

DISCERNING OUR CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE



*(An Introduction
to the Meaning
of Discernment)*

by John Reilly, S.J.

Nothing so masks the face of God as religion. A sentence like this may provoke believers in God, but it can be a good starting-point to begin our reflections on discernment, I feel, for it challenges both believers in God and non-believers alike. Discernment calls us all to reflect, to look again at ourselves, to look more attentively at the ways we try to experience God, and more broadly at the ways we experience life itself. It can lead us, whoever we may be, to a new level of wisdom, that is, knowledge which is real and practical in our lives.

Discernment calls for an openness in a believer to look again with honesty at the truth of one's own religious understanding of God. Is the face of the God I worship a true face, or is it merely the projection of my own imagination? A mask which reflects back to me my own human longings or personal fears? On the other hand, discernment can also challenge the non-believer, the one who may feel freed from any constricting belief in God for a more real freedom, to examine once

again the possibility of God showing his face in our world. Does a mystery exist at the source of all human living which is beyond our human understanding and yet which manifests in different ways a personal face in our material world?

Even if we may have never deliberately posed such questions to ourselves, the experience of our lives, our habitual attitudes towards our fellowmen, or our interior feelings and reactions to events around us already contain our unconscious answers. The way we live our lives reveals to ourselves, and to others who know us, our belief or non-belief in God, and, if we do believe, the level of our belief, or the face of the God in whom we believe. If God is real, he is for all. If God can be for all, he must in some manner be found within the real experiences of men and women of all races, at all times, and in any circumstances where human beings may live their lives. If God is real, he must always be aware of us and finding us, even when we have not yet found him, or found him only very imperfectly. Finding God in our human experience, becoming aware in our lives of the one whom we call God, is what we mean by discernment.

Discerning Our Experience

Discernment is not limited to finding God within our experience. Discernment is a term which can be used more widely, as widely as human experience can stretch, to signify that natural human inclination to know what is really going on in our lives, and to choose out of the many possible things in our lives what is best for us. Discernment involves our whole person. It is the struggle not only to become aware of what is true for us, but also to choose what is good for us. Furthermore, a right discernment will be recognized by the beauty and harmony it brings into our lives. A wrong discernment, on the contrary, brings ugliness and disharmony which sadden and repel us. Our discernment may be wrong either because our knowledge is untrue or because our choices are not for our good, or perhaps even because both our knowing and our choosing are faulty. The wrongness of our discernment will eventually come to be felt in the diminishment it brings into our lives, in the ugliness and disharmony we experience within ourselves and towards others. We get out of step with the real world around us and within us.

Discernment, then, is a process we all unconsciously use in the ordinary affairs of our daily lives and it involves three main activities: (1) Knowing or raising the level of our awareness of what is going on around us and within us, (2) Choosing or deciding among two or more possible choices what would be best for us, (3) Confirming or



testing the rightness of our knowledge and our decision by the overall impact it has on the harmony and beauty of our lives. These three activities do not have to follow one another in a neat logical order, as I have tried to explain the process here. Rather, they go along together as three indispensable aspects of discernment, even though one of these aspects may occupy the focus of our attention more than the others at different moments in our discerning.

A person with a gift for discernment in the ordinary affairs of life, in the complexities of human relationships, or in the more secret stirrings and movements of each one's interior consciousness, known only to oneself, is someone we could variously describe as a person of sound judgment, a realist, a practical person, or simply a wise person. Such persons are universally valued by people of all races and cultures who instinctively search for what is true, what is good for them, and what develops a deeper experience of harmony in the total context of their lives. It is such a discernment or wisdom within ourselves or in a companion which enables us to recognize untruth and evil and the consequent disharmony they bring into our lives. So we always look for discerning or wise persons to lead us in politics and business undertakings.

Discernment in our Religion

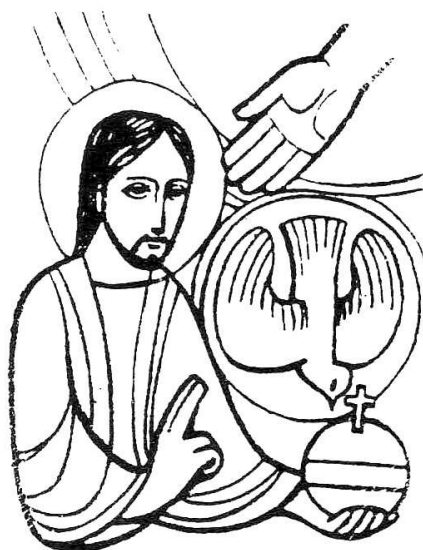
With religion it is the same also. We have need for wise and discerning persons to help us discover God within our experiences, to make choices in accord with the movement of his mystery within our world, and to test our knowing and choosing within the experience or not of a developing harmony in our lives as a whole. We have need, if we are already believers in God, to develop the art of discernment for ourselves, if our religion, our relationship with God, is to be realistic and linked with the practical experiences of our life. A religion which is not realistic and not practical diminishes a human being. Religion which stops at pious imaginings or remains a prison of dogmas, rituals and laws can never reveal the real God. Piety and the joyful outpouring of a heart in love with God is a beautiful and precious thing. The external elements of dogma, ritual and law are practical necessities for any religion which is to have a visible and

institutional presence in the real world. But if there is no more in our religious experience than moments of piety and devotion or no more than the lifeless rigidity of an institutional bureaucracy, then our religion would be reduced to just another way of experiencing a "high" or just another way of allowing oneself to be oppressed by the powerful, and those the most powerful of all, the ones who claim to hold the power of God.

If God is real, and if our relation to him, our religion, is real, then the basis of this realism must be the demanding world of our real experience. Such real experience of God requires continuing discernment, for even if God is real, as all believers hold, our experience of God may not be real. We may know him falsely; we may choose what separates us from him. Non-believers too, if they claim to be realistic and wise, need also to keep in touch with their day-to-day experiences by discernment. Without an honest and continuing scanning of one's experience for the possibility of a mystery, whom believers call God, manifesting his face to them in their awareness and challenging their freedom by his goodness for them, a non-believer could hardly claim to be realistic or wise in one's non-belief. Discernment of God within our human experience, then, is something we all need, believer and non-believer alike.

Discernment for Christians

For Christians, God is the one who has manifested himself and continues to manifest himself in the world through his Word made human and his Spirit offered to all interiorly, by which they might recognize and welcome the human experience manifesting his Word. Seeing or hearing or sensing in some manner God's Word made human around us, while responding interiorly to the movements of God's Spirit within our own human hearts is what discernment of God becomes for a Christian. The God who is always beyond us in every way chose to become the God who is his Word beside us in human persons and events around us and the God who by his Spirit lives within us in the stirrings we feel in our human hearts.



God's Word was once made human in the man Jesus of Nazareth who lived nearly two thousand years ago. He suffered the indescribable shame and pain of death by crucifixion before he had reached the age of forty. Immediately after his death, according to the unanimous belief of all Christians from the beginnings in Jerusalem, he was mysteriously restored to life by God. He became the first of us to break through to a new way of being human, a uniquely new way. He was, in traditional Christian language, raised by God from the dead. He was given by God a new way of being present in a bodily manner in our material world.

One of the chief ways in which this new bodily presence of God's Word in our world is revealed to us today is through other human beings around us. God's Word can reach us more widely today than it did when it was made human in Jesus of Nazareth in the human contacts and experiences others bring to our lives. The Word is able to do this through the action of the Spirit acting in others around us. God's Spirit enables each of us to recognize his Word in others for what it really is. The Spirit empowers us to welcome the Word of God and to act upon it by the hidden movement of this same Spirit of God, or Holy Spirit, in the human hearts of each of us. The Spirit is always calling us to belief in the God who continues to speak his Word today, initiating belief in God, sustaining it, developing it, and healing it of lapses into unbelief.

The first century Christians who wrote the New Testament part of the Bible knew of the continuing need of all Christians to discern the Word of God. This Word was always for them a living word or communication from God:

A living thing is the Word of God,
full of energy and sharper than the sharpest of swords.
It penetrates right to the core of the personality,
to the innermost places of the heart.
It discerns our innermost feelings and thoughts.

No creature is hidden from God,
all things are naked and laid open to his eyes.
Reckoning with him is our responsibility. (cf. Heb
4:12-13)

If what God did in Christ was only the revelation of his continuing Word in the world, challenging us and evaluating us, then who could find joy in such a penetrating and ruthlessly honest scrutiny? Only the great saints perhaps. But even they would fail to meet the standards

God's Word set for us and to reach the distant horizons revealed to the human family. What gives us a sure hope is that through his Word in the world God has sent and will always continue to send also his Spirit. The Spirit interiorly empowers human hearts to see things as God sees them and to choose our way in an increasing conformity with God's way of choosing, that is, in freedom. Where the Spirit of the Lord (=Word) is, there is freedom (2 Cor 3:17). By the interior gift of the Spirit of God in and through his Word, we find ourselves growing in a freedom not only to know but also to choose and to do.

We experience within us a growing capacity to choose in freedom with all the risk and responsibility that entails. We feel the confirmation of the truth and goodness of our discerned choices in the joyful and creative harmony that envelopes us. Our tentative and imperfect adventures into freedom find their true home and mysterious root in the hidden presence of the divine freedom at work all around us since creation began. We feel the freedom of God himself within us through the gift of his Spirit, inseparable from his Word.

Discernment as Christian Prayer

Discernment, therefore, becomes the continuing and supreme task of the Christian with a far greater urgency than it does for others. Christians have come to know what the God of us all has done, and so is doing, and will always continue to do, through his Word until the end, or rather climax of the world with which we are so familiar and which has always appeared to us so solid and so enduring (cf. Matt 28:20). This is the Word revealed formerly in Jesus Christ who was crucified, but now revealed in the same Christ who today is raised.



Rightly understood, discernment comes naturally to us all as we go about the daily tasks of our lives and as we live out the pattern of our relationships with others who share the world with us. For those of us, however, who have come to realize the profound significance for the whole human race of the life, death and rising of Jesus Christ, discernment takes on a very special quality, comes even more naturally to Christians, and presses upon them with a greater urgency.

This Jew, Jesus of the village of Nazareth in Galilee, two thousand years ago, in what today is the northern part of modern Israel, lived unmarried and left no children of his own. After he had died penniless and in disgrace as a criminal executed on a cross, according to the most basic and the most distinctive element in Christian belief, this same Jesus was raised by the mysterious action of the unseen God of all into a new life, called by Christians the Resurrection.

By the Resurrection, Jesus confessed by Christians of all times and of all races as the Christ, that is, the one specially sent from God to speak authentically in the name of God, has been inserted more deeply than ever, though invisibly, into our material world of time and space. It is by the Resurrection also that we are empowered as believers to perceive or discern this Christ-Word through the gift of the Spirit of God. Through the Spirit poured into our hearts through the Risen Christ, we begin to see life more clearly, choose our way through life more freely, and to feel more easily as a result the harmony God wants all to share. This is what discernment of our life experience is all about for those who bear the name of Christ. Let us seek to know more about discernment and the ways we can learn to practise it fruitfully in our lives as a distinctive form of Christian prayer.

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