

PRAYDREAMING

KEY TO DISCERNMENT

by Mark E. Thibodeaux, S.J.

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We Christians don't just decide things, we discern them. That is, we do our best to figure out what God is calling us to in every situation. We do our best to say yes to that divine invitation. But *how* do we discern God's will for us? That's the tricky part.

There are a number of approaches to discernment in the Catholic tradition. The one I know the best comes from St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, who lived in Europe during the 16th century. His insights are so rich and abundant that hundreds of books have been written about his life and work.

It is impossible to set down very many of the insights in an *Update*. But in the area of discernment, one insight in particular seems to be the key for understanding his perspective. His insight was this: "*Good discernment consists of*

prayerfully pondering the great desires that well up in my daydreams."

Great desires

Are desires good or bad? Many spiritual writers of Ignatius' day spoke of desires as obstacles to God's will. One solution was to suppress one's desires—to eliminate them whenever possible. Ignatius, on the other hand, held the radical notion that God dwells in the desires of a good person.

Not only are desires not evil, but they are one of God's primary instruments of communicating his will to his children. God enflames the heart with holy desires, and with attraction toward a life of greater divine praise and service. Ignatius did

not seek to squash desires, but rather sought to tap into the deepest desires of the heart, trusting that it is God who has placed them there.

Desires, of course, play a role in my sinful choices, too. But Ignatius would define sin as disordered desire. The problem is not that I *have* desires, but that they are *disordered* within me. That is why I must begin this entire process by tapping into the greatest, most universal desire among humans: to praise, reverence and serve God.

A teenager may want badly to have sexual relations with a girlfriend or boyfriend. Spouses may become sexually attracted to people outside of their marriage. Are these evil desires? No, they are merely disordered desires. Why do any of these people want intimate sexual relations? Because each craves oneness with another—each is created by God, for the experience of unity.

Another example: An older woman may desire to tell off her husband. In what ways might the roots of this desire be holy? Perhaps she has been too passive all these years. Perhaps she only now loves herself and values herself enough to stick up for what she believes is right. Perhaps she desires to reverence God's creation (her very self) by asserting herself. These deeper desires are not evil; they are, in fact, *holy*. They come from God. If she can focus on these great desires beneath the desire to tell her husband off, then she will not sin.

We fall into sin when we are ignorant of the *desires beneath the desires*. Consider this way of understanding personal sin: We sin, not because we are in touch with our desires but precisely because we are *not* in touch with them! This is one of Ignatius' most profound insights.

Praydreaming

How, then, do I tap into these great desires? I daydream, that's how! I fantasize about great and beautiful futures. I let God dream in me and I sit in silent awe and wonder as these holy dreams come to life before the eyes and ears of my soul. Now that's a different approach to prayer than most of us know. But that's what St. Ignatius taught.

If I have to choose among several different options, I might start with one option, and ask God to show me the marvelous things he could do with this possibility. I think crazy thoughts and mull over preposterous proposals. I have galactic visions of new worlds of possibilities opening up merely by saying yes to God's invitation to that option.

I then start all over again and dream about a second option, a third one and so on.

Let's look at an example. Say I'm a manager who has just been given an offer to relocate to a faraway city and join a more prestigious company. My immediate inclination might be to feel frightened of all the threatening unknowns: Will my family be happy in this new place? Will I like my new bosses? Will I find affordable housing? Will I be burning bridges with my current firm? All of these are reasonable concerns and will have to be considered later.

St. Ignatius would argue that these negative considerations are not the proper starting point for discernment. Instead, he said, start with dreams and desires.

I might begin by asking the big questions: "What is my purpose in life?" Of course, the answer Catholics learned as children applies: *To praise, reverence and serve God*.

I might then ask, "How am I uniquely called to do this?" *First, as a spouse and parent. Second, as a manager.* Then, "In my current roles, what are my dreams for my family?" *First, that we be healthy and safe. Second, that we be a family bonded with love and care for one another. Third, that our children might be not merely well-educated, but also well-formed in Church and school.*

Then I ponder, "What are my dreams for my career?" *That I might serve God and society through my profession. That I be honest, professional and fair-minded. That I might seek justice above all.*

Now, I begin to daydream—or better—to praydream! I ask myself, "How might I make these goals for my family and my job come to life, remaining here in my current job?" (Option A). I dream great dreams of all that could happen in the life of our family and work if I continue in my current job or place.

Then I dream Option B: How might I make these goals come to life moving to the new job and city? To prayerfully explore my options, I praydream all of the possibilities.

Note the difference between the way most people normally decide and this radical way of discerning that St. Ignatius is proposing. Most lead with the wrong foot: They allow the tools of the false spirit to drive the bus: fear and anxiety ("What will happen?"), ambition ("Here's my chance to rise!"), pride ("It's a more prestigious employer"), jealousy ("Finally, I'll leave my co-workers in the dust!") and so on. There will be time enough to deal with these negative realities. But for now, I allow my great desires to drive the bus. I imagine the greatest potentialities—the best-case scenarios—for each option. For now, I dream of glorious possibilities.

Pondering the praydreams

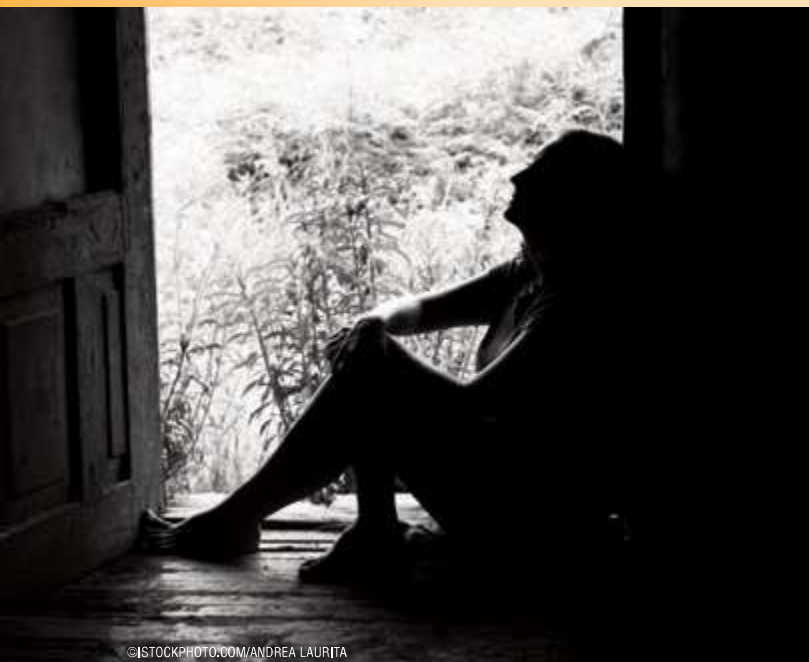
As I allow myself to dream crazy dreams, I then begin to ponder their meaning. As I praydream the possibilities of living out my great desires in each option, I try to note the stirrings in my heart. I ask myself:

After the initial excitement of new possibilities, or after the initial fear of potential problems, which dreams leave me in consolation? That is:

- Which of these dreams leave me filled with holy and wholesome desires?
- Which leave me with a sense of closeness to God?
- Which leave me filled with faith? With hope? With love?
- Which make me want to go out and share them with the people I love? With my mentors and friends?
- Which leave me with a deep-down peace and tranquility? With a sense of rightness? With a fits-like-a-glove sort of feeling?

GOD ENFLAMES THE HEART

with holy desires, and with attraction toward a life of greater divine praise and service.



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Then I discern, *Which dreams leave me in desolation?*

That is:

- Which leave me without faith? Without hope? Without love?
- Which leave me with a sense of distance from God?
- Which leave me disquiet and agitated?
- Which leave me with no passion and zeal? With a sense of boredom and tepidity? With no energy? Feeling deflated?
- Which fill me with deep-down anxiety and fear?
- Which are the dreams I'm not very excited to talk about with my mentors or friends? Which are the ones that I avoid mentioning to them?

As I dream these praydreams, I pay particular attention to the fluctuating moments of *peace vs. disquiet*, and of *impassioned energy vs. deflatedness*.

Peace vs. disquiet

gnatius says that when a well-intentioned, prayerful person is in sync with God, God's will comes "sweetly, lightly, gently, as a drop of water that enters a sponge." This inner peace—even for a tough decision—is one of the most important telltale signs of God's will.

When I ponder my praydreams, which of the options leave me feeling this way? Which leave me with a sense of deep-down peace? Note that I am searching for the *deep-down* peace, as opposed to simply feeling comfortable with the option.

It may well be that God's will lies in the most frightening option (for example, leaving a comfortable job in order to enter religious life, or firing an unfit employee instead of ignoring the problem or choosing some unpopular course of action).

I may therefore feel fearful when I praydream this scenario, and yet *deeper down*, there is a sense in me that this is the proper way to go and that the Lord's abiding presence will sustain me through the unpleasant fallout. It is this deeper peace that I am looking out for.

I am also looking out for its opposite—for deep-down agitation. Again, one particular option may look good on paper and make me feel comfortable on the surface of my emotions. This "easy option" may smooth things over, avoid conflict or avoid unpleasant or awkward situations (for example, upholding the status quo, remaining in current status, not making waves at the office, making only complimentary remarks).

Despite the fact that this option is clearly the path of least resistance, *deeper down* there is agitation within me. There is something that isn't quite settled in my spirit as I imagine myself moving forward in this direction. This negative indicator of sensing agitation is as important as the positive indicator of sensing deep-down peace.

Another example might help: A proud mom is helping her 18-year-old son to choose a college to attend. It has come down to the local state college just down the road from where they live and a much larger school on the other side of the country. Her son takes his mom's advice very seriously and wants to know what she thinks. What should she advise?

When she praydreams about her son at the local college, she feels warmth and comfort. Her son could come over often for meals and Sunday football with his brothers. If anything bad were to happen, she and his dad would be only minutes away. They could continue to have long conversations in the kitchen while preparing for supper. But *deeper down*, she senses a bit of agitation in herself—something not quite right about the feel of these praydreams.

When she praydreams about her son going to college on the West Coast, she feels frightened and alarmed. None of her children have ever lived far away. How would we get to him if he needs us? How often would he come home? How many important family events will he miss because it is simply too expensive and time-consuming to get him back for them? She feels quite uncomfortable with this option. But *deeper down* she is shocked to find a sense of peace within herself.

She knows that her son is a good and responsible young man and that he is quite capable of taking care of himself. She would miss him terribly, but she knows that this might well be his moment for the great adventure of starting out anew. She herself had the same experience years ago and wouldn't give it up for all the tea in China.

Only now, after coming to peace with the less comfortable but more peace-filled option, can she begin to help her son make this all-important decision.

Impassioned energy vs. deflatedness

This same discernment was an important part of my own journey toward the priesthood, and, more recently, toward a request to consider four options that led to my assignment as novice director for my province of Jesuits.

When I praydreamed the option I thought I most wanted, I was surprised by what I felt and didn't feel. I felt less energy. I could envision myself doing the work and even enjoying it, but I didn't feel "the baby leap in my womb for joy," as Elizabeth described her recognition of God's presence in her pregnant cousin, Mary.

This leaping prenatal John the Baptist is a good metaphor of the kind of reaction your soul has when coming in contact with the presence of the Lord in some pregnant future possibility. Your soul leaps with joy and excitement! It describes the crackle of electricity that I felt when I prayed over some of the other possibilities.

The moment you just know

Often, after many hours of prayerful deliberation, there will be a moment when you will just know. It will feel not as though you are *making* a decision but, rather, as though you are *acknowledging* a decision that has already been agreed upon by God and your heart.

I'll recognize this auspicious moment by the way one option over the others leads to praydreams. Maybe those praydreams aren't idealistic, comfortable or beautiful. But somehow they are realistic and right, more peaceful and charged with energy. These dreams will fit like a glove.

All the other options—though perhaps more beautiful, more comfortable or more safe—will drift farther from my soul's watchful eye and will begin to fade into the horizon.

The final step

Once we feel that we have reached a point of decision, Ignatius suggests we place that decision before God and await his confirmation. How will this confirmation come? In the same way that our initial discernment came. It will be through pondering the stirrings of our heart as we begin to take the first tentative steps toward our new option.

Perhaps the decision will be unpopular or uncomfortable, but *deeper down*, is there peace? Is your heart charged with God's energy? If so, then you can move forward with the decision, knowing that you have done all that you could to discern God's desires. You've pondered the desires he seems to have placed in your dreams.

Deciding is not an easy task. Discerning God's will is even more challenging! But St. Ignatius assures me that God has placed his desire deep within the desires of my own heart. Praydreaming allows me to ponder those deep desires and to discover and say yes to God's grace-filled path for my life. ■



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UPDATE

Question Box

- 1) Are you more likely to decide or discern?
- 2) Have you ever praydreamed your way through a difficult choice?
- 3) What tells you that you've made a good choice?

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