Spiritual Essay

Discernment and desire

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IN THE CHRISTIAN JOURNEY, A CENTRAL and never-ending question is 'How do I know if I am moving towards God, doing what God wants me to do?' The classic phrase which describes this question is 'seeking the will of God' and the process of attempting to answer that question is discernment. This is a complex, multi-layered experience in which, intentionally, decision and action are interpreted in terms of movement toward or away from God, the ground of all being, Holy Mystery revealed in Jesus the Christ.

Discernment includes interpretation of religious and psychological experience, for both interweave themselves in the process of reflection and choice. Central to discernment is desire, for it is the power of attraction which begins the experience.

This essay will consider discernment and desire in four aspects: the phenomenology of desire as seen in the work of Bernard Lonergan, the power of desire in the writings of Teresa of Avila, the negation of desire according to John of the Cross, and applications of these themes to discernment.

The phenomenology of desire

The work of Bernard Lonergan (1904–1984) is especially useful in helping to articulate the relationship between discernment and desire.[1] His work has been characterized as a 'grammar of desires'.[2] The structure of consciousness which Lonergan describes and analyses in *Insight* and *Method in theology* has four dimensions: experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding. In human experience something is sensed, perceived, imagined or felt. Intellectually we seek to understand what we have experienced. We search for truth as we seek to judge what we have experienced and understood. Finally we move towards action as we responsibly decide what to do.

The power of desire towards the Good, which is the movement of transcendence, moves us forward in freedom to choose the truly Good, who is God. The energy of desire shapes our lives, leading us to make choices which have consequences for ourselves and others.

The three dimensions of desire

Lonergan delineates desire in three dimensions: the desire to know, the desire for authenticity, and the desire for transcendence. The desire to know is 'the dynamic orientation manifested in questions for intelligence and reflection' which is pure desire since it is 'a dynamic orientation to a totally unknown'.[3] The intentionality which shapes the discernment process is that of the power of discovery beyond what is already known. In discernment this is the answer to the question 'What does God want of me?'

The second dimension of desire is to act, to be authentically ourselves, our 'true self' in Thomas Merton's phrase.[4] The question at the heart of this dimension of desire is 'What kind of person do I want to be?' It involves the analysis of the psychological complexities of knowledge and attraction; it also confronts the person with the decision as to whether this choice is the one *I* should make.

The third dimension of desire is that of transcendence and religious conversion. Lonergan states clearly that 'Man [*sic*] achieves authenticity in self-transcendence'.[5] The ultimate form of self-transcendence is being-in-love. The experience of love is transforming as is no other experience and 'from it flow one's desires and fears, one's joys and sorrows, one's discernment of values, one's decisions and deeds'.[6]

The power of the desire to know, to be authentically oneself, is brought to fulfilment and completion in the experience of the love of God, a being-in-love which transforms our desires so that we want to choose and to do that which God desires of us. Desire and choice thus become one in this love which surpasses all knowledge.

A framework for discernment

Lonergan's foundational work on the structure of human consciousness and his 'grammar of desires' thus yield a framework for the analysis of discernment and desire. Desire is a dual experience of consciousness: the experience of *what* we are attending to, and the experience that *we* are attending to it. Desire has a subject and an object: one who is aware that she is experiencing, understanding, judging the object of desire in order to decide what to do. This discerned decision is a response to God's desire that we live the truth in love. The choices we discern are judged to be truly good if they lead us further into the desire for Holy Mystery who is the end and cause of all that we can desire.

Teresa of Avila: the power of desire

Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) was a Spanish woman of immense charm and depth of spirit. She entered the Carmelite monastery in her home city of Avila at the age of twenty-one and did not make a truly serious commitment to a life of prayer until she was nearly forty. Two experiences of conversion in 1553 and 1554 were the transition from living the mitigated Carmelite rule, which allowed much visiting, little fasting and a relaxed life of prayer, to a lifestyle in which God became her sole goal and desire. Together with John of the Cross she reformed the Carmelite way of religious life so that it focused on the life of prayer lived in community, in poverty and seclusion.

For Teresa, desire is the energy which leads one to union with the will of God. Teresa was a person of great enthusiasm and vision and so her language is filled with the dynamism of desire for God. In her major writings – her *Life, The interior castle* and *The way of perfection*[7] – she speaks of desire in many ways as she describes the path to union with God.

Desire and prayer

Discernment is impossible without prayer. Teresa is very encouraging to the person beginning a life of prayer. 'There is nothing here to fear but only something to desire' (*Life* 8.5). Even in the First Mansion of the *Castle*, when persons hardly know anything about prayer, at least 'they have good desires' (*Interior castle* I.1.8). From the very first we must have great confidence and not 'hold back one's good desires' (*Life* 13.2), recognizing that these good desires are given to us by God. Indeed, in trying to pray we are responding to God who 'desires intensely that we love Him and seek His company' (*Interior castle* II.1.2). Desire meets desire.

Teresa explains that as prayer grows and deepens, often with intense times of consolation and resting in God, this prayer is the source of 'ardent desires' (*Life* 19.2). She rebukes those in the Third Mansion for their 'well-balanced' desires for penance and ways to serve God (*Interior castle* III.2.7). For Teresa love and desire must 'reach the point of overwhelming reason' (*Interior castle* III.2.7).

This begins to happen in Mansion Five, where Teresa describes the transformation of the person in the image of the silkworm and the butterfly. Because the person is filled with great desires 'everything it can do for God becomes little in its own eyes' (*Interior castle* V.2.8). As love increases so does desire, for 'the soul dissolves with desire'

(*Interior castle* VI.2.4), yet it does not know what to ask for any longer, since pain and desire coexist in the experience of God's love.

And what is the content of these desires of which Teresa speaks so glowingly? They are to know that she is loved and that, paradoxically, her desires please God (*Way of perfection* 42.2). To ask for these gifts with determination and increased desire is a sign for Teresa that one's experience of God in prayer is authentic.

Desire and suffering

Not to receive what we desire and want causes suffering, whether it is a healing from illness, a measure of achievement, or the love of someone dear to us. When Teresa discusses desire and suffering, she links the two, since, as one grows in union with God, desire causes suffering. As one comes closer to God the distance between what one desires and where one is causes anguish. Teresa explains this suffering:

> The reason is that since it is getting to know ever more the grandeurs of its God and sees itself so distant and far from enjoying Him, the desire for the Lord increases much more; also, love increases in the measure the soul discovers how much this great God and Lord deserves to be loved. (*Interior castle* VI.11.1)

As desire for God increases, the pain of the separation also grows. Such pain is experienced in the interior part of the soul, not the body. Teresa uses her favourite image of water to describe the intensity of these desires:

> On fire with this thirst, it cannot get to the water, and the thirst is not one that is endurable but already at such a point that nothing will take it away. Nor does the soul desire that the thirst be taken away save by that water of which our Lord spoke to the Samaritan woman. (*Interior castle* VI.11.5)

Discerning desire

For Teresa, the central desire of our life is that God's will should be done (*Interior castle* III.2.6; V.2.12). She gives some clear principles to use in order to judge the depth of our union with the will of God. These are very practical criteria, centred on love. We are not in union with God when these 'worms' gnaw at virtue: 'self-love, self-esteem,

judging one's neighbours (even though in little things), a lack of charity for them, and not loving them as ourselves' (*Interior castle* V.3.6).

We know that we are doing the will of God and growing in union with God, when we respond to God's call to love: 'The Lord asks of us only two things: love of His Majesty and love of our neighbour . . . By observing them with perfection, we do His will and so will be united with Him' (*Interior castle* V.3.7).

As one nears union with God, one's desire to serve God through love for our neighbour increases (*Interior castle* VII.2.9). Indeed, the person now desires to do anything if it would be for the service of God. Suffering is desired as long as it helps the will of God to be accomplished (*Interior castle* VII.3.4). Instead of desiring death in order to be with the Lord more quickly (which must have been Teresa's desire), she writes that now persons 'have just as great a desire to serve Him and that through them He be praised and that they may benefit some soul if they can' (*Interior castle* VII.3.6). In this final mansion, where the union between God and the person is expressed in marital imagery, the person now has only two desires, 'to be always either alone or occupied in something that will benefit some soul' (*Interior castle* VII.3.8). Teresa describes the peace and joy of attaining one's heart's desire – union with God – as the 'kiss sought by the bride . . . an abundance of water is given to the deer that was wounded . . . one delights in God's tabernacle' (*Interior castle* VII.3.13). Yet even in the midst of these delights Teresa insists that union with God, spiritual marriage, has but one purpose: 'the birth always of good works, good works' (*Interior castle* VII.4.6). Prayer gives us the strength to serve, and thus Martha and Mary become one (*Interior castle* VII.4.12).

Teresa's insights on desire

As we survey the richness of Teresa's writings on desire, several themes become evident. Desire is cherished as the energy which moves the person towards God. Teresa insists that we must have great desires, to reach for the moon, the stars and the sun all at once. The source of the movement to know and do the will of God is within us, seen in our desire to give God everything. Yet she is realistic in speaking of the suffering caused by desire since the experience of desire for God holds within itself the sense of the distance of God.

Authentically true and good desires are known by their object: to love God and to love one's neighbour. These are the chief discernment

criteria for Teresa; we know that we are doing God's will if we love both God and others intensely, generously and completely.

John of the Cross: the negation of desire

John of the Cross (1542–1591), Teresa's collaborator in the Carmelite reform, spiritual director, poet and explorer of the depths of the search for God, presents a very different perspective on desire. In contrast to Teresa who values desire so highly, John speaks of the negation of desire. Our desires block the action of God, as he describes so graphically in his works *The ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The dark night of the soul.*[8]

John stresses that we are created for love and union with God (*Spiritual canticle* 29.3). The nights of trials and sufferings are the path to this union. They are a liberation from our false self, from our selfishness and self-centredness. God and the false self cannot both be at home in the human heart. John writes of the person's journey to union with God, from twilight to midnight to dawn, as the night begins, deepens and then gives way to the morning of God's enduring presence.

Entering the nights

John distinguishes between various kinds of 'nights' in this time of suffering. They alternate between 'active nights' in which the emphasis is on the person's efforts toward liberation, and 'passive nights', in which the hidden action of God is dominant. The 'passive nights' are more important since it is in the quiet, hidden and profound suffering of these nights that God's transforming action occurs.

The journey toward union with God is a night for three reasons: the denial and privation of what our senses desire puts our senses in darkness; the road to God is the dark night of faith; and God also is a dark night to us in our earthly life (*Ascent* I.2.1:74–75).

The active night of the senses

John's strongest teachings on the negation and denial of desire are in this first night which begins at twilight. John tells us that 'this dark night is a privation and purgation of all sensible appetites for the external things of the world, the delights of the flesh, and the gratifications of the will' (*Ascent* I.1.4:74). In this night one's desires are purified and this causes immense suffering. As the depths of self-centredness are revealed by the purifying night, the person experiences

anguish and pain as he or she attempts to respond to the call to conversion and transformation.

This should not be seen as a two-step process: purification and then union with God; rather we are transformed '*through* what we cherish or desire and through what gives us security and support'.[9] Desire holds two kinds of energy within it: it moves us forward to grasp the object of our desire and it holds us in the possession of what we now have. The active night of the senses is an experience of learning to focus one's desires on the love of God and the love of neighbour. John is clear that attachment to God and attachment to all that is not of God (which he names as creatures[10]) cannot coexist in the same will (*Ascent* I.6.1:85). Even good things can enslave, let alone desires for that which is evil and causes suffering to ourselves and others, including patterns of social sin.

John gives many examples of how things which appear good are totally inadequate truly to satisfy us: the beauty of creation, human goodness, the world's wisdom and human ability, human freedom and sovereignty are as nothing as compared to God's beauty, goodness, wisdom and freedom (*Ascent* I.4.4–6:7–80). Attachment to all of these is slavery; the road map has been mistaken for the end of the journey. We are called to freedom and 'freedom cannot abide in a heart dominated by the appetites . . . it dwells in a liberated heart' (*Ascent* I.4.6:80). This recalls the saying of Jesus, 'You will know the truth and the truth will make you free' (Jn 8:32).

What does the road to freedom in the active night of the senses call us to? How do we (individually and as a community) experience freedom from anything that is not of God and the things of God? What can we *do*, for in the active night the emphasis is on our action?

Here is where John has earned his reputation of being a demanding guide. He brings us first to the imitation of Christ: we are to 'have a habitual desire to imitate Christ in all [your] deeds by bringing [your] life into conformity with His' (*Ascent* I.13.3:102). Second, 'Renounce and remain empty of any sensory satisfaction that is not purely for the honour and glory of God' (*Ascent* I.13.4:102). Then John gives an explanation that makes this very concrete and explicit:

> Endeavour to be inclined always:
> not to the easiest, but to the most difficult;
> not to the most delightful, but to the harshest;
> not to the most gratifying, but to the less pleasant;
> not to what means rest for you, but to hard work;

not to the consoling, but to the unconsoling;
not to the most, but to the least;
not to the highest and most precious, but to the lowest and most despised;
not to wanting something, but to wanting nothing;
do not go about looking for the best of temporal things, but for the worst,
and desire to enter for Christ into complete nudity, emptiness, and poverty in everything in the world.

(*Ascent* I.13.6:102–103)

And though the emphasis in the active night of the senses is on our efforts to break the bonds of sin and disordered desire, this is impossible by human effort alone. So beneath the language of *kenosis*, of total self-emptying in the manner of Jesus (Phil 2:5–11), is the presence of God – but known in the paradox of darkness which is an unknowing.

John further describes the journey in the language of *nada*, meaning 'nothing'. That is, compared to God, everything is nothing:

To reach satisfaction in all desire its possession in nothing.
To come to possess all desire the possession of nothing.
To arrive at being all desire to be nothing.
To come to the knowledge of all desire the knowledge of nothing.
To come to the pleasure you have not you must go by a way in which you enjoy not.
To come to the knowledge you have not you must go by a way in which you know not.
To come to the possession you have not you must go by a way in which you possess not.
To come to be what you are not you must go by a way in which you are not.
When you turn toward something you cease to cast yourself upon the all.
For to go from all to the all you must deny yourself of all in all.
And when you come to the possession of the all you must possess it without wanting anything.
Because if you desire to have something in all your treasure in God is not purely your all.

(*Ascent* I.13.11:103–104)

But as difficult as this first night is, it is literally only the first act.

Two overlapping nights

The passage from twilight to dawn can last as long as twelve hours at certain times of the year, but the 'nights' have no such duration. After a certain degree of liberation is experienced in the 'active night of the senses' there may be a time when no dramatic change appears to be happening. But at some point the night returns and deepens into midnight, an experience which John names as the simultaneous 'active night of the spirit' and 'passive night of the senses'. While the passive night is the more crucial, it is in the 'active night of the spirit' that John insists that desire must be purified even more.

This night is much darker than the first, for it is a time of purification of what John terms the 'spiritual' part of the person: the intellect, memory and will which John describes in Books II and III of *The ascent of Mount Carmel*. The path is of intense and dark faith, in which one paradoxically 'walks securely' (*Ascent* II.1.2:108) in God. This spiritual night of faith 'removes everything both in the intellect and in the senses' (*Ascent* II.1.3:108).

Dark faith

In the night of faith all images and experiences of God prove totally inadequate. John insists that God is beyond all concepts and ideas and so we cannot cling to them but must go forward in naked faith.

> For God's being cannot be grasped by the intellect, appetite, imagination, or any other sense, nor can it be known in this life. The most that can be felt and tasted of God in this life is infinitely distant from God and the pure possession of Him. (*Ascent* II.4.4:113)

A person is hindered from union with God if they are 'attached to any understanding, feeling, imagining, opinion, desire, or way of his own' (*Ascent* II.4.4:113). As human beings we will, of course, continue to think about God, imagine God, be moved towards God – but John warns us not to consider that any of these experiences are God. Here desire can mislead by mistaking the signpost on the road for the goal. The way is one of intense darkness indeed, as we 'pass beyond everything to unknowing' (*Ascent* II.4.4:114).[11]

Deeper hope

The second gift of the active night of the spirit is the purification of our memory and a deepening of the gift of hope. Memory is the capacity to store and recall life-experiences, both pleasant and painful. John instructs that the memory must be focused on God and away from our own fantasies and memories of past experiences. He states that the memory must be drawn 'away from its natural props and capacities and [raised] above itself . . . to supreme hope in the incomprehensible God' (*Ascent* III.2.3:215).

In speaking of the virtue of hope, John now gives a positive value to desire, for hope is the stirring of desire for God for whom we long and whom we love and serve. Our desire for God must not be confused with our attractions to anything else: 'the less other objects are possessed, the more capacity and ability there is to hope for the one object, and consequently the more hope' (*Ascent* III.15.1:236).

The strategy to deal with memories is very demanding: whenever ideas, images, thoughts come to us, we must not rest in them but 'turn to God with loving affection, in emptiness of everything rememberable' (*Ascent* III.15.1:236). We are not to be attached to anything in the path to union with God in love.

Consecration in love

The purification of the intellect and memory which results in deeper faith and hope are not sufficient; the will and the virtue of charity are John's focus as he concludes the third part of *The ascent.* John finds in Deuteronomy 6:5 the most appropriate text to describe his purpose: 'You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength' (*Ascent* III.16.1:237).

In order for this to happen, desires, passions and feelings must be controlled and focused on God. Working within the medieval understanding of the person, John states that the 'strength of the soul comprises the faculties, passions and appetites. All this strength is ruled by the will' (*Ascent* III.16.2:237). The whole person must be turned to and focused on God and God alone. Our passions and feelings are not to be suppressed or repressed but to be directed towards the love and service of God.

The purification which is the experience of the active night of the spirit results in a deeper freedom and a more loving attachment to God. The person's faith, hope and love are now firmly anchored in God who is known in dark faith. One is free to love with all the strength and

feeling of one's heart since one's desires are now firmly focused on God alone.

John's treatment of desire is the mirror image of Teresa's: all desires, whether sensory, intellectual or spiritual, are to be negated and purified. Desire is more apt to deceive than to lead to the way of truth and love. Thus his language is harsh and demanding. However, when he speaks of the purification of the memory and the will, desire begins to have positive value, since in the 'active night of the spirit' desire is good if it is focused on God alone.

Discernment and desire

These contrasting views of the meaning of desire describe a creative tension which provides a matrix for understanding the inner dynamic of discernment. Desire is powerful, for it is the energy which moves us towards God and the doing of the will of God; at the same time, it can enslave when it is directed to anything other than God. In discernment, the power of desire and the purification of desire meet. To ask oneself 'What do I really want?' is indeed a daunting question. To further inquire, 'How does this desire reflect God's desire for [my] fullness of life?' is to accept the need for the continual refinement of desire so that my desires become ever more congruent with God's desires.

Within the perspective of Lonergan's fourfold structure of consciousness, we can thus describe discernment as a process of:

focusing desire: the experience of desire itself, either moving one towards God or away from God;

analysing desire: reflection on the experience of desire, so that one recognizes the direction and intentionality of these desires;

judging the intentionality of desire: the energy of desire, purified in prayer and self-knowledge, is now interpreted as leading one to know and do the will of God;

desire leading to decision: making a choice in the power of the Spirit of God which will enflesh the deepest desires of one's heart: to know, love and serve God and all that God loves.

Thus what we describe as 'the will of God' for ourselves, or for the Christian community, is not strange to us, for it is the awakening of our deepest desires in response to the desire of God that we be the cherished persons God has created us to be.

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NOTES

1 This section includes material in S. Rakoczy, 'Discernment and desire', *Grace and Truth* vol 12, no 1 (April 1995), pp 3–15.
2 Cf V. Gregson, 'The desire to know: intellectual conversion' in V. Gregson (ed), *The desires of the human heart* (New York, 1988), p 16.
3 B. J. F. Lonergan, *Insight* (London, 1957), pp 348, 350.
4 T. Merton, *New seeds of contemplation* (New York, 1961), pp 31–36.
5 B. J. F. Lonergan, *Method in theology* (New York, 1972), p 104. Cf also W. Conn, *The desiring self* (New York, 1998), pp 34–36, 71–75 and P. Sheldrake, *Befriending our desires* (Notre Dame, 1994).
6 Lonergan, *Method in theology*, p 105.
7 Quotations are from *The collected works of St Teresa of Avila*, Vols I and II, trans K. Kavanaugh OCD and O. Rodriguez OCD (Washington DC, 1976, 1980).
8 All quotations are from *The collected works of St John of the Cross*, trans K. Kavanaugh OCD and O. Rodriguez OCD (Washington DC, 1979).
9 C. FitzGerald, 'Impasse and dark night' in J. W. Conn (ed), *Women's spirituality: resources for Christian development*, second edition (New York, 1996), p 415.
10 John's use of language is that of sixteenth-century scholastic theology. He is not saying that all created reality ('creatures') is evil, but rather that our desires for creatures can be enslaving. We mistake the good we find in created reality for the ultimate Good who is God, rather than seeing all of creation as a sacrament of God's presence.
11 The author of *The cloud of unknowing* writes: 'For it is a darkness of unknowing that lies between you and your God' (chapter 4).