

Discernment of Spirits

Historical Notes

In the Old Testament the influence exercised on man by the good spirit of God is contrasted with the influence of the evil spirit, e.g. in the story of Saul (1 Kings 10.9; 16.14-23).

And in the New Testament:

- Christ Himself is depicted as being led by the good spirit into the desert, where He is tempted by the evil spirit (Matt. 4.1—11).

- St. John advises the faithful to “try the spirits if they be of God” and gives them signs whereby they may discern “the spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (1 John 4.1-6).

- St. Paul places the discernment of spirits among the charismata infused by the Holy Ghost (1 Cor. 12.10—“the discerning of spirits”)

Hence it is no wonder that, from the earliest Christian times, ecclesiastical authors have inculcated the necessity for discerning the spirits by which man is influenced.

The Fathers of the Desert and the other founders of the monastic life developed and perfected this doctrine. St. Anthony did so, as related in his Life written by St. Athanasius; and Cassian, more fully, in his Conferences.

In the Middle Ages, St. Bernard speaks of the discernment of spirits. In the first part of the fourteenth century, Henry of Friemar, O.S.A., wrote a whole treatise entitled *On the Four Kinds of Instinct, Divine, Angelic, Diabolical, and Natural*. Similar works were those of St. Bernardine of Siena, *On Inspirations* (A.D. 1443); Denis the Carthusian, *On the Discernment and Examination of Spirits* (against Friemar); likewise Gerson and Peter de Alliaco, who, however, treat principally of discerning true revelations from false.

Many of the more recent authors treat both the discernment of interior impulses and the discernment of revelations properly so called, whilst others, like St. Ignatius, deal only with the former.

We must note, however, that while the authors commonly attribute good thoughts to a good spirit and evil thoughts to an evil spirit, i.e. the devil, yet from the very beginning they were aware that many thoughts and interior impulses come from human nature itself.

Thus Origen says: “We find that the thoughts which arise in our hearts . . . come sometimes from ourselves, at times they are stirred up by counteracting virtues, and at other times they may be sent by God or the Good Angels.”

Similarly, Cassian (Conferences, I, Ch. 19) says: “In truth we should be aware above all that our thoughts have three possible sources—God, the devil and ourselves.”

However, in modern times the psychological sciences, especially psychopathology, have made great progress, with the result that we can now readily recognize as entirely natural (whether diseased or normal) many phenomena which earlier authors attributed to the action of good or bad angels. Nevertheless the traditional rules of conduct are very prudent and should still be retained, with the proviso, however, that they be used rather cautiously in the matter of distinguishing natural impulses from angelic inspirations. The spirit of an individual refers to his internal inclination or propensity to good or evil, and it manifests itself with such regularity that it must be considered as a personal trait. Thus, if a person has a propensity to prayer, he is said to possess the spirit of prayer; if he has a tendency to arguments and altercations, he is said to possess a spirit of contradiction, etc. Understood in this sense, the spirit of a person is usually the result of both temperament and character.

It is indispensable both for the direction of souls and for the study of extraordinary mystical phenomena to be able to distinguish between the various spirits or impulses under which individual persons act or are acted upon. Unless one is able to determine whether or not a given

person is acting under the spirit of God, the spirit of darkness or the aberrations of his own illusions, it will be practically impossible to avoid error and even tragic mistakes.

Basic Notions

But it is also possible for an individual to come under the influence of a spirit which is extrinsic to his personality, whether from God or the devil, and for that reason it is the function of the discernment of spirits to judge whether a given act or repetition of acts flows from the spirit of the individual, the spirit of God or the diabolical spirit.

There are two types of discernment of spirit: acquired and infused. Acquired discernment of spirits is a special art which is complementary to ordinary spiritual direction and can be cultivated by all who use the proper means; infused discernment of spirits is a charismatic gift or *gratia gratis data* which is granted by God to certain individuals. We shall discuss infused discernment of spirits in its proper place under the *gratiae gratis datae*; for the time being we merely state that the charismatic gift of discernment is infallible because it is the result of an interior movement or inspiration received from the Holy Ghost, who cannot err. But it is extremely rare, and not even all the saints possessed it.

Acquired Discernment

Acquired discernment, on the other hand, is not infallible, and it presents many great difficulties, although it is absolutely necessary for a good spiritual director. It stands to reason that, if a director is ignorant of the various spirits that may be the cause of the acts and movements of the soul and if he is unable to decide the particular spirit that motivates a given soul, he will be unable to determine which movements should be suppressed and which should be fostered and developed. St. John of the Cross and Father Scaramelli place great stress on the importance of discernment, pointing out that the possibility of error and tragic misguidance of souls is greatly augmented when acquired discernment is lacking and that the priest who presumes to take charge of the direction of souls without such knowledge is guilty of temerity.² It is, therefore, important to examine carefully the various means to be used in order to acquire the art of discernment of spirits.

- 1) Prayer. This is the most important and fundamental means. Although we are speaking of an acquired art, personal effort would avail nothing without the special assistance of the Holy Ghost through the virtue of prudence and the gift of counsel. Hence it is not only a question of the constant practice of prayer, but the particular petition by which the director requests of God the prudence necessary for the direction of souls in general and the light to be able to discern the will of God for some particular soul at a given time. It does not suffice to possess a theoretical knowledge of the spiritual life and the ways to perfection; one needs in addition to know the practical and concrete application of these principles in particular cases. It is certain that God will answer these prayers with special graces which He gives to all rightly disposed souls so that they may fulfil their duties.
- 2) Study. The spiritual director likewise needs a vast amount of knowledge which is acquired through faithful study. He should be familiar with the general principles of spiritual theology as contained in Sacred Scripture, speculative theology, the masters of the spiritual life and the lives of the outstanding saints. He should be especially careful not to restrict himself to a particular "school" or method of spirituality, for while it is true that the individual soul will necessarily follow a particular path or way, the spiritual director must rise above this exclusive spirit and possess a broad and sympathetic understanding of the variety of schools and methods of the spiritual life. St. John of the Cross speaks with unusual severity when discussing those spiritual directors

who know only one path to perfection and strive to force all the souls under their direction to follow that same path.³

3) Personal experience. Self-knowledge is a basic requirement for any kind of direction of others. While it is true that each person has his unique traits and characteristics, there is also a common pattern which is possessed by all, and, unless one understands himself, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to understand others. Under this same heading we may include that sympathy or rapport which flows from an understanding of one's own virtues and defects and the ability to place oneself in the position and circumstances in which others find themselves, according to the statement of St. Paul: "There, but for the grace of God, go I." Moreover, if the spiritual director himself is not striving for greater perfection and has not attained some degree of virtue and self-mastery, it is not likely that he will be able to direct others or even understand their condition, especially when they enter upon the higher stages of the spiritual life. In this sense holiness of life is a most desirable trait in a spiritual director and is of inestimable value in acquiring the art of discernment of spirits.

4) Removal of obstacles. Under this heading we may place any of the defective qualities which are an impediment to the understanding and direction of souls. One of the greatest obstacles is the spirit of self-sufficiency which prevents the director from seeking the advice of those who are more learned or more experienced than himself. God refuses his graces to those who are proud, and grants them to the humble. Secondly, the director must avoid at all costs an excessive attachment to the one he is directing, for this attachment will cloud his judgment and cause him to be too sympathetic. He must strive to be as objective as possible and to maintain a strict sense of reserve in regard to his own person and a cautious vigilance as regards the one being directed. He will avoid the inclination to judge according to purely human standards and will be guided at all times by supernatural prudence. He will never be precipitous in his decisions but will subject them to mature reflection, without excessive cavilling.

Diverse Spirits

As regards the diverse spirits, St. Bernard enumerates six: divine, angelic, diabolical, carnal, mundane and human.⁴

All these, however, can be summarized under three headings: the divine spirit, the human spirit and the spirit of the devil. God always inclines us to the good, working either directly or through secondary causes; the devil always inclines us to evil, working by his own power or through the allurements of the things of the world; the human spirit may be inclined to evil or to good, depending upon whether the individual follows right reason or his own concupiscence. Due to the basic indifference of many purely natural inclinations, it is evident that they may be utilized for good and for evil and that, while grace does not destroy nature but perfects and supernaturalises it, the devil avails himself of human weakness and the effects of original sin to further his evil aims. Moreover, it may happen that in one and the same inclination or action the various spirits are intermingled, thus making it more difficult to discern which spirit has the predominance at a given time. It is evident that the spirit of God and the spirit of the devil cannot be operating at one and the same time, since they tend to opposite goals, but God can direct or intensify a naturally good inclination, or the devil may exercise his power to divert those inclinations to evil. Even when it is evident that the divine spirit predominates in a given action, therefore, it does not follow that all the antecedent or consequent movements and inclinations are likewise divine and supernatural. It frequently happens that purely human and natural movements introduce themselves, consciously or unconsciously, and cause the action

to lose some of its supernatural purity. This is one of the factors which makes it almost impossible for the director or theologian to discern clearly the divine element in extraordinary mystical phenomena.

Moreover, it is not at all unusual in the lives of mystics that their mystical and truly supernatural operations are interrupted by purely natural activities or that, with God's permission, a diabolical influence is introduced. It is not easy to determine when the action of God terminates and when the natural or diabolical movement begins.⁵ If the director is familiar with the signs of the various spirit, however, he will have sufficient grounds for making a prudent judgment in each case. It will not always be a situation in which one spirit is operating exclusively, but even if there is a mixture of several spirits, one or another will always predominate.

Signs of the Various Spirits

The following characteristics are general signs of the various spirits. When we treat of the mystical phenomena in particular we shall have occasion to speak of some of these characteristics in greater detail.

- 1) Truth. God is truth and cannot inspire anything but truth in a soul. If a person believed to be inspired by God, therefore, maintains opinions which are manifestly against revealed truth, the infallible teaching of the Church, or proven theology or philosophy or science, it must be concluded that the individual is deluded by the devil or is the victim of his own imagination or faulty reasoning.
- 2) Gravity. God is never the cause of things that are useless, futile, frivolous or impertinent. When His spirit moves a soul it is always for something serious and beneficial.
- 3) Enlightenment. Although one may not always understand the meaning of an inspiration from God, the effect of any divine movement or impulse is always enlightenment and certitude rather than darkness and confusion. This is true both as regards the effects on the individual who receives the inspiration and its effects on others.
- 4) Docility. Souls that are moved by the spirit of God, recognizing their own ignorance and weakness with all humility, accept cheerfully the advice and counsel of their directors or others who have authority over them. This spirit of obedience, docility and submission is one of the clearest signs that a particular inspiration or movement is from God. This is especially true in the case of the educated, who have a greater tendency to be attached to their own opinions.
- 5) Discretion. The spirit of God makes the soul discreet, judicious, prudent and thoughtful in all its actions. There is nothing of precipitation, lightness, exaggeration or impetuosity; all is well balanced, edifying, serious and full of calmness and peace.
- 6) Humility. This is one of the most certain signs of the spirit of God. The Holy Ghost always fills the soul with sentiments of humility and self-effacement. The more lofty the communications from on high, the more profoundly the soul inclines to the abyss of its own nothingness. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38).
- 7) Peace. St. Paul speaks frequently of the peace that comes from God (Rom. 15:33; Phil. 4:9), and Jesus mentions peace as one of the manifestations of His spirit (John 14:27). This is a quality which always accompanies communications from God, and when they are received, especially in prayer, the soul experiences a profound and stable serenity in the depths of its spirit.
- 8) Confidence in God. This is a counterpart and necessary consequence of true humility. Recognizing that of itself it can do nothing, as St. Paul says, the soul throws itself on the power

and mercy of God with a childlike trust. Then it learns that it can do all things in Him (Phil. 4:13).

9) Flexibility of will. This sign consists primarily in a certain promptness of the will to subject itself to the inspirations and invitations of God. Secondly it consists in a facility in following the advice and counsel of others, especially if they are superiors, confessors or spiritual directors. It is opposed to the rigid and unyielding will which is characteristic of those who are filled with self-love.

10) Purity of intention. The soul seeks only the glory of God in all that it does and the perfect fulfilment of the will of God, without human interest or motivation out of self-love.

11) Patience in suffering. Suffering is frequently the best touchstone for revealing the true worth of an individual. No matter what the source of the suffering or whether it is justly received or not, the soul bears it with patience and equanimity and uses it as a means of further perfection. But this sign is not to be confused with the stoicism and insensitivity of those who are cold and phlegmatic by nature.

12) Self-abnegation. The words of Christ Himself are sufficient evidence that this is a sign of the spirit of God: "If anyone will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matt. 16:24).

13) Simplicity. Together with veracity and sincerity, this characteristic is never lacking in those who are truly motivated by the spirit of God. Any duplicity, arrogance, hypocrisy or vanity must be attributed rather to the spirit of the devil, the father of lies.

14) Liberty of spirit. First of all, there is no attachment to any created thing and not even to the gifts received from God. Secondly, all is accepted from the hands of God with gratitude and humility, whether it be a question of consolation or trial. Thirdly, while all duties and spiritual exercises are performed with promptness and punctuality, the soul is ready to leave even the most consoling and profitable exercise as soon as the charity of God calls it elsewhere. Liberty of spirit enables the soul to live in a state of constant joy and eagerness for the things of God.

15) Desire to imitate Christ. St. Paul says that it is impossible to have the spirit of God without having the spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9). For that reason St. John of the Cross states that the soul which aspires to perfection must have a desire to imitate Christ in all things by conforming its life as much as possible to His.⁶

16) Disinterested love. We mean by this kind of love all the characteristics which St. Paul attributes to true charity (I Cor. 13:4-7). St. Augustine said of this type of love: "Love with the love of charity and do what you will; you will not sin. Whatever proceeds from interior charity cannot but be good."⁷

The devil may disguise himself as an angel of light and inspire actions which at the beginning are good, in order thus to conceal his true motives and goals. For that reason the director of souls must proceed with great caution, remembering that what is begun as good may become evil if deviations are not corrected. Even the most amazing mystical phenomena are no proof of themselves that the spirit of God is at work in the soul; it is necessary to judge from the fruits that are produced rather than from the phenomenon in question.

Since the signs of the spirit of the devil will be directly opposed to the signs of the spirit of God, we shall merely enumerate these manifestations so that the director will have at hand a ready reference.

1) Spirit of falsity. Sometimes lies are covered and concealed by truths so that they will more readily be accepted.

2) Morbid curiosity, love of novelty and attachment to useless details which kill true devotion and solid piety.

3) Confusion, anxiety and darkness of spirit.

4) Obstinacy. Stubbornness is one of the surest signs of a diabolical spirit.

- 5) Constant indiscretion. Whatever goes against the duties of one's state of life, even if it be a question of exercises of piety, is a result of self-will or the spirit of the devil. The same is true of those persons who habitually go to extremes, for example, in matters of penance or activity.
- 6) Spirit of pride and vanity.
- 7) Restlessness and unnecessary anxiety.
- 8) False humility. Usually this is merely a disguise for self-love and pride.
- 9) Despair, lack of confidence and discouragement.
- 10) Presumption, vain security and unfounded optimism.
- 11) Disobedience and hardness of heart.
- 12) Selfish motives, such as self-complacency, vanity, desire to be esteemed.
- 13) Impatience in suffering and stubborn resentment.
- 14) Rebellion of the passions or violent inclinations to evil.
- 15) Hypocrisy, duplicity and simulation.
- 16) Attachment to created things or sensible consolations.
- 17) Neglect of the imitation of Christ.
- 18) Feigned charity, fanatical zeal and scrupulous observance of the law. Many of the extreme reformers and defenders of the letter of the law fall under this category.

Once the spiritual director is assured that a person is under the influence of a diabolical spirit, he should concentrate his efforts on the following:

- 1) make the individual realize that he is a toy of the devil and that he must take arms against the enemy;
- 2) encourage the individual to pray earnestly to God for the grace to overcome the assaults of the devil;
- 3) advise the person to act quickly and with true disdain of the devil as soon as his influence is exercised, trying to perform the contrary acts to that which is suggested or felt.

These have been clearly enumerated by Thomas à Kempis in *The Imitation of Christ* (Bk. III, Chap. 54). His words should be pondered carefully, for he explains in a masterly fashion the struggle between grace and the human spirit, wounded by sin and inclined to its own interests and comforts.⁸

The human spirit is always inclined to its own satisfactions; it is a friend of pleasure and an enemy of suffering of any kind. It readily inclines to anything that is compatible with its own temperament, its personal tastes and caprices, or the satisfaction of self-love. It will not hear of humiliations, penance, renunciation or mortification. If any director or confessor goes against its own inclinations, he is immediately branded as inept and incompetent. It seeks success, honours, applause and pastimes. It is always a great promoter of anything that will arouse admiration or notoriety. In a word, the human spirit neither understands nor cares for anything except its own egoism.

It is sometimes difficult in practice to judge whether given manifestations proceed from the devil or from a purely human and egoistic spirit, but it is always relatively easy to distinguish between these two and the spirit of God. It will be possible in most cases, therefore, to determine that a given spirit could not possibly be from God and that it must be combated, even if one is not sure whether it is in fact from the devil or the human ego.

The following contrasts may serve as general rules for distinguishing between the diabolical and the human spirit. Natural impulses and inclinations are spontaneous; they can usually be traced back to some natural cause or disposition; the stimulation of the senses acts upon the interior powers, and they often persist in spite of prayer.⁹

Diabolical impulse or suggestion, on the other hand, is usually violent and difficult to prevent; it arises unexpectedly or with the slightest provocation; a mental suggestion excites the senses

and disappears as a rule with prayer. Self-denial and rectitude of intention are excellent remedies against the spirit of egoism.

Doubtful Spirits

Father Scaramelli dedicates an interesting chapter to what he calls the effects of doubtful or uncertain spirits, meaning that these effects are not to be taken as conclusive manifestations of a particular spirit but that they may be the result of any one of the three.

In this respect the spiritual director and confessor will do well to keep in mind the admonition of Pope Benedict XIV when writing on the beatification and canonization of the servants of God: if there is a possible natural or diabolical explanation for a given phenomenon, it cannot be presumed that it is supernatural in origin.

The following are the principal doubtful cases listed by Father Scaramelli:

- 1) To aspire to some other state in life after having made a prudent and deliberate selection.
- 2) To be attracted to rare phenomena or to singular exercises which are not proper to one's state in life. When God desires such things He will give unmistakable proof of his will; the test is obedience and humility.
- 3) To seek the extraordinary in the practice of virtues, such as the "holy foolishness" of some of the saints who so acted under an impulse from the Holy Ghost.
- 4) An inclination to practice extreme corporal penances. God has demanded them of some souls, but this practice is not in the workings of ordinary providence.
- 5) A taste for sensible consolations in the practice of prayer or the exercise of the virtues. The desire for continual spiritual consolations is even more doubtful, since the spirit of God breathes where and when He wills.
- 6) The "gift of tears" or the strong inclination to concentrate on the sorrowful and penitential aspects of religion.
- 7) The exclusive devotion to some particular mystery or pious exercise, which easily leads to a distortion of orthodox theology.
- 8) Great extraordinary favours such as revelations, visions, stigmata, when they occur in a person of little sanctity. Although the extraordinary phenomena and gratiae gratis datae do not necessarily presuppose sanctity or even the state of grace, God does not ordinarily grant these gifts except to his servants and friends.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we again warn directors and confessors to proceed with great caution in making judgments in those matters involving the discernment of spirits. It is extremely easy to err. In cases of extraordinary phenomena, it should be noted that, as a rule, when these things proceed from God, the soul first experiences great fear and humility and then peace and consolation. If they come from the devil they usually begin with feelings of sensible consolation and satisfaction, but later they cause confusion, anxiety and restlessness.

Lastly, in regard to the rather frequent inclination which some persons experience to change their state of life (and usually to go to a higher and stricter form of life), the director will bear in mind that it is quite possible that such a desire actually proceeds from God but without God's wanting the person actually to change his state in life. For example, a priest who is actively engaged in the apostolate may experience a strong desire to spend more time in prayer and solitude. In trying to understand the reason for this strong inclination, he may erroneously judge that it is God's will that he enter the Carthusians or the Trappists. Such is not necessarily the case, however, for it may well be that the only thing that God is asking of the priest is that

he be less involved in the whirlpool of activity and that he dedicate more time each day to prayer and recollection.’

As a final word on this common problem, we should state the following as a general rule for the solution of such cases. If the individual has prayerfully and seriously selected the state of life in which he is, he must present a serious positive cause for changing his state of life; otherwise, the will of God for him is the state of life in which he is. Another practical test is to see whether the individual is performing the duties of his present state in life with all fidelity; if not, he should not even think of changing to another state.