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Near the end of *Gaudete et Exultate*, Pope Francis has a section on “Discernment” (n166-175), which enables us to recognize impulses from the Holy Spirit in a world of multiple options, various distractions, enticing novelties, dramatic events and personal rigidity. For Francis, discernment is a gift of the Holy Spirit that we should develop through prayerful reflection, spiritual reading and good counsel. In order to achieve genuine freedom in Christ, we need to examine the internal desires, anxieties and questions in our own hearts as well as the external circumstances of our situation in the world. It is wise to use a prayerful discernment process not only in making big decisions in life but also in meeting our daily responsibilities. The pope highly recommends a daily examination of conscience as a valuable exercise in becoming a more discerning person. An effective discernment takes into account psychological and sociological factors as well as Church teaching, but transcends them by seeking a graced “glimpse of that unique and mysterious plan that God has for each of us” (n170). We should consider not only our temporal well-being, personal satisfaction and peace of mind but also the meaning of our life before the Father who knows and loves us. Discernment is a gift available to everyone that requires no special ability but only the effort to develop it as best we can. In this process, we need periods of silence to calm our anxieties and interpret our impulses from a faith perspective. We need to listen to the realities of life, to the good advice of others and to the voice of the Lord, which can challenge our ordinary ways of seeing things and “shatter our security but lead us to a better life.”

Discerning Christians accept the Gospel “as the ultimate standard” and respect the Church teaching that interprets it. They do not merely apply rules or repeat past approaches, but stay open to the risen Lord and the Spirit who alone can “penetrate what is obscure and hidden in every situation” so that “the newness of the Gospel can emerge in another light.” In this process, it helps to remember the patience of God, whose timetable is not ours, and to accept the “logic of the cross” that calls us to self-sacrificing love for others. Francis concludes his deep and insightful analysis: “Discernment, then, is not a solipsistic self-analysis or a form of egotistical introspection, but an authentic process of leaving ourselves behind in order to approach the mystery of God, who helps us to carry out the mission to which he has called us, for the good of our brothers and sisters” (n175).

I see elements of a graced discernment process in the story of a faithful Catholic woman by the name of Charmaine, who was born in the late 1930s in Sandusky, Ohio, a twin with an older sister. She was raised in a good Catholic family that faithfully attended Mass on Sundays and Holy Days, prayed before meals, went to Lenten Services and participated in popular Catholic devotions. As an adult, she remembers with gratitude that a charitable atmosphere prevailed in her family with no harsh language or swearing. While attending St. Mary’s grade school and high school, Charmaine was taught by Notre Dame nuns, who gained her admiration for instilling the Catholic faith in their students. After graduation from high school, she took a job at the local Catholic hospital, Providence, setting aside her thoughts of becoming a nurse, since that would put a strain on her parents’ finances. Grateful for her job, she saw herself on the normal path of most of her friends, which would lead to getting married and raising a family.

It was in 1958 that Charmaine first met Tom, a young man her age, who came from the nearby town of Fremont to socialize with friends at a local hangout in Sandusky. When she first met Tom, something told her he was “the one.” They began dating, getting together during weekends, enjoying movies, sporting events, bowling and spending time with friends and family. As time went on, they talked religion, and Charmaine learned that Tom’s Lutheran Church was really important to him. Since some of Tom’s Lutheran friends converted to marry Catholic girls, she assumed he would do the same. However, it gradually became clear that he was as committed to maintaining his Lutheran faith as she was to remaining Catholic.

Thus began a long ten-year discernment process for both of them. They were deeply in love, enjoyed each other’s company and had so much in common. They shared fundamental Christian teachings and moral principles. They did not live together but stayed with their own families, who were both welcoming and enthusiastic about the potential addition to their family. After extensive conversations, their respective positions became clear: Charmaine would definitely not give up her Catholic faith and would continue to practice it. She wanted to be married in her parish church, but would be willing to have her children raised Lutheran. Tom, on the other hand, was totally committed to his Lutheran Church, where he and his family were very involved, and was adamantly opposed to raising his children Catholic.

In the midst of their long discernment process, Tom spent two years in military service. After returning home, gave Charmaine an engagement ring, which she accepted without knowing how things could get worked out. Her parents and siblings. who loved Tom, supported her with love, but did not offer any advice. One of Charmaine’s Catholic friends encouraged her to give in, leave the Catholic church, marry Tom and become a Lutheran. This left Charmaine in turmoil, as she just could not imagine leaving the Catholic Church, which was so important to her.

At some point, in my role as assistant pastor for St. Mary’s Parish, I met Charmaine at Providence Hospital during my regular visits to the sick. As she got to know me better, she told me her story and asked my advice. We set up a meeting with Tom and his pastor which involved a long, intense, honest, charitable and prayerful dialogue, but yielded no solutions. Charmaine was disappointed, but continued to pray that Tom would convert. She prayed at Mass, said the rosary and developed a deep devotion to St. Jude, the apostle, patron of lost causes. I was very familiar with this devotion since my family regularly went after Sunday Mass to a shrine of St. Jude to pray for my younger brother, David, who was totally disabled from birth due to the complications of the Rh disease. I marveled at the faith and tenacity of Charmaine and felt a kinship with her reliance on prayer and devotion to St. Jude. At one point, Tom wanted to give up, but Charmaine prayed to St. Jude and found the words to encourage him not to lose hope. I continued to stay in touch with Charmaine, seeing her periodically and regularly praying for her and Tom.

In 1968, my bishop sent me to New York for further studies, where I was privileged to study under some of the best international theologians, including the great Redemptorist moral theologian Bernard Haring, who had close ties to some key Curial officials in Rome. I presented Charmaine’s case to him and he showed me how to write a petition to Rome asking permission for her to get married in the Catholic Church, while promising to raise her children “ecumenically,” the key word that would win Vatican approval of the marriage. Sure enough, within months the Vatican sent official permission for the marriage, and in 1968, after ten years of intense discernment, Charmaine and Tom were married in St. Mary’s Church and settled in Fremont, Tom’s home town. They came to see me in New York on their honeymoon, and we said prayers of gratitude over a joyous dinner.

Charmaine and Tom have enjoyed a long and happy marriage without ever having any conflicts over religion. Charmaine got involved in Sacred Heart Catholic Church, where she attends Mass regularly on Saturdays. She cooperated closely with Tom in raising their three children in the Lutheran Church, and with him has attended services every Sunday at St. Mark Lutheran Church. In 2018, they celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary, filled with gratitude for God’s blessing of a wonderful Christian marriage.

For me, Charmaine remains an inspiring example of a committed Catholic who practiced important elements of a graced discernment process. She was faithful to her informed conscience and acted on principle rather than expediency; she tried to do God’s will and relied on regular prayer; she sought guidance and engaged in respectful dialogue; she tried to understand the obstacles and persevered in seeking viable solutions; she trusted her deep love of Tom and respected his own religious commitments and his moral integrity; finally, she rejoiced in the surprising solution as a gift from God and remained faithful to her promise to live her Catholic faith and to raise her children ecumenically. It seems proper to note that their story told from Tom’s perspective would also reveal his deep faith and prayerful discernment process.

I have on numerous occasions shared the story of Tom and Charmaine with couples contemplating an ecumenical marriage, reminding them that fidelity to conscience is crucial to making a successful marriage and encouraging them to make decisions about how to raise their children religiously before getting married and not waiting until it is time to baptize a first child. Over the years, Tom and Charmaine have assured me that they are glad that their story has helped other couples trying to discern the path to a happy and holy marriage. Now my hope is that their permission to retell their inspiring story will provide guidance and encouragement to others striving to discern God’s will in various circumstances.