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Discernment in daily family life

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DISCERNMENT IN DAILY FAMILY LIFE

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Part One

Introduction

Three years ago this past spring, my wife and I felt besieged by life. For a year, I had been in and out of the hospital with life-threatening emergencies and major surgeries. And during that year we also experienced the sudden death of my father and then the loss of my job. Our five children were all still at home, and we knew that we urgently needed to discern our next step.

At that time, we thought back to the days before we met, when we would go on long retreats in order to better hear God's voice. Now, in our home, we were surrounded by grief and uncertainty, along with the clamor of constant needs.

For so many families today, this experience of "crisis upon crisis" is normal. And it seems it will be impossible to find the narrow path to heaven when we are surrounded by illness, death, economic instability, aggressive nihilism, and even all-out war. How can authentic discernment take place today, given how families are overwhelmed, exhausted, anxious, distracted, wounded, and broken?

We have to take a few steps to answer such a big question. I'll start by asking three smaller questions that will uncover the heart of the answer, the core principle we can use for discernment. And then Ever will show us how that principle can shape every level of family life. So, to start, my three questions are: 1) What is discernment and what is it for? 2) What is our unfailing aid in discernment? and 3) Is family life a distraction to discernment?



1) *What is discernment and what is it for?*

Discernment, our Holy Father Pope Francis says, is paying attention to the “voices that reach our hearts,” always asking “where they come from.” Then, discernment compels us, he says, to “ask for the grace to recognize and follow the voice of the good Shepherd...”

For parents who long for the quiet of a good retreat, recognizing the Lord’s “still, small voice” in the midst of family life may seem impossible. In reflecting on the reality of caring for children while enduring crisis upon crisis, we can see that in some ways discerning itself is secondary to being in an atmosphere in which discernment is even possible.

So, we may need to move beyond the question of discernment, and focus instead on how—realistically—we can create an atmosphere for it in our daily life. And as we make that attempt, let’s remember what discernment is for. Learning to follow the Lord’s voice helps us lead our families heavenward.

Ah, heaven! Now things are getting interesting! There is nothing more in the whole of life that we want so much as heaven! At times, we just want to leave our heap of crises behind, fly to heaven, and dwell forever, together with our loved ones, with our Blessed Mother, the saints, and above all with our loving Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But instead, the path looks long and full of confusing decision points. Will we make it to this much-hoped for life with God?

So, discernment is following God’s voice. And discernment is for finding our way to heaven, to life in the Trinity. So, now let’s move on to our second question:

2) *What is our unfailing aid in discernment?*

When we are troubled by doubts about how to find our way, first we need to remember that Jesus said, “I am the way.” So, what we are faced with is not so much the need to interpret a long, confusing path as it is the need to cling to Jesus as He guides us along it.



Sometimes we may feel that we cannot hear His voice, that He is too far ahead, that we are getting lost and left behind. But we must calm ourselves and remember that Jesus gave us an unfailing aid that allows us to keep pace with him—the Eucharist. And on this very practical reality—Jesus present in the Eucharist—we can begin to build that atmosphere for discernment in our daily family life.

When we cling to the Eucharist, Jesus, our way to heaven, what is the deeper reality? The deeper reality is that our souls are already in communion with God, that He is dwelling in us and we in Him, that the deepest part of us leaps over the long, confusing path and inhabits heaven already.

So, given what discernment is, what it's for, and our unfailing aid in it, let's ask the third question:

3) *Is daily family life a distraction to discernment?*

How do we bring our peaceful communion with Jesus into our noisy family so that we will be able to hear his voice and lead them to heaven? This is where we can all breathe a big sigh of relief. Because *families are already much closer to heaven than we might think!*

The truth hidden in plain sight is that the family and the Holy Trinity share a stunning similarity: both are a “communion of persons” by virtue of the love they share. Our families, made in the image of God, are icons of the Trinity. “The Christian family,” the Catechism declares, “is a communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit” (2205). Rather than being distant, the dynamics of life in heaven already belong to every family.

At this point, the parents of young children may be thinking, “That’s nice, *theoretically*, but I wish my kids would act like an image of God *today!*” So, now we have arrived back at the real challenge. On the one hand, we have renewed hope because we know that our families are an image of God, a taste of heaven in our homes. But we may also be discouraged because our families have such a long way to go. Rather than being discouraged, though, let us recall our Savior’s words: “Do not be afraid!”

Now my beloved wife, Ever, who throughout our 20 years of marriage has chosen “the better part,” will share how we can bring heaven down to earth, how we can weave our communion with



God into daily family life—our family’s communion in action—in order to create a real-life atmosphere for discernment!

Part Two

We begin with encouraging news! As Soren just shared, thankfully our families are *not* a distraction from good discernment! Discernment does *not* require an escape from family life, a sabbatical from marriage, or a “time-out” from parenting. By being our very own image of God dwelling in our homes, our families are both our way to heaven and our present taste of it.

Heaven, life with God, can be tasted in our homes. We as parents *can* courageously build a loving, immersive Catholic household, a vibrant little “society of daily life” that allows each family member to follow the Lord’s voice into full communion with Him and others.

But what are the practical steps to do that? To answer that, I’d like to reflect with you on three more questions: 1) What is the principle at the heart of authentic discernment? 2) How does communion shape every level of family life? and finally, 3) What are some moments in family life where the principle of communion helps us discern?

1) What is the principle at the heart of authentic discernment?

Simply put, the principle at the heart of authentic discernment in family life is communion. Why? Because the purpose of discernment is to prepare to live with God. And living with God means living in communion, because God’s life is one of mutual giving between the Father and Son, which brings about a creative, fruitful communion in the Holy Spirit.

Our families are created both as *an image* of that communion and as *a path* to grow in it, so we must evaluate our choices according to this mystical reality. Of any decision our family faces, we can ask, “Will the likely result of this decision *strengthen* or *weaken* our communion?”

It’s important to recall that communion comes about through attention to both the development of the person and the common good. With both, we can have mutuality, a healthy giving and receiving



that strengthens family bonds. So, with this principle of communion in mind, let's turn to the second question:

2) ***How does communion shape every level of family life?***

If communion is the principle for every decision, how does something so seemingly abstract translate into our intense and sometimes chaotic family life? In raising our children in what we call our “Trinity House,” we’ve come to see five interdependent levels of family life. Each is founded on markers that strengthen communion in both the *times and places* of daily life.

In Level 1, Faith Life, we *receive our communion*. We orient our time on communion by keeping a ***Holy Sabbath***, which deepens the communion that God gives us in the Eucharist for the week ahead. And we keep our place focused on that communion by tending our ***Home Altar***, which physically calls us to back to communion with God and each other in prayer throughout the week.

In Level 2, Person & Relationships, we *strengthen our communion* by developing other-centered persons and relationships. We keep our time oriented on communion by observing a weekly ***Date Night***, and our place by seeking out ***Quiet Places*** to connect with each family member.

In Level 3, Household Economy, we *care for our communion*. We hold a weekly ***Life Meeting*** between spouses where we organize and commit to the work of the household. And well-kept ***Workspaces*** physically support our communion so that we can effectively lead our children in shared work.

In Level 4, Family Culture, we *celebrate our communion*, first with a daily ***Family Meal*** and by keeping an attractive ***Family Table***.

In Level 5, Hospitality & Service, we *share our communion*, our taste of heaven, with others, first by being faithful to ***One Outreach*** at a time and also by focusing on our ***Neighborhood***, which includes our parish.



These core markers in time and place are just the beginnings of an atmosphere of communion, but they immediately make staying on the path to heaven easier. Because the family has *received* communion from God in the Eucharist and prayer, they can then *strengthen, care for, celebrate,* and *share* this communion as they journey to heaven together, becoming ever more an image of the Most Holy Trinity.

3) *Finally, what are some actual moments in family life when the principle of communion helps us discern?*

Each of us makes countless small decisions every day. Should I exercise now, or help my son with his homework? Should I develop myself to be what God has called me to be, or is it time for me to serve my family in a way that develops them and deepens our communion?

As we seek to answer these questions, we recall that the principle of communion preserves a delicate tension—between each person's development and their contribution to the family. If we make small decisions faithfully, allocating our time prudently among persons and the common good, then, when we come to medium-sized decisions, like whether to let our daughter play another season of soccer, it will be easier to discern.

In such a home, marked by growth and accompaniment, the family members are constantly opting to give each other the gift of time or to spend time together. Yes, as our Holy Father notes, “Sometimes the plates fly!” And when they do, we seek forgiveness, pick up the pieces, and resume growing our communion.

If we use the principle of communion at life's small and medium junctures, we will be ready when we arrive at big intersections: when we must decide whether to move to another town or take a new job, or how to care for an elderly parent, or a son who has just been released from rehab or prison.

Immersed in an atmosphere of other-centered communion, the family members turn to the Lord with their daily decisions and they hear his voice: in the voice of another, in the events of the day, in prayer, in his Word.

Conclusion



In conclusion, discernment that leads to greater communion with God and others is an invitation that our Lord makes to every family today, even those who feel their life is “crisis upon crisis.” If it is true, as Pope St. John Paul II said, that “the future of humanity passes by way of the family,” then the future will also pass by the way of each family’s daily discernment as a little Trinity, a communion of persons.

As our Holy Father says, “In families...there is always, always, the cross.” But, he continues, “the love of God...also opened up for us this path...after the cross, there is resurrection.”

So, despite the difficulties of family life, we can still cling to communion, to Jesus in the Eucharist. We can discover this principle at the heart of authentic discernment, and allow it to shape every level of our family life.

In the gift of communion that continually comes to us from the heart of the Most Holy Trinity, may our families, calling on our Blessed Mother’s intercession, step forward confidently on this path to holiness in family life!

Compare with spoken text