

# *“Discerning Christ’s Voice”*

an Introduction to  
*Ignatian Spiritual  
Discernment*



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# 1. THE SPIRITUAL ART OF DISCERNMENT

## DISCERNMENT

Discernment is the meeting point of prayer and action, where prayer is understood as the love relationship between the soul and God. It is a natural function of a loving, personal relationship with the Lord.

*"It is only from a life of continual and loving contact with the Lord that spiritual discernment can be developed. People who have lived long together can read between the lines; they are responsive to the smallest sign of what pleases or displeases the one they love. They can read in the eyes what has not been said in words."* Thomas H. Green, S.J.,

*The Father has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him." John 8:29*

*"At every moment of our existence God is communicating to us who God is, is trying to draw us into an awareness, a consciousness of the reality of who we are in God's sight. Whether we are aware of it or not, at every moment of our existence we are encountering God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who is trying to catch our attention, trying to draw us into a reciprocal conscious relationship.*

William H. Barry, S.J. *Finding God in All Things*

## THEOLOGY OF DISCERNMENT

- The spiritually mature man or woman has a responsibility to judge and discriminate between authentic and inauthentic 'voices' of God within them.

*The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."* John 10 :2-5

*Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God,*  
1John 4 :1

*No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit.* Luke 6 :43-44

## RULES FOR DISCERNMENT

*“Rules for perceiving and understanding, to some degree, the different movements that are produced in the soul—the good, that they may be accepted; the bad, that they may be rejected.”*  
S.E. 313

**By the discernment of spirits is meant the process by which we examine, in the light of faith, the nature of the spiritual states we experience in ourselves. The purpose of such examination is to decide, as far as possible, which of the movements we experience come from and lead to the Lord and which ones deflect us from this goal.**

## Predispositions necessary for Discernment

### 1- Prayer

*“The discerning person must be a praying person—one who takes God seriously and is genuinely concerned with and welcoming of God’s involvement in his or her life.”<sup>1</sup>*

### 2- A Desire to do God’s will

*“Unless it really makes a difference to me what God desires—unless I truly want, or a least desire to want, what God wants—discernment will be impossible.”<sup>2</sup>*

*Spiritual discernment is a way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life. S.E. 1*

### 3- Openness to God

*“This was the problem of the Pharisees. They could not properly discern the person and mission of Jesus and His call on them because they were blinded by their own preconceptions, their attachments to their own images of God.”<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes from *Weeds Among the Wheat*, Thomas H. Green S.J., Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Ind. 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

#### 4- A Knowledge of God

*“The less personal experience I have of the Lord, the more I will have to depend on someone else, who has this lived experience, to teach me what pleases Him.”<sup>4</sup>*

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- READ: METHODIST “COVENANT PRAYER” AND ST. IGNATIUS’ “TAKE LORD AND RECEIVE.” CONSIDER HOW THESE PRAYERS MODEL A LIFE FULLY GIVEN TO CHRIST. WHAT DO THESE PRAYERS EXCITE IN YOU? HOW DO THEY CHALLENGE YOU?
  
- WHAT ARE SOME AREAS IN YOUR LIFE THAT YOU ARE AFRAID TO GIVE TO THE LORD?
  
- WHAT GRACE DO YOU NEED FROM GOD IN ORDER TO PREPARE YOUR DISPOSITION TOWARDS A MORE OBJECTIVE PROCESS OF DISCERNMENT? MORE KNOWLEDGE? A GREATER DESIRE TO DO GOD’S WILL? MORE OPENNESS TO THE MYSTERY OF GOD?

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## **Take Lord and Receive** (*St. Ignatius*)

Take Lord, and receive all my liberty,  
My life, my understanding,  
And my entire will, all that I have and possess.  
Thou hast given all to me.  
To thee, O Lord, I return it.  
All is Thine, dispose of it wholly according to thy will.  
Give me thy love and thy grace, for this is sufficient for me.

## **Covenant Prayer** (*Methodist prayer*)

I am no longer my own, but thine.  
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.  
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.  
Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,  
exalted for thee or brought low by thee.  
Let me be full, let me be empty.  
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.  
I freely and heartily yield all things  
to thy pleasure and disposal.

## 2. Recognizing Consolations

### SPIRITUAL OBJECTIVITY

*I presuppose that there are three kinds of thoughts in me: that is, one which is my own, which springs from my own liberty and will; and two others which come from without, one from the good spirit, and the other from the bad. S.E. 32*

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

*Rom. 7:15-20*

- **WHAT DOES IGNATIUS MEAN BY “CONSOLATION”?**

*I call it consolation when some interior movement in the soul is caused, through which the soul comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord, and for others. I also call consolation every increase of hope, faith and love, and all interior joy which calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one’s soul, quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord. S.E. 316*

- **CONSOLATION AS THE PRODUCT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

It is characteristic of the good spirit to give courage and strength, consolations, inspirations and peace, putting away all inner obstacles, that one may go on in well doing. S.E. 315

- WRITE A “LIFE-LIST”
  
- CONSIDER ALL THE THINGS IN YOUR PRESENT EXPERIENCE THAT REPRESENT CONSOLATIONS TO YOU

*“Hopes and dreams give us ambition, energy and meaning. Desires fuel vitality and passion, and they provide us with deep, enduring motivation as well as the courage to risk and the faith to surrender.”* Albert Haase, OFM

### **3. THE SPIRIT OF DESOLATION**

(adapted from Alex. B. Aronis' *Developing Intimacy with God*)

Ignatius spoke of the spirit of consolation that we experience during prayer as well as times of confusion and agitation, which he referred to as *desolations*. He described the fruit of desolation in the following terms:

*“darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness rising from many disturbances which lead to want of faith, want of hope, want of love. The soul is wholly slothful, tepid, sad and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord.” S.E. 317*

**“You will know a spirit by its fruit.”**

*“It is characteristic of the evil spirit to afflict with sadness, to harass with anxiety and to raise obstacles based on false reasoning. Thus he seeks to prevent the soul from advancing.” S.E. 315*

## **Why do desolations occur?**

Everyone who practices prayer sooner or later becomes aware of times of desolation. God is not the author of these desolations, but Ignatius lists three reasons why God allows them to occur. The awareness of these might help us to consider the important benefits that can come from desolation.

- **SPIRITUAL CORRECTION**

*The first is because we have been tepid, lazy or negligent in our piety; and so through our own fault, spiritual consolation withdraws from us. S.E. 322*

- **TESTING OF OUR FAITH**

*The second reason is because God wishes to test us and see how we will advance in the pursuit of God without the encouraging experiences of consolation and good graces. S.E. 322*

- **HUMILITY**

*The third reason is because God wishes to give us a true knowledge and understanding of ourselves, so that we may have an intimate perception of the fact that it is not within our power to get or keep great devotion, intense love or any other spiritual consolation, but that all this is the gift and grace of God our Lord. S.E. 322*

## **PRAYER**

- TAKE TIME WITH GOD TO REMEMBER YOURSELF IN THESE STATES OF SOUL. WHAT ARE SOME SITUATIONS THAT OFTEN CAUSE DESOLATION IN YOU?
  
- CONSIDER HOW YOU RESPOND TO DESOLATION. HOW DOES IT AFFECT YOUR SENSE OF SELF? YOUR SENSE OF GOD? OF OTHERS?
  
- FROM YOUR “LIFE-LIST” CONSIDER ALL THE THINGS IN YOUR PRESENT EXPERIENCE THAT REPRESENT DESOLATIONS TO YOU. HOW ARE YOU PRESENTLY RESPONDING TO THESE DESOLATIONS?



# What to do in times of desolation.

## 1. Do not change course.

*“We must avoid making any major, new decisions while we are still struggling with desolation. If we were to give in to this desolation and act according to what it desires that would be tantamount to making the evil spirit our spiritual director!”*  
Alex Aronis, *Intimacy with God*

## 2. Persevere in prayer

## 3. Know that desolations are temporary.

*Let him who is consoled see to humbling himself and lowering himself as much as he can, thinking how little he is able to do in times of desolation without such grace or consolation. On the contrary, let him who is in desolation think of how much can be done with the grace that is sufficient to resist all his enemies, taking strength in his Creator and Lord. S.E. 324*

# Exercises for Discernment Between Choices

## Preparation

1. Recommit to the goal of your life (Principle & Foundation)
2. Focus on the topic(s) to be discerned
3. Seek impartiality: *"Imagine yourself like a balance at equilibrium"*
4. Ask the Lord to guide you through the process of discernment

## Discernment Exercises

1. Consider one of the choices in your discernment.
  - Assume, for the purposes of this exercise, that the Lord wants you to accept this direction. Act as though the decision has already been made.
  - Ask the Lord to confirm this decision with peace if it truly is His will for you.
  - Be sensitive to what you are experiencing as you consider the reality of this option—peace, joy, serenity, confidence, disturbance, confusion, frustration, fear.
  - Record your impressions

Repeat 1-5 in consideration of the alternative choice in your discernment

2. Imagine someone else facing the same choices you are making, a brother or sister in the Lord who you feel empathy for and want the very best for.
  - Without trying to manipulate or persuade them in their decision, consider the advice you would give them.
  - If the advice you gave this person is the same advice the Lord would have for you, ask for confirmation.
  - Compare the feelings you experience in this exercise with those you had from the previous exercise.

Repeat exercise 2 as though the Lord would have you advise the person in a contrary way to how you did in the previous exercise, e.g. to stay in the present situation rather than choose a new one.

- Compare the feelings you experience in doing so with what you felt in the previous exercise.
- Record your impressions

## 4. ACTING ACCORDING TO OUR DISCERNMENT

### The Essential Prerequisites for Action

- Humility

- Courage

- Peace

*The mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace. Rom. 8:6*

*For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. 1Cor. 14:33*

*“Fuss and feverishness, anxiety, intensity, intolerance, instability, pessimism and wobble, and every kind of hurry and worry—these are signs of the self-made and self-acting soul.”*

*-Evelyn Underhill, The Spiritual Life*

## Steps of Confirmation

*Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm. Prov. 4:26*

At this point you should see patterns of consistency or inconsistency evolving.

- If there is inconsistency, confusion or frustration, you should consider it inappropriate to move ahead with a decision at this point as it would indicate a state of desolation.
- It may be appropriate to reschedule discernment of this matter to another future time.
- If there is a deadline to decide by, and if your experience is still unsettled, it would be better to turn down a direction rather than choose a new direction in this state.

If the pattern you are experiencing is relatively consistent in favour of one of the choices, it is good to consider, over a few days, asking God to confirm the decision to which you think He has led you.

- You can do this by repeating the exercises of discernment asking God to continue confirming this choice: "Lord, I believe that you are leading me in this direction. If this is the case, please confirm this as your direction for me by continuing to give me peace about it."
- This can also be repeated by asking the Lord to confirm the decision by giving peace to the thought of leaving your present situation.

# Final Confirmation

Confirmation is the final interior affirmation at the end of the process of discernment. It reveals itself through the experience of consolation.

Through this experience, you will not necessarily have absolute certainty that the decision will prove successful, or that the decision will never have to be reconsidered in the light of new facts. Rather through the consolation of Confirmation, you will experience a kind of loving moral assurance that the decision was well made and, in that sense, you are able to judge that it is a "correct and good choice"

Fear in the face of realistic difficulties and apprehensive doubts are not necessarily at odds with the spirit of Confirmation. The experience of people who were called by God in both the Old and New Testaments, for instance, was often accompanied by fear and uncertainty.

The signs of discerning Confirmation ought to include:

- A real sense of the Lord's Presence in the process of discernment.
- A sense of peace.
- A quiet growth in trust.
- Continued humility and dependence on the Lord;