

Under the guidance of the Spirit (2/3)

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Spirit and prayer

The Brother must therefore ask Jesus Christ to ensure that all the teaching he gives «is energized by his Spirit and draws all its power from him. Just as he is the one who gives light to everyone coming into the world, he gives light also to the spirit of your students and leads them to love and practise the good that you teach them» (MR 195,3). He should be concerned not only about the teaching he gives, but also about the effect it produces: «This must be your goal when you teach your disciples, that they live a Christian life and that your words become spirit and life for them». They cannot have this effect unless they are «produced by the Spirit of God living in you». If they possess this Spirit «they will live that true life which is so valuable because it leads surely to eternal life» (MR 196,3). And when the Brothers encounter difficulties in their ministry, the Founder says to them: «Earnestly ask Jesus Christ to make his Spirit come alive in you, since he has chosen you to do his work» (MR 196,1).

Conscious of the role of the Spirit in the life of the Brothers, the Founder indicates the dispositions they should have in order to receive him. Basing himself on the words of St John: «the Spirit of truth whom the world can never receive since it neither sees him nor knows him» (Jn 14,17), he says that the first condition necessary for receiving the Holy Spirit «is that we should love God and give ourselves entirely to him. For this purpose we must be detached from all earthly things, and have no affection but for God alone. Whosoever is attached to this world and its goods, cannot be filled with the Holy Spirit, for he communicates himself only to such as he finds empty of whatever is not God». For he says that truth is opposed not only to intellectual error but to all forms of falsehood and duplicity. And so the Founder adds: «Despoil yourself, therefore, of all such, and attach yourself to God alone, if you desire to receive the Holy Spirit» (MD 42,1).

Basing himself on John 14,15-16, «If you love me you will keep my commandments. I shall ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you for ever», the Founder says that the second condition for receiving the Spirit is «that we should keep the commandments of God, and study to do his will in all things». He insists: «According to Our Lord's words, the truth-giving Spirit will be continually at our side and in us. But as he can take complacency only in souls which strive always to do what God desires, and to conform to his his holy will, we must not expect to receive this Holy Spirit unless we are resolved to accomplish the divine good pleasure in all things» (MD 42,2). The Founder

continues: «Doubtless, you had no other reason for leaving the world than to give yourself entirely to God and to possess abundantly his Holy spirit. You must not count on enjoying this advantage, however, unless you punctually carry out all that you know to be the will of God» (MD 42,2).

The last condition for receiving the Spirit is prayer: «Nothing better disposes the soul for the coming of the Holy Spirit than prayer» (MD 42,3), that is why Jesus himself asks the Father to send the Spirit (cf. Jn 14,15). The Founder exhorts the Brothers: «Apply yourself with attention and fervour to mental prayer, in order to be filled with the grace of God» (MD 42,3). That is also why he wanted all exercises to begin with an invocation to the Holy Spirit: «Often repeat with the Church these words of the Psalms: «Send forth thy Spirit and there is fresh creation: You renew the face of the earth» (MD 42,3).

And so, the Spirit is the first and primary means given to the Brothers to enable them to conform to Christ and to become children of God. The Spirit will achieve this by his interior action, his gifts and inspirations, etc. Hence it is necessary to be attentive to the action of the Spirit and to correspond with it with docility and promptness (cf. MF 96,1). This docility will be expressed by means of spiritual discernment and the Personal Programme, which are means of making us open to the Spirit and responding to him in a concrete fashion.

Spiritual discernment

Spiritual discernment is one of the primary roles of the Spirit. We need, however, to define what it is. A first step is to distinguish between spiritual discernment and discernment of spirits (cf. M. Ruiz Jurado, *El discernimiento espiritual*, Teologia, Historia, Practica - BAC 544).

The term most used in the New Testament is «dokimazo», meaning to weigh up or to examine something, to check its validity in order to be able to accept it or refuse it; to appreciate it at its just value, to give it the esteem it deserves. The other term sometimes used is «diakrino» (dia indicates separation, krino, judgment). It indicates judgment which separates things as a way of distinguishing between them. The verb «to discern» comes from diakrino through the Latin «dis-cernere», even though *cernere* is not the exact equivalent of *krino*, since it means to sift, separate, divide. The idea of separation is emphasised by the prefix «dis».

In brief, it means to distinguish in order to discover the true nature or intentions of someone or something; to separate what is mixed or tends to confuse, in order to make a correct assessment or to take a decision that is right. This is the kind of process that the word of God advises us to follow, not on the basis of purely human criteria, but on the judgment and good pleasure of God. It is a process which takes place on the level of the «spirit» and not on that of the «flesh», as we read in St Paul: «Now instead of the spirit of the world, we have received the Spirit that comes from God, to teach us to understand the gifts that he has given us» (1 Co 2,12; cf. 2,13-15; 3,1-3). It is important therefore to determine on what level distinctions are made.

Separation can take place on the physical and material level by using a sieve; on an organic or physiological level by means of the various organs which eliminate toxins; and on a higher level by means of conscious perception, whether instinctive or intellectual. All this is simply human and belongs to the level of the «flesh», according to the categories

established by St Paul. This reflects the different ways of envisaging things mentioned by the Founder in the Collection. To pass on to the level of the «spirit» we have to allow ourselves to be raised by the free gift of God, his grace, with its supernatural gifts and infused virtues which enable us to see things in the light of the revealed plan of God. This is the level of faith. Unless discernment is exercised on the level of faith, with docility to the Holy Spirit, who seeks to guide us by his inspirations and impulses, and who wishes to help us by his gifts and charisms, it cannot be considered to be spiritual discernment because it does not take place on this level. This distinction is important, because it seems to be taken for granted that, when we speak of discernment, what we are talking about is always spiritual discernment. It is not always clear that this is so, given the characteristics of spiritual discernment we have mentioned above.

When we speak of spiritual discernment, we need to understand the word «spiritual» as an adjective which qualifies the level on which discernment takes place. This is the level indicated by St Paul (cf. 1 Co 2); what we receive from the Spirit to distinguish the gifts which we have received from God (1 Co 2,12). Just as no one knows the true nature of man except man, so no one knows the true nature of God except the Spirit of God. With his human faculties (1 Co 2,14), man cannot understand the true nature of the Spirit of God, he cannot understand things which to him seem to be pure madness (id). Spiritual man, on the other hand, who has received the Spirit of God and allows himself to be guided by him can judge the value of everything (1 Co 2,15). In this way, he acquires the mentality of Christ (nous) to which we must conform, and on which, and not on the mentality of the world, we must build our lives: «Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you, but let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind. This is the only way to discover the will of God and know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do» (Rm 12,2. This passage is used as an epistle in I 1,7,17). It is on this condition that we will be able to discern the will of God, the things of God, what corresponds to the divine plan in Christ, his plan for each one of us.

The discernment of spirits is something else. In this expression, «of spirits» is in the genitive case. It indicates the object which is judged, that is, the activities of the mind and heart of a person - his thoughts, emotions, tendencies, inclinations, the internal forces that drive him. Sometimes we consider judgment to be a straightforward activity of the human mind. On this level, the discernment of spirits is not

possible. Those who do not enter into a life-giving relationship with Christ through grace, in order to exercise discernment in the light of faith and of his Spirit, do not discern spiritually, even though they can spend time distinguishing on a psychological level the forces which drive them. Only the spiritual person is capable of discerning spiritually, of exercising the discernment the word of God invites us to undertake as children of God, who must reveal themselves as such by their docility to the Spirit of God: «Everyone moved by the Spirit is a son of God» (Rm 8,14). Discernment involves at times judging states of mind, inspirations, impulses. At other times, it is a question of distinguishing between good and bad motives for a person's actions, or the signs that God sends us through the events of our daily lives, or something else. For discernment of spirits, like any other discernment, to be spiritual, it must be exercised on the level of the spirit (we teach spiritual things spiritually, 1 Co 2,14). If it is not, it has no right to be called spiritual discernment.

We must not confuse the two things: spiritual discernment is one that takes place on the level of the spirit, that is, with faith and the gifts of the Spirit; the discernment of spirits is used to distinguish the interior impulses or inspirations of a person, to discover their origin, and the conduct that should be adopted as a consequence in order to please God. Spiritual discernment depends on docility to the Spirit. Its effectiveness is in direct proportion to a person's ability and habitual willingness to grasp and follow his lights and inspirations. However, one form of discernment serves to complement the other.

This was St Paul's prayer for the Philippians: «My prayer is that your love for each other may increase more and more and never stop improving your knowledge and deepening your perception so that you can always recognise what is best. This will help you to become pure and blameless, and prepare you for the Day of Christ when you will reach the perfect goodness which Jesus Christ produces in us for the glory and praise of God» (Ph 1,9-11). And so the perfection of the Christian «will be characterised by docility to the divine will; it will be submissive and obedient to a divine will which he himself will seek and discern, without knowing beforehand what demands it will make on him» (S. Lyonnet, *La vocation à la perfection selon St Paul, in La Vie selon l'Esprit, condition du Chrétien - Unam sanctam* 55).

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