

HOW TO DISCERN

By Sister Rosann Ocken, O.S.B.

The process of discernment of a vocation can leave one undecided at best and distraught at worst. The path can seem painfully obscure and the destination out of reach. So, how does one go about searching out or discerning what we call a vocation?

Essentially, discernment means to distinguish, to sort out. To discern your vocation means to sort through the movements of your heart and unfold the truth of who you most deeply are. In discernment you discover the best way for you to live in this truth before God.

In my own discernment experiences and in assisting men and women in theirs, I have come to realize there are three basic steps of discernment. I call it the BLT method of discernment. To discern God's way in our hearts, we must:

- * *Believe*
- * *Listen*
- * *Trust*



Believe God loves you

The beginning of discernment is a step many forget. You must first believe that God loves you very much! God created you in all your uniqueness, beauty, gifts and weaknesses. God wants your good, your peace and your happiness.

But already in this beginning step, we can get derailed! We become overly self-conscious; we feel inadequate; we become un-empowered and lose energy. We stop short of discerning and responding to the Spirit's call within us when we do not believe that we are good or talented enough or do not believe we are forgiven.

Many of us see our gifts as half-gifts. "You know, I'm really not special; let someone else who is better than I am do that." This is a sin that we suffer; it's the sin of not believing God's action and grace in our lives. It is easy to say, "I believe in God,"-a powerful God somewhere out there far away from me. But our faith falls short when we fail to make the next step saying, "I believe in God living and working in me." God desires to use even our "half-gifts" and weaknesses according to His wonderful and wise plan.

Thoughts of doubt came easily to my mind when I first began my journey in the Lord and they can continue to tempt me when I get caught up thinking I must be perfect in order to serve God faithfully. The danger is that I can become knotted, insecure and splintered when I focus on myself, my weaknesses, my inadequacies. I get scared at times when I'm faced with my limitations. Although it is good for me to know my weaknesses, it is crucial to be able to put even these at the service of God. One of my favorite scripture passages is from

Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians: "God said, 'My grace is enough for you, for in weakness power reaches perfection.' And so I willingly boast of my weaknesses instead, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor. 12:9-10). Thus it is through struggle that I have come to believe that God desires to work through the whole me, strengths and weaknesses; even my "half-gifts" are gifts to share, and in the power of God, they bear great fruit.

The second aspect of our believing has to do with sin and forgiveness. It seems we can fail to fully accept God's forgiveness. Oh yes, we know in our heads that God forgives, but somehow we feel it is important to hold tightly to the memory of our mistakes and sins. Even long after we ask for and receive forgiveness, we can be chained by our sins when we refuse to live in the forgiveness we have received. This can greatly affect our freedom to believe in and respond to God's call in our lives.

Young adults sometimes encounter serious sin before they come to the realization of who they are in God and what they are called to be. Our society often condones abuse of alcohol and drugs and illicit sexual relationships, which can lead to serious moral decay and leave deep scars in our lives.

The most difficult situation I have encountered was a woman who had had an abortion 15 years before. She knew that God could forgive even that sin. But somehow she believed she had to continue to punish herself. Such belief became like a ball and chain attached to her leg. God had already cut the ball free. But she felt like she still had to drag it about.

God says, "I take your sins away as far as the east is from the west." (Psalm 103:12) We are called to live as persons fully restored to life; in grace we know that we are beautiful and free to become a new creation in the Lord. "This means that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old order has passed away; now all is new" (2 Cor. 5:17)!



Listen to the Spirit

The second aspect in the discernment process is to listen to the movements of God's Spirit. I find this process of listening much like an unfolding flower. One cannot actually watch it open, yet, day-by-day, night-by-night, the interplay of growth, rest, light and dark unfold the beauty. Listening to God does not happen all at once, yet, when one is attentive, one can discern the movements of the unfolding.

The Spirit speaks to us in both the outer and inner movements of our lives. External factors-our life experiences, nature, people-all become instruments of God's song in our hearts. The internal factors-awareness, reflection and prayer-decode the meaning and purpose of each. It is never a question of whether God is speaking, rather it is a question of our freedom to listen and respond.

The Spirit lives in us and guides us in this process. The Gospel of John reminds us that we are in God, "I am in the Father and you are in me and I in you" (John 14:20). The 13th-century Sufi mystic and poet Jelaluddin Rumi wrote: "I have

lived on the lip of insanity, wanting to know reasons, knocking on a door. It opens. I've been knocking from the inside." We are already in the grace of God, yet we can be like the fish in the ocean who asks his mother to teach him about the ocean. The mother says, "Everything around you is the ocean." We, like that little fish, find God's presence around us hard to grasp. Sometimes we seek answers separate from ourselves not trusting the voice of God within our experiences and within our own hearts.

Discernment is about listening to movements of the heart. In retrospect, I see now that my discernment centered around three aspects of my life: prayer, service, and joy. I knew I wanted my future to include prayer; my relationship with God was drawing me to enter into a deeper union, love, and commitment. It was calm and gentle. I didn't know much about the Bible at the time, and my spiritual life was certainly undeveloped. What drew me was the desire to be closer to God. This was the stirring of God's call within me.

I found my heart being drawn to service. Already as a youth I found joy in helping others; I knew that whatever happiness I would find in life would surely include outreach to others. This, too, was the stirring of God.

I was also drawn to my vocation because I liked the simple joy I saw in religious life. This joy seemed more authentic to me than other pleasures. I like laughter, playfulness, and peace. God drew my heart through the desires within me.

Yet, in my discernment there were also conflicting "voices" or movements. Some people brushed me off as "naive" (well, I was that too), and others voiced that I was surely wasting the gifts that God gave me. To add to my confusion, I thought I met the man of my dreams just months before entering the community. How were these experiences to fit in? To discern these, I felt like I had to go into the quiet inner mountain within myself. I cried there. I wrestled with God and with myself. I came to find that, in essence, even the contrasting voices were part of the truth and part of the journey I had to make. Ever so slowly through this desiring, questioning, and sorting out, I came to sense the yearnings that were most deeply within my heart.

It helped me to know that even after I made the first decision to enter religious life, I would have time to test that choice during the initial stages of formation. This is exactly what happened. Four of us entered that day in late summer. We began a deeper level of listening to the movements of God within our hearts. Not all of us stayed. Discernment happens slowly; it is ongoing. Rather than receiving the answer all at once, one senses little steps. By responding to those small movements the larger picture unfolds.



Respond in trust

This brings us to the most dangerous aspect of discernment: trust. It is not enough to believe in and listen to God's call within us. It may seem obvious, but both faith and listening can be dead-ended unless we respond in trust. Total surrender is required.

Some people stumble in discerning their vocation because they want to know to be sure before they act! They want to have a map of how this will be. The hardest part isn't the listening; the difficulty comes with the leap of faith. In Hebrew scripture we find Abraham and Sarah as pillars of this faith and action. They hear the call of God and they trust. The Book of Hebrews says that they believed that the One who made the promise ought to be trusted. We read, "As a result of this faith, there came forth from one man, who was himself as good as dead, descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand of the seashore" (Hebrews 11:11-12). Their faith and surrender go hand in hand. Jesus' mother, Mary, is also a woman who believed, listened, and then trusted. Mary certainly could not understand the message of the angel, but she did trust it. She said, "Let it be done to me as you say."

Our great spiritual leaders like Abraham, Sarah, and Mary show us that our yes comes, not because we know but because we trust that God knows. Someone recently asked me, "How can you know for sure that you have a vocation?" My answer was simple, "You can't. A vocation always involves a leap of faith." "But," she answered, "I feel afraid; I don't feel like I have any control; I don't know if I can do this!"

No matter which vocation we are called to, a life in search for the truth and love of God and self will always have its wandering through the desert. To live alive, alert, trusting, and responding to God's movements and power is the song of our response. This is enough.

I still find truth in the words of my grandfather. When things didn't come together in the way that he wanted, he would say, "God's timing is always right." Neither timing nor events can be forced when we speak of God's way in our hearts.

Returning to the image of the flower, the unfolding is not to be rushed; rather it is waited on, anticipated, relished. With time, attentiveness, patience, desire, and readiness, the sense of your vocation will also be revealed. You will begin to see a convergence of energy in your heart and in everything around you. A kind of energy happens that seems to direct you-push you-to become your deepest, truest self. The journey is never promised to be easy but it is worth your very life.

Discernment is possible when we believe, listen, and trust.