



Free Listening Hearts Program Materials

## **A Primer on Spiritual Discernment: Topic 1**

### **What is Discernment?**

The verb “to discern” means to sort out, to sift through, to distinguish. It is not a specifically religious word—people use it in a wide range of contexts. However, when the verb “discern” becomes a noun, the term “discernment” is used primarily in faith based circles. The problem is that not everyone in the church understands it in the same way. There are at least three different types of discernment practiced in the church.

Listening Hearts discernment is spiritual discernment, or what St. Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuits call discernment of spirits: distinguishing the Spirit of God from other spirits that influence us—such as the spirit of excellence, the spirit of winning, the spirit of a nation, the spirit of the times. Or, to put it in the vocabulary of call: distinguishing the voice of God from other voices that are telling us what to do—voices of our parents echoing through the years, voices of teachers and mentors who have been important to us, voices of friends and colleagues, voices of political and religious leaders, voices of the media. These voices may be good—God often speaks to us through them. But not everything they say is God’s word for us. And what may be God’s word for us in a given time and circumstance may not be God’s word for us in a similar situation at a different time in a different context. Spiritual discernment is a prayerful, informed effort to sort through all of this. Through it we are pointed in the right direction and shown the next step we are to take. To the extent that we develop a life of discernment with God at our side, the road in front of us continues to be illuminated.

Another kind of discernment is the discernment of gifts, sometimes called gifts identification. This type of discernment is scriptural and of clear value: if we know what our gifts are we can use them more consciously, with greater confidence, and thus more effectively. But discernment of gifts is not the same as discernment of call. In the Bible, over and over, God calls people to do things for which they are not the obvious choice, for which they do not seem to have the necessary qualifications. For instance, take Abraham and Sarah, childless and beyond childbearing age, called to become progenitors of an entire nation of people. Or Moses, who has difficulty speaking and is wanted for murder in Egypt, being called to go to Pharaoh to ask him to let the Hebrew people go free. And

there is Jesus, a gentle village carpenter called to become the Messiah when everyone was looking for a warrior-king. There are the apostles—ordinary everyday people with plenty of flaws—called to establish what would become the Christian religion. Part of the difficulty is that we often fail to grasp what qualities are most needed to do a job. And perhaps even more important: God seems to call people who clearly lack significant assets, so that we all can see that the person did not accomplish what they did because of any innate superiority, that the fruits that came were clearly the work of God. Beyond that, it also appears that God asks us to do what we know we are incapable of accomplishing. It is only as we respond affirmatively, obeying because we have confidence in God, that God provides us with what we need to fulfill the call.

A third kind of discernment is rational discernment in a Christian context. This is the most common type of discernment practiced in the church. It is based on a secular model that approaches a concern by thinking it through, engaging in discussion and debate, and making a decision. To put secular discernment into a Christian context, the process begins with prayers, applies Christian principles in the course of the deliberations, and likely ends with prayer. This all is good, but in spiritual discernment it is only preparation for the actual discernment, which involves immersion in the divine presence, imaginative engagement with the creative powers of the Spirit, and careful attention to signs of God's Spirit. Above all, spiritual discernment calls for deep prayerful listening and radical openness to the Spirit. Through it we grow into a closer relationship with God and other people. We develop a clearer sense of our path ahead, and become more at one with our own self.

*Discernment can be like driving an automobile at night: the headlights cast only enough light for us to see the next small bit of road immediately in front of us.*

– Farnham, Gill, McLean, and Ward, *Listening Hearts*, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, p. 24