges us to think of ourselves first, with minimal regard for the consequences to others. *Do I have difficulty eliminating “success” as a criterion?*
- Identify the pressures you put on yourself and your natural tendencies. If you would like to explore personality types further, consider using one of the many personality-profiling methods others have found useful, including the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, or the enneagram. Visit www.avemariapress.com to learn more about the enneagram process with the following resources: ***Enneagram Spirituality: From Compulsion to Contemplation*** and ***Finding Yourself on the Enneagram***.
- *Do I seek the cross? Have I been taught to seek it? What must I do to be able to accept (not seek) it, if God so wills?*
- Decision-making is about risk. *What is my risk tolerance? Am I risk averse? Am I rash?*
- *Do I put my full trust in God, or do I think I have to do everything?*
- *What must I set aside to be free? Is there something that I fear? Something that has a hold on me—possessions, unhealthy habits, etc.? Don't forget! Even good things can constrain us.*
- *How do I or would I, mourn a rejected alternative or missed opportunity? Consider some sort of ritual that will enable you to fully experience a sense of loss.*
- Near the beginning of the Methods of Discernment chapter are some excellent questions that the author uses “when confronted with impending decisions.” Use these and bring them into your prayer.