

THE STILL, SMALL VOICE

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FOLK-LORE IS AN imaginative mirror of human experience. 'The still, small voice' of conscience is an almost universal 'folk-lore' way of expressing the interior experience of awareness of a good to be done or an evil to be avoided, the stern call of duty, or the inner hearing of 'thou shalt not'. Man is aware of an on-going dialogue with himself which issues in personal imperatives or prohibitions; these he then freely chooses to affirm or to deny in his lived actions. This essay is intended to deepen our understanding of 'the still, small voice' in the christian context, wherein the speaker is the holy Spirit and the call is not primarily to do good and to avoid evil, but to respond to a concrete, here and now call to love God and other people. That which is objectively good is not necessarily, for all that, the expression of the concrete will of God for me here and now. In the covenant relationship of God to his people, human actions are a lived 'Yes' to a specific word of God spoken to individual persons and to communities in the actual events of their present lives. A truly formed christian conscience is a fundamental attitude of always welcoming the actual word of God through choosing and doing the best act of love here and now. It is not, then, merely a guarantee of goodness; it is a source of lived holiness.

All of the great religions of the world have understood holiness as union with God, however diversely they have conceived of God or of man's way of uniting himself to God. Christianity is the revelation in Jesus Christ that holiness is actually sharing the life of God who is a community of love: Father and Son and holy Spirit. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ all men are invited to share now and forever in this divine life. Concretely, then, christian holiness is the inter-personal communion of all men with one another in communion with the Father, the Son and the holy Spirit. Lived christian holiness, therefore, is continually choosing to do that action which is here and now the best concrete act of love of God and of other people. The christian conscience must discern how best to live love in each complex situation of life, a situation that includes the individual christian just as he is, here

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and now in his own human and spiritual maturity, the other persons to whom he now is actually related, and all the circumstances shaping the moment of choice. The truly formed christian conscience, then, is the conscience of a believer whose entire life is constantly guided by spiritual discernment. The 'still, small voice' of the christian is the voice of the holy Spirit bearing witness within him.¹

Since discernment of the Spirit is the key to lived christian holiness, it is central in the tradition of christian spirituality. Etymologically, the word discernment means to 'sift through' and, so, to separate. Spiritual discernment is the process of sifting through the felt needs and desires, the spontaneous impulses and inclinations, the conflicting interior reactions that we experience when we confront the situations and events of our lives, in order to separate the 'wheat' of those that move us to choose loving actions from the 'chaff' of those that move us to choose selfish un-love. The possibility of discernment of the Spirit – of finding the word of God spoken to us in events – is rooted in the structure of human self-awareness. We hear the voice of the holy Spirit within us by way of our own interior, felt reactions to our experiences. By becoming self-aware at the profoundest depth of our being, we can stand away from our multi-dimensional interior feelings and reflect upon them, choosing among them, and then living out our choices through action. To discern the Spirit, I must live within my life. I must be really present to myself here and now, and at the still point of my selfhood. I must stand back, contemplate, choose, respond. Discernment requires bringing my present life-situation to where God touches me. It requires bringing to conscious awareness my core faith-experience of the holy Spirit actuating his presence and power within me to enable me to confess that Jesus is Lord.

The New Testament identifies the basic act of discernment as discernment of the origin of Jesus: is he the Christ of God or a man who works his signs through Beelzebub?² This primordial discernment of Jesus Christ determines the most profound orientation of a man and of all the further actions of his life. Thereafter, all of his discernment is the effort to recognize those impulses to action

¹ 1 Jn 5, 6-7.

² Notable texts are: Jn, 1, 9-10; 8, 47-48; 12, 31; Mt (and Synoptic parallels), 5, 24; 10, 25; 10, 34-36; 12, 30; 13, 24-30; 16, 23; 21, 42-44. Cf. Rom 2, 18; 9, 33; 2 Cor 6, 15; 1 Thess 4, 3; 1 Pet 2, 6-8.

which are against his fundamental commitment to Jesus or which are the authentic living out of this commitment.

The New Testament presents these conflicting impulses within the spirit of man as the 'Two Ways': darkness and light, flesh and spirit, Christ and satan, which must be discerned in order to live the Christ-life.³ The christian conscience, then, is awareness of the testimony of the Spirit of the risen Jesus within a man's own spirit.⁴

The tradition of spiritual discernment in christian spirituality, rooted in the scriptures, passed through the periods of the monks of the desert, Evagrius of Pontus, Cassian, St Augustine and the fathers, the monastic tradition, the rheno-flemish mystics, the scholastics, the *devotio moderna*, and reached a kind of apex of methodology in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius Loyola. Explicit or implicit, spiritual discernment is always the axis of christian spirituality, because it is the source of christian living. For Cassian (c. 360-430), who carried the spirituality of the monks of the desert to the west, discernment is the application of conscience to concrete actions; and he defined conscience as a 'transparence of the spirit' placed within man by God. For St Augustine (c. 354-430), discernment is love lived (*ama et fac quod vis*): the fraternal love which has its source in the love of God who is present within the spirit of man.⁵ Discerning how to live christianity concretely means discerning how to live love for one another here and now. Love is the unique dynamism that synthesizes in its movement the multiplicity of appetites and instincts which tend to divide man. All the wanderings of desires are integrated through love. This is why it is love that enables us to discern the concrete exigencies of true christian living: how to allow the love of God to be expressed transparently in our action.

³ Notable texts are: Rom 8, 4-17; 1 Cor 2, 12; 12, 10; Gal 5, 16-25; 6, 4; Eph 2, 1-3; 5, 8-17; Phil 1, 9-11; Col 3, 1-4; 1 Thess 5, 19-24; Tit 1, 15-16; Heb 5, 13-14; Jn Prologue; 3, 19-21; 7, 16-24; 8, 12; 14, 17; 1 Pet 4, 7; 5, 8-9; 2 Pet 1, 4-9; 1 Jn 1, 5-7; 2, 22; 4, 1-6.

⁴ Notable texts are: Rom 5, 5; 8, 2; 8, 6; 8, 15-16; 1 Cor 2, 10-16; 8, 1-3; 12, 7; 2 Cor 1, 19-22; 4, 6; 5, 16-17; 13, 5; Col 2, 7; 3, 15-16; Gal 2, 20; 5, 22-23; Eph 1, 14; 1, 17-19; 3, 16-19; 4, 30; Phil 2, 1; 4, 7-10; 1 Thess 2, 13; 5, 23; 2 Thess 1, 11; 3, 5; 3, 16; 1 Tim 1, 5; 2 Tim 1, 7; Tit 3, 6-7; Heb 4, 12-13; 11, 1; 13, 21; Jn 14, 16-17; 14, 26-27; Jas 1, 5-8; 3, 17-18; 1 Pet 3, 15; 5, 10; 2 Pet 1, 3; 1, 10; 1 Jn 2, 20-27; 3, 19-21; 3, 24; 4, 1-6; 4, 13; 5, 9-10.

⁵ A key text for understanding St Augustine's doctrine on spiritual discernment is his Commentary on the First Epistle of St John. In Treatise VIII, § 12, he writes: 'You have begun to love? God has begun to live in you. Love him who has begun to live in you, so that he will make you perfect by living more perfectly in you'.

St Thomas Aquinas (1227–1274) reflects the tradition of spiritual discernment, not in his treatment of *discretio*, which is for him a potential part of prudence, but in his discussion of the experimental knowledge of the divine Persons inhabiting the soul of the just man, and of the gifts of the holy Spirit that follow upon this inhabitation, especially the gift of wisdom. Through union with God by charity, the just man enjoys a loving and felt knowledge of the divine Persons within him; and it is this love and spiritual taste or feeling which enables him to estimate correctly his relationship to God and to creatures, as this is to be expressed in his lived actions. For Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1328) and the rheno-flemish mystics, it is the experience of God within the spirit of man, the *scintilla animae*, the ‘spark of the soul’, which enables us to know how to reject what draws us out of our true selves – away from God; and to know how to follow what draws us to our true selves – pure responsiveness to God.

St Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), in his *Spiritual Exercises*, developed a methodological way of bringing spiritual discernment to bear upon the definitive choice of one’s life-vocation, one’s total way of taking his existence in the world in response to a call from God, and then discerning all the specific actions consequent upon this vocation if it is to be lived out authentically.⁶ During the centuries following, the tradition of spiritual discernment, although implicit in all spiritual doctrine concerning the living of the christian life, has rarely been treated explicitly, except in rather simplistic commentaries on the rules for the discernment of spirits in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius. During recent years, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in the explicit treatment of spiritual discernment, probably because of the extraordinary ambiguity of modern life. The following pages are intended to present a brief explanation of the process of discernment of the Spirit.

Spiritual discernment is the effort to hear the ‘still, small voice’ of the holy Spirit, bearing witness within us that we have identified the actual word of God to us here and now; namely, that we have truly recognized the concrete choice of action which is the best act of love of God and of other people in our own particular situation. To discern, then, fundamentally means to *find God*, and *therefore*

⁶ For a fuller treatment of discernment, see my study, ‘Ignatian Discernment’, *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, vol II, no 2 (St Louis, April, 1970). See also chapters 5 and 6 of my book, *Making an Apostolic Community of Love, The Role of the Superior according to St Ignatius of Loyola* (The Institute of Jesuit Sources, St Louis, 1970).

to discover his will for us, rather than to find his will and, therefore, to find God. When we attend to our interior experience and 'sift through' the various inclinations to choice which we feel moving us, we know that we have recognized that specific choice which is the actual word of God to us, when we experience the testimony of God within us. Because we find God, we know his call to us to which we must respond by our lived action here and now. Discernment, then, is not a sometime thing. Rather, it is a way of living, a way of always finding God in all things. It is impossible to use spiritual discernment therefore, until we have brought to conscious awareness our own basic, faith-experience of the Spirit of the risen Jesus. The first indispensable condition for spiritual discernment is to identify, clarify, and express to ourselves our own experience of the holy Spirit actuating his presence and power within us and enabling us to confess that Jesus is Lord. In the ignatian dynamic of the *Spiritual Exercises*, this is the 'fruit' of the first week, which must be achieved before one can pass on to the second week and to spiritual discernment of choices.

The key to spiritual discernment, then, is prayer. All true prayer, whatever form it may take (meditation, contemplation, liturgical prayer, spontaneous, shared prayer, pentecostal prayer, etc.), is basically an entering into our personal experience in faith of the Father in Jesus Christ through the holy Spirit. Only through constant, real prayer can we bring to awareness the testimony of God within us. Now, this faith-experience which we share with all christians is, nevertheless, a personal experience, a unique experience within the self-awareness of each unique, irreplaceable, utterly individual person. It is because of the concrete dimensions present within an individual's own awareness of his central, faith-experience of Jesus that he discovers his own specific vocation. The experience of a call is the experience of being placed within a Presence inviting one to a personal response of total love through a specific life-vocation. Lived fidelity to this vocation in all the following actions of one's life is discerned through the interior testimony of this Presence within, the holy Spirit.

It is impossible to hear the 'still, small voice' of the holy Spirit within unless one has achieved true spiritual liberty, the total interior freedom that is ignatian 'indifference', which means openness to the fact that God can use *anything* as a means of encounter with man. Given this wide-open freedom, we must also always be moved to action only by our desire for union with God

through lived love of him and of other people, the desire for the ignatian *magis*: choosing only that which brings us to greater communion with God. This freedom and this desire can be achieved only through prayer. It is through the encounter with God in prayer that we bring to conscious awareness our basic, faith-experience of him in radical wide-openness to him whose presence is known through ignatian 'consolation', the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control.⁷ This unique experience of being wide-open to God is the touchstone experience for spiritual discernment, which is done through a comparison of experiences. In sifting through the feelings moving me to various choices, I compare the interior experience of which I am aware in considering each concrete choice, to the interior experience of being wide-open to God as he makes his presence known within me. When I find that the anticipation of one choice brings the same deep peace and joy (even when there is much spontaneous repugnance in more superficial feelings) that I feel in my core faith-experience, I know that I have the testimony of the holy Spirit within me, that I have found the actual word of God to me here and now. This is why to discern means to find God and, thus, to know his will, and not the other way around. And this is why prayer is the key to spiritual discernment.⁸

Furthermore, the prayer which is contemplation of Jesus in the gospels is absolutely central to discernment of the Spirit in our lives. The foundation of all discernment is personal faith in the person of Jesus, the Christ of God. Living the life of the Spirit of the risen Jesus, therefore, becomes the norm for every experience of human living as a christian. Jesus Christ is the source of all discernment, yesterday, today, and forever. We contemplate the human, historical life of Jesus in the gospels, because here we see God's own disclosure of himself; and only this revelation can overcome our tendency to make idols: to create a false God, to respond to our own selfish needs, rather than recognizing the one true God

⁷ Gal 5, 22-23.

⁸ It is important to note, nevertheless, that prayer does not give us the *content* of the actual word of God to us. Rather, it makes us free and it illuminates for us the *events* through which God speaks to us, as he has always spoken to his people, through his active love in history. Individual discernment is always within a community history, within the Church, within the *total* situation of man before God; and, so, it must always look to the communal discernment of the Church as its norm. This is why authentic discernment is never illuminism ('my charism' against all others); never, as Martin Luther wittily put it, 'swallowing the holy Spirit, feathers and all'.

in Jesus Christ. We also contemplate Jesus in his historical, gospel life in order to learn how to respond to the Father at every moment in our lives through taking on the profound attitudes (beatitudes) of Jesus himself. Through our contemplative prayer on the mysteries of the life of Jesus, we must come to experience him as carrying and conditioning all our life and actions. We contemplate the passion and death and resurrection of Jesus in order ourselves profoundly to experience the paschal mystery, so that we are always ready to say 'Yes' to the Father, even when our discernment reveals to us that he speaks to us a word demanding that we cling to the rock and bleed, a calvary-climbing decision. It is this leaving room for the paschal mystery that distinguishes spiritual discernment from human prudence. Our paschal faith, that the Father brings new life out of ultimate absurdity and of total death, that he transforms our every 'Amen' into an 'Alleluia', does not rest upon human prudence. It is folly to the gentiles, a scandal to unbelievers, un wisdom to the wise of this world. Faith is the gift of the holy Spirit within us, enabling us to confess that Jesus is Lord and to believe his paschal good news.

Discernment of the Spirit, then, the on-going discernment of the actual word of God to me here and now at every moment, in every new situation of my life, is the progressive integrating of all the experiences of my life into my core faith-experience of the Spirit of the risen Jesus. It is the progressive integrating of all the actions and relationships and words and thoughts and feelings of my life into my growth in the life of Jesus. This progressive growth in the Spirit gradually will enable one to guide all his life and actions through a pervasive awareness of the testimony of God within him, a felt-knowledge of the response to make always and everywhere to the actual word of God. It will enable one to find God in all things.

Gradually, the presence of God, personally possessed within the depths of one's own being and brought to awareness through a life of prayer and of lived discernment, pervades oneself and permeates all that one encounters, so that God becomes one's environment. Then the whole world becomes a sign significant of God. Through living within our ever deepening faith-experience of the Spirit of the risen Jesus, we gradually come to be possessed by the love of the Father, the Son and the holy Spirit. Through our ever growing openness to his gift of love, our continual response to his love through total self-giving in return of love to him, we gradually come to love with God's own love all other beings: men, women,

children, animals, flowers, things – this whole fantastic world in transformation by man through mind and machine. The whole universe in its least details takes on a new dimension. As Teilhard de Chardin expressed it, everything becomes *diaphany*. The light of Christ shines from within each least creature, illuminating its own unique and special beauty. The presence of God is discovered everywhere in everything, not as something externally varnished over the creature, but like the light of the sun that brings out all the particular splendours of a stained-glass window.

Then, our life becomes a continual dynamic movement of love. In loving everything for itself with God's own gifted love, we love and possess God himself in everything. And in loving God in response to his gift of love, we love all that he loves, all that he gives being to through his creative love. Our entire life becomes a dynamic movement of love, always becoming a more profound, more intense love of God and of all things. Just as a lover loves the little finger, the eyelash, the hand, the brow, the whole body of the beloved – loving through them and beyond them the free, transcendent person of the beloved, who always beckons from beyond to an ever new depth of discovery of self, of profounder personal love and union, – so, in his love of all things, the lover of God always advances to a new depth of loving and of finding God in all things. This is lived holiness. It is the goal of spiritual discernment to which we are called by the 'still, small voice' of the holy Spirit within us.