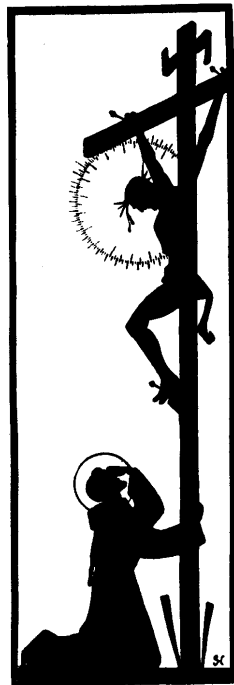


Primer on Discerning God's Will

based on Father Kentenich
and Schoenstatt's Spirituality



Overview: Discerning God's Will

A. General Method:

Putting up the "Ladder" of Divine Providence
(What Fr. Kentenich called Schoenstatt's method of meditation)

B. Voices:

1. Voice of the Times
2. Voice of the Soul
3. Voice of the Order of Being

C. Practices which help discernment:

1. a regular life of daily prayer (including the "ladder")
2. regular reception of the sacraments
3. fulfilling one's daily duties well (out of love of God)
4. cultivating the covenant of love with Mary
 - capital of grace
 - community
 - apostolate

D. Action Plan:

1. observe
 - the voices
2. act
 - make decisions and follow through with them
3. entrust
 - entrust all your observing to the MTA
 - entrust all your actions/decisions to the MTA
 - renew often the consecration of your whole life to her

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Introduction

We need to make many important decisions in life.

Some involve *moral choices*.

Some involve *decisions about my future*: like what to do after high school, or, which college to choose.

Some involve decisions *about my vocation*: am I called to marriage (if so, who will I marry?), the priesthood, single life, etc.



**The key to a solid Christian decision is this:
TO DISCOVER WHAT GOD WANTS OF ME
AND TO DO IT.**

If I do this, I can rest assured that my life will be ultimately happy and carried by God, for He knows me better than I do myself, and—more than anything else—wants that I be happy with Him in heaven.

By doing this we imitate Christ in the most central feature of His life and action: the desire to only do the will of His Father. As He prayed during the Agony in the Garden: **Not my will, but Your will be done!**

By doing this we imitate Mary in the most central feature of her life and action: the desire to only do God's will. As she said on the hour of the Annunciation: **Behold the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done unto me according to Your word.**

To discover what God wants of me means **discerning His will**. It is the **goal of this booklet** to outline how this can be done. It is based on the insights of Fr. Joseph Kntenich and on experiences gained by the movement he founded: Schoenstatt.

A. General Method

The most important thing about discerning God's will is *not to get stuck in our human way of looking at things*. We need to take the time to **see how God sees things**. This is what Fr. Kntenich called **putting up the "ladder" of Divine Providence**.

We could put it this way: To know what God wants, we need to have an **antenna** for His wishes. Fr. Kntenich once described it this way to couples in Milwaukee:

"In Schoenstatt we speak of a great law, the law of the transparency of all created things. This means we see all things with the eyes of faith. It is as if we were always using a looking glass. Through this looking glass I see everything in the light of faith. As a result I will see all things differently from the way others see them. For instance, without the light of faith I will only see how attractive my wife is. But if I use the light of faith I will also see my wife's beauty as a reflection of God's beauty. Then my love for my beautiful wife will be a way that I love my beautiful God." (J. Niehaus, *Gilbert Schimmel: The End Crowns the Work*, p. 162)



The key to discerning God's will is the belief that God really loves us and has a loving plan for our lives:

"Think of how our Savior gave us a lesson on faith in Divine Providence. He did it in a down-to-earth way. He wanted to show us that the Heavenly Father has designed a great plan—a plan for my life, for the USA, for world history (....) What does Divine Providence mean? It means God has foreseen everything. (....) Our Lord says—"Not one little hair falls from your head unless it is the will of God" (Lk 21,18). Do you understand what this means? It protests the fallacy that God does not care for us. It means: God takes an interest in every person and in the tiniest things." (*Gilbert Schimmel*, p. 162)

But how do we “put up the ladder” and see things from God’s perspective? In reality it is a very simple exercise which Fr. Kentenich liked to call “Schoenstatt’s method of meditation.”

“In Schoenstatt we have developed our own method of meditation. It is a unique method. How does it work? When you are on the way home, or if you can spare a few minutes or as you sit in the car or in the bus—think quietly to yourself. Do it this way. Ask yourselves: What happened yesterday at work (...)? [Even the hard things.] Now, think it over: Did this happen by accident? I could say: It will not be long before those stupid socialistic, communistic infiltrators will have us by the throat. That may all be true. But in spite of this I must say: God stands behind it, too. The question is:



Dear God, what are you trying to tell me through this?"
(Gilbert Schimmel, p. 163)

In other words, the method is this:

Schoenstatt’s Method of Meditation

1. Find 5 to 10 minutes of quiet each day.
2. Look back: over the last 24 hours.
3. Remember: What main things happened?
4. Put up the ladder: God, what were **you** doing?
5. Ask: GOD, WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO TELL ME?
6. Savor this question in quiet prayer and open yourself as Mary did to the will of God.
7. Entrust these thoughts and the next 24 hours to God.

A help for this meditation can be the prayer:

*'God is Father, God is good,
everything He does is good.'*

B. Voices

Once we have set up the “antenna” to listen for God’s voice in our lives, we need to know what to listen for. In Schoenstatt we look at three ways God speaks to us. Fr. Kentenich called them the “voices”:

1. The Voice of the Times
2. The Voice of the Soul
3. The Voice of the Order of Being

1. The Voice of the Times consists of all **events** and happenings: in ourselves, our families, the Church and world. Fr. Kentenich liked to say that God not only speaks through His Word (Scripture, itself a preeminent voice of God speaking through the times) but also through His **actions**. These actions include everything He causes and permits to happen in our lives. Fr. Kentenich said often:



***Nothing is mere coincidence—
everything comes from God’s Providence!***

In other words, even if I am bit by a mosquito, it is in some way permitted by God and therefore part of His attempt to make His loving wishes known to us.

Example 1: I happen to meet someone who becomes a good friend. He helps inspire my faith. *God, are you not telling me that you really care about me and the direction of my life?*

Example 2: My car breaks down. I miss work. My boss gets mad. *God, are you are trying to accomplish some good through this?*

Example 3: I live in times when many people do not believe in God and the morals of my nation permit evils like abortion. *God, are you trying to challenge me to a great mission?*

Example 4: I am in a happy mood for no apparent reason. *God, are you trying to tell me something?*

I should also be aware of the **law of the open door**. There will be times when God gives us unique opportunities (an “open door”). If this answers a voice of the soul and does not contradict the voice of the order of being, I should normally follow it. To see if it was really meant to be, I then observe for the **creative resultant** (that what comes out of it is positive, even beyond the normal expectation).

2. The Voice of the Soul is vitally important. It generally has the most influence and longest staying power on our decisions, since it is rooted in the individual being and ideal God has given us.



This voice shows in **the soul's responses and ideals**. In the way we *respond* to events: attracted or repulsed, inspired or apathetic, joyful or grieved, angry, worried, trusting or confused. In our *ideals and aspirations*: my dreams and longings, the particular kind of greatness to which I aspire, the challenges which move me most.

Different aspects of the voice of the soul are *conscience*, which helps us know right from wrong; the *sense of vocation*, giving me a feeling of my call even before I can find good reasons; my *temperament*, showing itself in how I react to the challenges of life; *my choice of favorite activities, friends and places*, reflecting interior longings and inclinations of the soul.



Our soul is not infallible. It can be too emotional or self-absorbed, or be entangled by fear, revenge, pride, lust or laziness. To avoid self-deception, one must 1) *test the voice of the soul* and not just follow it on a whim or fancy, and 2) *consult the voice of the order of being* to remain on solid ground, even while respecting the wisdom of the basic intuition God has placed into our soul.

Example 1: I am unhappy with my job, even though I try to make the best of it. *God, is my soul trying to tell me something about the kind of work I am called to do?*

Example 2: Computers really excite me. *God, are you giving me a clue about what my future profession should be?*



Example 3: I feel an inclination to the priesthood growing inside of me. *God, help me to discern if this meant to be my vocation. If it is, help me to know when and how to make the next step. If it is not, help me to know what you are trying to say.*

3. The Voice of the Order of Being is like a compass helping guide all our decisions. It includes exterior and interior voices:

Exterior:

- The 10 commandments.
- The Commandment of Love.
- The teachings of the Church.
- The laws of society.
- The rules of my family.
- Natural law.

Laws and teachings provide the compass for an ordered relationship to God, Church, country, family and self.

Interaction in society demands that we are aware of **how things really are**. For instance, marriage means that I have to meet the right person to marry. My generation or culture may have certain strengths or weaknesses. Today's moral and ethical struggle has precise roots in our society. The opponents of the Church use certain tactics which can affect the atmosphere I live in, etc. All of this gives clues about how God wants me to respond and which laws and teachings need to be brought to the forefront.

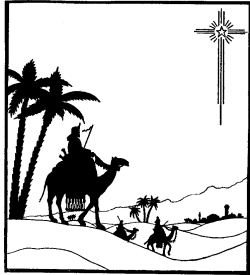
Interior: God speaks through **the exact way I am**. I have certain *strengths* (talents, skills, abilities) and *weaknesses* (character flaws, limitations, inabilities). God makes each person *either a man or a woman*. He makes me *an American or other nationality*. I come from a certain *family with pluses and minuses*.

Respecting this interior voice of God's order is very important. In my soul I might be attracted to a particular profession but discover that I do not have the aptitude or qualifications for it. Rather than get angry or disappointed with God, I should see it as His voice helping me know what I should do with my life. Through self-education, I can overcome some weaknesses, but there will always be areas where I have to accept that my "order of being" goes so far and no farther.

The **Voice of the Order of Being** is often like speed limit signs. Some are *positive law* for the well-being of society. The limit could be 50 or 70 or anything else, but the main point is safety in sharing the roads. *Natural law* is like the speed limit for a dangerous curve. If we ignore it, no policeman needs to issue a ticket; nature itself gives the penalty: we skid off the road and over the cliff.

A. Identify which voice(s) each example from the Bible illustrates (T = times, S = soul, B = being)

1. ____ “Honor your father and mother” (Ex 20,12).
2. ____ The wise men following the star (Mt 2,1-2).
3. ____ Mary and Joseph searching for 12-year-old Jesus (Lk 2,45).
4. ____ Jesus “went with them to Nazareth and was obedient to them” (Lk 2,51).
5. ____ A woman came to Jesus and begged Him to heal her daughter (Mk 7,26).
6. ____ The way the father welcomes the prodigal son (Lk 15,22ff).
7. ____ “You can tell a tree by its fruit” (Mt 7,20).
8. ____ The conversion of Paul (Acts 9).
9. ____ The curiosity of the two disciples of John who wanted to know where Jesus lives (Jn 1,38).
10. ____ Jesus washes the feet of His apostles (Jn 13).



B. Read the Story of the Wedding at Cana (John 2, 1-11) and answer these questions using the voices of the times, the soul and the order of being:

1. Which voice(s) urged Mary to ask Jesus to work miracle?
2. When Jesus says “my hour has not yet come” which voice of the soul makes Him hesitate to work a miracle? (=What is His ultimate criterium for deciding if “his hour” has come?)
3. The “voice of the times” says “no” to Mary (Jesus seems to have refused her). What voice in her soul urges her to say, “Do whatever He tells you”? What does this reveal about her soul?
4. In the end, Jesus works the miracle. Which “voice of the times” has finally convinced Him it is His Father’s will? What does this tell us about Jesus’ respect for God’s voice in *our* soul?

C. Practices which help discernment

After studying the three voices, we need to put discernment into action. The foundation is built on practices assuring a “clear line” to God. Basic practices of the faith (1 and 2) are essential to hearing God’s voice. Other practices (3 and 4) are well-known as effective helps in being receptive to God’s will.

1. A regular life of daily prayer. This is indispensable to discerning God’s voice in our lives. Daily morning and night prayer are central to remaining in touch with God. Here is where “putting up the ladder” also fits in as a simple but effective form of meditation.

2. Regular reception of the sacraments. The minimum requirements of the Church are: Mass on Sundays and holydays of obligation; communion and confession once a year. This is truly minimal! To effectively discern God’s will it is crucial that we more regularly go to confession and live a life worthy of reception of Holy Communion with each Mass. This presupposes a striving to be more than a “Joe Average Catholic” who goes to Communion without thinking about Jesus and his commitment to God. Here the extra sacrifice to attend weekday Mass can make a huge difference.

3. Fulfilling one’s daily duties well (out of love of God). This is what Schoenstatt calls “everyday sanctity.” It is interesting how important it is to discerning God’s will that we do our chores, fulfill our duties, do our schoolwork, go to work with the spirit: *God, I want to do this well to show you how much I love you.* If we do this, it is like we have much better reception to the wavelength of the Holy Spirit!

4. Cultivating the covenant of love with Mary.

For those of us in Schoenstatt, we have the further beautiful means which make our hearts more receptive to God’s will: contributions to the capital of grace, community experiences, apostolate. But most of all, the more we try to live our covenant of love with Mary, the more we become like her and she can help us be receptive to God’s will.



D. Action Plan

Once the basic practices are in place, the final step is the **strategy or action plan**. Schoenstatt likes to call its faith in Divine Providence “active,” meaning we do not just wait for God, but always try to respond to the three voices to the extent we can. It looks like this:

1. Observe. This is the ongoing process of looking for the voice of God in the times, our soul, and the order of being. It is especially aided by the “ladder” of Schoenstatt’s method of meditation. Observation can demand patience and the ability to wait for clarity.

2. Act. Once I have a reasonable measure of clarity, it is time to take seriously the voices of God I have discerned and **make a decision**. I then **follow through** and carry out what I decided.

Sometimes all that is clear to me is the next small step. Then I take it step to the best of my ability. When I dare to act on what God has shown so far, He often follows up by giving clarity about the next step. We do not need to be afraid of failure. Even if we goof, it will have been in an earnest effort to follow God, and He will use the misstep to accomplish something positive. “It is better to have tried and failed than to have not tried at all.”

The moment of decision may suddenly push itself upon us, as in a sudden event or deadline. This too is a voice of God and we should try to respond as best we can given what we have discerned thus far.

3. Entrust. Most importantly, we should entrust each step to Mary:
 all my observing and listening,
 all my actions and decisions,
and finally, I should renew often the consecration of my whole life to her. By doing this, I immerse the entire process of discernment in the right attitude and guarantee its fruitfulness—

“Not my will, but Your will be done.”

How is God speaking to me in my life?

God, what are you trying to say?

Prayer of Discernment

You know the way for me, you know the time,
into your hands I trustingly place mine.
Your plan is perfect, born of perfect love;
you know the way for me, that is enough.