

## **Temptation and Spiritual Discernment in Ignatius of Loyola and John of the Cross**

*by Segundo Galilea*

The practice of discernment is as old as Christian spirituality. To discern is to distinguish between good and evil in order to choose the good. It is to identify the will of God in order to follow it. In this sense discernment is applicable to any believer, whether or not this person has a spirituality, and whether it be profound or in its beginning stages. In this general form, discernment is often practiced instinctively according to the light of one's own conscience.

There is, nevertheless, a more specific form of discernment particularly applicable to our concern: the subtle, deceitful temptations that lead to mediocrity. The tradition calls this form "discernment of spirit." Here one is dealing not so much with explicitly distinguishing between good and evil, but rather with distinguishing the good spirit from the bad spirit, that is to say, distinguishing what is a call from God and what is temptation. This differs from the discernment of good and evil in that, even with good will, the two spirits are easy to confuse, since on this level (when dealing with spiritual persons) the temptations are subtle; at first sight they do not seem bad and could even be taken as inspirations from God.

The discernment of spirits is much more complex than any other type of discernment. It requires experience, sound doctrine, and counsel. This discernment has a long tradition in Christian spirituality; it is present, to varying degrees, in the teaching of all the great mystics and spiritual masters, beginning with the desert fathers and others. But not all of them have attempted to analyze the theme in a systematic way, nor have they always excelled as masters in the discernment of spirits.

Ignatius and John of the Cross complement one another, but the character of their mysticism differs. Ignatian mysticism is oriented to apostolic service; his discernment seeks to arrive at a form of commitment of "making a choice (election) to serve Christ" in His Church. Making a choice is essential in Ignatian discernment and the key to his Exercises. Sanjuanist mysticism, on the other hand, is oriented to communion with God and neighbor through faith, hope and love. Fray John is a contemplative mystic. His discernment is not directed as much toward orienting and confirming a way of making a

choice for Christ as it is toward purifying and developing a choice already made, thus the differences and the complementarity. Ignatius is more universal. His doctrine of discernment is as appropriate for those who want to begin to follow Christ as for those advanced in spirituality (in principle his Spiritual Exercises are appropriate for all who want to reform their lives). John of the Cross directs himself to those who are already on the way of Christian perfection; he assumes the first conversion and choice of a way of life. In fact, most of his writings are directed to members of the reformed Carmel. To be sure, his doctrine has universal applications; in principle, though, his writings are not as well suited to those who are just beginning, even less to those who require a first conversion.

Still, both mystics have the same objective; a discernment of spirits that permits the soul to adopt attitudes and decisions leading toward a greater surrender to God through love. And both mystics present discernment as a process of illumination, in which availability for loving and serving God is purified and confirmed. Because of the different styles of their writings (the *Exercises* of Ignatius are schematic, in the form of aids for the director; the major prose writings of Fray John are treatises), their methods of explaining the process and the doctrine of discernment differ, Ignatius presents a system of "Rules" in pedagogical order (14 in the first week of the *Exercises* and 8 in the second), in addition to the "times and ways of making a choice of a way of life" that characterize the second week and add valuable criteria for discerning the will of God. On the other hand, John of the Cross's doctrine of discernment is not synthesized as such, but scattered throughout his writings, as he analyzes the subtle defects and temptations of "spiritual people," above all in his treatise *The dark Night*. For the Carmelite saint, the "nights" correspond to the illumination and purification of inordinate attachments, thus implying a process of discernment. (Fray John's "night," however, corresponds to the Ignatian "desolation" only in some aspects as we will later see.)

Both mystics, in the end, also concur in the fact that their doctrine about discernment of spirits proceeds basically from their own personal experience. In this, Ignatius is particularly transparent: his rules for discernment and moments of making a choice correspond to his personal life experiences, historically identifiable during the first stages of his conversion of life.

### **Criteria for Discerning Temptation**

The criteria of both mystics for discerning what comes from God and what is temptation agree to a great extent, although their modes of presentation differ in details. Furthermore, they both add original contributions that enrich and mutually complement one another. In Ignatius these criteria of discernment are explicitly identified in the book of the Exercises; in John of the Cross they are present throughout all his writings in a more implicit way (almost never uses the term "discernment," for example).

***The Need for Inner Freedom.*** Provisionally, both agree in a fundamental criterion: Discerning the good spirit from the bad (temptation) requires the disposition of interior freedom, a progressive interior liberation from sins and deliberate faults, from inordinate affections and attachments, from passions and tendencies that customarily obscure and condition discernment in each person. (This interior freedom corresponds to the "indifference" of Ignatius and the "nothing" of John of the Cross.)

The grace of interior freedom in order to be able to respond with love and perseverance to the choice that God asks is one of the foundations of the Ignatian *Exercises*. In the "Introductory Observations," no.1, for example, he writes: "we call Spiritual Exercises every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul." The same theme appears in no. 23, "First Principle and Foundation." Again, in his counsels for making "a good and correct choice of a way of life" (Second Week), Ignatius wants to ensure interior freedom in the moments of making a choice and a holy objectivity and indifference.

John of the Cross follows another method on the road to this interior freedom: He analyzes in spiritual persons the subtle and often unconscious temptations and enslavements of the soul that hinder a greater freedom to love. At the same time he proposes the manner of behavior for the soul to receive illumination from God, and thus to discern and purify this subtle servitude; whereas, Ignatius places the accent on making a choice for the service of God. Fray John places it on communion with God. These are the two complementary dimensions of Christian mysticism. We read in the first book of the *Dark Night* (Chapters to 7) that the characteristic quality of these imperfections and temptations is that the spiritual person does not perceive them as such; but rather it seems that he or she is doing well. The Carmelite saint sees in this typical form of the deceitful influence of the devil. This can lead to a secret spiritual pride and

complacency in the spiritual person's Christian practices; a desire to have more and more pleasures and sensory experiences; or to delight in them, searching for one's own gratification; or wanting to appear spiritual before others; or becoming discouraged and irritable when one does not "feel" favor; or the tendency as well to compare oneself with others. For John of the Cross, discernment and the overcoming of these temptations that threaten interior freedom require the purifying and illuminating action of God in the soul (the night of sense and of spirit).

***Evil Under the Guise of Good.*** The two mystics agree perfectly in another fundamental criterion: The most subtle and dangerous temptation in spiritual persons is that which happens under the appearance of good. By this means the devil deceives and obscures discernment. Thus in the fourth Ignatian rule, no. 332 (Second Week of the Exercises), Ignatius writes, "It is a mark of the evil spirit to assume the appearance of an angel of light. . . . Afterward, he will endeavor little by little to end by drawing the soul into his hidden snares and evil designs." And John of the Cross in his [\*Precautions\*](#) (no. 10) says: "It should be noted that among the many wiles of the devil to deceive spiritual persons, the most common is deceiving them under the appearance of good rather than of evil, for he already knows that they will scarcely choose a recognized evil."

***Consolation and Desolation.*** This fact underscores the importance of taking into account other more particular criteria pertaining to the discernment of spirits. Among these, the criterion of "consolation-desolation" occupies an eminent place in Ignatius's doctrine. In one way or another, this criterion is present in almost all the "rules for the discernment of spirits," whether in the First Week or the Second. The criterion is essentially this: What comes from God causes consolation in the soul; what comes from the evil spirit, from temptation, causes desolation. Consolation is peace, inspiration toward good, intensity of faith, confidence and love toward God. These signs of consolation are not always accompanied by relief felt in the senses. What gives consolation is not necessarily what pleases the person more; peace and inspiration toward the good can at times be accompanied by aridity and interior sacrifice. Desolation, on the other hand, is the state contrary to consolation (confusion, anxiety, sadness, lukewarmness, etc.). Equally, the signs of desolation can at times be accompanied by sensory pleasures; desolation and consolation are experiences rooted in the depth of the soul, not in pure sensibility.

John of the Cross, on this topic, takes a different path, although convergent and complementary. His point of departure is not that of consolation-desolation in the process of spiritual discernment, but rather that of the "nights" of "the aridities and trials of the dark nights of the soul." For Fray John, the night is essentially the presence of the action of God, a process in which the soul must keep itself faithful and at peace, in spite of all. (In this sense the night has affinities with Ignatian consolation and not with desolation) The night is an experience of profound purifications of spirit by aridities and trials, and what the Carmelite saint seeks in his doctrine is to help souls discern if this experience of the night is fulfilling the sanctifying objective that God wants for it, or if the devil is taking advantage of the aridity to make these persons believe that they are evil because they do not "feel" the things of God, and thereby to carry the soul off on the road to discouragement and mediocrity. That is to say, John's goal is to discern if the night is rooted in consolation or moving toward desolation, to use Ignatian language. The criterion of John of the Cross for discerning if one is in the night that comes from God or in the desolation of the evil spirit is that, in the former, one maintains the fundamental choice and faithfulness to God in all aspects of the practice of Christian life; and in the second, conversely, faithfulness progressively declines. In the night there is no sensible consolation, but certainly fidelity; what is important is not what is felt, but what is coming into being (see especially *Ascent Prologue*, 6).

But it can happen as well that at the beginning the evil spirit disguises himself with consolation and by that means carries the soul off to desolation. Ignatius and Fray John both approach these cases with a similar criterion of discernment: The way of discerning true or false consolation is by the fruits that ultimately prevail in the soul, and whether or not they belong to the spirit of God.

Thus Ignatius in the third and fifth rules of the Second Week (nos. 331 and 333) insists: "The good angel and the evil spirit can give consolation to a soul, but for a quite different purpose. The good angel consoles for the progress of the soul that it may advance and rise to what is more perfect. The evil spirit consoles for purposes that are contrary, and that afterward he might draw the soul to his own perverse intentions and wickedness. ...[And so] it may end in what weakens the soul, or disquiets it; or by destroying the peace, tranquility, and quiet that it had before, it may cause disturbance to the soul." And John of the Cross (*II Ascent II*, 6) notes that the communications that appear devout but come from the evil spirit "cause in the spirit either agitation, dryness, and vanity or

presumption. Yet diabolical communications are not as efficacious in doing harm as God's communications are in doing good. For the diabolical communications can only arouse the first movements without being able to move the will any further if it is unwilling to be moved.... The divine communications, however, penetrate the soul, move the will to love, and leave their effect within." Thus the complementarity of the two saints is evident once more in the doctrine of discernment of consolations, desolations, and the nights.

**Consulting Others.** One last basic criterion in which both saints agree: personal discernment often runs the risk of error even in using the traditional criteria because of the deceitful nature of temptations and our lack of interior freedom. Therefore, in the process of discerning matters of evident importance one must consult with competent people and ask their advice. At the same time this helps individuals confirm for themselves the course taken and the decisions made (for Ignatius, confirmation of the choice discerned and made is very important). John of the Cross says: "It should be noted that among the many wiles of the devil to deceive spiritual persons, the most common is deceiving them under the appearance of good. To do the right thing, and be safe in such a matter, you ought to take the proper counsel" (Precautions, 10). Ignatius agrees: "When the enemy of our human nature tempts a just soul with his wiles and seductions, he earnestly desires that they be received secretly and kept secret. But if one manifests them to a confessor, or to some other spiritual person who understands his deceits and malicious designs, the evil one is very much vexed. For he knows that he cannot succeed in his evil undertaking once his evident deceits have been revealed" (*Exercises*, First Week, Rules for Discernment, no. 326).

This last criterion is ecclesial: it means having recourse to the discernment process to people who represent the church for us. This same perspective will come to Ignatius later in writing his "Rules for Thinking with the Church."

## **Conclusion**

In summary for Ignatius and John of the Cross the discernment of temptations characteristic of spiritual people is equivalent to discerning the good from the evil spirit. As a fundamental condition, both insist on interior freedom from disordered attachments of the will ("indifference" for the Jesuit, the "nothing" for the Carmelite). This presupposed, both adopt the basic criterion of consolation-desolation (understood as profound and lasting states of the soul and not merely

transitory and purely sensible) as signs of the good and evil spirit respectively. and in order to confirm the discernment and avoid the danger of subjectivism, both stress the importance of verifying what is discerned with competent spiritual people. Their message remains as important for us today as it was for the church of their own time.

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[Helping Hand](#)