

ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

Pastoral Counseling in Choosing One's Path in Life: Diagnosis and Therapy through Discernment

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The present doctoral research begins with the observation of a paradoxical reality affecting contemporary humanity: the multiplication of possibilities for choice is not necessarily accompanied by an increased capacity for commitment. On the contrary, in a context characterized by intensified social mobility, relational instability, the acceleration of the pace of life, informational overstimulation, and the weakening of traditional points of reference, the contemporary person has access to an ever-growing number of options while experiencing increasing difficulty in building and assuming a coherent, stable, and meaningful life. Choosing one's path in life therefore goes beyond the level of a merely practical, professional, or social decision and becomes a profoundly anthropological, spiritual, and pastoral issue.

The thesis situates this issue within the field of Pastoral Theology, starting from the conviction that contemporary human beings suffer not only from a lack of information or insufficient opportunities, but also from an inner fragmentation that affects their relationship with themselves, with others, and with God. A person may be highly active externally and yet profoundly scattered inwardly; permanently connected, yet unable to identify an inner center sufficiently stable to sustain the assumption of a vocation. From this perspective, discernment is approached not exclusively as an intellectual, moral, or decision-making exercise, but as a therapeutic and spiritual process of reunifying the person.

The motivation for this research arises both from the pastoral relevance of the issue and from concrete encounters with people struggling to discern their own existential path. Chronic indecision, the postponement of marriage or of the assumption of a vocation, professional and relational instability, anxiety, social comparison, the constant need for validation, and the inability to construct a coherent life project demonstrate that the problem of choice cannot be reduced to a lack of willpower or insufficient information. In many cases, choice is conditioned by fear, family and social pressure, passions, trauma, emotional fragility, distorted cultural models, or the loss of existential meaning.

Within this context, the research recovers the Philokalic understanding of discernment. In Orthodox spirituality, discernment is not a technique for optimizing decision-making, but the fruit of a purified mind, a healed heart, and a freedom that learns to orient itself toward truth, communion, and God. Prayer, ascetic struggle, repentance, watchfulness, and confrontation with one's own passions are not peripheral elements of discernment, but conditions for attaining inner clarity. The thesis therefore proposes an understanding of discernment as a reality situated at the intersection of anthropology, spirituality, therapy, and pastoral ministry.

Objectives and Research Methodology

The main objectives of the research are to highlight the Philokalic and anthropological dimensions of discernment; to analyze contemporary difficulties affecting the person's capacity to assume a stable path in life; to explore the relationship between discernment and freedom; to critically integrate the psychopastoral perspective into theological reflection; to recover the therapeutic dimension of discernment; and to formulate concrete directions for the pastoral accompaniment of persons experiencing difficulties in identifying and assuming their vocation.

The methodology is predominantly interdisciplinary, synthetic, and hermeneutical, integrating theological, Philokalic, pastoral, and psychopastoral analysis. The research draws upon Patristic and Philokalic sources, works of Orthodox anthropology and theology, contemporary contributions in Pastoral Theology, as well as relevant perspectives from psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Comparative analysis, theological interpretation, and critical reflection on the contemporary anthropological context are employed without allowing interdisciplinary dialogue to dilute the theological identity of the research.

Psychology is therefore employed as a dialogue partner and an auxiliary instrument for understanding certain psycho-emotional mechanisms, rather than as the ultimate paradigm for interpreting the human person. At the same time, the research avoids an abstract spiritualization that would disregard trauma, anxiety, addiction, emotional fragility, and the relational complexity of the concrete human person.

Structure and Development of the Research

The first chapter, “*The Stages of Acquiring Spiritual Discernment: Prayer and Asceticism as Formative Practices of the Inner Life*” establishes the theological and Philokalic foundations of

the central concept of the research. Discernment is analyzed in relation to prayer, asceticism, repentance, the gift of tears, watchfulness, temptations, and the work of divine grace. Both the Philokalic and the psychosocial and moral dimensions are explored, including the influence of social pressure, digital fragmentation, and informational overload upon the capacity for discernment. The research highlights the synergy between grace and freedom and emphasizes the need for discernment to be verified through humility, balance, ecclesial experience, and concrete commitment.

One of the fundamental ideas of this chapter is that discernment does not precede the spiritual life as an autonomous faculty but is formed within it. A person learns to discern insofar as he or she is healed from disordered desires, mental dispersion, and the absolutization of self-will. Prayer and asceticism are therefore presented not as forms of withdrawal from the realities of life, but as pedagogies of freedom.

The second chapter, “*Diagnosis and Therapy through Discernment*” provides an analysis of the main forms of fragmentation that influence existential choices. It examines disorders and inconsistencies of personality, individualism, autonomous rationalism, secularization, passions and addictions, shame and self-justification, perfectionism, comparison, and disordered sacrifices made in pursuit of an apparent “better life.” Particular attention is given to the relationship with the spiritual father, discernment in obedience, the danger of spiritual manipulation, and the mature interiorization of spiritual counsel.

The therapeutic perspective proposed by the thesis does not identify healing merely with the disappearance of symptoms, but with the restoration of the unity of the person and of inner freedom. From this perspective, passion is regarded not only as a moral deviation, but also as a distortion of the person’s faculties and a diminishment of freedom. Discernment consequently becomes a therapy of desire through its reorientation toward truth and communion.

The third chapter, “*Birth into Knowledge: The Courage to Remain on the Path*” shifts the focus toward existential commitment. The question “What should I do?” is examined in relation to freedom, fear, risk, authenticity, and fidelity to one’s calling. The research explores the need to seek competent persons within the counseling process, the role of trust, vulnerability, and shame, as well as the danger of allowing support to develop into dependency.

Considerable attention is devoted to family, peer, and social pressures, affective possessiveness, subtle manipulation, guilt induction, dependency, and the difficulty of psycho-affective separation. The chapter also analyzes existential comparison, envy, the social imaginary, and mimetic desire, all of which may lead a person to attempt to “live someone else’s life” and thereby lose contact with his or her own calling. The family is ultimately recovered not as an authority that determines a person’s vocation, but as a space of support, healing, communion, and maturation

The fourth chapter, “*Methods and Good Practices in the Art of Discernment*” develops the pastoral and applied dimension of the research. It examines the role of the pastoral counselor in managing “responsibility for the future,” a concept by which the thesis describes the person’s capacity to transform the future from a space of anxiety and postponement into a space of commitment. Chronic fatigue, role confusion, loneliness, and the weakening of the will are investigated, together with their effects upon the ability to construct a stable direction in life.

Within this context, the thesis formulates the “triad of the future” — truth, order, and sharing (communion) — as a synthetic instrument for pastoral counseling. Truth involves a lucid confrontation with one’s concrete situation and the distinction between reality and distorted interpretations; order translates the truth that has been discovered into concrete and verifiable steps; sharing prevents the person from becoming isolated and integrates commitment into a relationship of communion and support. The model is not proposed as an automatic technique, but as a pastoral framework capable of avoiding both reductive psychologization and abstract spiritualization.

The chapter also proposes contemporary pastoral methods for reducing the effects of “informational smog” and combating procrastination: evenings of dialogue with specialists, film screenings, social and philanthropic activities, visits, and training courses. Pastoral counseling in the diaspora and discernment in the digital age are addressed separately, with particular attention to the culture of comparison, identity anxiety, pseudo-models of life, virtual mentoring, fragmentation of attention, and the need to recover interiority and silence.

The fifth chapter, “*The Need for God and the Need for Discernment — Primary Needs of the Soul in Its Constant Search*” integrates the theological and missionary results of the research. It analyzes the contemporary crisis of anxiety and worldly care, the paralysis of vocational discernment, the continuing relevance of the priest’s missionary mandate, and the necessity of rebuilding inner unity

as a prerequisite for vocational commitment. Perseverance and fidelity are interpreted as forms of maturation, while identifying a person's psycho-somatic capacities is related to personal responsibility and service within the community.

The pastoral counselor is not called to label the person or to decide in his or her place, but to help the individual recognize gifts, limitations, and resources so that these may be integrated into a coherent life project. The research thus reaches the question of conscious choice as opposed to an unconscious flight from one's calling, and to the rebuilding of inner unity as a pastoral and missionary act.

Research Findings and Original Contribution

One of the central conclusions of the thesis is that difficulty in choosing one's path in life cannot be satisfactorily explained by a simple lack of information, willpower, or opportunities. In many situations, vocational indecision is a symptom of a deeper fragmentation of the person. For this reason, the pastoral response cannot consist solely in providing a solution or authoritatively indicating a direction, but must seek to restore the inner conditions within which a person can discern and freely assume a decision.

The research therefore highlights discernment as a therapeutic process of the inner reunification of the person. Mature choice becomes possible when the intellect, will, affectivity, conscience, freedom, and relationship with God no longer operate divergently, but begin to be ordered toward a coherent existential direction.

The thesis explicitly defines the nature of its originality. It does not claim to formulate a new psychological theory, an unprecedented methodological protocol, or new empirical field data. Its contribution is defined as synthetic, hermeneutical, and pastoral-applied. The original contribution lies in the critical interpretation, correlation, and integration of resources drawn from the Philokalic tradition, Christian anthropology, and relevant psychological literature into a unified perspective on pastoral counseling in choosing one's path in life.

More specifically, the contribution of the research consists in correlating contemporary vocational difficulties with the phenomenon of existential fragmentation; recovering Philokalic experience as a concrete resource for pastoral accompaniment; articulating a critical dialogue between Orthodox

anthropology and contemporary psychology; and proposing practical pastoral guidelines for the maturation of freedom and responsibility.

Within this framework, the concept of “responsibility for the future” is developed, through which the person is helped not to perceive the future exclusively as a threat or as an endless succession of reversible options, but as a gift that calls for response, fidelity, and commitment. The “triad of the future” — truth, order, and sharing — provides a pastoral synthesis of this perspective by connecting lucid self-knowledge with concrete action and communion.

Another significant result concerns the relationship between freedom and discernment. The research argues that authentic freedom is not identical with the unlimited multiplication of options or with absolute autonomy, but with acquiring the capacity to choose the good and to remain faithful to an assumed choice. From this perspective, renouncing other possibilities does not necessarily diminish freedom; rather, it may constitute the very condition for its maturation.

At the same time, the research proposes a balanced understanding of the spiritual relationship. The spiritual father or pastoral counselor should neither replace the freedom of the person being counseled nor create dependency, but should accompany the process through which that person comes to assume his or her own life responsibly before God. Mature obedience does not abolish personal responsibility, just as autonomy does not justify self-sufficiency.

Limitations of the Research and Perspectives for Further Study

The thesis explicitly acknowledges its predominantly theoretical and hermeneutical character. No extensive empirical studies or quantitative research concerning vocational behaviors and choices were undertaken. Consequently, the conclusions should be understood primarily as theological and pastoral guidelines rather than as statistical generalizations automatically applicable to all populations and contexts.

Another limitation results from the predominant focus on Romanian Orthodox pastoral realities. The diaspora, cultural and religious pluralism, advanced secularization, and the difficulties involved in transmitting Christian identity to generations raised in other cultural contexts require distinct investigations.

The research also recognizes the complexity of contemporary anthropological transformations and the need for ethical and conceptual prudence. Human experience cannot be reduced to rigid schemes, while the diversity of concrete situations makes universally applicable pastoral solutions impossible. The directions identified for future research include vocational discernment in the Orthodox diaspora, the impact of emerging anthropological ideologies upon identity formation, the relationship between the digital environment and the process of discernment, and the development and testing of pastoral models adapted to emerging cultural challenges

General Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the research argues that one of the fundamental crises of contemporary humanity lies not merely in the fact that people no longer know what to choose, but in the gradual loss of the inner capacity to settle into a choice and remain faithful to it. The multiplication of options, the acceleration of life, constant comparison, the fragility of relationships, the pressure to perform, and the fragmentation of attention can transform freedom into an experience of anxiety and provisionality.

Under these circumstances, the pastoral response cannot consist simply in offering an externally imposed solution. The person must be accompanied toward the recovery of inner unity, realistic self-knowledge, the healing of freedom, and the rediscovery of the relationship with God as the source of meaning and the ultimate criterion of vocation.

Discernment thus emerges not only as the virtue necessary for distinguishing between good and evil, but as a form of integral maturation of the human person, through which one learns to distinguish between desire and calling, pressure and responsibility, impulse and freedom, apparent good and authentic good. It requires prayer and reflection, obedience and freedom, ecclesial experience and personal responsibility, awareness of one's limitations and the courage to assume one's gifts.

From this perspective, pastoral counseling in choosing one's path in life does not seek to decide in another person's place, but to create the conditions in which that person becomes capable of discernment. The priest does not provide a rigid map of the future, nor does he abolish the freedom of the person he accompanies; rather, he helps that person to gather the fragments of his or her life,

to confront personal truth, to heal relationships with self and others, and to responsibly assume a calling before God.

Therefore, the “diagnosis” proposed by the research identifies fragmentation, passions, fears, pressures, comparisons, and mechanisms capable of distorting choice, whereas “therapy through discernment” seeks the restoration of inner unity, the maturation of freedom, and the transformation of choice into a responsible response to God’s calling.

From this perspective, discernment is neither merely a preliminary stage of spiritual life nor a technique reserved for moments of crisis. It is the expression of an existence that begins to heal, to become unified, and to enter into a living relationship with God, with oneself, and with others. In a world marked by dispersion, exteriority, and provisionality, the pastoral ministry of discernment thus emerges as one of the necessary forms of service and mission of the contemporary Church.