

What to Know about Discernment

One of my teachers in Rome was the famed Dominican Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange. He often shared bits of worldly wisdom like the following: A young teacher teaches even what she does not know, a middle-aged teacher teaches only what she knows, and an old teacher teaches only what is necessary.

Twenty years ago, as a middle-aged teacher, I wrote a little book on discernment, called *Silent Presence*. Recently, as an old teacher, I was asked to write a summary statement on the topic. Here it is. It will appear as an epilogue when Dimension Books republishes the book, which is undergoing wholesale revision for its renewed life. What, then, is necessary for discernment?

Discernment as Process and Problem

Discernment has two focuses: process and problem. It is process insofar as it is a progressive awareness of the movements of the spirits in our consciousness. The "spirits" are thoughts, desires, and affective moods, which are the telltale signs of the Holy Spirit or opposing influences. In the discernment process we become more sensitive to the movements of grace or the temptation to sin in our lives. Discernment is mindfulness, recollection, centeredness. It is being aware of what is going on spiritually.

Discernment as problem-solving is interpreting the spirits in order to determine God's will. Where are these feelings and sentiments tending? Are they moving the person toward or away from God? What behavior and choices are they suggesting? Discernment is not concerned with the emotional or physiological sources of these feelings, but only with their trajectory or orientation. Where are they pointing? God leads us by means of these secondary causes.

The two functions of discernment coalesce in our daily, moment-to--moment responses to God calling us forth in the concrete situations of daily life. This process is the "obedience of faith" (Rm 1:5), which is saying no to selfishness and yes to transcendence. We are called to live beyond rote rules and in accord with God's particular will for us. The ordinary teaching and ministry of the church provide the boundaries or the playing field. But God leads each of us one by one in the community of the church. God's project for me is that I become the unique person I was created to be. Discernment is the tool for the process.

The How of Discernment

There are three ways of evaluating our experiences. One is cognitive: we use our heads to analyze the experiences, we objectify the experiences, and we hold them before our eyes to understand and interpret them. The other two ways involve our heart: I call one mystical, the other affective; in these two ways we feel our way to the conclusion.

Cognitive discernment stays on the level of thinking. It thinks about holy thoughts and desires and their unholy counterparts as well. It asks which are which, with a view to following the good and avoiding the evil. It makes a judgment based on theoretical knowledge about what is virtuous and what is not. This endeavor prescind from the affective states; in cognitive discernment the feelings are beside the point. The norm is right reason and good sense. Mystical discernment is the experience of ourselves being lifted up to God in loving surrender. At the time there is no contrary movement of affectivity; experiencing a mystical grace, we have no doubt that we are in God and God is in us. Affective discernment involves an awareness of the comings and goings of a divided affectivity. We note the ambivalence in our lives between yes's and no's to God. We observe both positive and negative.

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A simple image may clarify this matter. Each of us is like a cone standing on its point and divided by a horizontal plane halfway up. The upper half is our conscious self, our soul or psyche; the lower half is our spirit. God dwells in the depths of our spirit at the point of the cone. He may activate his role as the point of the cone by letting our whole being sink more deeply into himself so that our deeply spiritual sense of contact with him is now much more than a point; it is a complete circle, a divine interface, a total saturation--this is the mystical grace referred to above. Or his action, instead of being mystical, may consist of helpful waves sent from the point through our being, waves that reverberate in our consciousness along with contrary movements from our old self. Affective discernment takes note of these contrary and selfish impulses as well as the resonances of God's presence. A sense of that presence and absence emerges.

Discernment takes place in the upper, conscious level of our being. In the mystical grace, the spirit dominates the psyche; the whole person feels raised up by God, by the sovereign action of Love. The consciousness of this divine gift is the mystical discernment. The person experiences wholeness, peace, humility, a joyous faith, hope, and charity, along with immense gratitude and all the fruits of the Spirit (Ga 5:22). There are no contrary affections as long as the experience lasts. The recipient knows and loves God and all that God stands for; at this point there is complete submission to the divine will, which is intimated in the exchange.

The action of grace in our being is not usually so total. Grace builds on nature and meets people where they are in their spiritual journey. Most people do not have perfect purity of heart; they are divided in their allegiance to God. So the Holy Spirit enters their consciousness via holy thoughts and desires; these are actual graces.

They vie for attention and acceptance against the contrary enticements of the world, the devil, and one's own unredeemed self. God's action does not wholly envelop the person. Part of the person is lifted up in noble sentiments, but another part is reneging and lagging behind; part is saying yes and part no. Affective discernment senses these

two directions in the affections themselves and interprets them intuitively as by a sixth sense.

We thus have three ways of doing discernment, one of them following objective norms and two of them reading the affections. In actual practice, discernment usually is a mixture of the cognitive and the affective, with occasional experiences of the mystical. We now address each of these three at greater length.

Cognitive Discernment

Cognitive discernment applies appropriate knowledge of the spiritual life to the issues at hand. Teresa of Avila puts a high premium on learning in spiritual directors, whose function is to assist in the process of discernment by confirming or questioning the conclusions of the client. Her teaching on the importance of knowledge in the spiritual life is germane here. She wants both experience and learning in the spiritual guide. But, if forced to choose between the two qualities, she favors experience (see her *Autobiography*, her *Vida*, chap. 13), but she always prizes the confirmation of a learned person.

What knowledge is involved in discernment? Knowledge of God's ways as revealed in the Scriptures, wisdom gleaned from the sages of Israel, from Jesus, and from the New Testament, knowledge of the spiritual life as it has developed in history. The knowledge is about human beings as much as it is about God. Today some knowledge of depth psychology is presumed. The ancients and the medieval writers did not have the benefit of Freud, Jung, or Adler, but they knew human nature in its mysterious vagaries. Applied psychology in programs like the enneagram, Myers-Briggs, transactional analysis, and the stages of growth in Erikson and his successors is helpful. All sources of knowledge about ourselves and our world are potential helps: anthropology, biography, literature, even journals of current events that record "signs of the times," indications of what God is doing in the world today.

Cognitive discernment is the way for beginners, who by definition struggle with disordered affections and moral limitations and cannot trust their feelings to be indicators of the divine presence. Beginners need to recognize their feelings, own them, and act beyond them by hewing to the line set by objective criteria. This is the teaching of the rules for discernment for the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. The rules suggest what feelings to expect at the beginning and along the way and how to handle them. The beginners' immediate goal is purity of heart, freedom of spirit, detachment, indifference, all of which terms are basically synonymous. This condition is the prerequisite for exercising affective and mystical discernment.

Cognitive discernment is not limited to beginners. Mature Christians use it when they are not experiencing turbulence or strong desires. At such times they work up the pertinent information in two columns (pros and cons) and make a rational decision, confirming the decision if possible by a subsequent affective discernment. St. Ignatius calls this mode of decision-making the "third time," his "first time" being mystical discernment and his "second time" affective discernment. Prayer and consultation are part of all discernment, as is confirmation by the community, usually through a representative like a spiritual director.

The execution of cognitive discernment may be assisted by one or more of the following suggestions: (1) Examine an area of your life such as prayer, relationships, or ministry by reading some basic reflection on the topic and consulting your conscience on your own performance. (2) Look for models or ways to proceed in people who faced similar questions or situations (such as making a vocational choice or dealing with a significant loss). (3) Listen attentively to what others say about you in praise or criticism for insights into self-knowledge. (4) Collect words of wisdom that may help you understand a specific question, such as the following words of Anthony De Mello about relationships: "You are precious to me, but you are not my life. My life is distinct and separate from you. I thank you for coming into my life. Good-bye."

Mystical Discernment

"The love of God poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Rm 5:5) orients one's life to God. It roots a person in God and constitutes the state of grace. One may experience this grace

as a special mystical gift. This experience is an awareness of one's whole person surrendered to God in faith, hope, and love. This experience is the perception of one's true self in a pure state, without any mixture of contrary desire. It is called mystical discernment because it depends on God's free action and the content of one's mind and heart, and their contentedness, are entirely of God.

Mystical discernment is the first principle of affective discernment, for it represents the fullness against which subsequent movements toward God are measured. These lesser affective movements are not the experience of total surrender; they are graces promoting love for God and are experienced positively because they are consonant with the original experience of the pure love of God. St. Ignatius calls them consolations. They are virtuous affections, experienced as harmonious with the fundamental option; they come across as feelings of well-being, authenticity, peace and love. Their opposites are called desolations by Ignatius; they obstruct one's surrender to God. They are negative feelings or reactions, and they come across as disruptive, alienating, and destructive. While the good movements are congruent with

one's ultimate orientation to God, these bad spirits or sentiments oppose submission to God.

Affective discernment moves back and forth between these two sets, whereas in mystical discernment there is only consolation - in Ignatius's classic words, "consolation without previous cause" (Spiritual Exercises, §330). This grace is the spontaneous, unmerited in-breaking of God that absorbs the whole person in the love of God. No previous acts of the person explain its presence. It is the *gustos* of Teresa of Avila, which she calls the prayer of quiet; it is the experience of mystical union in both Teresa and John of the Cross.

In this experience one discerns one's true self, not through knowledge about one's self, but through personal, intuitive contact. One "knows" God and knows one's self in the union with God, in the way St. Paul wants to "know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering" (Ph 3: 10). Paul seeks an affective experience, not abstract knowledge. This affective knowledge is not new truths or objective moral theology about right and wrong. Mystical and affective discernment do not establish what is right and wrong; these matters are to be decided by moral reasoning. The discernment has to do with one's subjective stance before God; it is about recognizing and responding in freedom to grace, and thus it is about being good, not about being right--just as people sometimes do the right thing for the wrong reason.

In mystical discernment there is no intrusion of the false self. The false self is the part of one's being that is not rooted in God. It does not come out of the spirit, but is the construction of one's own ego, a figment of one's imagination and feelings. One must be careful, therefore, not to confuse mere euphoria or "sensible consolations" in prayer with this special grace. Visions and locutions, even when miraculous, are likewise experiences of the psychic self, on the level of imagination; they are not the same grace as "consolation without previous cause." The distinctive mark of this truly mystical grace is wholeness: body, soul, and spirit are touched by God. The true self includes all of these. What happens in that mystical union with God, therefore, is totally of God. The false self may awaken after the event and masquerade as part of the gift in the afterglow of the mystical experience. Ignatius warns about this danger (Spiritual Exercises, §3 3 6). These subsequent thoughts and affections, like visions and locutions themselves, are to be treated like all other particular ideas and feelings: they must be submitted to cognitive or affective discernment.

Typical questions that may help to identify the mystical experience are the following: (1) Is the experience a fantasy, euphoria gone wild, a projection, or wishful thinking, or does it represent my actual self, my reality, my truth? (2) Is the exaltation of this experience corroborated by high standards of moral attitudes and behavior? (3) Is there congruence between the experience and my deepest desires?

Affective Discernment

The true self and the false self at work in ordinary consciousness are good handles for grasping this normal and recommended way of doing discernment. Both of these parts of one's being express themselves in thoughts, desires, feelings, moods, and sentiments. The true self is in touch with the spirit as well as with the soul or psyche. When it operates, there is an element of wholeness and peace along with other virtuous attitudes and movements. The false self has no roots in the spirit, is superficial and disintegrated, and acts only at the level of imagination and emotion, with no regard for basic spiritual truth and goodness. Its hallmarks are fragmentation, alienation, irritation, and the seven capital sins.

Ordinary Christians live in the state of grace; they are committed to the true self. But whole areas of their lives have not yet been penetrated by grace, and they are vulnerable to the vagaries of the false self. The two selves, true and false, struggle for supremacy in spiritual warfare. This is the to-and-fro of the true and false self, registered in a rising spiritual trajectory or a tailspin toward destruction.

One senses good movements as congruent with the orientation toward God and bad movements as ruinous of one's true good. The good spirits will be virtuous sentiments and choices: humility, docility, courage, obedience, commitment, all the good things listed by Paul in Galatians 5:22. The bad spirits will appear as deficient behavior, evil intent, charity's absence, intolerance, selfishness, all the evil works of Galatians 5:19-21. Disordered affections are the expression of the false self. Our self-serving desires, projections, rationalizations, addictions, and compulsions are examples. We need to become so attuned to the truth and beauty of God in our lives that we breathe the pure air of the divine presence and spot deviations intuitively, by a certain connaturality and affinity. This sensitivity comes with growth in the life of the spirit.

Some Points to Check

A necessary condition for doing affective discernment is basic detachment, at least at the time of the processing, the decision making. The term detachment needs careful understanding if one is to distinguish authentic spiritual value from the unhealthy psychological condition of apathy or will-lessness. Detachment holds all of creation loosely, in an open hand. One is committed to the truth, but flexible in recognizing and following its manifestations. Thus one is rooted in the tradition but open to change, and the ultimate norm is God's will. The best modern equivalent of this foundational spiritual value is biblical faith, the faith of the Blessed

Virgin Mary, who waited on God's word and followed it as soon as it became clear. Some questions that may assist the process of affective discernment are the following: (1) Is my discernment overshadowed by ego, by the desire to look good, to be first in

my group, to avoid criticism? Or do I rest like a weaned child in its mother's arms (Ps 13: 1), open and vulnerable to whatever decision emerges? (2) Do I set boundaries beyond which I will not go, arbitrary areas that I make nonnegotiable? Or am I truly free, accepting what happens or what is asked of me, and judging it wisely? (3) If I am afflicted with self-doubt and a poor self-image, can I detect its presence and make allowances in pursuing a decision or reviewing an experience? (4) Do I know by experience, and not just speculatively, the difference between virtue and its counterfeits, so that I recognize, for example, gentleness versus unwillingness to take responsibility, humility versus pusillanimity, and charitableness versus codependency? (5) Am I willing to live in creative tension between success and failure, light and darkness, love of God and the cost of discipleship, without collapsing my life to one side or the other? Affective discernment is living through the back-and forth of these contraries and drawing from the interplay a "sense" or a "feel" (and not just an emotional feeling) that this course of action bespeaks God's presence or absence. This way of discernment describes the mature way of living in the presence of God and seeking out the Silent Presence.

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