

DISCERNMENT

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I. INTRODUCTION

“Beloved, do not quench or suppress the Holy Spirit, but test and prove everything to see whether they are from God; test and prove everything until you recognize what is good; to that hold fast.”¹

Since the essential means of growth into the full stature of Christ, through union with Him, is our identification with **Him** in His (and our) passage to the Father, the Spirit of Christ is ever drawing us to a greater conformity to Christ in the Enduring Redemptive Act of Love which is our dying (to the false self) and rising (to our true self) in and with our Head and Bridegroom.

When communicating Himself in grace to humanity, God brings about in them the acceptance of this communication and the response to it. This is above all the movement of Faith, Hope and Charity. In them God is present to the consciousness, as the object of these virtues.

Since the “Grace of Discernment” is nothing less than the experience of God in the concrete particulars of daily life, the Experience of Him Who transcends the voice of all creatures is heard only in the inner silence of our transcendent self, the inner sanctuary of the heart. The most fundamental requirement for docility to the Voice of the Spirit is the grace of interior silence and recollection.

This interior Silence and Recollection is born and grows through the constant purification of the three divine, transcendent and unifying energies of our spirit: Faith, Hope and Love. Our daily growth in humility of heart and the spirit of prayer opens our entire being to receive a continuous increase of the gifts of Faith, Hope and Love, enabling us to live our daily life and make our choices by Faith, with Hope and in Love.

Let us touch on these interior dispositions that are so necessary for hearing, understanding and responding to the Silent Voice of the Spirit of the Father and Son, as He speaks to us in the silence of our heart.

Since the entire process of Discernment is “by-in-with-through” the Holy Spirit Himself, our growth in these interior dispositions of mind and heart (Docility, the theological Virtues of Faith, Hope and Love, Humility and Prayer) is itself the work of the Holy Spirit in us, with our cooperation. And since these dispositions are from the Spirit, they too, become for us, norms for discerning His Presence and Activity in the deepest recess of our heart.

II. DOCILITY TO THE VOICE OF THE SPIRIT

¹I John 4:1

A. The Docility Required of Beginners.

In the first stages of the spiritual life, the Spirit guides and directs us in the daily exercise of the virtues, both moral and theological - Faith, Hope and Love. Consequently, our fidelity to the inspirations of grace consists primarily in daily growth in the virtues, the exercises of which integrates and unifies all our forces and energies of soul and body. This opens us to the movement of the Holy Spirit through the operations of the Seven Gifts of the Spirit; and what the Spirit brings is Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Trustfulness, Gentleness and Self-control.

B. The Docility of the More Advanced.

As we become more delicately attuned to the silent, interior spiritual movements of God's Spirit testifying to our spirit; as "He speaks to us deep in our hearts" (to use the words of St. Paul in Romans 8:16) we enter into the fully "spiritual" life through the operation of the Seven Gifts of the Spirit, which are found revealed to us by God in Isaiah 2:1-3 and with which we were endowed at Baptism.

These Seven Gifts are the divine, passive energies of our spirit that place us at the constant disposal of the Holy Spirit, enabling us to surrender at any moment to the inflow into our spirit that of God's own Divine Light and Love, perceived by us through the interior senses of our spirit's intuition.

"To love this Spirit is to let ourselves be taken along by Him as a feather is carried by the wind; to let ourselves be possessed by Him as the dry branch is possessed by the fire that burns it; to allow ourselves to be animated by Him as the sensitive strings of a lyre take life from the artist's touch."²

C. All is the Work of Love.

From first conversion to Transforming Union with the Indwelling Trinity, the grace of docility is the grace of Christian Agape;³ God's Love flooding our hearts.⁴ Our response to the Spirit's continuous love is always a love that is called, a love stirred up, a love that responds to God's love. This activity does not have its origin in us. We are acted upon by the Spirit of Christ, Who gives us the capacity to respond to His love.

This continuous address of God's Spirit to our spirit is always addressed to our full liberty: God who knocks will enter only if we open to Him; God Who chooses would Himself be chosen; God Who offers Himself would have us give ourselves to Him in love, so that He might fill our being with the fullness of His love.

III. THE ESSENTIAL REQUIREMENT FOR DOCILITY

²Martinez, *The Sanctifier* p. 68

³a-gape2 (ä-gä'pä) (ä'g • -pä) —n. 1. Christian love. 2. Love that is spiritual, not sexual, in its nature. 3. In the early Christian Church, the love feast accompanied by Eucharistic celebration. [Gk. agapē, love.]

⁴Rom. 5:5

The voice of the Spirit is gentle; His movements are very delicate. To perceive them, we need a profound interior silence and peace of both mind and heart. To attain docility to the interior motions of God's Spirit interior silence and recollection are imperative.

“In order to attain this holy docility to the motions of the Spirit, the soul must be so silent and recollected that it can hear **His** voice; so pure and so filled with light that it can clearly perceive the meaning of the divine inspiration; so surrendered to the will of God that it embraces that will without hesitation; and so selfless that it performs that will without stopping at any sacrifice. Love accomplishes all this alone, or through the virtues and gifts which it coordinates and directs; for love as St. Paul teaches, ‘believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things’.”⁵

“Love brings recollection and silence to the soul. Whosoever loves, distinguishes among thousands of voices the voice of the beloved. Does not a mother know the voice of her child among all of the sounds, does she not hear it even when she is asleep? Love causes silence because it brings solitude and recollection; because it concentrates all its activity and desire on the beloved. The Holy Spirit frequently speaks to souls, breathes upon them, and inspires them. But they do not hear Him except in the measure of their love for Him, in the proportion in which love has anointed them with silence. Closely united with the Holy Spirit through love, souls feel the secret palpitation of the heart of God.”⁶

IV. FAITH AND THE GRACE OF DISCERNMENT

“Only by the Light of Faith (the impressive word is ‘only’) and by meditation on the Word of God (the essential means of growing in Faith), can one always and everywhere recognize God, in Whom we live and move and have our entire being and activity.”⁷ “Seek His will in every event, see Christ in all men whether they are close to us or strangers, make correct judgments about the true meaning and value of temporal things, both in themselves and in their relationship to man’s final goal.”⁸

Discernment, then is not a question of being intellectually clever; it is a question of being graced with the Pure Light of Faith, a question of being graced with an intimate, personal knowledge of Christ, Who is both the Light by which we see and the Reality seen, Who is, therefore, the entire reality of the grace of discernment, given to us by the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of Discernment.

V. HOPE AND THE GRACE OF DISCERNMENT

“He Who calls you is faithful, and He will sanctify you through and through: spirit, soul and body. He will do this for you, just as He promised you.”⁹

⁵Archbishop Martinez, *The Sanctifier*

⁶Ibid.

⁷Acts 17:28

⁸Vatican II, *Decree on the Lay Apostolate*

⁹I Thess. 5:23, ff.

Hope is an ardent longing for Transforming Union with the Indwelling Trinity through conformity to the Father's Will, through identification with Jesus, with His Filial Love of Obedience to the will of the Father in the Sacrament of the present moment.

Since the entire meaning, purpose and fruit of discernment is to seek, to discern and to embrace the Father's will in all the situations and events of daily life, it is not difficult to see how the grace of discernment grows in the measure our complete and total hope and trust in God grows, in His Power to embrace the Father's Will, which is made known to us through the Light of faith. How great is our need of this strength, God's strength which hope and trust in God's Power.

“Those seeking to know the Father's Will can succeed only if they seek it with the intense desire to do it as well as know it. Anyone who seeks to find God's will with the intention of deciding after he finds it whether he will do it or not, already has a barrier to finding it. He is not yet free from the blinding effect of self-will, of selfish interest. He will very likely end thinking his own will is God's will.”¹⁰

At times, after receiving some good inspiration from God, we immediately find ourselves assailed by repugnances, doubts, perplexities, and difficulties, which proceed from our weak fallen nature, our addictions which are directly opposed to divine inspiration. **How great is our need of hope and trust in God.** How great is our need of Divine Strength for discernment which hope and trust in God gives us. We must trust then in His Fidelity to His Word of Promise to be our strength, in His infinitely loving Mercy and Power.

Moreover, the more faithfully a person responds to the inspirations he receives the more grace he receives. God responds to our fidelity by giving more and higher graces in our journey to Transforming Union. Therefore, it often happens that a person experiences temptations to fear and timidity. He asks: Where does this way lead? How shall I be able to bear up under these increasing demands? How can I fulfill them? If at this point we begin to rely on ourselves and not on God alone, or if false discretion urges us to remain mediocre, then we lose courage and cannot go forward on the road of fidelity. This seems to be one of the chief reasons why so few reap the full fruits of “docility”.¹¹

VI. CHRISTIAN AGAPE AND DISCERNMENT

The grace of discernment, “the grace to test the spirits to see if they are all from God,”¹² has its deepest origin and fruit in love, as does everything that is truly Christian.

¹⁰Jules Toner,S.J., *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, Sept.1971

¹¹Joseph de Guibert, *The Theology Of The Spiritual Life* p.116

¹²John 4:1

The process of discernment is entirely rooted and grounded in love, and this for many reasons, not the least of which is that love unites us immediately and directly to the Supreme Norm of Discernment which is God.

For fruitful discernment of the varied impulses, attractions and aversions that we may be experiencing, it is imperative that we be able to transcend them; distance ourselves from them, in order that we might view them from a higher level of consciousness; see them in the Light of God Himself. Love is this power of transcending what must be discerned; it is the power of resting in God, in God's own Divine Light, which enables us to view all that we experience in the outer man from the level of our spirit.

If we are to discern the Voice of God, it is imperative that before and during the process, we hold our wills indifferent to any particular choices until we know what the Will of God is for us. Otherwise we will be inclined to hear and respond to the subtle voice of self rather than the Voice of God. Love is this power of complete detachment from anything and everything that is not God Himself, His Will for us. As St. John of the Cross says so well:

“Of its very nature love subjects the lover to the Person loved. Love of God, then makes us love all that He loves, transforms our wills into His Will, so that there are no longer two wills but only One; that of the Beloved, to which we conform ourselves perfectly. To love God is to lose our will (false self) in God, so that we no longer love anything but what God Himself loves.”¹³

As we saw, the key to the entire mystery of “Discernment” is an ever more perfect and habitual state of love, “Docility to the Holy Spirit,” for which the essential condition is Interior Silence and Recollection. Since it is Love that begets this interior recollection and silence, love is essential in the entire process of discernment.

Whoever loves distinguishes among a thousand voices the Voice of the Beloved. Love brings silence because it concentrates all its energies on the Beloved, awakening in our spirit a deep longing to hear His Voice and to surrender ourselves in love to Him Who so loves us.

VII. SOME CONCLUSIONS

Faith, Hope and Love are the work of the Holy Spirit in us, sharing with us the Divine Consciousness of Himself, which is the supreme norm of all genuine discernment. Our collaboration with the Holy Spirit, is our openness to hear and respond by faith, with trust and in love to the Divine Word He implants in our hearts; the Father's own Divine Word of Divine Truth, Promise and Love.

Since the measure of the inflow of the Spirit's Gifts of Divine Faith, Hope and Love, which are the Divine Powers of discernment, is in proportion to the depth of our humility, true and genuine humility is certainly one, if not the most basic disposition for discernment.

¹³St. John, *Ascent To Mount Carmel*, Bk. I, Chap 2, No 2-5

VIII. THE DISPOSITION FOR HUMILITY

God is close to the humble of heart, indeed He lives in them with all the graces of discernment. This is so because God is where Truth is and Humility is Truth; it is the lived Truth of my essential, ontological, and personal relationship to God as creature to Creator, the needy one to the Source of all of which I need, the beneficiary to the Benefactor, the servant to the Lord, the sinner to his Savior, the son to His Father, the bride to her Spouse, the temple of God to the Indwelling Spirit as Friend, Guest and Director.

Since Humility is Truth, the humble of heart will fully acknowledge and accept themselves as they are. They come into God's Presence, as they are and God sees them fully aware of their sinful condition, their radical poverty of spirit, their experiences of frailty and weakness, their failures in loving God, neighbor and the world with His own Divine Love.

The process of discernment will always be fruitful, always lead to greater identification with Jesus in the mystery of His dying and rising, to the extent it is carried out in truth: the truth of my complete and total dependence on God for His Divine Light, Strength and Love, the truth of acknowledging that in the process of discernment, I am deeply wounded in spirit, soul and body and am, therefore, in great need of Christ's healing love in the here present situation of discerning the Voice of the Spirit. We begin, continue and conclude our discernment not only in the consciousness of our great need of the Father's merciful love but with an ardent longing for the healing of all our spiritual, mental and physical wounds, especially those of which we are unaware and which are influencing the whole process of our discernment.

If humility is the most basic and fundamental disposition for discernment, it is also the clearest sign and norm of the presence of the Spirit in the interior movements of our spirit. The reason is clear: any genuine experience of God awakens within our deepest heart a profound reverence, respect, littleness and humility. The greater our experience of God the greater our experience of the littleness of the creature and the Transcendence of God, the sinful condition of man in the presence of the infinite holiness of God.

IX. REFLECTION

“The Holy Spirit saves us from the impulses that would throw us into wild competition with others. He delivers us from ambition. He is most easily recognized where He inspires obedience and humility. No one really knows Him who has not tasted the tranquillity that comes from the renunciation of our own will, our own pleasure, our own interests (without glory, without notice, without approval) for the interests of some other person.”¹⁴

“The inspirations of the Holy Spirit are not grandiose. They are most simple. They move us to seek God in works that are difficult without being spectacular. They lead us to paths that are

¹⁴Thomas Merton, *Ascent To Truth*, p. 185

happy because they are obscure. That is why they always bring with them a sense of peace and liberation; ‘for He is the Spirit of Truth, and the Truth shall set you free’¹⁵.¹⁶

X. PRAYER

“Prayer is absolutely essential for authentic discernment that we might arrive at true liberty of spirit and not be led astray by subtle self-seeking, prejudice, nor fixations caused by insecurity. Prayer is absolutely essential that each person may be truly open to the Spirit, seeking and desiring only the Father’s greater honor and glory, one’s own perfection and that of neighbor.”¹⁷

The Truth of Humility opens our spirit to all the graces of Faith, Hope and Love, the exercise of which is Prayer, union with God that gives us the Divine Light, Strength and Love necessary for all genuine discernment.

The Light of Faith experienced in prayer, faith that is strengthened by hope and inspired with love, is Light upon the existential Word of God here and now. It is the Light given by the Spirit which illumines one’s self, persons, events, situations in the Light of Christ.

Prayer is union with Christ that gives us the Mind of Christ, the divine Consciousness of Christ, which is the supreme norm for discernment.

With the Mind of Christ, His own Divine Light enlightening our spirit, we see all creatures as they really are, as God sees them; we see them as entirely from God, in God, to and for God.

Above all, this pure light of faith, experienced enables us to discern the deep motivation coloring a person’s reading of the evidence of God’s actual call to him, so that he will be truly free and open to the Spirit illuminating the evidence. Thus we are able to discern the orientation of our thoughts and feelings as we prayerfully reflect on the decision to be made.

“This discerning prayer is a reflection upon the existential Word of God indicated in the concrete evidence of the actual situation and contemplation of the word of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, in the Gospel, in the living tradition of the Church and experienced in each person’s own spiritual history.”¹⁸

XI. THE ANAWIM

“My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, my soul magnifies the Lord, for He has regarded the low estate of His handmaid. He who is Mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His Name.”¹⁹

¹⁵Jn.14:17

¹⁶Thomas Merton, *Ascent To Truth*, p. 185

¹⁷Futrell,S.J. *Studies*, p.60

¹⁸Futrell, op.cit.,p.61

¹⁹Luke 1:47

One word expresses the entire spirituality, the entire mystery of discernment in both the Old and New Testaments: *Anawim*, the little ones, the meek and humble of heart, the poor in spirit those who in loving docility to the Holy Spirit, place themselves by faith, with trust and in love at the complete disposal of the Holy Spirit. In fulfilling His Divine Mission in our lives the Holy Spirit is thus able to transform us from glory to glory into the Image of the Son, into the Son's own communion with the Father, with men and with the whole world - through love.

The joy, peace and fruitfulness of true and genuine discernment is ineffable contentment and happiness of the *Anawim*, the lowly and humble of heart, the true servants and handmaids of the Lord.

Through the grace of discernment the Holy Spirit is able to reproduce in us His greatest Masterpiece: our risen, glorified head, Christ, in the measure He finds in us, as He found in Mary, the interior dispositions of the *Anawim*: the meek and humble of heart, the unique example of which is Jesus and His Mother:

“Learn Of Me Because I Am Meek And Humble Of Heart.”²⁰

XII. CONCLUSION

Apex of Discernment:

“When we yield ourselves to the experience of the Spirit, when everything that can be grasped, named or tasted fades away, when we transcend all created reality, then we can be sure that not only the spirit, but the Holy Spirit, is at work in us. Then is the hour of grace. Then the uncanny fathomlessness of our existence, which we experience, is really the unfathomableness of God, Who is communicating Himself to us. It is the first approach to His infinity, in which there are no paths to be found, and which tastes like nothing, because it is Infinity.”²¹

“When we have yielded ourselves and no longer hear our own voices, when we have denied ourselves and no longer control our own lives, when all things including our own being are torn from us and flung into the distance, then we begin to live in the world of God, the God of grace and eternal Life. At first this may seem strange and unfamiliar. Ever and again we shall be tempted to flee back into the accustomed and the near; indeed we shall be compelled and permitted to do so. **But we must seek to acquire a taste for the pure wine of the Spirit**, that which is charged with the Holy Spirit. Or at least we must come to the point of not pushing the chalice away when His providence extends it to us.”²²

“The chalice of the Holy Spirit in this life is identical with the chalice of Christ. He alone will drink it who accustoms himself by degrees to find fullness in emptiness, success in failure, life in death, riches in renunciation. He who has learned this is

²⁰Mt.2:29

²¹Karl Rahner, cited by Dulles in *The Ignatian Experience In The Theology Of Karl Rahner*, p. 484

²²Ibid.

capable of experiencing the Spirit, the pure Spirit, and in so doing experiences the Holy Spirit of grace. For such a liberation is not normally given, at least in the long run, unless one accepts in faith the grace of Christ. And when a person is liberated in this way, they are set free by supernatural grace to plunge into the very Life Of God, which is the Life of our spirit, the ‘spiritual’ Life.”²³

“O’ Father, Lord of Heaven and earth, thank you for hiding these things from the wise, clever and learned, and revealing them to the little ones, to the meek and humble of heart. Yes, Father, I praise You that such was Your gracious Will and good pleasure.”²⁴

XIII. APPENDIX

St. Ignatius’ Rules For Making a Good Choice:

“In every good choice, as far as it depends on me, our intention must be simple. I must consider only the end for which I am created, that is, for the Praise of God our Lord and for the salvation of my soul. Hence, whatever I choose must help me to this end for which I am created.”²⁵

In making important decisions, in matters that are either good or indifferent in themselves, it is important to have a good, simple, practical method for discerning the Voice of the Spirit, for knowing what God’s Will is for me in the matter to be decided. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius gives us the following helps for making wise decisions.

The following are three circumstances in which a good decision might be made:

The first is, when God our Lord so moves and attracts the will, that without doubting, or being able to doubt, a devout soul follows what is shown it, as did St. Paul and St. Matthew in following Christ the Lord.

The second is when enough light and knowledge is received by experience of consolations and desolations, and by the experience of the discernment of various spirits.

The third is when one considers first why they were born, namely to praise God and save his soul, and desiring this they choose a life or state within the limits of the Church, in order to serve his Lord and save his soul. This is a time of quiet, when the soul is not acted on by various spirits, and uses its natural powers freely and tranquilly.

In addition there are two ways that will help in all circumstances:

A. The first way has six points:

²³Ibid.

²⁴Mt. 2:25-26

²⁵The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, No. 169

1. Put the choice before you, such as an office or benefice (or anything that falls in this category) whether to take it or leave it.

2. It is necessary to keep in mind the end for which I am created, which is to praise God our Lord and save my soul. I should not be more inclined or disposed to take the thing proposed and try to keep myself indifferent, without any inordinate propensity. I should think of myself in the middle of a balance, with an option to follow what I feel to be more for the glory of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul.

3. Ask God our Lord to move my will and put into my soul what I ought to do regarding the thing proposed, so as to promote more His praise and glory; discussing well and faithfully with my intellect, and choosing agreeably to His most holy pleasure and will.

4. Consider how many advantages follow from holding the proposed office or benefice for only the praise of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul. Then consider the disadvantages and danger that follow having or not having the same.

5. After I have discussed and considered all sides of the question to look where reason more inclines: and so, according to the greater inclination of reason, and not according to any inclination of sense, I should deliberate on the thing proposed.

6. When the choice is made the person should go with much diligence to prayer before God our Lord and offer Him his choice, that His Divine Majesty may be pleased to receive and confirm it, if it is to His greater service and praise.

B. The Second Way contains four Rules:

First Rule is that that love which moves me and makes me choose such a thing should descend from above, from the love of God, so that he who chooses feels first in himself that that love, which he has for the thing which he chooses, is only for his Creator and Lord.

Second Rule is to set before you a person you have never seen before and ask him what he would choose for the greater glory of God our Lord, and the greater perfection of his soul.

Third Rule is to consider if you were at the point of death what choice you think you should have made in retrospect.

Fourth Rule is to look and consider how I shall find myself on the Day of Judgment, to think how I would then want to have deliberated about the present matter.

“Dearest Lord, teach me to be generous. Teach me to serve You as You deserve; to give and not count the cost; to fight and not heed the wounds; to toil and not seek for rest; to labor and not ask for reward, save that of knowing that I am doing Your Will.”

- St. Ignatius

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