

# **Figuring Out Your Future: A Catholic Guide for Young Adults on How to Make Decisions with Confidence**

By  
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## **Introduction**

Does making decisions really have to be so difficult?

We face so many decisions every day. We have to decide: What am I going to wear to work? What should I pack for lunch or should I just go out to lunch instead? Should I go to the gym or should I just do laundry instead? Should I watch one more episode of this show or should I just go to bed now?

And then there are many difficult long-term decisions like: Should I look for a different job? Should I go to graduate school? Should I marry the person I am dating? Should I move closer to my family...or will my life be better if I am farther away from them?

The struggle to make decisions is real. The anxiety. The uncertainty. The indecision. The lack of confidence. It all seems so overwhelming.

How often have you picked out clothes to wear to work, put them on, and then took them off and chose to wear something completely different instead?

How often have you found yourself hanging out with friends and struggling to decide where to go out for dinner or for drinks because no one really wants to make a decision?

How often have you ordered something at a restaurant and then sat there thinking afterwards: “I wonder if I should have picked something different”?

How often have you said to yourself: “I’m afraid I am going to make the wrong decision”?

Sometimes it feels impossible to make a decision that we can believe in.

Sometimes it feels impossible to make decisions with confidence.

However, our Christian faith teaches us that it is possible to act with confidence when we face difficult decisions.

The Christian message is that we are not alone when our life is one long line of question marks. We believe in a God who desires to help us make good decisions. We believe in a God who desires to give us the advice, the guidance, and the direction we need to be able to take the next step in our life with confidence.

If you are struggling to understand your future and to make decisions about your future, you are not alone. Most young adults struggle with this. Many saints have struggled with this as well.

Take, for example, the life of a guy by the name of Íñigo Lopez.

From the time when he was a teenager, Mr. Lopez was generally only concerned with one thing and that was himself. Mr. Lopez loved when people paid attention to him. He loved when people noticed his flashy, designer clothes. He prided himself on being an incredible dancer and he loved to party hard. Most of all, he relished the attention women gave him and the pleasure these many women provided him. They especially gave him lots of attention when he was sporting his military uniform.

Some of his peers said he was the life of the party. Others who knew him better said he was a self-centered punk. One thing for sure, no one said he was a religious person.

Mr. Lopez lived this self-centered lifestyle of vanity through his 20s and into his early 30s. When he was 31 years old he was hospitalized because of a severe injury to his leg. Unfortunately, his leg did not heal well and the doctor told him he would walk with a severe limp for the rest of his life. His days on the dance floor at parties were over.

Mr. Lopez was furious. He insisted that the doctor re-break the leg and try to make it heal better. He did not want to have a limp when he walked. The doctor tried to explain to him that the chances of success were not great and that such a procedure would be painful. Mr. Lopez insisted he wanted the doctor to re-break his leg and try to fix it. The doctor asked him why?

Mr. Lopez' answer was simple. He was afraid women would be less attracted to him and less flattered by him if he walked with a limp rather than his usual swagger. He wanted to look like a handsome hunk of muscle in his military uniform and not like an invalid.

The doctor did the surgery. I also should mention that it was the year 1521. There were no anesthesiologists around to help make his surgery less painful.

During his time in bed in the hospital Mr. Lopez asked for some good novels to read. Again, this was 1521 so there were no Netflix or TV to help him pass the time. Mr. Lopez was disappointed when he found out that the only books in the place were religious books. They brought him a devotional book about the lives of Catholic saints.

He first refused to touch the book, but eventually he was so bored that he picked up the book.

And Mr. Lopez began to change.

While lying in that hospital bed, Mr. Lopez began to face the deep insecurities within his soul. Being immobilized in the hospital meant he could not distract himself from the lack of excitement he had about his future. He could not escape the fact that his life was not leading him anywhere meaningful. He could not escape his anxiety and his lack of confidence about the direction his life was going.

As Mr. Lopez began to read the devotional book he began to realize how God was trying to help him figure out his future. During that hospital stay, Mr. Lopez learned several lessons about decision-making that helped him eventually leave the hospital filled with new purpose, new direction, and new confidence in his future path.

Mr. Lopez would eventually share with other people these insights he had learned about Christian decision-making. Since the year 1521 hundreds of thousands of Catholics have used these insights of Mr. Lopez to make confident decisions. Mr. Lopez is better known as St. Ignatius of Loyola, the found of the Society of Jesus, whose writings on decision-making have led many, many Catholics over the centuries to make confident decisions about their future. In this article we will explore a few of the key lessons St. Ignatius taught about how to make decisions with confidence.

### **Questions for Reflection/Discussion:**

What difficult decisions are you facing in your life right now?

Where in your life are you struggling to find confidence in your path for the future?

### **Part 1: Don't Freak Out – The Starting Point of a Confident Decision.**

It was 4:00 AM on a quiet winter night on campus. I was in my college dorm room getting much-needed sleep when the screech of the fire alarm started bellowing in the hallway. My first thought was that leaving my warm bed to evacuate the building into the frozen winter night would be awful. My second thought was that it had to be a false alarm.

I mumbled some semi-coherent phrases across the room to my roommate about staying in our room. He agreed. It made perfect sense to us in our mid-slumber fatigue that we did not need to leave the building.

Or so we thought.

About five minutes later we heard a fist pounding rapidly on our door and someone shouting “Everyone out!”

Then I heard a key open the door to our room. A member of the building staff entered our room and shouted “Get out! Get out! Nowwwww! Didn't you hear the [expletive] fire alarm?”

And then we panicked. My roommate and I jumped out of our beds in fear. Perhaps there was actually a fire!

“Move!” the staff member yelled.

And so, we ran quickly out of the room into the empty hallway and scurried towards the courtyard outside the building.

Pretty much all the other residents were already outside. They were wearing sweatpants and hoodies. Some guys even had had the forethought to put on their winter coats, hats, and gloves.

My roommate and I were not prepared for the winter elements. My roommate was barefoot and wearing only athletic shorts and a white cotton undershirt. I was dressed similarly with the added luxury of a pair of slippers that I had slipped onto my feet on my way out of the room.

We both shivered in the cold and I looked up at the building and realized that our dorm was not on fire. There was no smoke anywhere. It actually had been a false alarm.

And we were freezing.

However, we could not reenter the building until campus security gave the “all clear”. Apparently, the security officers were not in a hurry as they inspected the warm building and we waited impatiently outside. And we waited. And we waited....

The sting of the cold began to give way to a feeling of numbness as my entire body felt like one big chunk of ice.

After what seemed like hours (it was probably only 10 or 15 minutes), security gave us permission to go back into the building.

I walked back into my room and thought: “Why didn’t I grab my jacket on the way out?”

The answer to this question, of course, was that I had panicked. I was afraid. I had freaked out. And so, in that moment of fear I had gone into survival mode and ran for my life.

Tragically, we often make major life decisions in the same way.

Fear, worry, and panic are oftentimes the dominating forces that motivate our decisions.

And we end up with much deep regret just as I felt deep regret when I was standing outside my dorm shivering in the cold, regretting that I had not thought through my decision more carefully. Making decisions in “survival mode” might seem necessary in the short-term, but this will unfortunately never lead us to a deeply fulfilling life in the long-term.

Confidence in decision-making comes from being proactive in making decisions and not just reacting to fear and stress in our lives.

When we make major decisions simply as a reaction to fear, we are setting the stage for decisions we will later second guess if not completely regret.

We will never find our future in our fears.

We will only find our future when we are making decisions from a place of trust and peace.

One lesson St. Ignatius learned is that confident decisions are possible only when we don't freak out and instead trust in God's love for us.

Fears and worries often obstruct us from being able to trust in God's care for us.

There are five typical fears that we must be willing to face in order to be able to make confident decisions about our future.

### **Fear of Failure**

One typical fear we face as we make decisions is fear of failure.

Sarah Blakely is a self-made billionaire. Sarah grew up in Clearwater, Florida and attended college at Florida State University (FSU). Sarah majored in communications at FSU and planned to attend law school after graduation. However, when Sarah took the entrance exam for law school (the LSAT), her extremely low score on the exam after not just one, but two attempts made it clear that law school would not be in her future.

And so, she took a job at Walt Disney World and worked there for three miserable months ushering hordes of sweaty park visitors into their seats on a ride.

Then she found a sales job selling fax machines. She sold fax machines for the next seven years.

While selling fax machines she came up with the idea to start her own women's apparel company. It seemed like the odds of success were against her, since she did not have a business degree and, by her own admission, she did not really know anything about how the clothing industry worked. Yet, her unashamed, confident approach led her business – Spanx Clothing - to become a huge success that quickly made her into a billionaire.

Sarah has frequently spoken about how one of the most significant keys to her success was something her father taught her.

When Sarah was a child, her father encouraged her to fail. Every week her father would ask her during dinner how she had failed that week. And the only answer that would disappoint her father was if Sarah said she had not failed at something.

Her father knew that if Sarah had failed at something it meant his daughter was trying new things, living life as an adventure, discovering the full potential of her gifts and talents, and refusing to settle for the status quo.

So Sarah tried out for musicals, sports, student government, or whatever...even if she knew she might not be successful.

To her father, “not trying” was the only kind of “failure” to be ashamed of in life. In fact, if Sarah did something challenging and failed her father would actually celebrate because this meant his daughter was not wasting her life living in fear of failure.

For Sarah, her father’s love and support as she tried new things and sometimes failed was the key to her creative success.

The same can be true for us as we make decisions about our future.

For us as Christians, trying new things and facing the possibility of failure is possible because of the unconditional love and support of God our Father.

We believe that God is our Father who loves us not just when we are successful, but also when we experience failure and disappointment.

We believe that God is our Father who is always inviting us to go beyond what is “easy”, “convenient”, “comfortable”, and “known” to us. God our Father is inviting us to live life as an adventure. God our Father is asking us to refuse to settle for a mediocre existence.

Unconditional love empowers us to discover the potential God has placed within us.

Unhealthy fear blinds us to great potential God has placed within us.

The Christian writer Thomas Merton once said: "The biggest human temptation is to settle for too little."

Accepting God the Father’s unconditional love for us will make it possible for us to overcome our fear of failure that leads us to settle for too little in many areas of our life.

In other words, when we are facing difficult decisions and trying to figure out our future God our Father is saying to us: “Don’t freak out. Trust! Find your future in my unconditional love for you.”

### **Fear of Making the Wrong Decision**

One particular way in which fear of failure can weigh down our decision-making process and steal our confidence is by leading us to be obsessed with fear of making a wrong decision that will completely ruin our life.

This fear of making the wrong decision can become paralyzing. The stakes seem so high. What will happen if we choose the wrong option? What if we have misunderstood what God is asking of us?

Back in the 1200s there was a restless young adult named Francis who was trying to figure out his future. Francis had grown up in an upper middle-class family. He had enjoyed lots of popularity among his friends thanks to his lively, vivacious, and engaging personality. However,

as he tried to figure out his future he kept feeling there was “something more” that he was supposed to be doing with his life.

Francis began to pray about his future. Francis began to ask God to help him know the “something more” that he was supposed to be doing with his life.

In 1205 Francis was praying in a dilapidated church building called San Damiano when he heard God say to him: “Rebuild my church”. Francis took these words literally. The church building was crumbling and in need of repair. There were many other run-down buildings like this one in the area.

Sadly, many members of the clergy were not concerned about the fact that several of the local church buildings were in shambles. They also did not seem too concerned about the fact that the faith lives of many people in their communities were also in shambles. Bishops and priests were often too concerned with maintaining their own comfortable, and in some cases, scandalous lifestyles to worry about other peoples’ relationship with Jesus.

Francis followed what he understood the message of inspiration he had received in prayer to mean. Francis started working to rebuild a dilapidated church building. He started working with his own hands to rebuild the building one stone at a time.

As his work on the church building progressed, Francis began to realize that he had misunderstood God’s plan for his life. Over time, God made it very clear to Francis that the words Francis had heard were divinely inspired, but their meaning was different than what Francis had thought.

Francis had made the wrong decision.

God’s plan for Francis’ future was for him not to rebuild church buildings, but rather, to rebuild the faith of the Church. Francis’ mission was to help the people and the clergy of the Church to rebuild their relationship with Jesus. Francis had misunderstood God’s plan for him!

However, God was able to show Francis how to redirect his plans and his life in a different direction. Francis took a new approach as he began to preach the gospel, serve the poor, and gather a community of followers in ways that reinvigorated the faith of the people and spiritually rebuilt the Church.

God was big enough to handle Francis’ misunderstanding of his plan.

God is also big enough to handle our misunderstandings about his plan for our lives.

God is big enough to handle our errors! In fact, God’s power is so great that he can even bring good out of the mistakes we make in our lives. As St. Francis learned, God can use our errors in decision-making to help us clarify our mission and lead us forward to a greater understanding of his plan for our future.

What is most important is that we don't freak out and that we trust in God's power. We will find our future in God the Father whose providence is big enough to handle our mistakes.

### **Fear of the Unknown.**

Have you ever procrastinated in making an important decision?

Have you ever put off an important decision in hopes that you would eventually find a completely "safe" option that would be totally comfortable to you?

Oftentimes, we put off decisions in hopes that we will eventually gain complete certainty about the right option to choose.

As appealing as it might be, this kind of complete certainty will never be achieved.

We are not God and so we will never know absolutely everything about every option we are choosing between as we try to make a decision. Only God knows the future. If we are waiting to know the future completely before making our choice, we are dooming ourselves to failure both in our decisions and in our relationship with God.

If we are procrastinating excessively about a decision then there is probably within us a desire for a level of control over the details of our future that we will never be able to achieve as human beings. To move forward in our future with true confidence, we will need to let go of our desire to control everything and instead be willing to trust in God's care for us.

In the book of Genesis chapter 12 God made a very big request of Abram (whose name would later be changed to Abraham). God told Abraham to leave everything that was familiar, comfortable, and known to him and to set out on a journey to where God would lead him.

For people in the primitive world like Abraham, the land was one of the only dependable variable in life. They could not predict the weather. They could not predict when warring tribes or peoples would attack them. They could not predict sickness or disease.

The one known factor of life was the land where they lived generation after generation.

God told Abraham to leave behind the one known factor in his life and to set out on a journey to a new land.

And Abraham obeyed. Abraham trusted. Abraham did not allow fear to stop him. Abraham did not freak out. Abraham did not drag his feet. Abraham set out on the journey.

Most of us would have freaked out if we were in Abraham's shoes. Yet, Abraham trusted and allowed God to lead him on a journey into the unknown. Through this journey Abraham became the "father of faith" for billions of people after him.

In order for us to make confident decisions, we must be willing to let go of our desire to have our future under our own control and to have a future that is known, predictable, and comfortable. God's plan is always bigger than our plan, so we must be willing to let go of our own plans in order to be able to discover the adventure God has planned for our future.

Confidence does not come from knowing every detail of our future.

Confidence comes from knowing God our Father and trusting that he knows the details of our future.

Confidence comes from trusting that our plans for our future are too limited and that God is leading us on an adventure into the unknown.

Confidence comes from letting go of our attempts to control our future and accepting the fact that the God who created us knows more about how to bring us fulfillment than we do ourselves.

### **Fear of Disappointing Others**

Another major fear we must face and overcome if we are going to make confident decisions is fear of disappointing others.

Many of us fear making certain decisions because we know that there are certain people in our lives who might disagree with the choice we make.

Maybe it is a parent or family member. Maybe it is a boss or supervisor. Maybe it is a coworker or a friend. Many of us have a person who comes to mind when we consider certain decisions. Their strong opinions can dangerously lead us to dismiss certain good possibilities because we want to avoid the drama of having to deal with this person's criticism or disappointment. We fear making a decision that will upset them. We fear letting them down.

Those of us who are people-pleasers who desire to make everyone happy are especially susceptible to being held back by fear of disappointing others.

However, Jesus challenged his disciples to live very differently than people-pleasers. Jesus challenged his disciples not to be afraid of what other people would think about their decisions or what other people would say about their decisions. Jesus challenged his disciples to be willing to go against the flow.

Jesus challenged his disciples to be willing to make decisions (when necessary) that would be so upsetting to other people that these people would be just plain mean towards them. Jesus said that in some instances his disciples would have to let go of even their desire to please their closest family members and friends if his disciples were going to fulfill their God-given mission in the world (Matthew 10:37).

In order to make confident decisions, we must be willing to let go of the expectations other people have placed on us. God has put us here for a reason that other people might not always appreciate or understand.

We will never be able to make confident decisions until we must learn how to be ourselves. We must be willing to accept the fact that our DNA and our life mission are different than that of every other person on the planet. Our life will be and should be different than every other person on the planet. Our decisions should reflect our uniqueness.

The Catholic writer Michael Quoist once said: "Don't try to live somebody else's life; it's just not you.... Say to yourself: I am going to bring something new into this person's life because they have never met anyone like me, nor will they ever meet anyone like me, for in the mind of God I am unique and irreplaceable."<sup>1</sup>

We will begin to make more confident decisions when we make the decision to live our own life and to live the special mission God has given to us. We will make more confident decisions when we choose to be ourselves regardless of what other people think or say about us.

If we never face our fear of what other people think of us, we will spend our entire life freaking out and making hasty, short-sighted decisions that we hope will please others. Sometimes these attempts to please others will be successful. Other times, even our best attempts will not be good enough to make them happy. What we know for sure though is that these relentless attempts to please other people will prevent us from fulfilling our unique mission and true purpose in life.

In other words, don't freak out. Trust! Find your future in God the Father who has given you a unique and irreplaceable role in human history.

### **Fear of Missing Out**

Another common fear that we must face if we are going to make confident decisions is our fear of missing out (FOMO).

We often fear making a decision because it will "restrict" our options in the future.

I think all of us can think of times we drug our feet in making a decision because we knew that once we made the decision, our future options would be limited. Think, for example, of the fear you faced in trying to decide which university to attend and which academic major to study. Think of fears associated with taking a particular internship or a particular job that would "tie you down" to a certain city or industry for the next few years of your life.

FOMO also often influences our decisions about romantic relationships.

We can find ourselves panicking and freaking out as we face the choice whether or not to start dating someone, or to continue dating someone, or to become engaged and married to a particular person.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Quoist, *Keeping Hope*, Gill and Macmillan, 2014, Pages 4-5.

Is it really worth limiting my options so much?

Would it be better just to keep my options open?

Underneath these fears is a fundamental misunderstanding, which is the false belief that life is always better without commitments or obligations.

Jesus teaches us that if we never commit to anything or anyone, we will miss out on realizing our full potential in life.

God has wired us to find purpose, meaning, and fulfillment in dedicating our life to something or someone.

Being “tied down” by certain commitments actually makes it possible for us to realize our highest calling which is love. While making a commitment “limits” our options, commitments are actually the path that leads us to be able to make a difference in the lives of other people.

I wonder if the nagging fear of “missing out” that rumbles around in our souls has some of its roots in the mantra that many of us heard growing up as children: “You can be anything you want to be when you grow up”.

Sadly, this is not true. There are certain things that we will never be able to do because of where we were born, our IQ level, our family history, our physical build, our genetics, our medical history, our past emotional experiences, our income level, etc.

For much of my childhood I wanted to play in the National Football League (NFL) as an adult. There is still part of me that thinks it would be a thrill to play in the NFL. I certainly would enjoy the multi-million-dollar salary!

However, I will never be able to play in the NFL. I am too skinny. I am too old. I have a bad knee. I am not fast enough. I am not strong enough. And the list goes on and on...

I cannot be anything I want to be. The same is true for everyone else on planet earth.

Not being able to do everything we want to do in life seems tragic at first, but our Christian faith actually says that this is not a tragedy at all.

Take, for example, the life of a Christian girl named Therese who was trying to figure out her future. Therese had grown up in an upper middle-class family. Her mother owned a successful business. Therese lived a comfortable childhood and saw firsthand the success of her hardworking and intelligent parents.

Like most young adults who have grown up in such circumstances, Therese felt the need to do something great and successful with her life too. She felt the need to do something that would make a big impact on the world.

Therese was a deeply religious person and developed the idea that perhaps God was calling her to become an international missionary who would travel heroically across the globe to serve other people.

Therese became more and more convinced that this would be the way she could live a successful life. This became her dream for her future.

Therese concluded that entering the convent and becoming a religious sister would be the way to fulfill her dream of doing missionary work.

There was a problem however.

Actually, there were many problems.

The more and more Therese pursued her dream the more the heartbreaking reality began to sink in that she did not have the ability to be a missionary.

Therese was very weak physically. She had major medical issues that sometimes left her bedridden for weeks. There was no chance she could physically endure the challenges of international travel, a foreign diet, or a missionary lifestyle.

Therese was very weak emotionally as well. She had a streak of melancholy in her personality that became more pronounced as she dealt with the death of her mother from breast cancer. Therese struggled with deep sadness. Therese even struggled at certain moments of her life with thoughts of suicide.

Therese realized that she could not be anything she wanted to be in the future. She would never become a missionary. Her dream to make a difference in the world would never come true.

And this put her into a deep existential crisis. She began to freak out. She feared she would “miss out” on so much in life because of her physical and emotional struggles and because her own plan for her future would never come true. How would her life be meaningful? What would she have to look forward to each day when she woke up?

One day Therese was reading the Bible and came to the words of the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of St. Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians. These words were all about love. St. Paul talked about how God has given different roles to different people in the Body of Christ but these roles mean nothing if a person is not a person of love. St. Paul said that it does not mean anything to be an important teacher, leader, missionary, or martyr if a person does not have love....because LOVE is the ultimate reason why we are here on earth.

These words helped Therese overcome her crisis. These words helped Therese figure out her future.

Therese realized that because of her medical issues and emotional issues her life would never be as glamorous as she had planned. However, St. Paul's words helped her realize that this was OK because her life could still have deep purpose and meaning if she chose to be a person of sincere love.

Therese began to live differently. She began to approach her humble tasks in the convent with more enthusiasm as she made them into acts of love. None of these tasks seemed that important. They were simple acts like peeling potatoes, scrubbing floors, and dealing with the abrasive personalities of some of the other sisters. Yet, Therese put all of her heart into these everyday actions so that they would be acts of deep love.

Therese died young. She was only 24 years old. Yet, the Church eventually canonized her a saint and Pope John Paul II named her a doctor of the Church.

The fact that Therese became a doctor of the Church is quite significant. This is a title usually reserved for accomplished theologians, teachers, and preachers.

St. Therese is a doctor of the Church because she taught through her words and example that the purpose of life is love. Chasing after our dreams is actually not the most important thing in life. Chasing after God's dream for us is what will actually bring meaning to our lives.

God's dream for us is to live a life of love.

As we face difficult decisions that will narrow our future options, Therese teaches us to focus on love. Choosing the option that will help us love best is the path that will bring us joy. Fear of limiting our options is dangerous because it leads us to freak out and shy away from the sacrifice, the commitment, and the dedication that true love requires of us.

In other words, don't freak out. Trust! Find your future in God the Father's invitation to you to dedicate yourself completely and wholeheartedly to a life of love.

### **Practical Application: How to overcome these 5 fears?**

So now that we have talked about these five fears, the real question is: How do we overcome them? What can we do practically to overcome our fear of failure, our fear of making the wrong decision, our fear of the unknown, our fear of disappointing others, and our fear of limiting our options?

A key tenant of Catholic spirituality is that God will never use any of these fears to try to push us into a certain decision. In fact, the devil is the one who tries to use these fears to bully us into a state of panic that will lead us to freak out and settle for choices that hold us back from embracing God's plan for our lives.

To overcome these fears, we must bring them into the light, so that Jesus, the light of the world, can help us see their true origin. Jesus desires to lift us out of the dark clouds of worry and fear

that steal our confidence as we try to make decisions. Jesus said: “I came into the world as light, so that everyone who believes in me might not remain in darkness.” (John 12:46)

We will now discuss four practical ways to bring our fears into the light and allow Jesus to enlighten our decision-making process.

The first step is to name our fears. When we do not name the fears that are influencing our decision-making, all we experience are their confusing effects. These effects include anxiety, frustration, unsettledness, and panic. Naming our fears helps us see the underlying reason why we are freaking out and why this decision has become such a heavy weight on us.

It is often useful to write out our fears that we have named. Putting our fears on paper helps us see our unhealthy and irrational fears as obstacles to confident decision-making. The process of putting down these fears on paper distances us from them and makes it possible for us to begin to strategize about how we can overcome them.

A second step is to talk to a good Christian friend about our fears. This step helps us continue to distance ourselves from our unhealthy and irrational fears and gives us someone to hold us accountable as we try to reject the unhealthy influence of these fears. Oftentimes, simply talking to someone about our fears helps us “feel better” because fear isolates us and makes us feel alone. Taking the initiative to allow someone else into our struggle makes it possible for us to claim our Christian identity as members of God’s family who are never alone when facing difficult decisions. Inviting someone into our struggle is a way of inviting love into our problems and this is a huge step towards confident decision-making because love casts out fear (1 John 4:18).

A third step is to take our fears to Jesus in prayer. Telling Jesus about our fears in prayer opens us to the grace Jesus desires to give us to face our fears. It is no accident that the most repeated divine message in the Bible is “Do not be afraid”. Reflecting on divine words of comfort from the Bible empowers us to trust in God’s power to lead us beyond our fears to a place of trust and peace. Some helpful Bible passages to reflect upon in our prayer about decisions include: 1 Peter 5:7; Jeremiah 1:4-8; Jeremiah 29:11; Matthew 6:25-34; Psalm 139.

A fourth step is to spend time being grateful for the instances in the past when God has helped us and supported us. Compiling a list of every blessing (no matter how small) can help us see how God’s light is still present even when we are going through moments of suffering and pain. These moments of gratefulness will eventually lead us to the realization that the same God who has helped us in the past will be there for us in the future as well.

These four steps will not always take place in this order. Sometimes first talking with a friend will then make it possible for us to take the step of naming our fears. In other moments, we will need to name and to write out our fears first before we will then be able to take the step of talking about them with Jesus or with others. Sometimes gratitude will be the first step before we can even begin to pray about or name the fears we have been burying within us.

Usually, the best first step is to pick whatever of these four steps is least intimidating for us. With time and with perseverance, these four steps will bring our fears fully into the light and make it possible for us to trust in God and find our future in God.

### **Questions for Reflection/Discussion:**

What are the main fears influencing your decision right now?

Do you fear failure? Do you fear not being good enough?

Do you fear that you will make the wrong decision?

Do you fear the unknown? What does this decision make you worry about the most?

Do you fear that you will disappoint others? Who do you fear disappointing the most?

Do you fear missing out or limiting your options? Have you been procrastinating even though you already know the right decision to make?

Who is a good friend or mentor you can talk to about your fears?

## **Part 2: Listening. How to hear God's voice that will lead you to confident decisions.**

### **Introduction: How does God deliver his plan to us?**

I remember at a certain point during college when I was trying to figure out my future I began to wish God would just drop down from heaven a type-written memo with clear instructions for my future. I remember thinking that I would be a lot less anxious and a lot more at peace if God would just give me a clear, printed outline of God's plan for my future.

And of course, no such memo from heaven ever arrived. And I became more frustrated.

When St. Ignatius of Loyola was bedridden and hospitalized he too was filled with frustration, anxiety, and fear about his uncertain future.

No memo arrived from heaven for him either.

However, over time he realized that God was speaking to him. Over time he realized that God had been speaking to him all along, but he had not been listening. He had not known how to recognize God's voice.

During college I eventually realized the same thing was happening in my own life. God had been speaking, but I had lacked the ability to recognize his voice. Once I learned how God

speaks and how to listen to God's voice the fundamental Christian truth became very clear to me: God desires to speak to us about our future! God desires to share with us his plan for our lives.

I finally began to hear God speaking to me and giving me guidance about my future.

Let me be clear. I was not hearing audible voices from heaven. But I was receiving clear direction that empowered me to make important decisions about my future with confidence.

We will now discuss four ways God speaks to us about his plan for the next step we should take in our lives. Knowing how God speaks will make it possible for us to recognize God's voice speaking to us in these four ways as we face important decisions.

### **-1) Pay attention to your heart. What does your gut say?**

Have you ever thought about how often you look at your phone each day?

One recent study found that the average iPhone user unlocks their phone about 80 times per day. The study found that many people pick up their smartphone around six or seven times every hour.<sup>2</sup>

One of the main reasons we pick up our phones so frequently is because we receive an alert. Our phone buzzes or dings and a message pops up on our screen to tell us that we have a new text message, a new social media alert, or a new email in our inbox. These alerts grab our attention and then they usually lead us to an action like picking up our phone, reading the message, and then responding appropriately to the communication and news we have received.

What St. Ignatius learned when he was lying in the hospital bed was that God has built in an alert system to us as human beings, so God can grab our attention and speak to us in the depths our soul.

God speaks to us in our gut to help point out to us his plan for our future.

God nudges us through our gut to move us in the right direction.

God uses the movements of our heart to show us the right path to follow in our lives.

When St. Ignatius was bedridden, he realized that in the times when he thought about returning to his former way of life as a soldier there was an emptiness he experienced in his heart. St. Ignatius called this desolation.

St. Ignatius also realized that in the times when he thought about using his life to serve God and work for the Church, there was an interior peace, excitement, and even joy he experienced. St. Ignatius called this consolation.

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<sup>2</sup> Julia Naftulin, "Here's how many times we touch our phones each day" in *Business Insider* (July 13, 2016), Available Online at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/dscout-research-people-touch-cell-phones-2617-times-a-day-2016-7>.

To be clear, the “consolation” St. Ignatius experienced was not a giddiness or superficial emotional high. In fact, St. Ignatius found himself missing his past lifestyle and its pleasures, but in his gut he was sensing more and more clearly that going a different direction than his past lifestyle was the “right thing to do”.

St. Ignatius realized that God was using these movements of his heart to alert him to the fact that he would find fulfillment in living life differently than he had in the past. St. Ignatius recognized that God was using “consolation” to help him know the right path to follow. He also understood that the “desolation” he experienced in his gut was God’s way of telling him that something was “off” and that he needed to reconsider the option that was bringing so much emptiness and lack of peace in his soul.

In other words, God was alerting St. Ignatius through the desolation he experienced in his gut that God’s plan was not for him to return to the battlefield. God was alerting him through the consolation he experienced that he needed to consider a path that involved a more radical Christian lifestyle.

God speaks to us through the consolation and the desolation we experience in our hearts.

While God will probably never drop down a memo from heaven with our future written clearly on it, we can find our future in God who speaks to us in our heart. When our future seems very confusing, it is important to be attentive to how our heart is responding to our options.

As we face a decision, the following questions can help us recognize which option is bringing consolation to our heart. God uses this consolation to tell us to pursue this option:

What option gives me the most joy, meaning, and purpose?

What option excites me the most at a deep level?

What option brings me the most peace?

What option feels most like a call from God?

As we face a decision, the following questions can help us understand which option is bringing desolation to our hearts. God uses desolation to tell us to pursue a different option:

What option leaves me unfulfilled?

What option makes me feel empty?

What option makes me feel like there is something more I am supposed to be doing instead?

St. Irenaeus of Lyon once said: “The glory of God is the human person fully alive”. God’s desire is for us to become “fully alive”. As we ponder different options, it is important to pay attention

to our gut and recognize what option seems like it will help us become most fully alive. If a certain option fills us with passion and purpose, gives us focus, energy, and direction, then this is a sign that God is inviting us to take our next step in this direction.

One common temptation is to believe that living out God's plan will require us to leave aside our personality and instead choose a confining and numbing existence.

The opposite is actually the case.

God's plan will fully engage our personality, and even stretch our personality and use our gifts and talents in ways that go beyond what we thought was possible, as God leads us to a future that empowers us to become more fully alive.

Learning to listen patiently to God speak in our heart will make it possible for us to follow the path God has planned for us to become a fully alive human being!

## **-2) Use your head. What does our reason tell us about this decision?**

A second way to figure out God's plan for our future is to use our reason. God will often speak to us and share his plan with us in our heart, but God also speaks to us through our reason. After all, God is the one who gave us a brain and designed us to be able to use our minds to sift through different options and figure out the best option for our future.

This approach to understanding God's plan is especially important in moments when we do not have a clear sense in our gut of where God is trying to lead us.

### **The "Pros" and "Cons" Exercise**

A practical way to allow God to speak to us through our mind is to write out our options for a particular decision and list the "pros" and the "cons" of each option.

Life is often very complex, so there are usually many "pros" and "cons" at several different levels when we consider each option. Some "pros" and "cons" will focus on whether or not an option will help us attain certain practical comforts, pleasures, or benefits, but other "pros" and "cons" will focus on whether or not a decision will help us live important Christian values and some of Jesus' most serious teachings.

In order to make sure our "pros" and "cons" list takes into consideration what Jesus said our top priorities should be as Christians, our list of "pros" should include reflection on questions like:

How will this option make me a better Christian?

How will this option help me serve others?

Our list of "cons" should also include reflections on questions like:

How will this option prevent me from growing in my relationship with Christ?

How will this option prevent me from serving others?

As we weigh the “pros” and “cons” of our options, it is important to remember that the best option might not always be immediately apparent. In fact, the best option might not become clear until after a significant time of prayer and reflection. At the same time, we should avoid the temptation to overthink a decision that we have already carefully reasoned through and prayed about. It is important not to keep putting off a decision when the best option has already become clear to us.

God gave us our brains to help us make good decisions and so we should be confident that we can find our future in God who speaks to us through our gift of reason.

### **The Advice Exercise**

Another way to open our reason to God’s voice is to consider what kind of advice we would give to Christian friends if they were facing the same decision. This exercise is often helpful for situations that are influenced by emotional turmoil. In fact, when we face difficult decisions about our future, some emotional attachments and biases to certain individuals or certain options can lead us conclude that we are the “exception” to the rules of Christian morality or common sense. This line of thinking leads to illogical decisions that are simply the result of wishful thinking and are not based in the reality our situation.

The exercise of putting ourselves in the shoes of someone else facing the same decision can give us some distance from our biases and make it easier for us to make a decision that is God-inspired and not just the fruit of cheery dreaming.

It can be helpful to ask: What advice would I give to a friend who is facing a similar situation?

And then the next step is for us to follow our own advice.

### **The “Looking Back” Exercise**

A similar exercise that can help open our reason to God’s voice while also engaging our heart is to spend some time imagining the end of our life.

Imagine what it will be like when your life is over and you are standing before God, the merciful and just Judge. Ask yourself the following questions about the decision you are trying to make right now:

At the end of my life will I have deep regrets that I did *not* pursue a certain option right now?

At the end of my life will I have deep regrets that I did pursue a certain option right now?

At the end of my life will I be satisfied with the decision-making process I went through to make this decision?

This exercise can help place our smaller decisions into a bigger perspective. Since it is very easy for us to simply “settle” for what is more convenient or expedient in the short-term, this exercise helps us broaden our vision and imagine the long-term consequences of the decision that go beyond our satisfaction and comfort in the present moment.

This exercise can also help us recognize which of our opportunities we should not take for granted right now. Sometimes our next step is a big one. Sometimes God has actually lined up our future right in front of us, but we are hesitant to take this big step because the consequences will be much larger than the previous smaller decisions we have made in our life.

### **-3) The Bible. What does God’s Word say about this decision?**

“I prayed to God for guidance but he never said anything back to me.”

I expressed this sort of statement several times when I was a young adult. I had prayed to God asking “God, help me know what I should do!!!” and all I heard back was silence.

Dead silence.

I received no answer at all from God.

Or that is what it seemed like to me until a priest gave me some very good advice.

The priest said: “People say they never hear anything back from God when they ask him for direction. But how can you expect to hear God speak to you if you are not opening up the book that contains the words he has written to you. The words of the Bible are the answer to your prayer. God will speak to you through the words of the Bible!”

The Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament put it this way: “Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12)

When we are struggling to figure out our future, God’s word can pierce through all our confusing emotions, feelings, desires, ideas, and dreams. God’s word can pierce through all the interior drama within us and make it clear to us what God’s plan is for our future.

We can find our future in God who speaks to us through the words of the Bible!

One place to start hearing God speak through the words of the Bible is at Sunday Mass. God will speak to us at every Mass if we are listening. When we go to Mass and listen to the readings we should be asking: What is God saying to me today?

If we pay attention to the readings and ask this question, God will speak to us.

Our recognition of God's specific message for our life circumstances might not become clear immediately during the readings. It might become clear as the priest or deacon is preaching the homily. It might become clear only later when we are driving home. It might be even several days after Mass when the same situation Jesus spoke about in the gospel takes place in our own lives and then we finally understand what God was saying to us. If we are attentively listening during the readings, eventually God's Word will speak to the situations and decisions we are facing in our lives.

In fact, spending time during the week looking at the Sunday readings or reflecting on a good Biblical devotional can train our ears to recognize and to hear God's voice more clearly. In fact, St. Ignatius of Loyola spent much time when he was bedridden reading a devotional book that focused on the life of Christ in the New Testament and this reflection helped him gain much clarity about his future.

Hearing God speak to us through the Bible is all about a relationship. The more time we spend listening to God's voice through the Bible, the better we will be able to recognize God's voice when we are trying to make decisions in stressful situations. When reading the Bible becomes a steady habit, we will be able to find our future in God who speaks to us through the words of the Bible.

#### **-4) The Church. What do trustworthy Christians say about this decision?**

God speaks to us through other people.

Almost every priest I know has said that someone else told him before he entered seminary that he would make a good priest. In many cases, people were telling him that he would make a good priest long before he was seriously thinking about the possibility of priesthood himself.

The same is true with Christian marriage. Many happily married couples met their future spouse through the intervention of their Christian friends who said: "You two would be good together".

The voices of Christians friends help us understand God's voice and reecho what we are hearing in our heart, our mind, and in the Bible. We can find our future in God who speaks to us through the Church, the Christian people he has put into our life.

After St. Ignatius left the hospital, he did not just live the rest of his life as a "lone ranger". In fact, he gathered together a group of other university students who shared his passion for serving God faithfully. They supported each other and helped each other figure out God's plan for their lives. They became the Society of Jesus, commonly known as the Jesuits.

God will often put other people in our lives to deepen our insight as we face tough decisions. The perspectives of good, Christian friends, family members, and mentors should be taken very seriously since they are the people who know us best and are also familiar with God's way of working in our life in the past.

Of course, God has also intentionally given us freedom and so it is important that we do not completely pawn off our decision on someone else or give into the temptation of simply trying to please other people as we make decisions.

The traditional Catholic practice of spiritual direction can provide valuable assistance as we ponder particularly important decisions, such as, choosing our life vocation. A spiritual director is a priest, a religious sister, or a trained lay person who serves as a “personal trainer” for our spiritual life. Spiritual direction meetings typically occur monthly and provide a confidential place where we can talk through the decisions we are facing and discuss our spiritual habits.

We do not have to make decisions completely on our own! We can find our future in God who desires to speak to us through the Church, the Christian people he has placed in our lives.

### **Conclusion:**

God is speaking to us and will make his plan clear to us over time through our gut, our mind, our reflection on the words of the Bible, and our Christian friendships. It will often take time and patience to gain clarity about a decision as we listen to God speak to us in these four ways.

The temptation is to freak out in the meantime, especially if our confusion grows and clarity seems more impossible to reach.

God, however, invites us to trust.

After all, God’s work is purposeful.

God is doing something much greater than we realize as we patiently listen for God’s voice and search for clarity about important decisions.

God is working even when we are frustrated and hate the fact that we do not have our future completely figured out.

God is teaching us to put our trust in him and to let go of our fears.

God is teaching us let go of our attempts to control our future.

God is teaching us that worry is futile.

God is teaching us that he is big enough to handle our mistakes.

God is teaching us that his loving care is where we will find peace and confidence about our future.

God is teaching us that confidence in decision-making does not come from ourselves, but rather from our friendship with him and his unwavering commitment to love us faithfully.

2,500 years ago, there was a group of people who were scared and anxious about their future. The prophet Jeremiah told them to avoid the temptation of thinking they could control their future if they worried passionately enough about it or freaked out enough about it or followed a certain political leader who was promising to solve their problems. Jeremiah told them they would only find their future in God. Jeremiah shared with the people this message from God:

“For I know well the plans I have for you - says the Lord - plans for your welfare and not for evil, so as to give you a future full of hope. When you call me, and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me – says the Lord – and I will change your lot...” (Jeremiah 29:11-14)

God’s desire is to give us a future full of hope, but we can only experience the fullness of God’s hope when we are willing to let go of our attempts to do everything ourselves.

In other words, don’t freak out. Trust! Find your future in God.