

# DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS AND CHRISTIAN GROWTH

By MICHAEL KYNE

**A**CCORDING to the decree of Vatican II on the ministry and life of priests, priests are expected to be able to 'discern the signs of the times' along with the laity (*Simul cum ipsis signa temporum recognoscere queant*). Further, it is by 'testing the spirits to see if they are of God (that) priests will be able to discover with the instinct of faith, recognise with joy and foster with diligence the various charisms of the laity'.<sup>1</sup> Such references as this in the council documents have brought a new popularity to the old idea of the discernment of spirits. But neither the understanding of it nor its practice is any easier than it has ever been.

My own focal point, in examining the term and discussing certain aspects of its practice, will be what St Ignatius has to say about it in his *Spiritual Exercises*.<sup>2</sup> This does not mean, of course, that I consider him to be the inventor either of the phrase or of the practice. His own spiritual experience led him to conclusions which were one with those of a tradition going back through the early period of monasticism to holy scripture itself; and he expressed those conclusions in a language which he received from this tradition.

*What are the 'spirits'?*

When we come to examine the rules for the discernment of spirits in the *Exercises*, the first question that probably occurs is: 'What are these spirits that are to be discerned?' At once the terminology employed arouses our suspicions: it might appear that we are dealing with some mythical world in which everything at all unusual is to be attributed to the agency of angels or devils. And there is a certain amount of truth in this. From very early times, christian writers, in treating of the nature of man, were accustomed to make the three-fold division into body, soul and spirit. The spirit of man, it was

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<sup>1</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 9.

<sup>2</sup> For the full text of the ignatian rules for discernment of spirits cf *infra*, pp 92-96.

traditionally taught, was open to the influence of good and bad spirits. On the other hand, the word 'spirit' was not always used univocally as referring to outside influences, diabolic or angelic, on man's spirit. A further distinction was drawn early on, before the fifth century, between two kinds of thoughts, *logismoi* and *noemata*: and *logismos*, as referring in a general sense to the reactions or impulses of man's spirit, was used as a synonym of 'spirit'. Throughout tradition, and by Ignatius, the word spirit is thus used in an ambiguous sense: either of a subjective reality within a person – *logismos*, or as the source of that reality, the outside spiritual influence which is either good or bad.

Now it seems to me particularly important to emphasize that in the discernment of spirits it is not our precise task to identify the *sources* of the various spiritual reactions which occur in a man. Christian spiritual literature teaches that there are three such sources or external influences; since the category of good spirits must be divided into uncreated (God) and created (angels). This distinction concerning external influences is not of great import in the discernment of spirits. We are not concerned with the external influences but with the subjective realities and their identification as good or bad. It is virtually impossible, and practically not very helpful, to identify the part played by external influences in those internal realities which we call a man's spiritual impulses or reactions; we cannot say definitely what these influences are in any given instance: they could as well be books or the example of other men as good or bad spirits.

What, then, is the meaning of 'spirit' in this second sense? What are these spiritual reactions or *logismoi*? The best definition I can offer is something like spiritual impulses, tendencies, inclinations, which are either the activation or the negation of a life of faith, hope and charity: the tendencies and moods which occur within a context of faith, hope and charity. Such impulses obviously spill over into thoughts properly so called, and into actions. The question arises here whether these spiritual reactions are to be identified with all our natural emotive reactions. Personally I am inclined to think that these spiritual impulses are normally indistinguishable from psychological moods and reactions; but one has to be careful to make some distinction, because the whole of tradition differentiates these *logismoi* from purely natural *noemata*. Certainly the definition that Ignatius gives in his rules for discernment, of consolation as always involving an increase of faith, hope and charity, does seem

to point towards a distinction between this sort of spiritual mood and a purely psychological one. But because we are dealing with something subjective, it is important to notice that we ought not to say that these *logismoi* can always be distinguished from *noemata* and identified absolutely.

### *The need for discernment*

What then is discernment? It is the distinguishing between these spiritual impulses, moods and states, so that I can decide whether they are good or bad; so that I can say what their direction is. This direction, particularly in a prayerful context such as making the spiritual exercises, will be for a generous christian towards the more perfect, the more Christ-like. Why do we need discernment? It seems to me that unless a person is practising this discernment, he is at the mercy of ephemeral impulses and moods, which are ambiguous. We can expect spiritual fluctuation, and in the christian life we all need to learn from this ambiguity and, in certain cases, to sit easy to it. What is vital as a christian is to decide rightly when we are affected by these states. They are in point of fact the springboard of our thoughts and actions, and they can falsify thought and action at the very heart of their reality. Hence the possibility of discerning spirits sometimes simply by considering a person's external actions.

### *Presuppositions for discernment*

Now it is clear that this discernment demands certain presuppositions. The first is that a person be generous, that his be a truly christian life, and that he effectively desires to grow as a christian: *ubi dixisti satis periisti*. A second presupposition is that man is made for God, his spiritual fulfilment, and that he is gradually unified round his choice of God, just as he might be round the choice of self or of any other centre. One must also accept that Christ is the way to the Father, and that the Church is the Body of Christ. Otherwise, it is not possible to understand anything that tradition says about discernment. Man is united to Christ, to the Church, to the Father, by one Spirit of truth and charity; so that the basic presupposition in discernment is charity – the charity which means union with God, union with others in the Church.

### *Advancing towards discernment*

It will be clear, I hope, from the foregoing, that it will never be enough to discern the isolated and momentary impulse. What con-

cerns the true christian is to discover the truth about a state or a mood which is prolonged in its reality or in its effects. Here, I think, the first question to be asked is what is a person's aim in life; whether it is God and the service of God. The second question to be asked is what is the general quality of the person's life in the fulfilment of that aim: quality in such activities as prayer, charity towards others and self-forgetfulness, which will indicate the overall tendency of his life. The traditional phrase which summarizes the required response to this question is: *dos haima kai labe pneuma*, 'Give your life blood and receive the Spirit'. The central reality of the christian life is self-giving, martyrdom, in order to be influenced by the Spirit of God. All that is good in the processes of monastic and ascetical practice flows from this principle.

Ignatius would say that if a person has a right intention, if he wishes to be generous, and yet in his life there is a tailing off in the quality of expression of generosity, then his moods and attitudes take on a double significance. You can say that his mood is good if it disturbs his complacency. If, as he lives out this life in a gradual deterioration, he is disturbed, then here is a mood which is leading him to halt that downward movement. Any tendency which leaves him in a state of complacency, or increases it, will be bad. The contrary would be true if he is a person whose generosity is increasing and finding further expression in prayer, in self-forgetfulness and in charity. Whatever in his desires or inclinations hinders or discourages him in this growth will clearly be bad; whatever gives him heart will be good. His aim is a settled aim, one which he is constantly, courageously expressing in his life.

However, it is a fact of my own experience, brief though that may be, that by far the greater number of problems concerning christian living, even for religious and priests, occur on a level of discernment which is not related to such a settled aim of a generous service of God. The discernment is, so often, no more than that exercised by beginners in the christian life – according to the rules set out in the first week of the *Exercises*. Many do not, in fact, manifest, in their impulses, mature choice of an aim; so they even lack consistency in doing the obvious thing that God wants of a christian, or of a religious as a christian. So often the problem which faces us is not one of fine discernment, but of human maturity, religious education and motivation.

There is, of course, a second stage in discernment, with which Ignatius deals in his rules for the second week. It is the situation of a

man who is generous in the service of Christ, has a right aim, and is spelling out this intention in his daily life. For such a one the real difficulty is often that generosity can mislead, and this is where real discernment is needed. In this connection, from St Paul to Ignatius, we find the citation of the phrase about Satan transforming himself into an angel of light. When a person is trying to be generous in the service of God, and in giving himself to God, fluctuations are to be expected; fluctuation in his generosity and in his reactions to every human situation. These reactions will need constant purification, because the total response of a person to God is in fact a gift; it is not something that a person can grasp and make his own by a once and for all decision. It is the alternation of his moods, especially in connection with some particular generous possibility that faces him, that a man learns how to cope with those moods, how to sit easy to them. Through such experience he learns to expect changes: changes which are meant to be an advantage to him, particularly in so far as they teach him to rely on the basic gifts of God, grace and freewill.

When Ignatius says that the mark of a right tendency, in the person with a settled and dynamic attitude of Christ-like generosity, is peace, that he finds a growing unification and harmony in the day to day events in his life, and spells out his aim through these events, he is simply re-stating the age-old spiritual tradition which begins with holy scripture. The constant experience of the fully committed christian is that peace and joy, that life more abundant which Christ came to give. This is why one can observe in such a person a deepening attraction to God and to his service and to love. This quality of peace has great significance for a person who is trying to be generous in the work he does and in his penance and prayer. If his generosity lacks discretion, if he over-exerts himself and goes beyond his physical and spiritual strength, he will automatically lose that peace which comes from the harmonious following of God. The mark, then, of a wrong tendency, a wrong reaction is exactly the opposite of peace: a disruption and anxiety. Anxiety, disruption, drive a man to turn away from God and to look to other things in isolation from God. Once the basic attention and intention is distracted, the settled aim becomes obscured.

In this variety of moods, each of which is normally related to some choice which has to be made, some action to be undertaken, the root question to be asked is 'Why?': the why of the mood, the attitude, the why of the choice, of the action. So often it is a question

not of what one does but of why one is doing it. In order to seek that 'why', Ignatius and tradition will say: 'Recall, think over, what led up to your present state. The beginning of a series of choices, of a course of action, may have appeared good. But has that goodness persisted in the means that you use, in the peace which has accompanied you along every step of the way? And what is the result, the end of this process? What characteristics does it portray?' If one looks at a period of a person's life, at a period of one's own life, it is not impossible to see whether the general tendency is towards an increase of joy and liberty or the reverse.

### *Objectivity in discernment*

In any human activity it is notoriously difficult to be a judge in one's own case. It is not surprising, then, that the whole of christian spiritual tradition insists on the need of wise spiritual counsel, a 'spiritual father' to whom these *logismoi*, these reactions, are revealed. The need was particularly emphasised in the beginning of monasticism and through to the high middle ages, the period when this practice of discernment was most highly developed. It implies that a common spirit is shared between the director and the directed; it implies too, on the part of the spiritual father, a knowledge of the individual whom he is helping to practise discernment. This knowledge and this sharing are of vital importance, because, it seems to me, very little can be said in general terms about discernment. An objective judgement from outside is essential, in order that the chances of hidden selfishness may be lessened.

The second objective safeguard to discernment is reason: but reason enlightened by faith. Discernment or discretion is certainly more than the gift of tact, of the ability to find the golden mean in the philosophical sense. The context is always that of the christian life, where the end and aim is God. But with that proviso, the working of reason and the leading of the Spirit, which is on a level above that of rational discourse, will not contradict each other.

Thirdly, there has to be an external framework against which discernment in any individual case is to be tested. This framework is made up of a number of elements. It may be described as the whole Christ, the life of Christ; and its direction, as it is presented, say, parabolically in the meditation of the two standards. It is the Christ-life taken as a whole; not just certain aspects of Christ's teaching, of those facets of his redemptive work which happen to appeal to me – Christ as risen, for example. This external framework of the life of

Christ is also the essential life of the Church. Assimilation to the compassionate Christ, the living desire to follow Christ, are certainly norms for discernment, but if you do not accept the genuine apostolic teaching, you cannot follow the Spirit of Christ. Hence life in the Church, and union with the Church, is a norm for discernment. On a lower level,<sup>1</sup> this life is expressed in the life of the christian community, whether it be the religious or family community. Any tendency, any mood which inclines me to break away from that community, provided that I entered into it by a definite and fixed choice under God, is not from God, whatever the subjective norms of discernment may tell me.

What gives the final definition to this framework is the complex of the duties of a man's state in life: his work, his relations with others. There are certain choices in the christian life which are decisive and irrevocable – marriage, the priesthood, perpetual vows in religion; and normally speaking, the direction of the holy Spirit will make these initial choices, and duties which flow from them, more clear-cut and compelling; so that we can say simply that true discernment will make a man a better husband and father, a more zealous and self-sacrificing priest, a more dedicated and hard-working religious. Discernment will enable a man to move towards the fullness of two kinds of freedom which complement one another: the willing and responsible acceptance of the duties which his state imposes on him, and his own positive and wholehearted co-operation in renewing and strengthening, by his own free activity, the various structures within the Body of Christ of which he himself is a part. Ultimately, it is discernment which enables the christian to come to unity in faith and the knowledge of the Son of God – that maturity which is proportionate to the completed growth of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> These two levels need to be distinguished clearly. A man may be fully sincere in leaving the Church, but objectively he is never led to do so by the one Spirit of Christ and the Church. However, the Spirit may, exceptionally, lead a person from one definitively chosen lesser christian community or lasting state of life to another. All the presuppositions and objective elements mentioned above need to be kept in mind in such a difficult case. It is precisely when externally verifiable elements, newly arisen or previously unknown, break in on the prior definitive decision that a clear judgement may at times be reached. On the subjective side, it is particularly important that the person habitually exclude anything clearly sinful from his life and have a fixed, generous desire to serve God, if his desire for such a change is to be attributed to God's leading.

The subjective and objective elements need to be judged not only by the individual and his spiritual guide, but also by those others who have an ultimate responsibility for the two communities or christian states of life in question. No purely private abandonment of duties definitively undertaken in a state of life seems ascribable to God's leading.