

Initial fear of God, the fear of punishment proper to novices in the spiritual life, is accompanied by newly found contrition (*penthos*), an attitude, unlike fear, that dare not change so long as one is in this world. This attitude propels the disciple of Christ to seek out penance, to make reparation, to weep for the offended God, and to give oneself over to the love of God.¹³³ Growing in love for God balances out fear until such moment when true love finally casts out all fear (see 1 John 4:18).

Beginning with the fourth century the phenomenon of the gift of tears has been appropriated by ascetic language. This is a common feature in Byzantine spirituality and is frequently found in Western spirituality as well. The Greek fathers hold tears in esteem, as proof of authentic conversion and pure love for God. "Blessed are those who mourn" (Matt 5:4) applies to the follower of Christ who, having sought consolation and glory in this world, repents. Thus, rather than a pessimistic presentation of Christian spirituality, this teaching reflects the guaranteed path to beatitude. Tears purify the heart of the penitent as much as they reveal conversion. They are a sign of gratitude for God's favor, for a tear-washed face reveals a purified soul. Tears, in effect, are a grace.

According to the Greek fathers, a fruit of the work of grace in the soul is *apatheia*—the mind's freedom and independence from carnal *pathos*—passion. This implies an interior strength born of asceticism and blossoming into ardent love for God. With this in mind, it should be clear that *apatheia* is by no means an end in itself but rather it opens the door to true knowledge (*gnōsis*) of the love of God. To underline the introductory role of *apatheia*, Diadochus opens his most important work by defining "faith [as] an impassible [*apathēs*] consideration of God."¹³⁴ Such interior self-dominion and quiet permit grace to work fruitfully and also engender better self-knowledge—both necessary for the all-important task of discernment of spirits.

¹³³ See Mark the Hermit's *De Paenitentiae*, 11, PG 65:981A.

¹³⁴ GC Def. 1.

Discernment of Spirits

After the work of grace and its effects we come to the other pole of Diadochus's spirituality.

A considerable portion of the path toward reintegration is covered through sound discernment of spirits. With true discernment the disciple penetrates the mysteries of God even as he uncovers the secrets of the human heart. It requires a spiritual perspicuity that sees past flesh, space, and time. Discernment therefore involves the art of identifying the true causes of interior movements: divine, diabolical, or human. Such movements include consolations, desolations, images, and dreams, and part of the task of their discernment is knowledge of self: of one's tendencies and aspirations, present state of soul, psychological state, and so forth.

For Diadochus, discernment of spirits is where theology and *praxis* meet. It requires learning to refine the "taste" of God's presence and discovering that true theology is not information about God but an experience of him. Therefore, real discernment has to be done in prayer; otherwise the warrior loses the taste for God and his relationship grows cold. Prayer without discernment has its own dangers, as it exposes the warrior to the deceits of the enemy. Learning infallibly to discern the "footprints of the Invisible One"¹³⁵ means that one has reached the heights of the spiritual life as a "theologian."

A true theologian has experienced God in an ineffable way, and such divine encounters become the standard by which to judge; otherwise, "we will not gladly forego present delights if we do not yet fully taste the sweetness of God with all our sense."¹³⁶ The encounter with the living God presents the warrior with a wholly new parameter. It is precisely this otherness of the source of these new experiences that can perplex the neophyte as well as the experienced follower of Christ. Therefore, Diadochus intends to help the reader discover the source of the interior movements

¹³⁵ See GC 1, 69.

¹³⁶ GC 44.

of consolations and desolations, dreams and visions, that make up the spiritual life.

Diadochus calls consolation a "movement"¹³⁷ that consists of divine love that inflames and impels the soul, seeking its reintegration so that "every part of the soul is ineffably united to the sweetness of this divine desire in an attitude of unending simplicity."¹³⁸ Symptoms of divine consolation include:

- Consolations without previous cause, mediation, or "imagination."¹³⁹
- Certainty that the motion comes from the Holy Spirit.¹⁴⁰
- Profound peace to the soul.¹⁴¹
- A fire within the heart and soul.¹⁴²

The enemy, too, can use consolation to deceive the warrior. Diadochus mentions that this often happens at certain times of the day or during certain activities. "Satan begins sweetly to lull during the night's rest, when one is just starting to fall into a light sleep."¹⁴³

Already differences are manifest. As opposed to the deep peace of the Holy Spirit, the evil spirit produces "sweetness," not nearly as deep or long-lasting as God's gift. Other symptoms of diabolical consolation include:

- Interior sweetness is briefly accompanied by inappropriate thoughts.¹⁴⁴
- It is disordered and brings about disorder if followed.¹⁴⁵

¹³⁷ GC 33.

¹³⁸ GC 34.

¹³⁹ See GC 33.

¹⁴⁰ See GC 33.

¹⁴¹ See GC 35.

¹⁴² See GC 33, 34.

¹⁴³ GC 31.

¹⁴⁴ See GC 33.

¹⁴⁵ See GC 32.

- It produces interior agitation.¹⁴⁶
- It seeks to make the warrior stumble on his path toward reintegration, bringing about interior division through vain consolation. In order to accomplish this the evil one will try to hide his presence in an attempt to convince the warrior that God is at work.¹⁴⁷ If he succeeds in this, he can be assured of sowing confusion in the heart and mind of the unwary warrior.

As mentioned before, the memory of God and, in particular, the Jesus Prayer are the weapons of choice for such encounters. This prayer has a threefold effect: it works as a defense against evil spirits, it engenders union with Christ, and it acts as a litmus test in the discernment of spirits.

Perhaps more subtle a subject to discern is that of the genesis of desolation. Diadochus discusses two reasons for desolation when the source is God. In the first case, God's motives are pedagogical or corrective, producing spiritual dryness and darkness in the soul of the warrior, hiding his presence deep in the recesses of the soul.¹⁴⁸ Through such a manœuvre God provokes the devil to attack the warrior with the intention that he experience the enemy's assaults and, in turn, learn to seek divine assistance. "Indeed, corrective desolation does not deprive the soul of divine light in any way whatsoever. As I have already said, frequently grace merely hides its presence within the soul, so that impelled by the devil's bitterness, the soul progresses though seeking God's assistance with all fear and great humility, thus recognizing little by little the evil deeds of the enemy."¹⁴⁹

For the soul advancing along the path of spiritual progress, the greatest enemy is spiritual pride. Pedagogical desolation intends to check the surge of pride and bring the warrior to new levels of

¹⁴⁶ See GC 35.

¹⁴⁷ See GC 33.

¹⁴⁸ See GC 85.

¹⁴⁹ GC 86.

humility. "God's pedagogical desolation brings about in the soul profound sorrow, humiliation, and a degree of despair, so that the glory-seeking and timorous parts be led to humility, as is fitting. Quickly it brings fear of God and tears of confession upon the heart and a deep desire for beautiful silence."¹⁵⁰

God also disposes of desolation as a means to punish the soul that has wandered from the true path. "That desolation which occurs on account of infidelity to God leaves the soul filled with despair mixed with faithlessness, pride, and anger."¹⁵¹ This is the logical consequence of one's own choices. In fact, it would be a contradiction for God to reward the soul with consolation if it had made evil choices or decided to live in mediocrity. God's mercy lets the soul experience the fruit of its choices with a view to its turning back to him.

Both desolations work toward spiritual good in one who knows how to respond in such a spiritual state. Chapter 87 offers the rules of discernment for such cases: "Understanding the experience of both types of desolation we must then go to God with the dispositions proper to each."

[1.] In the first case we ought to offer Him thanksgiving along with contrition as the one disciplining our undisciplined mind in the school of consolation, and for having taught us as a good father the difference between virtue and vice.

[2.] In the second case we should offer Him unceasing confession of our sins, tears without end, and greater solitude, so that by way of added effort we can petition God to look upon our heart as he did before. But one ought to know that when the battle between Satan and the soul takes the form of a confrontation—here I am referring to the purgative desolation—grace, as I said before, hides itself but operates invisibly aiding the soul in order to show its enemies that victory belongs to the soul alone.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ GC 87.

¹⁵¹ GC 87.

¹⁵² GC 87.

Another phenomenon that requires discernment of spirits is that of dreams and visions. Chapters 36–40 are dedicated to this teaching. Diadochus is categorically opposed to visions, not because God is incapable of manifesting himself through such a means but rather because they would contradict God's desire for us to walk in the twilight of faith.¹⁵³ His suspicion of visions leads him to instruct his disciples to reject any such image that appears to them as "patent deception of the enemy."¹⁵⁴

Dreams, on the other hand, are not always diabolical at their source. "Dreams that reveal to the soul the love of God are sure indicators of a healthy soul. . . . [T]hey approach the soul completely reasonably, heaping upon it spiritual delight. Therefore, even after the body has awakened, the soul seeks the joy of the dream with great desire."¹⁵⁵

Quite another thing are those dreams which come from the enemy.

Demonic fantasies, on the other hand, are completely the opposite: they do not keep the same image and they do not manifest themselves in a consistent form for long. This they do not willingly do, for in their deceit they only borrow such forms and cannot resist for long. They begin to scream and make lots of threats, often taking the form of soldiers at times playing on the soul with their shrieks. However, when the mind is purified it recognizes them and even in its dreaming it awakens the body. Other times it delights at having discovered the deceit. Therefore, confuting them over and over again in the same dream, it sparks his fury.¹⁵⁶

These are opposed to the divinely inspired dreams that do not "go from one image to another, nor do they frighten the senses, nor do they sneer or suddenly show a sombre expression."¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ See GC 36.

¹⁵⁴ GC 36.

¹⁵⁵ GC 37.

¹⁵⁶ GC 37.

¹⁵⁷ GC 37.

Further, "dreams are almost always nothing more than vague thoughts or the forms of errant thoughts."¹⁵⁸ In other words, most often there is no supernatural source for the dreams made of one's own jumbled thoughts and recollections.

In spite of his recognition of divinely induced dreams, Diadochus seems suspicious of all of them and thinks it virtuous to remain skeptical, regardless of the experience.¹⁵⁹ Entrusting oneself to dreams proves too great a danger and provides a shaky foundation for decision making. For "even if God's goodness should send down a vision to us and yet we were never to accept it, our much longed for Lord Jesus Christ would not be angry with us on that account, because he knows we come to this on account of diabolical deceptions."¹⁶⁰

Thus far we have seen that for Diadochus discernment is another word for cooperation with grace. By way of discernment, which offers "light of true knowledge," we progress along the path toward divine light. Discernment entails following the footprints of the Invisible One by way of the intellectual sense, which means developing a taste for the things of God, an experience that leaves us loving him with still more conviction and decision. In other words, rather than a mere a source of knowledge, discernment of spirits offers light in order to act.

Our author insists that such light and action are only possible if the disciple is willing to engage in spiritual combat, since that is necessary for spiritual growth and maturity. True discernment amid trials and darkness, generously engaging in spiritual combat, all contribute to the purification of the whole person and the soul's reintegration. Yet, this is a fight in flux. The tactics of the enemy and the action of the Holy Spirit are, to a certain extent, determined by the spiritual state of the individual. The following text makes it clear that Diadochus recognizes rules and modes of discernment proper to each stage of the spiritual life:

¹⁵⁸ GC 38.

¹⁵⁹ GC 38.

¹⁶⁰ GC 38.

One thing is the joy of the beginner; quite another is that of the perfect. One is not free from a wandering mind, while the other enjoys the strength of humility. And between the two are found godly sorrow and painless tears, for truly, *in much wisdom there is much knowledge and he who has increase of knowledge has increase of sorrow* [Sir 1:18].¹⁶¹

The Stages of the Spiritual Life

The brief analysis of the Jesus Prayer began by highlighting the relationship between obedience, memory, the reintegration of the sense, and the healing of the *nous*. Each of these elements is a microcosm of Diadochus's entire spiritual itinerary. What follows is a presentation of Diadochus's description of the stages of the spiritual life as well as the counsels he prescribes to achieve such progress under the guise of discernment of spirits.

A word about the nature of the stages of spiritual progress is in order. Although this teaching has a biblical foundation, and the support of the patristic, scholastic, and Spanish mystical traditions, it often suffers from misrepresentation by those spiritual directors who seem to fear that knowledge of this teaching might engender spiritual pride or simply confuse the faithful, and who therefore shun it. Note that these spiritual directors do not deny the truth of the teaching, but are simply hesitant to teach it. On the other hand, treatment of this subject has been rather hackneyed since the seventeenth century as writers have attempted to reproduce this sublime teaching in their manuals, neatly divided into ascetical and mystical theology. Such books have managed to categorize the stages and their corresponding symptoms in a way foreign to the mystical tradition and have forfeited what is simple and profound. Beyond those deficiencies, the two areas that have most suffered have been the role of the gifts of the

¹⁶¹ GC 60.