

DISCERNMENT

FINDING THE WILL OF GOD

THE SWALLOWS

Nature of these notes:

These notes are not a discernment exercise, but only an exercise on discernment. They can be useful as an introduction before a real discernment exercise is attempted.

Intent of these jottings:

- ✓ *To learn to practice discernment in order to find the will of God*
- ✓ *To help us to read the signs of the times.*
- ✓ *To become aware of the inner promptings of our nature and of the movements of Gods grace within us.*
- ✓ *To discover possible attachments and emotional blocks vitiating our discerning God's will..*
- ✓ *To realize that quite often the reasons we bring to justify our decisions are mere rationalizations*

Target Audience:

- ✓ *People desirous of doing the will of God.*
- ✓ *Serious-minded youth searching for their vocation in life. .*
- ✓ *People confronted with serious problems demanding a momentous decision from them.*

Uses of these jottings:

- ✓ *Talks and instructions*
- ✓ *Discernment sessions.*
- ✓ *Vocational events. .*
- ✓ *Group discussions.*
- ✓ *Adult Catechesis and moral instruction classes*

THE SWALLOWS (A Fable)

Narrator: On a tree by a river, a group of Swallows perched. And as they fluttered from branch to branch, they chirped....

Swallows: How short the days are now. Don't you find it getting colder? These grey skies make life so dull. Where is the sun shining now? All the flowers withered away! All the leaves are falling.

Narrator: All the signs in nature seemed to say “something” to the Swallows, as if they whispered to them: It is time for you to leave this place. Yes begin your journey immediately. Nature was beckoning the swallows to a far away distant land with brighter skies and warmer days with shorter nights. How they longed for the evergreen trees and the delightful scent of flowers! There was haven, there, they must go. All, but one wise swallow decided to make haven where she was. She argued with her companions:

Wise Swallow: But why do we have to go? Do you expect me to find anything very different from here?

Swallows: Are you not coming with us?

Wise Swallow: Where to...where do you want to go?

Swallows: To a warmer place where we can nest.

Wise Swallow: And how far is that place from here?

Swallows: Come along, we have not much time left, you’ll see.

Wise Swallow: Surely, you can’t expect me to leave my beautiful nest I have made here.

Swallows: Just leave everything behind, and come with us before its’ too late.

Wise Swallow: Too late? For what?

Narrator: She was a wise Swallow. She wouldn’t make a move until she had thought it over once, twice and again and again. In a final bid the Swallows urged their stubborn companion.

Swallow: Let’s be up and gone! Let’s not linger here any longer. Deep down within us we feel a call an urge to leave this place and go. Our hearts keep telling us “Go, Go, Go!”

Narrator: However, the most sensible among them refused to budge. She stayed put where she was. She scorned her companions:

Wise Swallow: I will not go from here till you can convince me! Really you are bunch of irrational creatures. First, to risk so much as leaving behind all you have here. Then, to go where you know not and next for no reason at all!

Narrator: Entrusting themselves to their inner voices and surrendering themselves to the promptings of their nature, all the Swallows left the

presently inhospitable country for a more friendly land. All, but the exceptionally, rational and calculating, swallow remained behind. She kept telling herself:

Wise Swallow: It's madness I say. To trust my inner feelings, without having a solid reason first! Don't you think that makes sense?

Narrator: As she nestled in her comfy home she kept reasoning out and convincing herself of her position.

Wise Swallow: I know what to do. Why do we have to fly away like cowards? Cannot we stay put here and fight it out.

Narrator: She figured it out, all right, from the start.

Wise Swallow: It's getting cold, no sun now, winter's days are advancing. So I must plan ahead.

Narrator: She went all round collecting feathers and pieces of wool to insulate her nest and make it warmer and more inhabitable. She muttered to herself:

Wise Swallow: Winter is cruel. I must keep really warm. This nest will shelter me for the rest of my winter days no matter what the weather.

Narrator: She was proud of her new re-feathered nest. She felt very cozy and warm. She kept telling herself:

Wise Swallow: How nice I feel inside here! Couldn't all have done the same? If they only had waited! That's what you call stupid and irrational and to think that now they are flying and flying, tired, exhausted and hungry, and without knowing where they go.

Narrator: She chuckled with laughter at the rest of her friends. The dreadful winter crept in, step by step. The days became still shorter and the nights longer. The winds grew stronger and the air cooler. The landscape was desolate. Still our Swallow was feeling warm and cozy in her beautiful nest! She thought she was saved from the clutches of winter, till snow began gently falling, covering the whole countryside with a spotless mantle of ice. There was nothing to eat, not a grain, not a crumb. She was hungry now, growing weaker and weaker. Feathers and bones was all that was left as life ebbed away...until .one day she was no more.

Her beautiful and cozy nest had become her grave. Winter passed over and once again the days grew longer and warmer, and flowers anew decked the countryside with color. Crickets and grasshoppers filled the air with sound and song and... oh wonder of wonders....

Those ‘stupid and irrational’ creatures who entrusted themselves to their inner voices and surrendered themselves to the promptings of their nature appeared again in the warmer skies of summer filling them with songs and dance!

Happy days were there again for them. It was good for them to be backing home. Everything was alive again, but for that little ‘rational’ Swallow who shrunk and withered lay dead in the heart of her cozy nest!

Reflection Questionnaire

Part (A) “Global interpretation” of the Fable.

- Read very attentively the text of Fable of The Swallows.
- Next, write-down your reflections on how to apply this fable to the area of “**Discerning or discovering God’s Will in our lives**”
- In your reflections explain what is symbolized or signified by the following items:

By The Swallows in general.

- Who do the Swallows stand by in real life?
- Their inner feelings and sentiments. The inner voices prompting them to go.
- The grey skies, the colder days and longer nights, the falling of leaves and the absence of flowers...
- Their readiness to go to the unknown and to follow their inner feelings, voices and instincts.
- Their willingness to forgo their nests and all they had.

The Distant land beckoning them go.

- Its attraction and promise.
- Its mystery and unknown character.

The Over-rational Swallow

- Her stubbornness and her arguing with her companions.
- Her “rationalizations, her trying to defend her position and to convince others and herself.
- Her chuckling with laughter at her companions.
- Her unwillingness to leave behind her nest and all she had.
- Her “craving” for security and “absolute” certitude.

The Final Outcome of the Story.

- The suffering and death of the “over-rational” swallow.
- The new spring.
- The return of the swallows.
- Their songs and dance under the new summer skies

Part (B) Reflect and Reply to the Following Questions:

(1) What's discernment?

- Is there any difference between “To choose” and “To discern”? Which?
- Have we to choose or discern the will of God? Why?
- Do you agree to the following statement “We mean by vocation the Will or the plan God has for each one of us in our earthy life? Give reasons.
- ”Should all we discern our vocation in life? Why?

(2) State of body and mind helpful for discernment

- What should ideally be our physical condition to enter into the process of discernment? Why?
- What should be our mental condition for a promising process of discernment? Why?

(3) Spiritual dispositions required for a good discernment

- What should be our spiritual state or dispositions to enter into the process of discernment? Why?

(4) How does God speak and communicate his will to us?

- In what different ways, so to say, what are the various languages God uses to manifest his mind to us? Mention them. Comment on them.

(5) Certitude, Risks and Trust

- Can we ever arrive at an absolute certitude that we found the will of God? Why?
- If not, what to do? What does God expect of us?

Suggested Ideas for a Input” on the Questions Above**(1) What do we mean by discernment**

- Discernment means an honest and loving search for the will of God.
- We strive to discover the will of God “objectively” independently from our likes and dislikes, our personal attachments, moods and whims.
- Discernment is a laborious and often a long process whereby we strive to ascertain the plans God has for us.
- Discernment has nothing to do with “choosing” the Will of God.
- We choose nothing. It is He who chooses. We have to accept whatever God has chosen for us.
- It is God who decides what he wants of us.
- Even before the world was created, God had already decided it for us. Our job is to find out what it is and how to carry it out!

- Discernment does not imply that we should see in advance before hand, the entire plan God has for us
- In advance, only God knows his entire plan for us. We have to accept it as it unfolds before us, day by day, .step by step,
- Discernment demands that we get continuously attuned, in the here and now, to God’s messages and inspirations and that we put them into action in our day-to-day living!

(2) Physical and Mental Dispositions Helpful for a Good Discernment

As regards the body:

- A relaxed mood, rested and fresh
- A good physical condition, alert and active..

As regards the mind:

- Peace of mind, away from worries, anxieties, sadness. nagging doubts, hesitations, scruples
- Free from negative feelings: like fear, sadness, depression, anger and their likes.

(3) Spiritual Dispositions Required for a good discernment

As regards the spirit:

- Prayerfulness - the entire process of discernment has to suffuse in prayer.
- Spiritual peace and joy and consolation. Free from aridity and desolation.
- Truly speaking, the crux, the most important requirement for a good process’ of discernment are the “ spiritual dispositions”
- Many times, for lack of the proper spiritual dispositions, a process of discernment becomes nothing but a long process of “self-deception”, of “self-justification”
- If a person has not attained to a reasonable degree the right spiritual dispositions, he should not attempt “discernment” at all!

Tentative list of the required spiritual dispositions for good discernment.

- **A genuine love for God.** To love God above all things created!
- **Great generosity.** A readiness to sacrifice everything, everyone, even oneself for the sake of God.
- **An emptying of one-self** for God’s sake with joy.
- **Trust and confidence in God:** Placing oneself completely in Gods hands.
- **Forgoing all security** except the one that comes from trusting in God.
- **Courage to “acceptance Gods acceptance”**
- **Refusing to ask God guarantees** and safeguards.
- **Not putting conditions** to God..

- **Detachment**, understood as an interior freedom from “inordinate attachments” to persons, things and self.

How to work out our Spiritual Dispositions

- ✓ By being less worldly and more spiritual
- ✓ By being less “un-free” and more masters of ourselves!
- ✓ By having a genuine and personal prayer life.

- ✓ By a willingness to change
- ✓ By austerity of life and penance
- ✓ By having faith in oneself
- ✓ By self-awareness and self -knowledge through a spiritual guidance.

- ✓ Freedom from fears and internal inhibitions

- ✓ By courage to face risks.
- ✓ By poverty of spirit and detachment.

- ✓ By a generously giving oneself to others.

- ✓ By humility to accept our weakness and correction from others.

- ✓ By a constant awareness of God as the centre and ground of our being.

Comments:

If the body is tired or tensed, or the mind disturbed and not at ease, or the spirit is not attuned to God’s inspirations, and our hearts are not in a prayerful mood, better postpone the process of discernment for some other time.

(4) At “discernment” time, God may communicate his will to us in various ways

Through External Signs: (Secondary causes or the signs of the times)

- World events.
- Circumstances and happenings in our day-to-day life.
- People’s needs and wants.
- Opportunities open to us.
- People around us: friends and enemies, companions, partners, superiors, inferiors, relatives and acquaintances..
- In fact, anything and anyone may be a channel of God speaking to us.
- We have to be attuned and learn how to read or interpret God’s continuous speaking to us through all events of life.

Through our Feelings, Emotions and Sentiments:

- Our spontaneous reactions to events, people and things.
- Inclinations and aversions. Attractions and repulsions.
- Our loves, fears and natural impulses.
- Our inhibitions and defense mechanisms.
- Our passing and our lasting moods.

Through “spiritual illuminations and graces”

- Spiritual consolations and desolations.
- Deep longings and inexplicable good desires, and compulsions
- Generous, altruistic inclinations beyond the ordinary to serve others.
- Love of God impelling us to do something
- Love for Christ and an irresistible desire to imitate Him.

(5) Certitude, Risks and Trust

- It’s not possible, through discernment, to arrive at a “metaphysical” or “mathematical” certitude of having found the will of God.
- God’s will cannot be discerned mathematically, syllogistically or apodictically..
- We can only arrive at a “moral” and “spiritual” certitude.
- The very words “absolute certitude” in regard to the will of God is a figure of speech, for God is a mystery and his Will for us cannot be otherwise..
- By human reasoning, we cannot decide in a “positive” way, what the will of God is
- No amount of “reasoning” will ever show to anyone whether he has to embrace celibacy or not, leave his home and forgo his possessions or not.
- Human reason guides us only in a “negative” way. In other words, it can indicate to us that our choice is not unreasonable..
- For instance, our reason may tell us whether the things we have discerned as the will of God are moral or immoral, wise or unwise, contrary to the Gospel or against charity. If they are immoral or unwise or contrary to the Gospel, we can conclude that they are not the will of God.
- Celibacy, absolute dedication, renunciation, poverty, dying for others, etc, do not make sense to human reason, but they do to a generous and godly “heart”
- The heart has logic of its own! Discernment in the spiritual sense is a matter of the heart.
- The reasons of the heart cannot be expressed in a “rational” way. Yet, they are not unreasonable..
- The logic of the heart, the promptings of the spirit do not contradict reason, yet they transcend it!
- When we enter into the process of discernment we are expected not to be unreasonable, yet we have to follow the “logic of the heart”

- In practice, the most important decisions of our lives are taken with our hearts, yet they should not contradict reason.
- No amount of cerebration can tell us whether we should marry or not, marry this man or woman or rather another; whether to embrace celibacy or not, whether to stake our life for a noble cause or not.
- When confronted with such issues our reason remains mum. It is the heart that speaks.

APPENDIX ONE; Activities

Notes:

We suggest below some activities that may help interiorize the ideas and trenching above.

Suggested Themes for the Activities.

The Participants together, or in smaller groups, may choose one of the themes suggested below and prepare an activity based on it.

- ✓ Rationalizations
- ✓ Attachments
- ✓ Lack of Generosity
- ✓ Anxieties and restlessness as obstacles to discernment
- ✓ Events and happenings of day-to-day life as manifestations of Gods will.
- ✓ Fear of risk. Love for security as an impediment to good discernment.
- ✓ Prejudices and assumptions as hindrances to finding God's will.
- ✓ Feelings and emotions and their role in discerning the will of God
- ✓ God's inexplicable inspirations.
- ✓ Demanding "absolute" certitude before taking a decision.
- ✓ Any other similar topics.

Suggested Activities

1. Role plays

The participants may role-play any of the above mentioned themes or any other of their choice.

2. Bible Study:

The Participants may take any of the passages suggested below and study it in the light of the day's sessions. .

Genesis 12/1-4	The call of Abraham
Exodus 3/1-21	The call of Moses
Jonah 1/1-17,3/1-10,4/1-11	The call of Jonah
1 Samuel 3/1-11	The call of Samuel
Mathew 2/1-12	The Magi
Mark 10/17-22	The Rich Young Man
Mark 10/17-22	The Would-be Followers of Jesus

Mathew 1/18-25
Acts 9/1-11

St. Joseph's Vocation.
Conversion of Paul

3. Case Studies **The participants may be given a "case-study" to discuss such as:**

One: John, a very promising young man tells his spiritual director: "Father, if you can prove to me 100 per cent that I have to leave home to work for the slum people, I'll do it! " What would you tell to John?

Two: Mary finished her teachers training. She always felt called to teach poor and destitute children. Unexpectedly she was offered a job as an airhostess. So, she became an airhostess. She has given up her idea of being a teacher to poor and destitute children. However, she tells herself and others: "I have taken this job of airhostess because, the salary being very good, I am able now to pay for the education of many poor children". What would you tell Mary?

Three: Anthony says, "My ambition in life is to become a doctor to help others. However, if I cannot secure admission in a Medical College, I'll join the Seminary to become a priest."
What do you think about his discernment? Is it O.K? Give him your comments?

APPENDIX TWO **Prayer Session**

Closing the Event with a Common Shared Prayer.

- Quiet down Relaxation exercises may help.
- Singing Hymns: "Come Holy Ghost", "All over the World", "Spirit of the Living God"
- Readings 1 Co 1/18-25 "The wisdom of God vs. The wisdom of the World"
- Communitarian reflections on the reading
- Silent prayer.
- Sharing the ideas, feelings and experiences of today's event
- My awareness and insights
 - ✓ Is the Lord asking something from me now?
 - ✓ How did God speak to me today?
 - ✓ Do I feel the need of some real discernment? About what?
 - ✓ What shall I do about it?
- Pray earnestly to God to give you the right dispositions for discernment
- Closing Hymn: (*Suggested hymns*)
"Stand by me",

“Somebody is Knocking at the Door
“God gives his people Strength”
“With you as my guide”,
“I surrender all”,
I’ll say yes”.