

# DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS

## *Finding God in our Experience*

If we believe that God is acting in the world through the Holy Spirit, it makes sense to try to follow the movements of that Spirit in our lives. This does not only happen in peak moments of prayer or liturgy, but throughout our experience. Discernment of spirits is the reflective exercise of trying to sift through our feelings and thoughts, to see which could indicate the movements of God as he draws us to life, and which could indicate a countermovement, getting in the way of our relationship with God.

### Guidelines for Discernment – Based on St Ignatius

Ignatius distinguishes between people who are trying to live a life of love, in relationship with God and those people who, as he says, are going from bad to worse, meaning their lives are totally self-focused with no regard for others or God. He indicates that the Holy Spirit acts differently in each case. These guidelines are for those who are trying to be open to the Spirit (whether or not they always manage it).

For these people of goodwill, the moods, thoughts and feelings that come from our lives being in tune with the Holy Spirit tend to be things like love, gentle inspiration, peace, courage, hope, openness, strength or repentance. (See fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22.) These movements help the person to engage in life, to 'choose life', they are welcomed and appreciated.



*The journey of faith leads to light and joy, but we must be careful not to fall into the darkness through carelessness or pride. (T-06728A-CW-V2)*

On the other hand the moods, thoughts and feelings that indicate a countermovement, going in a direction away from the prompting of the Holy Spirit tend to be things like nameless fear, anxiety, inappropriate sadness, self-centredness, seeing endless snags ahead, lack of hope. These feelings tend to paralyse, to prevent a person acting in a way they might wish, so as far as possible they are identified but not allowed to take centre stage, however fascinating.

When we are under the influence of a countermovement we call it 'spiritual desolation', when the Spirit is more clearly present we call it 'spiritual consolation'. The thoughts and feelings we are talking about here are not just superficial, fleeting sensations, but deeper streams within our heart and mind.



*Our daily duties are like a golden string that shows us God's will and leads us to Heaven. (T-01445-0L)*

## Spiritual Desolation

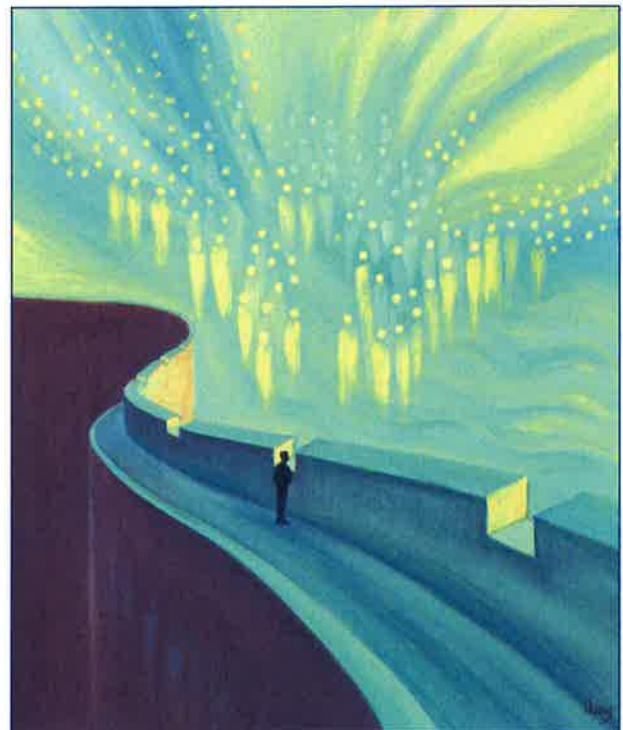
**Why does it happen?** Perhaps we are not living in a way we would like, not giving God any time, so busy rushing there is no time to pause, pray, be quiet. Perhaps it is time to make changes, to move on and we won't see it. Perhaps there is no obvious reason, BUT we can use the experience to try to be faithful, trusting God even though we don't feel like it.

- ◆ In desolation, try not to change major plans that were made at a time of consolation.
- ◆ Go against the desolation if possible, God is still there even if it does not feel like it.
- ◆ It usually helps if we can share our thoughts and feelings with someone we can trust and has some experience of the ways of God and faith.
- ◆ Desolation usually goes for our weakest points, this can help us to identify them.
- ◆ Be patient, hang on, consolation will return.

*(NB Spiritual desolation is not the same as depression, care must be taken to distinguish the two.)*

## Spiritual Consolation

- ◆ Be thankful! Recognise the real gifts in your life and give thanks to God for them.
- ◆ 'Store it up', remember this experience and what it tells you about God, so that you can draw on the memories in difficult times. (Desolation will return!)
- ◆ Don't become too proud, or certain that you have life sorted out, remember how helpless you can feel when in desolation.
- ◆ Sometimes we have an experience of God that comes out of the blue, there seems to be no reason for it, but we know it is God. When this happens, it is good to still be aware of our actions, noting what was in the experience itself and what comes afterwards which may or may not be from God.



*Prayer is like a glimpse of eternity, seen from the battlements of our earthly dwelling, as we pause and turn to God. The Saints are very close to us, in their glory. (T-00076-0L)*