

Four steps to hearing your call

By Sr. Anita Louise Lowe, O.S.B.

Throughout the ages, people have struggled to understand God's call to them. Four basic steps of discernment—becoming aware, gathering information, making a decision, and looking for confirmation of your choice—can help.

HOW DO YOU HEAR God's call in your lives? How do you understand what you hear?

These questions have been asked throughout the ages and continue to be asked by all who seek to discern God's presence and call in their lives. If you look at scripture, you find several examples of people struggling to understand God's call to them.



YOU ARE LIKELY to hear God's call several times before you realize who is calling. Your task is to listen, to listen well, and, once you've heard God's voice, to follow it.

Consider the story of the call of Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1-10). Samuel was a young boy serving in the temple when he heard a voice calling his name. He assumed this voice was that of the priest, Eli. Eventually, Eli realized that Samuel was hearing God's voice calling to him and instructed him to respond, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Samuel needed Eli to tell him that the voice he heard was God's. He didn't recognize God's voice on his own.

Or consider the story of Andrew and the other disciple when they were with John the Baptist. John sees Jesus walking by and points out, "Behold the Lamb of God." With that the two disciples of John follow after Jesus and become his disciples (John 1:35-40). They needed John the Baptist to point out Jesus to them. Then, they could follow and respond.

When you seek to discover God's call in your lives you enter a time of discernment. The dictionary defines discern as: to separate, to sort out, to sift through. Discernment, then, is a time of sifting and sorting. Religious discernment is also a time to see with the eyes of your heart so that you can choose life in God. It is a time when you allow yourselves to be open to God's will, and it is an opportunity to allow your hearts to guide your mind more than only trusting your own reasoning.

What do you hear?

While discernment has many parts, I would like to suggest four basic steps in any time of discovering one's vocation. The first is a call to become aware. You are called to listen to God, to yourselves, and to those around you.

If you are to listen to God, then prayer is essential. You need to take time to be in conversation with God, to ask God for help and guidance. You have only to look to the life of Jesus to see the prominent place of

prayer in discernment. As you read the gospels you find that before every major decision Jesus went off alone to pray. He did this prior to choosing the 12 apostles, and he spent much time in prayer as he prepared for his Passion and death.

While you need time alone, you also can find God's voice in the voices of those around you. Your call is not for you alone. While you may grow personally and your relationship with God may develop as a result of your call, your vocation is always a call for others, a call to be of service to others, a call to pray for others.

Gail, a young woman considering religious life, says, "Without the voices of others, I know I would not be where I am today in my spiritual process. God has sent me 'voices' throughout my life, people that I may have only known for a short time and others whom I have known for a long while. I feel so alive and filled with love when we have spiritual talks. It is their voices echoing mine that bring light and peace into my life."

Follow the four-step process

TAKE THESE STEPS as you go through the process of discernment:

1. BECOME AWARE

Questions to ask yourself: Has anyone ever suggested that I might want to consider being a brother, a sister, or a priest? Has someone invited me to be active in ministry? Has anyone recognized gifts and talents in me and called them forth? Do I acknowledge that these voices could be the voice of God leading me toward my vocation in life? How do I sift through all of it? How do I discern God's voice in the midst of the cacophony around me? What do I hear? To whom am I listening? How much time do I spend in prayer? Have I asked God for assistance as I strive to listen for my vocation in life? What do others have to say to me, about me?

2. GATHER INFORMATION AND INVESTIGATE THE MANY AVAILABLE OPTIONS

Questions to ask yourself: What are my gifts? Where am I best suited to serve? What motives are driving me in my choices? Where am I resisting God's invitation?

3. CHOOSE WHAT YOU UNDERSTAND TO BE GOD'S WILL

Questions to ask yourself: What is the most loving choice I can make? What is the choice that will help me be most fully myself?

4. LOOK FOR CONFIRMATION OF YOUR CHOICE

Questions to ask yourself: What happens within me? Is there peace, even in the midst of some doubts? What happens when I share my choice with other people? Do others say, "Oh, I can see you as . . ."? How do I understand negative responses that occur within me? How do I interpret negative responses that I receive from family members or from friends? How do I listen to these guides? Do I seek to find God's voice in the voices of those who know me and who love me? Do I take any criticism or concern as an opportunity to examine my motivations and find myself strengthened rather than weakened in my resolve?

What do you need to know?

The second step in discovering your vocation is to gather information and investigate the many options in front of you. Nicole says, "As I discern God's call in my life, I find that the perspective and input from people who know me in a vast array of settings helps to gain deeper insight and self-knowledge. For each person whose life path has connected with my own, I have been enlightened to my weaknesses as well as uncovered some of my hidden strengths."

Discerning a call to religious life is a two-way street. It calls for mutual discernment—on the part of the individual as well as the community. Just as with marriage, entering a religious community involves two parties, and both are called to be open and honest in order to discern if God is calling someone to join this particular community or not.

During this step it can be extremely helpful to have a spiritual director, someone with whom you can share your prayer, your relationship with God, your questions, and your fears. A spiritual director can help you sort and sift and discover where God may be leading you. Jennifer recalls how her own spiritual director has helped her and challenged her in her discernment of a vocation: "My spiritual director introduced me to communities that I would not have necessarily visited and to new ways of praying and worshiping our God. He encouraged me and pushed me out of my comfort zone to truly be what God had created me to be. He has helped me to be the best 'me' I could be."

If you are discerning a call to a particular community, part of this step involves conversing with the community's vocation director. "It is a real blessing to find a vocation director whose only agenda is to listen and to help you listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit within you and the respective community," Hillary says. "One such vocation director I met with really helped me to probe both myself and the life which I was discerning. She never pushed me one way or the other, but through many visits and conversations, I found plenty of affirmation and encouragement to stay open to this calling."

Where is God leading you?

Discernment calls for patience on all our parts. There is usually not a quick answer to the various questions posed. You need to take time to pay attention to the Spirit's movements within you. Eventually though, you do need to choose—to make a decision. This is the third step of discernment.

This step calls you to choose what you sense to be God's will as you can best understand it at this moment. You can't expect your decisions to be always right or that you will be 100 percent certain when you do make your decision. Rather, you are called simply to make the decision that you believe will lead you to become the most loving person you can be, to become the person God created you to be.

What happens now?

The fourth step of discernment follows this time of making a choice, and it is a critical step in the process. You look for confirmation of your choice. While prayer needs to be an element throughout the process, it is vital during this time. You have made a decision.

While some may support you in your choice, you may also encounter those who disagree with your decision and try to persuade you to do otherwise. At these moments it is important to pay attention to what happens within you. Do you find your choice weakening, or do you find it strengthened, even in the face of adversity? Sometimes such negative reactions actually can help strengthen your resolve.

If, however, after making a choice, you find yourself feeling more and more uneasy or even get sick physically, you may need to look more deeply again. Is this a simple case of the "jitters"? Or is your body trying to tell you that you've not made a good choice? Again, at such moments, the guidance of a spiritual director is imperative. A lack of confirmation may be a call to reconsider my choice. Such a time of reconsideration may, then, lead me to a different choice. Or it could simply point out some areas in which I'll need to find extra support as I continue living out my previous decision.

Lynn is a member of a large family and has a grown son herself. She recently told her family that she is considering a call to religious life. She said, "My son was surprised. But over time he seems to be OK. My father is a good old Irishman who just couldn't contain his pride. . . . My mother is not so happy about this at all. . . . She can't see, as I do, that everything I'd be doing as a sister would be by choice and would make me happy; that it wouldn't be a sacrifice. . . . I have told some of my close friends [because] I really needed to do so. . . . Most of them don't understand it at all. But they are so supportive and see it makes me happy. Most of them have the same questions that I've already asked. That's great, because it gives me a second chance to talk about my own concerns."

While discernment requires that you spend time alone in prayer and conversation with God, you also need other people to help you sort out the fruits of your prayer, to help show you the way to follow God's call. As members of the body of Christ, you need one another to uncover your talents and abilities. You need the other members of the body to assist you on your journey and, at times, to show you the way. We are all

members of a community, a family of faith. Your discernment in life, therefore, leads you naturally into that community, not away from it. God uses those around you to lead you, to guide you, to spur you into action.

Listen well

Discernment takes a lot of energy. Listening is not easy! Like Samuel, you are likely to hear God's call several times before you realize who is calling. But, with the help of your friends, your families, and your communities of faith, you can find where God's call is leading you. Your task is to listen, to listen well, and, once you've heard God's voice, to follow it as did the disciples of John—following Jesus who asks each of you, "What are you seeking?"