

SAYING
YES

ALBERT HAASE, OFM

SAYING YES

DISCOVERING AND RESPONDING
TO GOD'S WILL IN YOUR LIFE



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Saying Yes: Discovering and Responding to God's Will in Your Life

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Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone,
yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so
that she may not wear me out by continually coming.

—*Luke 18:4–5*

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	ix
1. GOD'S DREAM OF THE KINGDOM	1
2. TEN ATTITUDES FOR DISCERNMENT	17
3. LISTENING: THE HEART OF DISCERNMENT	31
4. A DISCERNING LIFESTYLE	49
5. DISCERNING THE DESIGNS OF THE DEVIL	65
6. WRESTLING WITH GOD	81
CONCLUSION	95
APPENDIX 1: PRAYERS FOR DISCERNMENT	97
APPENDIX 2: OTHER BOOKS AND MEDIA BY ALBERT HAASE, OFM	107
NOTES	109

INTRODUCTION



One of the most challenging spiritual practices for any committed Christian is discerning the will of God. What is God asking of me? How do I know if this is really of God and not simply my imagination? Where do I turn to find out what God wants? Should I follow my head or my heart? Do my deep-seated, recurring desires confirm or conflict with God's will? We all have asked these or similar questions at some point in time.

As a spiritual director and as someone who trains spiritual directors, I have spent a lot of time listening to the discernment struggles of others and reflecting on what the spiritual tradition has taught about discernment. I'm not the only one. Do a quick search on Amazon.com, and you'll discover enough books on discerning God's will to fill a library.

So why another book on discernment? Because *Saying Yes: Discovering and Responding to God's Will in Your Life* highlights in a singular way that authentic Christian discernment requires daily listening to the megaphone God uses to communicate with us: the nitty-gritty of everyday life. Like the persistent widow in Luke's parable (see Lk. 18:1–8), God invites each of us to respond uniquely to the dream of the kingdom. And then God waits. When our response is not forthcoming, God returns and invites again. And again, if necessary. No wonder so much of discernment is listening and reflecting on

our life; without that deepening self-knowledge and continual self-awareness, we could spend our lives dawdling and lollygagging.

Why this book? Because *Saying Yes: Discovering and Responding to God's Will in Your Life* shows how an adversary is bent on sabotaging our response to God's long-term plan for our glorious living. I have yet to find a book on discernment that clearly unmasks the devious designs of the devil and how the powers of darkness conspire against our response to the divine widow.

Why this book? Because *Saying Yes: Discovering and Responding to God's Will in Your Life* directly addresses a topic discussed in spiritual direction sessions but rarely written about: how we often wrestle with God and resist divine grace. Discernment includes not only discovering when God is calling us but also when, how, and why we fight against God's invitation.

In these pages, you will meet various people whom I have known or have been privileged to sit with in spiritual direction sessions. I've changed their names and some personal details to protect their privacy.

This little book will show how discernment is not confined to moments when we stand before two divergent roads and must choose a direction for our continued journey. Discernment is a daily spiritual practice of discovering in big and small ways the invitation of God to say yes to becoming a coworker for the kingdom.

Albert Haase, OFM

CHAPTER 1

GOD'S DREAM OF THE KINGDOM



For the first thirty years of my life, I understood God's will as a master blueprint or detailed script that had already been predetermined and written. As I figured, on the day of my conception, God had decided the role I was going to play in the history of salvation. I assumed I was supposed to spend the early part of my life "picking God's brain" to see what God demands of me. Once I discovered my preassigned vocation, I had to buckle under and fulfill it. I hoped I had discerned correctly what God intended for me—to be a Franciscan friar and a priest—though I wouldn't know if I got it right until the day I die.

I imagined that after my death I would stand outside the Pearly Gates. St. Peter would come out and ask my name. "Albert Haase," I would reply. He would go to the filing cabinet, open the drawer marked "H," and find the folder containing my permanent record. St. Peter would then pass it on to God, who sat on the throne of judgment.

Flipping through my folder, God would ask, "Well, Albert Haase, what have you done for yourself?" I would reply very confidently, "Lord, I became a Franciscan friar and was ordained a priest." I would keep my fingers crossed that God wouldn't grimace, shake his head, and say, "Sorry, buddy. You got it all wrong! You were supposed to be

married with three children and teach in a high school!” If God did, I would discover only then and there that my entire life had been wasted.

Pagan Fate or a Godly Dream?

I became uncomfortable with this understanding of God’s will. Though it sounds wonderful to say that God called me to be a Franciscan priest from the moment of my existence, or that God intended you to marry your spouse from the moment you entered the world, there’s a problem with such thinking: it smacks of the pagan notion of fate. It makes everything in this world a predetermined and preordained done deal; my eternal reward and happiness are not based upon my freely chosen, creative response to the grace of God in my life—what I call my yes—but rather on whether I managed to guess and find my preassigned role in God’s plan of salvation history and then performed it.

Is there really such a thing as God’s will? If so, how are we to understand it without falling into the trap of fate or predestination? Let me quote from the first chapter of the letter to the Ephesians. Here’s the paraphrase from *THE MESSAGE*:

How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He’s the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth’s foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he

decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son. . . .

He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making. He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.

It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone. (Eph. 1:3–6, 8–12, 14)

Rather than “God’s will,” I prefer the phrase “God’s dream.” At the dawn of creation, God had a dynamic, evolving dream for us—a “long-range plan,” to use the words from *THE MESSAGE* paraphrase. Even before the creation of the world, God had us in mind and with voracious enthusiasm wanted us to be the focus of a transformative love that would make us whole and holy. God’s openhanded and extravagant generosity would be centered upon us. And God delighted in planning this! God would adopt us into a divine family through his Son Jesus, who reveals to us our identity and mission. In the fullness

of time as this world evolves and becomes more complex and intricate, God's dynamic dream is that we take our place with all creation under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Original Sin

That dream was quickly tarnished. With Adam and Eve's freely chosen sin of wanting to be like God and thus eating the forbidden fruit, all of creation got knocked out of whack. That original sin had a ripple effect, first seen in the murder of Abel by Cain, that continues to affect us today. Just look at the world, and you will see war, violence, hatred, prejudice, and injustice. World peace, unconditional love, and justice for all seem so distant and unattainable. Indeed, creation has a long way to go before it comes under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

But Adam and Eve's sin could neither dampen God's voracious enthusiasm for us nor cancel God's designs on us for glorious living. God's dream was indomitable. As human history unfolded and evolved, God deliberately entered into intentional relationships, called covenants, with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These patriarchs represented the chosen people, God's "cherished, personal treasure" (Deut. 7:6, *THE MESSAGE*). God desired both the patriarchs and the chosen people to be dream keepers who kept God's dream alive by living lives of peace, love, and justice. By exercising their free will, they would be coworkers with God in making the dream come true.

Prophetic Reminders

The chosen people, heirs of Adam and Eve's sin, weren't always faithful to God's covenant. So God raised up prophets who reminded the chosen people that the world was not as God intended and chastised the people's misguided, egotistical, sinful behavior. The prophets called the people to return to the covenant with God and keep the dream alive: to cease doing evil, learning to do good, seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow (see Isa. 1:17). Only then could the dream once again gain a foothold in reality.



... [O]nly after the "fiat" of Mary, who consented to be the Mother of the Messiah, did "the angel depart from her" (Lk. 1:38). The angel had completed his mission: he could bring to God humanity's "yes", spoken by Mary of Nazareth.

—Pope St. John
Paul II¹

At the beginning of the first century, women were considered second-class citizens. Their sworn testimony was inadmissible in court; they were considered the property of their spouses with no legal claim to property of their own. So the only "property" a woman could call her own was her reputation. At a precise moment in history, God entered the life of one member of the chosen people, a woman by the name of Mary, and asked her to sacrifice that one thing—her reputation—and become the mother of Jesus. Surprisingly and at the initial consternation of her fiancé,

Mary said yes to God and became Theotokos, the “God-bearer,” the first and greatest title she continues to bear as a member of the human race.

God’s voracious enthusiasm and lavish gift-giving erupts in the person of Mary’s son, Jesus. Jesus is the divine reminder of the dream. He called it “the kingdom.” In more than twenty Gospel stories and parables, he reminded his followers that the kingdom is a place of peace, love, and justice. And he didn’t just preach the kingdom; Jesus orchestrated the reality of the kingdom in deed. In his life, death, and resurrection—what we call the Paschal Mystery—creation, knocked out of whack by Adam and Eve’s sin, got back on track. The kingdom was manifest, and, to this very day, we are on the way to experiencing the fulfillment of God’s long-range plan.

Coworkers with Christ

In April 1955, I came into the world. As a human being, I continue to experience the ripple effects of Adam and Eve’s egotistical ploy to be like God. And so I find myself tempted and sometimes wrapped up in what St. Paul calls the “works of the flesh”: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, and carousing (see Gal. 5:19–21). I choose to be deceptive, divisive, and discouraging.

And yet my baptism and commitment to Christ witness to who I am and what I am living for, to allude again to the paraphrase of Ephesians. I am God’s dream keeper, and my mission is to make God’s

dream present in my own life by living a life of peace, love, and justice. Following the example of Mary, I affirm and reaffirm—I say yes—to being a coworker in building the kingdom of God and promoting the lordship of Jesus Christ over all creation.

Grace and Discernment

My chosen identity in Christ and its subsequent mission are not assumed and realized by sheer willpower. Nor do they exclusively rely upon a single life decision or my limited perception. God's voracious enthusiasm for my glorious living is experienced as grace that emboldens and illumines my commitment—and sometimes, as it did in Mary's life, invites me to respond creatively to a specific circumstance or situation. *Discernment is a cooperative venture of discovering my unique contribution—my evolving and deeper yes—to being a coworker with Christ in making God's dream of the kingdom a reality right here, right now.* I call it “my evolving and deeper yes.” Why? Because as my circumstances change and I grow in the understanding of who I am and what it means to be a Christian disciple, my perceived contribution as a coworker with Christ will also change and evolve.



What you are is God's gift to you, what you become is your gift to God.

—Hans Urs von Balthasar²

In other words, I have God-given talents and abilities. As I grow through childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood, I gradually come to a deeper awareness of who I am as a person. I also learn what it means to be a Christian and how I might use my gifts and skills. That growing

awareness of my identity, including my commitment as a Christian, is ongoing. The vocational choices and daily decisions I make, based upon my identity, interests, and talents, become my contribution to the realization of God's long-range plan, the dream of the kingdom.

An experience from my past offers an apt analogy. I arrived for my first visit to the Grand Canyon rather late in the evening. It was already dark. But my curiosity and excitement at seeing the natural wonder would not wait until morning. So I went to the southern rim to take a look. All I saw through the darkness was a big hole. No splendor, no majesty. I couldn't help but think that this was another one of America's great tourist traps. I went back to my tent, determined that my disappointment was not going to ruin this vacation, and fell asleep.

The following morning I got up before dawn. For years I had heard about the miracle of sunrise over the Grand Canyon. So I started back to the rim, careful not to let any anticipation, of excitement or disappointment, get the better of me. As the morning sun inched its way into the sky and offered light to the earth, the "big hole" suddenly started coming alive with shades of red, purple, blue, and yellow. With hundreds of other people, I found myself "ooohing" and "aahing" over God's daily miracle in northern Arizona. It was the same ancient canyon as the night before but, in the light of the morning sun, everything looked so different.

Likewise, the more I consciously allow my commitment to being a dream keeper and coworker with Christ to challenge me, the more

clearly I will see the part I can play in salvation history. It will be the same old me, but, seen in the light of my Christian commitment, it will seem so different. My actions and attitudes will take on a deeper meaning. Some of my commitments and obligations might have to change, not because of infidelity, but because of the deepening appreciation for my Christian discipleship and my maturing responsibility and free response to the dream of the kingdom. So discernment is not a question of “picking God’s brain” to see what God demands of me. Rather, it’s my free, creative response to God’s long-range plan in light of my baptismal commitment to being a disciple of Jesus.



All of us can attain to Christian virtue and holiness, no matter in what condition of life we live and no matter what our life work may be.

— St. Francis de Sales³

A practical consequence of this understanding of God’s dream is that I don’t have to do specifically “religious” or “holy” endeavors to be a coworker with Christ. The kingdom needs shoe salesmen, authors, teachers, garbage collectors, parents, computer technicians, bartenders, web designers, hair stylists, and every other kind of occupation. Any vocation or job, performed from a faith perspective, can promote the lordship of Jesus Christ.

I spent a little more than a decade as a missionary in mainland China.

According to the laws of the People's Republic of China, foreign missionaries are forbidden to minister in traditional ways. I spent three years as a university English teacher and then became the director of human resources for an international accounting firm. I was always surprised when family, friends, and friars would e-mail me and say how sorry they were that I couldn't be a "real" missionary who was baptizing babies and spreading the Catholic faith. I had a different perspective: I certainly felt like a "real" missionary, though a newfangled one, as I kept the dream alive and tried to make it become reality as a teacher in the classroom and the boss of the HR department. The patience I exhibited with the struggling student, the fair and dignified treatment of an employee I had to let go, and my determination to rise above the gossip of the English department and the politics of the office were my ways of contributing to God's long-range plan.

Lamps of Revelation

There are six lamps that teach us about God's dream. They illumine and enlighten us about God, God's voracious enthusiasm for us, and the role we each can play in God's long-range plan of the kingdom. They also show us how to get back on track when we find ourselves gravitating toward Paul's "works of the flesh" or committing sin.

The first is the Word of God, *Sacred Scripture*. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls Scripture "the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit" (CCC, 81). Scripture tells us about God's voracious enthusiasm and deliberate choice to be



I give you thanks, O
 Lord, for having made
 shine forth this light
 from the sacred deposit
 of your Holy Scriptures.
 As you show me the way
 I should follow, and give
 me the desire to fol-
 low it, you will also give
 me the powerful help
 of your grace so I may
 tread it with a firm step,
 and with perseverance.

—St. Eugene de
 Mazenod⁴

in a relationship with us. It reveals the Ten Commandments that form the basic contours of our yes to God's voracious enthusiasm and focus us on right relationships with God, others, and self. The words of the prophets keep our feet to the fire as we commit to being coworkers with God. The New Testament letters offer practical advice and encouragement to communities wanting to promote God's long-range plan.

The second lamp that illumines God's dream for us is the Word of God made flesh, *Jesus Christ*. As the paraphrase of Ephesians says, it's in Christ that we discover who we are and what we are living for. In him we see the living and divine embodiment of love, peace, and justice. His teachings on loving God, loving neighbor, forgiving our enemies, and surrendering to the cross are important signposts that keep us on the straight and narrow leading to the full realization of God's dream. His Beatitudes and the Sermon on the

Mount show us the practical and radical implications of saying an even deeper yes to the Ten Commandments. As a committed Christian—which literally means “little Christ”—we say yes to following the teachings of Jesus and imitating him in his life and death.

Some might think that divine revelation—God speaking to us—has stopped with the Word of God written in Scripture and made flesh in Jesus. But God continues to speak! We call God’s continuing and ongoing revelation *Sacred Tradition*. Sacred Tradition, for lack of a better analogy, is the light of the Holy Spirit under which we continue to read and reflect upon the Word of God. It offers us insight and wisdom to interpret Scripture and the teachings of Jesus for our contemporary day and age. For example, Sacred Tradition has revealed to us that slavery is not part of God’s dream and women and children are not second-class citizens. For Roman Catholics, it provided us with the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It also has provided our great social teachings, promoting justice and peace in the world. God continues to reveal aspects of the dream through our reading of the signs of the times under the Spirit’s light.

The fourth lamp of revelation is the community of believers called the *Church*. This is the dynamic community that has been entrusted with Jesus’s mission of witnessing to and living love, peace, and justice. Over the centuries, the Church has been graced with a corporate wisdom that helps us discover and evaluate the authenticity or inauthenticity of a person’s evolving and deeper “yes.” The Church’s

incredible support and sage advice reminds us that we help build the kingdom as a family, not as lone rangers.

The Church's *sacraments* are another lamp of revelation. These ritual actions of pouring water, anointing with oil, breaking bread, and celebrating God's forgiveness and healing and God's abiding presence in love relationships help us not only grow in the life of the spirit but also give us the wisdom, strength, and fortitude to be faithful coworkers with Christ. The sacraments are encounters with God that reenergize the community of believers in their mission.

The final lamp of revelation is *personal prayer*. In personal dialogue with God at home and during communal worship services at church, I gain deeper insights into my Christian identity as well as my unique and singular contribution to salvation history. Moments of prayer provide the interior space and sacred silence where God speaks words of invitation. In many ways, the first five lamps of revelation provide the oil for this sixth and final lamp.

Kathy's Experience

A number of years ago, I had a spiritual directee, Kathy, whose experience shows how a person's yes evolves and deepens as it is illumined by the lamps of revelation. A practicing Catholic all her life, Kathy studied law at the University of Chicago and, after graduation, accepted a job at a prestigious firm. Within five years she had gained both the respect of her colleagues and a reputation as a fine lawyer. During those years, however, she also began to see and experience the

harsh injustices of the American legal system. “Basically, Father, only the rich can afford to have justice served,” she told me during a spiritual direction session.

After months of soul searching, which included a weekend retreat, daily prayer, steeping herself in Scripture, and attending Sunday Eucharist, Kathy realized she risked losing her faith in the legal system if she did not make a change. So she went into private practice and quietly accepted more and more pro bono cases. “They don’t help feed my husband and daughter,” she said, “but they keep me in touch with my Christian values.”

That wasn’t the end of Kathy’s discernment process. Successful as she had been in private practice, Kathy continued to allow the six lamps of revelation to enlighten her and help shape her evolving and deeper yes to being a coworker for the kingdom. She now has given up the practice of law and is enrolled in graduate studies in Christian ethics. Her dream is to teach future lawyers how to practice law with the highest ethical standards.

As disciples of Jesus, we commit to the community of believers called the Church and root ourselves in Scripture and Sacred Tradition. Aided also by prayer and the sacraments, we grow in a deepening appreciation of our identity and mission. That appreciation blossoms when we discern our unique and individual contribution to being a coworker with Christ in realizing God’s dream of the kingdom. Like Kathy’s, our yes is rarely static; it evolves and grows deeper as we find ourselves in new times and circumstances.

■ REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How have your Christian identity and understanding of mission grown over the years? What is the distinguishing hallmark of your current and more mature understanding?
2. Name at least three practical ways in which you have been shaped and transformed by Scripture, the teachings of Jesus, Sacred Tradition, your church affiliation, the celebration of the sacraments, and personal prayer. Of the six lamps of revelation, which one do you consider the most important? The least important? Why?
3. How do you currently see yourself as a coworker with Christ? In what practical ways are you keeping God's dream alive on a daily basis?

CHAPTER 2

TEN ATTITUDES FOR DISCERNMENT



The six decades of my life have taught me that discernment is not easy. The process of coming to an awareness of my Christian identity, my mission, and how I could use my gifts and talents to help promote God's long-range plan was slow and gradual—as slow and gradual as the 3,120 weeks it takes to live for sixty years. And just when I thought I had discovered my unique contribution that would take me to my final days, my yes would morph into something deeper and bring a smile of surprise to my face. My evolving yes started with becoming a Franciscan friar and being ordained a priest; it continued with earning a PhD for the purpose of becoming a professor; it mutated into becoming a preacher, a missionary to China, a writer, a college professor, an HR director, and a teacher of future spiritual directors. Who knows what tomorrow might ask of me?

Because our yes evolves and deepens over time, as we are illumined by the lamps of revelation and grow in the understanding of who we are and what we are living for, we need to bring ten attitudes to the practice of discernment. The spiritual tradition reminds us that these time-tested principles ensure creativity and

insight as we try to discover the roles we can play as coworkers with Christ.

1. Keep your ears to the ground
and not in the clouds.

I used to think the call of God came from above and was otherworldly. I had to comb the sky for signs and messages from God. I assumed that sooner or later the clouds would part, and I would hear a big, booming voice. Discernment involved gazing heavenward and, like a Marine, being prepared to respond at a moment's notice.

It didn't take me long to see my mistake. God, in fact, invites and speaks in the nitty-gritty of life: in the person needing assistance, the friendship with a neighbor, the contentment felt after a full day's work, the twinge of conscience, the creative thoughts that seem to come out of nowhere, and the frustration with a teenager. My life is the megaphone through which God speaks to me and the world. That's why it's important to keep my ears to the ground and listen to my circumstances.

Luke 18 begins with the parable of the unjust judge and widow. A widow persistently hounds an unjust judge to have justice rendered. The judge refuses until finally, because she keeps nagging him, he relents and issues a judgment.

Scripture scholars tell us that a parable is opened to a variety of interpretations depending on the "take" of the hearer. Luke himself interprets the parable of the unjust judge and widow as the "need to pray always and not to lose heart" (Lk. 18:1). But is God really like the

unjust judge who needs to be nagged, harassed, and badgered? I sure hope not.

What if we think of ourselves as the judge and God as the widow who every day comes to us and asks something that only we can do? That's why discernment is a cooperative venture between God and us. That's the story of Gabriel's annunciation to Mary—and that's another way to interpret Luke's parable. How do we hear the invitation of the divine widow? By keeping our ears to the ground and listening to our own lives.

At day's end, it's time well spent to ask yourself: *What is God up to in my life? What is God the divine widow asking of me in the events of today, in this situation, in these feelings or these intuitions?* A reflective, listening stance goes a long way in discovering and shaping your evolving and deeper yes.

2. Use your peripheral vision.

A common discernment mistake is approaching a particular situation wearing blinders, like those sometimes seen on race horses. With tunnel vision, we focus exclusively on the center of our gaze and think only in terms of a yes or no decision. Such a narrow-minded perception of a particular situation cannot include the possibilities that God's grace affords. Mary's vision seems to have been impeded initially when she asked Gabriel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (Lk. 1:34).

Good discernment requires peripheral vision and dreaming of all potential possibilities, options, and alternatives not found right



If I were to wish for something, I would wish not for wealth or power but for the passion of possibility, for the eye, eternally young, eternally ardent, that sees possibility everywhere.

—Søren
Kierkegaard⁵

smack in front of you. Peripheral vision can catch glimmers and glimpses of God's grace that might not be in the center field of focus. As Gabriel told Mary, "[N]othing will be impossible with God" (Lk. 1:37). That's wisdom from the periphery!

Angie and Brian discovered that being broad-minded and thinking "outside the box" can unleash creativity. It opened them to the unexpected. Both from large families, they dreamed of having five or six children after their marriage. Though they were devastated to discover their infertility, the news didn't hamper or impede them. They used their peripheral vision, dreamed about other possibilities, and acted on creative alternatives. Now, after twenty years of marriage, they have fostered fourteen children.

3. Bring a blank check.

God had an excruciating and inscrutable request for Abraham: the sacrifice of his son, Isaac (see Gen. 22:1–19).