Sometimes situations and decisions are placed before us in life where God’s will is not entirely clear. These moments provide a great opportunity to be with God, put yourself in a place of surrender, and listen intently. In these cases, Christian leader Ignatius of Loyola once said that we can discern the right choice by attending to the inner movements of our spirit. In particular, feelings of “consolation” and “desolation” will signal the correct course of action.

Ignatius always carefully put the word “spiritual” before consolation and desolation. For him spiritual consolation is our experience “when some interior movement in the soul is caused, through which the soul comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord.” Ignatius more simply describes consolation as every increase in hope, faith, and charity. Spiritual desolation is just the opposite; the words Ignatius uses to describe it include darkness of soul, disturbance, movement to things low and earthly, disquiet of different agitations and temptations.

We do not merely attempt to “feel peaceful” about a proposed decision; the feelings of spiritual consolation and desolation must be carefully assessed. Complacency and smugness about a decision can masquerade as consolation. At times, desolation can be a timely sense of restlessness pointing us in a new direction.

With these thoughts in mind, consider these steps to discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit:

1. Gather all information & ideas, with a heart open to God

What are all the options available? Have all possible answers to prayer been brought forward and considered, or just the most obvious ones? Pray for the Holy Spirit to transform your thoughts and bring creativity, innovative ideas, and a sense of consolation and peace if no others need to be prayerfully considered.

2. Pray for indifference, openness & discernment of obstacles

As you go into personal prayer, check your heart and motives. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see if you are truly indifferent, wanting nothing more than His will; this is a position of surrender. If you find there are thoughts or ideas which you are personally holding onto that you want to influence the decision, release those to God and ask the Spirit for the inner freedom and balance that allows you not to be inclined more toward one alternative or option than to the other.

Attempt to get in contact with your personal desires... including your motives and values. To do this well, you cannot rush this step. Pray this: “I want and I choose what better leads to your deepening life in me/us. I surrender this situation, and I surrender my ideas, my desires, my will, to You.” Perhaps consider praying the words of the Suscipe prayer:

“Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my entire will, all I have and call my own. You have given all to me. I give it all back to You. Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace, that is enough for me.” — Ignatius of Loyola

Ask the Holy Spirit to make you aware of any ways you are wanting to prejudge a path or choice up for consideration. Consider possible obstacles in your path to discernment: projections, disordered attachments like inferiority complexes, superiority complexes, or glorified self-images; “shoulds” or “oughts” that tyrannize you; perfectionism, fears, materialistic greed, and possessiveness; past hurts and self-pity; competitiveness that leads to envy; impatience with yourself or others; lust, ingratitude, and irreverence; desire for control, power, status, prestige, exclusiveness, and so forth.
3. Consider each option objectively, carefully & completely

Once you are in a place where you are confident your own desires won’t interfere with hearing God’s desires, now is the time to process all options with God. Ask the Holy Spirit to be with you as you take some time to make your lists of pros and cons; writing each down might be of particular help. Consider if there is anyone you should speak with to get further clarity about the situation and/or any possible options which you realize you don’t see fully. Weigh all ideas in a balanced way — yours, and all others for which you are aware.

Pray for the people being affected by the decision, and that no self-centered attraction or aversion about a choice will sidetrack you from what the Holy Spirit is pointing you to. Ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in all this. Ask to be free enough to be influenced only by this one value: which alternative will give most glory to God and best express my authentic self, as God has equipped me?

4. Ask God for guidance to the preferred option

This is the third of three states of the discernment. First, you asked the Holy Spirit to transform your thoughts, to make you aware of all options before you. Second, you asked the Holy Spirit to transform your desires (your will). Now, ask the Holy Spirit to direct your decisions, by stirring feelings of spiritual consolation: feelings of joy, enthusiasm, deeper faith, greater hope and trust, greater love, confidence, courage. These thoughts, desires, and feelings are all parts of your inner experience of the Holy Spirit guiding you to the truth.

These feelings of consolation accompany your desires when they are clearly pointed toward loving and serving God, others, and your true self. They are very different from the feelings that accompany your desires when they are influenced by disordered attachments aimed only at your selfish interests. Ask for light to see clearly what will best honor and serve God, those you might lead, your neighbor, and your true self.

As you evaluate the choices, your desires will be influenced by the Holy Spirit; that is, your will becomes more inclined toward one option and less inclined toward the other. These inclinations may fluctuate between options. Pay attention to these inner movements. Pray for light from the Holy Spirit about them. Eventually, your will is likely to focus on one of the alternatives.

If your will does not settle on one choice but continues to fluctuate, a disordered attachment may be influencing you. This feels like a lack of consolation and is a signal to do some more prayer. Making a decision without peace from God is risky and often is the Holy Spirit’s way of telling us to slow down and take some time to listen to Him more clearly. However, there is a difference between having peace from God about making a decision and everything “making sense” or everyone being in agreement, which are not a reasonable expectations when trusting God’s guidance in difficult decisions.

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5. Trust God’s leading when it’s time to decide, but make time to reevaluate

When the time has come to make a decision, trust in God and the peace He has provided you through this discernment process and make it, even if you are not certain about it. Trust that, from God’s perspective, if you needed it to be any clearer at this stage, He would certainly provide it (Luke 11:9-13).

Once you make a decision, live with it for a while to see whether your thoughts, desires, and feelings continue to support it. Take time as often as the Holy Spirit prompts you to pray and reexamine the decision. Ask God to show you if new data is needed, adjustments should be made, and/or the process should be redone.