

## Discernment

“Vocational Discernment during Pandemic”, Article 1, August 2020

So many aspects of this life can be scary especially when the world is full of new challenges and obstacles. This can make discerning your vocation seem even more difficult. Are you called to Religious Life or Marriage? Where do you begin - and how while social distancing? What if you start down one path and end up on another one? Are you being kept from the path you should be on? Is the path you're on the right one or are you avoiding where you should be?

In making it this far in my own discernment journey, I can tell you I've had many twists and turns. I've dated, I've discerned Consecrated Virginity, and I've discerned Religious Life. Each one I pursued as though it were the only Vocation God was calling me to, all while keeping my heart flexible to His leading should He point me in another direction.

Did I make a mistake dating? Was I on the wrong path in discerning Consecrated Virginity or other Religious Orders? Of course not! Nothing is wasted with the Lord. Whether my turns were 'right' or 'wrong', the Lord used them all to prepare me for exactly where I am right now - even down to moving to California and entering into Religious Life in the middle of a Pandemic!

There are so many reasons to fall into fear and anxiety right now, but we need to remember in all things - whether Vocation, Pandemic, or other - Jesus is still on the throne! As Christians, it's important that we be just as careful to avoid catching the pandemic of fear as we are to avoid catching any physiological virus. So pray that you don't let fear stop you as you continue to move forward in your discernment wherever the Lord has you in the process!

Discernment  
“Faithful in the Little Things”, Article 2, September 2020

Early on in my discernment, the Lord showed me that I had an imbalance in how I viewed religious life. In my mind, the active religious life was oddly glamorous. You went about in your beautiful habit having deep conversations, spending time in prayer, and going about the Lord’s work. My understanding of “the Lord’s work” was vague, but I imagined it to be something very beautiful and spiritual. And, most of all, religious life was ANYTHING but boring or mundane.

Praise the Lord that He saw that in my heart and loved me enough to gently reproach me, especially since He eventually led me into Religious Life!

Jesus, the great mirror that He is, showed me my heart through a visit I had with an active community I was discerning with a few years back. Over the course of my discernment weekend, I saw all those things I had imagined Religious Life to be! The Sisters went about in their beautiful habits having deep conversations, spending time in prayer, and going about the Lord’s work. But there was still more to their life. There was the daily grind: waking up early, going to bed late, answering emails, doing chores, planning meals, even dealing with jobs and homework.

I left my weekend with them feeling disillusioned. I told one of the Sisters later that her life seemed average...even mundane. My romantic notions of Religious Life fell away as I saw how oddly normal it all seemed. My reflection in the mirror got a little clearer and I saw how I was running towards Religious Life because I was afraid of the monotony of my daily life.

What the Lord had to show me is that Religious Life, at its core, is about being faithful to the work the Lord has called you. But this is true for us all - no matter what that work is and no matter your state in life. In this aspect, the work of Religious Life is not that different from the work in married life or in single life.

We all have something the Lord is calling us to right now: a job, a living situation, a relationship, a ministry, a child, a parent, a chore, a sacrifice. As a religious I have to wash the dishes, put away the laundry, take out the garbage and make dinner just like everyone else! So the questions we have to ask ourselves are: what is the Lord calling me to right now? And am I being faithful in what He’s calling me to?

As I learned to accept the various ministries, people, and jobs the Lord was calling me to during that season of life my romantic visions of Religious Life finally faded into something more realistic. I learned to be faithful to the little things He had already given me so that when He eventually called me to enter into religious life I was ready for all of it - the joyously romantic and the beautifully mundane.

Discernment  
“Building a Discernment Posse”, October 2020

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux is known for saying, “Anyone who takes himself for his own spiritual director is the disciple of a fool.” When you wrestle with any decision, and especially your Vocation, it’s important to surround yourself with wise counsel. We need those close to us to remind us of truth, ask tough questions, help us see our blind spots, and point us in the right direction.

In my Vocational discernment process I had a core team that consisted of two friends, two Sisters, and two Priests. The first friend was my constant confidant from the very beginning. We actually used to joke about founding our own religious order someday. I ended up helping her discern marriage, and she helped me discern if the Lord might actually be calling me to enter religious life as a Foundress. My other friend used to be a Religious herself before discerning out and getting married, and she gave me insight into a world I knew nothing about. The Religious Sisters were my back-to-back Spiritual Directors through the years and those two Priests were my back-to-back parish Priests. These Sisters and Priests challenged me and lovingly pushed me outside of my comfort zone. Each of these wonderful people were so valuable to my journey and kept me from being “the disciple of a fool” as St. Bernard would say.

Most people are pretty good at pulling together their go-to team of friends, family, and mentors when they are wrestling through a big decision. These folks become vital supports through what can be a difficult and beautiful journey. But as you wrestle through your own discernment I actually suggest adding a second go-to group consisting of a few Saints who you go to for counsel, inspiration, and prayer. My Vocational discernment is due in large part not only to my friends, Spiritual Directors, and Priests, but also to this group of Saints.

I can’t recall where I heard about this idea of having a group of Saints to help with discernment, but I saw wisdom in it and immediately began to compile my group. I didn’t know what I was doing, but I prayed about how to begin and the team sort of brought itself together over time.

I started with the foundation of my confirmation Saints: St. Mary Magdalene and St. Thérèse of Lisieux (I was given permission to have two patron saints not knowing that was uncommon). Saints Mary and Thérèse were both women of deep and amazing love and I knew that no matter where the Lord led me I wanted to embody their love for Him and for others. From there I decided that, since I was thinking about marrying Jesus, I should add His Mom to my team as well, so the Blessed Virgin Mary joined the ranks. Saint Clare of Assisi was next on the list – I’d always admired her love of Poverty, the Eucharist, her relationship with St. Francis, and her courage in being the first female Franciscan. She was also a Foundress, but that hadn’t been important to me at the time.

I thought I had a pretty good little team at that point, but as I journeyed along I discovered a couple of Saints who seemed to stand out and want to be on my team—and both of them were Foundresses! The first was St. Jane Frances de Chantal, a name I read twice on the same day in two completely different books. It seemed too much of a coincidence especially since I'd never heard of her before, so I looked her up and immediately felt a connection. The last to join my team was Saint Mother Cabrini – a zealous woman who traveled the world founding her order and caring for the needs of others.

In the years I spent discerning my Vocation and talking to all my saints- in-the-making down here on earth as well as my inspirational team of Saints in heaven, I'm grateful for the role both groups played in getting me this far on my journey.

If you don't know too many Saints I'd encourage you to start researching who is out there. Nearly every day is the feast of some Saint, so start reading up on the ones that stick out to you. As we transition into November, the feast of All Saints on November 1<sup>st</sup> is a good reminder that we aren't alone on this journey. There are so many who have gone before us and are ready to prayerfully walk us through our own journey ahead.

Discernment  
“Sacrifices for God”, Article 4, November 2020

When I was in Junior High I was obsessed with learning about Christians who were martyred for their love of Christ. Inspired by their faith, courage, and sacrifice, I would often daydream about how I might dramatically be martyred for the faith and die for the Lord. No surprise, as I grew older I was even more ready to do anything for God and go anywhere He asked me to go. I would tell the Lord that He could send me to another country (as long as they didn't have big spiders) or perhaps use me as some grand sacrifice for others. I was on fire and ready!

“Lord!” I would cry out, “Let me do big things for you!” A few times in my life He has responded with a big request: Go to College, move to Oregon, get your Masters degree, become Catholic, quit your job during a pandemic and move to California for a new job, quit your entire life and enter Religious Life...

Thankfully I've responded to every one of these steps with trepidation, but also Faith. When God is asking me to do something BIG, usually I find it easy to respond. It's those little requests, those internal nudges, private corrections, and willful submissions that I find horribly painful and impossible at times! More and more, those seem to be the sacrifices the Lord is asking of me, but they feel so much more difficult and they remind me of God's correction of Israel through the prophet Isaiah:

“Trample my courts no more! To bring offerings is useless; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath, calling assemblies—festive convocations with wickedness—these I cannot bear. Your new moons and festivals I detest; they weigh me down, I tire of the load. When you spread out your hands, I will close my eyes to you; though you pray the more, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood! Wash yourselves clean! Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes; cease doing evil; learn to do good. Make justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow. Come now, let us set things right, says the LORD: Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow; Though they be red like crimson, they may become white as wool. If you are willing, and obey, you shall eat the good things of the land; But if you refuse and resist, you shall be eaten by the sword: for the mouth of the LORD has spoken!” (Isaiah 1:13-20, NAB).

You see, what good is it if we set out to do big things for the Lord but continue to do evil in the little things? Maybe you're discerning Religious Life, maybe you're discerning Marriage, or even the Consecrated Single Life. All these are big and noble things to be called to, but in the meantime as you're discerning be sure to listen for the little ways the Lord is asking you to sacrifice for Him: apologizing to a friend or family member, letting go of your way of doing things, adapting your plans for someone else, buying coffee for someone that isn't easy to love, washing your housemates dishes, giving up a parking space, having a difficult conversation, or letting someone merge in front of you without grumbling. These are painful little ways we learn

to die to ourselves, and the better practiced we are at these little things the better prepared we will be for what the Lord has next for us—whether a big sacrifice or not!

## Discernment Article 5, December 2020

As families are making plans to connect during the Holidays, I'm reminded that the discernment of a vocation is also a discernment of family. Being created for relationships and community means that we are not only created for that relationship with God - first and foremost - but also for each other and so discerning your Vocation is also discerning what your relationship looks like with others.

The first time I heard about this concept was when I met a Seminarian a few years back. He'd been living a worldly life before the Lord got a hold of his heart and started calling him to deepen his Faith and eventually consider a Vocation to the Priesthood. I asked him why he wanted to be a Priest and his reply ended up laying a foundation for my own discernment.

He told me that, before his call, he'd been in a relationship with a woman whom he loved very much but that he felt called to love more than just her - he felt called to love and serve everyone. His call resounded in my own heart as he put words to what I'd been seeing more and more in myself. I even had a mentor at the time who pointed out that I had a great capacity to love and that instead of focusing my attention on one individual (a guy I had a crush on at the time) I should see who else in my life I could love.

You see, each Vocation is about your relationship with God as well as others. And on a deeper level, it's a discernment of family. With marriage, you and your spouse are coming together to love and serve each other while working on the ministry of creating and raising a family. In the life of a Consecrated Virgin/Single, you are opening yourself up to loving and serving the greater Church and allowing the Lord to build your family (ideally through, but not limited to, your own blood relatives). In the Priesthood, your family is very much the Church and specifically your parish/ flock. And in Religious Life, your family is your Religious Community and those your Community serves.

As I continued to wrestle through my Vocation and this idea of feeling called to love more than one person, I found myself paying attention to the context the Lord might be calling me to. I saw that as a Consecrated Virgin I would have more freedom in who my family was, but that I'd also be very much "on my own" - especially in my potential living situations. And I've known since I was in College that I'm usually a better person when I live in a Community that both challenges and supports me. So, even though Consecrated Virginity would have been the easier choice for me as it was very similar to how I was already living, I knew that my Vocation was going to need to be in Community which pointed me to Religious Life.

This might be a new thought for you depending on how long you've been discerning your Vocation, but your relationships and the sort of family you feel drawn towards is something to take to the Lord in prayer and talk over with your Spiritual Director. Always remember that the Lord knows you even more than you know yourself and that the family He calls you into will be just the family you need as you continue on your journey of Salvation.

## Discernment

“You Won’t Know Until You Try”, Article 6, January 2021

It’s one thing to think you’re called to Religious Life or Marriage, but it’s another thing to start living those realities. I mean, one doesn’t just wake up and find themselves married or living in a Religious Order. So how do you get there? Or how do you help someone who is wrestling through their Vocation - or any decision really? The following are tips for helping you move forward towards what the Lord is calling you to.

**Support Team:** In past articles I’ve talked about the importance of having a Spiritual Director and even a group of people that help you walk through the Vocational journey so I won’t go into detail about that here, but it’s worth noting for those who may not have read the previous articles or just forgot.

**Assessing Obstacles:** Depending on which Vocation you’re interested in, it’s important to assess yourself and if there are any obstacles or challenges standing between you and that vocation. The following items are areas you can improve on no matter which vocation you feel called to: *Do you have any debt you need to pay off?* While this isn’t a hindrance to marriage it certainly can be for Religious Life. *Do you have a consistent prayer life?* Increasing your prayer times is always a good thing no matter where the Lord leads! *Do you have any baggage and/or trauma you need to work through?* While counseling isn’t a requirement for either, it can be really helpful moving forward in religious life or marriage! *Is your life focused on others or on yourself?* Whatever Vocation you are led to will have sacrifice at its core, whether you’re sacrificing to enter a community or sacrificing for your spouse and children, so striving to be more selfless is a good virtue to work on.

**Assessing Your Options:** Do some research into different Orders. What Orders are out there? What do their ministries look like? What’s their day look like? How active are they? How contemplative? As you find out more about these Orders keep in mind which ones fit with what you’re passionate about, what you’re gifted in, and what you feel called to do. And also be ready for the Lord to possibly challenge you in what you think you want! This totally applies to marriage as well! Figure out what is most important to you so that you can find someone who is foundationally on the same page as you. Perhaps you both like different kinds of music, but do you both have the same values when it comes to your prayer life? Maybe your backgrounds couldn’t be more different, but do you share a common creed or desire for what your family will look like? Either way, know what areas are most important to you and be willing to be flexible in some of the other more negotiable areas.

**Adoration and Prayer:** I can’t emphasize the importance of this enough. Talk to God through the whole process. Be honest with Him about your fears and concerns, ask Him to speak into the process and guide you, and make sure you are allowing times of silence and contemplation as well. I journaled through my whole process and it helped at times to look back

over what I'd written in order to be reminded of some of the Truths and insights the Lord was showing me along my journey.

**Making a Move:** Don't be afraid to take that first step to start checking out different Orders! Or if you feel called to marriage, don't be afraid to say yes to a coffee date! Remember - and this is true for coffee dates and religious order visits - you might not be called to that first one! Keep seeing what's out there, and then be sure to discern each visit/date with a Spiritual Director. Discernment in Community is so important!

I hope these tips help you in your discernment. Don't forget to be faithful to what you can do now as you prepare for whatever God might be calling you to. The Christian life is a marathon, and I can tell you from experience that you won't get far in a marathon if you haven't done any training to prepare for it. So, consider your life right now as training for whatever the Lord has next for you!

## Discernment

“Descriptive VS. Prescriptive Comparison”, Article 7, February 2021

We all fall into the occasional trap of comparing ourselves to others, but that hidden snare is all the more treacherous when it comes to discerning our vocation. At different times in my life I fell right into the jaws of this temptation both in discerning marriage and in discerning religious life.

I've always been the kind of person that likes to learn as much as possible about something before diving in. For example, when I finally picked the college I was going to attend, I visited the campus, read all the information they sent me (including the entire student handbook), and I practically memorized their website.

I did the same thing with dating. I soaked up all the information I could from my dating and married friends: what traits to look for, what kinds of guys to avoid, the marks of a healthy relationship, what works, what doesn't, etc. So when I was in my first relationship I felt prepared! (Or so I thought...) The problem was, I was so focused on doing what worked well for all the healthy couples I knew that I was distracted from learning about what worked well for the relationship I was in! I finally realized what I was doing and that what worked well for other couples might not work well for us. I could pull from their wisdom, but I couldn't always apply their situations perfectly.

The same thing rang true when I was looking into Religious Life. As I met Sisters or read the lives of Saints who had been Nuns I found myself thinking, “This is what I need to do or look like to be a Sister.” I had that experience even more when the Canons asked me to help found an order. I started researching the stories of Foundresses and I quickly assessed that I'm nothing like them. Again I had fallen victim to the temptation of comparison.

Now, not all comparison is actually bad. There's much wisdom that can be gained in looking at someone further along in their spiritual journey and striving to be where they are; “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ,” as St. Paul told the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 11:1). But we need to avoid thinking that imitating someone's holiness means walking in their exact footsteps. Reading the life of St. Therèse is a great encouragement as she describes her experiences, but I should never take the *description of her specific life* to be a *prescription* of exactly how I should live my life. Just like someone dating can't look at a healthy couple and expect to apply their situation perfectly.

I want to encourage you that while you're discerning (whatever you happen to be discerning) take wisdom from the stories and experiences of others, but avoid trying to duplicate them or think that you aren't called to marriage or religious life because your life doesn't look exactly like theirs. After all, at the end of your life, God is not going to ask how faithful you were with the task He called them to, He's going to want to know how faithful you were with the task He gave you!

Discernment  
Article 8, March 2021

In order to aid in vocational discernment, I want to clarify some of the differences and similarities between Religious Life and Married Life. The differences are usually well known, but it is important to understand the similarities as well.

There is a thought out there that one vocation is easier than the other, or that one vocation is more difficult than the other. I've had these very thoughts and have known others to have them as well.

If you don't want to get married, it's usually because you don't want to give up your own plans for your life. Maybe you want to excel in your career. Maybe you want to travel. Maybe you want to serve the Lord but see serving a family as not as good as being a Sister or a Priest. Or maybe you just like having things your way and don't like the idea of having to compromise your will.

If you don't want to enter into Religious life the reasons can also stem from a fear of letting go of your own plans. Maybe you want to have a family. Maybe you don't think you can live without physical intimacy. Maybe you don't like the idea of living with little possessions. Or maybe you just like having things your way and don't like the idea of having to compromise your will.

You see what I did there?

When most people don't want to enter Religious Life or get Married, they'll throw out these sorts of reasons for why they "couldn't" do it. Often, these reasons have less to do with actual ability and more to do with a fear of sacrifice.

The big similarity in each Vocation is sacrifice. As Christians we are called to be "little Christs" and the reason Christ entered into our suffering here on earth was to be THE Sacrificial Victim for us. And we are, in turn, called to take up our cross of sacrifice as well. So, no matter which Vocation the Lord is calling you to, you can be assured that sacrifice is on the path ahead.

A few years back I talked with a friend about this very thing. She saw my desire to enter religious life as sacrificial and applauded me for it. I was surprised by this because she was a wife and mother of two small kids, so from my perspective she deserved accolades for her sacrifices!

Out of love for God and my neighbor I was free and willing to sacrifice my free time to serve others. Out of love for God and her family, she sacrificed herself daily to serve her husband and kids. Both our lives involved Sacrifice.

But I'm leaving out a key component of each of these Vocations as well - Love. Christ came to be a Sacrifice because He loved us, and we are called to be sacrifices for Love of God and for Love of Others. So as you discern your vocation you need to not only remember that there will be Sacrifices ahead - but Love as well!

I'll be straight with you - Religious Life is not something that you can just decide on a whim to do one day, which has to do with the seriousness of Sacrifice required... but I can say the same thing for Marriage as well! While my Mom-friends might think it's crazy that I'd give up a husband and kids to spend my entire day in prayer and service to others, I often think they're crazy (and part superhero) for spending their days (and nights!) serving their kids and husband! The Sacrifices we make in these Vocations are able to be lived out both through the strength God gives each of us to accomplish them, and the Love we have for those we are serving.

If you think Religious Life to be too difficult, then you might deem yourself not strong enough to pursue that Vocation. If you think Marriage is easy, you'll be very discouraged when the inevitable bumps in the road come along. What we need to remember in both Vocations is that each one has the same purpose, to grow in Holiness; they both also have the same obstacles, our sinful humanity; and they both have the same solution, sacrifice.

As part of our mid-afternoon prayers we reflect daily on Psalm 127, "If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do its builders labor..." and I find this to be a great reminder that if the Lord is calling you to a particular vocation, He will give you the strength to live it! So be not afraid of the Sacrifice and Love He might be calling you to!

Discernment  
Article 9, April 2021

Discerning a Vocation is like going on a Journey with God acting as your Google Maps. You get in your car, make sure it's gassed up and ready to go, turn on your little phone app, plug in your destination, and listen for that still, small voice that will point you in the right direction one step at a time.

I was on my journey into the Catholic Church when I plugged in my destination: Religious Life. The first little voice on my app had a lovely British accent and told me I needed to be Catholic first and then live as a Catholic for a season before beginning the Religious Life Journey. So I followed those directions: learning and growing along the way.

Shortly after I entered the Catholic Church, my app notified me that I was free to begin my Journey towards Religious Life! I hit the road with excitement, but I began seeing signs that told me the road ahead would be closed for anyone over the age of 35. This was concerning since I turned 35 the day after I entered the Catholic Church and was now pushing 36!

The further I went down the road the more ominous the signs about my age seemed to be. My little app said to just keep driving straight, but I began to doubt if the app was aware of the current road conditions. I got a Spiritual Director who agreed with my app and told me to keep driving straight, so I did.

My journey took me to places where I met Sisters from different orders, and, like a sponge, I absorbed all the information from them that I could. I ended up finding myself with an order that seemed to really fit what I was looking for so I started to take the exit, but suddenly my phone spoke up told me to keep driving straight.

“WHAT?!?!” I yelled at my app. “The Journey is clearly leading me here, the warning signs all tell me I should stop driving because I'm already out of time, and this seems like a great place to stop!” But the phone chirped that I should get back on the road and keep driving straight, so I did. What I thought was the destination was merely a scenic look-out on the side of the road.

At that point, the drive got quiet and the phone stopped giving directions. I could see that I was still on the route, but there was no indicator that I was to do anything other than keep driving straight. We've all been there on a long trip when the phone goes silent and you know that it's not going to say anything again until it's time to take another turn. In that silence is the temptation to take over. The temptation to think we know more than the phone. The temptation to find a different route or give up on the journey entirely.

And I wanted to. I glanced at billboards telling me about different excursions I could take, orders I could visit, perhaps even other Vocations to focus on... but the Lord had told me to just keep going forward. I saw the warning signs about my age and with every new candle added

to my Birthday Cake I grew increasingly worried that the door would finally close on Religious Life for good.

During this part of the journey I realized that I needed to not only trust in God's voice when it spoke, but also in His silence. God knew about my age, but He had also called me to this journey so there must be a reason He wanted me to keep moving forward.

What I learned during that part of the journey is that discerning God's direction means trusting Him even if it doesn't make sense at the time. And to my "find-the-fastest-and-most-direct-route" mind I can tell you that, at times, God's route seemed inefficient and seemingly useless.

But nothing is wasted with the Lord and if you're following His every direction and guidance you will find over time that every seemingly pointless turn has a hidden and often HUGE purpose to it! The season of "silence" I lived through ended up being very rich and prepared me well for Religious Life! I continued driving straight during those years and trusting that the phone would tell me when to turn next.

And when it finally spoke up, I was primed and ready for where it would lead me next...