



# The Cursillo® Movement

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## Prayer and Discernment

*Source: Presented by Fr. John Myers at the National Cursillo Encounter held at Villanova University in Philadelphia, PA – July 24, 2015*

The fourth major section of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (paragraph 2558-2865) is dedicated to instruction on prayer and deserving of our regular study and reflection. Personally, I prefer the definition composed by Fr. George Ashenbrenner, S.J., “A personal response to God’s presence.” (Consciousness Examen, Loyola Press, 1974) Our prayer begins with God acting in our human history. It has been this way since the beginning. Remember Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning GOD . . .

The art of discernment, that is, distinguishing between desires and motives that are of God, and those which are not (the world, the self, and the devil), is the *first area of concern* for us.

St. Ignatius of Loyola is well known for his rules for discernment for use in individual cases of discovering God’s will in one’s life. Below is a brief summary of **Discernment in a Nutshell** By Joseph A. Tetlow, SJ from his book: **Making Choices in Christ**.

*“Human beings are moved by a dense complex of motives, both in the things we do from day to day and in our big decisions. What drives a young woman to become a doctor or a young man to be an engineer? Many things contribute: success, altruism, interest. Or what drives a woman who has smoked for years to quit or an obese man to get thin? Again, many things contribute: fear of death, desire for health, concern of family. But they all interact in a kind of movement that eventually drives the person to act. Master Ignatius learned to think about those dense complexes of motives—images, ideas, attractions, revulsions—as “spirits.”*

*We can all name many spirits. There is school spirit, in which everyone cheers together for the football team. There is fear, which can depress an entire city, and exultation, which can cause a whole nation to rise up. But spirits are not only secular. A thrill of devotion fills St. Peter’s Square when a saint is canonized. A spirit of prayer drives people to make retreats. Christians under atheistic despotisms are moved to remain faithful.*

## Consolation and Desolation

*Master Ignatius noted that these dense complexes of motives and energies take on two configurations, which he identified with consolation and desolation. He discovered that both consolation and desolation can move you toward God or pull you away from God. Then he noted that sometimes consolation comes from a good spirit and sometimes from a bad spirit, and he noted the same thing about desolation.*

*Ignatian spirituality applies this to interpreting major decisions and daily experience as well. The movement of spirits, obviously, involves a set of complex variables: consolation and desolation, good and evil spirits, movements to and away from God. . .*

### ***How Spirits Work***

*Some basic patterns are easy to grasp. For instance, as you would anticipate, the good spirit usually brings love, joy, peace, and the like; the evil spirit characteristically brings confusion, doubt, disgust, and the like. Another pattern: when you are leading a seriously sinful life, a good spirit will visit you with desolation to turn you around; an evil spirit will keep you content so that you will keep sinning. Another clear pattern is the opposite of this: when you are seriously serving God, the spirits change roles. The evil spirit clouds your day with desolation to lead you away from God, while the good spirit fills your day with trust and love of God. And a final, easily grasped pattern: a spirit that works in light and openness is good, while a spirit cloaked in secrecy and deception is evil.*

### ***What to Do about Feelings***

*Some basic practices are also easy to figure out. When you have made a good decision to serve God better and after a while go into desolation, you should not change the decision; it's hardly a good spirit moving you. When you are feeling down, you would do well to pray a little more and increase the help you give to others. When, without warning or any preparatory activity, you are consoled with the love of God above all things, you can trust that it is a good spirit (particularly if it comes with tears). But when you are thinking or praying and grow consoled or disconsolate—well, test those movements. They could come from either spirit, as we have seen.*

*There is a good deal more to Ignatian discernment, and it gets no simpler. It is not, however, a merely human discipline. "Now instead of the spirit of the world, we have received the Spirit that comes from God, to teach us to understand the gifts that he has given us" (1 Corinthians 2:12). Serious disciples cherish this gift and put it to good use."*

See more at: <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/making-good-decisions/discernment-of-spirits/discernment-in-a-nutshell#sthash.LLMhnQiP.dpuf>.

The *second area of concern* for us is discerning what God is doing in the world around us, or how to first recognize and then actively cooperate with God in each of our environments. The first Rollo written by Eduardo Bonin was the Study of the Environment and is perhaps the most unique contribution to the Church by the Cursillo Movement. Certainly our conversations in grouping and in the School of Leaders can be helpful with this, but how often do we get past our own personal feelings and opinions about what is going on to the bigger picture, to even a glimpse of what God is about in our time. Consider the following words of Our Lord:

*"As he passed by he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him. (John 9:1-3)*

Notice the either-or question which is put to Christ, for which He offers a third and unforeseen explanation. In our attempts to discern the Will of God, it is essential that we accept the very

real possibility that God is doing something that is beyond our vision of things. Subsequent verses in the chapter describe the healing of the blind man and then the furor that is stirred up among the religious leaders, whom Jesus refers to as blind and voluntarily so. We also need to be careful of developing blinders that close us to what God may be doing in our time. As a Movement, we have already gone through a few painful stages of growth since our founding. The inclusion of weekends for women, for example, began much later and no doubt met with some resistance along the way. Those of you who have been around the Movement are aware that we continue to work on maintaining authenticity regarding our original charism, and once in a while have had a touch of resistance here and there 😊. So, discernment is an on-going process and one that requires both courage and humility to develop.

Below are a few prayers that I have found helpful for seeking the Will of God in particular circumstances:

**“Jesus, You know how I see things. Help me to see things Your way. In Your eyes, every person is a precious work of art in progress; every situation in my life is an opportunity to grow in faith, hope, and love. I know this, but sometimes it just isn’t enough for me.**

**Consider** *(name of difficult person)*. **What I see is** *(honestly say what you think and feel)*. **Help me to be honest about what I think and feel but also loyal to You. Help me to see this person as You do so that I may accept him/her as You have accepted me. I do not ask to understand him/her completely but I do ask You to show me how to live peacefully. I have had my say. Please, show me what I need to see. Teach me what I need to learn. And in the meantime, I entrust \_\_\_\_\_ into Your care to deal with as You know best and I will do my part not to interfere with his/her process of conversion. Since You have loved me even before I began to repent of my selfishness and sin, I ought to do the same toward others by the power of Your grace within me.**

**Then, there is this situation:** *(describe what you think and feel)*. **Sometimes I feel trapped and stuck. I know that there are times when you want me to act and other times when you want me to wait. Help me to sense Your timing and direction in this so that I will neither act on hasty impulse on my “good ideas” nor miss an opportunity to serve You. So often in the Scriptures You tell us not to be afraid but to trust You for everything. So, here I am ready to turn this problem over to You. I renounce my desire to be in control or to make things go my way. I await Your wisdom on how to best respond. I trust You to turn every difficulty into an opportunity; even failure You can use to prepare us for future victory. Speak, Lord. I’m listening. I await Your command.”**

While quite simple, these prayers invite us to allow God to correct our vision of people and things. They can be used by individuals as well as by a small group. In a group, however, our venting may say much more about ourselves than the person or situation and you need to be open to honest and charitable feedback on what you perceive. It is not easy to accept correction, let alone seek it out. Especially once we have had an initial conversion, it is easy to presume that we are fine and in no further need of change. In fact, this is precisely when the defects and failures we see around us become quite prominent. The indignation of James and John at the Samaritans who would not receive them (Mark 3:17) and the equally offended disciples at the ambition of the same (Mark 10: 40-41) are obvious examples.

Discerning what is going on in the life of another person requires more than just astute observation. It requires our acceptance of two facts:

1. Each person is at least partially a mystery to everyone, including him or herself, except to God.
2. God loves and accepts this person as he or she is, so I have no right to judge them as undeserving of acceptance, respect, and help to the extent that I am able. Failure to accept or respect another human being is never a failure on their part but on mine.

The big and small events that happen in life also require prayerful discernment. Our study of Scripture ought to enable us to recognize the meaning of our own lives. In Exodus, for example we learn how we were once slaves to sin, how we passed over into the life of Grace and are passing through desert times on the way to the Promised Land of Heaven. Indeed, the Old Testament may be even more helpful than the New Testament for making sense out of the ups and downs of our personal history. For most of my life the Book of Job, for example, meant very little to me personally. Eight years ago when I was diagnosed with Cancer, this Book became a great help to me. Those who are dealing with parish closings and mergers might find in the Books of Jeremiah and Ezequiel a great source of wisdom for working through such times.

Whether the times be pleasant or painful, the most important question for the Christian to consider is: **How can I respond with faith, instead of fear, hope instead of anger, and love instead of selfishness to the situation before me at this time?** Whether you win the lottery or lose your job, you are in a “Near occasion of Grace”.

Discernment is that gift and skill for recognizing what God is about, a sense of right timing and direction. In the words of Blessed John Newman:

*“God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do His work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it if I do but keep His commandments. Therefore, I will trust Him, whatever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him, in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him. If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me. Still, He knows what He is about.”*