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Archdiocese of Melbourne, Australia

*... proclaiming the power of the Holy Spirit,
and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ*



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HIGHLIGHTS

Spiritual discernment is the art of recognising when it is God acting on us and when it is not. These guidelines are designed to help us to correctly discern, and accordingly to grow in our relationship with God.

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Discernment: Recognising God's Voice

by **Brian Incigneri**

This article is based on *The Rules for Discernment of Spirits* by St Ignatius Loyola. Writing in sixteenth century Spain, St Ignatius was a master on spiritual discernment. His teachings come from his own experiences of temptation and of experiencing the movements of God in his soul. Over a long period of time, he began to recognise when it was God that was moving him, and when it was not, and what were the characteristics of both. He describes his rules as:

*Rules for perceiving **to some degree** the different movements that are produced in the soul.*

It also draws heavily upon the excellent guide on discernment, *Weeds among the Wheat* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1984) by the Jesuit priest and spiritual director, Fr Thomas H. Green, SJ.

Learning to Listen to God



When someone comes to experience the reality of the spiritual world and discovers that God is a personal being who is vitally interested in every aspect of their life, they soon discover that they need to learn to recognise promptings which come from God. They know that God is completely

good and completely self-giving, and they know that everything that comes from him is beneficial.

Such a person yearns to hear God's voice, to receive his guidance, and to do his will.

They discover, however, that discerning promptings from God is not straightforward — there are many 'voices' competing for our attention. These spiritual 'voices' are quite subtle. Perhaps we had not even been aware of them before — how do we know which voice comes from God?

The first proposition we begin with here is that God does speak to people, that is, he does communicate by some means and is fully involved in the life of each person. More and more people are coming to that realisation today, turning around a period in Western history in which God came to be seen as being quite remote and even disinterested. One of the main emphases of Catholic Charismatic Renewal is this closeness of God, and his constant readiness to guide and help us in both small and great things.

God does not speak to us by an audible voice (except, perhaps, in rare circumstances). His normal way of communicating is by more subtle leadings and promptings. He may speak through circumstances, or by an 'inner voice' by which we know he has communicated with us, but we have not heard words. His communication may seem like a thought to us or an idea or a realisation. Yet his communications have a different quality, and as we grow in the ability to discern, we come to recognise 'his voice' more frequently.

Discernment Must Be Learnt

Why doesn't God speak clearly to us? God has always chosen to risk the distortion of his Word by using human beings as messengers, just as he used the biblical writers, the Church and everyone who proclaims God to the world today. This is because of his desire that men and women be *mature partners* in the work of salvation. He could have spoken clearly and directly, but that would never have brought maturity. And so we are called to discern, and in doing this we are called to be open to things beyond the rational, and to consider the seemingly impossible.



If we are to grow closer to God, we must learn to come to know what he is really like. We come to know God's voice by coming to know God. Discernment, then, is getting to know a person.

It is as if we receive a telephone call, and the line quality is very bad. The person on the end is saying that they are someone we know very well. How do we know it is them? We know because of the type of thing they say, and the tone they use to say it. If they suggest something that we know our friend would never suggest, we know it cannot be our friend on the line.

In John's Gospel, we read:

[The shepherd] calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run away from him because they do not know the voice of strangers (John 10:2–5).

In Palestine, the shepherd would walk ahead of the sheep. Even if the sheep mixed with other sheep at a waterhole, the shepherd could separate his own sheep by just calling them. They knew his voice and would follow him. A tourist in Palestine once asked a shepherd whether the sheep would ever follow anyone else. The shepherd replied, “Yes, when they are sick they will follow anyone.” Once, the tourist saw a man driving a herd of sheep. When he asked about it, he was told that the man was not the shepherd, but the butcher.

Discernment Involves Making a Choice

The word “discern” itself means to exercise judgement. With discernment, ***we are always faced with a simple choice: is it God acting or not?***

As Catholics, we believe in a spiritual world in which there are spiritual beings which are inimical to the welfare of humanity. Satan certainly exists and tries to mislead us. But there are also our own inner voices which can work against God — we could call this our dark side.

However, if a prompting is not from God, we are not really interested in discerning the source. It is not helpful to try and work out if it is from ourselves or some evil spirit. Fr Green gives us excellent advice here: “When the pray-er recognises the tail of the snake, he or she is wise to run away without looking for the rest of it, and to leave the species determination to the snake specialists.” And so, ***we will be using the term “the bad spirit” to mean whatever forces are working within us which work against God.***

If we are concerned to do God’s will, then we are only interested to discern whether God is the source of the leading.



We must work at discerning God’s voice. Discernment is the art of knowing when it is God acting upon or speaking to us, and when it is not. This *art* can only be learned by trial and error. The voices we experience are quite subtle, and discernment requires us to become

sensitive to subtle differences between the different movements upon our soul. Yet ***we will never recognise the voice of God with absolute clarity***, and anyone who claims to hear God clearly and with certainty should be avoided — they have not even begun to know spiritual realities if they make such a claim.

Some Simple Rules

There are simple rules we can follow in discerning God's voice and these can make a very big difference for us. If we know them, we will make fewer mistakes. Many people make very bad decisions in their life because these basic rules have been ignored.

Someone who knows what God is like knows what his voice is like. As an exercise, write down a list of single words that describe what you think God's voice is like (for example: gentle, patient, kind, forgiving, encouraging). Then write a separate list of what you think the voice of the bad spirit is like (for example: harsh, condemning, impatient, negative). You will see a very dramatic difference between the two lists. And yet everyone regularly forgets this basic difference when they come to make key decisions. If you remember what the voice of the bad spirit is like, you will make fewer bad choices. You already know how to discern in most situations.

Presuppositions for Discernment

Before we can say discernment is actually occurring, certain conditions must be met:

1. **You must desire to do God's will.** This means that this must be your fundamental choice in life.
2. **You must be open to God at the moment of discerning.** This means that you must be completely open to accept any of the possible results of discerning. If you are only interested in doing what you want to do, and are not open to other possibilities, then discernment is not possible.
3. **You must know what God is like.**
4. **You must be a person who prays.**

A good discerner is also:

1. **Humble.** Humility involves knowing self (as good, but imperfect), an openness to be guided by God and others, and a readiness to follow that guidance. A humble person is ready and willing to learn. **The bad spirit will always attack you at your weakest**

points, and so we must know our own weaknesses.

Often that weakest point will be in our close relationships. Pseudo-Macarius warns us that we must learn to discern when the bad spirit is “operating in the area of our hidden passions.” Generally, the Desert Fathers emphasised the spiritual battle that those committed to the spiritual journey will necessarily be engaged in, and urged beginners to get in touch with what is happening inside them. They stressed the need to have a spiritual advisor available to help to discern.

With important decisions, we should always test our discernment by seeking the help of at least one other co-discerner. A community can only discern if all its members are discerners.

2. **Charity.** A good discerner is slow to judge others, and is tolerant. This allows for an openness to others which is essential for good discernment.
3. **Courage.** A good discerner needs to be ready to act boldly if necessary, and be prepared to take risks. In particular, the discerner must be prepared to be wrong.

It is important to realise that **only YOU can discern for you.** No one else can discern for you. You will never learn to discern if you expect others to tell you the answer. This does not mean that you should not seek help — you should, but the other person is only helping you to discern.

Also, **what is discerned must be consistent with what God has said previously.** This means that what we discern must be consistent with his previous revelations through Scripture and through the Church. God is always true to himself. This means, however, that we have an obligation to know what God has been saying through the Church. We must know our faith well. We also should know Scripture, not necessarily in detail, but we should understand what Scripture is and what it is not, and never misuse the Bible as so many do. We should know the Bible well enough not to take any part of the text out of context.



There are times when we do not need to discern:

1. **Unchangeable decisions** (for example, marriage).

2. **Changeable choices once made.** Sometimes we can have a false image of God as one who punishes us if we made the wrong decisions, even if in good faith. We should not worry about, and re-discern, previous decisions if made properly and with due order. Rather, we should do the best with the choice we have made, and God will work with us in that.
3. **Unless both courses of action are good.** If one of two possible choices is clearly not within God's will, we do not need to discern.

The Three Ways of Making A Choice

Ignatius says there are three ways of making a choice:

1. **Revelation.** Here, there is no doubt that God is speaking to you. No discernment is necessary here because of the certainty. An example would be St Paul on the Damascus road. This is a rare event (although not very rare; every person would probably experience this at one or more points in their life).
2. **Reasoning.** In this circumstance, God seems to be completely silent. Great uncertainty exists here. First, we must collect all the facts and weigh the pros and cons of our choices. We might use our imagination (*What would I advise someone who came to me with this same question? What would I rather have done when I am on my deathbed remembering the choice I made?*)

This is not discernment either — it is only a stage (perhaps a very necessary stage) before discernment proper can occur. From this, we must go to God in prayer. Ignatius says that, after we have come to our choice by reasoning, “we must now turn with great diligence to prayer, and offer to God our choice that He may accept and confirm it if it is for His greater service and praise.”

3. **Discernment.** Ignatius says that this is a time when “*much light and understanding are derived through the experience of desolations and consolations, and the discernment of diverse spirits.*”

Consolation and Desolation

Ignatius defines **consolation** as:

Every increase in faith, hope and love, and all interior joy

that invites and attracts to what is heavenly, and to the salvation of our soul, by filling it with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord.

He defines **desolation** as:

What is entirely the opposite of consolation ... darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness arising from many disturbances which lead to lack of faith, lack of hope, and lack of love. The soul is wholly slothful, tepid, sad, and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord.



One of the first things we notice is that the words used are **feeling** words. Although we do not make our decisions based on feelings, under the rules of discernment, feelings are the key to our discovery of God's will for us. Feelings may be treacherous, but we must learn to discern

them, because it is through feelings that we come to detect the source of the promptings.

Discernment involves the whole person:

- **Our feelings** are the raw material we discern
- **Our intellect** judges the source of those feelings
- **Our will** makes a choice and decides to act on the basis of this judgement.

We can also notice from Ignatius' definitions of desolation and consolation that the dominant motif is peace. With consolation, there is peace, and **God only speaks in peace**. With desolation, there is no peace.

In our discerning, if there are no feelings of consolation, we must wait. Perhaps we need to go back to reasoning, re-assess and return to prayer.

How, then, can some people be at peace when they are obviously not following the will of God? Ignatius says that there are two contrasting states of soul:

1. One whose fundamental life option is against God's will. This person will be 'consoled' by the bad spirit, and disturbed by God's Spirit.

2. One who earnestly strives to do God's will. This person is consoled by God, and disturbed by the bad spirit.

This idea of the bad spirit entering with a disturbance of your peace can be very helpful in identifying what is going on. You may know that you are disturbed by what is going on, but you cannot put your finger on what is causing you to be uneasy. As Ignatius says:



Like spirits will enter silently like one coming into a house with the doors open. Unlike spirits will enter with great noise and commotion.

Rules For Desolation

We can all identify with 'desolation.' Certainly there is a lack of peace, but it can be so strong there can be a real sense of darkness and a calling into question of one's basic life choices and commitment to God. It can also be more subtle, showing itself in discouragement, anger, or generally feeling sorry for oneself.

There are some simple *rules about what to do in desolation*. If a person remembers these, they will make far better choices in the spiritual life:

1. **Desolation is NEVER from God** (for a person committed to God).
2. Desolation is not a bad sign. God uses it for our growth.
3. Desolation is the normal experience for beginners in the spiritual life, or for someone making a new beginning in an important area of his or her life.



For someone committed to God, the Lord may seek to correct shortcomings and failures, and to purify the person's commitment, but **never** in such a way as to call into question his fundamental commitment to God. **God never condemns; if you hear a**

condemnatory voice, it cannot be God's.

The bad spirit (whom Ignatius sometimes calls "the enemy of our human nature") *will* do this, seeking to discourage us, or convince us of failure, or that God is displeased, or that the whole enterprise on

which we are embarked is a mistake.

This, then, is what we should do in desolation:

1. **NEVER, NEVER make any change, or any decision**, “but remain firm and content in the resolution which guided you the day before.”
2. **Work against the desolation** by *doing the opposite* of what the enemy suggests, and *renew our faith and disciplines of prayer*. Double your prayer time, go to Mass more often, go to the prayer meeting and serve more generously. This will quickly defeat the bad spirit.

If we do this, we will soon discover that the sun always rises again. A wise old Irish saying gives very good advice: “Go to bed, and see if the problem is still there in the morning!”

Rules for Consolation

Although desolation is **never** from God and God never speaks through it, consolation is **not always** from God. The enemy is a deceiver and can, for a time, mimic God. God on the other hand, must be consistently true to himself.

However, ***the bad spirit cannot produce a genuine consolation from beginning to end.***

There are two types of consolation:

1. **Consolation without preceding cause.** This means that the consolation is *a complete surprise*. There is nothing that could have caused it. It is often the exact opposite of what we would expect. We find ourselves at peace when we should be totally desolate.

This form of consolation must be from God, according to Ignatius, because “it belongs solely to the Creator to come into a soul, to act upon it, to leave it, and to draw it wholly to the love of His Divine Majesty.”

However, we must **beware the ‘afterglow,’** when we make our own plans and add our own desires after the genuine consolation is over, and the bad spirit turns us away from the genuine word from, or experience of, God.

2. **Consolation with preceding cause.** This means that something has gone before that has led to this feeling. It could be reading

Scripture, or it could result from prayer, or it could come from our succeeding at something we have done.

This type of consolation could have either source. To discern this, **we must look at the beginning, middle and end** to see (as Fr Green says) whether “the tail of the snake appears.”

And so, although the bad spirit might produce visions, and ecstasies, and even make us enthusiastic to do great work for God, somehow “the tail of the snake” will always appear. Discernment involves looking at the whole experience to see if we can see that “tail.”

We should not be concerned if the discernment process takes some time. If it is not the right time, we will not be at peace. God does not demand that we act now — he is not like that, and any demanding and impatient tone in the voice we hear is a sign of the bad spirit.

There are some tests we can apply when examining the beginning, middle and end: *What were we doing when these thoughts and feelings first came to us?* (For example, were we annoyed when we were disturbed in prayer? Were we in a bitter dispute with someone?) *What were the fruits?* (We may need to be patient to wait to see the fruits.)

Growing in Discernment



To grow in discernment, we must work at it, like prayer, and other aspects of the spiritual life. We must become committed to recognising the movements within ourselves, and knowing when it was the Lord and when it was not.

One of the best ways to do this, is to conduct what is called the **Daily Consciousness Examen**, which has been recommended by the Church through the ages and comes in many forms. Here is a recommended list of steps:

1. Begin by asking the Holy Spirit to guide you.
2. Look back on your day, and notice the gifts and blessings of God through the day, in a spirit of thankfulness.
3. Ask Jesus to teach you, and ask that you might know his voice better. Then go back over the day in your mind, looking at it with Jesus.

4. Ask questions like: Was I acting as the Lord would have wanted me to act? What moved me to act in that way? What were my feelings? What was the first feeling that moved me to speak or act in that way? Where did that feeling come from? Is there anything in this event that might point to my need for healing? What will help me the next time I encounter a similar situation?
5. End your time with praise and thanksgiving, focusing on the goodness of God.

St Teresa and Discernment

St Teresa of Avila also teaches us about discernment. Her approach is somewhat different, and is not the systematic approach of Ignatius, but she adds further insights in relation to ‘hearing’ words which may be from God. She speaks of three signs: first, the sense of power and authority that these “locutions” have; second, the great tranquillity that dwells in the soul; third, “these words do not vanish from the memory for a very long time, some indeed never vanish at all.”

She also gives other reasons we can be sure the locutions are from God: first, they are “very much clearer than others;” second, “the soul has not been thinking of what it hears — I mean the voice comes unexpectedly, sometimes even during a conversation;” third, “in genuine locutions the soul seems to be hearing something, whereas in locutions invented by the imagination someone seems to be composing bit by bit what the soul wishes to hear;” fourth, “one single word may contain a world of meaning such as the understanding alone could never put rapidly into human language;” fifth, “much more can be understood than the words themselves convey.”

Teresa also offers sound advice for those who might think too much of themselves because God speaks to them:

Do not think that, even if your locutions come from God, you will for that reason be any better. After all, He talked a great deal with the Pharisees. Any good you may gain will depend upon how you profit by what you hear (*The Interior Castle*, Sixth Mansion, Chapter III).

A Life of Discernment

Our goal, then, is a life of discernment which leads to an instinctive sensitivity to what pleases God. As we develop this habit of discerning love, the Lord’s peace, which at first is in the senses, becomes an interior peace. We more quickly recognise his action in our own lives

and in others. In *The Interior Castle* (Seventh Mansion, Chapter I), Teresa speaks of the soul which has grown closer to the Lord as being more and more aware of his presence, so that it “finds itself in this company every time it takes notice.”

Finally, Paul’s prayer:

And this is my prayer: that your love for one another may grow more and more with the knowledge and complete understanding that will help you to come to true discernment, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, entirely filled with the fruits of uprightness through Jesus Christ, for the glory and praise of God (Phil 1:9-11).

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