

Steps in Discernment

STEP 1: Know that the Lord has created you for a specific mission

STEP 2: Accept His love and choice for you

STEP 3: Make yourself available to listen to Him

STEP 4: Cooperate with Him in clearing away obstacles

STEP 5: Give yourself entirely to Him in love...be holy!

STEP 6: Distinguish the "four voices" of discernment

On Vocations in General

A vocation is all about love. A vocation is a life of love in a concrete, particular form because love is always concrete and particular. A vocation begins with Christ's love for you. In that love for you He is calling you to a particular form of life. This love involves first His total gift of Himself to you, and then in response your total gift of yourself to Him. After all He tells us in the Gospel according to St. John, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (Jn. 15:16). His choice for you is what makes a vocation different from an "occupation" or a "career". You can choose an occupation or a career for yourself, but a vocation (from the Latin verb vocare, "to call") is HIS choice for you and which He invites you to undertake for love of Him. Often we are taught to ask, "What do I want to be when I grow up?" or "What life will I choose?" The better way to think is, "What does Jesus want for me?", "What life will bring Jesus the greatest glory?" and ultimately to say, "I want what Jesus wants."

A vocation is the concrete life He has chosen for you, and for which He has specifically created you. He is God and therefore knows which life that will be the best way to bring about your salvation, your happiness, and His greatest glory. His call will completely fulfill you as a man and a father. A vocation means to be sent by Jesus on a mission to help Him bring His salvation to the world, and so will call for much love, heroism and sacrifice on your part. He loves you and has chosen you. His love gives you the ability to love Him in return. The key to discovering your vocation is first to allow Jesus to show His tender love to you. This love will make you capable of loving Him in return.

As you can see, it is vital that you find your vocation. Your fulfillment, your happiness, and ultimately your salvation can depend on your acceptance of the mission that Jesus has chosen for you. Moreover, other people's salvation will depend on you giving your full "Yes" to Jesus in your

vocation.

Presented below are the basic steps of vocational discernment. These steps, however, are not steps that are taken and finished. We are always engaging these steps at deeper levels, even after saying “Yes” to our vocation. Sometimes these steps are going on at the same time, and there is always more work we can do at each step.

STEP

1:

Know that the Lord has created you for a specific mission in the world

The Lord has loved you into being, and since the moment of your conception He has had a plan for your life. He has created you totally unique. There is no one else in the world quite like you, and he wanted you to be here in this world. You are not an add-on, an extra, an afterthought, or luggage in this world. You are essential, indispensable and important. Jesus Christ has created you and you alone for some specific mission, and wants to reveal it to you.

Jesus loves you so much that He invites you to help him save the world. Of course He alone is the Savior, but He opens up His life to us that we too may share in his mission of salvation. He is calling you. He is calling you to help Him in his salvation of the world. This is what we mean by vocation. So the first step in discerning your vocation is to understand that God has created you out of love and in His love invites you to share in his work of saving the world.

STEP 2:

Accept the Lord's love and His choice for you

The second step in discerning the vocation is to open yourself to the Lord's love. He told His apostles and now He is saying to you: “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you.”

In order to hear His call we have to receive His love. He asks you to accept His love in spite your past mistakes, your weaknesses, your ignorance,

your confusion...in spite of everything. He wants to overflow your heart with His love. Your task is to be open to receive. Without God's grace nothing good happens in this world, and so we need to receive His grace. His grace enables us to respond say "Yes" to his call.

Let Him free you so that you can say "Yes" to His choice for your life. His choice for you is far better than any choice you can come up with yourself. After all, He made you. He knows you better than you know yourself. He wants to make you happy and fulfilled, and knows that only by doing His will can we be free, happy, fulfilled and at peace. As the great poet Dante wrote, "In His will is our peace." This is often the step that is most challenging to even the faithful Christian. To say "Yes" to God without conditions is to put our lives radically at His disposal. When we say, "Not my will but Your will be done," we are handing over to Him our plans, our ideas, our goals, our very selves. This can be frightening, but it is only in His Will that we will find peace in this life and in the world to come.

His Presence in the Most Blessed Sacrament is a primary way in which we encounter and accept His love and then give ourselves in return. In every Mass, He invites us to unite ourselves to Him in His Sacrifice on Calvary. In the Liturgy of the Word, He cuts us with His Word from Holy Scripture which is "sharper than any two edged sword", so that He can pour His very self into us. In the Liturgy of the Eucharist we see the Word become Flesh before our very eyes, and then receive Him into our flesh in Holy Communion. In every Mass, we join our Blessed Lord in His act of sacrificing Himself for the salvation of the world, and receive from the altar His very Body and Blood. The Mass is the primary place where this giving and acceptance of His love happens. To find your vocation, going to Mass faithfully and often is extremely important.

STEP 3:

Make yourself available to listen to the Lord

If a vocation is a "calling" from God, then we must attune ourselves to His Voice so that we can hear His call.

Prayer ☐ Prayer is how we primarily listen to the Lord's Voice. Oftentimes we know we should pray, but don't know how or how to even get started. If you don't know how to pray, don't worry. The Lord longs to be with you in prayer and will help you. He has already helped us through His Church by showing us the primary ingredients to a life of prayer. The

first is liturgical prayer. Liturgical prayer is the public prayer of the Church, the greatest expression of which is Holy Mass. All of the Sacraments, like Confession, are liturgical prayer. Other examples of liturgical prayer are the Liturgy of the Hours, sometimes called the “Divine Office” and Eucharistic Adoration. We also need to develop habits of personal prayer, especially meditation (e.g. lectio divina). Prayer which honors Our Blessed Lady is indispensable for finding your vocation. The Church and the saints for centuries have strongly recommended the prayer of the Rosary.

□Attuning ourselves to the Voice of the Lord also means becoming aware of the obstacles to hearing His Voice. Sin and noise are the two major obstacles which get in the way of hearing His Voice.

Sin □Sin is perhaps the most obvious obstacle because sin means turning away from Him. Thus sin can never be seen as just the breaking of rules. Sin harms and can even destroy our relationship with the God who created us, hung on the Cross for us, and who is calling us to our mission. In discernment, sin is like mud that gets in our spiritual eyes and ears making us blind and deaf to the Lord.

To answer God’s call in life we must be free and being free to say “Yes” entails being freed from our sins. We are not born free nor can we become free on our own. Only Jesus can free us. Freedom from sins is accomplished primarily through the Sacrament of Confession. You will never know your vocation and be able to respond generously and freely to God without receiving the Sacrament of Confession regularly. It is strongly recommended that during discernment you should go to confession at least every two weeks and never less often than once a month. Not only does this great Sacrament forgive sin but it also pours sanctifying grace into your soul. This sanctifying grace is Jesus’ own divine life. Being saturated with sanctifying grace will go a long way in discovering your vocation.

A very good exercise during discernment is a General Confession. Making a General Confession can greatly aid the acceptance of forgiveness and allowing Jesus to help us put the past to rest. This practice is especially recommended by one of the Church’s greatest spiritual directors, St. Francis de Sales, and is entirely distinct from “general absolution”. A General Confession is a spiritual exercise in which one goes through his entire life and confesses every sin he can remember. The purpose is not to re-forgive those sins or beat oneself up about them. (Once a sin is forgiven it is always forgiven.) Rather the exercise helps one to let go of the past and to trust Jesus even more deeply. It usually takes about an hour and so it is advisable to set up an appointment with one’s confessor in advance.

After we have allowed Him to free us from mortal or serious sins, then we have the ongoing work of dealing with venial sins and our attachments to sin. Attachments to sin are those desires to sin even if we don't follow through on the evil act. It's wishing you could get away with it. St. Francis de Sales likens attachment to sin as the Israelites in the desert who sometimes longed for the life of Egypt (especially the melons and "flesh pots", that is, decent food) even though it was the place of their slavery. Those attachments, even if they don't spawn sin, keep us back spiritually. Those things though seemingly small, keep us from being totally attached to Jesus and His beautiful will.

Noise □ Noise is another obvious obstacle. We live in a world of noise. Often when we come to discern we are already immersed in noise: habits of watching a lot of television, idle conversations with others, video or computer games, listening to music all the time, etc. Rarely do we have silence (exterior or interior) in our day. In fact when we are silent we can start to get fidgety or even begin to freak out. St. Ignatius of Loyola, the spiritual master of discernment, said "It's true that the voice of God, having once fully penetrated the heart, becomes strong as the tempest and loud as the thunder, but before reaching the heart it is as weak as a light breath which scarcely agitates the air. It shrinks from noise, and is silent amid agitation." Therefore, if you want to know your vocation, begin to develop habits of silence. The first way to develop silence is to limit our time on television, video and computer games, the Internet, and using music as incessant background noise. I think a good rule of thumb is that one should not spend more than two hours a day total on those activities. The only way to do this is TURN IT OFF. Those things are not evil in themselves, but without using them with the virtue of moderation, they create spiritual static in our hearts and dull our spiritual sensitivity. The second way to develop silence is to develop habits of quiet prayer, reading (especially the works of our spiritual tradition), and just thinking and pondering.

STEP

4:

Cooperate with the Lord in clearing away obstacles to free you to say "yes"

Step three dealt with beginning to attune ourselves to His Voice. But even after we know of His love and choice for us, and have begun to attune ourselves to His Voice, we may soon realize that we are not completely

free to give ourselves to Him. Perhaps there are things inside us that make us hesitate or even pull away from His call. So as we consider His love and choice for us, we must also consider, "Am I free to say 'Yes' to Him?" What keeps us from giving our entire selves over in love to Him?

Past Hurts □ Past hurts can be complicated and complicating in the discernment process. Sometimes our sins are not the problem, but the sins of someone else who has hurt us. Past hurts can impair our ability to trust, and saying "Yes" to Jesus requires a lot of trust. These past hurts can take the form of some sort of abuse, the neglect or absence of a father or mother, rejection by a girlfriend, etc. It can be a rough a brutal world out there. Past hurts not only hurt our ability to trust, but they can also interfere with one's ability to receive love and to give love in return. Past hurts have a way of creating an environment of anger and fear in one's life. Past hurts can be difficult to forgive, and any lack of forgiveness prevents us from giving ourselves over completely to Jesus. We may find forgiveness difficult because we haven't yet dealt with the just anger we have about it. The good news is that Jesus is conqueror of sin and death, and longs to heal anyone who has been hurt so that they can receive His love and give love in return. It doesn't matter what has happened, Jesus declares loudly to us in Revelation: "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5).

Practically a few things can be done. First, have confidence in Jesus who comes to free you and make things new in your life. I would suggest finding a priest you can trust and open up the pain to him. Just talking through it privately with someone trustworthy can bring an enormous amount of healing, and he can pray with you and offer counsel. I often suggest that the person make a list of people with whom he has "unfinished business" and then write a letter to that person, which of course they won't send. The letter will contain what that person did and the bad impact it had on his life. This exercise helps to get the hurt and the anger out so that Jesus' love and forgiveness can be poured in, thereby making the heart more liberated to forgive and to say "Yes" to Jesus. Sharing such letters with that trustworthy priest can bring even more healing.

Fear □ Fear inhibits our complete gift of self to Jesus in love. The fear I'm talking about is not the awe and wonder of holy fear, but rather a crippling fear. Crippling fear is never from God, but rather from the devil, and we are asked to resist it and allow Jesus to cast it out of us. A person cannot discern in fear. The fears can be varied and many: "I hear Him knocking at the door of my heart, and I'm scared to say 'Yes' to Him." "I'm afraid to move away from home and my family." "Will I be happy as a priest?" "I've

done too many terrible things to be a priest.” “My parents want grandchildren and they won’t have any if I become a priest.” “What will be left of me if I give myself totally over to Him?” “My friends think I’m crazy for thinking about it.”

Jesus says over and over again, “Be not afraid!” Our late Holy Father, John Paul the Great echoed this line frequently, and Pope Benedict has continued it, because it is so needed. We live in a world of fear. St. John tells us, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1Jn. 4:18). Jesus casts out fear; He can put fears to rest. He can do this when together with Him we face them with courage and bring them to prayer. I would suggest sitting before the Blessed Sacrament and simply list the fears on a piece of paper. Then go over that list with Him in prayer and ask Him conquer them in you. I would also suggest discussing these fears with a confessor, spiritual director or sister.

Dealing with sin, past hurts and fear will free us and purify our love for Him so that His voice can begin to resonate deep within our hearts. It will help to clear stuff away so that we can begin to see our radiant, risen Lord Jesus with our vocation in His hands. When we hear His voice and fill our eyes with His presence before us, we will be in a position to say, “Yes, Lord Jesus. I say ‘Yes’. Be it done unto me according to Your will. Yes Lord, send me.”

STEP

5:

Give yourself entirely to Christ in love...be holy!

The next step then is to respond to that love with all that we are. We seek to give ourselves entirely to Jesus. Receiving His love and striving to get ourselves back to Him in love is called a “personal relationship” with Jesus. In order to understand the meaning of your life and what you are supposed to do with your life requires a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Another way of putting it is to ask yourself, “Do I know Jesus, or do I only know about Him?” It is in this relationship with Him as Lord as Redeemer and as His intimate friend where we can hear his call to us.

Loving Jesus means to strive after holiness. Holiness is our first vocation which was given to us at Baptism. Holiness means to live the life of God here and now. Within this call to holiness emerges the more specific call of the state of life in the Church: priesthood, religious/consecrated life, or marriage. The life of holiness involves prayer (contemplating God) and

virtue (living God's life) and asceticism (opening up oneself to God's life).

Sacraments □ The Sacraments give us sanctifying grace. This is God's own power and life at work within us. The Sacraments communicate God's own life to our souls. In discernment we focus especially on the Sacraments we can receive more than once: Confession and Holy Communion. It is vitally important during discernment that one receives Holy Communion as often as possible. Daily communion is ideal. Confession, as mentioned above, is essential and needs to be more than once a month. It can be especially helpful to go to confession to the same priest so that he gets to know your soul and can offer more specific advice.

Prayer □ Prayer is our vital, daily and intimate contact with the Lord. It entails the lifting of our hearts and minds to Him who is with us throughout the day. Prayer is more about listening than speaking to Him, but it involves both. A man must be praying if he wants to know his vocation. Only committed, daily prayer which includes Mass, Confession, the Rosary and Scriptural meditation leads to one's vocation. Much can be learned about prayer in the Catechism. Examples of prayer are Eucharistic Adoration, Lectio divina with Holy Scripture, the Rosary, the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, etc. But the most important thing about prayer is to JUST DO IT.

A personal relationship is built upon personal prayer. Therefore you must make time in your day to be with Him exclusively and not just when it is convenient. We make time for friends and important people, and there was no one else who is a better friend or more important person in your life Jesus Christ.

Virtue □ Virtue is a habit of doing good. It comes from the Latin word *vir* meaning "man" and is also used to convey "manliness" or "power". Virtue is a habit, that is, a virtue is not something we do now and again, but it is something that we do regularly, even without thinking about it. Part of the life of virtue is that we strive to live according to His commandments, and to develop habits that will help us keep His commandments. Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commandments."

Asceticism "Making Sacrifices"

Asceticism helps to open up our human nature to receive the Lord's life. Asceticism also sharpens our spiritual senses. To love means to give yourself and giving ourselves in love involves sacrifice. When two people love each other they do things for each other and make sacrifices for one another. Sacrifices are not made just for the sake of "giving up" things, but

are gifts given out of love. In its most basic sense asceticism means to thwart one's own will in order to embrace the Lord's will. Asceticism means curbing our earthly desires (pleasure, things, my own way, etc.) in order to open up our spiritual desires (prayer, good works, etc.). The most important sacrifice to offer the Lord is the sacrifice of one's will of doing good when we don't feel like doing good. This type of sacrifice can take the form of doing one's chores around the house with a smile, taking on an extra chore, or helping a brother with his homework. The sacrifice can mean letting a brother or sister have his or her way or allowing him or her to play with or use one of your possessions.

Every time we resist temptation and avoid sin we are practicing asceticism. Resisting temptation can be quite painful, yet offering that suffering to the Lord with love is very pleasing to Him. Always remember, the more hidden the asceticism is, the more effective it is. A good way to begin practicing asceticism is unplugging from all the noise mentioned above and limiting one's time with TV or computer games. It is important to remember that asceticism is not an end in itself. Asceticism is only good insofar as it opens us up to love and leads us to be more loving to Jesus and our neighbor. It's also important to remember that we don't do ascetical works to earn Jesus' love or grace, we do it to accept more deeply His love and grace that He already offers. Asceticism will help to sharpen our sensitivity to Him and His Voice.

STEP 6:

Distinguish the "four voices" of discernment

In the process of discernment we can become aware of four voices, and learning to distinguish them from one another helps tremendously in discernment. The four voices are the Lord's, our own, the world's, and the devil's. By attuning ourselves to the Lord's we can begin to tell these other voices from each other, which is why steps 1-5 are important. Those steps attune us to the Voice of the Lord. It is not always easy to tell these voices apart from one another, therefore discernment requires time, patience, struggle and perseverance. Confusion, frustration and sometimes even outright rebellion can be part of the discernment process. Nevertheless Jesus tells us, "Be not afraid. I am here." His love can conquer everything, and if we open ourselves to the power of His grace, we will come to find our vocation. Jesus' desire to tell us is infinitely greater than our desire to know. We only need confidence in Him.

The voice of the Lord

The Lord's Voice is that which is communicating His constant and unfailing love to us. We hear His Voice in His Divine Revelation, both in Holy Scripture and in Holy Tradition, and in the Magisterium of His Church. We hear His Voice urging us to do good in our actions, to trust in Him, to sacrifice out of love. Discouragement and confusion are never the voice of Jesus even when we sin. His voice always communicates confidence and hope in Him. His Voice is always saying, "I love you no matter what." His Voice is also challenging because He is always calling us to a deeper conversion to Him.

With regard to your vocation, you can be sure that He is calling you, as a man, to the vocation of the priesthood, consecrated life (religious life or consecrated virginity in the world) or marriage. His Voice is never deceptive, nor does He play games. Therefore, you can be confident that to whichever vocation He calls you, He will also give you the graces to accomplish it and the desire to do it. Sometimes we are tempted to think that Jesus will call us to a life that we do not want or cannot accomplish. This is not the Voice of Jesus. Within His call lies all the graces and desires to live that vocation.

The voice of oneself

Our own voice is expressed in the deep down desires of our heart. Part of growing up is becoming aware of who we are and what are the deep desires of our heart. Hopefully as a young man you have a desire to be heroic, a desire to change the world, a desire to love and serve the Lord Jesus with all that you are. However, it is not always so easy. Sometimes our deepest desires are in conflict. Our own sinfulness, that part of ourselves that is still under the dominion of Satan can clamor loudly. Sometimes our voice is in conflict with the Voice of the Lord. Sometimes the conflict can lie in choosing between two good things: "I want to be a priest, and I want to be married." Our voice always stands in need of more conversion.

Your truest self are those desires which have been placed there by Jesus and are in harmony with the desires that Jesus has for you. One way to become attune to your own voice is to become aware of what you think about when your mind is free. When you have a moment to yourself, what do you think about? Is there something that comes to mind often or even constantly? That is a beginning indication of your own voice. After becoming aware of what you think about during the day, ask Jesus and yourself, "Why do I think about those things? What is the motivation behind those things?"

The voice of the world

The voice of the world is a voice that is under the dominion of the devil, and thus could be considered an extension of the voice of Satan. The voice of the world calls us to put our trust in the things of this world: prestige, money, fame, relationships, to be a famous rock star, to become important, to get a big house, expensive car, money-making career. It is the voice we hear in advertising, on TV shows, and in much of the music on the radio. The “noise” that is mentioned above is part of the voice of the world. This voice tempts us to forget about Heaven, our salvation and the Lord’s call in our life. It tries to drown out the Voice of Jesus and His love.

The voice of the devil

The voice of the devil is that voice that is always trying to lead us away from Jesus and to remain slave to him. His voice always tells us to doubt the Lord’s goodness and not to trust in Him. It is the voice that says that “I know more than He does.” It is the voice that tells us to say “No” to Jesus. The most obvious example of the voice of the devil is the temptation to sin, but he can be very cunning, and as St. Paul says can appear as an angel of light. If the devil cannot get us to listen to sin, he then will try to get us to choose something good, but which is not the good that Jesus wants for us. In other words, the devil’s voice can try to make us choose a lesser good over the greater good that Jesus has for us. Always remember that the devil is a liar and a murderer and can be very cunning. In the discernment process it can be confusing to figure out whose voice is whose. Sometimes there is so much confusion in the heart because we have not yet been able to distinguish the Lord’s voice from one’s own or the devil’s.

Great progress is made in finding your vocation when you can begin to distinguish these four voices with regard to the vocational choice. By turning away from and ruling out the voices of the world and the devil, greater clarity and less confusion are gained. One is ready to make the free choice of the specific vocation when the Voice of the Lord sounds the one vocation and your own voice echoes the same vocation.

I would say that for the most part, we cannot distinguish these voices very well without the help of a spiritual director. You may find that a regular confessor (going to the same priest every time you make your confession) can also help you distinguish the voices. A spiritual director is one (usually a priest) who is familiar with the spiritual life and who also leads a life of conversion and prayer in his vocation. By finding a spiritual director and meeting regularly with him, you can go a long way in recognizing and distinguishing the four voices so that you can choose whatever the Lord’s Voice is saying to you.

Conclusion

By following these steps, you will be able to go a long way in finding your vocation. The important thing is to keep at it and not give up on any of the steps, and to have patience with the process. Keep giving it over to the Lord and it will happen. I also suggest that you begin to pray one “Hail Mary” each day to Our Lady asking her to help you discover and say “Yes” to your vocation. It’s a small prayer, but I’ve found it to be very powerful.

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