Discernment in the Franciscan Spirit:

A practical guide based on the writings and teachings of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Clare of Assisi.
Introduction

This short letter, written by St. Francis of Assisi between 1224 and 1226 to his good friend Leo, is the essence of what it means to discern from a Franciscan perspective. Brother Leo and Brother Francis had been on the road for a while, journeying from Assisi northward 90 miles to LaVerna. This is toward the end of Francis’ life and near the time he receives the Stigmata. His words to Brother Leo speak of what it means to engage in the process of discernment using a Franciscan lens:

“In whatever way it seems best to you to please the Lord God and to follow His footprint and His poverty, do this with the blessing of God and my obedience.”

The Letter is a moving expression of affection and spiritual friendship between Francis and Brother Leo. It is a document which can be seen as a spiritual counsel or direction between Francis and his secretary and confessor Leo. Its style is thus very personal and vague: “I am putting everything we said on the road…” says Francis to Leo. The Letter to Brother Leo shows also the sense of Gospel freedom which Francis experienced and his great respect for the conscience of each and every one of the brothers in making important decisions in life.

Rule of 1221—Ch 22:27

Let us always make a home and a dwelling place there for Him Who is the Lord God, Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Who says: Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of man.
Reflection Prompts:
- What are you hearing from Francis and Leo?
- How might this apply to your life?
- Who would say these things to you and to whom would you say these things?

Reflection Response:

All life can be understood as a journey, a way of beauty. Franciscan Discernment begins with abundance, knowing grace and beauty are everywhere. Love grounds Franciscan Discernment from the beginning:
- God’s abundant love for the individual.
- The individual’s overflowing love for God and the world.
- The Individual’s sense of his/her own life-journey into love.
According to Blessed John Duns Scotus, Franciscan Discernment involves two affections: affection for self (love of self) and affection for justice (love of others). The motivation to love oneself is directed inward, requires mature self-esteem, growth in integrity, healthy self-preservation, a good tendency toward happiness, and proper perspective with others while not permitting disrespect or abuse of oneself. The motivation to love others is directed outward, seeing what is good/just for the other with a desire to love each person according to their dignity as one made in the image and likeness of God.

“In the Franciscan vision, moral living is seen as a response to divine graciousness and love....True human freedom becomes the foundation and the summit of moral living, enabling the fully functioning moral agent to respond in right actions and ordered loving in imitation of Jesus Christ, to that love that God has poured out into our heart. (Romans 5:5).”


Right moral living requires balancing the two affections when making choices that shape one’s character. If we follow our affection for justice (loving others) the result is a dynamic of mutual love and expanding inclusivity. This includes:

- A self-reflective glance toward one’s own life.
- Critical awareness of injustice.
- Courage to act as quickly as possible on behalf of justice.

Letter to the Entire Order—50

Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God, give us miserable ones the grace to do for You alone what we know you want us to do and always to desire what pleases You.
Reflection Prompts:
- Do you truly and deeply love God?
- Do you believe God truly and deeply loves you?
- Is your love directed both inward and outward? What evidence do you have of both of these?

Reflection Response:

Overlooking lower Assisi
Key aspects of Franciscan Discernment

First and foremost, Franciscan discernment sees the whole situation one is discerning as a locus for beauty, not isolating one aspect. It is to let oneself be drawn by the heart, not turning life into a puzzle or a dilemma. It is a discernment based on praxis (practice), not abstract solutions. It does not involve figuring things out; rather, one follows the Spirit’s lead.

One must move from attentiveness to birthing beauty:

- As I am attentive to my love of myself, what is present to me?
- As I am attentive to those parts of me ‘that hold me captive’, what ways is beauty already present to me?
- As I am attentive to my distractions, my biases, my assumptions, how might I bring forth more beauty in a situation?
- As I am attentive to my own expectations of myself and God, what incarnational aspects disturb, surprise and unsettle me?

Reflection Prompt:

- After reflecting on the movement from attentiveness to birthing beauty, how are you called to do the same in your own discernment process?
Franciscan discernment is a path to wholeness and is all about balance and harmony. Thus, it is RADICALLY HOPEFUL. One becomes aware of one’s own desires and attractions, mindful of the aspects of the situation, who one is, and what one is considering. It is an attentiveness to the promptings of the Spirit, awaiting with patience and confidence for the movement within, the quickening. One acts with grace and peace toward a future filled with beauty and hope.

Francis expresses this well in his Prayer for Guidance:

“Most high and glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart, give me right faith, certain hope and perfect charity, sense and knowledge, Lord, so that I might always discern your holy and true will.”

Clare tells us in her Second Letter to Agnes of Prague:

Gaze upon Christ (Use all of your inner and outer senses to look at your discernment from all aspects.)
Consider Christ (Use your intellect to look at your discernment from all angles.)
Contemplate Christ (Use the core of your being where God dwells to pray with your discernment.)
Imitate Christ (Choose to act on your discernment as you follow in the footprints of Jesus.)
Second Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague 11-14

What you hold, may you [always] hold.
What you do, may you [always] do and never abandon.
But with swift pace, light step, 
[and] unswerving feet, 
So that even your steps stir up no dust, 
go forward 
securely, joyfully, and swiftly, 
on the path of prudent happiness, 
believing nothing, 
agreeing with nothing 
which would dissuade you from this resolution 
or which would place a stumbling block for you 
on the way, 
so that you may offer your vows to the Most High 
in the pursuit of the perfection 
to which the Spirit of the Lord has called you.
Reflection Prompts:

- In praying with Francis’ Prayer for Guidance, what faith, hope, charity, sense and knowledge are you asking for?
- Clare used the San Damiano Cross to inspire her discernment process. How might you use her advice to Gaze, Consider, Contemplate and Imitate in your own discernment process?”
- In Clare’s second letter to Agnes, Clare directs Agnes to always do what her discernment tells her and to never abandon what is at the core of her life. In my own discernment what are you led to never abandon; what is nonnegotiable for you? What is at the heart of your discernment, the heart of the core of your life?

Reflection Response:
Franciscan Discernment: A Process

When one is engaged in discernment through a Franciscan lens, there is a process that moves one toward making a decision grounded in balance and harmony. Reflect on a concrete practical decision one is discerning, out of a sense of abundance, knowing grace and beauty are everywhere. Then, once you have clarity concerning what you are discerning, take ample time to consider each of the following aspects of Franciscan Discernment. This is not a linear, step-by-step process; you can revisit any area at any time.

1. Be expansive and Inclusive!
   a. How might I expand the moral situation involved in my discernment?
   b. Who would I include in a larger circle of relationships that affect my discernment?
   c. How do I go about including more than two options in my discernment?
   d. How does this course of action strengthen existing relationships and open space for new relationships and new life?
2. **Emotions are morally relevant!**
   a. How often do my self-related emotional concerns drive my decisions?
   b. How alert am I to myself? To my feelings? To my inner movements?
   c. Do I put my emotions “on hold” when I make a decision?
   d. Do I minimize my inner sense of harmony or disharmony

3. **Be Creative!**
   a. Do I play things conservatively?
   b. Do I think about taking a moral risk that might have a huge impact on the world?
   c. How might I use my imagination to consider options that may seem farfetched?
   d. Do I consider not just the good, but the life-giving course of action?

4. **Be Faithful!**
   a. How do I stay connected to God and others in the situation?
   b. How do I stay connected to the most practical aspect of the situation?
   c. How am I aware of the Spirit’s inspiration?
   d. How attentive and ready am I?

5. **Know when to act!**
   a. How might the action I am taking provide its own affirmation?
   b. How am I being led by the Spirit, guided by the voice within?
   c. Am I willing to recognize that no amount of reflection is sufficient to move me to act?
   d. Will I move myself in response to the specifics of the situation?
Reflection Prompts:
- Carefully consider each of the five steps in the process for Franciscan Discernment. Take adequate time to pray with the questions and to answer them as your heart leads you. Then choose to act, knowing God will work through every choice that you make!

Reflection Response:
This process can be used by an individual or by a group. The key is recognizing that God, out of God’s extravagant love, will act through any choice that you make. Trust the process and, like Brother Leo, listen to Francis’ advice:

“In whatever way it seems best to you to please the Lord God and to follow His footprint and His poverty, do this with the blessing of God and my obedience.”
Francis Statue at the Carceri.

Process based on the work of Mary Beth Ingham, CSJ
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