

Discernment of Spirits

Discernment of spirits is a biblical charism (*diakrisis pneumaton*, I Cor. 12.10) and patristic virtue (Greek *diakrisis pneumaton*, Latin *discretio spirituum*), whose object is to identify the presence or absence of God in given human activity. The ‘spirits’ are affective movements within the person, and they are evaluated in their orientation or direction according to the gospel principle, ‘You will know them by their fruits’ (Matt 7.16). Discernment of spirits is thus a means to discern the presence or absence of the Spirit.

In the tradition the source of the movements is ultimately God or the devil, acting through outside agents like angels or demons or through the good or evil principles of spirit and flesh within the human being. Whatever the theological categories they are outside the actual discipline of discernment, since the project is not a speculative description of causes, but a practical judgment and decision about life choices. The process is experiential and inductive; it is wisdom rather than science. Discernment is, thus, open to new developments in theological understanding such as the insights today of depth psychology and social analysis.

The Desert Fathers evolved teachings on discernment that were systematized by some outstanding spokesmen like John Cassian (d. 432-435?) and John Climacus (d 649) and later codified by Ignatius of Loyola (d. 1556). The *locus classicus* for the tradition is Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, his manual for retreat directors, especially in the sections entitled, ‘Rules for understanding to some extent the different movements produced in the soul and for recognizing those that are good to admit them, and those that are bad, to reject them’ (Puhl translation, nn. 313-336). The two sets of rules, one for beginners (the ‘First Week’), and the other for the truly converted, whose lives show spiritual freedom or ‘indifference’ (the

‘Second Week’), supply a handy reference for summarizing the tradition.

In the unconverted or newly converted, the affective movements are too unstable to act as positive indicators of God’s presence or will. It is important to be in touch with them and to own them, hence the importance of self-knowledge and humility. But the immediate task at this stage is integration of the affectivity in the total personality and the direction of one’s life according to sound, moral norms amid the fluctuations of euphoric and depressive feelings.

Discernment of spirits properly speaking goes beyond this alertness to feelings and living by general norms prudentially applied. It seeks to read the movements of the sensible and spiritual affectivity in a positive way, i.e., as signs of the influence of the Spirit or a counterforce. This is possible in the Second Week, because the affectivity now registers in an immediate, uncensored way the reaction of the whole person. Specifically the feelings now show the consonance or dissonance between the present experience and the spiritual orientation of the person. The criteriology of these affective responses is precisely the tradition of discernment. ‘Consolation’ reinforces the orientation towards God, ‘desolation’ opposes, that fundamental option. The challenge is to identify true consolation and desolation and properly interpret associated choices.

Discernment takes place in the context of divine love experienced (Rom. 5.5) and delicate self-knowledge. But it looks for convalidation outside the individual and in the community, often in the person of the spiritual director.

C. Floristan and C. Duquoc (eds), *Discernment of the Spirit and of Spirits*, 1979; E. E. Larkin, *Silent Presence, Discernment as Process and Problem*, 1981.