



## DISCERNMENT

Excerpt from lecture series by Gerald Fagin, SJ at Jesuit Center: Loyola University New Orleans, spring 2003  
Some of this material can be found in Fagin's book: [Putting on the Heart of Christ](#)

Discernment is one of those words that people throw around like "spirituality." Discernment is an art and a gift. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit, a gift we pray for. I think God gives the gift to everyone, but in some cases people have it in an extraordinary degree. Discernment is the art of discovering God's will for us in the concrete circumstances of our lives. Or put in another way, **it is discovering God's hopes and dreams for us**, which I like much better than God's will. God's will sounds rigid and set, written in concrete. God has hopes and dreams for us like a parent does for a child or we do for our friends, and we discover God's hopes in conversation with God.

Discernment is a way of discovering what it means for me, in particular circumstances, to be a disciple, what it means for me to follow Jesus in my own concrete life situation. **Discernment is the art of appreciating the gifts God has given me and discovering how I can best use those gifts to live out my Christian life.** Discernment is always in the context of Christian love and seeking for truth within that. It helps us choose that course of action which most authentically answers the deepest desires and longings of our hearts and the movement of the spirit that God has placed within us. God has hopes for us. God has dreams for all of us. How do we know that? How are they revealed? They are revealed in creation. They are revealed in the gifts we have. They are revealed in God's word that is spoken to us. They're revealed in our life circumstances. We have to use our freedom to accept God's invitation, to cooperate with God in creating a world that enables us to become the people we want to become and to create ultimately the reign of God, a world of peace and justice.

**Discernment presupposes that life is a mystery to be worked out, not a problem to be solved.** It is a mystery that we try to live out. And it is the promptings of the spirit that help us explore that mystery. But it will always remain a mystery. **Discernment also presupposes that life is a process.** It is growing in a relationship with God, with the world around us, with the people around us, and ultimately with ourselves.

**At the base of Ignatius' approach to discernment is the belief that God touches the individual soul.** This is absolutely foundational to Ignatian spirituality and to Ignatian discernment. God touches the individual soul. God does not talk in broad generalities. God is at work in the heart of each person. That's a startling statement. But it is at the heart at what



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Ignatius means by discernment. There's not one size that fits all. **There's not one plan that fits all.** There's not some principle that I can give everyone in this room and then you can deduce whatever you are supposed to do. God is moving in your hearts. God is moving in your life circumstances, and you have to listen to that.

**Discernment is about noticing patterns in ourselves and the movements within our hearts.**

**It is not automatic. It's not like you put it in one end and turn the crank and out comes a decision. It's a process.** There is a lot that goes into that process, and we may not come to absolute certitude. There's still mystery in it. We make the best decision we can make given the time we have. Ignatius was concerned about action. **He was concerned about how to live out of the experience of being loved, of being forgiven, of being called by God. He does not have a magic method. There is no method that leads to absolute certitude.**

What Ignatius offers us is the wisdom of his own experience, what he learned from his own life and from dealing with others: the way that God shapes the human heart, the way that God reveals to us God's hopes and dreams for us, the belief and the trust that God will finally lead us the way that God wants us to go, and that we will finally discover, and, this is important, that the deepest desires of our hearts are the deepest desires of God's heart. We will not get to our deepest desires and discover that God has radically different desires. The struggle is to get to those deepest desires and live them out. Because if we do, that's when we find peace; and we know that we've heard God's call.