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Discernment of Spirits

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DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS

The capacity for the discernment of spirits responds to a profound expectation and a pervasive temptation within Christianity. All human beings who search for God want God to guide their lives, and Christians have been taught normatively to expect “to be guided by the Spirit” (Gal 5:18; Rom 8:14). Such expectations, both of a person and of the Church itself, tend to put great emphasis upon religious experience, upon an abiding interaction with God that engages affectivity and awareness, understanding and choice, prayer and action, intimate personal relationships, ecclesial solidarity, and the entire way of life of the community. This emphasis becomes temptation only under the persuasion that the intensity of experience absolves one from discretion, critical reflection, and the doctrinal content of Christian faith, giving experience a priority over the unspeakable Mystery that approaches human beings

through experience and transferring the religious guidance of a single person or of an entire community to an unchallengeable subjectivity, to sentimentality or superstition or excited enthusiasms.

This sense of ambiguity, of the tension between longing and temptation, is found in both Pauline and Johannine theology. In the earliest canonical document of the Church, Paul directs the Christian community: "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances. Test everything (*panta dokimazete*); retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil" (1 Thess 5:19-22). The First Letter of John counsels: "Beloved, do not trust every spirit but test the spirits (*dokimazete ta pneumata*) to see whether they belong to God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 Jn 4:1). Religious experience is almost always an equivocal reality, inherently ambiguous. Even Christian freedom, for example, can be twisted into a pretext for evil (see Gal 5:13). All influences need to be tested prayerfully to determine their authenticity. To meet this need, the community must be gifted with the discernment of spirits.

This NT concern comes out of the experience of Israel. Although the Hebrew Scriptures did not systematize a doctrine or even frame a term for the discernment of spirits, the practice of this religious discrimination pervades the OT in the choices that individuals and, indeed, the entire community were called to make. God will guide the upright with divine counsels (Ps 73:24), but human beings are also liable to be deceived under the appearance of great promise (Gen 3:13). Good and evil spirits were said to come upon a human being, and while all spirits remained under the sovereignty of Yahweh, they led in contradictory directions (1 Sam 16:14). The hearts of human beings themselves were the source of enormous ambiguity: "More tortuous than all else is the human heart, beyond remedy; who can understand it?" (Jer 17:9-10).

Prophetic interpretation emerged in the historical development of the chosen people to determine the presence and direction of God in the life of the community, and a corresponding set of criteria evolved among the people for recognizing the soundness of individual prophecy (Deut 18:21ff.). Prophets were to be judged by their own orthodoxy, the fulfillment of their prophecy, the contents of their prophecy, and the morality of their lives; the accurate discrimination by the people would depend upon the living faith of the community, its fidelity to and sense of the covenant, and an openness to be guided and corrected by God (McNamara et al., pp. 3-13).

In the Essene community at Qumran, during the second century before Christ, discernment of spirits as such emerges in the *Manual of Discipline*, the rule of life for this desert community: "For the instructor. Let him instruct and teach all the sons of light, concerning all the categories of men, all the kinds of spirits found in them, and their distinctive signs." These spirits are two—those of "truth and perversity"—and recognizing this, the community determined "to examine their spirit and their works each year in order to promote each one according to his formation and the perfection of his conduct, or to move him back according to his faults" (*Manual of Discipline* 3:13-14; 3:19; 5:24; see 5:20-21; 6:16-17; 9:14). This discernment is neither the OT prophetic interpretation of history nor the community's discrimination among prophecies. It is done by another—either a wise man or the entire community; its criteria are the rules and good order of the community; its goal is the determination whether a candidate should be admitted into the community and in what position. (See Guillet et al., pp. 17-30.)

New Testament Teaching

The concern to test and discern the influences that affected the Christian com-

munity preoccupied the early Church. Paul numbered among the important charismata given by the Spirit the discernment of spirits (*diakriseis pneumatōn*—1 Cor 12:10). This gift responded immediately to the need of the primitive Christian community to distinguish among the sources of ecstatic or prophetic utterances—whether from the Spirit of God or demonic spirits. As pastoral requirements indicated, however, Paul formulated a basic criteriology by which one could distinguish among all the agencies brought to bear upon the Church. On the one hand, there was the promised guidance from the Spirit of God, and one must come to recognize this divine initiative (Rom 8:14; Gal 5:18). On the other hand, the community had to be concerned, as was the Matthean community, to distinguish false prophecy from true (Mt 7:15-20; 12:22-35).

Prophecy and leadership were singled out as especially demanding this testing because destructive temptations entered into the Christian community not so much through the immediate attraction to evil as through the deception worked by the apparently good. "Such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, who masquerade as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan masquerades as an angel of light. So it is not strange that his ministers also masquerade as ministers of righteousness" (2 Cor 11:13-15). For the early Church, the prophetic and the charismatic were equivocal experiences, either gift or deception, but in no sense immediately self-justifying, for the demonic can enter a person's life as the apparently more intensely religious. It was imperative to determine how a discrimination among these influences could be made.

In elaborating the criteria by which the authentic influence of the Spirit of Christ could be differentiated from its counterfeit, Paul distinguished three relationships possible between Christians or a Christian community and the promised Spirit of God: the absence of the Spirit; the pres-

ence of the Spirit; the guidance of the Spirit.

The primitive and most basic criteria were those that indicated that one's actions were determined in the absence of the Spirit and under the influence of the "flesh": "Now the works of the flesh are obvious: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, occasions of envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal 5:19-21; cf. Rom 13:12). The criteria are clear (*phanera*) enough. Whatever the intensity of one's religious emotions and awareness, or whatever the seemingly charismatic experiences of the community, these deeds or outbursts are evil and they indicate the presence of the evil by which one is guided. "While there is jealousy and rivalry among you, are you not of the flesh . . . ?" (1 Cor 3:3).

The second level, the presence of the Spirit, is disclosed by the commitment to the mystery of God as disclosed in Jesus Christ. "Nobody speaking by the spirit of God says, 'Jesus be accursed.' And no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3). The first Johannine letter repeats this same doctrine: "This is how you can know the Spirit of God: every spirit that acknowledges Jesus Christ come in the flesh belongs to God, and every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus does not belong to God" (1 Jn 4:2-3). Specifically, this spirit is "of Christ" if it so conforms human beings to Christ that they, like Jesus, are able to address God as "Abba, Father" (Rom 8:12-17; Gal 4:6). But to be renewed, to be "justified," through the presence of the transforming Spirit is still only to "have begun with the Spirit" (see Gal 3:3).

The third level of the gift of the Spirit is the habitual direction by the Spirit, a guidance which emerges organically from the second level and which draws to itself the

whole Christian life and development: "If we live in the Spirit, let us also follow [*stoichōmen*] the Spirit. Let us not be conceited, provoking one another, envious of one another" (Gal 5:25-26). This is to "live in the Spirit" or to be "guided by the Spirit" (Gal 5:16, 18), and it follows upon a fundamental understanding of the gospel: "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" (Rom 8:14).

The Acts of the Apostles presents the life of Paul as embodying this doctrine. By the Spirit, for example, Paul is sent (13:4), is bound to a particular path (20:22), brought to conviction and choice (19:21), and even prevented from some ministries (16:6). This doctrine applies also for the Christian community itself: the Spirit acts in and through the teaching of the Church (15:28), comforts and fosters the Church (9:31), and Paul recognizes that the guardians who care for the Church have been established by the Spirit (20:28). In Galatians, Paul lists criteria for recognizing the guidance of the Spirit, and, like Matthew, he focuses upon the commensurate effect: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal 5:22-23).

The criteria have changed in subtlety. While the "works of the flesh" are "obvious," the morality of actions, outbursts and deeds, the "fruit of the Spirit" place greater emphasis upon virtuous affectivity; upon such experiences as love and joy, or peace and gentleness; upon the harmony within oneself and within the community—fundamental dispositions that underlie Christian deeds and make them possible. If one confuses these different levels, a monster can emerge. If, for example, one finds peace in party spirit or in fornication, the "peace" or "joy" does not authenticate one's life. The moral quality of the deed judges the health of the affectivity. But one lives by the Spirit if there is a prior Christian order in her or his life, an order indicated by the moral deeds of the Christian and the commitment to the reality of God

disclosed in Jesus Christ. Then what is in harmony with that orientation issues in love and joy, peace and patience, kindness and goodness, etc., and these states of virtuous affectivity indicate the influential presence of the Spirit. Christians learn to serve God in this way. "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the holy Spirit; whoever serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by others" (Rom 14:17-18). But the distinction of the levels and of their corresponding criteria is essential. In a similar fundamental discernment, the Letter to the Ephesians distinguishes "the works of darkness" from the "fruit of light" (Eph 5:9-10).

There are in Paul, then, three levels of discernment of spirits governed by three commensurate criteria. Even more, there is an organic development from one level to another: from sin through conversion into a life of sanctification, as the Spirit of God penetrates human life more deeply: "Do not conform yourself to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern (*dokimazein*) what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect" (Rom 12:2; see 1 Jn 2:23-24).

Hence one can speak of the discernment of spirits, both a charismatic gift given by the Spirit of God for the common good of the whole community and a developed Christian capacity to discriminate among the various spiritual states that are being experienced—the "spirits"—in order to determine which lead toward God and which lead away from God. The radical source of such discernment is the Spirit, giving a love and a knowledge that transform the Christian into a "spiritual person" (Rom 5:1-5; 1 Cor 2:12). Connaturally, this enables one to "judge (*anakrinei*) all things." The goal of discernment is "God's wisdom, mysterious, hidden" to which a person comes, for "we have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the things freely given us by God"

(1 Cor 2:7, 12). For the good of the Church, various gifts go together, each paired with another as the completion of its nature: the gift of tongues and the interpretation of tongues; healing and miracles; prophecy and discernment of spirits.

Christian Tradition

The early Church took up and developed out of its own experience the teaching it had received on the discernment of spirits. In his great work in systematic theology, *De principiis*, Origen (184–254) traces human thoughts back either to interior subjectivity or to three sources other than oneself: God, good and evil spirits. He further elaborates criteria by which each may be recognized. Particularly the monastic tradition developed the more individual side of this doctrine. Its classic development is found in the conferences of Abbot Moses in the works of John Cassian (ca. 360–435). “We ought, then, carefully to notice this three-fold order, and with a wise discretion (*sagaci discretionem*), to analyze the thoughts which arise in our hearts, tracing out their origin and cause and author in the first instance, that we may be able to consider how we ought to yield ourselves to them” (*Conferences* 1:20).

Cassian cites, as did Origen and Jerome, the most quoted apocryphal saying attributed to Jesus: “Become shrewd (*probabiles*) moneychangers,” noting that their highest skill is to differentiate what is pure gold from what has been made to look like it, to distinguish true coins from counterfeits, and to determine what is the proper weight of each. Similarly, human beings are taught to examine carefully “whatever has found an entrance into our hearts,” whether that be religious doctrine, the interpretation and use of Scripture, the urging to some work of piety or apostolic zeal (*Conferences* 1:20), and the spirit in which something is undertaken and done (*Conferences* 1:22). Any of these can begin a moment of deception whose internal contradiction leads eventually to religious disintegration.

“We should then constantly search all the inner chambers of our hearts, and trace out the footsteps of whatever enters into them with the closest investigation” (*Conferences* 1:22).

Cassian does not elaborate a criteriology for distinguishing among religious influences; he rather suggests a pattern of spiritual discipleship. Discernment can only come out of a humility that will allow a monk to disclose his thoughts and deeds to the elders, “for a wrong thought is enfeebled at the moment that it is discovered” (*Conferences* 2:10). This self-disclosure makes spiritual direction by the elders possible. One learns discernment through this pattern of a continual self-revelation and of an obedience conceived among the monks primarily as a dimension of spiritual direction. (See *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, 11:304–316).

In the 6th century John Climacus, writing for the monks at Raithu, summarized the debt of Christian tradition in discernment to John Cassian: “From humility comes discernment as the great Cassian has said with beautiful and sublime philosophy in his chapter on discernment. From discernment comes insight, and from insight comes foresight. And who would not follow this fair way of obedience, seeing such blessings in store for him?” (*Ladder* 4:105). Climacus built upon the work of Cassian in the twenty-sixth chapter of the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, outlining a progress in discernment that marked the faithful life and giving it extensive, albeit aphoristic, treatment: “Discernment in beginners is true knowledge of themselves; in intermediate souls it is a spiritual sense that faultlessly distinguishes what is truly good from what is of nature and opposed to it; and in the perfect it is the knowledge which they possess by divine illumination, and which can enlighten with its lamp what is dark in others. Or perhaps, generally speaking, discernment is, and is recognized as, the assured understanding of the divine will on all occasions, in every place

and in all matters; and it is only found in those who are pure in heart, and in body and in mouth" (*Ladder* 26:1).

In the subsequent tradition of the Church, "discernment of spirits" (*discretio spirituum*) came to possess a series of distinct but related meanings, one of which is often confused with another, while the emphasis remained more upon the individual experiences or interpersonal relationships than upon the life of the whole community. Discernment ranged over the whole interpretative process in which human beings make decisions.

Different understandings of discernment of spirits were distinguished in terms of the "spirits" being differentiated. In its most limited sense, this discernment designated the ability to distinguish between evil and good spirits as they attempt to inspire human thinking, choice, or prophecy. In a more general sense, it denoted a discrimination among all the factors that influence human choice: states of affectivity, such as consolation or desolation; states of intentionality, such as imagination, fantasies, thoughts, or visions; and all personal—prophetic, angelic, or demonic—and societal structures that enter a person's world and affect judgments and decisions. In still another sense, it indicated an extraordinary gift for reading hearts and foretelling the future. In each of these three senses, this discernment of spirits remains a hermeneutical capacity, the interpretation of the religious meaning of various influences that bear upon human awareness and decisions. This use of discernment must be further distinguished both from the prudential skill of simple "discretion" (*discretio*) and from what is often called the "discernment of the will of God," the knowledge of that finality which lies at the basis of "the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling."

Discernment of spirits in each of its understandings could also be distinguished in terms of its source. It was understood as an infused gift of the Spirit or as a connatural

sensibility issuing from a committed Christian life or as knowledge learned from study, or an intermixture of all three. It was consequently classified as an art or as a doctrine, and the experiences out of which it issues have historically included the radical and transforming gift of the Spirit, a life of spiritual discipleship, and the disciplined inquiry into the criteria by which diverse religious influences may be recognized. These criteria focus not so much upon the origins of these influences as upon their orientation.

Ignatius of Loyola

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius of Loyola outlines his classic "Rules for the Discernment of Spirits." These function critically as the exercitant attempts to respond to the influence of God directing her or his life. The rules unite all of the factors that previous traditions included: good and evil spirits, personal and preternatural influences, thoughts and imagination, and states of affectivity, consolation and desolation. Consolation indicates any movement of affectivity toward God; desolation, any movement of affectivity away from God. These divergent influences are perceived to be causally connected, e.g., evil spirits can cause the kind of thoughts or imagination that effect desolation, or a state of desolation can issue into commensurate thoughts that place one under the personal influence of evil. The fourteen rules for the first week are offered for those who are being tempted "openly and obviously," i.e., either by the pleasure that attracts to evil or by the pain and cost that can deter from discipleship. Ignatius indicates two different subjects of such temptations and frames a matrix by which the influences upon their lives are united and contrasted (1-2). Consolation and desolation are defined (3-4). The subject is counseled how to act directly against desolation (5-6), against the thoughts that arise from desolation (7-11), and against the personal influences of evil (12-14).

The eight rules for the second week are much more subtle and deal with the experience of being deceived or tempted under the appearance of good. At such a juncture it is no longer enough to know how to deal with the attraction to an obvious evil or with the repugnance for the good. These rules distinguish the consolation in which there is no danger of deception—when one is drawn wholly into the love of God without commensurate thoughts or images—from the consolation mediated by ideas and imagination (2-3), in which deception is possible. These latter must be tested for their authenticity. One must attend to the attraction toward the morally good by considering the beginning, middle, and end of the entire process. These rules outline the progress of deception disguised in apparent consolation (4) and frame a procedure by which true and false consolations can be distinguished at the terminus of their influence (5), during the course of their influence (6), or even at the beginning of an integral religious “movement” (7).

Ignatius warns against giving the rules for the second week to those whose temptations are those of the first week—“week” being used not to designate seven days but a stage in the development of the exercitant’s prayer. In the first week affectivity is to be judged by its obvious direction, and this direction distinguishes affectivity into consolation and desolation; in the second week the apparent moral worth of what is proposed is judged by the affectivity and thoughts to which it leads over the course of its history, i.e., by the experience of peace and joy, etc. Affectivity is not the criterion in the first week that it is in the second, and between these two moments lies conversion and the reorientation of affectivity worked by the contemplative union with the mysteries of Christ. Only as affectivity is ordered can it in turn become a clue to the influence of God.

Whereas the focus in the *Spiritual Exercises* is upon the influences that come upon an individual’s choice, Ignatius expanded

the practice of discernment to an important communitarian function through the “Deliberation of the First Fathers” and through the repeated provisions made throughout the *Constitutions* for the discernment that enters in manifold ways into community life and government.

Other Developments

The discernment of spirits has received extensive analysis in the history of Christian spirituality. Mention must be made of three treatments in the West that have become classics: Denis the Carthusian, *De discretione et examinatione spirituum* (ca. 1445–1450); John Cardinal Bona, *De discretione spirituum liber unus* (1671); and Giovanni Battista Scaramelli, *Discernimento degli spiriti* (1753). In the East, the *Philokalia* (1782) collected many of the most important texts in this tradition from the 4th to the 15th century in order to guide the interior or contemplative life.

Major developments in the understanding and applications of the discernment of spirits have occurred in the contemporary Church. Discernment of spirits has retrieved its importance for individual spiritual direction, and, through communal discernment, it has developed its possibilities for the guidance of Christian community. The Second Vatican Council contributed to this with its emphasis upon “reading the signs of the times.” New paths have been opened by the liberation theologians, with their insistence that discernment is an essential part of orthopraxis. The capacity for Christian discernment depends upon the prior position one has taken toward the oppressed. Discernment must be brought to bear upon the revelation of the glory of God disclosed in the liberation of the poor. The absolute criterion of orthopraxis becomes that of Mt 25:32ff.: “I was hungry and you gave me food,” etc. One’s practical discernment originates both within this eschatological horizon of faith and the historical horizons of situations of justice and

injustice (strategy) and within the consequent determination among actions that this condition calls forth from the Christian (tactics)—(Dussel, pp. 47–60).

Jesus is the embodiment of Christian discernment. His Spirit makes it possible for Christians to continue his manner of discernment. His passion and death as praxis—to bring the Good News to the poor—offer a set of criteria for discernment conceived as putting into practice the divine will. For one must verify in the social and historic order what has been understood (Sobrinho, pp. 14–26).

See also DESIRE; DETACHMENT; DISCRETION; EXPERIENCE; FEELINGS; GRACE; HOLY SPIRIT; IGNATIUS SPIRITUALITY; PRAYER; PRAXIS; SPIRITS; SPIRITUAL DIRECTION.

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DISCIPLESHIP

The concept of discipleship, central to the ministry of Jesus, is expressed in the NT by the verb *akolouthein* and by the noun *mathētēs*. Jesus called men and women to "follow after" (*akolouthein*) him. Those who followed him were known as his "disciples" (*mathētēs*).

Discipleship in the NT

The word *mathētēs* appears more than 250 times in the NT, always in the Gospels and Acts. In secular Greek the word means "one who learns." A *mathētēs* was someone bound to another in order to learn, thus an apprentice to someone in a trade or profession or a student of a philosopher. There is

no *mathētēs* without a *didaskalos*, a "master" or "teacher." The English word "disciple" comes from the Latin *discipulus*, "pupil."

In the OT the master-disciple relationship does not appear; *mathētēs* is not used in the Septuagint. It enters the Jewish tradition with Rabbinic Judaism, probably under the influence of the Greek and Hellenistic philosophical schools.

In the NT *mathētēs* refers most often to the disciples of Jesus. There is no question that Jesus gathered a group of disciples around him and sent them out as his co-workers to proclaim the coming of the reign of God. *Mathētēs* is also used for the disciples of John the Baptist (Mt 11:2) and occasionally for the disciples of the Pharisees (Mt 22:16). But its usage in reference to the disciples of Jesus, along with the verb *akolouthein*, is unique.

Akolouthein, appearing fifty-six times in the Synoptics and fourteen times in John, does not always refer to those who were disciples in the strict sense, as when it is used of the crowds that followed Jesus (Mt 4:25; 8:1). But when used of individuals (Mk 1:18; Lk 5:11; Jn 1:43), it, like *mathētēs*, shows the special characteristics of discipleship in relation to Jesus.

First, unlike the case of discipleship in Rabbinic Judaism, the disciples of Jesus did not choose the master; rather, the master chose and called the disciples. The initiative comes from Jesus (Mk 1:17; 2:14). In Mk 3:13-14 Jesus called those he desired for a twofold purpose: that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach. The coordinate conjunction *kai* ("and") indicates the equal importance of both aspects.

Second, there is an inclusive element to Jesus' call, even if it is still within a Jewish context. Unlike that of the rabbis, Jesus' call was not restricted to the ritually pure and the religiously obedient. Among those invited to follow him were "tax collectors and sinners" (Mk 2:15). Women also accompanied him as disciples (Lk 8:2).