

**Discernment for Holy Orders:  
Is God Calling Me to be an Aspirant for Holy Orders?  
(Abridged)**

**Chapter 1  
Getting Started**

The Christian life is about discernment. Many Americans are socialized to live a life that can be characterized as radically independent. We talk about doing our own thing and about following our bliss. We take great pride in being able to “do it my way.” I am encouraged to get my needs met or to grab all the gusto I can, as I move through life. I have my dreams and my goals that I relentlessly pursue. I am searching for what the humanistic psychologists call “self-actualization.”

In our Christian walk we deviate from this secular pathway to self-actualization, which will ultimately lead to self-destruction. We are called to a higher purpose. Jesus said that in losing ourselves we will find ourselves. How paradoxical is that? But, it sure is real. The Psalmist prayed, “Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness” (Psa. 115<sup>1</sup>; NIV). To the church at Galatia Paul writes, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2<sup>20</sup>; NIV). In a similar vein Paul explained to the Romans that “none of us lives to himself alone, and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord” (Rom. 14<sup>7-8</sup>; NIV). In his first letter to the church at Corinth Paul admonishes the Christians to eschew sexual immorality, because a Christian’s body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who was received from God. Then, Paul adds, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your body” (1 Cor. 6<sup>18-20</sup>; NIV). Holy Scripture is clear that as Christians, we are not our own.

Because we are Christians and have found our true identity in Christ Jesus, we live a life characterized by discernment. Instead of being relentless in our pursuit of self-actualization and the personal gain that accompanies such endeavors, we are seeking the mind of Christ. Paul instructs the Philippians to “let each of you not look to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,... (Phil 2 4-5; NRSV). If we are to take seriously that we no longer live to ourselves and that we live our lives in submission to God, then we must discern what God’s will is for our lives. We seek the mind of Christ in all things. Discerning God’s will for our lives is a perpetual endeavor.

This book is about such discernment. Although its purpose is to assist those who are potential aspirants for Holy Orders, the contents are useful to all who are discerning God’s will for their lives. Whether we are discerning for Holy Orders or not, God is calling us to ministry. All of us have been called to be participants into the priesthood of all believers. Peter stated, “you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into this wonderful light” (1 Pet 2 9; NIV). This book describes a process of discernment to assist you in finding this “wonderful light” in your life. The process may lead you into Holy Orders or not. Bear in mind that the outcome is not about what you want, but rather about what God wants for you. God has a plan for you. Your task is to discern what that plan is. Fortunately, you are not alone in this endeavor. Brothers and sisters in the faith are here to assist you in your searching. They will walk with you along this path of discernment. As you embark on this journey, pray that God’s Spirit will guide you each step of the way and will disclose to you and to those selected to walk with you, what his will is for your life.

### **In a Sense Every Christian is a Priest**

All Christians are ordained to Christian ministry by virtue of our baptism and confirmation. In the waters of baptism the recipient of the sacrament dies to self and

is resurrected as a new creature in Christ Jesus. In the same waters the person is initiated into the body of Christ on earth, which is the Church. This baptism is the beginning of a process characterized by transformation and regeneration. Baptism marks the beginning of our Christian pilgrimage. All human beings are born into the family of creation, which is alienated and separated from God because of our fallen nature and the transmission of original sin. In our baptism that sin is washed away, and we are adopted into the family of God. The sacrament of Holy Baptism replaced circumcision as the mark of the New Covenant. In baptism a conversion has occurred. The person has become a new creature in Christ. The old has passed away, and behold, all things have become new. Following the baptism the celebrant marks the newly baptized person's forehead with chrism and says, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. Amen." The newly baptized is received into the household of God. The newly baptized is then admonished to do three things: (1) confess the faith of Christ crucified; (2) proclaim his resurrection; and (3) share with us in his eternal priesthood." Baptism is an ordination of sorts into the sacred order of the priesthood of all believers. In 1 Peter 1<sup>9</sup> it is written, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God...." The tasks of ministry given to all believers in these acts of baptism and chrismation are: confession, proclamation, and sharing.

Through that same baptism the new Christian receives the gift of the Holy Spirit for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry. The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to all Christians to enable us to do the work of ministry to which we all have been called. Each of us is called to use these gifts to make our unique contributions to the Body of Christ. These spiritual gifts are discussed in Isaiah 11; 1 Corinthians 12 -14; Romans 12<sup>6-8</sup>; Ephesians 4<sup>11-13</sup>; and 1 Peter 4<sup>10-11</sup>.

In the Sacrament of Confirmation the bishop anoints the confirmand with chrism and lays hands on them for the express purpose of strengthening the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Confirmation completes baptismal grace and strengthens the recipient of the sacrament in their Christian walk. In the Sacrament of Confirmation

power is bestowed to enrich the person's ministry. Thus, in these Sacraments of Initiation all Christians are received into the Body of Christ and into a priesthood of believers.

### **Called to A Set Apart Ministry**

Holy Scripture and the tradition that has been passed onto us from the early church clearly show that some men were set apart into Holy Orders. The authority of the apostles was transferred through the laying on of hands to an episcopate order that was identified in the New Testament as bishops (*episcopos*). Apostolic authority was passed onto them. Credentials for men being consecrated to this sacred order are defined in 1 Timothy 3<sup>1 - 7</sup>. In the verses that follow [1 Timothy 3<sup>8 - 13</sup>] the qualifications of deacons (*diakonos*) are clearly specified. Holy Scripture is replete with references to a priesthood (*presbyteros*). The Book of Hebrews talks about Jesus Christ as being the Great High Priest and an order of priests after the Order of Melchizedek, which has its roots in the Abrahamic Covenant. Aaron and his sons were ordained to an order of priests as part of the Mosaic Covenant. New Testament scriptures such as: 1 Peter 5<sup>1 - 4</sup>; 1 Timothy 5<sup>17 - 22</sup>; and Ephesians 4<sup>7, 11 - 16</sup> address issues related to the work of the priests (*presbyteros*) in the community of believers.

In his writings to the six churches and to St. Polycarp, St. Ignatius of Antioch makes numerous references to Holy Orders and the hierarchical organization of the Christian Church. In St. Clement of Rome's Epistle to the Corinthians, he addresses the issue of apostolic authority, which is sent forth from Christ in the form of Holy Orders. He explains the concept of "apostolic succession." Building on the order in creation, he extends the discussion of order into the church. According to St. Clement of Alexandria, the Church's hierarchy is a reflection of the hierarchy in heaven. In 255 A.D. St. Cyprian argued that, "The bishop is in the Church, and the Church is in the bishop, and if anyone is not with the Bishop, he is not in the Church."<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine made a connection between the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Orders. He states that, "Each is a sacrament and is given by a certain consecration: the one when a man

is baptized, the other when he is ordained, and so in the Catholic Church it is not permitted to repeat either."<sup>2</sup> Consequently, a man is baptized only once and is ordained or consecrated to each holy order only once.

St. John Chrysostom recognized the holy nature of the office of the priest. He says:

The office of the priesthood is exercised on earth, but it ranks among things that are heavenly, and with good reason. For it was neither a man nor an angel nor an archangel nor any other created power, but the Paraclete himself who established this ministry.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the Holy Spirit, Himself, ordained and established these offices to serve the needs of the Church. As Mike Aquilina points out in his book *Roots of the Faith* this leadership that the Holy Spirit has created is a divine institution, which can be traced back to Jesus Himself and extended in an unbroken line of apostles down to the present day.<sup>4</sup>

By virtue of your baptism you have already been grafted into the priesthood that is composed of all Christians. Now, you are beginning a process of discerning whether God is calling you to a set apart ministry of Holy Orders. As you embark on this journey through the process of discernment, perhaps a good place to begin is by reflecting on the spiritual gifts that have been given to you by the Holy Spirit for the work of ministry. In the time that you have been a Christian how have you exercised these gifts in your lay ministry? You may want to keep a journal as you go through this process. By recording your thoughts and reflections on paper you are disciplining yourself to be intentional about your reflections. You can begin your journaling with a description of the ministry that you already have been given through your baptism and confirmation.

## **Keeping a Journal to Document Your Spiritual Journey Through Discernment**

There is no time like the present to introduce the spiritual discipline of journaling. Journaling allows you to track the course that your discernment pilgrimage will be taking. The journal provides a written record of where you have been that you can review along the way to assist in organizing your subjective experiences and in tracking the trajectory of your movement. Upon reviewing the contents of your journal you may discover or uncover new insights into your self, your beliefs, your relationships, and how God is working in and through these dimensions of your life.

So far, we have talked about the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, two Sacraments of Initiation. Sacraments are God's gifts to us, because they always are always focused on God's redemptive activity among us. These sacraments are about the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in our lives. They are about God's initiative in seeking us out. Christianity is the only world religion where the God seeks people out and invites them to dinner. Sacraments are an extension of the incarnation and God's initiative in sending his only begotten Son into the World to redeem us. Consequently, baptism and confirmation are not really about me. They are about God's initiative in reaching out to me and drawing me toward Him through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. Baptism and confirmation are my response to God's initiative with me. Christianity is about having a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Jesus reaches out to you and me, and we either respond by entering into a relationship with Him, or we reject his initiative and his invitation for us to be in relationship with Him.

In the second creation saga in Genesis 2<sup>4b</sup>- 3 God had developed a practice of coming into the garden to walk with the people He had created. Apparently, Adam and Eve were eager to see God and were right there ready to respond to his greeting. On that fateful day after the people had partaken of the forbidden fruit, God came into the garden and immediately recognized that something was wrong. How did He know that something was wrong? The people who were generally eager to see Him

were nowhere around. So, God calls out to summon them, still taking the initiative to find them, and Adam replies that he is naked and afraid. Adam was experiencing shame; the natural inclination is to hide one's face when one is feeling shame. Consequently, Adam was hiding his entire body, because he felt so much shame. Whereas the essential nature of man was to be in an intimate relationship with God, the disobedience and the betrayal of God erected a barrier in that relationship. The new existential nature of man was to avoid being in relationship with God and to reject his overtures to be in covenant with us. The purpose of the Christ event was to heal that narcissistic wound, so that once again we could open ourselves up and have a receptive heart in response to God's initiative to be in relationship with us.

Baptism became the new circumcision, the new mark of the covenant. The Incarnation empowered baptism. Baptism became the vehicle for me to have restored relationship with God. God paved the way and extended the invitation. I merely avail myself to the overture. Baptism grafts me into the vine that Jesus talked about in St. John's Gospel. Through baptism I am adopted into the family of God. God made it happen. My response is to be grateful. Everything that I do in response is an expression of my gratitude.

Baptism is not predicated on my profession of faith. Rather, it is based on God's gift of Word and Sacrament. The conversion that occurs in baptism is not on account of anything that I am doing in the sacrament; the conversion occurs because of what God is doing in the sacrament. This sacramental theology does not minimize the importance of my response. I am not a passive responder in this process. I am an active responder. My activity is to open myself up so that I can be a receptacle of God's grace. I must be receptive to God's activity in my life. If I think of my relationship with God, as if we were dancing together, God, through the person of the Holy Spirit, is the choreographer, and He leads. My responsibility is always to follow his lead.

The first journaling task has three parts. First, write about your understanding of how you became a Christian. In your mind how did that occur? What happened? You may want to reflect on your understanding of sacraments in general and of baptism and confirmation in particular? How did you get to where you are now in your pilgrimage of faith? What path has your pilgrimage of faith taken? How did you get here from there? Second, when God adopted you or grafted you into his family, the Church, what spiritual gifts did the Holy Spirit give to you? Perhaps additional gifts were given along the way as various needs arose. If you are uncertain about the spiritual gifts you have, you may wish to get some spiritual direction to assist in identifying the spiritual gifts you have and to examine why they are so hidden. Third, reflect on and write about how your ministry has evolved as a layperson in Christ's "One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church." In this series of reflections, focus on your entry into Christ's Church and the ministry that you have developed as a dedicated and committed Christian.

### **Getting Started with Discernment**

In order to get started off on the right foot, talk with your priest about helping you to convene a discernment committee composed of committed Christians whose judgment and discernment you trust. Pray about who to approach and ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Your discernment committee should be consist of four people, preferably laypeople, who can meet with you over a protracted period of time. There is no rush. The Holy Spirit works in his time, and you cannot push the river. In one of the Pastoral Epistles Paul admonishes Timothy "not to ordain anyone hastily" (1 Tim 5<sup>22</sup>;NRSV). Work with your priest to convene your committee and begin working with them. Below is a list of 10 recommendations to help structure your discernment. Share this list with your committee. Then, pray...and listen!



## **The Discernment Process: A Way to Structure and Monitor Your Progress Along the Path**

1. Be diligent in prayer. In the *Christian Priest Today*, former Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, describes the priest as a “man of prayer.” A central focus of the priest’s prayer life is intercession. Bishop Ramsey says that intercessory prayer is to “be with God (adoration) with the people on our heart (intercession)” (15). For the man in Holy Orders prayer is not a specialized activity but is a way of life. The writer of Hebrews describes Jesus as the Great High Priest. In his description of Jesus’ activities he writes, “He always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7.25). In the Spirit of Jesus be diligent in prayer and record what you notice in your body, heart, mind, and soul.
  
2. Pray at least one of the Daily Offices (either Morning Prayer or Evening Prayer) each day. Bishop Ramsey indicates that “The point of the Daily Office is to root your prayer in the scriptures and in the Church’s corporate prayer.” American spirituality has embraced a radically individualistic perspective on prayer. The Daily Offices remind us of our connection to the Church, who is the corporate Body of Christ. Consider developing a practice of praying Compline at bedtime. This practice is a really good couple or family activity.
  
3. Keep a **prayer journal** that documents your discernment process. An advantage of keeping a journal is that you can review it to gain insights into the process and to identify patterns that have emerged. A journal provides an outward and tangible document of an inward and spiritual journey.
  
4. During this time of discernment read one or more of the following books on the priesthood and the diaconate.

*The Christian Priest Today* by Bishop Michael Ramsey

*The Priest is Not His Own* by Bishop Fulton Sheen

*Many Are Called* by Dr. Scott Hahn  
*Deacons in the Liturgy, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* By Ormonde Plater

5. Through our baptism each Christian is received into the sacred order of the priesthood of all believers, which is an ordination of sorts. Hands were laid on us in the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation through which we were commissioned to a life of ministry as a disciple of Jesus Christ. What have you done with that ordination? What ministries have you already developed? How do you see your life in a context of ministry now?

6. The Anglican Church is a Catholic Church, part of the "One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church" that we confess in the Nicene Creed. The Holy Orders of the Diaconate and Priesthood are different from other forms of Protestant ordination, just as in the Reformation the reformation that resulted in Anglicanism was different from the reformation that was occurring on the continent of Europe. Do you recognize such a difference? What is your developing understanding of that difference?

7. What does it mean to be Anglican? The 1888 Lambeth Quadrilateral listed four essential beliefs to be considered Anglican:

1. Authority of Scripture
2. Ecumenical Creeds, especially Nicene, Apostles and Athanasian
3. Historical episcopate and apostolic succession
4. Sacraments, minimally Baptism and Holy Eucharist

What does being Anglican mean to you? What are the distinctive features that set us apart from other Christian groups?

8. Begin working on a faith statement. What is it that you believe? This statement will be a work in progress. Peter advises, "Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3.15b).

9. As you move through this discernment process keep your attention focused on the following dimensions of your experience:

- What is the Holy Spirit communicating to me about a call to a set apart ministry? Include reflections on these experiences in your journal.
- Why do you think you are being called to Holy Orders? For what purpose? In your reflections include ways that your experiences are similar to that described by others who have been called. Consider the following cases:
  - God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17)
  - Call of Moses (Exodus 3)
  - Call of Samuel to be a priest (1 Samuel 3)
  - Prophetic calls:
    - Elijah
    - Elisha (1 Kings 19.19-21)
    - Isaiah (Isaiah 6. 1-6)
    - Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1)
    - Ezekiel (Ezekiel 2-3)
  - Jesus calls 12 apostles (Matthew 4.18-22; Mark 1. 16 – 20; Luke 5.1 – 11; See also John 20. 19-23)
  - Saul's conversion and identity change (Acts 9. 1-31)
- Why Holy Orders in the Anglican Church? Why ACNA? Why Missionary Diocese of All Saints?
- Holy Orders involve a life of obedience and service. How do you see these virtues fitting into and affecting your life?
- Where are you with self-sacrifice, self-discipline, and suffering?
- What do you believe about tithing? Do you consider tithing to be the biblical norm for managing your finances?
- How do I know that God is really calling me to Holy Orders?

10. Use your priest mentor and your discernment committee. Be open in your self-disclosure. Talk with the priest and the committee about your disclosures, insights

and awareness, struggles, questions, doubts, fears, concerns.... These people are there to be supportive of you. Always bear in mind that you are not going through this process alone.

## **Chapter2**

### **Decisions... Decisions...Decisions**

#### **The Spiritual Dimension and its Impact**

We don't live in a biological vacuum. Our biological existence occurs in a larger spiritual context. The Christian worldview holds that we exist in the context of a spiritual reality that seeks to influence the choices we make. Our choices are not merely the expression of our genetic predisposition and its hardwiring meeting everyday sensory experiences. What we believe goes something like this.

God created all that has existence. He looked at it and determined that it was good. Human beings were a part of this creation. God created us to live in relationship with Him and with each other. When the structure for this creation was established, God imposed one restriction. God established a boundary between himself as the Creator and human beings as the creatures. Implicit in this creation was a hierarchy. It would be incumbent upon the human creatures to always know our place in the created order. Effectually, God's instruction was that we have free access to nearly all aspects of the creation except for the fruit of one tree, which was established from the beginning to be off limits. Free access was given to everything else in the creation. The license did not include access to this one tree. That doesn't seem so tough. It doesn't seem to be unreasonable, and initially our ancestors had no difficulty complying with the imposed restriction, but here is the fly in ointment.

We live in a context of a spiritual reality that is composed of both good and evil. This spiritual world that is superimposed over the physical world is dichotomous with a conflict between these two forces—good and evil. In the context of the creation

“good” is defined as being obedient to God and the restriction that He imposed. After all, He is God, and we are not God. We are creatures and not “The Creator.” Rank has its privilege. The “good” constitutes one of the dimensions in this spiritual reality. What about the other side?

The other side is the evil dimension. “Evil” is defined as disobedience to God’s directive. God wants us to do the right thing. Unfortunately, there is opposing counsel who desperately tries to persuade us to be disobedient by placing temptations into our path in the hope that we will deviate from God’s plan and follow the enticement that is implicit in the temptation. Whether we like it or not, this conflict of spiritual realities has been programmed into that DNA/hardwiring we have been talking about. We are caught in that spiritual conflict. St. Paul really understood this reality. In Romans 7<sup>18 - 25</sup> he writes, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good that I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now, if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it... What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Paul had a keen understanding of this spiritual warfare that raged within him. We can make a distinction between the essential nature of man and the existential nature of man. The essential nature of man is how God created us in his image to be obedient to the order He established in creation. After we blew it in “The Fall,” we took on an existential nature that Paul is describing in the Romans text quoted above. When our essential nature became contaminated with sin, it became our existential nature, as sin and the propensity to sin became endemic to who we are as human beings.

A Christian anthropology that is true to Holy Scripture and to the apostolic tradition recognizes that our decisions are influenced by this spiritual conflict that continues to exist, even today in our postmodern world, between good and evil. The

Christian tradition has personalized this battle by identifying the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, this God who sent his Only Begotten Son into the world to restore humanity's essential nature with the forces of good. On the opposing side evil is identified to be in the person of a devil who is named Satan. Evil forces continue to influence our decision-making by trying to seduce us away from being and doing good.

We do not have to spend a lot of time around people to see the effects of this seduction of evil. We see the effects even in very young children. For example, consider the toddler who knows that he is not permitted to touch the TV's remote control, but he is drawn to this remote, as if it contained a magnet that pulled him in its direction. He gravitates to the remote, and just as he reaches out his hand toward the remote, he looks at his mother who is seated nearby and grins, as he reaches toward the forbidden object just waiting to see what her response will be. He has not had an opportunity to learn to be disobedient. He didn't have to learn it. It's programmed into his DNA. It's part of the existential nature of mankind.

### **Implications of Christian Anthropology for Making Choices**

What have we learned about human choices? First, our existence is a perpetual and never ending progression of choices. Many of these choices are on automatic pilot, and we don't have to think about them at all. If we did have to think about them, we would be instantly overwhelmed by the stimulus demands, and nothing would get done. Neural circuits would be completely overloaded. Having many choices on automatic pilot is a good thing. It frees up attention for the really important choices. There may be choices that we currently have on automatic pilot, because they have become habits that we really need to get off automatic pilot. That is, there may be things that I do automatically without thinking about doing them or about the consequences of doing them that I may need to be more intentional about. I can ask God to bring those choices into my awareness. As I become conscious of these choices, I can give them more intentional consideration and take steps to make

necessary changes that would enable me to be more in compliance with God's desires for me.

### **Journaling Opportunities to Understand Your Decision-making Processes**

Now we move upstairs, so to speak, to address the choices that are before us. What are the choices in your life that are currently highlighted in your awareness? Presumably, one of the choices has to do with vocation. How will you make a decision about that area of your life? Ostensibly, one might expect that you would approach this decision much the same way as you approach other significant decisions in your life. You may want to make your journal into an awareness journal where you record what you are aware of in your experience that seems relevant in one way or another to this decision-making endeavor. What are you discovering about how decisions are made in your life? What is the process that you go through? You may want to begin by looking at the many choices that you make throughout the course of your day and decisions you make. They are not of equal valence and require more or less consideration depending on the level of importance. Reflect on your decision-making process.

What is your history with decision-making? Do you typically make good decisions or is there a pattern in your life of making poor decisions that you need to recover from? You may want to journal about some decisions that you have made that have had a terrific outcome. Juxtapose them with decisions you have made that have not worked out so well. What are the differences? Is there a pattern that emerges in how you make decisions that have a positive outcome and those that have a negative one? To what extent are your decisions influenced by thoughts about good and evil? How conscious are you in thinking about and reflecting on the sin in your life? As we have seen, thinking about sin is not a popular notion in our culture.

You may want to spend time reflecting on the process you go through to make really important decisions. Do you rely only on your own resources or do you tend

to involve others? If you involve others in your deliberations, how do you select the other players and what role do they play? Do you seek advice? Do you take advice? Do you seek input only from others who you think will agree with you?

Another dimension to consider in your journaling has to do with how your personality features influence your decision-making? How does the person you are affect how you make decisions? For example, are you open-minded and flexible in your thinking or do you tend to be stubborn and rigid? Do you jump to conclusions, arriving at a definitive decision quickly, or are you patient in your deliberations? Do you typically give consideration to many relevant details or do you find that you miss a lot of important considerations? Do you look at all sides of an issue? Do you consider the many facets of a decision, various assets and liabilities, advantages and disadvantages? Do you imagine different scenarios and possible outcomes of each? Are you able to anticipate a future? Or, do you find that you tend to be trapped in the now with your time perspective? When you make decisions, to what extent are your choices based on needs for pleasure, status, prestige, power, dependency, independence, comfort, or prosperity? How much do you make choices that are based on a need for avoidance?

It would be beneficial for you to take an in-depth look at your decision-making practices. Are important decisions made intentionally, or do they often just happen, sort of in a default mode? There is an old expression—"Not to decide is to decide." Spend a lot of time reflecting on the decision-making process in your own life and experience. Look for trends and patterns. See if you can identify aspects of your decision-making process that you think are really good and important to hang onto to. Also, be honest with yourself in looking at the characteristics of your decision-making that need to be overhauled and restructured.

You are about to embark on a discernment process that will culminate in one of the most important decisions of your life. We started this journey looking at your initiation into the Body of Christ. That process started with a decision on somebody's



part to influence you in a particular direction in your spiritual and personal development. Or, it started with a choice you made to respond to God's offer of new life in Christ Jesus. Either way, that choice set you on a course that has brought you to where you are today. At some juncture you made other choices along the way that have had implications for this course that you have charted. One such choice was the choice to be confirmed, to have a man consecrated in apostolic succession to lay hands on you to strengthen the power of the Holy Spirit in your life. Ostensibly, you have been choosing to use these experiences and the gifts that come with them to live out the faith commitment you have made in some intentional way. Now, you have arrived at another decision point. What does God want for your life? What is God's plan for you? How can you identify it and how might you be able to execute it? Spend time reflecting on these things.

In the chapters that follow we will move into the actual discernment process. The next chapter will examine what discernment is and how it can be done. Keep your journal accessible. Please write about your reflections and disclosures. Be honest with yourself. If you are having trouble getting into the intentionality of this process, what do you think it means? Many years ago Plato determined that "The unexamined life is not worth living."

## Chapter 3

### Discerning the Will of God in All Things

In this chapter we will look at discernment as a general spiritual discipline. As you engaged in your journaling at the close of Chapter 2, what discoveries did you make? A really important evaluative question is: How prominent a role has God been playing in your decision-making? Is He regularly consulted? If so, how extensively? The Ignatians talk about approaching discernment with an attitude of "detachment." The Benedictines call that attitude "indifference." The meanings are synonymous. The intention of both is to encourage us to enter into discernment without a specific desire concerning the outcome. Often, there is a propensity to approach discernment with a preconceived notion about the outcome we desire. If you come out of this discernment using language like "I really want to be ordained a deacon," you have missed the intent of the process. What you want is secondary in this process to a more important consideration. The primary question in this endeavor is not what you want, but rather, *what does God want?* Is it God's desire that you be ordained to Holy Orders? How do you know that to be true?

If in your journaling you discovered that many of your decisions are influenced by needs for status, prestige, or power, your desire to be considered for Holy Orders may be motivated more by your personal needs for such narcissistic supplies than by a desire to do God's will. Deacons and priests are expected to die to self, which is the symbolism of the gray and black clerics. The dark color symbolizes that in the ordination the ordinand has died to self. The white collar symbolizes a yoke of obedience. Together the meaning is that the ordinand has died to self and is yoked to Christ. As St. Paul writes, "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2<sup>20</sup>, NIV). As you read the pages that follow attend to how your patterns of decision-making behavior line up with this process of discernment that is being described.

## **What is Meant by Discernment?**

The word discernment comes from the Latin *discernere*, which literally means “to separate, set apart, mark off, bound, part, or divide.” In discernment we are attempting to set a boundary around what we understand to be the will of God so that we can separate that information from what may constitute our own desires or interests in the matter reflecting my will rather than his will.

In effect discernment is a search that we are instigating to enable us to discover what God has in store for us. It is a search whose objective is discovering the will of God for our lives in whatever matter is before us. As Christians, we discern before we decide. Otherwise, we are merely pursuing our own agenda, the product of our own stubborn will to have it the way we want it, rather than as He wants it.

## **Discernment Begins with Prayer**

If one is sincere about finding the will of God, then one has to be in conversation with God, which begs the question, how's your prayer life? Do you pray the daily offices? Do you pray compline before retiring at the end of your day? In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus provides scripted instructions on how to structure prayer in the form of prayer that is commonly called the “Our Father” or “The Lord’s Prayer.” In Luke 11 his disciples approach him with a request, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples” (Luke 11 <sup>1</sup>; NIV). His instruction contains a form very similar to the model described in Matthew 6.

In Romans 8 <sup>26</sup> St. Paul explains that we really don't know what we ought to pray for. Fortunately, the Spirit will intercede for us with groans that are beyond verbal expression. God who searches our hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because the manner in which the Spirit intercedes is congruent with God's will for us. Through this Spirit that is within us we can cry “Abba, Father” (Romans 8 <sup>15</sup>). God's Spirit testifies with our spirit in such a way that we are children of God. According to Paul

we are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if we share in his sufferings in order to share in his glory. Oh, did we say that being under Holy Orders can involve suffering? How does that prospect sound?

How do you structure your prayer life? In your prayer life do you depend on the Spirit's intercession? How does that happen for you? The scripture from Romans 8 referenced the participation of the Holy Spirit in the form of collaboration with our spirit and in intercession with our spirit. The Holy Spirit resides within us. In 1 Corinthians 6<sup>19</sup> St. Paul asks the Corinthians about whether they know that their bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit that they have received as a gift from God. He informs them that in their Christian walk they are not their own but have been bought with a price. Since the Holy Spirit resides within them, they are admonished to honor God with their bodies.

In the Nicene Creed we confess that we believe in the Holy Spirit, the giver of life who proceeds from the Father [and the Son, although there is some dispute about the *filioque clause*). In this confession we are acknowledging that our spiritual existence is dependent on the Holy Spirit breathing life into us. Within orthodoxy there is what is called a *taxis*, which is a prescribed order of progression. It goes like this: from the Father, through the Son, to/in the Spirit. This is the progression that God follows to get to us. There is also a *reverse taxis* which enables us to gain access to God, and that progression goes this way: From the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father. Apart from the Spirit we would have no access to God. In Hebrew Scriptures all participants in the covenant did not receive the Spirit. The Spirit was given only to specific persons who were called to particular functions. The prophets represented such a group of persons. On Pentecost the Holy Spirit was made available to all persons who repented of their sins and were baptized into the community of faith. The Holy Spirit is a tremendous resource in our lives, as we seek to discern and to understand God's will for our lives. How do you draw on that resource in your prayer life and in your discernment? That question is not just relevant to discernment for Holy Orders. Its application is much broader. How do you rely on the Holy Spirit in

all your decision-making practices? How does the Holy Spirit inform your practices surrounding prayer?

### **Prayer of Examen**

In his *Spiritual Exercises* (no. 43) St. Ignatius of Loyola introduced a model for prayer that he called the Prayer of Examen. This prayer is a formula for the examination of conscience and for use during periods of discernment. St. Ignatius's personal experiences with this prayer are recorded in his *Spiritual Diary*. St. Ignatius used journaling as a way of reflecting on his experiences.

In his book, *The Examen Prayer*, Fr. Timothy Gallagher, OMV selected a typical day from St. Ignatius's diary as an illustration of how St. Ignatius made use of the examen prayer. The date was 12 March 1544. Ignatius was 53 years old. Although he had already accumulated an extensive track record of faithful prayer, sensitivity to God's call on his life, and receptivity to God's love and grace, there continued to be periods when he struggled to really comprehend what God wanted him to do. 12 March 1544 was such a day. As Fr. Timothy relates the story, he sets the scene in Rome where Ignatius was living. Ignatius began the day like most days with quiet and fervent prayer. At the conclusion of his prayer he went to take on the day. His days were filled with grueling demands. According to the secretary that traveled with him, he had been sick for nearly four months, leaving him in a weakened condition. Ignatius was actively involved in a sacramental ministry to the dying in Rome and was occupied with the establishment of a group home for women in trouble. He offered spiritual direction to those who wanted it. He attempted to provide spiritual assistance to several men, one of whom was highly resistant and contentious. In addition, he helped settle disputes and engaged in a practice of conflict management. All these activities were over and above his responsibilities as the leader of the Society of Jesus, which was expanding throughout Europe and beyond. After his "customary prayer" that was filled with "much devotion," he was busy.

Ignatius paused in his excessively demanding schedule to celebrate the Eucharist. He prepared to celebrate the Mass by saying prayers. As he entered the sanctuary, he became aware of desolation (a spiritual disturbance). He was bothered by distractions caused by disruptions that were occurring around him. He realized that often such reactivity to external disruptions can be a manifestation of desolation within himself. He questioned whether that might be the case in this current situation. He returned to the privacy of his anteroom to resume prayers of preparation for the Mass. When in doubt, return to prayer, as Ignatius modeled in this vignette from his life.

The prayer of examen is an examination of consciousness and conscience. Plato believed that the unexamined life is not worth living. From a Christian perspective the unexamined life is not an option. The prayer of examen provides a structure that enables us to reflect on our experiences of the day. Our reflections occur in the context of our relationship with God. Because the prayer of examen involves reflecting on personal experience, the end of the day is a good time to do it.

When you are ready to begin the prayer, find a quiet and peaceful place away from the obvious distractions. Often when Jesus prayed, the evangelists tell us that he went off by himself to commune with the Father. You will want to find such a place that works for you; a place where you are unlikely to be interrupted. Get comfortable and just allow yourself to become centered. You may want to begin by just focusing on your breathing, as you open yourself up to this experience with the Almighty. Don't rush the process; you can't push the river. The river just flows.

Then, as a way of transitioning into the examen prayer spend some time reflecting on the love God has for you. In a mindful way just allow yourself to be aware of God's love for you. Focus your attention on his love and all the ways that you experience his love manifested in your life. If your mind wanders, don't be critical of yourself, just accept the distraction and bring yourself back to the present moment and the love of God in your life. When you are ready, ease into the examen. In

preparation for the examen you may want to reflect on some Psalms, such as the following:

O God, you are my God,  
for you I long;  
for you my soul is thirsting (63:1).

Search me O God, and know my heart;  
test me, and know my thoughts.  
See if there is a wicked way in me,  
And lead me in the way everlasting (139: 23-24).

According to Father Gallagher (2006, p. 29), the prayer of examen consists of five distinct steps. In the first step, you **thank God** for the blessings of the day that you just lived. In the second step you **ask for grace** to be able to see and acknowledge your failings. The third step involves **reviewing** the experiences of the day to see our spiritual existence throughout everything that happened. Remember that God was in all that happened, because God is in all things. The Psalmist reminds us that we cannot go where God is not. God is in all of our experiences; it is up to us to find Him. In the fourth step you **seek God's forgiveness** for all the things you may have done and for the things you have left undone. In the fifth step **plan** for the coming day and the events and experiences that God has planned for you. How are you anticipating the reception of them? This is not a time to worry about the future. Remember Jesus' lilies of the field who give no thought for that they will put on. God has it covered. So, regardless of what you may be expecting to happen, don't sweat it. Remember, God is in it someplace. You'll figure it out. Rather than worry or fret, this is a time for you to prepare your heart and mind for another day in God's providential care.

In their book *The God of Intimacy and Action*, Campola and Darling (2008) have provided an outline for doing the examen in four steps. The first step is finding an

appropriate location for doing the prayer. In line with Fr. Gallagher's suggestion solitude and silence are recommended, if such space is available where you are. If not, this time can become an exercise in developing a discipline to shut out the noise and distractions of the outside world and to create your own internal sacred space. Over time you will develop a sense of your needs and what works for you. If you find yourself in a situation where there are distractions, merely identify the distraction, accept it, and draw your attention back to your internal process. After you have arranged appropriate spatial accommodations, begin by praying Psalm 139: 23 – 24 and follow it with a prayer of contrition that can go something like this example:

Heavenly Father, I thank you for your grace and mercy made available to me through the sacrifice of your Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and for the gift of your Holy Spirit, the sustainer and guide of my life. As I pause to reflect on the events and experiences of the day that has passed, I pray that you will remove all obstacles and defenses that might prevent me from seeing myself, as you see me through the lens of your unconditional love and acceptance of me. Open my heart and mind to be receptive to the movement of your Spirit and help me to listen with the ear of my heart that I might receive whatever you have for me. Help me to be completely honest on my presentation of myself to you, holding nothing back, and help me to share in St. Paul's affirmation that there is nothing within me or outside of me that can separate me from your incredible love through Christ Jesus. Amen.

After you complete the prayer, take a few minutes to sit in quiet contemplation just being with God. When you are ready, continue to step 2, which is the actual process of examination. Review your day's activities with openness, acceptance, and gratitude. Embrace a spirit of acceptance and reconciliation. You can use the following outline to structure your self-examination, as you review and reflect on your day's activities. In Lamentations 3: 40 we are instructed to "Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord."



Begin with a running record of the events, activities, and experiences that composed your day. You may want to compose a bulleted list of the events, activities, and experiences that seem to be most salient, which you write out. When you have completed your summary, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Did I present my body as a living sacrifice in a way that would be holy and pleasing to God, which is my spiritual worship? Or, did I use my body in a way that would not reflect favorably on the goodness of God's creation [e.g. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, what kind of dwelling or residence did I provide today? Did I treat my body in an abusive or negligent way?].
2. Did I conform my behavior to the secular standards promulgated by the world rather than to allow my heart to be transformed by the renewing of my mind?
3. In my decision-making did I seek the mind of Christ by discerning the will of God—what is good and pleasing to Him, or was I insistent on having my way in matters? Did I submit my stubborn will to the sweet will of God?
4. Did I give any thought today to how I fit into the Body of Christ with regard to my particular configuration of spiritual gifts that have been entrusted to me for the building up of the Body of Christ? Did I investigate ways that I can use my spiritual gifts to build up Christ's incarnate Body in the world today in the particular settings where I found myself [e.g. family, work, community, etc]. Am I doing my part to advance the cause of Christ in the world? Did I put the needs of Christ, his Church, and others ahead of my own needs or was it me first and Christ further down the list? Am I making effective use of my spiritual gifts and discerning ways to apply them?
5. Did I exhibit love and respect for others as my Christian standard for right living today?
  - a. Were my expressions of love genuine?
  - b. Did I exhibit appropriate hatred for what is evil?
  - c. Did I express love for others with mutuality?
  - d. What are the ways I showed honor for others? Was I humble and respectful in my interactions with others?

6. Did I hold fast to what is good, or did I drift away into areas of questionable conduct where the name of Jesus was not glorified and my witness was either compromised or nonexistent?
7. Was I enthusiastic in doing the Lord's service? Did I express a gentle spirit characterized by gratitude for all the Lord's blessings? Was I thankful in all things?
8. How did I handle periods of adversity? Did I rejoice in hope or did I complain and become defeated? Was I patient in suffering? Did I persevere in prayer or did I get discouraged and give up?
9. Was I generous and gracious in my dealings with others, even those who sought to annoy me? Was I a person for others or was I demanding and self-centered in my interactions?
10. Did I bless others today, even those who are persecutory or abusive in their manner of relating to me? Did I bless them and not curse them?
11. Did I share in the joys and sorrows of others? Was I empathetic of their circumstances? Was I open and responsive to the needs of others—their joys and sorrows or did I dodge opportunities to be a witness to the love of Jesus Christ in responding to others?
12. Am I living harmoniously with others in my life or was I acrimonious? When there is conflict, am I managing it compassionately or am I hostile? Am I avoiding conflict and confrontations or am I speaking the truth in love? Am I a peacemaker? As much as it depends on me, am I doing my part to live peaceably with all people?
  - a. Am I humble or prideful/haughty? Do I accept what the Lord gives me with humility or do I act as if I am entitled to have what I want when I want it? Do I think more highly of myself than what is right? Do I associate with people who are at lower stations in life than I, or do I see myself as being above them or better than they are?
  - b. Do I see myself as being wiser than I really am? Am I arrogant about who I am?

- c. When I feel as if I have been wronged, do I seek retribution or do I exhibit a forgiving spirit? Do I seek to repay evil for evil? Am I willing to defer to God who alone has the prerogative to seek vengeance? Have I forgiven others, as I want to be forgiven?
  - d. When I saw my enemies in need, did I respond to them in a generous manner or did I ignore them in the belief that they have received what they deserve? Am I hospitable even with those who mistreat me?
13. Have I persevered against the causes of evil in the world that have been placed in my path or have I succumbed to the temptations that befall me? Have I permitted myself to be overcome by evil or have I sought to overcome evil with good? Have I looked for positive outcomes to situations that occur so that good can triumph over evil?

Self-examination is hard, especially if we have not been as successful as we might like. The purpose of this discipline is not to brow beat ourselves with our failures or short-comings. We always have them, as a part of the human condition, the existential nature of who we are. Although we were created in the image of God, that image is our essential nature. The fall spoiled our capacity to exude that image, leaving us with an existential nature that is vulnerable to the effects of sin. Accepting who we are includes recognizing our plight.

Now that the day is out on the table along with our honest analysis of where we are, step three involves reflecting on the day's activities, events, and experiences, both the successes and the failures. Maintain a balanced view of yourself. If you find yourself being skewed in a direction of being overly idealizing of yourself, such that you are injuring your arm patting yourself on the back, you are likely missing some things. Likewise, if you find yourself being excessively harsh, negative, judgmental, and self-demeaning, you are also omitting or underplaying the things in your life that you should legitimately rise up and call blessed. If you are being realistic in your appraisal, your day was likely a combination of successes and failures, peppered with both strengths and weaknesses, because that is who we are. We all have our Achilles

heel, areas where we tend to be more vulnerable to temptations, and we also have our areas of strength where we are able to excel with the Lord's guidance and mercy. It is important that we operate out of a balanced view of ourselves with a realistic perspective on who we are as persons, a combination of positive traits that we are eager to embrace with appreciation and negative features that emanate from the harness of our hearts. If we are committed to the cause of Christ, the Holy Spirit is at work transforming those features that we and others find less attractive in us. We are always a work in progress. If you do the prayer of examen on a regular basis you will begin to identify a pattern or strengths and weaknesses, which will become grist for the mill. Throughout it all, keep these thoughts in mind:

Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, If there is excellence or if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (Philippians 4:8).

In step four we pray a prayer of confession. I might go something like this:

Thank you Jesus, for what you have shown me about my day, and for the good work that you have begun in me to transform my heart and mind, to make it more like the mind that was in Christ Jesus. Help me to accept with gratitude and renewed humility everything that you have revealed to me, as I have reflected on the events of our day together. I pray that you will prepare me for tomorrow that I may do better in those areas where I have shown weakness and to build on my strengths. Open my heart and mind to what the Holy Spirit reveals to me about how I might prepare for tomorrow. Expand my vision and hearing that I might see and hear your will for my life. Give me a discerning heart, and help me to listen with the ear of my heart. I ask that your Holy Spirit will give me the courage to honestly confront the destructive patterns in my life that present obstacles in my pathway and that hinder me from being the person you created me to be. Forgive me for those things I have done that I ought not to have done and for failing to do those things that you wanted me

to do but in my fear and human frailty could not do. Thank you for all the ways that your love is manifested in me and help me to be a purveyor of that love to others. Help me to recognize my utter helplessness in being able to make changes on my own and help me to be receptive to what I must allow you to transform in my life. Give me strength and courage to persevere in the faith even in times of adversity and suffering. Thank you for blessing my heart's true desire to love and to serve you and to bless others in your name. Please continue to do the work that you have begun in me to enable me to love and serve others in your name that others may see more of Jesus in me and less of me in me. I pray in the name of Jesus who is the Christ. Amen.

Finish step four with this benediction and prayer from Pope Clement VI:

Volo quidquid vis  
    volo qui avis,  
volo quomodo vis,  
    volo quamdiu vis

I want to what you wish,  
    in the way that You wish it,  
for as long as You wish it,  
    because You wish it.

Now, you have completed the prayer of examen. What are you discovering about yourself? Over time, you will begin to see patterns emerge consisting of areas in your life that are true strengths. You will undoubtedly find other areas that need work. Hopefully, as Christians we are on path to holiness, but it is a process of purgation. Be patient with yourself and accept God's mercy and grace to be the person God created you to be. One of the really neat things about being Christian is that we don't have to get down on ourselves when we trip and stumble, because He is there to pick us up, dust us off, and get us going again. We are not in this endeavor

we call life alone. He is with us, and we can trust Him to do his part. In Christ God confirmed his dependability not just as a promise-maker but also as a promise-keeper. As they say, we can take that to the bank!