



Prison
Contemplative
Fellowship

Discernment versus Decision Making

By Richard Rohr
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The holiness of Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), like all holiness, was unique and never merely a copy or imitation. In his Testament, he tells his brothers, “No one showed me what I had to do,” [1] and then, at the very end of his life, he says, “I have done what is mine; may Christ teach you what is yours!” [2] What permission, freedom, and space he thus gave to his followers!

We are each unique incarnations of God, bringing to visible and tangible expression God’s presence in the world. Sr. Ilia Delio paraphrases Francis’ message from his Later Admonition and Exhortation:

When love transforms our actions in a way that Christ is “represented” — then we become mothers, sisters, and brothers of Christ. This birthing of Christ in the life of the believer . . . is a way of conceiving, birthing, and bringing Christ to the world in such a way that the Incarnation is renewed. It is making the gospel alive. [3]

So, how do we discover what is ours to do? How do we connect with our sacred vocation in service to the needs of the world? How do we give birth to Christ in the world? How do we renew the Incarnation and give flesh to the Word? First, we must go through a process of discernment. Henri Nouwen explains:

Christian discernment is not the same as decision-making. Reaching a decision can be straightforward: we consider our goals and options; maybe we list the pros and cons of each possible choice, and then we choose the action that meets our goal most effectively. Discernment, on the other hand, is about listening and responding to that place within us where our deepest desires align with God’s desire. As discerning people, we sift through our impulses, motives, and options to discover which ones lead us closer to divine love and compassion for ourselves and other people and which ones lead us further away.

Discernment reveals new priorities, directions, and gifts from God. We come to realize that what previously seemed so important for our lives loses its power over us. Our desire to be successful, well-liked and influential becomes increasingly less important as we move closer to God’s heart. To our surprise, we even may experience a strange inner

freedom to follow a new call or direction as previous concerns move into the background of our consciousness. We begin to see the beauty of the small and hidden life that Jesus lived in Nazareth. Most rewarding of all is the discovery that as we pray more each day, God's will—that is, God's concrete ways of loving us and our world—gradually is made known to us. [4]

When I moved to New Mexico in 1986, Henri Nouwen personally told me to forget the many things I try to teach and just teach one thing—contemplation! This is why I am still doing it.

References:

[1] Francis of Assisi, *The Testament*, line 14. See *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1 (New City Press: 1999), 125.

[2] Francis of Assisi, quoted by Thomas of Celano, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, chapter 162. See *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 2 (New City Press: 2000), 386.

[3] Ilia Delio, *Franciscan Prayer* (Franciscan Media: 2004), 150-151.

[4] Henri Nouwen, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life* (HarperOne: 2013), 17.