

Discernment of Spirits by Father John A. Hardon, S.J.

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How to recognize God's voice from the seductions of the evil one

I might begin by observing that the full rendering of this statement is, "Discernment of Spirits" implying a plurality and especially implying a distinction between one kind of spirit and another. We know from both the teaching of the Church and by now our own experience that serving God and following Christ is not all just a straight, easy, smooth path. It involves, by its very definition (and Christ went out of His way to impress us with the fact)...*conflict*. The conflict, moreover, is not only with or within ourselves or with the world (with human beings outside of us), but also and mainly for our purpose, a conflict with the evil spirits. We further know on faith that the evil spirit, while he cannot (and God will never permit him to) coerce our wills, he can surely test or tempt the weaknesses we have. He then can exploit our passions. He can most certainly use other human beings, as he often does, to lead us into temptation.

All the while that we say this however, we know that God's grace is also and more than correspondingly active in our souls, impelling and inviting us to the practice of virtue. Given these two dialectic expressions, that on the one hand we are being tempted by the evil spirits, on the other hand we are being invited by God's grace. Realizing that life is lived concretely, it is most important for us to be able to recognize the one impulse from the other. In other words, to be able to distinguish *inspiration* from *instigation*, or if you wish, *grace* from *temptation*. So as, of course, to be able to respond to the one and resist the other.

I firmly believe that many of the critical problems today are due not so much to ill will, or malice, but to a failure in discernment, in people not being able to distinguish between the one impulse and the other. And afterwards, once they are

caught in the web of demonic temptation, it becomes very difficult to extricate oneself. In the present meditation, let us reflect on how we can be more alert to the two ways in which we are being, as it were, worked upon. The two kinds of spirits that either wish to draw us closer to God because the Spirit comes from God, or away from God because it is the instigation of the sworn enemy of the Creator. I think we can synthesize the "how," that is, the how we can become more alert to being able to discern between the two. We can synthesize this "how" in three words: *attitude, peace* and *confidence*.

1. Attitude of will—readiness to do God's will (Rule 2)

We begin then with *attitude*. An almost undefinable word, but we know pretty well what it means. In order, then, to be properly disposed for recognizing temptations and distinguishing them from graces, the first indispensable precondition is the proper attitude, and it is an *attitude of will*. Let me sort of repeat myself. There are certain conditions that God requires for our being able to, well, recognize anything in the spiritual life. How often both the Old and the New Testaments talk about being properly disposed in heart. Here then, this *attitude of will*, which I am going to describe, is the atmosphere or situation in which I must either be (and if I am not, into which I must predispose myself) in order that I might have the grace to be able to distinguish. You see how we need grace even to distinguish grace from its opposite, temptation!

What does this proper *attitude of will* concretely consist in? It means an honest and sincere desire to do God's will. Notice I have duplicated the adjectives, honest and sincere, and I might have added three more adjectives. To make sure that we are not just talking about a desire to do God's will, but to make absolutely certain that our attitude is *honest, sincere, real, authentic and genuine*. And as with all things of the spirit, all

we can do is talk about them and hope that, with God's grace, either what we hear or what we read will register, and He decides whether it does. All I can do or say in this context is, well, beat the molecules of the air with syllables.

I wish to stress the honesty, the sincerity, the genuineness. Maybe I have sinned. Maybe I am still sinning. Maybe I have not been all that I should have been. Frankly, and there is no *maybe* about this. I am not all that I should be. Maybe there is in my life a lot to improve and I hardly know where to start. Maybe there are things that should be uprooted from my life. And again, where do we begin?

I watched one of the workmen yesterday pulling weeds. I looked beyond him, and I saw an acre. Well, at least he was pulling weeds. I don't know when he will finish. If we have more rain, I guess he'll have to just start all over again. Nevertheless, I can, with God's help, decide (and it is a decision and not all people make this decision) that I – with a stress on that perpendicular pronoun, "I" – want to do what God wants. If I look too closely at myself, I panic. Notwithstanding, if I really want to do God's will – (and there is no cheating here, it is a deep down interior sincerity) – then I am prepared to cope with temptations. Where the beginning to cope is this matter of being able to recognize when I am being tempted by the evil spirit and when I am being led by God, then I am also correspondingly ready to respond to God's invitation.

I could spend not the few minutes that I am dwelling on this point here. I could spend a week drawing on all sorts of places in God's Revelation (and...centuries of the Church's ascetical and spiritual teaching), on the absolute indispensability of complete naked honesty with God. If I am that honest, no matter what my past has been or my present is, my future is secure, because then I will be given the corresponding light to recognize *temptation* from *inspiration*. And you notice that it is light that we first need. God gives His light, and here is where that beatitude is the diamond in the center of the spiritual life, the pure of heart – where purity here means absolute honesty – they shall see God. They will be able to recognize Him when He

speaks and distinguish His voice from the seductions of the evil one.

A retreat time is mainly this: it is the beginning in the nature of things of what is supposed to follow after the retreat is over. A retreat is not a time of inventory, except insofar as that may help to do this. I am to prepare myself for such future as God still gives me. I am, then, to do three things:

- First, find out WHAT God wants me to do. As I tell my students, "If you want to be really clear when you teach, use monosyllables." I didn't plan this, but look: find-out-what-God-wants-me-to-do. But the predisposition necessary for me to know what He wants me to do is this utter openness and readiness. With Samuel, I must say, "Lord, speak. Your servant is listening." Watch the accents in God's revelation: "I am listening."
- Second, resolve on WHY I want to do what He wants me to do. You might say, "Well, why bother with that?" Because it is not enough to know *what* God wants me to do. If I am going to do it, I've got to be motivated, and we don't do anything, we don't wash our faces, unless we have a reason . . . We have got to have a reason for doing things, because unless I am strongly motivated, and not just initial motivation, although that is most important psychologically. Pastoral theologians say the most important motivation is when I make the resolution. And that can carry me through a lifetime, if need be. But something I can go back to and keep telling myself, "Why are you doing it?" "This is why."
- So the first is the WHAT, and the second is the WHY. But then decide on HOW I will carry it into effect. Methodology, then, has a lot to do with not just making resolutions but, what is far more important, keeping them. This I think is also the heart of genuine sincerity. If I am not only willing to do what God wants me to do, but I am willing to take the means, ah, that's the crunch! Because it is the means that will cost. It's the

overcoming perhaps of something I have been accustomed to do for years. Habits are not easily broken.

I was taught by the Marianist Brothers. I think it was my junior year of high school that one of the Brothers in religion class, on a clean blackboard, printed the word, "habit." Then, to impress us how important it is to cultivate good habits and how bad it is to get into evil habits, that a habit is hard to acquire if it is a good one, and hard to break if it is a bad one.... I have forgotten so much of what I learned in high school, but I have never forgotten that.

He said, "Fellows don't acquire bad habits, because if you have a bad habit you work at it and you work at it and..." Then he erased the "h," and said, "You still have "abit." Then he said, "You work at it and you work..." He then erased the "a," and said, "You still have a "bit." Then he said, "You still work, you struggle and you strive." And then he erased the "b" and said, "You still have, "it."

Consequently, it is the means that are going to be costly. And the index of our honesty is our willingness before God to take the means, knowing full well they are going to cost.

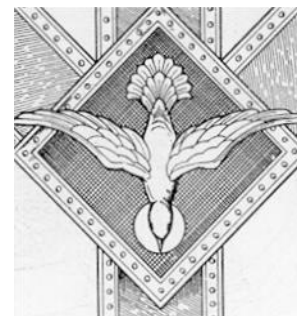
2. Peace – the sound of grace (Rule 3)

Peace. One of the best, in fact, THE BEST way of distinguishing between temptations and graces is to find out whether they bring *peace* or *anxiety* to my soul. I cannot tell you how important in my own life has been what I will share with you in the next ten or so minutes. In the nature of things, no matter how equipped you may be with Spiritual Directors, you don't have access to that much immediate, ready at-hand, human spiritual direction.

Let's not forget that the principal Director of our soul dwells within our hearts. This is the way He directs us: When He speaks and when we wish to know whether it is He who is leading us, and not

His enemy trying to mislead us, let's remind ourselves that the *sound* of grace is peace. The *form* of grace is peace. The *taste* of grace is peace. The *effect* of grace is peace, or summarily the *name* of grace is peace.

It is not a casual title of Christ when we call Him the "Prince of Peace." It was not a coincidence but a divinely-foreordained plan from eternity that His first words the moment that He rose from the dead, having



redeemed the world on the Cross, that He commanded His disciples (and that means us), "Peace be with you."

On the other hand, temptations of the evil spirit are the opposite. The evil spirit causes confusion, doubt, insecurity, despondency, anxiety, worry and, if we allow him, despair. Is it any wonder that Saint John, under divine inspiration, should simply distinguish the Word of God by calling Him, "The Light," and identified the evil spirit as the "Prince of Darkness."

We know what happens when we are in darkness. We grope, we stumble, we don't want to move. All our muscles and all our faculties are intact, but darkness paralyzes us. We dare not move because we don't know where we are going. Reread, re-meditate on those passages especially in John, the Master Evangelist of Discernment of Spirits, from the beginning of his Gospel through his letters and his *Apocalypse*.

Notice of course, that there must have been, and that is why I anticipated what I am saying now, there must be the previous attitude of our readiness to do God's will. Otherwise, we cannot be sure, and God will not allow us to be that clear in recognizing Him. How many times Jesus, remember, in speaking to the crowds, said, "Why do you not listen to me?" Talk about grace! This was the Son of God talking infinite truth, speaking to men. You know what He told them? "Because your hearts are not right." Am I clear? It is the right disposition of soul that is needed.

Sin or no sin in the past, and we have all got it. We are all sinners. We are all the same; it is only a matter of degree of sinfulness. But that utter sincerity, the willingness of soul and then what miracles Christ worked. Remember? Miracles in the body, in order to reach the spirit. He'll work the same in us provided we are disposed, ready and willing. Lord, speak!

Notice too, lest we forget, that this peace may involve suffering. It will surely involve effort. It will involve trial and of course, the cross. Who said *peace of soul* is incompatible with the cross? Incompatible – that is what the Beatitudes are all about. It is those eight humanly-speaking incompatibilities; substitute peace for happiness and you got it.

3. Confidence and trust in God (Rule 7)

Finally, confidence. The last element in reflecting on this very crucial element in the religious life is great confidence in God that He does not deceive His elect. If the precondition for being able to distinguish inspiration from temptation is the ready willingness to do God's will (the sustained attitude), once we know *what* God wants us to do, having motivated ourselves as to *why* He wants us to do it, and having, with His grace, found out *how* we should carry it into effect, the sustained post-condition which must continue is *confidence*. Otherwise, we are going to weaken. Our knees are going to give in. Christ told us, and this is the source of our confidence, "Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be afraid."

Now the next one. "You believe in God," where the word, "believe," in Greek, is: *you trust in God, trust in Me*. He wants us to trust Him

implicitly. This is the guarantee of perseverance in His grace once we have discovered that it is His grace.

Once, then, we have decided what God wants, we are to go ahead. He warns us not to look back, which I sometimes paraphrase: not to look inside. Not to look at ourselves or re-examine what we have done, but trust implicitly. You see, and the saints are all eloquent in telling us this: "God treats His friends kindly." He will never inspire us to do more than, with His grace, we can carry through.

Lord Jesus, make me open to your grace. Let me trust You since I know I cannot trust myself. But, very well, since You told me to trust, because You have overcome the world, why shouldn't I, hand-in-hand with You, trust that I too, with Your grace, will overcome not only the world or the devil, but also my own inclinations?

This is the key to spiritual growth. Complete honesty with God, then doing what we know He wants us to do, and then letting go, trusting Him that He will not fail us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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