



Finding God's will in your life

*You can weigh the pros and cons
of decisions; find the answers*

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*Fr. Hauser was asked by WINDOW to provide a condensation of a chapter from his recently published book, *Moving in the Spirit: Becoming a Contemplative in Action*, but with a special slant aimed at our readers and their daily lives. Fr. Hauser took the following from Chapter Four of his book.*

Jesus' life was dominated by the desire always to do the will of his Father. Jesus teaches his disciples that this must also be their desire: "None of those who cry out, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of God but only the one that does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt. 7:21). And

Jesus teaches his disciples to pray that God's will be done "on earth as it is in heaven."

We Christians have always agreed that God does have a will for us. However, we have not agreed what this will includes.

Does God's will include only those

universally binding norms that flow from Scripture, from duly constituted authority, or from the right use of our reasoning power? Or does God's will also extend to personal decisions that cannot be deduced from the above norms, decisions regarding the married or single state of life, choice of ministries, and other significant decisions?

The problem has troubled me much over the years. It is my belief that God does indeed have a will for us that involves particular decisions in life, a will that simply cannot be deduced from the universal norms given above. My approach to this problem has been influenced by the thought of St. Ignatius Loyola in *The Spiritual Exercises*. In this work Ignatius presents guidelines for finding God's will for major decisions. From these guidelines I have evolved a system for seeking God's will for significant decisions in my life. My system is inspired by Ignatius but is not identical with his. It has been influenced by the thought of Avery Dulles, Karl Rahner and Jules Toner.

An important clarification is in order on the meaning of God's will. I do not believe that God has a master plan for my life which will be revealed to me through my method. I do believe, however, that God desires I choose those alternatives in my life — all good in themselves — that are more for God's Kingdom, that is, for the love and service of God's people. These alternatives are then God's will for me.

And I do believe God will reveal these alternatives to me through the use of my method. My reason for this belief is simple: God is committed to the fullest expansion of the Kingdom possible in this world and can only achieve this expansion through us. Consequently, I believe God calls us through the gift of the Spirit within ourselves to make those choices that more directly foster His Kingdom on earth. I do not believe, however, that God condemns us for not choosing this will; rejecting this will is not a sin. Jesus did not condemn the rich young man for refusing to leave all and follow him. God's will is, then, God's preferred way for our lives because it is our way to do the most good for the Kingdom. I also

believe that this will is the path to our greatest happiness and fulfillment in life.

The guidelines I have evolved fall into three categories: conditions that must be present before using this method of finding God's will, the method itself, and, finally, confirmation of the decision made through the method. The method cannot be used unless certain conditions are present. To ensure the conditions are present I must answer four questions.

1) Do I believe God has a will for me in this decision?

It is my personal position that God has a will that includes not only our state of life (married, single, priestly or religious) and major choice of service within that state (homemaker, business person, teacher), but also significant choices within our current service or ministry, providing of

experiences, that is, our thinking, willing and feeling, and lead us to a conviction that one alternative promotes God's Kingdom more than the other.

For instance, on the basis of this conviction I will accept or not accept a request for special presentations. It is important to note that the sign God uses to reveal God's will is a quality of our own inner experience. The sign is not some type of external occurrence. The Spirit always works in the human heart. We can expect that this is where the sign of God's will is to be found.

3) Do I really want to know God's will?

This is the crucial question. We may be entering the discernment process intending to have our own initial convictions confirmed. If this is the case, the Spirit will have a diffi-

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course, they bear in some way upon the Kingdom of God. For example, in my own life I believe I have been led by God's Spirit to be a Jesuit priest and a college theology teacher.

Furthermore, I believe that God will guide me to make significant decisions within this state of life and ministry. For instance, I regularly make decisions regarding accepting requests for special presentations and workshops. I regard these decisions as significant since they take much time both for preparation as well as for presentation. I believe God guides me toward making decisions that are for the greater service of the Kingdom. These decisions I then regard as God's will for me.

2) Do I believe that God will reveal this will to me?

We must believe that God will make this will known to us through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will transform our inner

cult time breaking through our resistance.

I experienced this truth dramatically my senior year of high school. In January during my senior retreat I asked God whether or not I should become a Jesuit. "God" told me "no." Upon reflection I can see that I was totally closed to God's will unless it happened to confirm my prior decision not to apply to the Jesuits. My resistance was caused by the three factors that typically impede our freedom: group preference, inner-dividedness, and rationalization. My friends were all going on to college; why should I be different? College and a professional career were the way to the good life; why should I give up possessions and family? And, besides, since I would doubtless be wealthy, couldn't I do as much good for the church by my generous contributions? In March of my senior year I finally asked God what God

wanted me to do with my life. I had finally opened myself to the Spirit and was no longer seeking to have my initial inclinations confirmed.

4) Do I intend to carry out God's will when it is made known to me?

The response to this question is an index of our sincerity in answering the third question affirmatively. If we do not intend to implement God's will when we are seeking to discover it, we will never find it. By sheer effort of our own will, we will simply confirm our prior inclination.

For instance, since I had no intention of actually entering the Jesuits in January of my senior year, I could not discover God's will. Many of us are not truly free when we look for God's will; indeed, often our resistance is not even conscious. But using the method I'm proposing does not presume total freedom. However, it does presume awareness of resistance at some level so we can eventually deal with it. Often it is only through the use of the method itself that we recognize the resistance and ask for God's help in dealing with it. I believe in March of my senior year I finally became aware of my resistance. I recall at this time truly asking what God wanted me to do with my life — no strings attached!

There are five steps in the method for seeking God's will. The first step is the formulation of the proposition to be reflected upon. The proposition should be stated as concretely as possible. Since we intend to carry out the decision, it should contain as many details as possible. And the proposition should reflect the way we are initially leaning.

To illustrate this method I will use a decision I made to accept a speaking engagement. Our reflections should always be written out; I record mine in my journal.

The initial statement of my proposition read as follows: "I will give a four-week Lenten series on Personal Prayer at St. Mary's Parish on Monday nights."

My decision was a rather simple one with basically two alternatives. If more alternatives are possible, they must first be ranked in the order of preference. Then use the method on the alternative listed first.

The second step of the method is

using our minds to reflect on the proposition. During this step we write out all the reasons that occur both for and against the proposition or any part of the proposition. It is helpful to make two columns, a "pro" column and a "con" column.

Depending upon the importance of the decision, we will add to these lists over a longer or shorter period — major decisions requiring a longer period. Our lists should include all our motives, God-centered as well as self-centered. My journal contained the following lists:

Proposition: I will give a four-week Lenten series on Personal Prayer on Monday nights at St. Mary's Parish:

Cons:

Lenten schedule already crowded
Done series at St. Mary's before
Done four prayer series this year
Bored with prayer series
Need evenings for other work
Need more time for self
*Do different series
*Do Finding God in Daily Life
*Finding God remote preparation for new book

*After changing topic to Finding God I added these to Pro Column

Having verbalized all the conscious motives for and against the proposition, we should then evaluate the motives to assess which ones flow from a desire to serve God and which do not. It was clear to me that several of my motives were selfish, most especially selling copies of my book and enhancing my reputation. Nonetheless, I became convinced that even in spite of some ambiguous motivation, God was asking me to do the series.

I was uncomfortable with only one detail of the proposition, the topic. I then restated the proposition, changing the topic from Personal Prayer to Finding God in Daily Life, transferring three entries from the Con Column to the Pro Column. I was now at peace with the proposition.

I was at peace with the proposition even though it meant more work for me in preparing the series, and prudence might have dictated another conclusion, but, as is often the case, God's will is not always

identical with prudent judgments. Consequently, we cannot let the length of the lists determine our conclusion. There may be one or two entries that are more compelling than all the others. For me, they were the desires to prepare for a forthcoming book and to increase my service to God during Lent.

The third step in the method for seeking God's will is observing the direction of our own will as we reflect on the reasons for and against the proposition.

Steps two and three of the method are closely connected. As we observe the reasons for and against the proposition, we find our wills moving

Pros:

Good Lenten penance for self
People like prayer series
St. Mary's centrally located
Monday best night for me
Requires little preparation time
Extra service for God in Lent
Chance to sell copies of my book
Make money for community
Enhance my reputation in town

toward one or the other alternatives. If the reflection occurs over a long period of time, we may observe regular fluctuations of our will. If we have begun our discernment without total openness to God's will, the period of reflection becomes a period of purification. We pray for the grace to give up our selfish motives and to embrace only those that foster service to God.

I believe this is what happened to me during January through March of my senior year of high school. And, often before our wills rest comfortably on one alternative it may be necessary to change a particular aspect of the proposition, as I did in changing the topic of my series from Personal Prayer to Finding God in Daily Life.

The fourth step of the method is observing our feelings: On which alternative do we experience greater peace and joy, greater sensible consolation? The middle three steps of the method are closely connected: First we ask the Spirit to enlighten our minds to know God's will, then we

ask the Spirit to draw our wills toward this will, and finally we ask the Spirit to give us sensible consolation for the alternative that is in accord with God's will.

The gift of sensible consolation is the final criterion for knowing God's will. But just as our wills may fluctuate during the process of reflection, so may our feelings, especially if we want to have inclinations confirmed rather than to know God's will. This was illustrated for me during my senior year. In January I experienced no peace or joy; only in March after I reversed my decision on applying to the Jesuits did I experience peace and joy. Likewise I experienced peace regarding the Lenten series only after I had altered the topic of the series. The peace we experience is a peace the world cannot give; it comes upon us when we are most quiet. And we know it is the Lord.

The fifth and final step of the method is confirming the decision.

We make a tentative decision that God's will has been indicated when our minds, wills, and feelings rest peacefully and joyfully on our proposition. Then we live with the decision for a longer or shorter period of time, depending on its importance, to see whether we continue to be drawn to it. If we are not, we review the process to see if we have conscientiously fulfilled the conditions and method.

The condition most often lacking is the third: Do I really want to know God's will or do I want to have my own inclinations confirmed? Our minds, wills, and feelings tend to be drawn initially to our own inclinations, which often are self-centered and not God-centered — though what initially attracts us may indeed be God's will.

During the period of confirmation it is important to spend time alone with God, asking God to draw us to the alternative that is better for the Kingdom. If we fail to do this, we may never get in touch with the subtle movements of the Holy Spirit working in the depths of our hearts; we will merely be in touch with our self-centered desires. It is my experience that many of my tentative decisions are not confirmed and so I must revise them. Indeed, this was the

case in my senior year of high school. For me it is often necessary to make the "wrong" decision first. Only after I have made the wrong decision and have experienced a lack of peace and joy do I receive the motivation to revise the decision.

The sign of God's will is a certain quality of inner experience accompanying a decision. And, when our minds, wills, and feelings are drawn to a particular alternative for a period of time, God has indeed given us this sign. Thus, we conclude that this alternative fosters greater service to the Kingdom and consequently is God's will for us. God's Spirit working in our hearts has brought us to

When our minds, wills, and feelings are drawn to a particular alternative for a period of time, God has given us the sign of His will

this decision and is holding us to it.

This truth is not revealed as such in Scripture nor taught formally by the Church. It is, however, presented in *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*. Several prominent theologians, among them Avery Dulles and Karl Rahner, have reflected on the reason for the validity of this Ignatian criterion. They ask why we should experience sensible consolation when reflecting upon a particular alternative for serving God. There seems no natural reason for this, especially if the alternative chosen is initially at odds with personal preference and even at times with prudent judgment.

Since this cannot be explained by natural reasons, theologians conclude it must be explained by supernatural ones: The peace and joy we experience are God's sign to us that our wills are now resonating with God's will. God's Spirit has joined our spirit and is now directing our lives. Or, as St. Paul put it: "Since the Spirit is our life, let us be directed by the Spirit" (Gal 5:25). I find this

reasoning compelling.

Seeking God's will for significant decisions in life is often a lengthy process. I find myself simplifying the process by giving others — and myself — two brief pieces of advice.

First: "Listen to your heart and not your head." I know my heart is the place God speaks most directly to me; my head is the place I am most influenced by pressure outside myself and my own inner dividedness.

And second: "Take the next right step for your life." I cannot be sure what the future holds for me; I can only decide what is right for me now. I trust the big decisions will fall into place as I conscientiously look for

God's will in the smaller ones. I know there is much good I can do for the Kingdom in many parts of the world; I am often anxious because I am not doing enough. But I am always comforted by the fact that the best service I can do for God is that which God asks of me. Doesn't Scripture teach that God prefers obedience to sacrifice?

Finally, it must also be acknowledged there is no absolute certainty we have found God's will even when we think we have.

Why then bother seeking it? For me the answer is simple. I want to live Jesus's prayer in my life: "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." I believe God alone knows best how I can serve the Kingdom. Consequently, I want to give the Spirit of God maximum opportunity to direct me. And even if I do not have the certainty of knowing I have found God's will, I do have the immense consolation of knowing I have tried my best to seek it. And isn't this all the Lord ever asks? **W**