

# Devotional Exercise

## Prayer of Discernment

### INTRODUCTION

#### THE PRAYER OF DISCERNMENT

*1 Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. 2 This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 3 but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. 4 You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. 5 They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. 6 We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.*

— 1 John 4:1-6 (NIV)

#### JOHN TEACHES US...

...that followers of Christ need to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God”; yet it is challenging for many Christians to have this kind of necessary discernment. We are constantly facing decisions of various sorts throughout the day and we are in desperate need of this kind of discerning wisdom to guide us. John’s exhortation is grounded in the reality that as Christians we have the Spirit of God who is able to lead us to this kind of discernment; however, we are often oblivious to this grace which we have received. How can we grow in this kind of spiritual discernment?

One model was developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Jesuit Order. He began to learn about discerning different spirits while recovering from serious battle injuries:

“He did not consider nor did he stop to examine this difference until one day his eyes were partially opened and he began to wonder at this difference and to reflect upon it. From experience he knew that some thoughts left him sad while others made him happy, and little by little he came to perceive the different spirits that were moving him; one coming from the devil, the other coming from God” — *Loyola, Autobiography, no. 8*

From this he developed a discipline of looking back on his day to discern the influence of various spirits in his life. The Scriptures teach that we live in a world where sin, the flesh and the devil are constantly leading us into deception, confusion and darkness, but we often are oblivious to the impact of these various spiritual forces upon us. In our desire to live obediently and walk closely with God, we do need to discern the influence of spiritual realities upon our lives and the lives of others so that we might pray and live more vigilantly. This area of spiritual discernment is critical for our interior growth and our ability to wisely counsel ourselves and others. As we look to Christ, we are empowered to overcome evil and live triumphantly in the power of the gospel. Building on the “Prayer of Examen” devotional, we now move to the discipline of discernment as we consider the Ignatian concepts of consolation and desolation. Read below Loyola’s descriptions of these two concepts.

#### SPIRITUAL CONSOLATION

“I call it consolation when some interior movement in the soul is caused, through which the soul comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord; and when it can in consequence love no created thing on the face of the earth in itself, but in the Creator of them all. Likewise, when it sheds tears that move to love of its Lord, whether out of sorrow for one’s sins, or for

the Passion of Christ our Lord, or because of other things directly connected with His service and praise. Finally, I call consolation every increase of hope, faith and charity, and all interior joy which calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord."

(From *Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, Spiritual Exercise 316*)

## **SPIRITUAL DESOLATION**

"I call desolation all the contrary of the third rule, such as darkness of soul, disturbance in it, movement to things low and earthly, the unquiet of different agitations and temptations, moving to want of confidence, without hope, without love, when one finds oneself all lazy, tepid, sad, and as if separated from his Creator and Lord. Because, as consolation is contrary to desolation, in the same way the thoughts which come from consolation are contrary to the thoughts which come from desolation."

(From *Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, Spiritual Exercise 317*)

The key question in interpreting consolation and desolation is: where is the movement coming from and where is it leading me? Spiritual consolation does not always mean happiness or positive emotions, though its tempting to think all good feelings come from God. Likewise, spiritual desolation does not always mean sadness or negative emotions. Sometimes an experience of sadness can be a moment of deep intimacy with God. Times of human suffering and difficulty can lead to moments of great grace. Similarly, peace or happiness can be illusory if these feelings are helping us avoid changes we need to make.

## **DIRECTIONS**

The following directions will lead you through the Prayer of Discernment which has been tailored for modern life. Do this at the end or beginning of each day. Leave minimally 15 minutes to do so, starting with 10-15 minutes of Scripture reading. Discernment of spirits is a challenging task. It requires maturity, inner quiet and an ability to reflect on one's interior life. Discernment takes discipline, time and practice. Ignatius' rules for discernment provide a framework, not a program. We must be ready to improvise and adjust because God works in each of us uniquely. That is why we need the encouragement and wisdom of trusted spiritual friends, advisors and pastors. Ultimately this exercise will not only aid in becoming more aware of spiritual promptings but the hope is that it will lead us to a deeper intimacy with Christ.

► 01 MIN

### **OPENING PRAYER OF INVITATION**

- Sit comfortably in stillness for these minutes.
- Be reminded that our God brings structure out of the chaos of our days.
- Invite the Holy Spirit who searches our hearts to guide you through this prayer.

► 03 MIN

### **REVIEWING THE DAY'S EVENTS**

- List all the major events of the day and write down a basic chronology of what happened today.
- Does any particular event, meeting, conversation or place stand out to you? In the rush of our days, it's easy to overlook so much. Think about the things you ate, saw, smelled, and heard. Remember that God is even in these details.
- Walk through each of these events in the presence of God.

▶ 04 MIN

**AS YOU REVIEW THE DAY, LIST THE DESOLATIONS YOU'VE EXPERIENCED**

- Turns our focus in on ourselves.
- Drives us down the spiral ever deeper into our own negative feelings.
- Cuts us off from community.
- Makes us want to give up on things that used to be important to us.
- Takes over our whole consciousness and crowds out our distant vision.
- Covers up a sense of gratitude.
- Drains us of energy.

▶ 04 MIN

**AS YOU REVIEW THE DAY, LIST THE CONSOLATIONS YOU'VE EXPERIENCED**

- Directs our focus outside and beyond ourselves.
- Lifts our hearts so that we can see the joys and sorrows of other people.
- Bonds us more closely to our human community and draws out a love for them.
- Deepens our love for God.
- Restores balance and refreshes our inner sense of calling and purpose.
- Shows us where God is active in our lives and where he is leading us.
- Releases new energy, creativity, and inspiration in us.

▶ 03 MIN

**CLOSING PRAYER: PRAYING TO LIVE MORE IN THE POWER AND GUIDANCE OF GOD'S SPIRIT.**

## **ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS**

*People who are learning about discernment regularly ask several questions:*

### **WHEN SHOULD WE USE DISCERNMENT IN OUR DECISION MAKING?**

Actually, I hope we will bring the attitude of desiring to seek God to all our decisions, and as our lives become more conformed to God's call, all our decisions, even small ones, flow from this conformity, almost without our conscious awareness. I encourage you to use discernment consciously and somewhat formally, however, when you know you are approaching a major decision.

### **DOES DISCERNMENT COVER THE DISCRIMINATION BETWEEN RIGHT AND WRONG, GOOD AND EVIL?**

When the choice facing us is between an ethically evil action and a neutral or good one, discernment, strictly speaking, is not at issue. God could never be calling us to do something evil. We don't discern whether or not to cheat on our income tax, for example. In a world of moral ambiguities, however, the difference between good and evil may not be so very clear, and discernment may assist us in these ambiguous situations. We may very well discern whether to tithe our income, or whether we should withhold our income tax for matters of conscience. As a Christian spiritual discipline, discernment is appropriate when one is faced with deciding between two "good" choices, between a "good" and a "better" choice, or sometimes to help sort out morally ambiguous choices.

### **HOW SURE IS DISCERNMENT?**

You might wonder, how can I ever be certain that I am doing God's will? Absolute certainty is impossible. We can never do away with the need for faith. What we do achieve is a relative certitude about our decisions, knowing that we have carefully and consciously tried to dispose ourselves to hear what God might be saying to us and to remove any obstacles that might prevent us either from hearing or from putting our decisions into action. This kind of moral certitude is all God asks of us, given our finite capabilities.

### **DOES DISCERNMENT ALWAYS LEAD TO THE RIGHT DECISION?**

Answering this question depends on the meaning of "right." If by "right" we mean that decision which corresponds most closely to God's call, which flows out of our deepest, best selves, the answer is yes. If "right" means turning our powers to hearing and following as best we can, then surely the answer is yes. But a common error in discernment is to assume that, once we have discerned, the outcome of the decision should also be clear or that everything should work out as we imagine it. Not necessarily. Making this assumption leads to all kinds of confusion. For example, suppose a family carefully discerns that they should sell their house, pick up and move across the country in order to take advantage of a new work situation, only to arrive there and find the job market dried up. In this sense, discernment may not yield the "right" answer. In terms of the choices open to us, our decisions may be qualified by the data we have gathered—or not. We will also still be subject to forces we can't anticipate. God does not protect us from these. However, God does not abandon us in the midst of these unforeseen circumstances, and we may rightfully say to God, "Now what?" knowing that we have done our best to hear and respond. Discernment, then, is not getting certitude about the outcome or being right, but seeking God in and through our decisions.

— From Liebert, Elizabeth, *The Way of Discernment*, Westminster John Knox Press.

DAY 01

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# SCRIPTURE

READING

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02 MIN

*Opening prayer of invitation: becoming aware of God's presence throughout the day.*

03 MIN

**WRITE DOWN THE PAST DAY'S EVENTS.**

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04 MIN

**AS YOU REVIEW THE DAY, LIST THE DESOLATIONS YOU'VE EXPERIENCED**

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04 MIN

**AS YOU REVIEW THE DAY, LIST THE CONSOLATIONS YOU'VE EXPERIENCED.**

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03 MIN

**CLOSING PRAYER: PRAYING TO LIVE MORE IN THE POWER AND GUIDANCE OF GOD’S SPIRIT.**

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