

Discernment Steps* (as developed by Sister Sandra Weinke, SSND; commentary by Sister Bridget Waldorf, SSND)
***PRAYER IS INTEGRATED INTO EACH STEP.**

1. LOOK

What is your experience of yourself, your gifts, and your talents? What are the needs in the world...the Church?

LOOK – look around – what is happening in the world, your community, the church? Evangelization, education, immigration, war, divisions, poverty, prisons, disrespect for life, etc. Look within – what are your gifts / desires / talents and what is your experience of yourself? As you look within, what do you see? We bring our whole selves to our discernment – our head, our hearts, and our physical selves. What are your ambitions, your fears, your attractions and your sense of self?

For example, I recall being drawn to an international congregation and saying to myself, “what’s that about?” I didn’t know until I reflected on it a bit more that it had to do with some of the cultural experiences I had as a child. Ask yourself, does any of what I see in the world, the community, the church match up to what I know about what I have to offer or hope to offer those situations? Are there religious congregations involved in serving those particular needs?



2. LISTEN

What is your heart telling you?...your friends or mentors? Do you hear a call, or feel a longing?

I was struck at a recent vocation event how a number of women religious in the panel noted feeling something strong in their hearts in their own discernment. The heart is amazing – it can break, it can burst, it can long for something, it can weep, it can be attracted to someone or something, it can struggle, it can be tugged, it can be at peace, it can be closed off or it can be filled with giddiness – listen to what your heart is telling you at moments along the way. Do you hear a call? Are you being invited to something?



Listen to your mentors or wise friends – people who know you well, people who will be honest with you, people who understand commitment and want to help you discern God’s will. What are you hearing from them?

Find a spiritual director that can walk with you as you discern God’s invitations. Something that is sort of obvious but needs to be said is this: if we are to listen, we need to find times of quiet. Stillness helps us listen. Where and when are your moments of stillness?

3. LEARN

How do you understand your role in the future? What could you give or share?

Be curious.

Ask questions.

Take advantage of invitations from individuals or communities who invite you to come and see or experience them more closely. It’s okay – we want to help you. Clarify. For example, ask the question, “When you say you pray three times a day, what does that look like?” Ask questions about mission or ministry or educational debt or family visits or community life or material

goods. Learn why a particular group wears what it does. Read. Weigh the pros and cons as you understand them. Take notes. Do the practical research. What is a community saying? What is it not saying? What is the history of the congregation? Is it an international congregation or diocesan?

Imagine yourself with a particular congregation – how do you see your gifts being shared? What interests you about a congregation’s ministerial focus or mission?

Much of learning is necessarily practical, but it is only one part of discernment. We bring both our heads and hearts to discernment.

4. LEAN INTO IT

Lean into your discernment.

Embrace it. Surrender to it.

Be intentional.

Talk to someone - because even before he or she says anything, it’s really helpful for you to say out loud what your hopes and fears are. Use your imagination – imagine taking the next step and then reflect on what it feels like to do so. Imagine yourself as a consecrated woman with a particular mission being done in the midst of a community of other women doing the same. “Wade in the water” of life as a married person or one who offers her life as a single person. What does that look like? How does that feel? Take little next steps or make a decision. Make the phone call. Tell one person what you’re thinking.

Lean into prayer too. Embrace opportunities to pray. Break open scripture with another person or two. Read the stories of God calling individuals in scripture. What were the responses? How might those stories lead you in prayer? Up the number of times you go to Mass during a week; spend time in adoration; participate in liturgy of the hours. Be honest and specific with God. Ask Jesus to befriend you in ways that will be of support. Pray to the Holy Spirit for guidance.

I recall listening to a panel of sisters speak about their own vocational stories - sacred stories of women who had discerned God’s will. Stories that were human and authentic and touching and joyful. We heard words like call, prayer, following God’s will and phrases like, “if you’re open, you’ll hear” and “I entered and found things I didn’t know about.” It made me grateful to be in that space to listen and I was also thinking of Galatians 5:22 – the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – and that is what was experienced – women who had leaned into their discernment and came to know love and joy and peace....that’s the promise when we welcome the Holy Spirit into our discernment.

Step 5. LOVE

At the end of the day; at the end of our lives, we are simply and profoundly called to love and to be holy. The state of life doesn’t change that truth – we are called to holiness, we are called to love. Not about what you do – but who you are. Intentional, prayerful discernment will help in knowing the particular way in which we are called to love and to be holy – and we can trust that the God who created us, knows us, and loves us will not lead us astray. There is great freedom, a holy indifference even, once we can find that place of trusting God...and allowing God to lead us. In the words of Saint Augustine, “Love and do what you will”. Perhaps these thoughts by Teilhard de Chardin are also of help...

*Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are, quite naturally, impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way
to something unknown, something new.
Yet it is the law of all progress that is made
by passing through some stages of instability
and that may take a very long time.*

*And so I think it is with you.
Your ideas mature gradually -let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
Do not try to force them on as though you could
be today what time (that is to say, grace and
circumstances acting on your own good will)
will make you tomorrow.*

*Only God could say what this new Spirit
gradually forming in you will be.
Give our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you, and accept the
anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.”*

- Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin