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Theology and Discernment of Spirits

Joseph M. Gambescia, M.D.

Dr. Gambescia, on the staff of St. Agnes Medical Center, Philadelphia, wrote the following article for a class in Introduction to Theology.

PREFACE

*The idea for this paper eventuated from the confluence of my involvement in several apparently disparate events which occurred over a period of 40 years. The first occurred in a religion class at Villanova in 1939 when the class was opened with the question "How many theologians do you think there are in hell?" While we never arrived at any set number, it became apparent that there is a distinct difference between knowing about holy things and being holy. Yet the reasons for this difference always vexed and perplexed me. As a medical student, I was introduced to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius¹ by Msgr. Charles B. Mynaugh. Then in the course of my medical career and being involved in the Catholic Physicians' Guild, I obtained almost firsthand information in the theological dissent that followed *Humanae Vitae*. This added to my perplexity, not to mention the vexation. Then it was my good fortune for some years to have had the privilege under Rev. Lewis Delmage, S.J., of making the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and studying their structure, as well as being instructed by Rev. Herbert F. Smith, S.J. on discernment of spirits — the heart of the Spiritual Exercises. Finally, during the first session of our class in theology, following Father Scanlon's explanation of Macquarrie's definition of theology, he was asked, "Why is participation necessary for a theologian?" Subsequently reflecting on this question and then seeking out Macquarrie's text on theology, I began to perceive the answer to my perplexity. The paper, then, tries to answer the question, "Why is participation so necessary for a theologian?" and, I suppose, also tells theologians how to stay out of hell.*

The final encouragement to approach this subject came, unknown to him, from Father Thomas Scanlon himself who in teaching and lecturing to us, many times used examples from his own experience and

revealed in them that the professor of theology was also a discerner of spirits.

In the course of developing my thesis in this paper, I find myself inadvertently taking issue with a renowned and respected theologian, John Macquarrie. I do this in all humility and with deep respect, appreciating that this boldness is no doubt born of insufficient knowledge on my part since I am a mere infant in this study of theology. On the other hand, "out of the mouths of babes" will come forth wisdom, and we must remember that it took a child to observe that the emperor had no clothes. And if I am wrong, I would appreciate my professor instructing me in this wise, else how can I advance in wisdom and knowledge?

Theology, discourse about God, has been defined as *Fides quaerens intellectum* — Faith seeking understanding.

One need not travel far in that journey which is the study of theology to appreciate that a basic activity in this seeking-of-understanding is an intellectual one and that this activity comprises an engagement in perceiving, discovering, ascertaining, apprehending clearly, discriminating, differentiating. It is a process of discernment, the object of which is the understanding of a religious faith.

It is a short step for anyone familiar with the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* to a wondering if any relationship exists between theological discernment and Ignatian discernment of spirits — the life blood of the Exercises — the object of which is the determination of a particular course of action within the ambience of Christian faith.

The *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* are designed to bring an individual to God. It was St. Ignatius' contention that through these exercises God would communicate Himself to an individual (or to a community). It was within these Exercises that St. Ignatius expounded a means of discerning and sorting the various motions and the varied spirits within men which would help us identify the will of God.²

If a relationship does exist then one should explore of what order and to what depth this carries. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate this relationship and to explore its quality and significance.

The basic model I will use is that described by Father Smith, in his article "Discernment of Spirits."³ I have elected this approach because it is the one most familiar to me (having been tutored in Ignatian discernment by Father Smith himself) but also because Father Smith explains discernment by analyzing its nature, and this approach lends itself to the type of analysis utilized here.

For comparison I have chosen Macquarrie's definition of theology because it was a definition used in class; it is consonant, within limits,

with the several definitions given in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* ⁴ but, perhaps of greatest importance it, like Father Smith's paper, approaches an explanation of theology from the aspect of its nature.⁵ Thus the comparison of discernment of spirits and theology is more easily accomplished without running too great a risk of comparing apples with oranges.

In studying Macquarrie's definition (*vide infra*) and the factors which he states are formative in theology, certain key elements are noted, namely that theology is:

1. a study of a particular faith;
2. a participation in a particular religious faith;
3. a reflection on a particular religious faith;
4. expressing the contents of that faith;

and it utilizes:

5. experience;
6. revelation;
7. reason;
8. scripture;
9. tradition;
10. culture.

It is these key elements which I will use in relating theology to the elements that Father Smith develops in his essay. To facilitate the presentation of this relationship, I will present the key elements in parallel. Because of their length, and respecting the constraints of space, I have not listed the principles put forth by Father Smith. Rather as each one is introduced, it will be quoted in the left hand column.

I have taken the liberty of changing the order of Father Smith's principles. This should not be construed as a criticism (Is the pupil greater than the master?), but rather as my choosing to use these principles from a different vantage point.

Definition

"Discernment of spirits is the happy experience of being led by the Spirit in deeper union with a particular course of action joining me more intimately to the slain and risen Son in His Body the Church."

Definition*

"Theology is the study which through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith seeks to express that faith in the clearest and most coherent language available."

*Macquarrie's definition is a general one designed to encompass any theology. In this paper all references to faith, theology and the theologian will be from the Catholic vantage point.

Comment:

Even cursorily, examining concepts rather than a particular wording, one can note that "discernment" and "seeking" are essentially the same activity; "being led to deeper union" is equivalent to "participation" and "reflection"; certainly "participation" and being "joined to Christ" indicate the same action. The particular course of action being discerned in theology is expressing the faith, and certainly Catholicism is a spirit-led faith; the course of action being sought in discernment of spirits is one's personal expressive response in faith, led by the Spirit.

This paradigm thus suggests and supports a significant relationship.

Rahner and Smith say of Torres' discussion of the Exercises, "He does not even scruple to say that a few days spent in making the Exercises will teach one more real theology than thirty years of reading and studying scholastic theology."⁶

Let us then examine this relationship in more detail, utilizing the key elements in both discernment and theology.

Discernment of Spirits

"5.* The basic interior measuring rod for discerning spirits is the whole history and shape of a person's relationship with God. This relationship must therefore be known by constant prayer and meditation and return to the springs of first graces."

Theology

Macquarrie carefully elaborates the need for participation in faith. He points out that it expresses itself variously but particularly in actions and a way of life. In his discussion of experience he points out that the life of faith precedes theology and may be said to motivate it.

*These numbers refer to Smith's principles as numbered in the reference article "Discernment of Spirits."

Comment:

For both the person involved in discernment and the theologian, it is necessary to begin with a personal life with God. Neither discernment nor theology is a spectator activity. For a Catholic, attendance at Mass and following the Commandments is not the essence of Christianity, but its starting point. The development of a vital prayer life is essential as a way of life for any Christian. "Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test" (Mt. 26:44). . . . "Pray constantly". . . (Ephes. 6:18).

The Catholic theologian must be steeped deeply in a life of prayer. God is not a problem to be solved but a Person to meet in a relationship of God as Father and we as His children. We meet Him through Christ Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn. 14:6).

Let us represent graphically this interior life as a dynamic force

shaped by a trinity of attributes — prayer, meditation and the return to the springs of first graces.

In trying to present this thesis in the clearest and most coherent language available I have, in addition to the discursive method, resorted to a graphic representation attempting to demonstrate the functional and structural relationship of the key elements. While it is true that the graphic representations are arbitrary, yet even in this arbitrariness the relationship is depictable. Thus one might say we are demonstrating the functional anatomy of both discernment and theology.



“1. To circumscribe the arena of legitimate freedom for personal discernment, and to obtain the necessary guidelines for Christian discernment, know the Bible and Tradition.”

In the study of theology and for the theologian, Macquarrie stresses the importance of Scripture and cautions against absolutizing it as the sole source of the “primordial revelation” or using it as the sole source of theology.

The importance of tradition is emphasized, acknowledging the correctness of the Catholic position. He points out that scripture and tradition are a bulwark against individualism and enthusiasm which theologians may be inclined to follow.

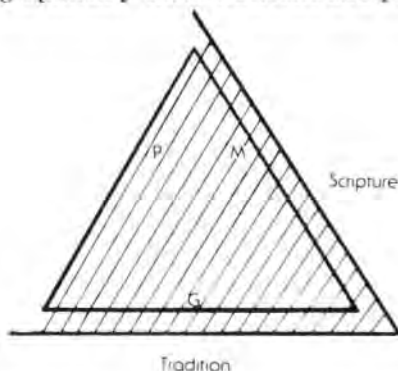
Comment:

The Bible and tradition are the major sources of God’s revelation of Himself to man and form one sacred deposit of the word of God which is committed to the Church and both are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of devotion and reverence.⁸ God reveals Himself through the deeds of salvation history and through the words of the prophets. Most of all He has spoken to us through His Son.⁹ For the theologian, then, the basic material to be studied that would

need clear expression is contained in Scripture and tradition. It is evident also that Sacred Scripture and tradition contain the nutrients for the life of prayer. Thus in both discernment and theology, the guidelines and sources are the same. These serve, as well, as part of a protective mantle and shelter for this life of prayer.

This protective mantle is not to be construed as an inhibiting force, but should be likened to the human skin — a protection to the body yet a vital and dynamically functioning organ protective but resilient and elastic within limits, capable of growth necessary to accommodate the dynamic life contained therein; protective, yet vulnerable to penetration, like the skin which is penetrated by the rays of the sun for health, by medication to restore health, by missiles that kill.

Let us represent graphically these nutrient and protective forces.



“10. Individual discernment for the Catholic is limited and guided by hierarchical authority.”

Macquarrie at best makes only implied reference to this. However, for the Catholic theologian, his role as informant to the magisterium is well spelled out¹⁰ as well as the limits of licit dissent.^{11, 12}

Comment:

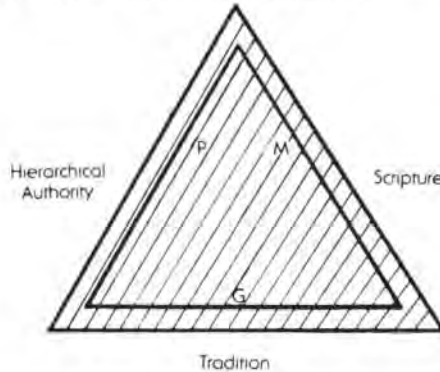
The importance of this hierarchical authority is well demonstrated. Macquarrie points out the necessity of Scripture and tradition as bulwarks but without the limits noted here, the theologian flirts with exactly the individualism that Macquarrie cautions against and without which the discernment of spirits would be completely adrift. “The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living Magisterium of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.”¹³

This limitation by hierarchical authority must not be confused with a rigid unnatural and unilateral constraint. It is not so much a law or code as an attitude best expressed as “thinking with the Church.”

Rahner, speaking of St. Ignatius, continued “. . . for this servant, this noble soldier of the Church was the one who handed down to us this, ‘Rules for Thinking Rightly with the Church,’ this attitude is as old as the Church itself.”¹⁴

One can perceive, however, Macquarrie’s at least tacit assent to its necessity in the strong point he makes against individualism and the need to speak from a community of faith. This omission, however, may be a defect in any general definition which attempts to be too all-encompassing.

Schematically also it is apparent that the Bible and tradition are not sufficient to completely protect the life in the Spirit. A definite hiatus is noted which is closed with this key element.



The dynamic life of man with God which is enclosed in prayer, meditation and return to springs of first graces though enclosed in a protective mantle of scripture, tradition and hierarchial authority still is in a precarious position and requires a firm footing. This foundation is seen in another of Smith’s principles.

“4. Reason informed by faith must play its proper role in every discernment of Spirits.”

“. . . a claim is staked for reason among the formation factors in theology — and not merely for elucidatory reasons but for corrective and architectonic reasons”

Comment:

Man, who is created to the image and likeness of God, shares the divine image, in great part, in his rationality. To disregard reason then, would be a serious error. On the other hand, man’s reason alone can never approach a full knowledge of God. God turns man’s wisdom into folly (1 Cor. 1:19f; Job 30 and 40). Hence, man in relating to God, in meeting God, in surrendering to the divine will must have his reason illumined by the gift of Faith. This God provides free for the

asking. All that is required is our assent. It is this reason, informed by faith, that comprises the major vehicle of the theologian's activities and that provides a firm basis for discernment in the spiritual life.

This is a crucial area for it is here that the interior life of God seeks its object. For the discerner, it is faith seeking love; for the theologian, it is a loving faith seeking understanding of love.

Macquarrie suggests that the theologian must, in essence, "step back" in this discernment. I think this is a serious error because it would seem to me that in this regard the theologian, like the discerner, must perforce step *into* the faith. Only then is he truly participating and only then can his seeking be fruitful. Christ stated that He was the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn. 14:6). The truth then is something real, tangible, palpable. Faith permits us to see this truth — it is "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hb. 11:1). Faith then may be likened to spectacles and a hearing aid. The Spirit Who is obscure or not seen at all, Who is heard faintly, or not at all, becomes seen and heard when the spectacles and hearing aid of faith are put on.

I am quite aware of what Macquarrie's point is in his "stepping back." He fears that the theologian would not see the forest for the trees. He fears the loss of a certain objectivity. I submit that this stepping back is precisely what a theologian should not do because in stepping back, theology becomes purely intellectual and thus the full force of faith is impeded. The theologian may step back to evaluate what he has thought or said or written — an action of surveillance, of thoughtful consideration, of prudence. But he cannot step back to understand the faith; rather this thoughtful consideration, this prudence, this objectivity is sharpened by faith. It is the proper use of discernment of spirits as presented in the Exercises that ensures objectivity. The relationship is unequivocal. Rahner states, "It will be impossible to understand and especially to guide the election, the masterpiece of Exercises without deep theological study."¹⁵ Thus the very thrust of the Exercises is objectivity in making authentic Christian decisions so that its only orientation is seeking the will of God.¹⁶ Certainly the theologian in discharging his obligation to the Magisterium must assume this same posture. In "stepping back" not only does he not see the trees, he doesn't see the forest.

Osler said that to study medicine without books was to sail an uncharted sea, but to study medicine without patients was not to go to sea at all. To study theology without the intellectual discernment required is to sail an uncharted sea. To study theology without faith is not to go to sea at all. Christianity is not a cause to be championed, not an ideology but a God to love, a God to surrender to, a God to listen to — a way of life. One cannot step back from a way of life without losing the way.

St. Paul states that we must put on Christ. Macquarrie in trying to

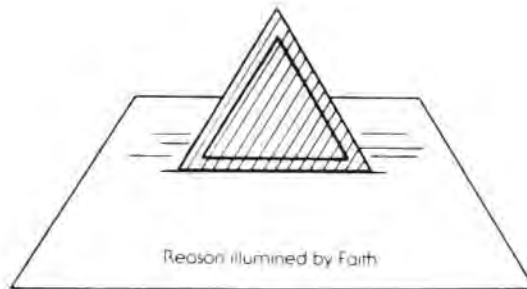
clarify theological activity points out that St. Thomas' "My Lord and My God" is not theology, but datum for theology. Another St. Thomas would pray, "Lord, teach me to believe that I might better understand." This, too, is not theology but certainly describes the posture of the theologian.

Some of this misunderstanding may arise from Macquarrie's attempts to relate theology as a science to the other sciences. He suggests a position intervening between natural and behavioral science, thus relating to both. Yet he finally points out that it has many singular aspects and terms it a divine science. I would envision theology as a prism that receives the light of truth which illumines the way. The prism separates this light into its component truths, shedding its spectral radiance on *all* sciences. It is the theologian's task to finely tune the position of the prism so that the proper light falls on the proper place.

Thus theology embraces all science. So it is that the theologian must be in discourse *with* God on one hand and in discourse *with* scientists on the other in order to have discourse *about* God.

I have taken pains to stress this point not so much to disagree with Macquarrie, but rather because it seems that many modern theologians have fallen into this trap to the point that they attempt to reconcile the faith to modern experience and culture, thus compromising the faith.^{17, 18, 19} Too many theologians have picked up microscopes and stethoscopes; too many scientists have picked up stoles; not enough theologians or scientists have picked up the cross.

Let us represent this stepping into faith-illuminated reason as a structured frame, the skeleton as it were for the interior life without which the dynamic life collapses.



"9. Before the pilgrim can gain expertise in the discernment of spirits, he must develop the habit of habitual attunement to his own psychic and spiritual states

Macquarrie points out that theology draws on the whole range of human experience "and especially in a secular age. . . . Theologians have drawn attention to what

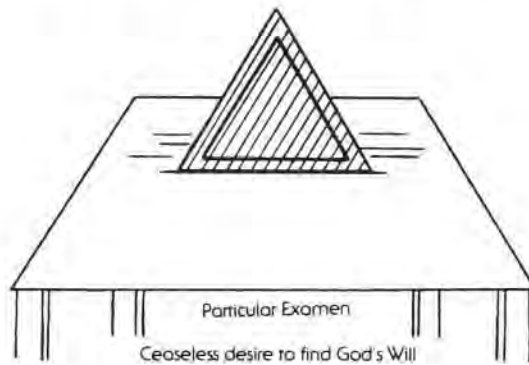
for they are the instruments of discernment.” (Particular Examen).

might be called “religious dimensions” in everyday experiences. “In the broadest sense it is a quest for self-understanding and has theological significance to the extent that it comes to grips with the religious dimensions of experience.

“12. Discernment of spirits in the veteran discerner is a spontaneous and ceaseless process that instantaneously guides his conduct in accord with the desire to find and to do God’s will.”

Macquarrie makes the point of the need for self-understanding. For the individual pursuing the life of man with God this is accomplished by the daily examination of conscience and the constant awareness of seeking to do God’s will: “My food is to do the will of my Father.” This knowledge of self and searching for God’s will raises this dynamic personal life with God above all other considerations. For the Catholic and Catholic theologian, this awareness of one’s psychic and spiritual state is not to be reduced to purely psychological terms.

Let us represent this recognition of man’s relationship with God and the world as an elevation in an interior sense, and a means whereby free movement and locomotion become possible.



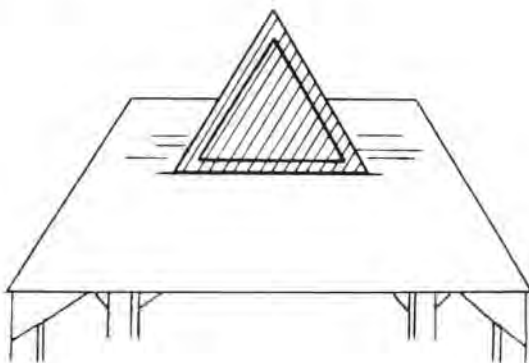
“8. Since a wise leader rarely promotes a man who is doing poorly in his present responsibilities, entertain grave doubts

about the accuracy of a discernment that leads you to more difficult enterprises if you are already failing under your present obligation.”

Comment:

Macquarrie makes no mention of spiritual direction. In the discernment process, the spiritual director is a necessary guide. One would think that for Catholic theologians immersed in a life of prayer, a spiritual director would be an absolute necessity. The role of the spiritual director is not to dictate or even suggest the content of the dialogue between man and God, but rather whether an individual is correctly interpreting the source of the inner effects and motions he is experiencing.

This is spiritually a stabilizing influence, much like tendons and ligaments.



“11. The object of discernment of spirits is to employ all my ingenuity in determining upon the course to which I am guided by the best use of my own wisdom responding to the inspiration and confirmation of divine wisdom. Discernment, therefore, seeks an illumination, a rightness, a certainty which God alone can give (cf Gen. 3:22 with Col. 1:9).”

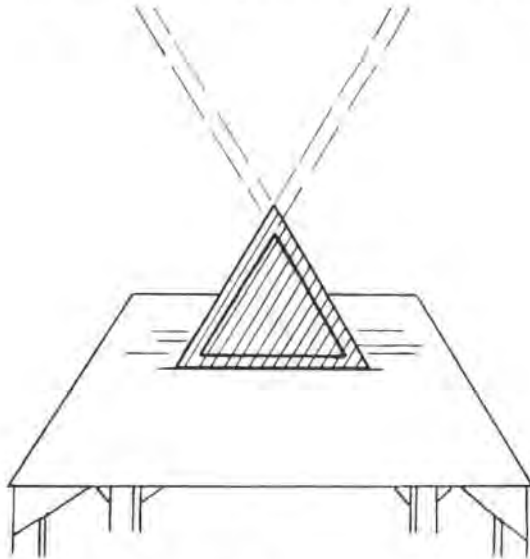
Herein lies Macquarrie’s explanation of reflection.

Comment:

“For this illumination and rightness to be appreciated, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving joy and ease to everyone assenting to the truth and believing it.”²⁰

“He who made our mind and hearts speaks also within us. He gives those whom He calls to know Him a light by which they can with certainty recognize that it is the Lord of all who calls them to life.”²¹

The spiritual life is now in a posture of receptivity. In a protective mantle, elevated and stabilized, it is in position to seek God’s communications and is in position and open to discern the various motions and affections which will lead it to determine God’s will. Then the interior life of man with God can reach out, and as with arms outstretched, can apprehend God’s communications. This attitude is critical to both the discerners of spirits and the theologian.



“2. At times God reveals His will to us so personally and so clearly that we carry it out spontaneously without discernment of struggle because we experience neither doubt about it nor resistance to it but only a loving impulse to do it at once.”

Macquarrie speaks of both the inspired revelation we receive from God as well as the private revelation one receives personally. These contribute to the formation of the theologian.

“3. A private revelation does not necessarily eliminate the need for

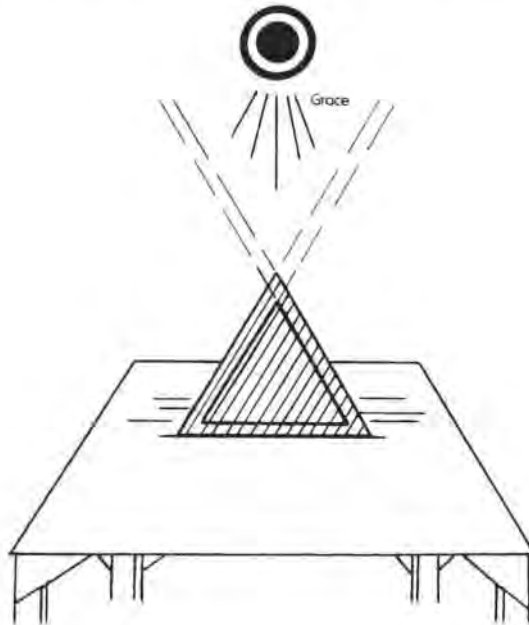
discernment, for the revelation itself may need to be discerned as to its authenticity.”

“6. Discernment of Spirits is founded on the belief that as regards private revelation and inspiration, God reveals Himself and guides us individually and personally more through interior states of affective experiences than through clear and distinct ideas.”

Comment:

It is a major tenet of the Judeo-Christian heritage that God, in fact, speaks to us. From the theophanies of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, through the prophets and finally through Jesus and the Church, God steps into history. God speaks to us through His Church, through Scripture and tradition, through the signs of the times and through prayer. Individual discerners and theologians alike must utilize these channels.

In continuing our graphic representation, the Sun of Justice is depicted as well as the graces, and the various motions to which we are subjected.



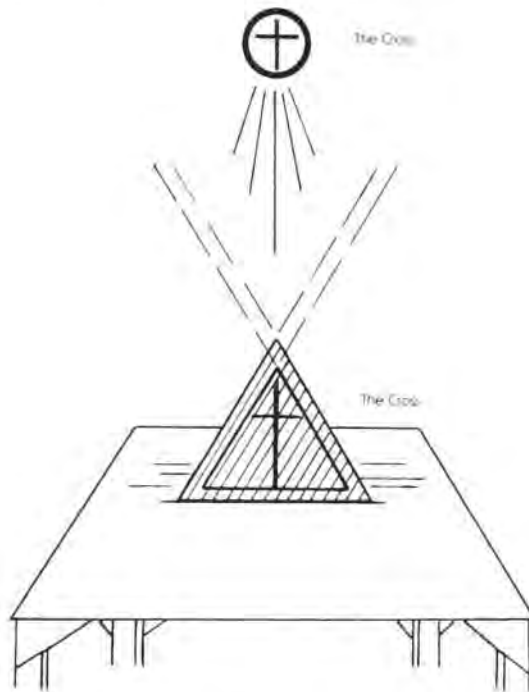
“7. Discernment of Spirits must be done in the shadow of the cross of Christ and in the hope of resurrection with Him or it will lead to error after error.”

Again Macquarrie’s participation and reflection came into prominence here.

Comment:

From the standpoint of the Catholic theologian, all seeking and expression must be done in the framework of the Paschal mystery.

It is only in the cross that we meet the whole Christ; it is at Calvary that the Covenant is sealed, signed and delivered. Discernment outside of the Paschal mystery and theological activity outside of the cross are, at best, natural reasoning and natural theology.



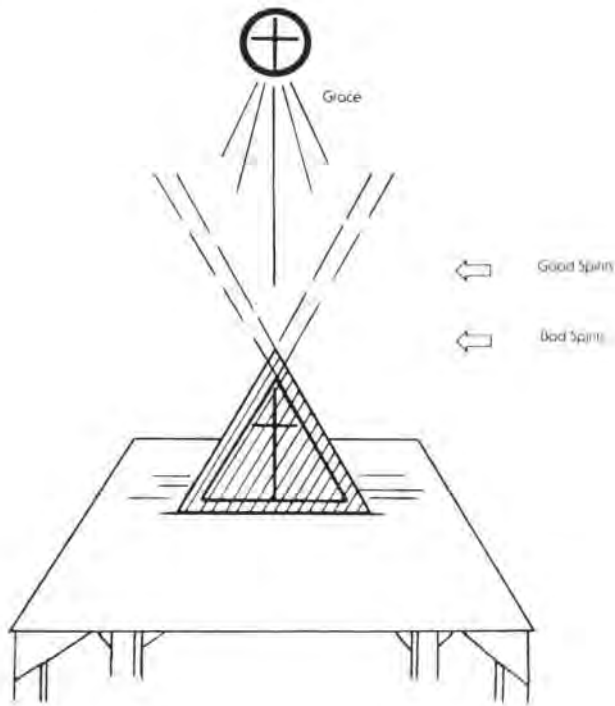
“13. Discernment of Spirits will not proceed in the wisdom of Revelation unless it takes into account the fact that in addition to human and divine impulses, man is influenced by the devil.”

Macquarrie makes no mention of this, however, from a Catholic standpoint; the fact that the devil and evil spirits bear some influence on us is well established. (Ephesians 6:10f). Mac-

quarrie however points out the necessity of the "primordial revelation" as a source.

Comment:

From two important meditations in the *Spiritual Exercises*, "The Kingdom of Christ" and "The Two Standards," it is possible to sum up in a single sentence the basic plan for the formation of a life of perfection: Man is created to fight in the Church, to be militant against Satan by reverent service to the majesty of the Triune God through making himself like to the crucified Jesus and by so doing to enter into the glory of the Father."



Discussion:

Granted then that discernment of spirits and theological discernment have elements in common, granted that they are related, can we say the this relationship is close enough that in effect certain elements are one and the same and hence, though discernment of spirits and theology are different activities, in one or more loci they are actually conjoined?

Approached initially from a negative standpoint, we might say that since the object of either discernment process is different, conjunction cannot exist in this element. Further, since each individual is unique with a singular makeup and a singular God-given purpose, conjunction cannot be present at the level of the interior life, although both need to develop an intense life with God.

On the other hand as both discerner and theologian operate and speak from the same community of faith, an adherent bond must be said to exist at the level of reason illumined by faith, especially since both are subject to the same authority. Thus, the discerner needs the theology to understand and discern God's word and the theologian must discern to understand and express God's word. The discerner without theology cannot illumine his reason sufficiently. The theologian without discernment cannot illumine his reason sufficiently.

But it is at the level of the cross that a true cohesion and identity exist. For it is only here that both discerner and theologian can penetrate the real participation of the redemption of man, for it is here that the covenant is completed.

Thus, it is at the cross that the activities of both discerner and theologian are congruent — one and the same. It is under the shadow of the cross that discernment of spirits and theology are conjoined, because it is only here that the love which both discerner and theologian are seeking is seen in its fullness and its complete integrity. It is only here that the whole Christ is met. It is at the cross that the least of men and the most endowed, gifted and decorated of men become co-equals — children of God.

Conclusions:

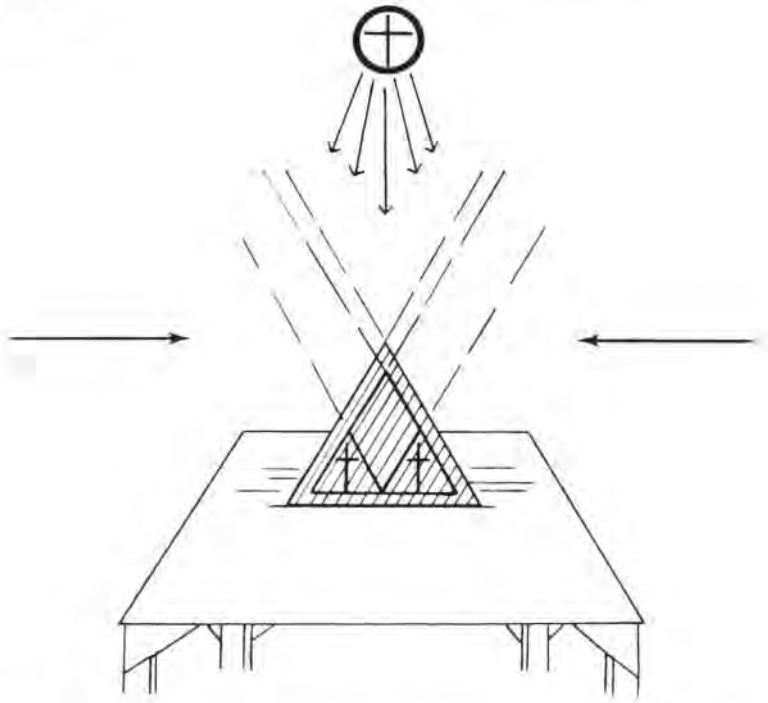
In both discernment of spirits and theological discernment a deep interior life is required. The interior life of man with God in both instances is formed by prayer and meditation and response to grace and is nourished and protected by Scripture, tradition and hierarchical authority.

While the motions and affections in each individual are different and the object of reasoning varies, the faith that illumines reason is the same and the need to proceed within the paschal mystery is identical.

St. Ignatius' claim is not to be taken lightly. The whole force of Ignatian spirituality is communication with God. But this is not an Ignatian invention. Ignatius recognized it, prized it and constantly admonished his friends and members of the order to be always in the posture of receptivity.

The role of the theologian is of such import in the life of the Church that it would seem presumptuous of any theologian not to subject the object of his seeking and expressing to this discernment.

In essence, then, one can say that a Catholic theologian not only must participate in the faith but this participation must be at a level of constant communication with God — necessitating thereby a discernment of spirits.



The structural and functional anatomy of discernment of spirits and theological discernment. Two individuals each with a personal — singular interior life, sharing the common protective integument of the Bible, Scripture and tradition supported on reason illumined by faith, moving actively in the faith with constant movement toward God, supported by spiritual direction, receiving from God His grace through the Holy Spirit, vulnerable to the many spirits but conjoined under the same cross.

Postscript:

Just a word concerning the graphic representations of the functional anatomy of discernment. The value of this structure lies in its presentation of the relationship of the various elements to each other structurally and functionally. It also provides an easy reference point in evaluating any discernment. For example the lack of sufficient prayer and meditation should place any discernment into question.

The discerner who is not assiduous in his particular examen should be real cause for concern. The lack of attention to hierarchial authority should be a warning sign that the discernment is faulty. Thus a good discernment or a faulty discernment may be more easily identifiable.

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 17. Costanzo, *op. cit.*
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 20. *The Teachings of Christ*, p. 43.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
 22. Rahner and Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
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