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# Vincentian Discernment And Decision-Making

By

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## Introduction

Ours is a world where we are saturated with information which we are expected to absorb and respond to, often instantly. Not only must we respond, but the expectation is that we will make decisions with wisdom, with justice, with compassion and with a whole array of other values. Where can we find guidance or a degree of certainty in making decisions? How do we know what God is asking of us?

When we face decisions which affect the direction of our own lives as well as the lives of others, when we determine whether to add or eliminate programs, when we adjust the budget and thereby eliminate jobs, where is the available help to let us know we are on the right track? How assuring it would be if we could go to the copy room, pick up a fax from God with instructions saying, "Just Do It." Or, "From my vantage point this is not going to work. Cancel all negotiations." It seems the God-fax would make life a whole lot easier.

However, we know this direct action is not God's way. God respects us so much He would not interfere and make decisions for us especially since He has given us the ability to make those decisions. In the Scripture quote we listened to which introduced this session, we heard Jesus tell us that His intention was always to do the Will of His Father. Yet Jesus, too, had to discover and perhaps struggle to conform his decisions to those of His Father.

"... It is not to do my own will that I have come, but to do the Will of the One who sent me." (John 6:38)

Throughout his life, we know that Jesus made *conscious* decisions — he deliberately chose certain people to be his apostles; *uncomfortable* decisions — he chose to separate himself from the establishment; *loving* decisions — he chose to associate himself with the poor and the least respected; *difficult* decisions — he chose to turn his direction to Jerusalem even though torture and death were awaiting him. These conscious, uncomfortable, loving, difficult decisions were always made in order to fulfill the Will of the Father.

Over the last several days, we have heard much about Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. From our lofty position on the threshold of this 21st century, we can look at these two 17th century saints and

very human persons and think how easily they modeled their decisions on Jesus in order to carry out God's Will in their lives. Yet, we know that they, too, struggled. Their personal plans were very different from God's plans for them. Vincent wanted a comfortable retirement — his goal in becoming a priest; Louise, a life in a cloistered convent — an understandable response to her dysfunctional family upbringing.

### **Preoccupations of Louise and Vincent**

In this presentation we will talk about a way, a method of discernment, to help us to make decisions along life's journey. This practice of Vincentian Discernment is not one that was written down, or outlined, or notarized by Louise and Vincent, but it is one which they lived. From their actions, we deduce their method.

There were two main preoccupations of Louise and Vincent:

- 1) To imitate Christ.
- 2) To do the Will of God.

When we read their letters and their conferences we find these two concerns mentioned so frequently that it is obvious that the imitation of Christ and adherence to God's Will were integral to the daily operations of Louise and Vincent. The more intimate they became with Jesus, the more important it was that every decision they made conformed to what they believed to be the Will of God.

In one of his conferences to the Daughters of Charity, Vincent told the girls:

Planning is good when it is submissive to God, but it goes to excess when we are eager to avoid whatever we fear; when we trust more in our precautions than in God's Providence. Planning goes to excess when we hope to accomplish much while anticipating His orders with our disorder which causes us to adhere to human prudence rather than the Word of God.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris, 1920-1925), 12:122.

Neither Louise nor Vincent were passive, pious bystanders who watched life from afar and bemoaned the social conditions of the day. They were movers and shakers, unafraid to jump into the middle of the fray and get their hands dirty. They collaborated with nobility and with peasants; they worked out deals with politicians and with bishops. It is said of them that they changed not only the face of France, but also the face of the Church. The effects of their lives, the effects of their decisions are felt in our world today.

However, before they were willing to angle a new turn in the road, they had to be sure that what they wanted was what God wanted. Vincent, in particular, was slow to act. At times his slowness drove Louise crazy because she wanted to hurry and get things done.

“Let God act” was a favorite expression of Vincent’s. “Whose time are you worrying about; your time or God’s time?”

For her part, Louise told the sisters: “Remember that it is the most holy will of God which put you where you are and that it is for the accomplishment of His will that you must work there as would an ambassador for a King.”<sup>2</sup>

Active leaders that they were, Louise and Vincent were also people of profound faith and prayer. The effects of their faith and prayer were evident in their actions — the results of their decisions. How did they discern those decisions so as to know God’s Will?

### **Definition of Discernment**

Before we go any farther, perhaps it would be well to clarify what is meant by “discernment.” There are various definitions, but for our purposes, we will use the following very simple definition: Discernment is a prayer-filled process through which each of us can discover the difference between what is my will and what is God’s Will.

### **God’s Personal Plan For Me**

Just as God had a plan for Louise and Vincent, so God has a plan for each of us. God loves each of us tenderly, calls us by name and wants what is ultimately good for us. God’s overriding desire is that we are happy. All of God’s plans for us are for that end.

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<sup>2</sup> Louis Sullivan, D.C., trans. and ed., *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, Letter of Louise de Marillac to Anne-Elizabeth Hardmont, July, 1647 (New York:, New City Press, 1991), 208.

Are you summarizing the memories of a lifetime and saying to yourself, "No way, José" (or God). If that is true, what about the failures, the stabs in the back, the rejections, the crosses in my life? That is God's idea of happiness?"

Maybe. Each of us can think of things which have happened which we never would have chosen for ourselves, yet because of those crosses, we have grown, we have become better persons. Louise was disheartened and disappointed when she was rejected by the cloistered Capuchins. Vincent was humiliated and forced to question himself when he was accused by the judge with whom he was living of being a thief. Had those events not occurred, how different might have been their life journeys?

Yet, you may persist, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" "Why did this happen to *me*?"

At this point, it is important to say that not everything that happens is willed by God. I have a free will and I can decide that I am going to cheat, lie and slander in order to get ahead. You may suffer profoundly because of my ruthless ambition. A part of you may die. God does not want me to misuse my freedom and God certainly does not want you to suffer because of me. But even when that suffering does occur, God does not renege on his gift of freedom of choice. God permits me to misuse my gift of freedom of choice.

What God does do is offer new life from that death that was inflicted on you. You are offered gifts which enable you to be wiser, more insightful, and more sensitive and compassionate than you were. God turns the crosses and the injustices to our benefit.

### **God's Plan for Vincentian Organizations**

The task for each of us then, is to discover God's Will and not to confuse my will, my wants and my desires with God's Will. Just as God has a plan for me individually, so God has a plan also for each of our institutions, our organizations, our schools, our agencies. Organizationally, as well as individually, we need to seek God's Will. This is what it means to be value-driven. Ultimately, this root drive to base decisions on the Will of God is what distinguishes leaders in the Church today, leaders in Vincentian organizations, from leaders of Columbia—HCA, General Motors, IBM or any other for-profit corporation. Constantly, we must ask ourselves: What drives me? What motivates me? Is it personal gain/market share or the Will of God?

To do the Will of God sounds very lofty, even a bit pious. Honestly, we have to ask ourselves if it is even practical to seek that Will in the high-powered competitive corporate society in which we live. The smirk of the corporate world tells us to forget the “values stuff” and be real.

I think it is not too strong to say that if Vincentian organizations wish to survive and to impact the twenty-first century, it will only be because our leaders have the inner conviction that they must discern in order to make decisions and to act according to a value-base.

Anything less spells our demise.

So, the question is How? How can those values we say we want to live be made concrete in the decisions we make? Following is a plan, a method it seems that Louise and Vincent followed. The plan has four steps.

### **Steps in Discernment Process**

#### *1. Imitation of Jesus Christ*

Discernment starts within, in an interior private place in the heart. It requires that we slow down the hectic pace of our lives and that we take time to pray and to reflect. We take time to get to know Jesus. Even a cursory acquaintance of Louise and Vincent tells us that they would be embarrassed to have us look at them. They would say that was heresy. They always tell us to look at Jesus.

“What would the Son of God do?” was a phrase that Louise and Vincent often used.

“Whoever studies the life of Jesus Christ should surely find the very same features in the life of a Daughter of Charity.”<sup>3</sup>

Louise and Vincent were driven in their decisions by the vision of Jesus as Servant of the Poor. They never took their eyes off Jesus and this is what helped them to have clarity of vision. This is what helped them to keep their focus despite all the pressures exerted on them. They knew Jesus to be compassionate but they also knew him to be a tough bargainer. They knew Jesus to be totally honest and never one to curry favor.

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Leonard, trans., “On the Spirit of the Company,” in *Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul to the Daughters of Charity*, (Great Britain: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1979), 526.

For both Louise and Vincent, the effect of the two great commandments had to be linked to every decision:

- a) Love of God
- b) Love of neighbor

They could never understand the undertaking of an activity which did not benefit others, particularly the poor.

These are questions we might ask ourselves in order to clarify our vision:

- a) What would Jesus do in this situation? In these circumstances?
- b) How does this decision enable me to better serve others?
- c) Does this decision promote my own selfish interests?

## 2. *Unrestricted Readiness*

Each of those words is vital in the discernment process:

- a) *To be ready to accept*
- b) *To be ready to accept without restrictions*

Unrestricted readiness means our minds are not made up and we are not trying to change God's mind and the minds of everyone else. It means letting go of control. It means we can accept a "yes" or a "no." It means we can look at God and say, "OK. No holds barred. We accept success or failure, acceptance or rejection, health or disease."

All of us are programmed by education, by background and by family to believe that certain things "ought to be." We strive to make those "ought-to-be's" happen. Can we step outside that programming in order to see things differently and be ready to let go of all those "right" opinions we have?

Unrestricted readiness may well be the most difficult step in the Vincentian Discernment Process. In translations of Vincent's conferences that we Daughters have studied, we heard Vincent talk about "holy indifference." A few years ago, Father Hugh O'Donnell, C.M., translated that term as "unrestricted readiness" probably a much more accurate translation of Vincent's meaning.

One of the signs that we possess this readiness is the peace, the inner calmness we feel. We do not have to agitate to make sure that everyone accedes to our ideas. We do not have to be stressed out or

have sleepless nights because the emphasis is not on control. No longer do we have to convince everyone of the absolute correctness of our ideas, but rather, we are free to let go and allow God to speak and act through people and events. Wise as we believe we are, we accept the fact that there may be a better plan than ours.

In this step, we need to ask ourselves:

- a) Am I willing to let go of my prejudice?
- b) Am I willing to step outside my preconceived plan?
- c) Am I willing to give up control?
- d) Am I willing to accept a “yes” or a “no”?

### *3. Significance of Events*

Events are revelations of the Will of God and contribute to the unfolding of God’s Plan. Look at what is occurring — who are the people involved, what are the circumstances, how are others affected? God is found in the event if we stop, reflect and allow ourselves to realize “God is here.”

Every event brings a message. God intervenes in our lives through events and it is through these events we can listen to God speaking. However, though God speaks distinctly, the message may not always be clear because it is passing through human mediation. Both Louise and Vincent saw all the events of their lives, the expected and unexpected, as signs that God was speaking to them and letting His Will be known.

Think about an event that is occurring in your life now. It is important to take the event to God in prayer. Do not react automatically, but reflect, weigh the pros and cons, use the gifts of wisdom and understanding which God has given. Take some time to ponder the event with God. If it is difficult to find time, try getting up before the rest of the family to pray and reflect in the quiet of the early morning, or turn off the radio during the drive to work, or close your office door for a few minutes during the day. Scripture tells us, “Mary pondered events in her heart.” She reflected, then she questioned before she said — even to God, “I’m your servant, I’ll do as you say.” (Luke 1:38)

In order to help us in our reading of events, we need to get input from others who are knowledgeable and trustworthy. Each of us is good at fooling ourselves and convincing ourselves that what we want is such a good thing that surely, God must want it also. We need objective input so as not to dead-end in self-delusion. Discernment is



a process which starts in the heart, but must progress outwardly to include others. Vincent would tell us to be guided by legitimate authority. For him, the King or the Queen was always the voice of God. We can also find guidance in laws, in mission statements, in doing research, in working with committees and in doing needs assessments.

At this step, it may be helpful to ask ourselves the following questions:

- a) What are the subjective/objective facts? Feelings?
- b) How is God speaking through events?
- c) How is God speaking through people?

#### 4. *The Decision*

After we have walked through these three steps:

- 1) Imitation of Christ
- 2) Unrestricted Readiness
- 3) Significance of Events

It is time to act. Sometimes the Will of God is absolutely clear; sometimes there is only reasonable clarity and all we can say is, "This is what the Will of God seems to be."

However, if there is uncertainty, if reasonable clarity is absent, then it is not the time for a decision and, as Vincent would tell us, we need to "wait for God's time."

We must respond to needs. That is a question of conscience. To know that something must be done and to remain passive and unresponsive is to fail to respond to God's Will making itself known to us through events.

Both Louise and Vincent tell us to do what is good and what is necessary. That means that if needs are being met by someone else, we do not have to duplicate. The goal is not to outdo the competition, but to look at those areas of need which are not being addressed by anyone else and determine if we can respond. Vincent's advice holds true today just as it did in the 17th century when he said:

"The Spirit of God incites us gently to do the good we can reasonably do so that good might be done effectively and for a long time."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Coste, English translation, Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents* (New York: New City Press, 1983), 1:92. Hereafter cited as Kilar, *CCD*.

After you have done your best to discern the Will of God and you have made the decision, be firm in going forward. Do not vacillate or look back or waste energy on “if onlys” or “maybe-I-should-haves.” Put your face to the light and trust in our loving and powerful God to work through the smallest and weakest of us to accomplish His Plan. The work is God’s, not ours.

To assist at this step in the process, we may want to ask ourselves these questions:

- a) Is the decision reasonably clear?
- b) Is it rooted in peace?
- c) Is the decision just?
- d) Is the decision compassionate?

### **Conclusion**

As is obvious, it takes time to walk through the Discernment Process. It takes time to pray, to reflect, to consult. This “taking time” is contrary to our culture where we are programmed to demand “instant everything” from satellite communications to fax messages, to microwave meals and to a complete life drama in thirty minutes TV time. We want the answer NOW, if not yesterday.

To our objections, Vincent would repeat his sage counsel, “Whose time are you worrying about, your time or God’s time?” Clarity emerges naturally and cannot be forced by our anxiety.

There are some emergency decisions that have to be made quickly, even instantly. Those decisions are exceptions to the necessity of following a discernment method. However, if we have been practicing discernment, the effect of our life’s daily habits will be reflected even in emergencies.

Pain and struggle are unavoidable in the process of choosing between what is my will and what is God’s Will. But what is more significant is the discovery that, as we move through the process for discerning decisions, our intimacy with and our trust in God will increase. We will be calmer, more accepting people.

Undoubtedly, the responsibilities of leaders in Vincentian organizations are awesome. Probably at no other time in history have leaders been faced with decisions whose outcomes are as weighty as those with which you are faced. You have accepted those responsibilities with all the attendant stress, struggles and strife. You are people of

courage and wisdom and deep spirituality. The Vincentian family is better, stronger and holier because you have accepted the challenge to live the charism into the twenty-first century.

To each of you, Vincent de Paul would say: "Do not worry yourself overmuch . . . Grace has its moments. Let us abandon ourselves to the Providence of God and be very careful not to run ahead of it. If it pleases God to give us consolation in our calling, it is this: That we have tried to follow His great Providence in everything."<sup>5</sup>



Loretto Gettemeier, D.C., second from right, pauses to meet with participants during a morning break.

**I ask God to be Himself your strength.**

*(Saint Vincent de Paul,  
letter to Nicole Haran, 16 January 1658)*

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<sup>5</sup> Kilar, CCD, II:453.