Discerning Your Vocation,
Ignatian Style

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Nobody does discernment better than St. Ignatius Loyola, and he learned the skill by observing the movements of his own heart. If you want to learn discernment from Ignatius, the best place to begin is with his own story.

Ignatius was born into a low-nobility family in the Basque-land of Spain in the year 1491. He aspired to be a sort of knight-errant: winning the hand of a noble lady, vanquishing the enemy in a great battle, carousing in the local alehouse. He was well on his way to this life when, in a fool-hardy battle in a fortress in Pamplona, Spain, his leg was badly damaged by a cannonball. He spent many dispirited months in convalescence in the Loyola castle back at home, dreaming of the chivalric life, bored to tears. He asked for knightly stories to read—the pulp fiction of the day—but there were none to be had. The only two books anyone could scrounge up were a book on the life of Christ and another on the lives of the Saints. When tiring himself of his daydreamed fantasies, he would occasionally battle boredom by reading a story or two from one of those books. After a while, a second set of daydreams emerged in his imagination. He dreamed of becoming a spiritual knight, following in the acetic footsteps of the saints, living a life of religious service and extreme fasting and prayer. Like his dreams of chivalry, these daydreams would delight him for hours on end.

After some time, Ignatius began to notice a difference in his interior response to these two sets of daydreams. He noticed that when he dreamed of chivalry, he enjoyed himself very much, but the joy lasted only as long as the dream. When the dream ended, so did the joy. But when he dreamed of living a saintly life, the joy inside him would remain long after the daydream ended. Ignatius had a hunch that he could determine the source of an attractive fantasy by pondering the deep emotions that accompanied and followed the fantasy. This seemingly simple insight was the zygote of a lifetime pursuit of what has come to be known as Discernment of Spirits, the method of determining God’s will by measuring the breadth and depth, the hue and tone of a prayerful, daydreaming heart.

How might you apply St. Ignatius’s insights to your own vocation discernment? At its most basic, Ignatian Discernment comes down to Getting Quiet, Gathering Data, Dreaming Dreams and Pondering Dreams.

**Step 1: Getting Quiet**

I hope it doesn’t take a cannonball to get you quiet, but it might. Thanks to the advertising, entertainment, and technology industries, we are noisier than ever before in human history. A
friend of mine wrote the following wry comment on his Facebook page: “In the mall today, I saw a woman sitting on a bench by herself and she wasn’t looking at her smartphone. I hope she’s OK.” All of us fill up every minute of our day with flashy images and lots of noise.

Let me be blunt: if you cannot put away all your gadgets and silently pray a little bit every day, you cannot claim to be doing any type of Christian discernment. It doesn’t have to be lengthy, but it does have to be regular and frequent.

It took a cannonball for Ignatius to finally quiet himself. What will it take for you?

**Step 2: Gathering Data**

If you’re going to make a good decision about something, you’ll want to be as well-informed as possible. This is no less true if you want not only to decide but to discern something. Discerning the possibility of a religious vocation, you’ll want to research the congregation, order, or diocese that you’re considering. You’ll want to explore their websites, attend their vocation events and have conversations with those who have made similar choices. And you’ll want to ask lots of questions. Following are good questions with which to start:

- What is your congregation’s own blend of contemplation and apostolic ministry?
- How do you pray?
- What are a few pillars of your spirituality?
- What type of works do you do?
- How many are you? When and how were you founded? Where in the world do you work?
- What does a typical residence of yours look like?
- What is your formation process like?
- May I spend some time with a few of your younger members?

That last question implies a whole other level of data-gathering. To decide something, you’ll need factual information. But to discern something, you’ll also need spiritual data that comes from your internal reaction to the factual data. Why? Because St. Ignatius’s insight is that you will determine the source of your attractions by observing your internal movements while in the midst of entertaining those ideas.

So then, for example, when you’re visiting a residence of the group you are considering, take note of the number of members, the type of work they do, and so on. But take note, too, how your heart is responding to the experiences you are having and the information you are learning. As you spend time with the members, are you feeling at home or uncomfortable? Are you enjoying yourself or can you not wait to get out of there? As you learn about the formation process, can you picture yourself engaging in it and growing from it? How does it feel as you imagine yourself in formation in this particular group?
Gathering data for discernment, then, is more than just gathering facts. It’s also about making observations of your internal movements as you daydream about the facts.

**Step 3: Dreaming Dreams**

Now we’re really getting to the good stuff! Ignatius was a big daydreamer and his followers do the same. If you’re discerning between say, joining the priesthood or religious life or pursuing marriage and family life, get yourself quiet by getting into the rhythm of daily prayer. Gather data—both informational and spiritual. And then take that data into your daily prayer through *praydreaming*—daydreaming your options right smack in the middle of your prayertime. Here’s an example of what I’m talking about:

1. Sit in a position that is neither so comfortable that you’ll fall asleep nor so uncomfortable that you won’t relax.
2. Make the Sign of the Cross and pray a simple formulaic prayer such as the Our Father. Speak spontaneously to God, asking for a sense of his will for your life.
3. Let yourself get really still and quiet now. Try to quiet down not only your body but your thoughts and emotions as well. In place of your fidgets and meandering thoughts, try to sense God’s presence inside you: calming you down, filling you with love, giving you peace.
4. Once you’re there, quietly and peacefully drift into a little fantasy about your life. Imagine that you’ve found the perfect mate for yourself, that you’ve had a wonderful dating relationship, that now you’re married, that now you have beautiful children and a fulfilling family life, and so on. Like Ignatius with his own dreams, allow this fantasy to carry you away for a while.
5. Now dream of an alternative life. Imagine joining a group of religious or a seminary: Living as a novice or seminary student, learning to pray from your elders, laughing at table with your peers. Imagine your life proceeding deeper into priesthood or religious life: becoming a sister, a priest or a brother, ministering to God’s people, growing old with your friends in ministry. As you did with the first praydream, revel in this fantasy a while.
6. Now, pull away from the praydreams and return to a deeper silence. Try to empty yourself again of all but God’s loving and peaceful presence.

**Step 4: Pondering the Dreams**

The bigger the discernment you are making, the longer you’ll want to spend in that third stage of praydreaming. Discerning whether or not to buy a new smartphone? Maybe praydream just once or twice. Discerning a life choice like marriage or religious life? You’ll want to praydream—at least from time to time—for at least months, if not a year or two.
But praydreaming is just daydreaming if you don’t ponder the meaning of your dreams. When Ignatius pondered his fantasies, he noticed that dreams from God left him feeling differently than other dreams. Later, as Ignatius and his followers further developed the method of Discernment of Spirits, certain characteristics of one’s internal movements began to emerge as strong indicators—though not infallible—of God’s will for one’s life. So, what are these characteristics? And how do you ponder your praydreams? It might look something like this:

1. In the midst of praydreaming in the manner described above, I pause and take note of my internal reactions and responses to the fantasies I am imagining. How do these praydreams leave me feeling? Peaceful? Optimistic? Desirous of a life of great faith, hope and love? Or the opposite: Ill-at-ease? Pessimistic? Unenthusiastic about living deeply the virtues of faith, hope and love?
2. Which of these praydreams leave me with a lasting peace long after I have left the dream and gotten on with my day? Which praydreams fill me with joyful excitement and great desires? Note the negative internal responses as well: Which praydreams seem to run out of gas—lose their appeal shortly after the dream is over? Which praydreams leave me feeling not excited but rather burdened or obligated?
3. After several prayertimes wherein I praydream my options, I might spend a prayertime simply pondering what has been going on inside my heart in these past prayertimes. Do I, like Ignatius, notice that one set of dreams leaves me feeling one way while another set leaves me feeling another way? I speak with God about this. I write about it in my spiritual journal. I talk about it to my spiritual director, my elders in the Faith, my good friends, my family, and so on. I listen to myself as I describe to someone else my internal response to these praydreams.

Here are a few other things to look out for as you ponder your praydreams:

**Possible Signs of God’s Will**

1. **God’s presence.** Is it easier to feel God’s presence in one set of praydreams than in the other?
2. **Great desires.** Ignatius believed that when dreaming of God’s will, your heart will be inflamed with desires to do good and holy things. Your heart will be on fire and you will want to set the world on fire.
3. **Peace.** Strangely, while feeling inflamed with great desires, you will also sense a deep-down peace. On the surface, that praydream might be kind of scary, but deeper down you sense a peace that seems to come from God.
4. **Spiritual Freedom.** When you imagine living out this particular life-choice, your heart feels liberated and untethered. For example, despite the fact that the vow of chastity binds you to a life without sexual intercourse, you somehow sense that you would feel more free to reach out to others in love. Despite the fact that the vow of obedience would limit your independence, you inexplicably imagine yourself more available for service of God and God’s people.
5. **Transparency.** A good sign that God is present in a praydream is that you are able and desirous of sharing this dream with wise people who love you and tend to know what’s good for you. If you find yourself wanting to keep secrets from the people who have been good sounding-boards for you in the past, then this might be a sign that you’ve wandered off-course.

6. **Tranquil in regards to the timing of your actions.** It is a good sign if you feel a great desire to get started but also—at one and the same time—at ease with the idea of waiting for just the right moment. You feel a desire to act boldly, but in a measured fashion. Beware of a moment in which you sense inside yourself a *false urgency*: a compulsion to get started immediately while the wise, loving and holy people in your life are advising you not to rush.

**More than anything, relax and trust in God**

Reading all of the above instructions might leave you believing that you’ll succeed at discernment if and only if you follow the steps correctly. But the truth is that God does all the heavy lifting for you. God leaves only the easily-manageable tasks for you to do. Discernment is less about following precise instructions in order to produce a product (a decision) and more about peacefully, trustfully listening in on the conversation that God is already having with your heart. So long as you faithfully sit quiet and listen, they’ll let you know what they’ve decided!