

Dating and Discernment

It's not a question of whether or not a discerner "needs to date," but of whether or not discerners can "settle the matter in their mind." As St. Paul says, "But the person who has **settled the matter in his or her own mind**, who is under no compulsion but has control over their own will, and who has made up their mind not to marry does the right thing" (1 Cor 7:37). We each carry the responsibility to 'settle in our minds' the vocation which is our 'freely chosen' path of eternal unification in the body of Christ. By honest awareness of our heart's desires, we consciously choose our vocation 'without compulsion', moving forward through the threshold without needing to look back.

In the Catholic Church, there are several vocational options (state-of-life options) for discerners to choose from—four for men and three for women: priesthood (for men only), religious life, holy matrimony, and permanently single-in-the-world. My hope for all discerners is to avoid creating a situation where they feel victimized by their own choice of vocation--that is to say, either by default or else by ignoring or suppressing their valid desires during the discernment process, or needlessly prolonging discernment by not moving forward and applying to, and entering, religious life or the priesthood without any real reason for the delay.

Discernment is the time to be honest (without blocking or suppressing our intellect and inner yearning) about our heart's desire regarding dating or not, and if so, how. In our humble honesty about what we are thinking, the matter of what society is

thinking for us--or even what other religious people are projecting onto us, or what we ourselves may have thought we “wanted”--will shrink and dissipate in the light of conscious awareness. After all, Catholic vocation is about living out the “deepest” experience of Christ within--also known as the “abundant life” the highest eternal experience of love for us on the earth. Though many could live most all vocational states of life well, discernment has to do with choosing and living out openly and publicly the “deepest” state of Christ within.

It’s not for anyone to ultimately decide for another person whether or not he or she should date, and if so, in which way or for what length of time, but rather for the person himself/herself to own his or her personal desire, or lack thereof, in deciding which way to “settle it in their mind”. Not everyone feels the need to have a romantic element in their lives. For many, this would be a distraction. If a relationship with a romantic element is a distraction, if it takes one’s focus off of Jesus, or even becomes annoying (which I have heard of), therein lies the answer. If a discerner can take marriage or leave it (which many have expressed), they do best to strongly consider the latter by visiting religious communities of interest, then applying and entering without needless delay, once accepted.

Important note: Yet, while I believe that discerners should strive to trust their own judgment on these matters, if the fruit of the path they are embracing is bearing a sense of sadness, grimness, doom or gloom, we do well to point this out and encourage them to seek a more joy-filled direction. As many saints have said, “Joy is the surest sign of

God's presence". Vocation can involve sacrifice, but consciously sacrificing one's own happiness for the whole of one's life (most would agree) is going too far.

For those who sense a need to date, dating is a valid desire, and each person's choice of how he or she will date and for how long is his or her own, but most who are actively dating should not needlessly prolong the process--which would be a failure to be proactive in one's life course. The amount of energy a discernor wishes to put into the dating process can be very revealing concerning how badly the person wishes to be married. When Isaac was in want of a wife, his servant searched over a great distance to find Rebecca (Gen 24:10). For those who are actively dating and who find a good potential spouse, it usually doesn't take more than two years of actively courting to decide if Holy Matrimony is the goal and hope.

What do I mean by dating? Well, it can be in a group situation, if that is sufficient and desired. I have heard of many who simply had a few group dates--such as meeting for ice cream or bowling in a group of men and women. This type of experience can be enough for many. Others may feel a need to date more formally, such as meeting for dinner alone, getting to know the other. This can be enough for some persons to "settle it" in their minds regarding the desire for a lifestyle of Holy Matrimony. If it is enough, then it is best for the individual to acknowledge that fact and own it--that is to say, stop asking other people their opinion and take responsibility for one's own vocational decision, no matter what others (the media, society) project. Still other discerners may have a desire (even a need) to date more seriously, as in a courtship.

Though many discerners say they have ‘dated’ in some capacity, it is often with those who are not nearly as deeply committed to Catholicism as they are. I sometimes joke with discerners saying that, “those who are as deeply committed as you are have already become monks, sisters, brothers, and priests”. They laugh because it is true. The graces to be a nun, sister, brother, or priest, are extraordinary, and many take these graces for granted until they try to find someone just like themselves during the dating process. The truth is that most all discerners have grown tremendously, without need of a spouse, which speaks volumes in itself. Many do not appear to be in need of an earthly spousal “helpmate” in Holy Matrimony. They are already flourishing. What many come to realize is that what they truly want is the companionship of other deeply committed persons who live in religious community. Wanting to live in community with others like themselves is one of the primary reasons that discerners cite for seeking out help and information on the religious life and priesthood.

Sometimes it may happen that discerners remain “stuck” and become more and more confused until they date someone who is at least a good “Catholic potential”. I say this because I have heard of many who thought they wanted Holy Matrimony until they met someone Catholic with a high degree of knowledge and fidelity to our faith. Then, after forming a good friendship with that person, they realized that they simply wanted the friendly support of someone of the opposite sex, not a lifelong commitment as in Holy Matrimony. They realize that what they truly wanted was a relationship somewhat

similar to that of St. Francis and St. Clare--that is to say, a relationship of support for their commitment to consecrated religious life or priesthood.

The key here is not to tamper with the action of the Holy Spirit within ourselves, but to cooperate. Allow the desire to date (to whatever degree), or the lack of such desire, to be what it is without either exaggerating or minimizing it. As a discernor, the process is truly “all about us” in regard to our need (or lack of need) to date. Thinking deeply about what desires are in our hearts is not “selfish” but rather “self-care”. There is no sin in choosing to date or not to date. As discernors, we need to know that we have choices, and it is in our best interest to make our own decisions with “eyes wide open”. That is to say, we need to feel the freedom to date if we wish; however, if we wish not, that is okay, too.

It is good for discernors to have as high a degree of self-awareness as possible in regard to listening and acknowledging Christ within. By learning to have compassion on Christ within oneself in matters of dating (and even in everyday matters), we are in a far better place to have compassion for Christ in others after we enter the fulltime ministry of our vocation. “Charity begins at home”; that is to say, in the confines of one’s own heart first, in regard to listening and honoring reality within the depths of one’s being. “Love thy neighbor as thyself” not “instead of thyself”. It is an act of positive self-love to be aware of the desires to date or not, and if so, how.

Additional Perspectives to be Aware of

Even in Holy Matrimony--though there is no marriage in heaven in terms of exclusivity--the unification that Holy Matrimony nurtures on earth is without end long after physical intimacy ceases. Many persons need Holy Matrimony in order to bring the kingdom to earth in a smaller (and to them more tangible) domestic church, while others have a deeply-rooted tangible awareness of the unifying life of Christ in all of creation, as in a global family married to Christ collectively--that is to say, rather than feeling deprived of marriage, they experience an enormous expansion of Christian intimacy as the 'bride' within the larger body of Christ. These persons can serve Christ on the earth, conscious of the fact that they are in a very real kingdom with a very real King (Jesus) ruling and reigning from the tabernacle in a very real form, the Real Presence. It can be quite difficult for those who have experienced this great "expansion of Christian intimacy" to revert to the idea of shrinking this vast experience into the smaller, though beautiful, domestic church of marriage. For this reason, some married persons have even willingly devoted themselves to celibacy, living as brother and sister. As the years pass, their love reaches out into the masses; over time, they have learned--and now long to live out--these words of St. Paul to the full, "**those who have wives should be as though they had none**" (1 Cor 7:29). Many have described this experience of ever-expanding eternal family as a "great adventure" without end. The cycle of greater communion birthing a greater experience of expansive love is never-ending.

Through the awareness of Christ's "Real Presence" on the earth, ruling and reigning from the tabernacle, everyone on earth (including those who have passed from

this life and those yet to be born) has truly become our “**brother, sister, husband, child**”; all of creation becomes ours and all “**lands**” are ours (neither having nor needing any title of ownership), since Christ owns everything that exists to its very core (Matt. 19:29). As a matter of fact, He is the core and the substance of the core itself of all things visible and invisible. Now, with the above being said, not everyone can “hear” this, for whatever reason. Those who long for biological children or the consolation of wife or husband should “settle it” in their minds. They do not “sin” in marrying and forming a domestic church, but they need to be aware that “**those who marry will face many troubles**”, St. Paul (1 Cor 7:28).

Whether we embrace religious life, priesthood, holy matrimony, or permanently single-in-the-world, once we have done an honest and thorough discernment and have truly moved forward, the path of vocation discernment becomes a distant memory. Through the vocation we have embraced, we skip ever deeper into love, joy, Holy Spirit spontaneity, and freedom. By our sound and firm decision, we bear the wonderful fruit of vocation, which is the happiness that Christ describes “**unless we become like a child** (experience the joy of a trusting child) **we shall not enter the kingdom**” (Matt 18:3).

Yet unfortunately, far too many persons are still standing at the portal of vocation indecision (psychologically and emotionally), even though the time of moving forward has come. Their joy is dampened by their clinging to indecision. In other words, they are stuck. Moving forward renews our sense of stability, which increases our sense of agility,

progress, being on a journey, running a race, and embracing an often unknowable yet exciting adventure.

Final note: There are some who have already decided upon their vocation and seem outwardly to be well into their chosen state of life, yet still ponder needlessly. An additional help in moving forward from the past lies in this story of two monks walking toward a rising stream during a time when it was not acceptable for monks to interact with women: There was a woman stranded on the bank of the stream wanting to cross, but she couldn't. The older monk carried her across on his back in silence. On the other side he let her down, and both monks moved on. After a short time the younger monk said, "Why did you carry the woman?" The older monk answered, "I sat her down on the bank. Why are you still carrying her?" Way too many persons are still carrying *all* of their options too far into their discernment--sometimes even after they have entered their chosen way of life. "**Settle it in your mind**"; do not carry the heaviness of rehashing discernment when discernment is completed.

[Note: Every healthy person has hormones. Hormones can be confused with a need to date or marry. Hormonal energy fluctuates, and it can be channeled. It is up to each person to learn how to do so, by seeking out spiritual direction from those who are advanced in matters of celibacy and who can guide us. If a person truly believes that he or she is unable to channel these hormones, then that individual should seek counsel, and perhaps seriously consider heeding this advice from St. Paul, "**If you cannot control**

yourself, you should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion” (1 Cor 7:9).]