

HOW TO DISCERN GOD'S WILL LIKE ST JOSEPH

III PLAN AND BE READY TO ADJUST THE PLAN

Introduction

What is the scope of discernment? The ultimate aim of the process discernment is to discover, or to come to know the Will of God. But discernment is surely not an exercise in curiosity. Coming to know the Will of God carries a great responsibility. God speaks, God reveals, but then He expect a corresponding answer, that "*Fiat*", "*Let it be done of me according to Your word!*", or "*Here I am ready to do Your Will!*"

Discernment necessarily leads to action. If discernment reveals to us the Will of God, then, it demands obedience, the fulfilment of that Will. In fact, God never reveals His Will if there is no disposition to believe, to obey, to get it done.

Therefore, the first two steps of discernment according to St Joseph are the essential manifestation of this disposition. To seek to be silent is a clear manifestation that you really believe that God has a plan and has a plan for you, which He wants to reveal. To be silent shows that you really want to listen, that you really are open to what God wants to tell you and show you.

Being just, or rather seeking to conform your life according to the Commandments of God, is another essential manifestation that you really want to know what else you can do for Him Who loved you so much more beyond what you deserve. In fact, discernment is an exercise for the disciples of Jesus. If one has not yet taken the decision to become a disciple of Jesus, He needs to be evangelised. There is no discernment that can help someone to become a disciple of Jesus. Especially if one is baptised, what he or she needs to do is obvious: be what he or she is meant to be. First you need to be what you are as a baptised, a disciple of Jesus, only then comes discernment to show you how.

So, the next two steps lead to the fifth and last step of taking action.

A. Third step: Make a plan

Then, the third step is to make a Plan.

St. Joseph was a man of action. Even before the angel appeared to him, he had a plan in place when he thought Mary had been cheating on him. Jesus too had His plan in place as well, when He "*set his face to go to Jerusalem.*" If you want to discern like Joseph, you need to put a plan together.

Pope Francis tells us that *“Even though he (St Joseph) does not understand the bigger picture, he makes a decision to protect Mary’s good name, her dignity and her life. In his hesitation about how best to act, God helped him by enlightening his judgment.”* (PC 4)

Whatever plan we can think of or design, it should always fit into the plan of salvation. *“The greatness of Saint Joseph is that he was the spouse of Mary and the father of Jesus. In this way, he placed himself, in the words of Saint John Chrysostom, “at the service of the entire plan of salvation.”* (PC 1)

God respects our intelligence and our freedom. *“If at times God seems not to help us, surely this does not mean that we have been abandoned, but **instead are being trusted to plan, to be creative, and to find solutions ourselves.**”* (PC 5)

1. What is the issue

In order to plan well, you need to know where you want to go, or what is necessitating a plan of action. In other words, one needs to be clear on the issue, difficulty, problem or challenge that is being faced with.

St Joseph had various issues to solve, to decide upon. First whether he should leave Mary and how. How long should he stay as an immigrant in Egypt. Whether he should go to Bethlehem or to Nazareth on his return from Egypt. But there were other serious problems that demanded from him an urgent decision such as when Herod decided to kill all babies under two years old to assure himself that he will kill even Jesus. Interesting that Joseph was illuminated by God about this threat, even before he could know it.

They say that, if you do not know where you are going, you will surely not arrive there.

2. What you can do, God will not do for you

Once you identify where you want to go, what issues or problems you need to resolve, what it is exactly the matter for which you are seeking to know the Will of God, then you need to work. Sometimes we may take a passive attitude in front of the Will of God. Discernment is a very demanding process that can take a long time. Discernment is not a magical ritual, there are no formulas you can simply use and attain right away the answer as you receive a cup of coffee from a vending machine. What we can do, God will not do for us. We need to work as if everything depends on us, and trust God as if everything depends on Him. We need to work hard but then leave the outcome up to him. If God is in charge we can tolerate mixed results and endure failure.

Pope Francis noted this spirit in the life of St Joseph:

*“God always finds a way to save us, provided we show the same creative courage as the carpenter of Nazareth, who was able to turn a problem into a possibility by **trusting always in divine providence.**”* (PC 5)

“As we read the infancy narratives, we may often wonder why God did not act in a more direct and clear way. Yet God acts through events and people. Joseph.... was the true “miracle” by which God saves the child and his mother. God acted by trusting in Joseph’s creative courage.” (PC 5)

*“Nor should we ever think that believing means finding facile and comforting solutions. The faith Christ taught us is what we see in Saint Joseph. **He did not look for shortcuts, but confronted reality with open eyes and accepted personal responsibility for it.**”* (PC 4)

B. Fourth step: Adjust the plan if need so

Even though St. Joseph had a plan, he was open to changing course when God intervened to reveal His plan. Jesus also had to change His plans when He was afraid He’d be carried off and made king (cf. John 6:15). So make your plans, but like St. Joseph, be flexible when God is ready to reveal His plan.

Pope Francis tells us that *“The history of salvation is worked out “in hope against hope” (Rom 4:18), through our weaknesses. All too often, we think that God works only through our better parts, yet **most of his plans are realized in and despite our frailty**..... Even through Joseph’s fears, God’s will, his history and his plan were at work. Joseph, then, teaches us that faith in God includes believing that he can work even through our fears, our frailties and our weaknesses.”* (PC 2)

1. Be flexible

St Joseph impresses us with his flexibility. He was never afraid to change his mind when he sees something better. When he was confronted with closed doors, he did not despair, but found another opening. *“Arriving in Bethlehem and finding no lodging where Mary could give birth, Joseph took a stable and, as best he could, **turned it into a welcoming home for the Son of God come into the world** (cf. Lk 2:6-7).”* (PC 5) He was not rigid, he was never anchored; he was always ready to change and to adapt. It was not a problem for him if he were asked to wake up in the middle of the night and set up on a journey. It was not a problem for him if he had to live in a foreign land and in a different culture. It was not a problem for him if he were asked at the last moment to move to Galilee instead of going to Judah.

2. Fine tuning

So, in the school of St Joseph, we learn that to make a good discernment we do not only need to do our part and plan according to the intelligence and wisdom God gave us and which we have and can improve and deepen, but we need also to be ready to change and to change promptly. St Joseph, like Mary, teach us never to make resistance to change and to what is new. And for this we need to be flexible even with our spiritual ideas or devotions. Sometimes, the process of discernment needs to be complete, because very often, what we understand we need to decide and do, would need some fine tuning. When Herod died, St Joseph understood that God was calling him to return to Israel, but the exact place where he best to go still need to be discovered. *“As he had done with Mary, God revealed his saving plan to Joseph. He did so by using dreams, which in the Bible and among all ancient peoples, were considered a way for him to make his will known.”* (PC 3)

Conclusion

St Joseph was not a stupid man. He was not a dreamer. He must have dreamt a lot during his life, as every normal human being. But there were four times when he convinced that the dreams were coming from above. He could discern these dreams because he was a good listener to God, because he was obedient to His Will in general, and because he knew how to do his part, and he knew that God can use him who, in front of the world, seemed simple, weak and insignificant. Listen to what the Pope says in this regard:

“A superficial reading of these stories can often give the impression that the world is at the mercy of the strong and mighty, but the “good news” of the Gospel consists in showing that, for all the arrogance and violence of worldly powers, God always finds a way to carry out his saving plan. So too, our lives may at times seem to be at the mercy of the powerful, but the Gospel shows us what counts. God always finds a way to save us, provided we show the same creative courage as the carpenter of Nazareth, who was able to turn a problem into a possibility by trusting always in divine providence.” (PC 5)