

Discernment

THE ART OF CHOOSING WELL

Based on Ignatian Spirituality

PIERRE WOLFF



Liguori/Triumph
LIGUORI, MISSOURI

Imprimi Potest:

Richard Thibodeau, C.Ss.R.
Provincial, Denver Province
The Redemptorists

Published by Liguori/Triumph
An imprint of Liguori Publications
Liguori, Missouri
www.liguori.org

Excerpts from *The New American Bible*, copyright © 1970 by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C., are used with permission. All rights reserved.

Excerpts from *The Jerusalem Bible* by Alexander Jones, ed., copyright © 1966 by Darton, Longman & Todd, Ltd. and Doubleday, a division of Random House. Used by permission.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wolff, Pierre, 1929–

Discernment : the art of choosing well : based on Ignatian spirituality /
Pierre Wolff.—Rev. ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7648-0989-7

1. Discernment (Christian theology) 2. Decision making—Religious aspects—Catholic Church. 3. Ignatius, of Loyola, Saint, 1491–1556. Exercitia spiritualia. I. Title.

BV4509.5.W64 2003

248.4—dc21

2003044619

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Copyright © 1993, 2003 by Pierre Wolff
Printed in the United States of America
18 17 16 15 14 / 10 9 8 7 6
Revised edition 2003

*“Day by day, dear Lord,
of Thee three things I pray.
To see Thee more clearly,
Love Thee more dearly,
Follow Thee more nearly,
Day by day.”*

RICHARD OF CHICHESTER
C. 1197–1253

Contents



Introduction ix

Part One: The Components of Any Choice

Chapter 1. Everybody Has What Is Necessary
for Choosing 3

Chapter 2. Discernment Is to Choose
Methodically With God 12

Questions 16

Part Two: Discernment by an Individual Person

Chapter 1. How to Work With the Head 21

Chapter 2. How to Listen to the Heart 37

Chapter 3. How to Become Freer
From the Beginning 58

Chapter 4. We Are “Servants Put in Charge” 70

Questions 75

Part Three: Discernment by a Group of People

Chapter 1. Others Help Me to Discern 81

Chapter 2. We Want to Discern for a
Common Decision 89

Questions 105

Final Reflections on Our Decisions

The Last Test and Judgment 108

Appendix 1. More About the Four Criteria 121

Appendix 2. Is This Method of Discernment
Only for Christians? 124

Appendix 3. What Can We Do to Clarify the
Object of the Choice? 129

Appendix 4. Dealing With a Spiritual Helper 131

Appendix 5. The Six Points of Ignatius' Method
in the Last Version of
The Spiritual Exercises 139

Appendix 6. Diagrams 141

Appendix 7. Index of Scriptures 143

Suggested Readings 145

Other Books by Pierre Wolff 147

Introduction



In our family, professional, social, and political life, we all—believers or nonbelievers—face choices. If, in the past, we made some good choices that were beneficial for both ourselves and for others, we also, probably, made some mistakes that did nobody any good. When we reflect, our familial, social, or political crises remind us that it is important to be able to choose well.

One aspect of some of our worst choices may affect us deeply. How often have we had the impression that our most disastrous decisions were made under the influence of unconscious motivations. So, we followed passively either the counsel of others or our own uncontrollable impulse. We were led when we thought we were choosing freely. Anyone who is addicted to something or dependent on someone knows how painful it is not to be in charge of one's decisions.

For people who have religious faith an important part of what is at stake for them in their decisions is their companionship with God. Because of their belief, they desire to walk with God. That requires them to avoid wandering away from the One they worship, and they hope to make straight the highway for God (Isa 40). As believers, they are concerned also about finding out what God might want for them. And they desire to act in accordance with what they discover so that they do not lose the company of the One they serve. For Christians, looking for God's presence and invitation in their daily life, the problem of discernment was

summarized by Andrew and his friend when they asked Jesus the important question, “Master, where do you live?” (Jn 1:38).

So then, if we want to increase our chances of making fruitful choices for others and for ourselves, to manage our decisions with greater freedom, and to be faithful to our God, we need to learn to discern.

Discernment is the process of making choices that correspond as closely as possible to objective reality, that are as free as possible from our inner compulsions, and that are closely attuned to the convictions of our faith (or to our value system, if we have no religious belief).

The content of this book is an interpretation of a method of discernment that has stood the test of time in Christian tradition. In the sixteenth century, the founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius of Loyola, developed a systematic way of considering and making choices. This is the heritage that I would like to present, supported by my own years of experience in helping many people make choices.

Many articles and books have been written on this subject. Some of the books I have read are satisfactory to me. But some people have told me that they could not really get into them, because the technical language became an obstacle. Specialists in spiritual matters might find some parts of this essay too simple, but that has been precisely my purpose: to write a book that is at the same time *accurate but simple, complete but not too long, and understandable to everyone*.

This book is an introduction to discernment in the sense that it is going to be effective *only* if its content is put into practice. Discernment is not a theory. It is a concrete way of dealing with daily reality that leads to making choices that affect our lives and the lives of others.

The content of the following pages is born from my own practice. I have led many directed retreats and workshops, and I have helped many individuals as well. The people I have met represent all levels of intellectual training, social and professional status,

in several different countries. They were usually Christians, but I did work with people of non-Christian faiths and with nonbelievers. Therefore, I know this book can help *everybody* to use the ordinary tools we all have for making decisions, for *discerning*.

Structure of the Book

Part One shows that behind the sophisticated vocabulary of some specialists, discernment is based on abilities we all have. The framework, tools, and cornerstone are everybody's. The question is to learn how to use them methodically when it is time to make a decision.

Part Two describes the method of discerning *for an individual person*. I start with the individual discernment before explaining the discernment of a group of people because I am deeply convinced by what I have seen that a body of people can't discern if its members are unable to discern personally.

First, I describe how to use the means at our disposal, head and heart. Even if the description uses Christian notions, a translation is possible for non-Christians or for nonbelievers. It is found in the Appendix entitled, "Is This Method Only of Discernment for Christians?" Then, I go further to refine the method for use in cases that are more difficult to solve—for example, when a choice requires us to pass through an impulsive reaction that hides the deepest desire of our being. Finally, the description goes back to the basic requirement of any personal choice, *freedom*. How do we assure ourselves that freedom is a part of the process from the beginning?

Part Three treats discernment that is made *by a group of people* (the temptation for some readers might be to go immediately to this part; I repeat what I have already said: such discernment requires that the members of a group know first how to discern personally).

In this part, I introduce a situation where an individual faced with making a personal choice asks a group for help in discerning. Then, I develop the case of the group reaching a common decision.

Final Reflections on Our Decisions reminds us of the last test and criterion concerning all our decisions: what we do for the poor. Eventually, we see what kind of salvation God wants for us in all our decisions.

At the end of the book, the reader will find some additional information that may be helpful. Appendix 1 details in a more complete way the four criteria for making a choice as explained in the book. Appendix 2 translates the method for use by people who are neither Christians nor believers. Appendix 3 gives some suggestions for clarifying the object of the choice. Appendix 4 describes what to expect from a good spiritual helper. Finally, Appendix 5 gives the last version of Ignatius of Loyola for the six points of his method of discernment. Appendix 6 includes four diagrams to help the reader present the steps of discernment in a visual fashion. Appendix 7 is an index of the Scripture passages referenced in this book. The quotations of the Bible I refer to are from *The Jerusalem Bible* and *The New American Bible* translations.

At this point I can make the reader a promise. If you learn and practice this method you will have the satisfaction of making better decisions, you will taste the joy of greater personal freedom; and, if you wish, you will experience the deep intimacy of deciding with your God. If you are not a believer, you will experience the contentment that comes when you are true to your most important values. I make this promise confidently, because those who followed the method experienced such contentment and serenity.

I would like to thank all the people through whom I learned how to discern. Some taught me, some helped me spiritually. Some shared their discernment with me, either as individuals or as groups. I would also like to thank those who have helped me to translate my ideas into a simple and understandable language. And a very special thank you to Carol.

PIERRE WOLFF

2003

PART ONE



The Components of Any Choice

CHAPTER ONE

Everybody Has What Is Necessary for Choosing

Although we hear the word *discernment* used frequently, the process by which it is achieved remains mysterious for many people. It might appear that its mastery is the privilege of certain spiritual or theological specialists, such as ministers and priests, gurus and monks. However, once discernment is explained, this mystery is obviously not the case. Actually, everyone discerns since everyone makes choices, for life requires all of us to make daily decisions. And it is possible to do this in a more or less systematic way.

The verb *to discern* comes from the Latin verb *discernere*, which means to separate, to distinguish accurately one object from another. Discernment is a process that allows a person to see, without confusion and ambiguity, what differentiates things. It should be immediately obvious that this process is necessary for making a choice. Choosing requires discriminating. To choose the sidewalk, for example, is to choose not to walk on the street. But this simple choice presupposes that we are able to distinguish the sidewalk from the street—more clearly than, say, a drunken person whose sight and balance are disturbed by alcohol. The better our discernment, the clearer our choices.

We discern daily. Normally, we would trivialize the word *discernment* if we were to apply it to selecting from a menu. However, if I am watching my cholesterol level, I need to take the time to decide what I am going to eat. First, I cross red meats, butter, and creamy cheeses off my list. Then, from the remaining

options, I choose what I would prefer: veal or fish, raw or cooked vegetables, pasta, potatoes, or a bean dish. This opportunity for decision that recurs as regularly as our daily meals contains all the elements of the most systematic and sophisticated discernment. Holding aside for the moment any religious connotation of discernment, let us consider a few examples that may be more consequential than simply choosing a menu. For instance, let us suppose that we must move, find a new job, or choose a school for one of our children. What is the best way to approach such decisions?

The Framework: Time

To the extent that the situation permits, we never want to make a decision in a hurry. The more important the problem, the more time we ask of ourselves or others for decision making. What parents would choose a school for their child in five minutes? Even when the task itself doesn't take very long, the first and most essential part of any decision-making process is time.

The Tools: Head and Heart

We usually don't pick up the telephone book, open to the Yellow Pages and, with our eyes closed, put our finger on any random entry in order to select the street where we'll live, the company where we'll work, or the school where we will send our child. We certainly do not want chance to make those decisions for us. As mature human beings, we prefer to trust in better tools than luck for reaching a decision.

First, we use our head. We reflect on the situation. We look for information. We weigh the advantages and the disadvantages of our options. And we try to foresee the consequences of them. Sometimes we consult people whom we see as experts about schools, a certain job, or the area of the town under consideration. We collect and file away data on the problem we want to solve.

After analyzing and synthesizing, we come to see, more objectively, a way to proceed. The word *objectively* implies that, at the end of our considerations, the solution that we have identified as possible, based on our data, would seem to be a reasonable choice to many other people as well.

But our head is rarely, if ever, the only part of ourselves involved in choices. All along, we consult our heart in order to verify whether or not the possible solution appeals to us. Objectively, a particular kind of house may respond to our needs, but we cannot picture ourselves living in such a wealthy and isolated area. This particular job may bring a good salary and provide the opportunity for an interesting promotion, but the idea of a future with so much time spent away from our family disturbs us. The school in question is renowned for its academic successes, but we, parents as well as child, do not feel at home in its elite atmosphere. In a word, our heart has something to say in our investigation. For we all know that the word said by our heart is often the last word when it comes to decision making.

So, we screen with our heart what we discover with our head in order to make a decision that is *ours* and one we can confirm subjectively. It's our decision. This means that others may understand our choice intellectually, without agreeing, because they may not value the same things we cherish. They may even judge us unreasonable.

The decision is really ours and ours alone. This is so true that it is possible to be aware of one's aloneness even with close friends. I may, for instance, discuss my problem with some friends I consider wise: "You know me well; tell me where you can picture me living, in the city or in a suburb? You have been with me for a long time; can you see me as a plumber or as a mail carrier? You have followed our child's life for years; what school would you recommend?" But, in the end, I know that the wise friend cannot decide for me. I am the one who has to move and live for years in a new environment. I am the one who shall carry the burden or savor the joy of a new job for quite a while. It is our

child who shall undergo and deal with the results of the education that will mold her. The actual choice is, and remains, my choice. Sometimes, it is so much mine that I finally decide to act against all of the advice that has been offered.

This helps us to remember that no responsible choice exists without inner freedom. No one else can make my decisions, neither my closest friends nor the most skilled experts. Of course, I may seek the aid of both friends and experts, but I must not let their opinions influence me to such an extent that I lose my internal freedom. This is fairly obvious, but what may not be so obvious is the need to stay free as well from any *subconscious motivations* that may direct my actions without my awareness or consent. In the opening sections of this book I describe the basic elements involved in the process of making a decision. In later chapters I will come back to the fundamental notion of inner freedom that is called into question each time I use my head and my heart to choose.

The Cornerstone: Values

The components that structure the decision-making process are already present when we select from a menu in a restaurant: time, intellect (head), and emotions (heart). We summarize the complex emotional side of ourselves by using the term *affectivity*. But we are still missing one ingredient.

When life asks me to make choices, I usually weigh my options with respect to what is important to me. What leads me to consider cholesterol in my food selection is the value that I see, both intellectually and emotionally, in maintaining my health. My physical well-being is important to me. It is the value I perceive in being in the city or in a suburb, in spending or investing a large amount of money in a house purchase, and in having a certain kind of family life that directs me when I choose the place where I will live. It's the value I place on creativity, on a better salary, or on the social status that leads me to take a new job. It's the value I see in the qualities of the studies, of the environment, and the

cultural fulfillment of the human-being-to-come in our child that will push me to give priority to one school rather than another. In my mind and in my heart, I keep one goal before me throughout the process that prepares me for and ends in my decision. The goal is to make my decision in the light of either one or several values. Others may or may not agree with me according to whether or not they understand and share my value system.

What has been said about the various components involved in the preparation of a decision can be summarized in one sentence. Influenced by our values, we work with our intellect and our affectivity in order to determine, in time, our decision.

The diagrams in Appendix 6 provide for an easy recall of the principal concepts of the process of discernment.



So, there's nothing here that is mysterious or magical. We have simply described the typical structure of any human decision made seriously. Let us call such a process *discernment*.

It is time to go back to what we put aside earlier, the religious implications of a choice for someone who has a religious belief. For believers, the notion of discernment also implies God. So, from now on in this book, discernment will mean a systematic process of working in time with our intellect and affective self (emotions), according to a value system illumined by faith. Thus, this book is a religious book, but, as I said in the Introduction, those who profess no religious belief will find, later in these pages, a translation of the method into secular terms.

So, what happens when, through religious belief, faith, we introduce God into this process of discernment? First of all, faith does not change the structure we have just described. It would be strange if we had to ignore, deny, or reject the framework or the tools that arise from the essence of our human condition in order to make a decision suitable to our faith in God. They are gifts of our Creator. Even people of deep faith have always to