

Nine ways to open up God's will for you

By Father Michael Scanlan, T.O.R.

During my 35 years as a vocation counselor, I've discovered nine steps to help people find what they want--and what God wants for them.

I'VE BEEN A VOCATION COUNSELOR for 35 years, and these days I meet regularly with more than a dozen people of all ages and walks of life. Every person and every situation is different, but I've discovered nine basic steps that keep me and those I talk with moving toward positive and faithful life decisions.

I try to assure people who bring a difficult decision to me that they will be able to know, in their deepest being, in their heart of hearts, what God is calling them to do. Many people are not sure they will ever know God's will or, if they do, that this knowledge will necessarily bring them peace.

We begin with prayer. Two verses from the psalms are favorites of mine for these situations: "Take delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4) and "I am your servant. Give me wisdom that I may know your decrees" (Ps. 119:125). We pray the prayer to the Holy Spirit together: "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful. . . ." We add other prayers appropriate to the situation, and we ask the Holy Spirit to inspire us and lead us to true wisdom.

1. Use your mind

I advise people that in the ordinary course of events they can use their minds to reach conviction in their hearts. We'll often read the beginning of Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 12: "I urge you, therefore . . . by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect" (Rom. 12:1-2).

We talk about renewing the mind--centering the intellect and the will totally on God and what God wants for us. I like to quote scripture to reinforce this point, including the greatest commandment: "Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, your whole mind and with all your strength; and love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31).

The purpose of our discussion--indeed, the purpose of our lives--is to seek out and live God's will for us.

2. Look at the options

I ask people what they think God wants them to do. If they present alternate possibilities, I ask which one they are inclined to think is God's will. From students and younger people, the possibilities I hear most frequently are: Should I marry? Should I be a religious or a priest? Should I break up with the person I'm dating? Should I change my course of study in school? Should I spend my summer in volunteer missionary work, or should I take a job at home? Should I room with these particular people? Should I direct my future career into work for the church?

From recent graduates and older people I hear: Is God calling me to move and change my job? Should I go back to school? I thought I was called to marriage, but it's been a long time and I haven't found anyone to marry. Should we adopt children? Should I join a lay community or apostolate? How do I deal with my strong attraction to the married person at work who seems to be flirting with me?



3. What does God want?

Most Catholics follow God's commandments and the teachings of the church. Indeed, the question is usually, "What does God want?" Seldom will a proposed course of action be inconsistent with what God wants. However, a careful review of the priorities involved in the person's state of life will frequently cast a helpful, new light on the proposed decision or change. Such statements as "I am first called to be a wife and mother" or "My first priority as a priest is to serve the people God has given me" will clarify the matter if a new direction threatens to undermine these commitments or make fulfilling them more difficult.

We might also review secondary commitments such as "God has called me to be a teacher" or "My main service to the church is in the area of respect for life." Deeply held commitments of this kind lay a foundation for future actions.

4. Will it help conversion of heart?

The key to discerning a specific vocational call is conversion. Our response to vocation involves converting our life more deeply and fully to the Lord. The call to religious life means a special call of service and self-surrender. The call to marriage always means conversion to a life centered on a spouse and possibly children. Being "in love" is important but not sufficient. Marriage, as well as the religious vocation, involves a commitment to the loving service of others.

In talking about conversion, we'll examine the person's spiritual history of turning away from sin and growing in love of God. We consider how the proposed action fits into this history. Will it bring the person closer to God and a life of virtue, or will it lead him or her further away? We look at how it will change supportive relationships. Will it be easier or more difficult to practice the disciplines of a spiritual life, such as regular prayer, participating in Mass and other sacraments, sharing faith with others, and having spiritual directors and models of holiness?

Sometimes the process of discernment will end here, when it appears that a proposed decision will make it harder for the person to grow in holiness. After going through this review, people sometimes will say, "I can see now that the Lord doesn't want me to do this; this isn't right for me." (More often, however, this conclusion comes after the next step--consistency.) At the same time, a new direction that involves considerable additional responsibility should not be ruled out simply because it might raise new temptations and challenges. Perhaps meeting and overcoming new challenges is precisely what's needed for the next stage of your spiritual growth.

5. Is it consistent with the way God has dealt with me before?

The discussion moves to consistency: How has God led you to this point? The difference between the conversion and consistency is often blurred. In both we're discerning a pattern of spiritual growth. Does the plan under consideration fit in? Can you see your life leading to this point? Do you have the time, energy, and resources to fulfill more demanding commitments?

Sometimes we understand our vocational call only when we meet the people we would like to spend our lives with. In any case, the call will be consistent with what has gone on before in our lives. Sometimes we know we are called to marriage or the religious life long before we find someone we would like to marry or a religious order we would like to enter.

The consistency of the vocation will be tested over a period of time. A couple will go through years of acquaintance and courtship to discern their vocation. People discerning religious vocations will spend years in seminary and formation before making vows for life. We say that married people are "made for each other." We say that priests and nuns and brothers "have a vocation."

The same is true for vocations to the single life. Many people are called to actively embrace singleness in order to care for family members, join a lay apostolate, or lead some other life of service. There must be

consistency between the service, the person, and the call to singleness, just as there must be conformity to the gospel and an awareness of how the call will lead to greater conversion and union with God.

As you discern a life vocation, it's important to live consistently. You should start living now what you believe is your vocation. Eliminate the contradictions. As a decision about marriage approaches, both partners will stop dating other people and devote their attention exclusively to each other. Men and women might date in the early stages of thinking about a religious vocation. But as they move toward a decision, however, it's important to begin to live the celibate call, without romantic relationships.

6. What confirms the wisdom of the proposed action?

Usually people tell me several ways that their course of action appears to be confirmed. Friends will endorse it. Circumstances will change in surprising ways to make the act possible. They may have detected special spiritual signs that seem to affirm it. A life vocation is a two-way street. In large decisions--marriage, religious vocation--the confirmation of another party is required. Two parties, not one, make marriage vows. The religious community, as well as the individual, assents to a call to a religious vocation.

The lack of a confirming invitation can cause great anguish. Lovers say their hearts are broken when their love is not reciprocated. The same thing happens to people who think they have a call to the religious life. The call to a religious vocation is mutual. Both the individual and the church must hear it.

Because the mutuality of a religious vocation is often less well understood than the mutuality of marriage, I'd like to say a bit more about it. Dealing with the church can be difficult. But the church is the institution established to carry out the Lord's work--including the work of discerning vocations to the religious life. God became human. He entered into human life. He works through limited, flawed, and sometimes erring human beings and human institutions.

You may encounter problems in this discussion of the confirmation of your vocation. What does it mean when the signs are negative while the disposition of your heart is positive? Parents and family are opposed, circumstances seem to block action, but you still think the proposed course is the right one. Is this a question of timing, should the whole matter be reexamined, or should the signs be disregarded?

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What is the relative importance of confirming signs--or the lack of them? How important is the approval of others? What does it mean when it looks very easy, or very difficult, to implement the decision? Be careful not to let the discussion of these complexities overwhelm the discernment process. Difficulties tend to become more complex the longer they are discussed. Move quickly to conviction of the heart. This is decisive.

It is often helpful to write down the most important items of confirmation--or lack of it. In fact, it is usually a good idea to summarize the conclusions you reach at each stage of the discernment process for later prayerful consideration.

7. Interpret spiritual signs

Signs have their place. Signs appear frequently in scripture. "And this will be a sign for you: You will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger," the angel told the shepherds (Luke 2:12). Gideon repeatedly prayed for signs that God wanted him to lead his small force against a greater army. Jesus' miracles were signs of the coming of the kingdom of God. At the same time, Saint Paul explicitly warns against relying on signs rather than on the faith we have received (1 Cor. 1:22).

In my experience, a person's account of spiritual signs is more useful as confirmation of the desire in the

person's heart than as a confirming sign in itself. Often, the individual is fully convinced that he or she should go ahead; the spiritual signs are incidental or ambiguous points of confirmation.

8. What does your heart say?

Conviction is decisive. What do you sense about the moral certainty of the rightness of your call? I'll talk with people about their deepest values and desires. "Ask yourself this: Putting aside all other considerations, including difficulties in implementation and other complexities, do you believe that this is the right thing to do? When you prayerfully think about going ahead with this, do you experience a deep 'yes,' a release and a pouring out, or do you experience hesitation and deep uncertainty?"

The standard of moral certainty is high in commitments such as marriage and religious vocation where the commitment is for life and time is not a great factor. The standard of the conviction of rightness is lower in matters where you have to choose the best of several alternatives in a certain period of time. In these cases, moral certainty is a practical conclusion that this is the right course of action, as far as I can see at this point, as a Christian who follows the Lord.

9. Pray

The key to obtaining conviction is prayer. The Lord himself--through the Holy Spirit's action and presence--is the source of true conviction. We all need to pray daily for God to lead us in obedience and faithfulness.

Discerners need patience. Ultimately, neither you nor the rules are in charge. Courtships can be lengthy. Religious vocations can take a long time to unfold. There can be false starts. The process of making a life commitment is easily described, but it's messy and imperfect in reality. We are dealing with sinners, not angels. The man and woman at the altar are two imperfect people exchanging vows of love and faithfulness. Every religious community and parish is populated by people marred by sin. We shouldn't look for the perfect spouse or the perfect community. Even if we found the perfect partner, the marriage wouldn't be perfect after we joined it.

Those in discernment will change. Those who are too rigorous, legalistic, rigid, and set on things being a certain way will learn to adapt and be flexible. Those who like things to be loose and informal, never settled, will learn the benefits of discipline and structure. Those who escape into the spiritual to avoid the natural and the physical will learn how to embrace the messiness of real life. Those who are too cautious and careful will learn how to leap ahead with God's call. Risk-takers will learn the skills of caution and reflective deliberation.

Our life vocation is a treasure buried in a field, the pearl of great price. The grace is in the calling. Pursue it at whatever the cost.