

Discerning God's Will for Our Synod

The Basics of Discernment

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The period that precedes the election of a Bishop is one in which the whole synod is engaged in discernment. For Christians, the goal of discernment is seeking the will of God. For synods before an election, that includes understanding God's will for the future mission and ministry of the synod and understanding God's role in choosing a shepherd for that ministry. It is God who chooses. It is the work of the Synod Council, congregations and rostered leaders, assembly voting members and the pastors who will be interviewed to discern God's choice and the Spirit's leading.

The process of discernment has its roots in the New Testament community as described in the book of Acts. In Acts 1, when filling the vacancy among the Twelve Apostles, the disciples all prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry..." (Acts 1.25-26). It was a prayer of discernment.

In Acts 6, when it was time to expand the ministry of the local church in Jerusalem, the leaders called the membership together and asked them to nominate seven men "full of the Spirit and of wisdom" for this new task of ministry. The seeking of candidates "full of the Spirit" was a seeking of the Spirit's leading and calling, and seeking of God's will. It was a process of discernment. (Acts 6.1-6)

At every point of development of the new Christian Church in Acts, the Spirit was leading the church, and its members were seeking the Spirit's leading so they could follow God's bidding. At a particularly crucial point, when the leadership questioned whether Gentiles had been included in God's gift of salvation, the Holy Spirit made it known to them through a careful discernment process of receiving reports, examining evidence, engaging conversation, and prayerful deliberation that "God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11.1-18). This led to further discoveries of God's will for the Gentiles that led Church leaders to publish the results of their discernment in a letter sent to the Gentiles that boldly declares, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials..." (Acts 15.28).

Some Basics about Discernment

Through Holy Scripture and faith experience, all Christians have come to realize that knowing and doing God's will is the best possible thing that can happen to them. And so Christians pray to God frequently, "Your kingdom come, your will be done," as Jesus taught in the Lord's Prayer.

Accordingly, Christians over the centuries have learned that there are some basic assumptions that undergird the discernment process. We assume:

God's Presence

1. The Triune God is self-revealing and reveals his will within the context of our committed faith relationship with him.

2. God becomes human and vulnerable in Jesus so that we are drawn into a higher purpose through the cross.
3. The Holy Spirit is present in our personal and corporate lives, given in baptism, so that we may discern God's way of the cross that leads to new life in the resurrection.

Our Practice

1. We place God's word and will as the ultimate value in our knowledge and experience, higher than all other values that might influence us.
2. We participate humbly in a faith community of grace as we discern God's will for our lives.
3. We are dedicated both personally and communally to practices of Scripture reading, prayer, worship and discernment to know and follow God's word and will.

Our Posture

1. Trusting in faith, we are willing to follow God's word and will, shedding our personal fears, needs and anxieties.
2. We share our God-given gifts and insights in the ministry of discernment for the benefit of the discerning community.
3. We practice discernment as an ongoing feature of a life of discipleship as modeled by Jesus and the apostles.

In this period prior to the election of a Bishop, our life together as a synod will be greatly enhanced by being a discerning community. The following Bible studies are offered as a starting point for your ministry and personal reflection. We encourage you to look into other resources for the discernment process. Sr. Michelle Collins in the Synod Resource Center can assist you.

In the end, the goal of discernment for our synod is much as it was for Christians in Acts and that is to be able to say, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..."

Use the space below to record your own reflections on the basics of discernment:

