

Principles of Discernment

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The last article of Bishop Morneau to appear in these pages was "*Dives in Misericordia: Themes and Theses*," which appeared in the September issue. Bishop Morneau may be addressed care of the Ministry to Priests Program; 1016 N. Broadway; De Pere, WI 54115.

The journey of life is filled with many choices, the consequences of which can be far-reaching. But as we enter into the decision-making process we are not necessarily alone. Friends and counselors frequently give helpful advice. Also we have the advantage of both personal and collective experience from which we can extract patterns and principles that provide guidance and wisdom. This essay spells out ten such principles that can help us discern God's voice and respond to the Lord's call with generosity and courage. A basic belief underlies this endeavor: growth is much more likely to happen when we critically reflect upon our experience and watch for reoccurring patterns than when we simply move from one spontaneous experience to another without explicitly dealing with any of them. Reflection, done in prayer and with serious intent, provides insight and energy for spiritual development. Growth in the Lord is greatly impeded when reflection and articulation are absent.

A three-fold method will be used: 1) the *articulation* of ten principles of discernment; 2) *a series of quotations* from various authors who reflect some dimension of the basic principle; 3) *a tripartite commentary* which includes *a reference* to Scripture, *an image* illustrating the principle and *an example* from literature providing a case study of our theme.

Discernment is a gift to be exercised; principles are abstractions offering meaning. Both are significant for human and spiritual growth. This essay presents the principles; the reader brings the gift and the experience. The hope is that the roads intersect rather than run parallel.

1. *Discernment is a prayerful process by which experiences are interpreted in faith.*

By discernment of spirits is meant the process by which we examine, in the light of faith and in the connaturality of love, the nature of the spiritual states we experience in ourselves and in others. The purpose of such examination is to decide, as far as possible, which of the movements we experience lead to the Lord and to a more perfect service of him and our brothers, and which deflect us from this goal.¹

Basically, as I see it, *Discernment* may be defined as the meeting point of prayer and action. That is, discernment is the art of recognizing what God is asking of us—what he would like us to do with our lives, how he wishes us to respond to the concrete life-situations which we encounter in following our vocation.²

The Christian who reflects on his own experience and on that of the community, who seeks to discern in these the divine voice, and who wants to respond to it by redirecting his life, is—theologically speaking—engaged in prayer.³

“Then he (Jesus) bent down and wrote on the ground again.”⁴ The adulterous woman stood before him; the scribes and pharisees made their accusation; the people observed with keen curiosity. We do not know exactly what happened in the mind and heart of Jesus as he leaned forward and wrote in the sand with his finger. We do know that this immediate experience needed an interpretation. Jesus was a prayerful person; his bending forward in silence may well have been a deep moment of communion with the Father. The Gospel records the Lord’s response to the situation: the accusers could silently withdraw, the accused could depart without condemnation. This is but one example of Jesus’ ministry. Many other times he also turned to the Father for guidance: the prayer on the mountain before choosing the disciples, the garden prayer before his passion and death, the prayer in the desert when tempted to infidelity. The necessity for discernment is the experience at a crossroads; the standard for discernment is whether or not the decision leads to God and more complete service; the act of discernment requires a posture of contemplative faith.

The *combine* used in harvesting and threshing grain has given tremendous help to the farmer. It separates the grain from the straw, retaining the former for winter feeding and discharging the latter in neat rows. The wheat and the chaff, the good and the evil, the true and the false, the beautiful and the ugly—throughout history the human spirit has been challenged to distinguish one from the other. This is no simple process. The grey areas are vast, time is often needed and not available, the multiplicity of experiences tends to clog up the task. Even with these obstacles, the spiritual combine of a discerning heart must perform its duty as well as it can. Grounded in prayer and nourished with learning, the spirits of good and evil can

¹ *Discernment of Spirits*, introd. by Edward Malatesta (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970), p. 9.

² Thomas H. Green, S.J., *Darkness in the Marketplace* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1982), p. 69.

³ Gregory Baum, *Man Becoming* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 256.

⁴ See Jn 8:8.

be sorted out and properly responded to.

Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* is a story about spiritual discernment, its successes and its failures. The "whiskey priest" must constantly make decisions concerning his person and his ministry as he is confronted with the Mexican religious persecution. The failures of discernment may well be grounded in the reflection: "a prayer demanded an act and he had no intention of acting." His success would demand courage and sanctity; the vision is given but not its reality:

He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him at that moment that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage. He felt like someone who has missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted—to be a saint.⁵

Discernment is that prayerful process allowing each individual and the larger community to move in the direction of sanctity.

2. Discernment must deal with many voices seeking to capture our minds, hearts and energies.

Since the mysterious voice of the Spirit is not the only voice we hear but comes to us accompanied by the tumultuous sounds of our own conflicting impulses and the clamorings of the entire creation, it is essential for us to be able to *discern* the presence of the Spirit in order to choose to say "yes" to him.⁶

So the soul that waits in silence must learn to disentangle the voice of God from the net of other voices—the ghostly whisperings of the subconscious self, the luring voices of the world, the hindering voices of misguided friendship, the clamor of personal ambition and vanity, the murmur of self-will, the song of unbridled imagination, the thrilling note of religious romance. To learn to keep one's ear true to so subtle a labyrinth of spiritual sound is indeed at once a great adventure and a liberal education. One hour of such listening may give us a deeper insight into the mysteries of human nature, and surer instinct for divine values, than a year's hard study or external intercourse with men.⁷

While his mind had been pursuing its intangible phantoms, and turning in irresolution from such pursuit, he had heard about him the constant voices of his father and of his masters, urging him to be a gentleman above all things and urging him to be a good Catholic above all things. These voices had now come to hollow sounding in his ears. When the gymnasium had been opened he had heard another voice urging him to be strong and manly and healthy and when the movement towards national revival had begun to be felt in the college, yet another voice had bidden him to be true to his country and help to raise up her language and tradition. In the profane world, as he foresaw, a worldly voice would bid him raise up his father's fallen state by his labors and, meanwhile, the voice of his school comrades urged him to be a decent fellow, to shield others from blame or to beg them off and to do his best to get free days for the school. And it was the din of all these hollow sounding voices that made him halt irresolutely in the pursuit of phantoms. He gave them ear only for a time but he was happy

⁵Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (New York: The Viking Press, 1940), p. 284.

⁶*Discernment of Spirits*, p. 9.

⁷Hermann Hesse, *Steppenwolf* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 43.

only when he was far from them, beyond their call, alone or in the company of phantasmal comrades.⁸

The parable of the good shepherd stresses the importance of recognizing the voice of the master.⁹ Eternal life depends on this; only those who hear and respond enter into the fullness of life. But Jesus' voice was one among many. Competition for the sheep was great and, given the gift of freedom, there could be no forcing of individual liberty. Though Jesus called some directly, they refused to listen: the rich young man, Judas, the scribes and pharisees. Others, men like John, Stephen and Paul, heard the loving call and became committed disciples. The voice of the risen Lord continues to compete with the sounds of our times. He can be heard in our sacraments of faith, in the sights and sounds of nature, in the revelation of Scripture, in the community of believers, in the words and deeds of our fellow pilgrims. Life itself is a summons to reach out and fulfill our task of becoming fully human in order that we might glorify our God.

Radios have a selective apparatus called a *tuner* through which we can choose the station that pleases us. Many excellent possibilities are available: beautiful music, intelligent conversation, educational programs. Other options expose us to dissonant sounds, inane banality, devious propaganda. With a twist of the dial we have the power to position ourselves in any one of these environments and thus grant permission to certain ideas and images to enter and shape our perspective. In the spiritual realm, discernment tunes itself to God's message of love and forgiveness in Jesus and lives this deep mystery in word and deed.

A novel by Chaim Potok entitled *My Name is Asher Lev* presents an artistically gifted young man who has to discern among many voices. Early in life Asher Lev recognizes that his ability to draw had not only the potential for self-fulfillment but also the possibility of a serious rupture with his parents and the Jewish community at large. In anger and confusion he argues with God:

You don't want me to use the gift; why did you give it to me? Or did it come to me from the Other Side? It was horrifying to think my gift may have been given to me by the source of evil and ugliness. How can evil and ugliness make a gift of beauty?¹⁰

The pressure from the leaders of the community, the warnings of friends, the intrinsic urgings of the gift, the delicate relationship with his parents were all voices seeking attention and action. Would the gift be heard and exercised regardless of the cost? Discernment calls for radical fidelity to God, self and others. Wisdom and courage are needed to hear the truth and implement it in our personal history.

3. Discernment is cultivated in listening love that allows one to hear the felt-experience of good and evil movements within oneself, others and society.

⁸James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Colonial Press Inc., 1944), pp. 83-84.

⁹Jn 10:1-5.

¹⁰Chaim Potok, *My Name is Asher Lev* (New York: Fawcett Crest Books, 1972), p. 116.

For these souls, their hearts tell them what God desires. They have only to listen to the promptings of their hearts to interpret his will in the existing circumstances. God's plans, disguised as they are, reveal themselves to us through our intuition rather than through our reason.¹¹

Love gives freedom. Love accepts another person as he is, and discerns in the other person hidden strength. Love communicates to the other a new kind of self-possession, and enables the other to act with self-confidence.¹²

Only by the supernatural working of grace can a soul pass through its own annihilation to the place where alone it can get the sort of attention which can attend to truth and to affliction. It is the same attention which listens to both of them. The name of this intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention is love.¹³

It is not blind love that is the enduring love, the love that God himself is. It is a seeing love, a knowing love, a love that looks through into the depth of the heart of God, and into the depth of our hearts. There is no strangeness to love; love knows; it is the only power to complete and lasting knowledge.¹⁴

Jesus was a listener and a lover. In a powerful exchange with Peter,¹⁵ Jesus listens to Peter's profession that his master is indeed Messiah; Jesus also hears Peter's unwillingness to embrace the fact that the Messiah must suffer and die. As he listens with love Jesus discerns the first response of Peter as coming from the Father and the second movement and response as coming from mere human standards. This beautiful example of double discernment resonates with many of our own experiences in which we act out of mixed motives and according to diverse and sometimes contradictory criteria. Authentic discernment is possible only when one has the graced ability to listen in love to the deepest impulses, urges and longings of the human heart with great care and exquisite respect. Jesus models for us the very essence of discernment.

The *sunflower* delights both our eye and our imagination. In the morning it faces the east awaiting the dawn; by evening it gazes to the west as though pursuing its god. Two qualities are evident in this docile plant: the "listening" power enabling it to take in the sun's warm rays and its ability to respond to the flight of the sun in loving fidelity. This image highlights the importance of sensitivity in the discernment process. The slightest impulse, urging and prompting must be absorbed and responded to if we are to faithfully follow the call of the Master. Such listening and responding is grounded in love. Love pulls us out of self-preoccupation and the parochialism of our narrow lives. The sunflower images a type of listening and love characteristic of a discerning heart. Would that the simplicity, spontaneity and flexibility of the sunflower were ours!

¹¹Jean Pierre De Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence* (New York: Doubleday Image Book, 1975), p. 105.

¹²*Man Becoming*, p. 50.

¹³*The Simone Weil Reader*, p. 333.

¹⁴Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 110.

¹⁵Mt. 16:13-23.

The movie, *Ordinary People*, presented a scene in which an emotionally disturbed young man reached out to a psychiatrist for help. Initially the relationship did not go well. Later, with time and patience, the deep loving concern and listening skills of the doctor won out. The boy revealed his story and partial healing took place. More than simple listening happened here: a deep discernment of the movements of the heart surfaced, were owned and dealt with. More than superficial concern was demonstrated here: a profound, radical trust resulted in giving life and well-being. In such instances heart speaks to heart (*cor ad cor*) and even though religious language is not used nor God mentioned explicitly, a person of faith can recognize his presence in such an encounter and appreciate the exercise of the gift of discernment.

4. Discernment relies on two mirrors: Jesus and revelation.

The disciple living today....does possess one ultimate criterion for correct discernment: i.e., Jesus himself.¹⁶

With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine Word. In this way, revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood, and set forth to greater advantage.¹⁷

Jesus is our master to whom we do not pay enough attention. He speaks to every heart and utters the word of life, the essential word for each one of us, but we do not hear it. We would like to know what he has said to other people, yet we do not listen to what he says to us.¹⁸

The miracle of the loaves as presented in John's Gospel¹⁹ involves an example of discernment. Many of the disciples who had followed Jesus up to this point now walked away, finding incredible the claim that Jesus himself was the bread of life. The Lord turned to the Twelve and asked if they too would go away. Simon Peter's response: "Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life."²⁰ The specific choice that was made was based on a person and his word. No abstract philosophy here; no esoteric theology; no subtle psychology. Discernment and decision flowed from a relationship of trust and faith. Implicit in such a discernment process is fidelity: decisions are made in terms of personal commitment. Such fidelity secures personal identity because in such an exercise of freedom we protect both the reality of the Creator and the creature. No lies are possible with authentic discernment.

The *keystone* of an arch is in a precarious position. Its presence makes the arch integral but it is dependent on the two columns which it unites. If either column is missing there simply is no arch and the stone meant to be a key remains just an

¹⁶Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1978), p. 129.

¹⁷*The Documents of Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes* New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), p. 246.

¹⁸*Abandonment to Divine Providence*, p. 53.

¹⁹Jn 6:1-71.

ordinary stone. Discernment rests on the personal column of Jesus Christ: his values and affections are the very substance we use in sorting out the many options of life. Discernment also rests on Sacred Scripture which provides a vision of salvation history and the backdrop for measuring what is spiritual and what is not. Blessed are the poor, the peacemakers, the ones who hunger and thirst for justice; ungodly are the self-indulgent, the self-serving, the lukewarm. Revelation clarifies those actions which are life-giving and those which are death-dealing. The person of Jesus leaves unambiguous the path we are to follow. Such lights as Jesus and Scripture are rich and necessary graces for our journey.

The Confessions of Augustine of Hippo reveal a man for whom the word of God and the person of Jesus were vital sources of power. It was in St. Paul's letter to the Romans that God's word overwhelmed the struggling Augustine; it was in personal relationship with Christ that he perceived reality from a faith perspective. Augustine's hunger for the truth, nourished for years by the classic philosophers, now found sustenance from Scripture. Augustine's deep affectivity, once frantically seeking fulfillment in an unbridled sensuous life, found its home in the Lord. With these two resources it is no wonder that the bishop of Hippo is noted for his keen, incisive decisions. Both as a judge of human affairs and as an exegete of Scripture, he brought much life to many because his process of discernment was rooted in the Lord and in biblical faith.

5. Discernment assumes that God is continually working in the depth of every individual and community.

He (God) revealed himself several times reigning, as is said before, but principally in man's soul; he has taken there his resting place and his honorable city. Out of this honorable throne he will never rise or depart without end. Marvelous and splendid is the place where the Lord dwells; and therefore he wants us promptly to attend to the touching of his grace, rejoicing more in his unbroken love than sorrowing over our frequent fallings.²¹

But whatever we do, we do it because we are drawn to this particular action without knowing why. All we can say can be reduced to this: "I feel drawn to write, to read, to question and examine. I obey this feeling, and God, who is responsible for it, thus builds up within me a kind of spiritual store which, in the future, will develop into a core of usefulness for myself and for others." This is what makes it essential for us to be simple-hearted, gentle, compliant and sensitive to the slightest breath of these almost imperceptible promptings.²²

Ah, but it is hard to find this track of the divine in the midst of this life we lead, in this besotted humdrum age of spiritual blindness, with its architecture, its business, its politics, its men!²³

The realization that God is active in all that happens at every moment is the deepest knowledge we can have in this life of the things of God.²⁴

²⁰Jn 6:68.

²¹*Julian of Norwich: Showings*, trans. Edmond Colledge, O.S.A., and James Walsh, S.J., *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 337.

²²*Abandonment to Divine Providence*, p. 81.

²³*Steppenwolf*, p. 35.

²⁴*Abandonment to Divine Providence*, p. 117.

Creation is God's presence to us in beauty; the cross is God's presence to us in our brokenness and twistedness.²⁵ God's creative and redemptive power is at work wherever there is life. Whether or not a given individual responds to that presence is dependent upon the working of grace and freedom. The point is that God is always working. John's Gospel drives this fact home.²⁶ Accepting this in faith, we are challenged to become increasingly conscious of divine stirrings deep within our individual lives as well as our communities. Focal awareness, a high intensity consciousness, may not be that frequent, but subsidiary awareness, a sense of a background presence, can become a way of life.²⁷ As our faith deepens we become ever more sensitive to the working of God's Spirit in our minds and hearts.

The life story of the grape can provide an image of the discernment captured by the vines and their energy transformed into grapes. Upon being harvested and crushed, the grape enters into a *fermentation process*. Through the hidden workings of bacteria surrounded by proper temperatures, darkness and sugars, the grapes are converted into wine. So, too, in our spiritual journey, the need for ongoing conversion is a constant call and is made possible through the perennial movements of God in our innermost being. The sourness of the unredeemed areas of our inner life are turned into the succulent sweetness of a life of union.

In her sensitive allegory *Hinds' Feet on High Places*, Hannah Hurnard has us journey with the main character Much-Afraid through a fermentation process that eventually results in "much-trust." At first our heroine is enslaved by fear, oppressed by human respect, devoid of joy. Gradually she begins to sense the stirrings of grace within her soul. God's promptings lead Much-Afraid into freedom and then on to acts of courage. Her story is symbolic of all those enslaved by fear. Her liberation in grace is greatly aided by an exercise that could well become the model for many:

To this place she was in the habit of going very early every morning to meet Him and learn His wishes and commands for the day, and again in the evening to give her report on the day's work.²⁸

Such conversation and accountability enrich the discerning heart.

²⁵John Shea, *Stories of God: An Unauthorized Biography* (Chicago, Ill.: Thomas More Association, 1978), p. 152.

²⁶Jn 6.

²⁷In an essay entitled "The study of Man," Michael Polanyi writes: "We may say that when we comprehend a particular set of items as parts of a whole, the focus of our attention is shifted from the hitherto uncomprehended particulars to the understanding of their joint meaning. This shift of attention does not make us lose sight of the particulars, since one can see a whole only by seeing its parts, but it changes altogether the manner in which we are aware of the particulars. We become aware of them now in terms of the whole on which we have fixed our attention. I shall call this a *subsidiary awareness* of the particulars, by contrast to a *focal awareness* which would fix attention on the particulars in themselves, and not as parts of a whole. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), pp. 29-30.

²⁸Hannah Hurnard, *Hinds' Feet on High Places* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1973), p. 13.

6. *Discernment respects the nature of time and is willing to wait freely for a decision that has need of clarification, detachment and magnanimity.*

Lightning and thunder require time, the light of the stars requires time, deeds require time even after they are done, before they can be seen and heard.²⁹

Simply by making us wait he increases our desire, which in turn enlarges the capacity of our soul, making it able to receive what is to be given us.³⁰

The poet contrasts us in our waiting and in our going ahead.

For those who take initiative into their own hands, either in the atheism of pride or in the atheism of despair, the words are weary, faint, and exhausted. The inverse comes with waiting: renewed strength, mounting up, running, walking. But that is in waiting. It is in receiving not grasping, in inheriting and not possessing, in praising and not seizing. It is in knowing that initiative has passed from our hands and we are safer for it.³¹

Many of the Lord's parables deal with the notions of time and waiting. One of these tells of the necessity of being ready for the master's return from the wedding feast.³² Happy for those who are awake and prepared for the unexpected. Fear, weariness and even impatience are moods that threaten our call to decide to respond to God's call. Milton's "they also serve who only stand and wait" expresses a situation that only the most courageous can accept. Timing in decision-making is most subtle; indeed, God's time (*kairos*) is often not our time (*chronos*). A basic guideline in the spiritual life is that we "act on our clarities." When things are too muddy we wait, however painful that may be. Without expecting a certitude or clarity that is unrealistic, we gradually become comfortable with that faith fact that seeking and waiting can be as meritorious and grace-filled as finding. The important thing is that God's will be done.³³

Telephone companies provide a service by which a person can find out the correct time by *dialing a certain number*. Would that our inner seasons were as clear as our chronological time frame! It is hard to discern in winter when dormancy and coldness immobilize our hearts. People are counseled never to make decisions of major import when depressed; it is simply the wrong time. Nor should decisions be made when romanticism sweeps through the heart blinding the individual to the shadow side of life. We discern on level ground, not on the peaks nor in the valleys. The correct time is known more through intuition than rational deduction—we sense discernment more than figure it out. The phone number locates us and orientates us according to the sun; discernment provides bearings in reference to a much brighter Light.

Shakespeare's *King Lear* provides an excellent example of timing and discernment. The king was aging and decided to distribute his property and wealth among his daughters, each being given a share in proportion to her profession of

²⁹Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969), p. 11.

³⁰Thomas H. Green, S.J., *When the Well Runs Dry* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1979), p. 113.

³¹Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 78-79.

³²Lk 12:35-40.

love for her father. Not only was Lear unwise in his standard of division, he was misguided in his time. The consequence was eventual insanity and death. Discernment demands a standard, one based on knowledge of reality and deep faith. Discernment demands awareness of the Lord's timing. Until that surfaces we wait, trusting that the Lord will show us his plan. Detachment allows us to accept whatever is asked; magnanimity provides room to welcome whatever is given. Discernment needs much grace and graciousness.

7. Discernment is a gift which comes to those who are properly attuned through obedience and surrender.

In everything else, this soul will preserve a perfect liberty, always ready to obey the stirrings of grace the moment it becomes aware of them, and to surrender itself to the care of providence.³⁴

When a soul has reached the third stage, the love of friendship and filial love, her love is no longer mercenary. Rather she does as very close friends do when one receives a gift from the other. The receiver does not just look at the gift, but at the heart and the love of the giver, and accepts and treasures the gift only because of the friend's affectionate love.³⁵

The hearing of God's Word requires complete self-surrender.³⁶

The Annunciation narrative in Luke's Gospel³⁷ presents Mary in a perplexing situation. Her future with Joseph had been determined; plans were made; important decisions were set in motion. Suddenly God breaks into the "best-laid schemes o' mice an' men." What is to be done? To whom does one listen? What price the surrender of one's will to the call of God? This biblical account gives us a classic example of discernment. The divine will summons and history hangs in balance. Though struggling with fear and the unknown, Mary discerns the voice of the Lord and in prompt obedience and generous surrender commits her life to the providence of her God. That gift of discernment was rooted in her identity as the handmaid of the Lord. Mary knew who she was and it was from that giftedness of her graced filled life that such an extravagant and total response poured forth from her heart.

A *hearing aid* is a great blessing for those individuals for whom deafness is an encroaching reality. This technical device helps restore the precious gift of hearing. One can once again listen to a variety of sounds and calls and through surrender render personal obedience. Physical listening has its counterpart in the spiritual realm, as does deafness. Often we do not hear. Sometimes this is a matter of choice, sometimes a matter of circumstance. Regardless, we fail to discern the words and movements of the Lord because the gift of discernment has not been activated. Hearing aids can be adjusted, even turned off. When God asks what is

³³Julian of Norwich: *Showings*, pp. 195-196.

³⁴*Abandonment to Divine Providence*, p. 88.

³⁵Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogues*, trans. and introd. Suzanne Noffke, O.P., Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 134.

³⁶*Meister Eckhart*, trans. Raymond B. Blakney (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1941), p. 33.

³⁷Lk 1:26-38.

demanding or unpleasant we can unconsciously or blatantly turn from his summons and fail to respond. Here we see that the discernment process has high mutuality: the call and gift from God, the free response of obedience and surrender from the human person. God respects our freedom too much to force a response. Gradually it becomes evident that discernment is not just one gift among many: it is a crucial gift determining destinies.

Story of a Soul, the autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux, is a candid revelation of a deep love relationship. Surrender and obedience were qualities that gave constant direction to the saint's life; these dispositions opened her to the gift of discernment. Therese realized that Christian living demanded not only recognition of what is to be done but also the actual doing:

As little birds learn to sing by listening to their parents, so children learn the science of the virtues, the sublime song of Divine Love from souls responsible for forming them.³⁸

Authentic discernment moves from listening to virtue. God uses many intermediaries (parents, teachers, friends, "enemies") to both proclaim his message and model a response. In this environment the gift of discernment takes root. Therese's being was receptive to the stirrings of grace. The song of divine love was heard, the responding melody was also one of deep love.

8. Discernment happily blends faith and pragmatism: it searches out God's will in radical trust and does it.

The People of God believes that it is led by the Spirit of the Lord, who fills the earth. Motivated by this faith, it labors to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs, and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age. For faith throws a new light on everything, manifests God's design for man's total vocation, and thus directs the mind to solutions which are fully human.³⁹

The will certainly seems to me to be united in some way with the will of God; but it is by the effects of this prayer and the actions which follow it that the genuineness of the experience must be tested and there is no better crucible for doing so than this.⁴⁰

Every activity is related to good and evil twice over: by its performance and by its principle.⁴¹

While teaching one day,⁴² Jesus was interrupted when some men, carrying their paralyzed friend and lowering him through the roof, ingeniously got everyone's attention. The story is familiar; two things should be noted for our purpose. These men had a deep faith in Jesus. They truly believed that this teacher had power and concern. Secondly, their faith was active. They expended much energy.

³⁸*Story of a Soul: the Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux*, trans. John Clarke, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1975), p. 113.

³⁹*The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 209.

⁴⁰*The Complete Works of St. Theresa of Jesus*, ed. and trans. E. Allison Peers (London: Sheed & Ward, 1944), 2:238.

⁴¹*The Simone Weil Reader*, p. 292.

⁴²Lk 5:17-26.

and subtle creativity in allowing their faith-filled hearts to be nourished by divine healing. Both their trust and activity were rewarded in the cure of their friend. Discernment is both relational and functional; it is contemplative and active; it is faith-filled and pragmatic. The contemporary concern for integration is similar to the ever present call to discernment. A person of true discernment is integral. No false dichotomy here: action must be consequent to principle. Grounded in deep faith discernment pushes from below; drawn into active response discernment calls us forth to be agents of change.

H_2O is the chemical formula describing our precious gift of water. The blending of these two elements produces a substance necessary for life. Hydrogen without oxygen fails to give us our refreshing liquid and vice versa. So in the spiritual domain: faith without action is dead; action without faith loses its ultimate significance. The water of the spiritual life is the grace of discernment; its basic elements are faith and deed. Depending upon the developmental phases of the community or individual, the weight will shift more towards faith, more towards action according to the level of maturity and the needs of the people. Here we realize that spiritual laws are much more subtle than those of nature.

In his journal entitled *Markings*, Dag Hammarskjöld records the diverse movements of his inner life. We come to realize that this international figure, busy with multiple responsibilities of the United Nations, had a very well developed and nurtured spiritual life. He speaks often of faith; he notes the importance of action. One passage will suffice:

We act in faith—and miracles occur. In consequence, we are tempted to make the miracles the ground for our faith. The cost of such weakness is that we lose the confidence of faith. Faith is, faith creates, faith carries. It is not derived from, nor created, nor carried by anything except its own reality.⁴³

The mixture is right; the roots of the tree blossom forth through the branches carrying and bringing much life. Discernment makes this possible.

9. Discernment looks to consequences for its authenticity: decisions are of God if ultimately leading to life and love.

I am quite sure that no one will be deceived in this way for long if he has a gift for the discernment of spirits and if the Lord has given him true humility: such a person will judge these spirits by their fruits and their resolutions and their love.⁴⁴

To estimate the worth of a spiritual decision, we thus have three criteria at our disposal: the authenticity of our union with God, the unity of the different elements of our being, the cohesion which our action assumes in relation to ourselves, to others and to the world.⁴⁵

The work of love not only heals the roots of sin, but nurtures practical goodness. When it is authentic you will be sensitive to every need and respond with a generosity unspoiled by

⁴³Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1966), p. 145.

⁴⁴*The Complete Works of St. Theresa of Jesus*, 1:378.

⁴⁵Francois Roustang, S.J., *Growth in the Spirit*, trans. Kathleen Pond (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1966), p. 122.

selfish intent. Anything you attempt to do without this love will certainly be imperfect, for it is sure to be marred by ulterior motives.⁴⁶

Authentic Christian living results in action and explicit concern. Jesus draws our attention to the fig tree that is rich in foliage but devoid of fruit.⁴⁷ For a hungry person the fruitless fig tree is worthless. We discern its worth in this case by whether or not it achieves its essential destiny. In our spiritual journey discernment is tested by the effects of our action and the concomitant affectivity. Does our activity give life, i.e., does it foster an increase of love, joy and peace? Or do our actions lead to death, i.e., apathy, sadness and anxiety? Discernment registers at the deepest level of our humanity—in our guts! We come to sequester that which nurtures from that which enervates. As in economic affairs so in spiritual matter we come to the bottom line: the financial world looks to profit/loss and the spiritual world looks to life/death.

The *stethoscope* allows medical personnel to become attuned to the inner physiological movements of the patient. The trained ear can evaluate the proper functionings or pathological stirrings of vital organs. What the naked eye has no way of knowing, the ear with the aid of the stethoscope can easily ascertain. Discernment is a process of listening to the stirrings of the many different spirits constantly at work within the complexity of our lives. A good spiritual director intuitively senses how our life-style and motivational field is impacting on the inner terrain. If congruence is sensed, then God's word is taking root and bearing proper fruit. If there is dissonance, then dialogue is in order to understand where it is coming from. This is no easy task. The movements of the spirit are mixed and often ambiguous. At times God's word will cause dissonance while the work of the evil spirit causes apparent harmony. These uncharted waters make us hesitate and call out for help from a good spiritual navigator!

Sophie's Choice, a novel by Willim Styron, narrates the many decisions that a young woman had to make in very dire circumstances. The choice of letting either her son or daughter be sent to the gas chambers is symbolic of the horrendous decisions that confront the human spirit. Throughout this novel we witness people making choices and dealing with the powerful effects that shape their destinies. These effects basically fall on one or other side of the line: life or death. Sad to say, most of the decisions were not life-affirming. Any good novel is essentially a study of discernment from an experiential point of view. Situations arise, choices are made, life or death follows. No one is exempt from dealing with the script of his or her own life. The process is universal. Grace is necessary if we are to discern wisely and act with courage.

10. Discernment leads to truth and, through truth, into freedom.

The very word "truth" filled my heart with enthusiasm. The beauty of the word shone in my

⁴⁶*The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counseling*, ed. William Johnston (New York: Doubleday Image Book, 1973), p. 64.

eyes like a spiritual sun dispelling all shadows—those of ignorance, of error, of deceit, even those of iniquity, which is an error of measure and a lie. "Knowing the truth"—a pleonasm. With truth there is already knowing, as there is reality and being. To think the word "truth" is to assume a spiritual faculty, in which alone truth can be found. It is to assume the capacity of such a spiritual faculty to conform itself to being, to reality, in order within itself to produce the truth. It is also to raise the question of knowing whether such a faculty exists.⁴⁸

And if a will of iron represents one aspect of the liberated soul, flexibility and detachment of spirit represent a complementary aspect. To obey the inspirations of grace moment by moment, to adjust oneself readily to the promptings of a living Master, is a task which demands the glorious liberty that is the high prerogative of the sons of God.⁴⁹

But at this moment I came upon myself. Previously I had existed, too, but everything had merely happened to me. Now I happened to myself. Now I knew: I am myself now, now I exist. Previously I had been willed to do this and that; now I willed.⁵⁰

God's word calls us to truth and freedom. Mary Magdalene wandered in the garden in deep dejection because her master and friend was dead.⁵¹ Death appeared to have had the final say and such news caused enslavement to fear and depression. Then the experience of the Lord! The truth is exposed: sin and death are overcome by the cross and resurrection. God's fidelity and power are everlasting. The bond of sin is broken; the sting of death destroyed. With this truth came freedom, a freedom overflowing into joy. Mary sees and is able to act. This narrative helps us to see that the gift of discernment brings vision and responsibility. In recognizing the risen Lord we contact reality; in being graced, we become gracious. Through the word of God we deepen our sense of identity and mission. This process allows us to find meaning which allows for motivation, enabling us to risk the use of time and energy in new and creative ways. For Mary, Jesus was the truth that leads to freedom; for Mary, his person allowed proper discernment.

Scientists use two instruments in their work of discovery and invention that are, by nature, tools of discernment, the *microscope* and *telescope*. With awe and wonder, we use the microscope to probe cellular structures revealing the deep patterns of life; with anticipation and excitement, we find the telescope pulling us into galaxies undreamt of by our ancestors. Gifted with such tools we come to know invisible worlds and incredible spaces. The spiritual realm is no less astounding. With the tools of subtle interior silence and perceptive wisdom we scan the vast plan of God's creative love. Such dispositions are crucial in coming to know truth and to exercise our freedom. Discernment falters amidst noises; it is blinded and cannot know what is pleasing to God. Discernment is seeing, a seeing that leads to freely doing the truth in love.

Lavrans Bjorgulfson, speaking to his wife, says: "I know not. You are so strange—and all you have said tonight. I was afraid, Ragnfrid. Like enough I

⁴⁷Mk 11:12-14.

⁴⁸Raissa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together* (New York: Green and Co., 1942), p. 80.

⁴⁹E. Herman, *Creative Prayer* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Forward Movement Publications, n.d.), p. 79.

⁵⁰C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. by Aniela Jaffe and trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), pp. 32-33.

⁵¹Jn 20:11-18.

understand not the hearts of women...."⁵² In Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter*, we witness the tragedy of ignorance and the paralyzing power of fear that follows. Lavrans, a good man, does not understand the heart of his wife, Ragnfrid, nor that of his daughter, Kristin. Their loves were mysteries to him and, lacking proper discernment of the movements of their hearts, the tortuous pain of misunderstanding was bound to follow. The truth of the heart is a special knowledge all its own. Only when the heart is "informed" and well-known do the waters of freedom flow.

Principles clash with the particulars of life. Helpful as they might be, life is lived in experience, not reflection. Yet we need to step back ever so often for perspective and meaning. Hopefully this essay has fulfilled that task. My only hope is that these pages have realized the mandate once given by Emily Dickinson:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—

⁵²Sigrid Undset, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, 1 *The Bridal Wreath*, trans. Charles Archer and J. C. Scott (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), p. 232.

Pope John Paul II to Jesuit Superiors, February 27, 1982: In fact, a special bond binds your Society to the Roman Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ on earth. . . . St. Ignatius and his companions . . . attached capital importance to this bond of love and service to the Roman Pontiff, so much so that they wished this "special vow" to be a characteristic element of the Society. . . . It is evident that here we are touching upon the essence of the Ignatian charism and upon that which lies at the very heart of your order. And it is to this that you must always always remain faithful.