

Franciscan University Presents
“Discovering God’s Will”
With guest, Father Timothy Gallagher, OMV

Excerpts from *Discerning the Will of God*
by Father Timothy Gallagher, OMV

This book explores how we can discern God’s will in such situations: when persons of faith, who love God and want to do God’s will, are faced with choices between options that are good in themselves. These include:

- this career or that,
- one’s present job or a new job,
- work or further studies,
- a change of place for the family or no change,
- involvement in this ministry or that,
- marriage to this person or to another or not at all,
- marriage or priesthood,
- marriage or religious life, and so forth.

In such situations, how can these persons *discern God’s will*? How can they find a clarity that will permit them to pursue wholeheartedly the course chosen, confident of doing God’s will? In many years of working with discernment, I have heard this question repeatedly. More than any other, this question awakens the desire for a clear teaching about discernment. I have written this book in response to that desire.

Our guide in this exploration will be St. Ignatius of Loyola. The central focus of his Spiritual Exercises is precisely the situation just described. With unparalleled mastery and practicality, St. Ignatius provides a way of “seeking and finding the divine will” (*SpirEx*, 1)—of discerning God’s will—in choices between good options.

I am deeply grateful to St Ignatius for his teaching on discerning God’s will...It prepares me to seek God’s will when the options are all good and the choice is left to me. In retreats and spiritual direction, I have seen St. Ignatius’s teaching on discernment resolve doubt and release energy for service in people who love God. This teaching is a gift for all in the Church, in all walks of life, whether priest, religious, or layperson, single or married. My purpose in this book is to offer a clear, essential, and usable understanding of Ignatius’s teaching on discernment to those who must make choices, and to their spiritual guides (pages 4,5).

In a famous meditation, John Henry Newman writes: “God has created me to do him some definite service; he has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. *I have my mission.*” In the Scriptures, the Lord says to Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you” (Jer. 1:5). Isaiah describes a

similar consciousness in the Servant of the Lord: “The Lord called me from birth, from my mother’s womb he gave me my name” (Isa. 49:1). Paul, too, knows that his mission is from God, “who from my mother’s womb had set me apart and called me through his grace” (Gal. 1:15). This awareness, however, is exemplified above all in Jesus who, when coming into the world, said, “Behold, I come to do your will, O God” (Heb. 10:7). Jesus has come “to do...the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38). And always does “what is pleasing to him” (John 8:29) (page 29).

Awareness that God has created us out of love, for love and ceaselessly offers that love to us;

a consequent thirst for communion of wills with the one who so deeply loves us: the consciousness that each of us can say with John Henry Newman, “He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another,”

the desire to live like Jesus who always did the will of the One who sent him: this is the *foundation* of discernment.

Clearly, then, if we are to discern well, we must come to *know Christ deeply*, personally, intimately, so that *we may love him more* and *follow him more closely* in our choices (*SpirEx*, 104). Ignatius dedicated the largest part of preparation for discernment precisely to this: repeated contemplation of Jesus in the gospels, so that, our hearts filled with Jesus, we may know, love, and follow him in our discernment.

An early biography of Francis of Assisi offers us a lovely description of a heart utterly centered on Christ. In the text, we read:

The brothers, moreover, who lived with him knew how his daily and continuous talk was of Jesus...Indeed, he was always occupied with Jesus; Jesus he bore in his heart, Jesus in his mouth, Jesus in his ears, Jesus in his eyes, Jesus in his hands, Jesus in the rest of his members...He always bore and preserved *Christ Jesus and him crucified* [1 Cor. 2:2] in his heart with a wonderful love.

A person transformed by Jesus, bearing Jesus in every part of his humanity; a person ever centered on Jesus “with a wonderful love”: this is a person *ready to discern*.

Such, then, is the disposition that prepares us to discern God’s will:

the *foundational awareness* of God’s infinite love for you;

the *healing encounter with Jesus* who loves you to the death to free you of sin and burden;

and, at the heart of all, the continuing quest for *heartfelt knowledge and growing love for Christ*.

From the outset, Ignatius describes preparation for discernment as a series of spiritual exercises—spiritual activities that persons undertake in order to “prepare and dispose” themselves to “seek and find the divine will” (*SpirEx*, 1). For Ignatius, the Eucharist is a daily element of the Spiritual Exercises; it is also the daily context of his own practice of discernment (pages 48-50).

This preparation for discernment is crucial. Without it, no true process of discernment is possible. By means of it, many problems in discernment are resolved. For these reasons, Ignatius dedicates a substantial part of the Spiritual Exercises to this preparation—a model for any process of discernment (page 64).

In the first year of his conversion, Ignatius lived a rigorously penitential life. Among his practices was the resolve to abstain from meat. Ignatius recounted the experience that changed this practice:

While he [Ignatius] was persevering in his abstinence from eating meat, and was so firm in this that he had no thought of changing, one day in the morning, when he had risen, some meat prepared for eating was presented to him, as though he saw it with his bodily eyes, without his having any desire for it beforehand. At the same time there came to him a great assent of the will that from then on he should eat it. And although he remembered his former intention, he could not doubt about the matter, but resolved that he ought to eat meat. Relating this afterward to his confessor, the confessor told him that he should consider whether this might not be a temptation. But he, examining it well, could never doubt about this.

In this experience, *something is shown to Ignatius*: that God does not want him to continue in a specific penitential practice. In the same moment, *Ignatius's will is strongly drawn* to what is shown him: “There came to him a great assent of the will that from then on he should eat it.” And Ignatius simply *cannot doubt* that what is shown him is God's will: “And although he remembered his former intention, he could not doubt about the matter...But he, examining it well, could never doubt about this.”

Reflection on such experiences led Ignatius to identify a first “time”—that is, a first way, a first mode—of how God reveals his will in choices between good options. Ignatius describes this mode succinctly in the *Spiritual Exercises*:

The first time is when God Our Lord so moves and attracts the will that, without doubting or being able to doubt, the devout soul follows what is shown to it, as St. Paul and St. Matthew did in following Christ our Lord. (*SpirEx*, 175).

In this brief text, Ignatius formulates a general teaching drawn from experiences like that described. Here we find again the same three elements:

Something is shown to a person (“devout soul follows *what is shown* to it”),

the person’s will is drawn to what is shown (“God Our Lord *so moves and attracts the will*”),

and the person cannot doubt that what is shown, and what so draws the will, is truly God’s will (*without doubting or being able to doubt*).

Such experiences, Ignatius says, are a first way God may reveal his will to those who face choices between good options (pages 69-71).