

**THE DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS**  
**WEEK 2: BASIC PRINCIPLES OF DISCERNMENT**

**FOUNDATIONS OF DISCERNMENT**

The practice of the Discernment of Spirits is integrally connected with the holy life and one's progression toward a life of perfection. This means that as one hopes to recognize the presence of the Spirit, one must build from a foundation built on that same Spirit, giving the soul the stability, peace and recourse needed for clarity of vision. Toward this end, Dn Burke draws from St. Ignatius 4 "foundational truths" essential to the spiritual life:

Authentic "yes" in your heart  
The Eucharist and Regular Confession  
Daily Prayer  
Ascesis: exercising of self-giving

**KEY ELEMENTS OF DISCERNMENT**

Authentic discernment, that is discernment that infallibly seeks the presence of the Spirit, requires four key elements. If one of these elements is not given due attention, then one runs the risk of being deceived and mis-identifying the voices and spirits at work. However, when all four are put to use, as taught by Diadochus, one can rest in full confidence and infallibly discern the Spirit without fear or doubt.

Self-Knowledge  
Knowledge of God  
Virtue  
Prayer

**SELF-KNOWLEDGE**

Many of doctors of the Church testify to the fundamental reality that we are born into this world without any self-knowledge. Hilary of Poitiers, in particular paints a vivid and clear understanding of the reasons and consequences of this, recognizing that the beginning of self-knowledge is the awareness of our separation from God and the humble state in which we find ourselves, as compared to our Perfect Creator and in need of His Love and Goodness. This helps us to see that one of the most important aspects of self-knowledge is found through our relationship with others. This also should not be a surprise as, being created in the image of God, who is Trinity, defined as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the substance of who we are and our identity, would equally be found in relationship.

*SELF-KNOWLEDGE IN RELATIONSHIP*

Every relationship that we have carries certain responsibilities, obligations and rights of authority:

Son/Daughter	Brother/Sister	Mother/Father
Husband/Wife	Baptized	Teacher
Doctor	Friend	Employee
Aunt/Uncle	Priest	

We should also note that each relationship is reflexive, that is, one cannot be a father, without there also being a son or daughter; a teacher necessitates a student.

#### *INTERIOR MOVEMENTS*

With an increase in self-knowledge comes an increase in awareness of one's interior movements, the interior life being the life of the spirit. Most often times, we likely think of these as emotions. While emotions are themselves a kind of interior movement, they are merely one kind and are not synonymous. This is also where our modern culture has largely canonized our emotions, while the Fathers of the Church, in particular Diadochus, warn that emotions cloud our spiritual vision.

Consolations and Desolations  
Spiritual and Physical  
Recollection of the Memory of God

#### *INTELLECT AND THOUGHTS*

It should be no surprise that a core aspect of self-knowledge is growing in awareness of our own thoughts and how our mind works. This includes:

Memory  
Imagination  
Sense and the Present (physical and spiritual senses)

#### *TENDENCIES AND DISPOSITIONS*

We all have certain tendencies and dispositions. One of the greatest tragedies of modern culture is that it has often canonized our tendencies and dispositions as being always good: "This is just how I am"; "Proud to be me"; "I'm on the right track, baby, I was born this way". However, knowing our tendencies helps us to recognize whether an interior movement may be of God, or of ourself. A few examples of things that can affect our vision:

A naturally fiery temper (I'm Irish)  
I doubt other's affection  
Snobbish and look down on poor people  
Inattentive to details or planning ahead  
Think negative/positive of peoples intentions

#### *PERSONAL TRAITS*

Knowing our personal traits includes things like our talents and weaknesses, interests, and our strongest passions. Often times we attempt to discern based on what we want to be good at doing, or those talents which others regard highly, rather than according to our actual talents. Knowing our strongest passions can help us be aware of things we may need to resist because this is where our greatest temptations are going to lie, and where the evil one is going to try to lead us away from the spirit.

## **KNOWLEDGE OF GOD**

If one is to follow God in the Spirit, then it should be obvious that one must come to know the one whom we hope to follow. Again, as St. Theresa of Jesus has said: How can one hope to recognize God's taste, if one hasn't spent time with Him. Any knowledge of God's ways requires knowledge of God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church also tells us: "Man's faculties make him capable of coming to a knowledge of the existence of a personal God. But for man to be able to enter into a real intimacy with him, God willed both to reveal himself to man and to give him the grace of being able to welcome this revelation in faith." (no. 35)

We can consider various aspects of knowledge of God:

- Knowing His commandments
- Through His activity in the World
- Coming to know His presence (recognizing the taste of God)
- Knowing His story revealed through Sacred Scripture and lives of the Saints
- Theological knowledge

## **PRAYER**

In addition to imparting true knowledge of God on the soul, prayer has the additional affect of quieting the soul so that one can hear the ever quieter voice of the Spirit. While all forms of prayer will benefit the soul in recognizing the Spirit, there are certain forms that are more directly beneficial with regard to discernment, the most beneficial coming through the celebration of the Sacraments. Some other essential forms are:

- Contemplative prayer
- Recollection of the Holy Name
- The Our Father
- Prayers of a protective character (ie. Prayer to St. Michael, Shield of St. Patrick)
- Asking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit
- Seek Assistance from Archangels and particular Saints (ie. St. Raphael, St. Joseph)

## **VIRTUE**

If self-knowledge is the interior way by which one recognizes one's relationship to God, then the virtues are the exterior way in which one recognizes one's relationship with God. Living in and practicing the virtues is the work of walking in our Lord's footsteps. They are, in fact, virtues for this very reason, whereas the vices are those things which inherently lead one away from God.

See attachment for detailed information.