

Facilitating vocation discernment for lifelong commitment

[Religion](#), [Jesus](#)



In our contemporary cultural and ecclesial milieu, commitment appears to be given little or less importance. This is commonly visible around us in the broken promises, divorce from marriages or early departures from priestly and religious life, wounded relationships, wasted potentialities, lack of direction. As a result, so many people today tend to experience a general sense of being unfulfilled.

It is clear that these problems both foster and are a result of a real failure to engage oneself in a lifelong commitment. Many young people today are reluctant to make commitments for fear that commitment might lead to their loss of freedom. Such people believe that lifelong commitments by definition restrict one's freedom. In fact, people who do not want to commit to anything, do so because they do not want to sacrifice anything.

In a vocational context, commitment ultimately involves a call, a choice, a promise (Sammon, 2004), sacrifice and renunciation. It is the surrender of oneself in faith, hope and love to God. Commitment to discipleship demands the immediate and unconditional response of turning aside to a life that is new. This is evident in the lives of those called by Jesus; they were called to live as new creatures, sacrifice their very selves, abandon their means of livelihood and sever their family ties (cf. Mk 10: 21).

As Upton (2011) asserted the formation house should be full of men who are willing not just to 'discern' but to 'commit,' not because they have pieced together some vocational puzzle, but because they want to be genuine disciples and missionaries of Christ. The different stages of formation are important times of preparation into lifelong commitment for the candidates,

and of discernment for the formators. The Congregation for Catholic Education 2008 believes this time is especially important for spiritual and human formation. It should "nurture a greater self-awareness for personal growth," and foster a "solid human" formation in addition to spiritual development (nos. 59-60).

In Christian literature, the word 'discernment' can be used to describe a faith process of determining the will of God in a situation or indeed for one's life. It is a process which involves decision making and also carries elements of spirituality. According to the insights of St. Ignatius of Loyola, "discernment is the discovery of one's greatest hope for happiness and peace within one's providential life setting" (Burke-Sullivan, 2004, p. 10).

This hope is grounded in the discovery of God's desire for each person and in the liberating power of God's spirit. Jackson (2009, p. 307) points out that discernment is a faith rooted experience which consists in "discovering God's direction and guidance in the concrete reality of our day-to-day lives." In large part, discernment describes "the interior search for an answer to the question of one's vocation, namely, determining whether or not God is calling one to the married life, single life, consecrated life, ordained ministry or any other calling" (Ezeani 2016, p. 277).

Indeed, vocational discernment involves making an informed decision enlightened by faith and reason. We might say that since we can never possess empirical certitude in matters of faith, our vocation discernment could retain an element of darkness. Ultimately, the discernor is moved not

only by faith but also led by God's spirit to overcome the forces of evil that operate within human experience by means of fear, seeking to blind, deafen and defeat our capacity to choose. The use of reason reaching into the darkness of faith determines the validity of the discernment.

Spiritual accompaniment remains a great help in providing sound formation and facilitating vocation discernment. The task of the accompanier is to facilitate a free and conscious response to the divine action in the life of the formee, to guide him to embrace single-mindedly the celibate life and to live it in a meaningful and joyful manner.

Without a doubt, all effort at priestly and religious formation seek to help the formees to more clearly and confidently answer God's call (Vechtel, 2006). In this regard, apart from one-on-one interaction with the formees, other means such as workshops, vocational growth sessions, personal reflection tools, meditation, etc., could be helpful in facilitating discernment and fostering growth in human maturity. Catholic spirituality has proposed various models or characteristics involved in proper discernment.

Jackson (2004) advises an approach to discernment which requires for the discernor to have the ability to reflect on the ordinary events of one's life, the ability to reflect what one experiences, a habit of daily prayer, self-knowledge which includes knowledge of one's deepest desires, and openness to God's will. He affirms that discernment begins with a prayer for enlightenment and proceeds through a repetitive process of evaluation, prayer, clarification leading to an informed decision.

Bertrand (2001) and Gallagher (2007) described similar processes of general spiritual discernment, which are also applicable to vocation discernment.

Bertrand (2001) relied on the spiritual wisdom passed down through the teachings of St. Bernard. Gallagher (2007) wrote of spiritual discernment using the teachings of St. Ignatius of Loyola in the Spiritual Exercises.

According to both theologians, candidates should be able to determine whether an inspiration is coming from God, from self, from an evil spirit, or from another source (Bertrand, 2001; Gallagher, 2007).

Using the Ignatian method of discernment, a formee evaluates his feelings in regards to each option to learn from where the thought or feeling originates (Bertrand, 2001; Gallagher, 2007). According to the Ignatian method, feelings of sadness and happiness, also called desolations and consolations respectively, give valuable information to the formee regarding from where the thought or inspiration originates (Gallagher, 2007). Consolation occurs when people are engaged in integrating thoughts and feelings into the specifically spiritual relation they have with God.

In desolation, people are inconsistent in their choices, fixed in their self-image, secretive, bear the mark of guilt and regret and painfully vulnerable in one obvious aspect or another. To simplify Ignatian method, one must eventually determine whether the choice he or she considers leads to fleeting happiness or long-lasting happiness (Bertrand, 2001). Based on the belief that God's will leads to true and eternal happiness, one can determine whether or not a particular inspiration comes from God and thus whether or not a particular path or vocation should be chosen (Bertrand, 2001).

Ignatius explores the experiences of consolation and desolation as a means of assessing and facilitating discernment and spiritual growth. Vechtel (2006, p. 132) argues that for Ignatius, "the way of discipleship meant looking at the brokenness of one's biography and the ambivalence of one's motives and actions. One's personal convictions and ideas about life had to be measured by gospel values."

In February 2009, while addressing the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, Pope Benedict XVI stated that the important discernment in formation "happens on the part of formators" (Upton 2011, p. 71). The onus lies on formators to create an enabling atmosphere in which candidates can freely and confidently engage in the discernment process. Generally, a formee does not receive a direct confirmation of his call from God, nor should he expect to receive such a confirmation. Although the Church maintains the possibility of a miraculous vocation like the call of St. Paul on the road to Damascus, but it is rare to experience this kind of vocational calling today.

We are no longer in the time of Prophets that God would speak to directly, nor in the time of Jesus who chose 'whom he wanted.' The formator, spiritual director and counsellor are important facilitators in vocation discernment. Jesus himself in a special way accompanied his disciples, the sinners, Zacheus, the Samaritan woman, the woman caught in adultery, Nicodemus, the disciples of Emmaus, those suffering from diseases and bondage. The approach of Jesus could serve as a model for formators in facilitating vocation discernment and accompaniment.

While emphasizing the importance of personal accompaniment in facilitating vocation discernment, Nugent (2000) refers to structured meetings with the Spiritual Director who can act as guide and model of sexual integration, as well as with the formator " with whom students are expected to articulate their understanding of celibate chastity and their readiness for such a commitment" (2000, p. 75).

The spiritual accompanier can facilitate vocation discernment by enabling fuller insight into the personal motivations of the formee, helping him to develop various aptitudes for community living, including the capacity for healthy solitude and fostering healthy psychosexual integration. Formators can facilitate the healthy integration of the two drives of spirituality and sexuality. As Ezeani (2011) noted "sexual integration embraces, and is inclusive of spiritual integration."

Furthermore, the accompanier plays a decisive role at the level of the soundness of motivations and often at the level of certain abilities, particularly concerning the ability to live the evangelical counsels. According to researchers (De Souza 2007), often the motivation to priestly or religious life is not strongly founded on any previous experience of God, but is influenced by ambition for upward social mobility, careerism, social security and so forth. Because of this, in some cases, the accompanier may ask a candidate to consider discontinuing his formation.

Indeed, in the process of discernment, some young people may find that their psychological makeup simply is not suited to the personal demands of

priestly and religious commitments. A priest's days are filled with hospital visits, marriages, funerals, baptisms, and with the lives of hundreds perhaps thousands of people under his pastoral care.

Those candidates who come from severely traumatic childhood experiences may find such a life to be excessively difficult, if not impossible. Indeed, the formee must show the capacity to carry out the vocational project. Does he possess the natural predispositions, inner capacities, and ego strengths, which will help him to realize the proclaimed ideals? In the following section, we propose some elements that can foster personal growth and improve the vocational commitment of the formee.