

Chapter Eleven:

Discerning the Will of God

For those who have decided to follow Christ our Lord and have made His will and His glory the central goal of their life, the question will inevitably arise: “What is God’s will for my life?” This is a key question to which every Christian must seek an answer. Unfortunately, many people do not even ask this question. Instead, many think about what they want out of life and fail to start exclusively with the will of God. Make the choice today to put the will of God as the essential starting point for your life.

Knowing the will of God is clearly not the same as doing the will of God. But in order to do the will of God, you must first know it. However, before embarking on a mission to discern the will of God for your life, there is one essential prerequisite. It is essential that you are willing to do whatever the Lord asks of you. This fundamental disposition of making yourself completely available to the will of God and surrendered to the fulfillment of God’s will must embody who you are. You must say “Yes” to the will of God even before you know what it is that He asks of you. You must be ready and willing to do anything and everything He asks of you. You must seek to be completely indifferent to what He asks of you. Remember that “indifference” for Ignatius is not the same as lacking concern. On the contrary, you must have deep concern for that which God wills. But to be indifferent simply means that you do not insert your own personal preferences into the equation. You do not try to “influence” the will of God. Rather, you are detached from the outcome and are ready and willing to do whatsoever He asks and commands of you right now, without hesitation. This interior disposition of heart is a beautiful thing!

With that disposition as the foundational prerequisite, consider the question at hand: “What is God’s divine will for my life?” This question may arise at certain times in your life when major decisions are being made, such as whether you should get married or be a priest or religious. Or whether you should marry this person. Or join this religious order, etc. Additionally, in life there are many other decisions that need to be made in the service of God’s will. Should you take this job, should you have another child, should you move here, be friends with them, go to this event, buy this item, etc. Life is full of choices; therefore, learning to discern God’s will in the more monumental decisions in life will also help in the smaller and even daily decisions in life. Granted, some daily decisions (perhaps most) do not require a drawn-out process of discernment. But all decisions should ultimately be guided by discernment. And if you can learn to practice discernment in a habitual way, living by these principles, then daily decisions will more easily be quick to make and more likely in accord with the will of God. And when the more monumental decisions of life come your way, your

habit of practicing these principles will be an invaluable guide to choosing and fulfilling the will of God.

With that introduction, let's consider the teaching of Saint Ignatius on discerning the will of God and making what he calls "a good election." By a "good election," Saint Ignatius is especially speaking about major life decisions. But the methods he describes for making these major life decisions also can apply to other decisions of lesser consequence. He explains that when you make a decision in life regarding what you believe to be the will of God, your interior experience of facing such a decision can be categorized in one of three ways. Thus, he offers us three different "times" during which one is able to arrive at the will of God. The interior experience of the first time is short, clear and easy. The interior experience of the second time is a bit longer and incorporates some of the methods of the discernment of spirits already discussed. However, when neither of the first two interior experiences are present so as to enable you to discern the will of God, Ignatius offers a third way of discerning the will of God using two practical methods.

First Time—Clarity Beyond Doubting

First Time. *The first time is, when God our Lord so moves and attracts the will, that without doubting, or being able to doubt, such devout soul follows what is shown it, as St. Paul and St. Matthew did in following Christ our Lord.*

Coming to know the will of God with a clarity that is beyond doubting is best illustrated by two Scriptural examples. The first example includes the direct and immediate opportunity for conversion given to Saint Paul. Recall that he was knocked off his horse and the Lord spoke directly to him, asking him why he was persecuting His Church (Acts 9). Paul knew, by this vision and by a clear interior certitude, that God spoke to him. The result was that he changed his life immediately and became a great evangelist. The second example is found in [Matthew 9:9](#). Jesus encounters Matthew, and He says to him, "Follow me." And Matthew gets up, leaves all behind, and follows Christ.

Though both of these examples entail some form of literal encounter with our Lord (in a vision by Saint Paul and in person by Saint Matthew), there is also a strong and clear interior calling that they both experienced, and each one of them responded to that calling without hesitation.

In your own life, you will not encounter the physical Lord walking about calling you to do this or that, nor will you likely experience a profound vision that knocks you down, blinds you and

transforms your life. However, there may be times when the same interior certitude of Saint Paul and Saint Matthew is experienced in your life by a powerful grace of God.

Not much needs to be said about such an experience. When you have such an experience of clear and definitive communication from our divine Lord, the only appropriate response is to say “Yes” and to follow without reserve. In this case, you know God’s will simply because you know His will. It’s beyond explanation and it’s beyond doubting. You just know. With certitude.

Though this experience may be rare, it does happen. Sometimes people are filled with such a strong conviction of the will of God that they do not hesitate to respond. If this is something that you encounter in your life, do not be afraid to trust this clear and certain conviction from our Lord.

Second Time—Discerning Consolations and Desolations

Second Time. The second, when enough light and knowledge is received by experience of consolations and desolations, and by the experience of the discernment of various spirits.

If there is not a clarity beyond doubting produced by some direct communication from our Lord, then the second way of discerning the will of God can be used. This second method of discerning the will of God uses the methods already covered regarding the discernment of spirits (Chapters Five and Six). In this case, the focus is upon the interior movements of your soul to discern the various consolations and desolations received by this or that action and train of thought. The primary focus is not a reasoned-out logical evaluation and assessment of the situation; rather, it’s a process in which reliance is made upon the felt spiritual movements of God within your soul.

If, for example, you are discerning the possibility of moving to a new town with your family and every time you do so you clearly sense various consolations from God, you should be attentive to these movements and begin to follow them. Additionally, if every time you think about remaining where you are you experience clear desolation as explained by Saint Ignatius, this also is a clear sign that staying is not God’s will. This approach requires time and attentiveness to these spiritual experiences. Thus, your human reason is used, but what you “reason” about is the consolations and desolations. It will also be useful to rely upon the daily examen and the fruit of those examinations over time.

Third Time—Tranquil and Rational Evaluation

Third Time. The third time is quiet, when one considers, first, for what man is born—namely, to praise God our Lord and save his soul—and desiring this chooses as means a life or state within the

limits of the Church, in order that he may be helped in the service of his Lord and the salvation of his soul.

I said time of quiet, when the soul is not acted on by various spirits, and uses its natural powers freely and tranquilly.

There are three factors present when this third approach to discerning the will of God is to be used:

1. You are interiorly calm and at peace;
2. You do not have a clarity beyond doubt as described in the First Time above; and
3. You do not have a clear experience of consolation and desolation as described in the Second Time above.

When those three factors are present, you must rely upon a rational process of weighing the “pros and cons” of the decision. Ignatius offers two methods of discernment within this third situation:

The first method:

- Begin this process of discernment when you are tranquil, interiorly at peace. A peaceful disposition of the heart is essential to this objective process of discernment.
- Place the decision before you. Strive to be “indifferent” to the outcome, ready to choose whichever conclusion tips the scale, so to speak, toward the greater glory to God.
- Make a specific petition to God that He will incline your will toward that which gives Him the greatest glory. Pray that your intellect will comprehend and choose this.
- Consider the advantages and disadvantages of both choices. Consider them side by side. As you do so, be attentive not only to the number of reasons for both choices but also the “quality” of each reason.
- After careful consideration, determine what your human reason concludes. What reasonably gives the greatest glory to God? Again, this is an exercise of human reason, not a focus upon your affections and desires.
- Once a rational decision is made as best as possible, submit that decision prayerfully to God so that He can confirm it in your prayer. It may also be useful to share your reasoning process and conclusion with a spiritual confidant or spiritual director if possible, especially when the decision to be made is of greater magnitude.

The second method:

- This method is used when the first way above does not produce the clarity needed to make a good decision regarding the will of God.
- Begin by, once again, making the Love of God and His glory the single goal of your choice. Then try to objectively consider the decision from three perspectives.
- First perspective: Consider what you would say to a stranger, whom you would want to help perfect his own choices to give greater glory to God. What would you recommend to this person? After doing this mental exercise, follow the same directions that you gave to the person to make your own choice. This imaginative exercise helps maintain objectivity and detachment.
- Second perspective: Consider yourself on your deathbed. From that perspective, what will you have wished you had chosen?
- Third perspective: Consider your day of judgment. As you stand before God, what would you have preferred that you had chosen?
- As in the first way, once a rational decision is made as best as possible, submit that decision prayerfully to God so that He can confirm it in your prayer.

As you can see, this third approach to discerning God's will relies heavily upon the use of rational thought. Beginning with the *first way* above, you make the love and glory of God your number one goal; you then go through a process of considering the two options that you are choosing between; you weigh, from various perspectives, which one appears to give the greater glory to God; you make these considerations in as objective way as possible; and then you prayerfully submit the final choice to God so that He will confirm it as His will in your prayer. When the *first method* does not produce the desired clarity, you move to the even more objective *second method* of this discernment process following the same steps, considering what advice you would give to another, what decision you will be most at peace with on your deathbed and on the day of judgment.

Though this situation may lack the same certitude as when God speaks loudly and clearly, and though it does not rely upon the various consolations and desolations one experiences interiorly over time, it does contain a well-reasoned and practical approach for discerning the will of God. And after following these methods, you will then be able to make a good choice with confidence and with a clear and certain conscience.