

may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.⁴

NOTES

¹Abraham J. Heschel, *Man's Quest for God* (New York: Scribner's, 1954), p. xiii.

²John J. English, S.J., *Spiritual Freedom* (Guelph, Ontario; Canada: Loyola House, 1973), p. 183.

³Thomas Merton writes: "In all the situations of life the 'will of God' comes to us not merely as an external dictate of impersonal law but above all as an interior invitation of personal love. . . . We must learn to realize that the love of God seeks us in every situation, and seeks our good. His inscrutable love seeks our awakening" (*New Seeds of Contemplation* [New York: New Directions, 1972], p. 15).

⁴Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (Garden City: Doubleday/Image, 1968), p. 81.

Discerning the Spirits in Prayer

William Sampson, S.J.

Volume 38, 1979, pp. 229-235.

After centuries in which little was said of discernment of spirits, we are today presented with a great mass of contributions. Some people still can find it hard to apply it in their own lives. I would like to present, in concrete instances, how discernment can be applied to a person's prayer life. First, three cases will be presented. Then some conflicting spirits will be detailed and evaluated in the abstract. Lastly, the evaluation will be applied to the three cases. It may be a help in learning how to use discernment practically. The three cases:

Case 1: Kevin feels his prayer life is poor. He does not pray regularly. There are, though, times when he finds he can pray easily, periods of peace in his life when for a few hours, or even a week, everything fits together. But there are big stretches when he does not advert to the Lord at all. He finds himself on a merry-go-round. Days fly by, accompanied by a vague sense of unease about his spiritual life.

This has been his experience for so long that he honestly does not hope for much of a change. All the spiritual input he has received doesn't seem to affect these dead stretches. When he does think of prayer it gives him an unpleasant feeling, so he thinks of it very little.

Case 2: Sam is very aware of being on a new wavelength with God. He has followed the advice of a retreat-director, and now prays regularly for thirty minutes each day. He is delighted with the consolation he finds in prayer, and doubts that he could get through the day without it. This new intimacy with God pleases him. He can sense his growing spiritual health. He wonders how he ever got by before he learned how to pray. He would like to share with others the peace that fills his life, but he finds this a mixed affair. Some are recep-

tive and a strong support for him, but many are apathetic, unconcerned, inert.

He has found that he can see God "popping up" in his day now. At times he senses God working through him to touch others. When he is in some bind, the Lord moves mountains. His confidence is great. Jesus' life comes alive for him and Sam sees himself as working alongside Jesus in his apostolate, working effectively, at last.

Especially has prayer helped him to counter within himself the depressing influence of some members of the community who are caught in destructive patterns—time-wasting, excessive television-watching, drinking, and so forth. He now sees the kingdom coming into the world and into his life, and he feels a strong call to bring others to see it and to experience his own joy.

Case 3: Chuck would have a hard time saying how he is doing. His prayer is not regulated. It resembles, in his eyes, a "foxhole" spirituality. When he is up and all is humming, he tends to pray very little—often less than ten minutes. But when he is in pain from some personal relationship or job situation, he tends to pray much more.

He feels he is not very responsive to the Lord, nor sensitive to the needs of other people. He is constantly noticing in retrospect instances of callousness and manipulation in dealing with others. When this gets to him—as at times it does—he finds the Lord always comes with strength and consolation, assuring him that He is, in ways unseen, leading him out of his lovelessness. Chuck wonders whether he is ever going to get really serious about prayer.

There are many ways of looking at the three cases presented. There are a variety of norms that can be applied to them to indicate just where each man is, and where he should move. What I shall do is outline *one* criterion that I find useful, and then apply it to the three cases.

This criterion is based on two contrasting images of God. In the one image, man sees God as somewhat remote, as difficult to contact. To get God's ear is a costly process. To get God's favor, a price must be paid. To make sacrifices in order to become intimate with him is taken for granted. At times, such intimacy demands the sacrifice of life itself.

The second, contrasting image is one in which it is God who is having a very difficult time making contact with man because of man's remoteness. To get man's ear is a costly process for God. To get his cooperation God must pay a price. He must make sacrifices if he wants to enlarge his intimacy with man. In fact, he must sacrifice his very life.

The struggle of the spirits within us is the movement back and forth between these images; now one affects our moods and choices, now another. While it is not a great problem to identify the second image with the gospel-revelation, this intellectual clarity does not free us from the patterns of behavior that spring from convictions that are more in accord with the first image—God's remoteness.

Notice how a person would act and feel in the grip of the sense of God's inaccessibility. There results a focusing upon the self. What needs to be done, must be done "by me." The distance between me and God is *my* problem. There is a sense that a massive effort is being called forth from me.

One of the clearest cases of this feeling I have run into was a priest who told me that he would have great difficulty with the directed retreat because of the suggestion that the prayer periods be limited to one hour. He told me that ordinarily he prayed for three hours: it was usually one hour before even the sense of God's presence came. Here was a man who found God remote, requiring a great input of time just to make contact. Almost as with a great industrialist, you take for granted you may have to use up an hour just getting him on the phone.

He also told me that he had not prayed in over two years. With such an image of prayer springing from such an image of God, it wasn't surprising. This is so far from St. Ignatius' assurance to the young scholastics: "expect great visitations of God even in brief visits."

Now this was an unusual instance, but it is a common problem in prayer. A sense that God is not so readily available, that a price must be paid—in time, or quietness, or reading, or even a sacramental confession—is part of our natural makeup. It is hard for us to believe in practice—that is, to act upon our intellectual awareness, that *God is near*.

This conviction that a price must be paid can keep a person from intimacy with God. Returning to the Lord, in certain situations, can seem to involve such a great burden. There are things that must be done first before I can expect him to let me get near. It's like having borrowed a large sum from a friend. If I can't pay up, there's an inclination to avoid the person, to take a different route home, to go on an earlier bus. Because of the debt, thinking about the friend can produce a depression. What was once a consoling thought is now unpleasant. God has become someone to whom I owe too much for comfort. "Some day, Lord, I'll steel myself . . . but not yet!"

The thought of God has become a bit depressing. He is not "good news" to me anymore. I may just need ten dollars to get me through today, and I know he has it, but there's that huge debt. To ask for more would mean promising again how I will get to the big debt, and I no longer believe myself. It's too obviously hypocritical.

The man is chained by a false image of God. That image has him in despair about a close friendship with the Lord. From day to day he expects very little from God. He's on his own. Somehow the Lord must break that false idol he is so unhappily worshipping. The Lord must touch him, heal him, and break the chains. The most troublesome aspect is man's lack of awareness that his image of God is an *idol*. Were he asked, he would affirm the nearness of God. His thoughts and his words may be correct; but his choices and his moods are governed by the false image he has.

How might the Lord break in? perhaps in the course of the *Exercises* he will see his own behavior in a new light and the suggestion will come: "What if my image of God is not true? What if he *is* near, making no prior demands on me, inviting me into his friendship from exactly where I am?"

As a person comes under the influence of the second image, the one of God-pursuing-man, his outlook changes. Here is a God who deals with us as friend to friend; a God who wants to help and who can help. God's determination is to befriend us. It is a costly effort for him—as Jesus reveals in his preaching and, even more, in his life-work. When such a man is in need, turning to God is instinctive just as it would be to seek out a friend whose help is needed.

In the gospel, Jesus speaks of a Shepherd who pursues us who have gone off each in his own way. Jesus came for the sick, as a good doctor. He does not relate easily to the "healthy" among us. He has a task to do, a healing.

In St. Ignatius we have an image of a God who works and labors for us. He puts himself at our service; he becomes our servant. Julian of Norwich presents an image in which God is our clothing; He wraps and enfolds us for love; he embraces us and shelters us. St. John Chrysostom has God call himself our food, clothing, home, root, foundation, everything we could wish for, even our servant.

Now let us apply these images to the three cases we have set forth. The Spirit of Darkness is in each of us, urging us toward a negative image of God. The Holy Spirit is within fostering an image of a God who is really *good news*, surprising us by the completeness of his commitment to us.

In Case 1, Kevin finds it easy to ignore God. He finds it possible to pass his days without any exchange with the Lord. He prays only when he doesn't need it. When he does need it, he doesn't pray. He is treating God as a person who is not a friend at all. God is, for him, a burden, added to his other burdens. He is in the grip of his man-made image of God. This is the effect such a conviction has on us. In Ignatian terms, he is in desolation. God is not the light of his life.

What is the Holy Spirit doing within Kevin at this point? Where could he look to find the Lord? He may well be in the suggestion: "Could it be that I don't know the Lord?" How will that suggestion enter Kevin's consciousness? Perhaps through a book he reads, or a word spoken to him by someone who sees where he is. Perhaps in the desperation of his painful loneliness and alienation from God there will come a sense that there must be another path.

What is plain in Kevin's life is that his fitful and upside-down prayer life is revealing a conviction about God that is far from Jesus' own conviction. The Spirit will be leading Kevin into a greater awareness of who God *really* is, and this will free him from the circle of frustration in which he finds himself.

In Case 2, Sam offers a very different picture. Here the relationship with God is very positive. God is an important person in Sam's life. But there are questions that can be raised about Sam, indications that all is not so well as it appears. To get some light on this we will have to look again at our two basic images.

Notice that neither of these is just an image of God. Both also contain an image of man. When God reveals to us what he is like, at the same time he must reveal to us his picture of what we are like. And, in similar fashion, when the Spirit of Darkness grips us with his false image of God, we are also caught in a false self-image.

Typically, man's image of himself is of one who tries his best. "I'm not perfect. But I do what I can." The gap between himself and God is caused, he feels, by God's remoteness, not by any lack of effort on his own part. To climb the mountain of the Lord is a very demanding task, not one for the common man who can only try the best he can, and humbly accept his place. In this image of a remote God is included an image of a man who is basically good, doing what he can, within the limits of his relative weakness. He is a decent sort—if not perfect by any means.

In God's image of man, however, we have something quite different. As he reveals to us the *good news*: we have a God who is terribly close to us, concerned with all his fatherly heart, he also reveals to us that we are in flight from him, and this is a very unwelcome piece of bad news. To save us from our deliberate rejecting of love, he must shed his blood. He reveals that we live our lives in such a criminal way that it cannot be undone by serving a five-year prison term, nor even by a life sentence. It calls for our death. We are calling for our death in our day to day choices. He reveals that we need a savior, that we need his dying for us.

As man approaches closer to God, this truth looms larger each day: He must die to heal me, so sickly is my misuse of freedom, so hostile am I to letting love into my life—even though he be a brother—and to entrusting my security to another's will—even though he be my God. The saint is filled with this awareness: his own lack of response to the great needs of others, and to the full trustworthiness of God.

These two aspects go hand in hand. The more I see the Lord's passionate commitment to me, the more I will see my own wounds, my own reluctance to respond, my own great need of him. The saint sees himself before the Lord as a living need. What is strange for him is the great consolation that accompanies this entry into the truth of the bad news about himself which leads to the good news about God. There is in the saint a freedom from the need to see himself as a loving, trusting person, a freedom that comes through God's working in him.

That freedom to see himself in all his negativity is what St. Ignatius called mortification, the death of man's self. The path to it that Ignatius points out for us is the *examen of conscience* as a way of life. This involves a persistent surfacing of those concrete choices where I prefer unlove to love, and refusing to trust the Lord over faith. In the centuries that preceded Ignatius it was called *compunction*, a sharp awareness of responding inadequately and personally to a Lord passionately involved in securing my love, and to my brothers and sisters who need me so badly.

Going back to Sam, our second case, we have a mix of spirits. Sam has undergone a conversion, and an influx of consolation. This involves risks. It is very easy to fall in love with what he sees happening within himself. This new Sam, so grace-filled and bursting with consolation is becoming the object of his self-attention. Pharisaism is a constant danger for the "converted." To avoid it, a second conversion must take place, in which his attention shifts from his own spiritual strength to the needs of his neighbor and the awesome love that God has for him. This second conversion can only arise from a growing awareness of his negative choices. The idol of himself as a loving person will be gently destroyed. He won't need it anymore.

When Sam looks at himself, he is not perturbed, nor filled with the salutary sadness of which the saints speak. His self-image is consoling to him. This is not a gospel consolation. The Lord will shift Sam's focus from the gifts he already has to the gifts he does not yet have, and to his reluctance to receive them. He is still a lost sheep, and God must still bloodily pursue him. He has not passed beyond the need of being saved, but Jesus' dying for him is not playing that same large role that it does in the gospel and in the lives of the saints.

It is others whom he sees as needing grace. They are apathetic, unconcerned, inert. They are caught up in defective behavior patterns. Sam is moving towards the righteousness that inevitably accompanies self-esteem. The Lord is drawing him elsewhere, into the realization that *he* is the apathetic one, the unconcerned, the inert, and that he is caught up in defective behavior patterns. Sam's eye has shifted away from the Lord's painful wrestling within him. It is not the Lord but himself he sees wrestling with the sin around him. That he himself is still the object of the Good Shepherd's pursuit is not central in his consciousness. Part of the gospel is left outside himself to be applied only to others. The image of a God seeking his attention at great cost is not what governs his behavior. Embarrassment at his own persistent, day to day, unresponsiveness to the Lord's invitations, and to the needs of others, is not playing its vital part in his life.

The Lord *will* be working within him. Judging by Jesus' experience, it is a far more difficult task to reveal to man his needs, his sin, his unloving and unbelieving choices, his need to be died for. As it comes into man's consciousness it produces a growing inability to judge others, a growing concern for others' needs, a loss of concern about "How am I doing?"

St. Ignatius cautioned us about relying on quantities of prayer. He promoted instead the ideal of a man alive to his own weakness. For such a man even brief prayers would suffice. A regular prayer-life can produce a sense of well-being that is far from the gospel. The Spirit consoles us even as he reveals our inertia, our indifference to others' need for compassion and bread. It is not the Spirit's role, no more than it was the role of Jesus, to tell us how well we are doing, but rather how lucky we are to have him

as friend who alone would persist in befriending us at such great cost to himself.

That leaves us *Chuck*. He has no sense of spiritual strength. His prayer is a spontaneous springing from the sense of need. He is practicing the Ignatian principle of praying longer in desolation, of not letting the Lord go "until he bless." He is taking his spiritual growth on faith and not demanding signs. Prayer has no quantitative aspect in his life.

The power to surface his unresponsiveness to others and to the Lord is a working of God within him. It frees the Lord to deal with him familiarly.

The Lord will be leading him deeper along the path he is now going. More and more Chuck will be led to see his own callousness, his hard-heartedness, until all his consolation will spring from the Lord's promise to give him a new heart—a heart of flesh. In relating to others, Chuck is ready to notice his manipulating tendencies at work. This leads to greater sensitivity to others. His freedom to see himself as he truly is will lead to a humble service of his neighbor, and a more consoling vision of the Lord as he is—boldly and totally committed to us.

Summary

There are deep convictions that affect our behavior. How we actually choose reveals how we imagine God's relating himself to us. Two images are struggling for control of our heart, one man-made, the other coming from the *good news* revealed in Jesus' life and preaching. We are blinded by our man-made image, and depressed by it without being aware that we are in its grip. In some, it produces anxiety and loneliness, a sense of meaninglessness, a lack of enthusiasm for the gospel word. In others it produces a need for denying their own sin, a fear of the truth which, while it enables them to see themselves as co-redeemers with Jesus, keeps them from identifying themselves as the one being redeemed. It leads them along judgmental paths.

The wound that this false image causes is what the Lord is wrestling to heal throughout our lives. In befriending us, he desires to free us from such a crippling, enslaving darkness. As he leads us into the truth of our own self, the truth of God's total commitment to us becomes clearer. A growing assurance of his victory replaces anxiety.

This healing work of the Lord demands no particular quantity of prayer. But it does require a prayer that is like that of the publican in his awareness of need. It requires that I let the Lord lead me into how little I love others, how little I trust him, how little I expect from him, how little I want him at the core of my life. It was through reflection on Jesus' death that the early Church came to realize the horror of sin, the wound being cured. The same is true in my life. I am the one who needs this bloody dying by my God. Only then does God's passion become good news for me.