

How Do We Avoid the Misuse of Discernment in Decision-Making?

FR. MICHAEL ROZIER, SJ, PhD

Associate Professor, Health Management and Policy at Saint Louis University

Even though most of us may not recognize it, much of our personal and professional lives are spent in regular discernment. Should I let my child have 10 more minutes of screen time? Should I have one of the cookies sitting in the break room? How should I respond to my colleague whose demands are routinely unreasonable? Our days are filled with decisions that are not overly consequential, but that, when taken together, shape how we live and who we become in consequential ways.

A discernment process is often used in Catholic ministries when matters of consequence are under consideration, and some may say that the above description unhelpfully conflates the idea of decision-making and discernment. They will rightly observe that we should not spiritualize the mundane decisions we all must make throughout our days. That is certainly true. Some questions are simply decisions: Should I wear a blue or a grey shirt? Can we afford to go to the movies this weekend? Such decisions are related to questions whose answers don't fundamentally change who we are.

At the same time, we do not want to minimize the way that even routine decisions shape who we are and who we become. For some, the question about eating a cookie would be a decision, but for those who are consciously trying to be more disciplined in their eating habits, that same question may have an element of discernment.

Many others have helpfully described the core elements of discernment by placing it in the context of the Church's history and different congregations' spiritual traditions.^{1,2} These elements include: identifying the core question; being transparent about one's biases, hopes and fears; taking

time in prayer; and sharing honestly and openly.

While Catholic health ministries have grown in the practice of discernment, we must also be aware of two critical errors that often accompany this practice. First, just as we speak of the conditions necessary for discernment, we must also be aware of its misuse. This is often uncomfortable to speak about because the desire for discernment comes from a good place. Nevertheless, like other good intentions, the use of discernment has the potential to be misplaced. Second, we should not allow the use of formal discernment to replace an even more fundamental expectation of having a discerning disposition.

Both of these issues are addressed in this article, and neither is meant to suggest that our collective investment in discernment processes is mistaken. Both concerns are raised out of a desire to refine the good work occurring throughout our ministries.

THE UNINTENTIONAL MISUSE OF DISCERNMENT

There are at least three categories of the misuse of discernment. The first is when people who are capable of undertaking discernment are not given the conditions to do so. This occurs when the

individual's internal capacities for discernment are present, but something external to the individual compromises their ability to discern freely. For example, a participant in a discernment process may have the necessary freedom around a decision and may be aware of their personal hopes and fears related to the decision. At the same time, their supervisor may also be participating in the discernment. Even if the supervisor has freedom in the matter at hand, if those in the subordinate roles believe that the supervisor has a preferred outcome, a discernment is not possible. In this situation, every participant has the capability of undertaking a discernment, but there is something about the conditions themselves that have made such a task impossible.

The second misuse of discernment is when people who are incapable of or inadequately trained in discernment are asked to engage in it. This is probably the most common mistake made in ministerial discernment processes that take place within Catholic health care ministries. The truth is that genuine discernment is quite difficult, and many of the religious women from whom we draw this charism spent a lifetime cultivating the personal spiritual resources to do it well. Primarily, it requires having an active prayer life over a period of time. It also requires having a great deal of self-awareness, suspending judgment and delaying a decision for much longer and more often than we typically like to do. The challenge comes when rooms are filled with talented and accomplished people, and we pretend that being talented and accomplished in one area of life means that one is also prepared for the work of discernment. I wish that were true, but it isn't.

The third common misuse of discernment is when the subject matter being considered is inappropriate for a formal discernment. This most often arises from good intentions being misapplied. A formal discernment process is a rather weighty activity and should be reserved for matters of greater moment.

In fact, I think a formal discernment process should be relatively rare within our ministries. Should we consider a major acquisition, alienation or merger?³ Those are questions for discernment. Should we reorganize our senior leadership

structure to place greater emphasis on community health? That could be an appropriate question as well. Should we place radio ads for our new urgent care center? Although important, this is not a matter for discernment. Should we shift our investment policy toward higher-risk asset classes? Again, important, but likely not a matter for discernment.

Most matters are just not significant enough to be material for a formal discernment. In many situations, the question is a business decision that shouldn't be falsely spiritualized by cloaking it in the language of discernment. Sometimes building a new wing of a hospital is a strategic business

The difference between a decision and a discernment is whether the outcome is likely to shape the character of the ministry.

decision that is perfectly fine to make through the lens of operations and finance. Of course, if the decision is to use financial resources to either build a new wing of an existing suburban hospital or build a clinic in an economically challenged city center, that may be a matter of discernment.

The difference between a decision and a discernment is whether the outcome is likely to shape the character of the ministry. This distinction parallels the different types of questions at the beginning of this article, which depend on whether the decision might shape how we live and, therefore, who we become.

The unintentional misuse of discernment is a common type of spiritual trap. Most spiritual failings do not come from being overtly evil. Intentional evil, in my experience as a confessor, is rare. More frequently, spiritual failing comes from slightly twisting and misapplying an otherwise good desire. For example, one's generosity and desire to help others can go from a virtue to a vice if that desire to help becomes too intense and instead becomes controlling behavior. Just so, we must be careful that the very good desire to engage in discernment doesn't lead us to misuse the process when either the people are not ready, or the situation is not appropriate for formal discernment.

Acknowledging when discernments are poorly done is just as important as recognizing when dis-

cernments are done well. Both types of situations are great teachers and can only help us get better at discernment in the future. Sometimes discernments fail for one of the previously mentioned reasons. Sometimes discernments get it wrong despite doing everything in the way that we are supposed to. We are human, and that means we are imperfect. Having the freedom and awareness to retrospectively examine discernments and their results is key to becoming better at this important work.

A DISCERNING DISPOSITION

In the Catholic tradition, we distinguish between a Sacrament and sacramental or a sacramental worldview. The “big S” Sacrament is reserved for seven specific communal activities that are often described as an “outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace.”⁴ They are Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Matrimony.

These seven Sacraments have many similarities to sacramentals, which are a wide range of actions that offer a sanctification of people and the world. This includes the blessing of food, people or spaces, blessing with holy water, making the sign of the cross and lighting an Advent wreath. The list goes on. They are each a sign of God’s presence in our world and the blessing we are each called to be. Yet, as meaningful as they are, they do not have the same theological significance as Sacraments.

Moreover, we might also speak of someone having a “sacramental worldview.” This does not describe someone who regularly participates in the sacraments, but a person who moves through their day and is able to readily recognize God’s activity, or God’s grace, in the world around them. For example, this would include someone who is consistently and fully present to those around them because of their commitment to others’ inherent worth. Or it would be someone who regularly notices the good things in their life because they believe so deeply in the goodness of the created world. These are sacramental people who bring invisible grace into the visible world simply by how they live.

The distinction between Sacrament and sacramental worldview is the same distinction we should be making between Discernment and a discerning disposition. Sacraments (aside from Eucharist and Penance, perhaps) and Discern-

ment are relatively infrequent occurrences. On the other hand, a sacramental worldview and a discerning disposition are something we can all cultivate and display every moment of every day.

As a sponsor of a Catholic health ministry, I am far more interested in someone’s discerning disposition than I am in their ability to engage in Discernment. This is because a discerning disposition will affect every interaction with a patient or coworker, every contribution during a meeting and every decision.

FORMATION TO GROW A DISCERNING DISPOSITION

My primary ministry is Catholic higher education, and there is much that higher education and other Catholic ministries can learn from the formation programs present in Catholic health care. Nevertheless, we also know that Catholic health formation programs are not perfect.⁵

In the coming years, I hope we can take some of the energy we have devoted to discernment and place it toward being discerning. This is not to abandon discernment, but I suspect growing awareness of one’s discerning disposition would have a bigger influence on the culture of our ministries. For example, although our coworkers’ lives are impacted by whether or not we acquire another entity (the result of discernment), they are likely more affected by whether they feel involved in routine decisions in their unit (the result of a supervisor’s discerning disposition).

In addition to formal formation programs to help build discerning dispositions, there are many practices that can embed this into a ministry. For example, many meetings begin with prayer or reflection. The effect of this can be deepened by occasionally pausing during the meeting itself so that those present can take time to consider how they are reacting, in real time, to what is being discussed. This process is aided by activities to increase both self-awareness and comfort in speaking beyond the intellectual, particularly to one’s emotional state.

In addition, many teams are very good at taking time to consider an action before it is taken but are less disciplined in revisiting that action so that everyone can learn from it. Revisiting decisions is not just a good business practice, but is essential to the spiritual life. This is the key insight of a regular examination of conscience,⁶ which asks us to

retrospectively recognize patterns, both good and bad, so that in the future we might more regularly act on the good and avoid the bad. These practices and others are, of course, more possible if we consider one's discerning disposition when recruiting and promoting within our ministries.

As a member of a religious order, and one that has a strong commitment to discernment at both individual and communal levels, my experience is that formal discernments are fairly uncommon. At the same time, we are expected to live our daily lives in a discerning way. I believe this is true for the congregations who founded our Catholic health ministries.

There are certainly some major decisions that define each of our ministerial histories and that will shape our future. Yet, for the most part, we speak to the character, or the disposition, of our religious foundresses. In fact, it is the daily attentiveness to one's discerning disposition that cultivates the self-awareness and freedom that makes a larger discernment more possible. As it was for them, so may it also be for us.

FR. MICHAEL ROZIER, SJ, is a Jesuit priest and an associate professor of health management and policy at Saint Louis University College for Public Health and Social Justice.

NOTES

1. Ladislav Orsy, *Discernment: Theology and Practice, Communal and Personal* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2020).
2. Scott Kelley and David Nantais, "Why a Habit of Discernment Is Crucial for Catholic Health Care," *Health Progress* 103, no. 3 (Summer 2022): 4-11, <https://www.chausa.org/publications/health-progress/archive/article/summer-2022/why-a-habit-of-discernment-is-crucial-for-catholic-health-care>.
3. For more on alienation, see: Rev. Francis Morrissey, "Alienation and Administration," *Health Progress* 79, no. 5 (September/October 1998): 24-29, <https://www.chausa.org/publications/health-progress/archive/article/september-october-1998/alienation-and-administration>.
4. The Roman Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2000).
5. Diarmuid Rooney, "Ministry Formation Has Come a Long Way, but Is It Enough?," *Health Progress* 104, no. 2 (Spring 2023): 55-57, <https://www.chausa.org/publications/health-progress/archive/article/spring-2023/formation---ministry-formation-has-come-a-long-way-but-is-it-enough>.
6. Timothy Gallagher, *The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today* (Spring Valley, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006).



GET IT DELIVERED

Health Progress and Catholic Health World

CONTACT THE SERVICE CENTER AT SERVICECENTER@CHAUSA.ORG



Issues are complimentary for those who work for CHA members in the United States.