

Session 7- Handout 5

WAYS TO DISCERN

1. Application of Spiritual Doctrine

Christians (and other religious traditions) have a well-developed spirituality and doctrine of discernment. Scripture is one primary source in helping us understand what is true and false spiritual growth. Three components of spiritual development involve relationships with self (recognizing our brokenness), God (attitude of trust) and others (dialogue).

2. Recognizing Feelings

Inner feelings or movements are not direct indicators of God's will but as experiences to be reckoned with at the beginning of a journey. The feelings are those of attraction to God or repulsion to God. It is important to recognize the movements so as to make good use of the good states and avoid injury from the bad ones. They are meant to put us on guard but do not give us a positive direction to take.

3. Interpreting Feelings

God speaks to us personally in the ordinary course of life and we can hear God through our affective experiences. God does not use words or sound waves but the "effect God produces in our souls". It can be called a spiritual illumination which Thomas Aquinas defined as "a certain inner intelligible light which elevate the mind so that it can perceive things that understanding cannot perceive through its natural light." The illumination is the interpretation of God's word. Our feelings bear the message from God which helps us make choices. (Larkin)

OBSTACLES IN DISCERNMENT (Lonsdale)

1. Physical factors

Since all dimensions of human existence are interconnected, physical and psychological factors can be obstacles to spiritual growth. Chronic states of tiredness or ill-health may hinder openness to the spirit of God and to others. Time can be a hindrance in moments of crisis when there is little time to make thoughtful and prayerful choices. It can also be an obstacle for people who find it hard to make decisions and who produce endless vacillations.

2. Emotional and Psychological Factors

Depression and anxiety may have harmful results in a process of discernment and the amount of harm done may depend on the severity of the depression. Serious mental illness and personality disorders distort perceptions and judgment of victims and are definite obstacles.

3. Attachments and Addictions

Addicted to alcohol, chocolate ice cream, or shopping at the mall? Addictions that impair decision making to the extent that they control behavior and limit freedom inhibit discernment. Serious addictions require professional treatment but more common attachments and compulsions can also influence perceptions and behavior and have a harmful effect on our attempts to make choices.

4. Rigidity in Attitudes

Discernment requires a degree of freedom, an ability to arrive at the truth by listening to others in genuine dialogue and openness to change. Hanging on to rigid rules we learned as children and refusing to grow with new ideas and methods of doing things can be serious stumbling blocks in spiritual growth.

5. Lack of Imagination

Imagination is a creative quality of mind and heart that is essential to every field of human endeavor, not just to art, poetry, and prophecy. It is essential in discernment because of our ability to enter with sympathy and understanding into the minds and circumstances of others and the capacity to create alternatives to the present and past. God is endlessly imaginative and we must enter creatively into God's vision for the world in order to make it a reality. Imagination is a capacity for arriving at the truth. Without it, we are trapped at seeing things in only one way.

6. Fragmentation

Western religious culture has stifled expressions of feeling. Control of feelings is fostered as a civil way of living, but repression of feelings has banned us from many normal expressions which have been labeled as negative (anger, aggression, resentment, envy, greed, etc.) This repression has led to the belief that some feelings are morally wrong. Lack of the awareness of all our feelings is a hindrance in discernment.

7. Images of Self

A negative image of self means we are unable to accept ourselves as we really are. If all we see are our negative qualities, then we see ourselves with little value in comparison with others. If we reject our body, we may focus on it and constantly envy the bodies of others. Distortion of ourselves is destructive.

8. Fear

This is the most powerful psychological obstacle. It is not the roots but the consequences that inhibit us...fear of God, of people, of the past and the future, of change, of the new and old, of failure and success, etc. Fear makes us rigid in our opinions and distorts our behavior. It also hinders discernment which requires some peaceful openness in the decision-making process. It makes us want to control and manipulate a process so we get a favorable result. Fear also generates guilt which keeps us from responding to God to freedom and love.

9. Social and Cultural Factors

We are often blinded by circumstances around us. Wealthy people in the suburbs often are unconscious of the serious plight of the homeless and hungry in city slums. We continue in ways of living that are harmful to the earth or contribute to the enslavement of people who make our clothes in Third World countries. Working for a large company which pollutes or cheats or makes weapons of war influences the way we make our choices.

10. Theological Factors

Good discernment presupposes God loves us without condition and wants us to enjoy our freedom. This image of God helps us trust in God's unfailing love wherein we make our choices. If we image God as a judge, stern father or punishing creator, then we act out of fear and guilt, rather than love and trust. These impede the necessary trust we must have in God.

A view of church which gives too much weight to church authority can paralyze our discernment process. Church authority has a rightful place but it also has limits. If I am a slave to the church or its laws, then I give up my own freedom and fail to assume responsibility for my own self. A truly catholic means more than following the laws of the Catholic Church; it involves openness to all of the Christian tradition. An exclusive attitude is limiting.

11. Spiritual Factors

Discernment prayer allows space for listening, for receiving as well as giving. If this time for listening is missing or it is filled with recited prayers, then discernment will be difficult. Prayer must get out of the head and into the feelings; it must have room for listening and silence.