

Discerning God's Will for Us

“Discernment is faithful living and listening to God’s love,
listening to God’s love and direction so that we can fulfill our
individual calling and shared mission.” (Henri Nouwen)

The sixteenth-century saint and founder of the Jesuits, St. Ignatius of Loyola began his spiritual journey of discernment while he was convalescing from serious battle wounds – and that dramatic beginning changed his life. The beginning of our own spiritual journey may not be so dramatic!

Asking ourselves the question what is the meaning of life, especially our own life, may appear a pointless, rhetorical exercise, and yet, we human creatures continue to ask it in the hope that there may just be someone out there who has the right answer. We want to be able to discern what is the point of this life of ours that needs to be meaningful.

God speaks to us all the time and in many different ways, but it requires spiritual discernment to hear God’s voice, see what God sees, and read the signs in daily life as Henri Nouwen tells us. The books we read, the nature we enjoy, the people we meet, an answer to a decision we have to make, all contain signs of God’s presence and guidance in our lives. They also enable us to realize our lives are far from ordinary. There is nothing in our daily reality that is not meaningful, nothing that cannot offer us something that is beneficial for our spiritual growth, learning, expression of gratitude, and awe.

For many of us, the journey of discernment may begin when we find ourselves seeking a deeper relationship with God in the very mystery of the ordinariness of our lives. How often does it happen that when we are alone and still, we may sometimes experience a yearning so deep within that it aches?

We may well ask ourselves the question, what does it mean to become spiritually aware and how important is it to us? Generally speaking, spiritual awareness enables us not only to examine our own lives but also to understand what is happening in the world on a level that is much more acute and sensitive to the myriad layers of existence.

Discernment...2

Gradually, we will find ourselves paying more attention to aspects of reality that perhaps we were ignoring before, such as our fears, wounds, hopes and dreams. We will begin to listen with not only our ears but also the ears of our hearts, with a resonance we didn't realize existed. And then, hopefully, discover that the whole world is permeated with sacred meaning.

Not everyone is fortunate to have his or her own spiritual mentor and that is why we mostly turn to spiritual books and other sources as we seek to discover what God's way forward is for us. However, studying spiritual discernment is quite different to studying, say, philosophy, for example. It is not an intellectual or technical skill to master. It is not just reading about spiritual things but also reading about them in a spiritual way. As Henri Nouwen observed: 'That requires a willingness not just to read but to be read, not just to master but to be mastered by words.'

Discernment is a gift. And like any gift, it must be received with openness, at a time of the giver's choosing. Pope Francis has repeatedly reflected on the need for patience in discernment, a patience that is not passive resignation but active reliance on God's good time. Discernment, for Pope Francis, meant not rushing ahead of graces given, but patiently following God's lead.

This waiting on God also requires from us an act of radical trust in those periods of uncertainty and confusion. Poet John Keats called this period of waiting 'negative capability'; that is, 'when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'. It's a mysteriously fertile space in which the seed of discernment may grow and bear fruit.

We need to become spiritually discerning because life is constantly speaking to us, giving us insights, help and wisdom. Discernment also helps us to find our true place in the scheme of things. As we become more spiritually discerning, we will be better able to hopefully maintain a balanced sense of who we are and what our responsibilities in life are to our God, society and neighbour.

Ends

Peggy Spencer

12/06/20

