

THE DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS
WEEK 1: SPIRITUAL WARFARE AND DISCERNMENT IN THE TRADITION

ONLINE ACCESS

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SPIRITUAL WARFARE AND THE DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS

St. John Chrysostom, in a homily prepared for the first Sunday of Lent, considers the reasons why the Spirit led Jesus into the desert to fast and face temptation by the devil. As in all things that our Lord accomplished, he says, he did this in order to teach us. And in this particular circumstance, that we may not fall into the trap of believing that life in following him would be easy, that we could rest on our laurels as though we are already resting in the comfort of God's arms, but that we have been armed and are called to fight. Our Lord faced and defeated the devil in temptation, and ultimately defeating him totally through the life of his ministry and the passion of the cross.

Spiritual warfare, as the Church Fathers, the mystics and the faithful throughout our tradition is not limited to rosaries, prayers of deliverance and invoking the heavenly hosts to come to our visible aid and protection, but it entails everything that we do which is connected to the spiritual life; in the words of Dom Scupoli, Theresa of Jesus and John of the Cross, it is the work of perfection; it is the recognition that there is a fight over our soul, the One who wants to save and give eternal life, and one who desires to pull us away and separate man from God. In another way, one could imagine our life at birth beginning at the base of a ladder which climbs from earth to heaven. Baptism begins our climb up this ladder. All along the way, as we attempt to ascend, reaching the heights where Christ awaits us, there are evil spirits trying to place obstacles, pull us down through temptation and in every way possible, prevent one from experiencing eternal life. There is an ancient icon depicting this very reality which is the Ladder of Divine Ascent.

The Discernment of Spirits is one of the most significant aspects of the spiritual battle. There is the kind of Discernment of Spirits that is a gift of the Holy Spirit. This is the supernatural grace that some have received that could be considered a second set of eyes, or a spiritual vision such that they see spiritual realities much like an ordinary person sees with the physical eyes. There is also a natural *discernment of spirits* which is the ability to recognize the quality of spirits, whether they are good, evil or our own. This is a natural sense, meaning that it is natural to our humanity and everyone, barring disease or disorder, has the ability to strengthen and grow in this sense. Some have described that as *following the footsteps of the invisible, conforming to the will of God, the use of discretion* or even *following the way of perfection*. In another way, it is the practice of recognizing the presence of God.

DISCERNMENT IN THE TRADITION

DIADOCHUS OF PHOTIKĒ

Discourses on Judgment and Spiritual Discernment (100 Chapters)

The discernment of spirits is where theology meets praxis. One's ability to discern the presence of the Spirit, and thus recognize what comes from evil spirits or one's own passions, is directly related to how far one has progressed in perfection. At the end, one can infallibly discern the Spirit by the natural use of one's interior senses of the mind.

JOHN CASSIAN

The Conferences: Second Conference of Abbot Moses

The discernment of spirits is just as valuable and necessary as knowledge, understanding and the other gifts of the holy spirit. For through proper discretion, one can avoid the many pitfalls that await us day-to-day. Even great holy men have lost all that they had gained in spiritual rewards because they failed to use proper discretion.

ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA

Discernment is concerned with the movements of the soul and their correct management. In this, he addresses the two parts, which others have also described as discerning and choosing, that having discerned properly, there remains the task of choosing the path to follow. The discernment is dependent on three aspects:

- Self-knowledge
- Moral character
- Participation in the Mind of Christ

ALPHONSUS LIGUORI

Uniformity with God's Will

"The greatest glory we can give God is to do his will in everything." As this is the greatest virtue, an essential aspect of conformity is to know accurately what one is hoping to be conformed to. This hope is what discernment of spirits provides, that one can recognize, in any moment, whether God desires one to "pile sand on the seashore or to pull weeds in the garden" His Spirit is always at work in making His Will known.

ST. TERESA OF JESUS

from The Story of My Life

How can one expect to know what God tastes like, unless one spends time with Him.

DOM LORENZO SCUPOLI

The Spiritual Combat

To attain Christian perfection, we have been given four weapons "without which it is impossible to gain victory in this spiritual combat":

- Distrust of self
- Confidence in God
- Proper use of faculties
- Daily prayer