

The Gift of Discernment by Father John A. Hardon, S.J. Founder of the Marian Catechist Apostolate



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Although by now the terminology has become commonplace in Catholic spirituality, its historical popularization on a broad level began with Saint Ignatius. He has long and elaborate rules for what he calls *discernment of spirits*. In his own life, it was through his *discernment of spirits* that he discovered his vocation and the work that God wanted him to do. Wounded in the battle of Pamplona, bedridden for months, he had nothing to do but read lives of the saints. That made him reflect on his past, of which he was ashamed. Although he had, at times, one kind of feelings, when he thought other kinds of thoughts, he had other kinds of feelings.

So he had a third kind of thought, namely, there is a difference between the kind of spirit which prompts one kind of thinking and the spirit that prompts another kind of thinking. This was the beginning, at least in most modern spiritual theology, of the *discernment of spirits*.

It is not my purpose to elaborate on the Ignatian theology of discernment. It is rather to look at the vast subject in biblical perspective – to first ask three questions and then close with some practical observations.

- What are the biblical presuppositions on which *discernment of spirits* is based?
- What is the theology of the *discernment of spirits*?
- What is the psychology of this discernment?

Biblical Presuppositions

Regarding biblical presuppositions, we know there are many things in the Bible which form the premises or the pre-condition of things which by now the Church has developed and on which so much of our spiritual lives is built. So here, regarding discernment. While the whole New

Testament is filled with implicit presuppositions, implying that there were certain premises underlying that discernment, the moment you even talk about discerning anything, you've got to talk about norms and principles, otherwise how can you discern, which means *distinguish*?

While there are many implicit premises in the New Testament, there are three classical places in the writings of three of the Apostles where we have the preamble for the foundation in faith for the elaborate spirituality of discernment on which the Church has since built. The first is Saint Paul in his *Letter to the Galatians*, chapter 5:16-25. The second is Saint Peter's second letter, chapter 2:1-10. The third is Saint John in his first letter, chapter 4:1-6.

Without saying more about these biblical presuppositions, let me recommend that you read them and use them as meditation. They are the foundation of our biblical faith for all that, over the centuries, the Church and the Church's writers have said about discernment.

Taking each in sequence, I shall point out the different focus of Paul, Peter and John. Each is a whole panorama of deep insight as to how to discern the good from the evil spirit, but each is also different. Based, then, on each of three passages, which we technically call *exegesis* of what Peter, Paul and John are saying, we have a better understanding of what *discernment of spirits* means on the grounds of our faith—because, remember, between the faith we profess and the life that we live, there must be reflection, understanding, analysis and application. Bare faith alone is not sufficient; we must appropriate the faith, make it our own, study it, ask God to enlighten us as to what He means.



Saint Paul

Galatians 5:16-25

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would. But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us have no self-conceit, no provoking of one another, no envy of one another.

Two spirits, two kinds of fruits

First, Saint Paul. Paul speaks of two kinds of spirits active in the world: the Holy Spirit and the evil spirit. In writing to the Galatians, after having told them in plain Greek, "Who has bewitched you, you stupid Galatians?" he comes to contra pose two ways in which the two different spirits operate: the Holy Spirit in one way, the evil spirit in another.

There is logic behind his long description of how the Holy Spirit produces one kind of fruit (that's where we get the fruits, by the way, in this passage in Galatians—the fruits of the Holy Spirit and the fruits of the evil spirit). Each manifests itself in different conduct in the different people. In one case, they have allowed themselves to be inspired by the Good Spirit, and in the other, instigated by the evil one. What's the essential difference?

After you go through the fruits of the Holy Spirit and the fruits of the evil spirit—both are there—and you compare them and you boil them down to their ultimate essence, the fruits of the Holy Spirit can be reduced to *love of God and love of neighbor*, and the fruits of all evil spirits can be reduced to *love of self and indulgence*.

The Good Spirit makes goodness possible

How does the Good Spirit show Himself? In the person loving God and his neighbor. He may not know he has the fruits of the Spirit, or know how many fruits there are; no less, he is the object of the Good Spirit working in him. And wherever you find self-love and self-indulgence, this is the infallible revealed sign of the evil spirit. We can tell where the one or the other spirit has been active, depending on the kind of conduct that we see.

This, however, is more subtle than we have so far implied. Why? Because you might think that a person can be good and their conduct morally praiseworthy without necessarily saying that the Good Spirit is active. Not so. It is impossible—and this is the key—it is impossible to practice moral good, as Christ expects His followers to do, without something more than mere human moral power. It requires grace; it requires assistance in the form of light and strength from a power beyond the human—namely, the Divine.

Whenever we see genuine goodness on Christian principles, whether we realize it or not, whether we admit it or not, that goodness is not the mere product of that human being. It cannot be. Christ's teachings, the Christian ethic, cannot be lived out without the Holy Spirit enlightening the mind and continuously inspiring the will.

Consequently, if a person gives himself to the Holy Spirit, then his conduct will be revealed, and while

we may generously praise the person, we should first praise God; because, while it is true that, except for the person's free cooperation, he would not be practicing the virtue which he does, it is – before, during and all through whatever good we do – mainly the Holy Spirit Who is the responsible agent.

What we're after in using Saint Paul's principles is to find out where is the Good Spirit in this world. Saint Paul tells us He is in all good people. Not in some vague poetic sense, but in the most fundamental sense possible: that it is the Good Spirit who makes this goodness really possible.

Our capacity to do evil

When a person is doing good by Christian standards, we say he could not do this except with the light and assistance of the Spirit of God. When a person is doing evil, he is not precisely giving in to a power beyond himself; he is really giving in to himself. This means that except for the instigation of the evil spirit, we don't need superhuman power to do evil. All we have to do is allow the evil spirit to tempt us to do our own wills.

We then can recognize, whenever we see evil (and the greater the evil, the more sure we are), that the evil spirit has tempted, not precisely inspired. Giving the devil his due, however, we shouldn't give him more than his due. People don't need the devil to give in to themselves. They don't really need the devil to sin, because what is the essence of sin? The essence of sin is self-will contrary to the will of God.

The masters of the spiritual life, building on Saint Paul, therefore, said that we can discern the Good from the evil spirit if we study the direction which the thought or the inspiration takes. If it is towards pride—which means self-satisfaction, self-complacency, self-adulation, in a word, self-will—suspect the spirit of evil. You see, that's all he had to do at the beginning of the history of the human race. We have within us, provided we allow ourselves to give in to the demonic temptation, the capacity for all evil. That's the power we have. But as to do good, that's different. We don't have in our power either the light or the strength—I don't say to do any good, because we do have that—we can listen to classical music, for example—but in order

to carry out what Christ expects His followers to do, we need more than ourselves to do it. So much for Saint Paul.



Saint Peter

2 Peter 2:1-10

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master Who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their licentiousness, and because of them the way of truth will be reviled. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words; from of old their condemnation has not been idle, and their destruction has not been asleep. For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into Hell and committed them to pits of nether gloom to be kept until the judgment; if He did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven other persons, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes He condemned them to extinction and made them an example to those who were to be ungodly; and if He rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the wicked (for by what that righteous man saw and heard as he lived among them, he was vexed in his righteous soul day after day with their lawless deeds), then *the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial and to keep the unrighteous under punishment* until the day of judgment and especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority. Bold and

willful, they are not afraid to revile the glorious ones.

Saint Peter presumes the activity of both the Good and evil spirits. His stress is on the operations of the evil spirit. Otherwise than Saint Paul, however, Saint Peter's emphasis, besides being on the evil spirit, is also on the contest, the conflict between, not so much good and evil, as between truth and falsehood.

Saint Peter concentrates on the *spirit of falsehood*. Then in his ten verses (2 Peter 2:1-10) he speaks at great length about true and false prophets. Saint Peter identifies the false prophets as persons who have listened to the *spirit of error*. Saint Peter's words in the Greek, which he used, made it clear that he was speaking about listening to the spirit of error. We hear a lot of things; we shouldn't listen to everything we hear. Listening is hearing with attention. So, behind these prophets of error, Saint Peter points to the spirit of error. He further isolates the character of these prophets of error. They are also prophets of deceit. And, indeed, he spells out various levels of falsehood or of decadence; and since it is the spirit of error behind these spokesmen of error, there are levels of malice.

Levels of Malice

What are the levels of malice relative to the truth?

- On the most shallow level is mere ignorance of the truth. It's bad, but the persons who don't know the truth may not even themselves be responsible. They simply don't know. So that decadence, relative to truth, has depths. The least serious is just ignorance of the truth.
- Second, and a deeper level, is exclusion of the truth. That's more than ignorance; that's error. In other words, you not only don't know, but you accept and you prefer the opposite to the truth, which is error.
- Third level, where a person embraces the error. He not only is in error, but embraces it, and then seeks to promote it. That's false teaching.
- But there is one deeper level—the dungeon—where the one who, having embraced error and is teaching falsehood, conceals his designs by stealth and

cunning, in order to seduce others into error.

All of this is implied when Saint Peter warns the faithful against the prophets of falsehood.

Implications

What are the implications? There are manifold implications.

1. First, the evil spirit uses human beings to propagate error—just as the Good Spirit uses human beings to propagate the truth.
2. Second, that these human beings, inspired by error, become teachers who are absolutely convinced that error is truth. It may take the evil spirit years—and some fail the course—to convince certain people that what is error is the truth. If you've met them, as I have, they're thoroughly convinced, for example, that God is not infinitely perfect, that He is a changeable Being; indeed, that He is part of the universe. And the man who believes this can be a Catholic priest teaching theology. They speak, they write, they have misled millions. They have such conviction as you sometimes would wish to see in believers believing the truth. ...[T]he propagators of error are convinced that what they are doing is good because what they believe is thought to be the truth. They really do! Of course, the evil spirit has helped in creating the certitude; have no doubt, it's there.

Hiding the Falsehood

Now how do people who are properly trained in the school of the evil spirit hide their designs? How do they falsify the truth? In two ways: in what they teach, namely, *content*; and in how they teach, *methodology*. Generally speaking, it is far easier to recognize false content. It is much more difficult to recognize a methodology which will be consciously deceptive, because then the false content will be camouflaged. It is critically important, therefore, to know that error always conceals its designs: error is always deceitful. Error is falsehood; deceit is hiding the falsehood.

People look for evil as evil, or error as error. They have been beguiled (mislead) into embracing evil as good and error as the truth. So they have truths, partial truths, aspects that are true, but by the time

you've swallowed the sweet pill, you realize it is cyanide. Falsehood, then, is always cunning.

The evil spirit is always the erroneous spirit. He tries, if he can, to deceive good people under specious designs. Note, therefore, that falsehood cannot succeed except through cunning. From the first Fall of the human race to the last Fall of the human race, from the first sin to the last sin that will ever be committed, it is committed because people have allowed themselves to embrace falsehood through being deceived by cunning. Falsehood would never take people away from God unless they were deceived into thinking that what is false is really true.

How to identify agents of the evil spirit

The spirit of error always seeks to hide. What I'm sharing with you is things to look for in people, people who are the agents of the evil spirit. They always seek to hide; they are never fully open. The spirit of error fears to be identified. So they will have commissions or committees or organizations or this group or that group. Who's behind it? Nobody knows. It tries to conceal, it avoids openness and frankness. It always makes evil look like good or, as I prefer, it *masks evil under the guise of good*, always. That adverb is part of our faith. To be on one's guard is to have won half the victory.

All the successful misleaders of history (listen to this – this is a capsulized personality sketch of all the great misleaders in the Church, of the Church) they have all been attractive people. They have all been appealing personalities. They have all been pleasant in their manners. They have been disarmingly sincere. They have often appeared to be extraordinarily pious. What I consider the most devastating heretic of all times was a contemplative monk by the name of Pelagius—an ascetic, a bag of bones, his contemporaries tell us. So he came along and said it's not God's grace but human will that can give us mastery over our passions and finally win Heaven. He looked like a titan of will power. They are, with the rarest exception, ascetical people and remarkably charismatic in their temperament and personality—magnetic people, no exceptions. So much for Saint Peter.

Saint John

1 John 4:1-6

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every Spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already. Little children, you are of God, and have overcome them; for He Who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are of the world, therefore what they say is of the world, and the world listens to them. We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

We still have Saint John. No single New Testament writer speaks more often or more clearly about the need for *discernment of spirits* than Saint John. It is in Saint John that we have the familiar dichotomy, which means conflict, between light and darkness. He begins his Gospel on that theme and he ends the Apocalypse on that theme. In Heaven we shall have no more need of the sun or the moon or stars. Christ will be the light of the elect.

- So, light and darkness, Christ and the world. That's Saint John.
- Peace and turmoil. That's Saint John.
- The Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. That's Saint John, till the last verse of the *Book of Revelation*.

Identify the Antichrists

Now in the passage to which I referred in his first letter, Chapter 4:1-6, Saint John isolates the target of the conflict between these two forces by identifying how the Spirit of God can be distinguished from the spirit that is not of God. He is very practical. According to John, it all depends on if a person accepts Jesus Christ. Those who do, are His followers; those who don't are followers of the antichrist. (It's John who coined the term "antichrist.")

But he means something more definite than just that in one case Christ is accepted, and in the other, He is rejected. He means more than just the semantic

acceptance or rejection. He means first of all that the acceptance of Christ is the acceptance of Christ as the natural Son of God. A lot of people say they accept Christ. What do you mean? This is John's question. Who is Christ? Is He the Word of God that was with God because He is God from the beginning? That's what acceptance of Christ means: that that man, Jesus, is God.

Whereas, the rejection of Christ is the denial of Christ's divinity. Words couldn't be clearer. Who is the antichrist? The spirit at large in the world that has by now convinced many people that Jesus is not God. Thus, for John, you can distinguish the evil spirit from the Good Spirit by their respective attitudes towards Christ. The spirit of evil denies that God took on human flesh, dwelt among us, and taught the human race the way to salvation, and is now teaching mankind through the Church He founded.

Followers of Christ

The Holy Spirit, operating in Christ's followers, professes Christ's divinity, and His followers thereby submit themselves to the hard requirements of His teaching, communicated by His Church. Not, of course, because the teachings are hard. Monogamy, celibacy, self-sacrifice, charity towards the uncharitable, mercy towards the unmerciful, patience with the impatient, and the endurance of the cross is hard. That's not why the followers of Christ embrace these, but because, though hard and unpalatable to our natural desires, these mysteries of the faith should be lived out because the One Who told us, and through His Church tells us, they should be lived out is our GOD.

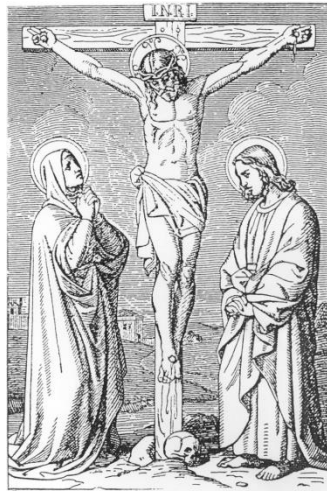
Never perhaps, in the Church's history, was it more necessary to make the right *discernment of spirits*,

that is, distinguish truth from error and virtue from malice. Why is it so important? Because so much error has insinuated itself into nominally Christian and Catholic circles and is being propagated by so many who still consider themselves Christians and Catholics and, maybe, even leaders in the Church of God.

Practical Observations

How to discriminate? All that I have just said is the answer to "how." But let me add three suggestions at the end.

- 1. First, watch the conduct of people.** Ideas are often hard to identify; people can be recognized. Are they humble and patient? Are they respectful of the Holy See? Are they docile to the teachings of the Church? If they're not, no matter what else you may like about them, protect yourselves—they are dangerous.
- 2. Second, expect false teachers to disguise their intentions.** They are attractive; they are disarmingly nice people; they are, generally, pious people. Expect error to be in disguise.
- 3. Three, watch for humble submission or proud unwillingness.** And finally, recognize with Saint John that the surest mark of Christ's Spirit in what we hear, in what we read, in what we see or observe is the humble submission to Christ's teaching. And conversely, the plainest mark of the antichrist is the proud unwillingness to follow this teaching as interpreted by the Church. The first is to be followed because it is true, and truth is identified by humility. The second is to be avoided because it is false, and falsehood is always identified by its pride.



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