



DISCERNMENT

“In hope we were saved. Now hope that sees for itself is not hope. For who hopes for what one sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait with endurance. In the same way, the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings. And the one who searches hearts knows what is the intention of the Spirit, because it intercedes for the holy ones according to God’s will.” - ROMANS 8:24-27 [1]

CLASS DISCUSSION: THE FOUR FEARS

1. I’m worried my background will make it hard for me to discern my vocation or to succeed in it.

While it is true that problems in our family or past will affect our lives, God can help us move past any problem. St. Augustine’s parents had a strained relationship; his father was not a Catholic. He was an angry and controlling man, yet St. Augustine became one of the greatest bishops and theologians in history. St. Thomas Aquinas’ family locked him up when he wanted to become a Dominican. Zélie Martin’s mother was harsh and unloving, but Zélie became an incredibly loving wife and mother. “My grace is sufficient,” God told St. Paul (2 Cor 12:9). This is true for us as well.

2. I’m worried my sins and bad habits will make it hard for me to discern my vocation or to succeed in it.

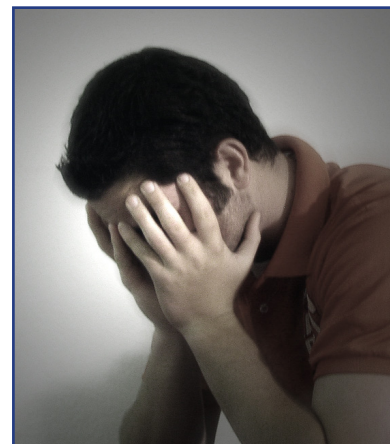
Again, St. Augustine shows that God can help us move past our downfalls. After years of impurity and pride, he was able to change his life at the age of 33. Peter betrayed Christ and became leader of the Apostles, our first Pope. St. Paul helped kill St. Stephen and would have killed more, but Christ reached out and called him. Franz Jaggerstatter got a girl pregnant but later returned to a chaste life and had a beautiful marriage with his wife Fanj. Charles de Foucauld repented of his wild ways and became a great contemplative (see story below). Christ calls everyone, especially the sinners. It’s never too late to repent and seek His will.

3. I’m worried that I will make a mistake in my discernment and choose the wrong vocation.

God’s ultimate wish is for us to be saved and happy with Him in eternal life. He loves us and He wants us to know His will. It is a normal temptation to fear a calling before one commits, and then sometimes to doubt the calling later. The main remedy is to pray and trust God. Whatever you choose, God would still give you every possible grace to succeed in that vocation, so

long as you open yourself to His grace by living virtuously and receiving the Sacraments.

An interesting story to consider is Mother Luisita, a remarkable wife and mother who became a remarkable religious sister. Her family wanted her to marry although she felt a call to religious life. She married and made a great marriage. When her husband died, she became a religious sister. We may never know if she was originally called to religious life or to married life or to both, one after the other. The point is that God can be served in every vocation, and He will help you, whatever you choose.



4. I’m worried that even with the best of circumstances, it will still be too hard and I will fail.

St. Teresa of Avila felt this kind of fear often during her life. She learned to realize it was a trap. If a person feels this kind of worry, he ought to turn straight to God: “If we turn from self towards God, our understanding and our will become nobler and readier to embrace all that is good: if we never rise above... our own miseries we do ourselves a great disservice.... We shall always be glancing around and saying: “Are people looking at me or not?” “If I take a certain path shall I come to any harm?” “Dare I begin such and such a task?”... “Will people think better of me if I refrain from following the crowd?” [2]

According to St. Teresa, these little phrases going through our minds are distractions. Focus on Christ, and forge ahead on the path He will show you, and trust that He will always lead you!

[1] Scripture taken from the New American Bible, Revised Edition, available at <http://www.usccb.org/bible/books-of-the-bible>

[2] Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, translation by E. Allison Peers, I.2, paragraph 19





CLASS DISCUSSION: THE FOUR FEARS

BLESSED CHARLES DE FOUCAULD (1858-1916) ^[3]

Charles de Foucauld grew up in France. Orphaned early, he inherited a fortune and knew an easy life. Although baptized Catholic, he was no longer interested in religion by the time he was 15.

He was famously lazy and expelled from school for doing so little work. Later, when he wanted to join a military academy, he worked hard to



Bl. Charles de Foucauld left a life of unchastity to find true happiness.

get accepted. Once there he barely passed. He finished last in the cavalry training section. He spent huge quantities of money on expensive food, drink, and sweets. He grew so fat they had to make a special uniform for him. During one term his bad conduct earned him twenty-one days in house arrest and forty-five days in “strict confinement.” ^[4] He was famous for having many mistresses. He joked to his prostitutes—“I rent by the hour; I don’t sign a lease.” ^[5]

He liked specially to see how far he could outrage people by his behavior. He was dishonorably discharged from the army for his conduct with one mistress. “It was absolute selfishness,” he would say later. “I went further from you, My Lord. My life started to be a death. You allowed me to feel a great sadness.” ^[6]

When a war broke out, he was permitted to rejoin the army. Afterwards, in 1885 he returned to France and refriended a cousin. She was a faithful Catholic who greatly loved God. Charles started going to church, curious to see if there really could be a God. He later said “The moment I realized that God existed, I knew I could not do otherwise than to live for Him alone.”

*“The moment I realized
that God existed,
I knew I could not do
otherwise than to live
for Him alone.”*

Charles de Foucauld went through a series of changes before he found his final vocation. He became a Trappist monk, later a nameless servant in Jerusalem. He was ordained a priest in 1943 and went to live amongst Moslems in Algiers as a poor hermit. He said “I would like to be sufficiently good that people would say, ‘If such is the servant, what must the Master be like?’” ^[7]

One day he was captured by a band of rebels. When Charles saw two guards approaching, he tried to warn the rebels to flee. He was shot in the head by one of the rebels whom he had tried to warn.

Charles de Foucauld was beatified in 2005.

[3] A great version of the story of Charles de Foucauld is available with photographs in Ann Ball’s *Modern Saints* (Tan Books, 2009).

[4] Vincent O’Malley, *Ordinary Suffering of Extraordinary Saints*, (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2000), 207.

[5] *Ibid.*, 207.

[6] See <http://youtu.be/naK9sDJCHRo>

[7] See www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_20051113_de-foucauld_en.html



DISCERNMENT

CLASS DISCUSSION: BUT HOW WILL I KNOW?

There it is. The final question. If you are reading this, you are probably a senior in high school. Perhaps you have talked to someone about vocations, or watched a video, or—if you have worked through the other lessons on vocations—perhaps you have learned about the different vocations and gone through many discussions.

*After all this discernment, how will I **really** know?*

Here are some things to keep in mind:

- First of all, a vocation will not usually come through a blinding flash of inspiration. It will be a quiet pull, a desire that comes back to your thoughts again and again over a long period of time.
- A vocation will make desires from your past, as well as events, conversations, talents, and skills seem to make sense or to fall into place.
- If your desire is a call from God, doors will open and problems standing in your way will resolve themselves. (Sometimes you will have to stand firm against opposition when you know what you're doing is right, but always God will make roadblocks clear if you are faithful to Him.)
- A vocation does not depend on your decision alone. Even when you decide, your vocation will depend on others to confirm whether this is your vocation. A bishop must call a man to the priesthood; a religious order must accept an aspirant; and a person called to marriage has to find another who is willing to marry. You must decide, and then you must let your decision be examined and tested by others.



But...how will I know?

- St. Francis de Sales says that the worst thing for a person besides sin is anxiety. Do not be anxious about your vocation. God wants us to love Him, not fear Him. He is not passive-aggressively trying to make you guess His will. Make a prudent choice and then go for it. God will help you.



CLASS DISCUSSION: BUT HOW WILL I KNOW?

But...how will I know? I want to KNOW!

- St. Ignatius of Loyola founded the Jesuits. He was a master of discernment. He had to discern his own vocation after a tragic war injury, and then he had to help his new religious order through its difficulties. As a new worldwide movement, with many strong-willed members, tough decisions had to be made all the time. So St. Ignatius developed some good principles for decision-making. He is a good guide, and here is what he can teach us:

1. Pray. Pray with Scripture. Go to Mass.
2. Consult a priest, parent, or other trusted adult about decisions. Think about their advice.
3. Consider: what would you advise someone in your shoes to do? Step outside the emotional struggles to try to get an objective view of your situation.
4. Understand that the soul has ups and downs. Be aware of these. The up periods bring peace, joy, and good desires. The down periods bring sadness, anxiety, and discontent. Down periods can be solved by making an examination of conscience and getting to Confession regularly.



Be sure also to get good sleep, exercise, and eat well. If it seems physically or psychologically curable, take care of it. If there is no known remedy, trust in God and stay firm in your decisions. This type of down period is used as a temptation to get you to lose your trust in God and change plans. But it's also a time to strengthen your resolution to be faithful to God. It comes to everyone who is struggling to follow God, and it passes.

5. Never make an important decision during a down period. Definitely don't make your vocational decision during a down period.
6. Never change your plans during a down period. If you have made your vocational decision with prudent reasons and consulted others, don't let doubts and fears in a down period sway your decision.
7. Watch the down periods. If they do not pass away as you approach ordination or final vows or marriage, talk to someone. A vocation should be accompanied with peace most of the time. Ongoing sorrow or anxiety is not a good sign. Pay attention to that.
8. Don't agonize. Set a reasonable time to decide. If your parents want you to work first or go to college, maybe that's a good deadline—you could even pray, "God, if you want this sooner, make this really clear. Open the doors and solve the things that stand in my way."
9. Choose a set amount of time, try to attend some daily masses and then make your decision. You aren't making a final decision when you decide to go to seminary, or live with a religious community as an aspirant, or seriously date someone. You have time to examine your vocation and continuing to pray about it through seminary, religious formation, or courtship.

Above all things, pray and trust in God. He has been by your side since you came into the world, and He always wants the best for you.

HOMEWORK

Write a letter offering your best advice for a younger student discerning a vocation. What are good things to keep in mind? Good prayers or patrons? Good things to read or research?

Good websites or films? What should a younger person do to understand and know his/her vocation?