

Catholic

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FIVE GUIDELINES FOR DISCERNING YOUR VOCATION

How do I know what God is calling me to do with my life? Here are some suggestions for discerning God's call and becoming the person God created you to be. *by Father Dan Lackie, OFM*



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What is God asking of me? sounded like a great idea for a parish seminar. Parishioners face all kinds of dilemmas: midlife career changes, decisions about medical care for family members, life vocations—marriage, religious or single life, priesthood. Others are just looking for that *something more* that God seems to be nudging them to explore.

I began to prepare the seminar by turning to the tradition I know best—the way of St. Francis of Assisi. That was a mistake. My friend, a Franciscan scholar, told me why: “St. Francis is the worst example of vocational discernment. He heard the Gospel call and went out and did it. No method, no clear process of discernment for others to follow.”

‘MADNESS’ AND METHOD

Truth be told, that was only half the story, but a crucial half. Many saints make discerning a vocation—God’s call to a

particular life path or lifestyle—look simple. Yet our faith conviction challenges us to make bold choices, a boldness that’s seen in some saints as “holy madness.”

Imagine St. Clare, the first female follower of St. Francis, leaving the refined luxury of her noble home, dodging guards in the dark of night, and joining Francis and his companions outside Assisi’s city walls. In doing so, she committed herself to a life of poverty and dependence on God alone. Was it madness or holy boldness that helped her resist her uncles who forcefully tried to take her home?

Historians researching the lives of saints often find realities that closely mirror our own: the time of Sts. Francis and Clare of Assisi was marked by social upheaval, as were the times of St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Benedict, two giants of spiritual discernment. Christ’s followers, then and now, are immersed in social tensions—violence, division, materialism. The saints didn’t deny that these forces had infected them, nor did they magically rise above them. They probed their hearts and faced their life decisions head-on, guided by the Spirit and Christ’s example.

Embracing the Gospel and applying it in various life situations came to Francis and Clare with difficulty. They experienced periods of personal questioning and even torment, to say nothing of physical illness. Ongoing conversion, prayer with Scripture, and communion with others became the hallmarks of what we today would call their “practice of discernment.” In other words, bold action has its place, but so does prudence—even for the “holy fool.”

I suggest five guidelines to help you find that grace-filled place between the “madness” of bold action and a reflective method for discerning your vocation:

- 1. Set aside time for daily prayer.** If this were a lesson in physical—not spiritual—exercise, this would qualify as a call to focus on the fundamentals of the game. Prayer is fundamental to the spiritual life—especially extended periods of quiet. Explore various styles of prayer. Spend time in prayer and in reading the Bible. Be consistent. Make it a daily practice.
- 2. Put aside concerns about looking foolish.** There *is* something to be said for holy madness! In an account of St. Francis and his traveling companion, Brother Masseo, madness and wisdom converge and raise some unsettling questions and emotions for Masseo. As the pair approaches a three-way crossroads, Francis tells Masseo to twirl around. He does so, to the point of dizziness. When he stops, he’s facing Siena. “That’s the way God wants us to go,” Francis declares. Masseo is left wondering why Francis made him look the fool.

At one point in my journey toward religious life, I too felt turned around and foolish. I had completed novitiate and started studies in theology when it came time to renew yearly vows. I was sorting out a number of issues in my life, including

“Show me the path I should walk, for I entrust my life to you.” —Psalm 143:8



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the death of my father. After many conversations and much time in prayer, I decided not to renew my vows at that time.

A year and a half later, after more conversation, prayer, and confounding life experience, I asked to return and was accepted back into the community. I felt like a fool, now being “out of step” with my classmates. My family and friends wondered what I was doing with my life. But I persevered. I had to find my own way and couldn’t get caught up in how I looked to others.

3. Don’t let failure define you or hold you back. I learned this lesson from a Franciscan who for 50 years was one of the most beloved men in San Francisco. Father Alfred Boeddeker was a pioneer in outreach to the poor. He started St. Anthony Dining Room in 1950. It thrives today as an oasis for the homeless.

When Father Alfred died in 1994, he left behind voluminous files. In those files his staff discovered records of numerous projects that Father Alfred had initiated but that had gone nowhere; in fact, he had set a goal to wipe out world hunger by the year 2000! With quiet exuberance, he never allowed failure to hold him back. Like Blessed Junipero Serra, the founder of several California missions, Father Alfred was dedicated to the motto: “Always forward, never back!”

4. Examine the script of life you’re working from. I used to think that I’d do fine in life if someone would just hand me the script. I’d know what to say and what my cues were. Everything would be in the hands of the playwright and the judgment of the casting director.

What an irresponsible way to wish to live! What I learned is that, based on habits of thinking and acting learned over the years, I was already working from a script. Facing that fact meant applying the ancient philosophical dictum: “Know thyself.” And with that self-knowledge comes the capacity to take responsibility and, where necessary, forgive thyself.

The tradition that St. Francis initiated is often called a “wisdom tradition.” While certainly a tradition of service, Franciscan life—indeed, all Christian life—is founded on a commitment to self-reflection and ongoing conversion. *Who am I, Lord? And who are you?* Francis repeated these words in his nightly prayer (as reported by a nosy brother who spied on him).

In more contemporary terms, we might ask ourselves: *How have I learned to live? How have I learned to make decisions, form relationships, and make commitments? Who modeled these things for me? Are those models still working?*

Some of the wisest people I’ve met in vocational discernment are grounded in Twelve Step spirituality—connecting

WISE WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

A 13th-century exchange of letters shows St. Clare assisting the discernment of Agnes of Prague:

“May you always rejoice in the Lord. And may neither bitterness nor a cloud of sadness overwhelm you. Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! Place your heart in the figure of the divine! And transform your whole being into the image of God through contemplation! So that you too may feel what God’s friends feel as they taste the hidden sweetness that God has reserved from the beginning for those who love him.”

—based on third letter of St. Clare to Agnes of Prague

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DISCERNING STEPS

Active discernment means putting the questions of your heart into play—in writing and in conversation.

1. Find a spiritual director and meet regularly. If “spiritual director” sounds daunting, find a trusted friend, mentor, or Twelve Step sponsor to serve as your discernment companion. Work up questions together, such as *Where do I want to be in 10 years? What captures my imagination? What activities, settings, and possibilities make my heart sing?*
2. Write a spiritual autobiography. Include your earliest experiences of God’s presence, your spiritual heroes and role models, and how your image of God has changed over the years.
3. Join a group of others who are also discerning their vocations.
4. Check in with a career counselor or join a career renewal group. Networking is key.
5. Interview those who are doing the kind of work or living the kind of life you’re attracted to. As you do this, don’t be surprised by the good people placed in your path.

DIG DEEPER

When have you felt God nudging you to “something more”? How did you respond?

In what ways can you and your faith community better support vocations to marriage, ordained ministry, single or religious life?

How will you more regularly “tune in” to how God is calling you?

core Christian principles to the recovery model of Alcoholics Anonymous. The practice of making a periodic moral inventory is central to this spirituality. This translates into a careful examination of how we have learned our basic habits of relating to God, to ourselves, and to others.

It's not surprising that similar inventories are standard requirements for couples seeking marriage in the Catholic Church. The key is to make such reflection an ongoing life practice—with the help of trusted (and honest) friends, spiritual directors, Twelve Step sponsors, or mentors.

5. Return God's loving embrace. Pedro Arrupe, SJ, the great 20th-century Jesuit, famously counseled his fellow Jesuits: "Nothing is more practical than finding God, than falling in Love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything." The converse is sadly true: our relationships, service, and practice of the faith will derail very quickly if we lose the spark of love. St. Francis' spirituality was founded on his deep experience of Jesus' message in John's Gospel: "As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love" (15:9).

A friend recently shared her experience of falling in love when she was a student some 27 years ago. She sought the counsel of a beloved Franciscan professor. "I'll never forget his response to me," she said, "how he smiled and delighted with me in the wonder and beauty of the experience. He invited me to tell him all about it. It was only after this affirmation that he posed the question: *Where do you want to be in 10 years?*"

My friend's story reminded me of advice I'd also received from a beloved professor: "Always affirm, never deny. Always expand, never restrict the scope of the conversation." We return God's embrace when we allow ourselves to explore experiences



of God's love in our lives and extend this freedom and invitation to others.

GOD'S WILL, OUR JOY

Whatever the context of our vocational discernment—whether we're discerning marriage, single or religious life, or ordained ministry—we can be assured that, as disciples of Jesus Christ, where two or more are gathered, there he is in our midst, ready to confound, delight, and orient us in the direction of our deepest joy.

In the end, blessed hungers or holy longings will lead us to where God wants us to be. Daily prayer, facing our fears, and being honest about our own habits of thinking and acting are fundamental in approaching life decisions. When they're rooted in a personal assurance of God's loving embrace, they can lead to life choices that reflect God's will in our lives.

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