



DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS

Seeking and finding God in our experience

If we believe that God is acting in the world through the Holy Spirit, it makes sense to try to follow the movements of that Spirit in our lives. This does not only happen in peak moments of prayer or liturgy, but throughout our experience. Discernment of spirits is the reflective exercise of trying to sift through our feelings and thoughts, to see which could indicate the movements of God as he draws us to life, and which could indicate a countermovement, getting in the way of our relationship with God. The following are guidelines for such reflection, based on a long tradition of discernment and given particular shape by Ignatius of Loyola.

GUIDELINES FOR DISCERNMENT - BASED ON ST IGNATIUS

Ignatius distinguishes between people who are trying to live a life of love, in relationship with God and those people who, as he says, are going from bad to worse, meaning their lives are totally self focussed with no regard for others or God. He indicates that the Holy Spirit acts differently in each case. These guidelines are for those who are trying to be open to the Spirit.

For these people of good will, the moods, thoughts and feelings that come from our lives being in tune with the Holy Spirit tend to be things like love, gentle inspiration, peace, courage, hope, openness, strength or repentance. (See the list of fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22). These feelings help the person to engage in life, to 'choose life', so they are welcomed and appreciated.

On the other hand the moods, thoughts and feelings that indicate a countermovement, going in a direction away from the prompting of the Holy Spirit tend to be things like nameless fear, anxiety, inappropriate sadness, self-centredness, seeing endless snags ahead, lack of hope. These latter feelings tend to paralyse, to prevent a person acting in a way they might wish, so as far as possible they are identified but not allowed to take centre stage, however fascinating they are.

When we are under the influence of a countermovement we call it 'spiritual desolation', when the Spirit is more clearly present we call it 'spiritual consolation'. The thoughts and feelings we are talking about here are not just superficial, fleeting sensations, but deeper streams within our heart and mind.

SPIRITUAL DESOLATION

Perhaps we are not living in a way we would like, not giving God any time, so busy rushing there is no time to pause, pray, be quiet. Perhaps it is time to make changes, to move on and we won't see it. Perhaps there is no obvious reason, BUT we can use the experience to try to be faithful, trusting God even though we don't feel like it.

(NB Spiritual Desolation is not the same as depression, care must be taken to distinguish the two.)

- In desolation, try not to change major plans that were made at a time of consolation.
- Go against the desolation if possible, God is still there even if it does not feel like it. Try to pray.
- It usually helps if we can share our thoughts and feelings with someone we can trust and has some experience of the ways of God and faith.
- Desolation usually goes for our weakest points, this can help us to identify it.
- Be patient, hang on, consolation will return.

SPIRITUAL CONSOLATION

- Be thankful! Recognise the real gifts in your life and give thanks to God for them.
- 'Store it up', remember this experience and what it tells you about God, so that you can draw on the memories in difficult times. (Desolation will return!)
- Don't become too proud, or certain that you have life sorted out, remember how helpless you can feel when in desolation.
- Sometimes we have an experience of God that comes out of the blue, there seems to be no reason for it, but we know it is God. When this happens, it is good to still be aware of our actions, noting what was in the experience itself and what comes afterwards which may or may not be from God.

Is this spiritual desolation?

- God is not part of my consciousness
- Turned in on self
- I feel sad, separated from God
- Lack of caring, everything seems hard
- Feel hyper & happy, but a lack of delicacy, a fanatical quality, with my disordered tendencies influencing actions
- I feel alone & separated while at the same time desiring to be with God
- It is a cover-up for seeking myself
- The experience is moving me away from God

Is this spiritual consolation?

- The experience is moving me towards God
- Delicate and gentle
- Leading to an interior acceptance of others and of self
- Leading to a realistic knowledge of self
- A sense of God's presence
- Meaningfulness and a sense of hope
- Not turned in on self
- If painful/ dry/sad it is because of God, there is a sense of faith, hope or love
- Tension may still exist but at depth there is a sense of God's presence

