

(To Help Us Prepare For The Synodal Process

Discernment - becoming who we are

by Gemma Simmonds



Pope Francis often talks of ‘discernment’. It is not only the engine of decision-making in the synodal process throughout the Church, which begins next month – it is vital to living and choosing well in our everyday lives

Adapted from *Dancing at the Still Point: Retreat Practices for a Busy Life*

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From the moment we wake up to the moment when we fall asleep, we are making choices, some of them trivial and incidental, others involving the building up or deconstructing of good or bad habits that may have a significant impact on the rest of our lives. How we choose to live our daily lives, even in the small details, can play a major role in how we either grow into the fullest version of who God created us to be, or dwindle and diminish into a shell of that person.

Few people get out of bed in the morning and idly decide to get married, start up a company, commit a murder or cheat on their spouse or partner. Both positive and negative decisions are usually the cumulative build-up over time of smaller choices that might appear insignificant in themselves. We make our major life decisions in linear time, on a particular date, but we also go on constantly reiterating and refining or reshaping these decisions as we grow and change. We make decisions and then spend time growing into them. Many of us make life promises without any real notion of what the living out of those promises might entail. Only time and experience teach us what we have taken on. We live in a permanent state of becoming, so that the more we live, the more we become the person we are in the process of turning into.

In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses presents the people with a stark choice: will they choose to live in relationship with God (life and prosperity) or will they go their own way (death and adversity)? He urges them to “choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:15-20). Believing in God does not give us a safe package deal on how to live a trouble-free existence, but faith gives us the assurance that the Holy Spirit is at work within us and, by nature, we have the capacity to make choices which are in tune with the mind of God.

One word for getting things into better focus is “discernment”. It is a way to practise making choices in small things so that listening for the voice of the Spirit becomes a habit of awareness and reflectiveness which will serve us well when it comes to the bigger choices as well as the general orientation of our lives. The Covid-19 pandemic has pulled many people’s lives apart in ways that were experienced as shattering and destructive. But while this has had lasting and devastating consequences, it has also provided some opportunities for rebalancing lives that had become oppressive in subtle ways.

How do we develop a capacity for discernment? Making well-discerned choices generally requires a regular habit of serious prayer and reflection; it also requires the ordinary human elements of adequate information: weighing reasons for and against a particular option and confirmation over time. A discerning person needs to be equipped with self-knowledge, self-acceptance, the ability to integrate dreams and desires with the reality of the lived context and the validation that comes from sharing these thought processes with wise and trusted friends and companions.

In discernment, our desires matter. An image of God that tells us we are not allowed to have desires of our own will not help us make good decisions, any more than will our using God to legitimise whatever our plans may be. Finding out what we truly want and being willing to engage with those desires can be a challenge, especially if we are not used to connecting with our desires. Equally, we may find ourselves being invited to let go of certain dreams and desires if they have become rigid and compulsive.

In the garden of Gethsemane, we see Jesus afraid, not wanting to die. He admits this to himself and his

Father but places himself trustfully into the Father's hands. Paradoxically, this handing over of his own will leads to the freedom and authority that he displays through his entire trial and Crucifixion.

If our desires matter, then our questions also matter; whether they be practical/information questions, without which we cannot make a well-grounded choice, or our own inner questions, denoting a level of uncertainty or misgiving. A key part of discernment is to know what lies at the heart of our questions. Are there fears and anxieties there, an inability to let go and walk forwards in trust? The fact that we are - uncertain does not always carry negative implications. It may be that, in our heart of hearts, we don't want to make a choice that has been wished on us by others or by circumstances. If we have not been used to having our own desires taken seriously, we may need to find courage to admit to ourselves that we have preferences. If we have always been used to being the decision-maker, we may need to become more sensitive to the unspoken hopes, fears or objections of others.

Having adequate information and reliable self-knowledge is a crucial part of making trustworthy decisions. But sometimes we have to make a leap of faith, based not on rational thought so much as on intuition. In this sense, we need to learn to take our instincts and intuitions seriously. If we have had a "sort of feeling" over a long period or recognise a pattern of orientation towards a particular choice that will not let go of us, it is worth exploring this as the guiding light of God's Spirit. It may also be worth taking our dreams seriously in this context as they reveal from our unconscious mind hidden desires or fears that can be essential data in our decision-making. We may also need to pay attention to unadmitted negative feelings. Reason and imagination are not opposites: they are different faculties of the mind that enable us to get in touch with responses to God's grace which are both affective and the fruit of careful consideration.

Our body must also be taken seriously in a process of discernment. All sense experience is data for discernment and most of it comes to us first through our bodies, which can be a source of God's revelation. Even our language tells us something important about the wisdom carried by our bodies. When we talk about being "unable to swallow" something, "feeling choked" about something, or something "being a pain" or "giving us a headache", we may be speaking figuratively but also revealing a point of tension within the physical self that reveals unresolved conflicts and anxieties to which the conscious mind is not yet attuned. All of this needs to be taken into account if we are to make reliable choices.

However hard we try to discern according to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, time and experience may prove that we were mistaken in our judgement in a given instance. It may simply be that circumstances are beyond our control and we cannot make "the right choice"; we can only make the least bad choice. Sometimes we gain greater wisdom from our failures and mistakes than from our successes. This, in its own way, is a form of discernment, when we learn to put our trust in God, whatever the outcome. Confirmation of a choice made can be found in the Scriptures and in the doctrine and moral teaching of the Church. It can also be found in the wisdom and experience of the faith community or that of family, colleagues and friends. It takes courage and inner freedom to face the answer, but we can ask ourselves what the most frequent criticism is when we receive it.

There are other factors that can be an obstacle to good discernment. Poor physical or emotional health might suggest that we need sufficient rest and relaxation or recovery time to enable us to pray and reflect seriously. The aftermath of a major loss or bereavement, or the breakdown of a significant relationship, is not a good context for making choices and decisions requiring inner freedom. It is important that we take our emotions seriously before engaging in discernment. We may have formed attachments or compulsions that prevent us from being able to exercise freedom of mind and will. This is also important when it comes to having rigid attitudes, whether they be patterns of religious thinking or prejudices to which we cling. We may have become disconnected from feelings and memories that make us feel uncomfortable, or we may have got out of practice in using our imagination. This will make the charting of our affective responses difficult, as will being dominated by fears and anxieties or social and cultural factors that make it hard for us to think broadly.

The development of a discerning heart is something that happens over a long period of time. Some people enter into retreat or a time of discernment with the express purpose of coming to a momentous decision. Sometimes it turns out that they are not so much coming to a decision as coming to accept and acknowledge a decision already made, though that news has not yet reached their brain. It is often best not to focus on the decision itself, but to "park" it in a corner, where it can be acknowledged and treated with respect but not made the sole focus of attention. When the time is right, the choice often emerges organically, without having had to become the focus of a specific or separate process. It's as if the decision creeps up on us and makes its presence felt without us having noticed that we are making it.