

## The Christian Decision-Making Process

Experience shows that decision making is a difficult matter. It reminds me of an old cartoon of a man who is speaking with his psychiatrist and saying: "Life would not be difficult if it were not for the need to make so many decisions." We laugh at such humorous insights, but we all know that there is a grain of truth in the matter.

Perhaps I can illustrate the Christian decision-making process for you as it was done by a woman who was about to join the secular branch of the Order some time ago.

She had to be out of town a good deal during that year because of her work. And on one occasion, she wrote me the following letter trying to arrive at a decision she would be comfortable with. The letter read, in part:

Dear Father Michael,

The last time I spoke with you about my vocation, I thought all my problems were solved. It seemed that all I had to do was to be ready for the ceremony at the next meeting of the Secular Order of Carmel. But now I find that I have run into a number of problems and I have become a little bit discouraged.

I think the problem can be stated in a few words by saying that my husband is upset with my decision to enter the Secular Order and my youngest daughter is not as close to me as she formerly was. Perhaps it is all due to the fact that this has been a hectic year and I am forced to go on many more trips for the company I work for. But, at any rate, after this trip I will not need to travel again for some time and thus I will be able to be with the family more. Incidentally, we begin our family vacation in a week.

Since I will only be in town for a day before going on vacation, I just hope that I can come to see you about these matters so that I can come to some kind of decision, if possible, before the next meeting.

Sincerely,  
MCV

**The Meeting** - When Marie returned from her trip, she came to see me and we went over the problem more carefully. But one thing was immediately clear: she wanted to do something about her problem, she did not merely want to discuss it for the sake of getting sympathy. This was an excellent beginning. In the following paragraphs, I will go over a few of the things that were touched on in the meeting and how she proceeded to make her decision.

**Vocations Baffle Others** - After listening to her problem, I told her that I felt I understood a little on the basis of my own experience. I told her that when I was very young I decided to go away to the seminary to begin studying for the priesthood. When I first began to think seriously

about my vocation, I was naturally enthralled with the prospect. I often went over in my own mind the goal I was reaching for and the good that I thought I could do in the future. And each time I thought of my vocation, the thought became more thrilling.

Some time passed and when I thought the right moment had come, I discussed the matter with my parents. I was surprised that they did not immediately share all my enthusiasm. In a reasonably short space of time, they did agree to let me go away to the seminary. Naturally, I was a bit puzzled by all this - as was many a young man - that it takes parents time to come around to the idea of a vocation to the priesthood.

Actually, it is not as surprising as one might think. After all, when one receives a vocation one thinks about it a long time, prays over the situation and in this way removes all obstacles that may stand in the way. And only afterward do we share these ideas with others. They are dumbfounded because they did not have any warning. Let us remember that it takes time for them to think this through for themselves. This is only natural. We also see the same thing in families when a couple announces their intention to get married. Isn't it true that they are often stunned that their announcement does not meet with immediate approval? Later, when they have worked through the process of winning the approval of their parents, they discover that it takes a bit of time and a good deal of effort before all is successful.

Yes, vocations may fill those who have them with a great deal of light and joy, but the same vocation may seem strange and baffling to others when the idea is first presented. So, my advice to you is to be patient, and all will turn out all right, if it is the will of God.

**Why? Why?** - As we try to convince others of our vocation, especially our own family, it may happen that we will become a bit frustrated if they do not immediately offer us their sympathy and approval. We may find ourselves saying: "Why can't I do this when I think it is the right thing for me to do?" Or, "Why can't I do something spiritual, something that I feel is important to me?"

Did you ever notice that in a state of frustration we use arguments of that sort? But it is important to note that "why" questions are generally self-centered questions. They may be the way you feel, but questions of this sort frustrate and anger others in times of tension and stress. It is much better to keep away from them and just try to show that your decision can be in everybody's best interest. After all, in stress they are thinking of their interest, and this is only natural, hence it is no time for you to present your case and show only what is in it for you. The Gospel is right in telling us to "be as wise as doves but as prudent as serpents."

**How to Handle Stress** - Some time back I had to conduct a course that was titled "How to Handle Stress." It was given at the Adult Education Program of the Catholic University of America. It was not the greatest course ever given, but the students found it helpful in many ways. Some took the course because they faced a great deal of stress in their jobs, another lady found that it was stressful for her to drive to work on the Beltway each morning and evening, and there was a man who did not like to speak out at business meetings, but had an important job for an international agency for feeding the poor of the world. Common to all these

problems was a need to have a better understanding of what was causing the stress in their lives. They were able eventually to solve their problems (only you can solve your problems, a teacher can only offer guidelines and encouragement) when they were able to do three things:

- (1) First, they had to learn to identify the cause of their problem, thus obtaining a better understanding of what was causing so much stress in their lives.
- (2) And secondly, they had to identify the emotions that were underlying their situation and causing so much anguish. For example, if one finds a job very stressful, it is also necessary, even more important, to know what kinds of feelings are being experienced. Are you getting angry? feeling frustrated? becoming quarrelsome with fellow workers? What precise feelings do you experience and why are those feelings so discomfiting to you?
- (3) And finally, it is important to see the larger picture of your lives and why it is important to learn to reduce the stress and learn how to live with those unpleasant feelings. Thus the man who found it difficult to speak up in meetings eventually learned that if he did not do this it could easily be interpreted as lack of interest or even hostility. This, in turn, could prevent him from utilizing his great talents and being given promotions in his job.

**Decision-Making for the Carmelite** - The Carmelite aspirant whose letter I quoted above was a good example of one who truly wanted to make an intelligent decision. I told her that her letter showed that she wanted to take charge of her life and that she had done something important. She had gotten down on a piece of paper what she thought was the essence of her problem and where she experienced a conflict in her home life. Just doing this much put her on the road to an early solution to her problem.

But then I told her that it would be a good idea for her to try to identify the emotions and the feelings that she experienced. Furthermore, it would be a good idea for her to identify the exact emotions and feelings of her husband and children. It is not enough to say “they are upset” or “they don't like the idea.” This may be true, but we do not know exactly what these statements mean. And if you do not know exactly what they mean, you are not in a position to solve your problem. This lack of clarity can only complicate your situation further. The woman agreed to try to identify the feelings and emotions her husband and children were expressing.

Next the woman agreed to the need to take a look at the wider picture of her life. Many times when we experience conflict, we can get bogged down. We may even overlook the wider issues of life, the more important issues. Thus for this woman, her love of God, her deep attachment to her faith and her belief in her vocation to the secular branch of the Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel were important interests to her. And, of course, her love for her husband and her children was of paramount importance. This was the wider picture of her conflict, and

it was precisely because she had such deep love for all these that she found herself in an emotional bind. It is not unusual when there is such high and intense love and dedication that there can easily be conflicts and tension. But I also stressed that these problems are more easily solved, because there is more love and good will.

**The Way of Life** - One of the great features of being a member of the Secular Branch of Carmel is that the Order provides you with a way of life. Experience proves that many people go through life without any direction or aim. Hence, while many want to live a spiritual life, their lives lack shape and form. There is no organization. Hence they find themselves going nowhere. But secular Carmelites do not have that complaint because their way of life is comprehensive and specific. Secular Carmelites tell me that the more they understand of their way of life the more they love it.

**Stress Because of Good Things!** - We instinctively feel that stress comes in life only when things are going wrong. Am I right in surmising that this is how most people feel? The fact of the matter is that good things can sometimes cause *us* more stress than unpleasant things. If someone is contemplating a marriage, this can be very stressful. Or if a young couple is having their first baby, this is a great blessing to them, but it can be most stressful. So it is not true that only bad things cause stress.

Do you remember when we said that when you experience God calling *you* to Carmel you are filled with joy and delight? This is good, but it is the goodness of your vocation that can also be the occasion of misunderstandings on the part of others.

**What Do the Rule of St. Albert, the Constitutions and the Statues Say?** - If I were a married man or woman and my spouse announced love for and intentions to enter a secular Carmelite fraternity, I am sure that he or she would not find it all crystal clear as to what he or she was up to. And most spouses would feel the same way, unless they were totally indifferent to the matter. I am stressing here that serious misunderstandings can be entertained by the husband, wife or family.

One might wonder what this evangelical life is all about. Does it mean that the husband or wife will have a different understanding of any type of conjugal intimacy as a result of this step she is contemplating? Does poverty mean that he or she will adopt a totally new life style? Will he or she be more interested in his or her new group than he or she is in his or her own family? These are real questions; this is not just a make-believe situation. They must be faced with good will.

**We Must Deal With Our Problems** - Problems do not just go away. We must do something about them. I remember going to Father Kenneth OCD one day with a problem I had in my ministry. I said the situation was unpleasant, but that I was doing my best and coping with the problem. He told me "Remember there is a difference between coping with a problem and dealing with a problem." If you cope with your problem, you may be doing the right thing or the wrong thing. For example, if a lady is having problems with an older son at home, she may cope with her problem by arguing with the boy, or she may choose to ignore his activity altogether. Neither solution may be helpful, but she is coping with her problem.

On the other hand, if she wants to deal with her problem, then she will seek an appropriate solution. She will not ignore it, or just hope that it will solve itself. No, she will face up to the problem and its meaning, and not give up until she has found the correct solution that serves the interests of all concerned.

**Give Reassurance** - I told Marie not to be surprised if her husband and children come back again and again regarding this matter. You may think that it is enough to speak with them once, but it can easily happen that from time to time they will want to discuss the matter further.

It must be understood that it would be advisable to give your husband or wife as much information concerning the Carmelite Secular Order as possible.

In all probability he or she is still feeling uneasy, anxious or disturbed about the matter. Thus he or she is in need of reassurance. More than anything else he or she need to be told that the new step one is taking is not going to interfere with the marriage nor does it signify that one will become so engrossed in this Carmelite vocation that one will neglect him, her or the home.

You may put his mind at ease by going a step further. You can tell him or her how much your marriage means to you and hence invite him or her to let you know if at any time your Carmelite vocation appears to him or her as a threat to the marriage or your home. You may say to him or her: "I have thought this over carefully and I am taking this step with the determination of making sure that it does not interfere with our marriage. In fact, if anything I am determined that it will strengthen rather than interfere with our marriage." Then you may continue, saying: "I really would appreciate it if you would feel perfectly free at any time to tell me whenever you notice that I am neglecting the home in any way because of my Carmelite vocation. And I want to stress that I really mean this, because my marriage and my home are everything to me." Reassurance of this type is exactly what your husband, wife or children are seeking.

**Assume the Responsibility** - In the case of such a problem at home, always remember that you must assume the responsibility. It is basically your problem - just because you are contemplating a step that you intend to be for the greater honor and glory of God does not mean that all others are to ignore this move or not to do anything about it. The candidate must assume the responsibility of dealing with the problems that arise. This may be a bit

burdensome, but it most surely will strengthen your vocation. It will not weaken it. I am thinking at this point that often it happens that many marriages fall apart and many homes dissolve because no one wants to deal with the situation. Many a man could have saved his home and marriage if he had chosen to deal with and was willing to work through the problem occasioned by his love for his job and career. Often such a husband will not face up to the damaging effects his job and career are working on his marriage. He cannot just assume that his wife and children must put up with the situation and be glad that he is paying all the bills. He must do more than that. He must take into account the needs of all in the family. If he chooses to truly assume responsibility, he can work it out that all will feel reasonably satisfied.

**Christian Decision-Making** - Up to this point, we have been going over the basic elements for making a decision. Now we come to the most important part-the question of what really makes a decision a Christian decision?

If you are seeking to be united with Christ and do all together with Him, then you will be choosing only what fulfills this purpose. This is what I mean by a Christian decision. Hence, Marie, if you first of all unite yourself with Christ consciously before speaking with your husband wife or children and ask for the grace of engaging in this discussion only to please your Lord, you are on the right track. But also remember to unite your husband, wife or your children to the Lord so that they will receive the light and love of the Lord and the reassurance they seek.

This may be the point that is most overlooked. People often pray that they themselves may have the strength and the confidence that they need, but they forget to pray for the other persons involved. But when we do pray for them, it is amazing how much freer we feel, how much more willing to work for the best interests of others. If we don't do this, not only are we not making a full Christian decision, but we are locking ourselves into a situation where we will primarily be seeking our own good, and only our own good.

**A Demanding Process** - As you can see, this whole process is a long one, and it can be very demanding in terms of time and patience. But the important point is that it works. You truly seek the honor and glory of God in this way, you take care of your own true needs, and you honestly seek the needs of all others.

These are the steps that need to be followed in this crisis of life, but the same steps are to be followed in all life situations. Unfortunately, more people never make any Christian decisions of this sort. Hence they do not integrate many of their situations into their Christian life.

If you have trouble in your own life in convincing your husband or family, it can well be that you are going through the trial-and it is a real trial-that will enable you to make sure that all your decisions are truly made in a spiritual way. The work may be great, but the rewards will be

even greater.

**My Carmelite Background** - I know what is on your mind, Marie. I know you are asking yourself just why I am so sure of myself. You want to know what makes me so confident.

The secret is to be found in my Carmelite background. My life in the Order of Carmel has taught me many things, chief among them that all that I do I want to do in union with Mary, the Virgin and Mother of Carmel. Instinctively I go to her, also to Saint Joseph and the saints of the order. You see, we have a tradition of not only praying to them for our needs, but even more of praying with them in all that we do. That must account for my confidence and assurance. And the longer you are in the Order, you will see yourself doing this instinctively and you will not only feel assured yourself, but you will bring loving assurance to others.

**Conclusion** - Marie, I am very conscious that we are running out of time. But before we conclude this, it might be well to quickly and briefly summarize all that we have said. Let's put it this way:

1. First of all, when God gives you a vocation, there are also initially problems that accompany it. Mary herself had a problem of convincing Saint Joseph. She had to be patient; she had to wait; she had to trust in God for help.
2. Getting your problem down on paper can be most helpful. In that way you can see your own problem, the feelings this is eliciting in you, and you can also take time to clarify your thinking about the problems and feelings that are disturbing the other members of the family. As I said, you received the calling from God first, hence you were given an opportunity of working through your own thoughts and feelings. Now you must give others equal time and equal opportunity to work through conflicting and disquieting feelings.
3. Always remember not to lose sight of the larger picture. In your case, the larger picture includes the honor and glory of God, and your own personal needs as well as the needs of the other members of the family. You must pray that you will be true to all these concerns. Then you will not be talking at them but will be lovingly discussing the matter with them. It will be loving dialogue, not anxious monologue.
4. Make sure you are willing to work through and work out your problem in a truly Christian way. The Christian decision-making process may take time and effort, but it assures fairness and charity toward all: to God, to self, and to family. But it is a Christian decision process when you first of all unite yourself to God and ask for His help, and then intend to remain united with Him and also wish to unite the others to the light and love that the Lord alone can give. After that, be sure that you will say the right thing. When you are lovingly united with Christ and

when you lovingly unite others with Him, you will deal with the matter in a way that reflects the love of Christ. You cannot fail. Trust me.

I see that the hour is up. I will be praying with you, Marie, that all goes well. If you do as so many Christians have done before you, you can be sure that all will go well. As I said, my years in the Order have convinced me that if you also ask Mary and Joseph and the saints of the Order to pray with you, you will see that this trust is not disappointed.

Michael D. Griffin OCD

***Discussion points for the Christian Decision-Making Process:***

*What are the three steps recommended for handling stress?*

*What are some common emotions involved in the decision to become a Carmelite?*

*How would living the Rule of Life change my daily life with my family?*

*What is my attitude about this? Am I open to the will of God? open to my family? hostile? defensive? superior?*

*How much do I pray? Am I faithful to prayer? Have I put all of this into the heart of Jesus?*

*Am I including Mary and Joseph and the saints of the Order in the solution?*



