

# DISCERNMENT AND POVERTY

By WILLIAM J. BYRON

**T**HIS ESSAY is about poverty *and* discernment, with the emphasis on the conjunction: not about discernment, necessarily, nor about poverty in any theological or sociological detail, but about the link between the two.<sup>1</sup> I regard poverty of spirit as a preparation for, a precondition to discernment.

The wheat-grain text in the fourth gospel<sup>2</sup> opens the way to theological reflection on poverty of spirit, as well as many other religio-social realities, including the religious life itself. The wheat grain symbolizes the paschal mystery, the paradigm of all christian growth — through death to life. Any christian, and therefore any religious community, has to embody in some way the paschal mystery. In the case of a religious community, the organizing principle should reflect the 'death' considered appropriate to the group: radical poverty, for example, is 'death' for the franciscan life, obedience for the jesuit.<sup>3</sup> To this extent, poverty is prerequisite to discernment, the 'testing' of the spirits, the sorting out of the movements of the soul in an effort to arrive at the will of God.

The wheat grain also symbolizes the 'letting go'. Hence the wheat grain symbolizes the *kenosis*, the emptying out of Christ described in the christological hymn in Paul's letter to the Philippians.<sup>4</sup> There is an 'emptying out' associated with the vows of religion: the empty purse of poverty, the empty arms of chastity, the emptying out of pride which is the life-long process of obedience. Without the emptying, the religious cannot discern. Without a similar stance, appropriate to his state of life, no christian can discern God's will.

<sup>1</sup> In my view, poverty, whether spiritual or actual, religious or secular, means sustained deprivation. The motivation and circumstances that sustain the deprivation, and the goods and services of which the poor person is deprived, specify the type of poverty that might be discussed: income poverty, educational poverty, nutritional poverty, cultural poverty, etc. Discernment is the 'testing of the spirits' called for in I Jn 4, 1. My understanding of the discernment process is expounded in 'Group Decision Making', in *Catholic Mind*, vol 71 (February, 1973), pp 27-34.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 12, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Ladislav Orsy S.J., has mentioned to me his recognition of the possibility that the desire of some contemporary jesuits to adopt a radical, franciscan style of poverty may be accompanied, in the same or other quarters of the Society, by a dilution in the obedience-commitment offered traditionally by jesuits to the holy See.

<sup>4</sup> Phil 2, 6-11.

Finally, the wheat-grain symbolism provides assurance of a flowering-in-place, a happiness here, the gospel guarantee of a hundredfold now. Discernment, like discipleship, has its cost; but it yields a personal benefit here and now.

The techniques of discernment are either well known to the reader or available for study elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> The need for discernment is evident, especially in a time of change. It is a mistake, however, to look upon discernment as an escape-hatch from risk, uncertainty and the hard choices we have to make just to remain human. Through discernment, one arrives at relative clarity: the options become clear. As a result, better choices are made, perhaps because more options are seen: certainly because the options that are seen are seen more clearly. God will provide the clarity; man still has to make the choice.

I would like now to mention what I consider to be prerequisites to discernment, and to show that poverty — spiritual and actual — relates to them in a variety of ways.<sup>6</sup> To discern or decide well, one must be, first, ready to move in any direction that God wants: that is, radically free. This is indifference: radical readiness. This prerequisite of freedom has been well described as being fixed in the things of eternity and sitting loose to the things of time. The 'things of time' can get in the way of spiritual discernment. One who is possessed by his possessions need not hope to discover anything but the broadest strokes of God's design for his life: little more than an awareness that he should do good and avoid evil.

Secondly, true discernment will be contingent upon an openness to sharing all that God has given. One must therefore be radically generous. Again the obvious impediments of wealth come to mind. In a speech given at New Haven on 6 March 1860, Abraham Lincoln pointed to the influence of property on public opinion, and insisted that slaves, as

<sup>5</sup> See Gervais Dumeige S.J., 'Jesuit Deliberation and Discernment', in *Supplement to The Way*, no 20 (Autumn, 1973), pp 51-71; his footnote no 2, p 56, gives current bibliography on communal discernment. For personal discernment, see, among others: Heinrich Bacht S.J., 'Good and Evil Spirits', in *Supplement to The Way*, no 2 (July 1962), pp 188-95; Avery Dulles S.J., 'Finding God's Will', in *Woodstock Letters*, vol 94, no 2 (Spring, 1965), pp 139-52; John C. Futrell S.J., 'Ignatian Discernment', in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, vol II, no 2 (April 1970), pp 47-88; Maurice Giuliani S.J., 'The Movements of the Spirit', in William Young S.J. (tr.), *Finding God in All Things* (Chicago, 1958), pp 191-204; Michael Kyne S.J., 'Discernment of Spirits and Christian Growth', in *Supplement to The Way*, no 6 (May, 1968), pp 20-26; Edward Malatesta S.J., (ed), *Discernment of Spirits* (Collegeville, 1970) — this is the authorized english edition of the article *Discernement des Esprits*, from the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*; François Roustang, *Growth in the Spirit* (New York, 1966), chapters 3, 4 and 5.

<sup>6</sup> For an earlier discussion of these prerequisites, see my 'Group Decision Making', *op. cit.*, p 29.

property, reflected a strong vested interest on the part of their owners. The slave-holder, according to Lincoln, convinces himself that slavery is right; the property influences his mind. To make this point clear, Lincoln told the following story to his New Haven audience:

The dissenting minister, who argued some theological point with one of the established church, was always met by the reply, 'I can't see it so'. He opened the bible and pointed him to a passage, but the orthodox minister replied, 'I can't see it so'. Then he showed him a single word — 'Can you see that?' 'Yes, I see it', was the reply. The dissenter laid a guinea over the word and asked, 'Do you see it now?' So here. Whether the owners of this species of property do really see it as it is, is not for me to say, but if they do, they see it as through 2,000,000,000 of dollars, and that is a pretty thick coating. Certain it is, that . . . this immense pecuniary interest has its influence upon their minds.<sup>7</sup>

The third prerequisite to discernment is a willingness to suffer if God's will requires it. One must therefore be radically patient, radically humble. Here again, wealth has a tendency to get in the way. The rich man tends to become rather full of himself, asserting his monetary claims to the service and respect of others. He becomes enamoured of power, prestige, esteem. Impatience becomes characteristic; pain and discomfort can be accounted for only in terms of absence of wit or wallet or both.

In his paper on 'The Apostolate of Theological Reflection',<sup>8</sup> Avery Dulles indicates how his religious vows should be an 'important asset' to the jesuit theologian in his professional work:

St Ignatius apparently had in mind the formation of a group of men who could penetrate the citadels of power and influence in church and society without running the risk of being corrupted by the class interests of the dominant elite. To banish all national chauvinism, he insisted on the international character of his society. To guard against any bias in favour of the rich and powerful, he insisted on strict poverty and the refusal of honour and dignities. The vows, in his conception, were intended to guarantee humility, detachment, and evangelical freedom — virtues which, in the present investigation, have been found basic to the discernment process. For, as we have noted, ethnic and class interests

<sup>7</sup> Roy P. Basler (ed.), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol IV (New Brunswick, 1953), p 16.

<sup>8</sup> *Supplement to The Way*, no 20 (Autumn, 1973), pp 114-32.

frequently blind men's judgment, especially in the area of those great human and social problems that have been proposed as the principal subject matter of theological reflection.<sup>9</sup>

The fourth prerequisite is a quest for union with God in prayer. To discern well, one must be radically spiritual. Prayer has been compared to a kind of death: a withdrawal, a leaving behind, a temporary apartness in faith, if not full enlistment with the 'faithful departed'. 'You can't take it with you' is a dull dictum that brings pain to the wealthy and comfort to under-achievers. But even in life, you can't take your materialism, consumerism and enchantment-with-possession into the stillness of prayer. They won't make it through the door, through the eye of the needle. Possessions have a fatal tendency of blocking our union with God, and one divided from God cannot discern. Poverty, then, can contribute to making one free, generous, patient and spiritual: to making one indifferent, open, humble and prayerful. Thus prepared, a believer will find discernment possible.

Until now, I have not made explicit mention of faith; but this, quite obviously, is prerequisite to the whole enterprise. Prayer and faith are closely interlocked. An identity between them could be argued — one reality differing only in degree, not kind. I have heard Thomas Clarke S.J. explain the identity by an analogy with embers (faith) and the flame (prayer) that is fanned by formal, conscious approaches to God by man in meditative moments.

Nor have I mentioned what all would agree are certain necessary human predispositions. Chief among these are (1) the ability to identify one's own feelings, (2) the ability to listen to others, and (3) the willingness to change. If a person is out of touch with his feelings, he can hardly sort through them to discern what God may or may not be communicating to him through his moods. If he listens to no one, he has closed off multiple possibilities for approaches by the Spirit. If he is unwilling to change, there is little point in attempting to discern what the next move should be.

My effort in this brief essay has been to focus on the centrality of poverty to the qualities that I see as prerequisite to spiritual discernment: radical patience, radical union with God in prayer. Believing, as we do, that the Christian is called to accept, not merely admire, the paschal pattern of life-through-death and light-in-darkness, we find direction in the wheat-grain metaphor and inspiration in the

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p 122.

christological hymn of Philippians. Joseph Fitzmeyer's translation of the first of these verses is not only exegetically precise, but pastorally supportive of the point I have made here about poverty. He renders, in these words, Paul's text about Christ:

. . . Who, though of divine status,  
did not treat like a miser's booty  
his right to be like God,  
but emptied himself of it . . .<sup>10</sup>

So long as we insist on clinging to our booty, spiritual discernment will elude our grasp.

Abraham Lincoln seems to have been preoccupied with the will of God as part of his very preoccupation with the issue of slavery. 'It is my earnest desire to know the will of providence in this matter. And if I can learn what it is, I will do it'.<sup>11</sup> He received the necessary clarity and made the right choice. Included in the gift of providence to him in this regard was the insight that property and wealth can impede man from seeing what the right course of action should be. Lincoln was probably unaware that something was happening then in America that would build us into an 'affluent society', but would very often blind us to the will of God. Later, after it happened, the novelist Thomas Wolfe puts these reflections on the lips of one of his characters:

Sometimes it seems to me . . . that America went off the track somewhere — back around the time of the civil war, or pretty soon afterwards. Instead of going ahead and developing along the line in which the country started out, it got shunted off in another direction — and now we look around and see we've gone places we didn't mean to go. Suddenly we realize that America has turned into something ugly — and vicious — and corroded at the heart of its power with easy wealth and graft and special privilege. . . . And the worst of it is the intellectual dishonesty which all of this corruption has bred. People are *afraid* to think straight — *afraid* to face themselves — *afraid* to look at things and see them as they are.<sup>12</sup>

Poverty, the spiritual and religious poverty that the christian seeks, not the grinding poverty which he hopes to eliminate from the world,

<sup>10</sup> *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, vol II, no 50, 18 (New Jersey, 1968), p 250.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph B. Winn (ed.), *A Concise Lincoln Dictionary: Thoughts And Statements* (New York, 1959), p 102. This was part of Lincoln's reply to a Committee from Religious Denominations of Chicago. I am grateful to Neil Hurley S.J. for bringing this quotation to my attention.

<sup>12</sup> *You Can't Go Home Again* (New York, 1934), p 393.

gives a freedom to ask questions, to speak out. It also delivers the freedom to think straight, to face oneself. Without this freedom, discernment is impossible and happiness stands out of reach.

I want to conclude this reflection (where wealth has been seen as a possible block to discernment) with a story from rabbinical literature, quite similar in intent to Lincoln's story about the two clergymen. This story has been called 'The Window and the Looking Glass'. It is taken from De Menasce's *Quand Israel aime Dieu*, a book about the Hassidim, pious jews who lived in the ghettos of Poland at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

A man whose heart was hardened by wealth went to the rabbi Eisig. The rabbi said to him: 'Look out the window, and tell me what you see in the street'. 'I see people walking up and down'. Then he gave him a looking glass: 'Look in this and tell me what you see'. The man replied: 'I see myself'. 'So you don't see the others any more? Consider that the window and the mirror are both made of glass; but, since the mirror has a coating of silver, you only see yourself in it, while you can see others through the transparent glass of the window. I am very sorry to have to compare you to these two kinds of glass. When you were poor, you saw others and had compassion on them; but, being covered with wealth, you see only yourself. It would be much the best thing for you to scrape off the silver-coating so that you could once again see other people'.<sup>13</sup>

To discern is to see. Yet we see 'a dim reflection in a mirror'<sup>14</sup> when we quest for God: the face-to-face clarity is not yet available to us. The more we scrape the silver from our lives, the clearer our discernment shall become.

<sup>13</sup> Cited by Charles Journet, *The Meaning of Grace*, trans. A. V. Littledale (New York, 1960).

<sup>14</sup> I Cor 13, 12.