

# THE MOST UNDERRATED AREAS OF DISCERNMENT

*Lord you have been good to your servant  
according to your word.  
Teach me discernment and knowledge  
For I trust in your commands (Ps 119:65).*

Before I share with you what I think are the most underrated areas of discernment we need to be clear as to what discernment is and what it consists of. Discernment must take place in a climate of faith and prayer. After all, God is the one who is doing the calling. Expecting your vocation to be made known to you outside the practice of your faith, worship and regular prayer would be like expecting a radio to work when it is not tuned into a radio station!

The analogy of tuning a radio is a good one to keep in mind, because St John of the Cross taught that being open and receptive to inspiration is important to obtaining God's gifts:

*Although it is true that every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, having come down from above, having come down from the Father of lights, as St James says [Jas 1:17], yet this gift is not received without the ability and help of the soul receiving it.<sup>1</sup>*

If I could make another important point in introducing this topic I would say this. Discernment is definitely more than a fruit of mere intellectual examination and reflection. While discernment is an act of the *mind*, it also involves the activity of the *will* (our will, otherwise known as our heart, is the faculty we have by which we can choose and love). I'll speak more about how our will is involved in discernment later. While I'm introducing some important dimensions of discernment, I'll make one other distinction. Lest you mistake discernment to be primarily a human activity, let me tell you, it is, rather, by the most part, a fruit of grace.<sup>2</sup>

Precisely because it *is* a fruit of grace, the most important aspect of discernment is *living* a life of grace. This is often overlooked. Many people focus on processes and techniques when guiding others to discern their vocations. These help, but it is unfortunate that more attention is not given to fostering the *conditions* for receiving God's light, for it is not cheaply given. Instruction is also often lacking in: characteristics of authentic inspirations of the Holy Spirit; and inner and outer verifications of a calling. Instruction is also seldom given in how and when God enlightens us, however, I won't have time to speak to you about this here.

Another point I will be making in this talk is this. Discernment processes are useful, but only after the conditions and signs I just mentioned are operative. On this point Fr Thomas Dubay, SM, one of the foremost spiritual directors and retreat masters of our time, states, "Techniques and processes may be useful, but, like recipes, without ingredients they are useless."<sup>3</sup> He also states that the enlightened encounter with God is a real meeting of persons and not simply the right application of abstract principles and that processes and techniques, therefore, only constitute about 2 percent of discernment.<sup>4</sup> So, let's focus on the other 98 percent. This 98 percent can be summed up as living a life of grace. In order to do so, we do well to: (i) be aware of the obstacles that impair a deep union with God; (ii) foster the dispositions which make us receptive to the Holy Spirit and the inspiration He gives; (iii) have frequent recourse to what makes grace available; and (iv) acquire a "spiritual sense." Let's have a closer look at these things.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 30, no. 6.

<sup>2</sup> St John of the Cross sees discernment to be a sure, infused and deeply embedded knowledge of finite things in themselves, deeds and events. He states: "This knowledge pertains to the spirit of prophecy and to the grace St Paul terms the discernment of spirits [1 Cor 12:10] (cf. *Ascent of Mt Carmel*, Bk II, ch. 26, no. 11).

<sup>3</sup> *Authenticity – A Biblical Theology of Discernment* (San Francisco: Ignatius), p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 16, 79, 80.

## (i) Be aware of the obstacles that impair a deep union with God

So what are the obstacles? Firstly, the biggest obstacle is sin. If a person is still struggling with sin, especially serious sin, he or she should not expect discernment to be any easier than trying to drive a car with a grimy and grubby windscreen encrusted in dirt; you just can't see where you are going! St John the Apostle identified the three kinds of 'dirt' that can accumulate as bad habits on the 'window' of the soul that keep God's grace from coming in. These are 'carnal dirt' (inordinate love of fleshly pleasures); 'money dirt' (the lust of material things); and 'ego-centric dirt', (pride, selfishness and vanity).<sup>5</sup> Given that St John said that these desires are "not of the Father" but "of the world"<sup>6</sup> it is only natural that when a person gives in to such desires they condition him to have a vision for only worldly, finite and temporal things. Thereby his ability to see things which lead him to the divine, infinite and eternal are diminished.

Jesus was particularly mindful of this when He spoke to those whose lifestyle was contrary to the Gospel. So He reminded them what the Prophet Isaiah had said:

*You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them.*<sup>7</sup>

To those who were trying to be faithful to His teachings, however, Jesus said, "Happy are your eyes because they see, your ears because they hear!"<sup>8</sup> As you can see from these words of Jesus, the problem He is identifying does not pertain to *listening* with our mind, but the *choices* we make with our hearts. The deepest source of error is not found in the intellect, but the will. If a person is not living a life of grace, if any of the light of God's truth does get through, he wards it off and bars it out, because his will is bent on conflicting desires. His will does not allow him to admit the truth presented to his mind. Under these conditions the best discernment processes and techniques in the world are useless if the Lord wants to help you to see things differently because as Benjamin Franklin said, "To change the mind against the will is to be of the same opinion still."

It is clear in St Luke's mind that he knew of the important place the will has in being open to inspiration, for he recalls St Paul's address to the women at Philippi in the *Acts of the Apostles*. St Luke describes a certain Lydia as hearing the Apostle's words, but he notes that the Lord had to touch her heart first in order that she might heed the message.<sup>9</sup> Another passage of Scripture makes it clear that discernment is not only an intellectual exercise. St Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians, "God is at work in you, both to *will* and to work for his good pleasure."<sup>10</sup> In other words, God does not just illumine our *minds*, He also places the *desire* in our hearts to follow Him.

When you listen to the testimonies of men and women who have consecrated their lives to Christ as priests or Religious Sisters and Brothers you can identify how their desires put them in touch with their vocations. They did not enter these states of life because they had no desire for love. On the contrary, God has given them hearts that long for love so much that they do not want to settle for anything less than the very source of love itself.

St John of the Cross gives further explanation why divine light does not illumine immediately, but only after a while. Although God does cast light into our hearts from the beginning, we do not perceive it because it first illumines what is nearest to us, namely, the things we are attached to as a result of our sins. This we find painful, dark and difficult. But after the divine light and love have

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<sup>5</sup> cf. 1 Jn 2:16.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Mt 13:14-15.

<sup>8</sup> Mt 13:16.

<sup>9</sup> cf. Acts 16:4.

<sup>10</sup> Phil 2:13

burned away our sinfulness, we then begin more and more to be capable of perceiving the positive goods God is giving.<sup>11</sup>

Another deadly enemy of discernment is *illuminism*. The illuminist is often an enthusiast, so such a person often has an aura of sanctity. But scratch the surface and you'll discover that such a person deemphasises the intellectual, objective approach and favours instead the path of subjective and 'privileged' access to God. The illuminist is so convinced of his inner light that he does not see any need for his inspirations to be verified from without, which, as we shall see later on, is an essential component of discernment lest we suffer from illusion. I will speak more about spiritual direction later on, but while we are on this topic, my experience concurs with Fr Dubay's who states:

*In the work of spiritual direction, I consistently find that persons who give every sign of genuine prayer development and authentic holiness instinctively follow this practice. The Holy Spirit gives them the inner inclination, even a felt need, to submit the apparently divine communication to a priest in whom they can confide. This inclination may be taken as a sign of a genuine communication from God, whereas its absence suggests otherwise.*<sup>12</sup>

In addition to a priest, we could include any other reputable guide, such as a consecrated person, or at least someone trained in theology who is a person of prayer. St John of the Cross states something similar:

*As often as He reveals something to a person, He confers upon his soul a kind of inclination to manifest this to the appropriate person.*<sup>13</sup>

St John also connects this with the virtue of humility:

*This is the trait of a humble person: he does not dare deal with God independently, nor can he be completely satisfied without human counsel and direction.*<sup>14</sup>

While illuminism is an obstacle because it involves too much trust in oneself, its opposite extreme is also a hindrance, namely, *authoritarianism*, as this involves investing too much trust in another. If you have an expectation that a spiritual director's role is to tell you what to do, or if he or she tries to dictate the decisions you make, rather than travel alongside you as an objective other, this too will obstruct you from authentic discernment as it stifles the Spirit. I'll talk more about this later on when I speak about how the inspirations we receive from within need to be confirmed from without.

To avoid illuminism we must not neglect the use of reason as a source of light. On this point Fr Dubay states:

*God expects us to use ordinary means to achieve ordinary ends. If I break a leg, he expects me to get it set by a doctor. I may pray for divine healing but not instead of refusing ordinary medical help. We should surely pray for divine enlightenment but not instead of refusing study and consultation. Where human reason is sufficient to solve problems, God is not likely to intervene in a supernatural manner.*<sup>15</sup>

Other obstacles involve various passions. Human passions are not sinful *in* and *of* themselves, but they can nevertheless become obstacles because they often blind us. St John of the Cross accepts the scholastic reduction of the eleven passions<sup>16</sup> defined by Aristotle into four principal ones, namely *joy*, *hope*, *sorrow* and *fear*. He explains *why* these passions can blind us:

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<sup>11</sup> cf. *Dark Night of the Soul*, Bk. 2, ch. 13, no. 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Authenticity*, p. 120.

<sup>13</sup> *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk II, ch. 22, no. 9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, ch. 22, no. 11.

<sup>15</sup> *Authenticity*, p. 119.

<sup>16</sup> Appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, friendly feelings, hatred, longing, emulation and pity.

*These passions manifestly keep the strength and ability of the soul for God, and direct it toward him, when they are so ruled that a person rejoices only in what is purely for God's honour and glory, hopes for nothing else, feels sorrow only about matters pertaining to this, and fears only God. The more people rejoice over something outside God, the less intense will be their joy in God; and the more their hope goes out toward something else, the less there is of it for God; and so on with the others ... It should be known that, in the measure that one of the passions is regulated according to reason, the others are also ... Accordingly, you should keep in mind that wherever one of these passions goes the entire soul (the will and the other faculties) will also go, and they will live as prisoners of this passion ... As a result Boethius claimed that if you desire a clear understanding of the truth, you must cast from yourself joys, hope, fear, and sorrow' [The Consolation of Philosophy, 1, 7].<sup>17</sup>*

Let us look at each of these one at a time:

## Joy

As for the passion of *joy* in particular, St John explains that “the more people rejoice over something outside God, the less intense will be their joy in God.”<sup>18</sup> Can you think of any examples of how joy can blind a person in this sense? Upon asking this question to some young men who were attending a retreat one man said, “Joy at getting back at someone who has wronged you.” Another said, “Sex outside marriage – the joy is there, but it does not last because it does not unite you to God.”

## Hope

This passion operates in the memory. At this you may ask, “Why the memory? Memory deals with the *past*, while hope pertains to the *future*. So, why do we need our memory in order to hope?” The answer is simple. Whenever we invest any degree of hope in the future it is always a consequence of what we have come to value from experiences we have gained in the past. While this is true for the things we hope for in this world and in our relationships with one another, it is also true in our relationship with God.

Lest the passion of *hope* blind us we need to purify our memory because we cannot invest more hope in God unless our memory has the capacity to recall what He has done for us in the past. On this point St John states:

*What souls must do in order to live in perfect and pure hope in God is this: As often as distinct ideas, forms and images occur to them, they should immediately, without resting in them, turn to God with loving affection, in emptiness of everything rememberable.<sup>19</sup>*

St John is recommending that “in the measure that individuals dispossess their memory of forms and objects, which are not of God, they will fix it on God and preserve it empty, so as to hope for the fullness of their memory from him.”<sup>20</sup> Can you think of any examples of how hope can blind a person in this sense? Upon asking this question to the retreatants I referred to earlier, one young man said, “Star signs.” This is a good example. Any kind of superstitious hope blinds us from God’s presence and activity in our lives and prevents us from trusting in His love for us and for what good things He plans for us. The same can be said for any other form of hope that focuses on others, things, or self. In other words, anything other than God.

## Sorrow

The more people cultivate feelings of sorrow for things which that do not cause sorrow in Jesus’ sacred heart, the less they will be sensitive to the sorrow that leads to repentance (cf. 2 Cor 7:9) and attain a greater identification with Jesus in His Passion. For example, feeling sorrow for failing to compete at one’s best at sport or an examination is a sorrow that causes a person to focus on *self*, not

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<sup>17</sup> *The Ascent of Mt Carmel*, Bk III, ch. 16, nos. 2, 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 15, no. 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

God and the sorrow in His Son's heart. When I asked the men on retreat if they could think of any other examples, one young man said, "Judas." Judas Iscariot is an archetypal example because he demonstrates what can happen if sorrow is not associated with God's mercy. If we speak of sorrow as "misery" for a moment you will be able to see this more clearly with the following play on words:

Misery without mercy leads to despair;  
Mercy without misery leads to arrogant presumption; while  
Misery with mercy leads to peace of soul and reconciliation with God.

Sorrow for sin is not the only form of sorrow that can blind us. Sorrow for the tragedies of life and its setbacks can also have this effect. How many people do you know who have stopped practising their faith because of the death of a loved one or some other form of grief? Is there some form of sorrow in your own life that is blinding you, preventing you from being able to recognise the tender love God has for you and that he is worthy of your trust?

## **Fear**

Since a lack of courage in the will, as we shall see later, brings about a lack of conviction in the intellect, if our will is darkened by fear that is in relation to self (such as that which emerges when we consider how our reputation, possessions, etc. may be lost), instead of fear of God (such as that which comes about from considering how we may displease Him), we simply cannot discern effectively. As for fear of one's reputation in particular, the more a person is afraid of what others think, the less he is able to be conscious of what God thinks.

Among the men on retreat one young man was quite candid and 'down to earth' when I asked if they could think of any other examples of how fear can blind us. He said, "Oh Father that's me! In coming to this retreat I'm really afraid because I'm scared if I find out God is calling me to become a priest!" Upon hearing him say this everyone else in the room laughed. They were laughing not because they thought he was out of touch, but because they could identify with what he was saying in their own hearts. In their laughter was also a degree of relief. I sensed that they had gained some assurance that it is OK to feel afraid, but that we do well not to let it get in the way. I responded to this young man by saying, "You are doing well to be aware of this fear. If you are willing to talk to God about why you are afraid of discovering your vocation you will be in for a pleasant surprise! The more fear you have about what God is asking of you, the less able you will be to consider the joys God has in mind for you. Conversely, by bringing your fears out of the dark into the light – if God is indeed calling you to be a priest – you will discover a joy that you never thought possible."

Among these retreatants another man gave the fear of commitment as another example. This kind of fear is not exclusive to those who are discerning a vocation to the Priesthood because being afraid to be committed is something which 'runs across the board' to every vocation today, even marriage. Think of how popular it has become for couples to just 'shack up' and cohabit today rather than get married. If a person was to overcome a fear of commitment he would experience the liberating effect of being able to 'see past his own nose' and behold God in his presence so habitually that he would never lack determination. This determination that comes from being liberated from fear is not something that comes from any confidence in our own strength or ability. St Teresa of Avila understood, rather, that being truly determined does not draw so much upon human qualities as it does divine ones, for in having God as her starting point, He became both the beginning and the end of her desires: "When we are more determined we are less confident in ourselves, for confidence must be placed in God."<sup>21</sup>

Another retreatant gave fear of silence as another example of what can blind us from God. This example is certainly relevant to the experience of many people today because we are living in such a noisy world! The more fear of silence a person has, the less able he would be to encounter Christ.

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<sup>21</sup> *Way of Perfection*, ch. 41, no. 4.

There is a paradox in this because God's *presence* is more often perceived in *absence*. So, if you are wanting to discern your vocation you need to observe sufficient moments of silence every day.

Another obstacle can be, believe or not, a desire to be *certain* about your vocation. Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that you should be blasé about discernment. To say, "Enie-meanie-minie-mo" is certainly one extreme, but the other extreme is to be overly obsessed in your desire to have certainty about your vocation. This desire can be on account of a number of reasons. One is trying to keep all of your options open. Today's society conditions us to want to have it all. Jesus alerts us to the danger this expectation leads to. There is clearly no profit in gaining the whole world because it can lead you to forfeit your own soul (cf. Mk 8:36). What's more, if you are not doing anything to narrow down your search this can lead to *paralysis by analysis*! For this reason, the sad thing about trying to keep all of your options open is that you will realise *none* of them!

If you are lusting for certainty it may also be because you lack courage. Lacking conviction in the intellect correlates with a lack of courage in the will. I remember when I first began to feel called I often said to God in prayer: "Lord, if you are calling me to the Priesthood, give me a sign. Then I'll have the conviction to respond; to take the first step. And most importantly, then I will be able to respond to your love." I thought this was a good prayer at the time! But then I began to feel something was amiss by asking God for a sign. I felt Our Lord saying to me in the silence of my heart: "If I gave you a sign; if you knew that I was calling you as clearly as you can see that black is different to white, you would no longer have to *trust* in me and my plans for you. And if you had no reason or incentive to trust in me, the 'whole bottom would drop out!' Because where there is no trust there is no *faith*. And where there is no faith, there is no inspiration and motivation to *love*."

I realised then that if the Lord granted me what I wanted, namely, absolute certainty, it would *hinder*, not *help* me love Him. Since we all have a deep desire to love and to be loved, I did not want to miss out on what I thought would be a good opportunity to grow in love by becoming a priest. And I certainly was not deluded. It is not the only way God can expand the human heart. But for those who respond to the Priesthood or the Religious Life, God does not fail to deliver.

I also became more in touch with how asking God for a sign did not so much come from a *lack of clarity* in my calling but a *weakness of will* in responding. That is why I can honestly say that I would never have become a priest were it not that I had recourse to a great deal of prayer to strengthen my resolve to respond. Through prayer I discovered the delightful truth of St Paul's words: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13).

Since absolute certainty about one's vocation would almost rule out the capacity to love God, we should not be surprised that certainty is for bigots and maniacs! Hitler had certainty. Having stated this, I knew I wanted to become a priest when I entered the seminary, but I did not know that God wanted me to become one until I was ordained. Only when I became a priest did I have certainty.

## **(ii) Foster the dispositions which make us receptive to the Holy Spirit and the inspiration He gives**

Only those who are rightly disposed can detect the gentle motions of God working in their hearts and minds. What constitutes these dispositions are as follows:

On the virtue of *humility* Fr Dubay states:

*Anyone who hopes to detect the mind of God, to hear him, to learn his ways and to probe his will must expect to be surprised, even to be contradicted. Most of us would expect that the way to the mind of infinite Truth is diligent study, a searching out of wisdom, ancient and new. This is a way, but it is*

*not the way. The first condition for detecting the divine mind is just what we would not expect: smallness, unpretentiousness, apparent weakness.*<sup>22</sup>

Lest we take humility for granted, let us not be deceived by how pride makes a man a slave of the opinions of others. Of such a man Fr Dubay writes: “that man who wants to make a good impression, the man who so lives in the minds of others ... he cannot live in his own mind.”<sup>23</sup>

*Yes, the proud live in the mind of others. There is no room for the mind of God, a mind that is dead set against the mainstream of secular society. The proud cannot detect the motions of the Spirit because their minds are impregnated with another value system, and value systems exclude one another. Jesus could assert that human approval meant nothing to him, that his listeners could not believe because they sought approval from one another not from God (Jn 5:41, 44). Concern for human approval blocks divine approval.*<sup>24</sup>

The Book of Proverbs tells us that the humble man knows where the source of light is. He trusts completely in the Lord and places little confidence in his own insights.<sup>25</sup> He is aware that only the fool trusts his own mind.<sup>26</sup>

*Through the long centuries of the Christian dispensation, spiritual directors have considered humility as an important sign of authenticity ... When St John of the Cross was asked his opinion of a nun who reportedly had extraordinary experiences, his analysis of her written account was negative because indications of humility were lacking. She had, he said, little fear of being mistaken. She was overly confident of her opinion. Where this healthy fear is absent, remarked the saint, the Spirit of God is never present. She seemed to desire to persuade others of the goodness of her experiences; she gave little evidence of humility, and her style lacked simplicity – it was exaggerated and affected. The saint was consequently little impressed with her experiences.*<sup>27</sup>

Humility is not only one of the necessary *dispositions* that are required to be receptive to the Holy Spirit, for it is also an *effect* of the Holy Spirit. St John of the Cross explains that “communications which are truly from God have this trait: they simultaneously exalt and humble the soul.”<sup>28</sup>

The theological virtues of *faith, hope and charity* are also essential. These are called *theological virtues* because they come from God and have Him as their object. That they are virtues you no doubt understand, but why do they condition us to be open to the Holy Spirit? Since these virtues are gifts that are freely given to us by God we often think of them only in relation to what they *give* us. While it is true that these virtues are indeed tremendous gifts, St John of the Cross also sees that they *empty* in order to fill. Fr Dubay provides an excellent summary of St John of the Cross’ teaching<sup>29</sup> here:

*Faith frees the intellect of merely human ways of knowing, which are as different from the divine as Heaven is above the earth [cf. Isa 55:8-9]. Hope empties the memory of passing allurements that we might seek eternal enthrallment. Charity unburdens our will and heart of false and fleeting loves*

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<sup>22</sup> *Authenticity*, p. 125.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 130.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 131.

<sup>25</sup> cf. Prov 3:5.

<sup>26</sup> cf. Prov 28:26.

<sup>27</sup> *Authenticity*, pp. 132-133.

<sup>28</sup> *Dark Knight of the Soul*, Bk II, ch. 1, no. 2.

<sup>29</sup> St John of the Cross states how the theological virtues unite the 3 faculties (intellect, memory and will) to God:

*Faith darkens and empties the intellect of all its natural understanding and thereby prepares it for union with the divine wisdom. Hope empties and withdraws the memory from all creature possessions, for as St. Paul says, hope is for that which is not possessed [Rom 8:24]. It withdraws the memory from what can be possessed and fixes it on what it hopes for. Hence only hope in God prepares the memory perfectly for union with him. Charity also empties and annihilates the affections and appetites of the will of whatever is not of God and centres them on him alone. Thus charity prepares the will and unites it with God through love. Because these virtues have the function of withdrawing the soul from all that is less than God, they consequently have the mission of joining it with God (The Dark Night, Bk II, ch. 21, no. 11). See also The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Bk II, ch. 6, nos. 1-4.*

*that we might cling unimpededly to true and lasting Beauty and experience the complete fulfilment found only in the divine embrace. These three virtues free us of the ephemeral that we may be transformed into the eternal.*<sup>30</sup>

When speaking about the virtue of charity in particular, it is good for us to be aware that what motivates us to love God is not something that originates from our own initiative. Our love is a *response*. St John of the Cross was fully aware of this, as he said:

*In the first place it should be known that if anyone is seeking God, the Beloved is seeking that person much more.*<sup>31</sup>

In other words, he was saying, “If your desire for God is so great, imagine what His desire for you is like, in order for you to desire Him in the first place!” When we are conscious that our love is a response, (rather than something that we have to initiate), the love of the Lover then has more power to motivate us. If we can say with St Paul: “With us, the love of Christ is a compelling motive”<sup>32</sup>, then no trial or sacrifice can be too big for us in our desire to respond to God’s love. Here you can see that our greatest openness to God is our *desire*, for as St John of the Cross said: “the desire for God is the preparation for union with him.”<sup>33</sup>

Love is important for another reason. Just as “there is no one so blind as he who wills not to see,” so there is no one so seeing as he who wills to love. As St Paul said, “Love rejoices in the truth.”<sup>34</sup> Love gives us the deepest insights into the mind of God because “God is love”<sup>35</sup> as St John the Apostle tells us.

Esteeming the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and being docile to His promptings is also important, for as Jesus said, “For to him who has more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”<sup>36</sup> Commenting on these words of Jesus, Jacques Philippe states:

*To obtain more inspirations, we need to begin by obeying the ones we receive. Next, it is obvious that God will grant us more inspirations if he sees us being faithful in fulfilling his will when it comes to us by other ways: the Commandments, the duties of our state in life, and so on. God’s will is expressed in many ways, and we know these without any need for special inspirations. We know God’s will as expressed in a general way through the commandments of Scripture, the teaching of the Church, the demands that are part of our vocation, and those that come from our job, for example. If we have sincere desire for faithfulness in these domains, God will favour us with more motions of his Spirit. If we are careless about our normal duties, then however much we beg God for special inspirations there is not much chance of him granting them.*

*Let’s not forget either to consent, for the love of God, to all the legitimate opportunities for obedience that present themselves in the areas of community, family, or social life. Of course we must “obey God rather than men” [Acts 5:29], but it would be an illusion to think we were capable of obeying God if we are incapable of obeying other people. The reason for this is that the same obstacle has to be overcome in both cases: attachment to ourselves and to our own will. If we can only obey people when it happens to please us, we are fooling ourselves about being able to obey the Holy Spirit. If we are never prepared to renounce our own will (our ideas, our tastes, our attachments) for other people, what guarantee is there that we’ll be able to do so when God asks us to?*<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Dubay, SM, *Fire Within*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), p. 55.

<sup>31</sup> *Living Flame of Love*, stanza 3, no. 28.

<sup>32</sup> 2 Cor 5:14 (Knox translation).

<sup>33</sup> *Living Flame of Love*, stanza 3, no. 26.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Cor 13:16.

<sup>35</sup> 1 Jn 4:8, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Mt 13:12. See also Lk 19:26.

<sup>37</sup> *In the School of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Helena Scott (New York: Scepter, 2002), pp. 31-32.

St Faustina gave testimony to her own experience in this matter in which she states: “faithfulness to one grace attracts others.”<sup>38</sup> St Francis De Sales said something similar:

*When we profit from an inspiration that our Lord sends, he then sends another, and thus our Lord continues his graces as long as we continue to profit from them.*<sup>39</sup>

St John of the Cross explains why our faithfulness to God’s grace draws further favour from God:

*...when God beholds the soul made attractive through grace, he is impelled to grant her more grace, for he dwells within her well pleased with her. Knowing this, Moses begged God for more grace, desiring to oblige him by the grace he had already received from him: “You say that you know me by name and I have found grace before you; if, therefore, I have found grace in your sight, show me your face that I might know you and find grace in your sight” [Ex 33:12-13].*<sup>40</sup>

Responding promptly to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit will not only merit an increase in such divine light, but also make each successive response progressively easier. Even those things which at present we find impossible will – in virtue of being faithful in the little things that are within our grasp – become possible to fulfil in the long term.

St Therese of Lisieux also gives testimony to this:

*The practice of virtue became sweet and natural to me; to begin with, my struggle often showed in my face, but little by little this disappeared and renunciation became easy to me even at the first moment.*<sup>41</sup>

So, if you want to gain a clearer perception of God’s will, and a greater ease in accomplishing it, do not underestimate the little and seemingly insignificant inspirations of the Holy Spirit. Nor should you take for granted the opportunities they provide to attain further enlightenment as a welcome effect. Obedience to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit is all the more important if our spiritual director has attested to the likelihood of their authenticity. St Teresa wrote about this on numerous occasions. Here are some of the significant things she said:

*The safest thing, as the Lord told me, is to make known to my confessor the whole state of my soul and the favours God grants me, that he be learned, and that I obey him. The Lord had often told me this. It is what I do, and without doing so I would have no peace.*<sup>42</sup>

*What I intend to explain is why obedience, in my opinion, is the quickest or best means for reaching this most happy state. The reason is that since we are by no means lords of our own will in such a way that we can employ it purely and simply in God, obedience is the true path for subjecting it to reason ... human nature and self-love can find so many of them [good reasons] that we would never arrive at the goal. And often the most reasonable thing seems to us foolish if it is not to our advantage.*<sup>43</sup>

*Once while thinking about the severe penance Dona Catalina de Cardona performed and about how because of the desires for penance the Lord sometimes gives me I could have done more were it not for*

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<sup>38</sup> *Divine Mercy in my Soul: Diary of Sister M. Faustina Kowalska*, no. 282.

<sup>39</sup> Letter 2074.

<sup>40</sup> He goes on to provide further explanation in *The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 33, no. 7:

*Because this grace exalts, honours and beautifies her in his sight, God loves her ineffably. If prior to her being in grace, he loved her only on account of himself, now that she is in grace he loves her not only on account of himself but also on account of herself. And thus enamoured by means of the effects and works of grace, or without them, he ever continues to communicate more love and more graces. And as he continues to honour and exalt her, he becomes continually more captivated by and enamoured of her. God manifests this in speaking to his friend Jacob through Isaiah: “Since you have become honourable and glorious in my sight, I have loved you [Is 43:4]. In other words, after I had turned towards you, thus giving you grace and making you glorious and worthy of honour and my presence, you merited the grace of more of my favours.*

<sup>41</sup> *Story of a Soul*, Manuscript A, no. 48.

<sup>42</sup> *The Book of Her Life*, Ch. 26, no. 3, p. 225.

<sup>43</sup> *The Foundations*, ch. 5, no. 11.

*obedience to my confessors, I thought it might be better not to obey them any longer in this matter. The Lord told me: "That's not so; you are walking on a good and safe path. Do you see all the penance she does? I value your obedience more."<sup>44</sup>*

Just in case we may be mistaken to think that St Teresa was exclusively referring to the vow of obedience that she as a Carmelite nun had taken, she also wrote:

*Even though a person may not have this obligation of the vow, if he desires or aims after contemplation, it is necessary for him, in order to proceed correctly, to give up his will, with complete determination, to a confessor, who must be the kind that will understand him ... for there is more progress made in this way in one year than without it in many.<sup>45</sup>*

When St Teresa states that the person receiving direction should “give up his will with complete determination, to a confessor” she does not mean that personal responsibility should be abdicated to another, nor does she mean that one’s reason should be abandoned. Nor does she consider that a spiritual director should expect you to passively obey *every* word he gives in advice. Such a person would not make a good spiritual guide because without your own personal freedom your capacity to develop a personal relationship with Christ would be limited. It would be analogous to receiving a detailed map, but being robbed of your compass! Christ is the ultimate point of reference, without which directions mean nothing because they are not ends in themselves, but a means to a greater union with Him.

Rather, the only time St Teresa would ever expect you to pay strict heed to the advice of a confessor or spiritual director would be in matters that pertain to scruples, the Commandments, avoiding occasions of sin, overcoming lukewarmness or anything serious that pertains to growth in faith, hope and charity.

I think it goes without saying why being obedient to advice about scruples, the Commandments and avoiding occasions of sin is important. But lukewarmness? Why is avoiding that important? Because a lot hangs in the balance! “So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of my mouth.”<sup>46</sup> As for the advice we receive to help us grow in the theological virtues, this is especially important because they are the highest of all the virtues. Let me explain why they deserve more attention this way. All virtues need to be governed by prudence (*prudence* enables a person to know what is the best course of action that could be taken in any round of concrete circumstances). Without prudence, bravery – when applied to action – could become foolhardiness; mercy could be inappropriately applied to a given circumstance so that it could sink into weakness; and likewise temperance or fortitude into fanaticism.

Let me illustrate one of these examples I just gave you. Without prudence, bravery can become foolhardiness. Some time ago I was riding my bike to the Vocation Centre which is in the Polding Centre. Whenever I go there, I put my bicycle in the bike rack in the garage, so when I was approaching the building I could hear the “beep-beep-beep” sound of the garage door closing before I came around the corner. So I began sprinting, pedalling as fast as I could so that I could get in before the door closed. But when I saw the door I could see that it was almost shut. You could say that I lacked prudence, because while I thought I was being brave, in reality I was foolhardy because rather than stop I kept going! As I got to the door I slammed on my back breaks, skidded sideways and slipped under the door. “Woo-hoo!” I thought, “I’ve still got all the moves!” Although I managed to slip under the door, it was not without the door hitting my head, the impact of which forced my tailbone onto the bike-frame. “Ouch!” Having a bruised tailbone is something you don’t want to have because it means you can’t sit down without pain for about a week!

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<sup>44</sup> *Spiritual Testimonies*, no. 19.

<sup>45</sup> *The Way of Perfection*, ch. 18, no. 8.

<sup>46</sup> Rev 3:16.

I would have avoided this injury if I allowed my bravery to be governed by prudence. Now, while it is true that prudence governs all the other virtues, some people confuse prudence with *moderation*. Moderation should always accompany the moral virtues, but not the theological virtues of *faith, hope and charity*. Moderation does not have a place in these virtues because in them the most precious treasure is at stake. Have you ever heard of a saint who had *too much* faith or trust in God? Or a saint who had *too much* love for God, or hope in Him? So while your spiritual director will help you to strike a balance in all the other virtues, he should be demanding in the pursuit of the theological virtues, at least when they pertain to serious matters. For example, if a man thought he was called to the Priesthood and wanted to enter the seminary while his parents were very ill and needed his assistance, assistance that no one else could give, he would – in his very attempt to respond to the love of God – be sinning against charity in a serious way.

What is more, as we saw earlier, growing in the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity is important because they condition us to be receptive to the Holy Spirit.

While we are on the topic of prudence I should also say that some people also confuse prudence with *compromise*. This leads them to see nothing wrong with something that is objectively sinful if some degree of good is found in it. In speaking about some priests who guided her imprudently, St Teresa said:

*What was venial sin they said was no sin at all, and what was serious mortal sin they said was venial. This did me so much harm that it should not surprise anyone that I speak of it here in order to warn others against so great an evil.*<sup>47</sup>

St Alphonsus Liguori recognised the importance of being obedient to those who are in a position to guide us. He said that those who consecrate their lives to Christ cannot invest too much trust in God through those who guide them because he went so far as to write:

*Thus, on the day of judgment, religious will be charged with every act of disobedience; but, as St Philip Neri used to say, they shall be most certain of not having to render an account of the actions performed through obedience. For these the Superiors only, who commanded them, shall be held accountable. Speaking particularly of nuns, the Lord once said to St Catharine of Sienna: "Religious will not be obliged to render an account to me of what they do through obedience; for that, I will demand an account from the Superiors." Obey, says the Apostle, your prelates, and be subject to them; for they watch, as being to render an account of your souls: that they may do this with joy, and not with grief. And, O blessed spouse of the Lord! if you practise obedience, when after death you shall be asked by Jesus Christ why you have not done greater penance, why you have not made more mental prayer, or why you have performed such an action, you can answer with confidence, that in all this you only fulfilled his commands by obeying your Superiors, whom he commanded you to obey as you would obey himself; and that if you have done wrong, the blame is imputable to your Superiors, whose authority you obeyed.*<sup>48</sup>

In short, while there are reasons why we should heed some words of advice we receive in spiritual direction more than others (and I hope the criteria I just mentioned helps), the main thing is that we are prepared to follow Christ in a spirit of obedience beyond our superficial inclinations and comfort zones. Conversely, if we remain attached to ourselves and to our own will, how do expect to discern God's will?

### **(iii) Have frequent recourse to what makes grace available**

Having frequent recourse to what makes grace available is also essential to discernment. Among the most valuable are (i) prayer, especially contemplative prayer; (ii) the sacraments, particularly regular

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<sup>47</sup> *The Book of Her Life*, ch. 5, no. 3.

<sup>48</sup> *The True Spouse of Jesus Christ*, ch. VI.

participation in the Mass and frequent recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation; (iii) spiritual direction; (iv) devotion to Mary; and (v) maintaining good Christian friendships.

As for prayer, you simply cannot expect to discern your vocation without it. If you are not spending time in contemplative prayer *every* day, you would have as much chance discerning your vocation correctly as winning a game of poker. The main reason why prayer is indispensable is this. At the heart of every vocation is love. It is a response to the love of God as St Therese of Lisieux so deeply knew it. “My vocation is love”<sup>49</sup> she writes in her autobiography. If you are not actively fostering habits of prayer you are neglecting yourself from the opportunities you need to be put in touch with the love of God, and thereby, how He wants you to respond to His love. Can you imagine a couple who want to get married not wanting to spend time with one another? Look at the many hours they spend in each other’s company. If you really want to know your vocation I would recommend that you spend an hour in prayer every day. It certainly worked for me.

St Therese of Lisieux also stated in her autobiography, “Charity gave me the key to my vocation.”<sup>50</sup> If our vocation is essentially about responding to that which we first receive, namely, God’s love, it figures that we should do as much as possible to put ourselves in touch with that love. For this reason I think it is a good idea to participate in the Mass as often as possible and to incorporate acts of love in your prayers throughout the day. Short aspirations such as, “O my God, I love you above all things, with my whole heart and soul, because you are all good and worthy of all my love.”

When we pray it is important that we do not expect God to use extraordinary means to make our vocation known to us. If we are expecting God to speak to us directly, give us visions, or any other extraordinary phenomena, then such expectations go against our best interests as I said earlier; but there is another reason – such expectations can *offend* God. Let me explain. When Peter the Apostle saw Our Blessed Lord transfigured on Mt Tabor he said, “Rabbi, it is wonderful for us to be here; so let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah” (Mt 17:4; Mk 9:5).

In other words, Peter was saying, “This sure beats encountering God in the *ordinary* events of life! Let’s stay here in the midst of this *spectacular* and *extraordinary* event where we can learn everything we need to know.” But a voice came from the cloud above: “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.” (Mt 17:5; Mk 9:7) St John of the Cross said that God was more or less saying:

*If I have already told you all things in my Word, my Son, and if I have no other word, what answer or revelation can I now make that would surpass this? Fasten your eyes on him alone because in him I have spoken and revealed all and in him you will discover even more than you ask for and desire ... I have already spoken, answered, manifested, and revealed to you by giving him to you as a brother, companion, master, ransom, and reward ... If I spoke before [through priests and prophets in the Old Testament] it was to promise Christ ... [But if people asked God to speak to them now or ask for visions] they would offend my beloved Son deeply because they would be obliging him to become incarnate and undergo his life and death again. You will not find anything to ask or desire of me through revelations and visions. Behold him well, for in him you will uncover all of these already made and given, and many more ... My Apostle proclaimed this in writing to the Colossians: ‘In the Son of God are hidden all the treasures of the wisdom and knowledge of God’ (Col 2:3).*

St John of the Cross concludes: “Anyone wanting to get something in a supernatural way would, as it were, be accusing God of not having given us in his Son all that is required.”<sup>51</sup> So if you feel called to a vocation but have not had any spectacular visions you are not missing out on anything!

There is something insightful about how Moses and Elijah appeared on Mt Tabor when Jesus became transfigured. One of the reasons why they were *there* was this: God gave the Law through Moses, and

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<sup>49</sup> *Story of a Soul*, ch. 8.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *The Ascent of Mt Carmel*, Bk 2, ch. 22.

his teaching through the Prophets among whom the greatest was Elijah. This is quite telling because we too can gain further assistance in discerning our vocation by contemplating the Law and the prophetic teaching Christ provides through His Church. This includes the individual guidance we receive from its ministers.

This is especially true of spiritual direction as it provides invaluable assistance in discerning our vocation. Even if such spiritual guidance is received within the frequent reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, although it may be brief, it can be very helpful in the spiritual life. It helps us to attain greater discretion, especially when we consider that it is hard to be objective when our own interests are involved.

If you feel that you need more guidance than what you receive in Confession you can ask someone to provide you with spiritual direction. A spiritual director does not always have to be a priest. Such direction can be gained from Religious Brothers or Sisters, or lay people who are trained in theology and who are known for their prayerfulness. Our need for individual spiritual guidance is analogous to a person who has been in a closed room for a long time: he does not notice that the air has become stale; whereas one who comes in from the outside notices it immediately. This happens on account of how we often do not understand what is happening in our soul, for as the Prophet Jeremiah said, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?”<sup>52</sup>

St John of the Cross brings another reason to our attention why assistance is needed in discernment:

*Since no one is capable of knowing perfectly the things that pass naturally through his imagination, or of forming an integral and certain judgement about them, how much less is one able to make judgements about supernatural things which transcend our capacity and occur but rarely.*<sup>53</sup>

On this point Fr Dubay states:

*The veteran teacher knows how difficult it is for even adult students accurately to express back to him what they have just heard in his lecture. If this liability to faulty expression is frequent in everyday, clear human communications, we should expect its possibility in the dark, divine communications. Our sinfulness as well as our native intellectual limitations readily explain why the expressions of divine experience may be altered by our unrealized pride and preferences.*<sup>54</sup>

In light of this, spiritual direction can greatly assist us because it helps us to grow in our self knowledge in the light of the Holy Spirit and to become more sensitive to God’s presence and activity in our lives. There are more reasons why going to Confession frequently and/or receiving regular spiritual direction can help us to discern our vocation:

- It predisposes us to view our life more in relation to God’s will than our own immediate desires.
- Furthermore, the advice we receive can encourage us to take decisive steps.

Such encouragement is often needed because, as I stated earlier, the difficulties we face in discernment are not so much attributed to a *lack of clarity* in our calling but to a *weakness of will* in responding. Many of the people we meet in the Bible had this difficulty, even though they were known for their great sanctity. For example, when God called Moses to lead his people out of their slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, he was afraid, weak, and doubtful about his mission. He did not possess the courage to give strong credence to what God was calling him to do. However, this all changed when he was heartened by God through his brother Aaron. God said to Moses:

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<sup>52</sup> Jer 17:9.

<sup>53</sup> *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk. III, ch. 8.

<sup>54</sup> *Authenticity*, p. 93.

*Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well; and behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you he will be glad in his heart. And you shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do.*<sup>55</sup>

This is just one example from the Scriptures. There are many others, such as:

- the advice Moses received from his father-in-law, Jethro;<sup>56</sup>
- the encouragement Gideon received about the seemingly impossible mission God entrusted to him when he heard about a Midianite's dream;<sup>57</sup>
- the numerous times King David received encouragement and advice from the Prophet Nathan; and
- the confirmation Ananias gave to St Paul about his vision which enabled him to be "increased all the more in strength"<sup>58</sup> to become an Apostle of Christ.

As you can see, the inspirations and promptings of the Holy Spirit that enlighten, convict, and encourage us from *within* are more likely to achieve their desired effect if they are confirmed from *without*. This confirmation we receive from our confessor or spiritual director can provide great help, for as St John of the Cross stated, "Until consulting another, one will usually experience only tepidity and weakness in the truth, no matter how much may have been heard from God."<sup>59</sup>

The following may prove to be a helpful guide when looking for a spiritual director. It is by no means an exhaustive list, but the qualities I am about to share with you are amongst the most important things:

## 1 Prudence

St Francis de Sales had sound advice here. He said:

*...choose one [a spiritual director] out of a thousand, as Avila says. For my part, I say one out of ten thousand, for there are fewer men than we realize who are capable of this task. He must be full of **charity, knowledge, and prudence**, and if one of these three qualities are lacking there is danger. I tell you again, ask God for him and having once found him, bless his Divine Majesty, stand firm, and do not look for another, but go forward with simplicity, humility, and confidence for you will make a most prosperous journey.*<sup>60</sup>

In addition to prudence as the most sought after quality in a spiritual director, St Teresa of Avila also considered *experience* as important.<sup>61</sup>

## 2 Learned

It is interesting that of all the qualities esteemed by St Teresa in a spiritual director, the one she saw as to be even more important than his own capacity for spiritual things is that he be learned.

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<sup>55</sup> Ex 4:14-15.

<sup>56</sup> cf. Ex 18:1-27.

<sup>57</sup> cf. Jgs 7:13-15.

<sup>58</sup> Acts 9:22.

<sup>59</sup> *The Ascent of Mt Carmel*, Bk II, ch. 22, no. 12

<sup>60</sup> *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part 1, ch. 4 (Emphasis added).

<sup>61</sup> cf. *The Book of Her Life*, ch. 13, no. 16.

*...learning is a great thing because learned men teach and enlighten us who know little; and, when brought before the truths of Sacred Scripture, we do what we ought. May God deliver us from foolish devotions. (...)*

*I hold that the devil will not deceive with illusions the person of prayer who consults learned men, unless this person wants to be deceived, because the devils have a tremendous fear of that learning which is accompanied by humility and virtue; and they know they will be discovered and go away with a loss (...)*

*I have already said that it is necessary to have a spiritual master; but if he is not a learned man, this lack of learning will be a hindrance. It will be a great help to consult with a learned man. If they are virtuous even though they may not experience spiritual things, they will benefit me.<sup>62</sup>*

Although St Teresa held learned spiritual directors in higher esteem than spiritual ones, she did say that “if these learned men do not practise prayer their learning is of little help to beginners.”<sup>63</sup> Being learned means that a spiritual director should be trained in theology and has some knowledge of the lives and teachings of the saints, and the Church’s spiritual Tradition. If he has any knowledge of philosophy and psychology then this is certainly a bonus.

### **3 Good Interior Life**

Ideally, a spiritual director should be a person whose interior life is not lacking, that is, someone who is known to be contemplative (a person of prayer) and a person of self-sacrifice. Mere verbal information is no substitute for what we might call tasted insight. The ideal guide is someone who knows contemplation from the inside; someone who has a feel for the reality because of direct experience. If you choose someone who does not pray much, or at all, he will tend to talk in psychological terms about ideologies, motivations, neuroses, group tendencies, etc. He will only be comfortable to talk about human topics (noble though they may be), but still merely human. Such a person would not make a good spiritual director. This does not mean that human topics and the insights which come from psychology must be avoided. But spiritual direction cannot be limited to this.

### **4 Someone You are Comfortable With**

Humanly speaking, you need to be comfortable with your spiritual director, because if you wish to experience him as an instrument of God’s grace you need to be at ease with him as a person through whom God’s grace is mediated. This would be a different matter if the directee’s feelings of discomfort come from such things as personal pride, lukewarmness or reluctance to be open to conversion and growth. But generally speaking, it is important that you are on the same “wavelength” as your spiritual director and that he is helping you to find peace.

### **5 Someone Who “Walks the Talk”**

A good spiritual director will be someone who frequents the sacrament of Penance. Fr Joseph Carola, SJ, commenting on one of St Augustine of Hippo’s sermons on the Good Shepherd,<sup>64</sup> insists that the priest’s humble acknowledgement of his own need for God’s mercy reveals the authenticity of his mission:

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, ch. 13, nos. 16, 18, 19.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, ch. 13, nos. 16, 130.

<sup>64</sup> Sermon 137, par. 4.

*By confessing his sins, he proves himself to be the true shepherd who pastors the sheep rather than the marauder who threatens the flock [cf. Jn 10:1-2]. For the humble man enters through the gate whereas the proud man exalts himself in order to breach the wall of the sheepfold and falls.<sup>65</sup>*

If your spiritual director is a priest, his love for the Sacrament of Penance will also be evident by the amount of time he spends in the confessional. Furthermore, he should be someone who receives spiritual direction himself on a regular basis. This follows a basic principle: no one can give what he does not have.

## 6 Someone Who Has Fidelity to the Church's Authority

Since, in teaching the Faith, the Holy Spirit guides us through the Pope and the bishops, the work of the spiritual director must never be at variance with the Church's guidance in faith and morals.

As you look for someone to provide you with spiritual guidance, it is good to take into account the following good counsel of St Teresa of Avila:

*Let them, however, postpone having a master until a suitable person is found, for the Lord will provide one on the condition that all is founded upon humility and the desire to do the right thing.<sup>66</sup>*

St John of the Cross wrote something similar:

*If one thinks he may have some enlightenment from God but can find no one competent with whom to share it, it is best just to turn one's attention from the communication and speak of it to no one.<sup>67</sup>*

Devotion to Mary is very helpful in discernment precisely because no greater example can be found in a person who has said, "Yes" to God. You may recall that I stated earlier that living a life a grace is important to discernment. Since Mary was "full of grace" (Lk 1:28) she is a great exemplar in this respect too. In addition to her example we can also benefit from her intercession and the grace of God that is mediated to us through Christ, the fruit of her womb.

In addition to prayer, the frequent reception of the sacraments, seeking spiritual direction, and being devoted to Mary, I would also add maintaining good Christian friendships as that which can help us grow in God's grace. St Teresa of Avila writes:

*...it is a kind of humility not to trust oneself but to believe that through those with whom one converses with God will help and increase charity while it is being shared. And there are a thousand graces I would not dare speak of if I did not have powerful experience of the benefit that comes from this sharing.*

She goes on to even state the following:

*I know and say that if the Lord had not revealed this truth to me and given me the means by which I could ordinarily talk with persons who practiced prayer, I falling and rising, would have ended by throwing myself straight into hell.<sup>68</sup>*

Notice how it was a *saint* who wrote this, not a lazy bum! If a saint identified a need for good Christian friends, then how much more do we need them? While it is true that there are few friends of the type St Teresa had in mind, when the rare person is found, we should make every effort to further the

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<sup>65</sup> Joseph Carola, SJ, *Augustine of Hippo – The Role of the Laity in Ecclesial Reconciliation* (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2005), pp. 69-70.

<sup>66</sup> *The Book of Her Life*, ch. 13, no. 19.

<sup>67</sup> *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk II, ch. 30, no. 5.

<sup>68</sup> *Book of her Life*, ch. 7, nos. 20-22. See also *Testimony* 12, no. 4.

relationship. In her mind this person cannot be loved too much, unless the friendship is not centered on Christ or becomes exclusive to others.

#### (iv) Acquire a “spiritual sense”

No talk on discernment is complete without reference to the *discernment of spirits*. Jacques Philippe provides an excellent summary of the insights of various saints on this point, particularly those found in St Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*.

*...what comes from the Spirit of God brings with it joy, peace, tranquillity of spirit, gentleness, simplicity, and light. On the other hand, what comes from the spirit of evil brings sadness, trouble, agitation, worry, confusion, and darkness. These marks of the good and the evil spirits are unmistakable signs in themselves. Peace, joy, and the like, are certain fruits of the Holy Spirit; the devil is incapable of producing them in a lasting way. And since, by contrast, trouble and sadness are the sure marks of the evil spirit, the Holy Spirit cannot be the source of them.*

*There is, of course, the ‘sadness that leads to repentance,’ which is caused by the Holy Spirit. But if it really does let us to repent, it quickly turns into joy. Moreover, that sadness does not itself actually come from the Holy Spirit, only insofar as the Holy Spirit has brought to light something within us that is wrong and needs to be made right. Out of all the marks of the good and evil spirits, the most characteristic of all is peace. The Spirit of God unfailingly produces ‘peace’ in our souls, and the devil unfailingly produces ‘agitation.’*

*In practice, however, things are more complex. An inspiration may come from God and still cause a lot of turbulence in us. But this turbulence does not come from the inspiration, which in itself (like everything that comes from the Spirit of God), is gentle and peaceable. The turbulence comes from our resistance to that inspiration. Once we accept the inspiration and cease to put up resistance to it, then our heart finds itself settled in deep peace.*

*This situation happens frequently. Certain inspirations of grace, when they reach us, meet with resistance from us, whether or not we are aware of it, and they arouse fear on the human plane, come up against our attachments to our own habits and the like. The idea of putting what the Holy Spirit is suggesting into practice worries us, and we start thinking: “How can I? What are other people going to think about me? Do I have the strength to do it?” and so on.*

*To describe this situation, we can use the image of a great river flowing tranquilly which produces eddies and whirlpools when it meets obstacles. If an inspiration truly comes from God, and we silence our fears and consent to it wholeheartedly, in the end we shall be filled with irresistible peace; for the Holy Spirit will not fail to produce such peace in those who allow themselves to be led by Him. This peace sometimes dwells only in the very deepest part of the soul, while questions and worries remain at the human and psychological level, but it is there and it is recognizable.*

*By contrast, if an inspiration comes from the devil or from our own ambitious, selfishness, exaggerated need for being recognized by others, and so forth, and we consent to it, it can never leave our heart in total deep peace. Any peace it does bring will only be superficial and will soon disappear, to be replaced by disturbance ... However, the spiritual life and the interaction between the spiritual and psychological elements are complex, and so there may sometimes be trying situations, or particular temperaments, that make it difficult to apply this criterion in practice.<sup>69</sup>*

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<sup>69</sup> In *The School of the Holy Spirit*, pp. 51-54.

## Complementary signs: Constancy and humility

*One of the characteristics of God's Spirit is constancy. And by contrast what comes from our flesh or the evil spirit is unstable and changing. There is nothing more inconstant than our moods and wishes, as we know. The same is true of the devil: he pushes us in one direction, then another, distracts us from one project to take up a new one, so that in the end nothing gets done at all. One of the strategies he often uses to stop us from accomplishing a good project is to paint a different one in glowing colours, to distract us from the first one.*

*Divine inspirations, on the other hand, are stable and constant. For that reason it is a good general rule not to be overly hasty in following an inspiration (especially, of course, in a really important matter), in order to verify that it doesn't soon vanish completely; such evaporation could be a sign that it was not from God ... This true humility is absent from those who are acting under the impulse of their own flesh or the devil. And, let's not forget, one of the surest tests of the true humility is the spirit of obedience.*

*To sum up, we could say that divine inspirations are recognizable by this: they establish us in peace, are not changeable, and impress on us a sense of humility.<sup>70</sup>*

Once we have made a decision to follow what we perceive to be an inspiration of the Holy Spirit, another common sign of its authenticity is the experience of joy:

*...even though obeying the Holy Spirit is often hard for us at the start, because it conflicts with our fears, our attachments, and so forth, that obedience is always, in the end, a source of joy and happiness. It is accompanied by an outpouring of grace that enlarges our hearts and makes our souls feel free and happy to travel the Lord's paths: "I will run in the way of thy commandments, when thou enlarges my understanding"! [Ps 119:32] ... Another spiritual law, which is worth taking note of and that is confirmed by experience, is this: this path of docility to the motions of the Holy Spirit may be very demanding, because 'the Spirit breathes where he will' [John 3:8], but it is a path of freedom and happiness. We may journey without constraint, our hearts not confined but expanded. This enlarging of the heart is a clear sign of the presence of the Spirit.<sup>71</sup>*

Sometimes this joy can be so exuberant that it could not be mistaken as having a mere natural origin. The reason why the Holy Spirit can have such a profound affect is this. Just a *tiny* amount of the Holy Spirit's unction can fill our hearts with more contentment than all the riches of the earth, because the Holy Spirit is infinite. Richard of St Victor says:

*I boldly affirm that one single drop of these divine consolations can do what all the pleasures of the world cannot. The pleasures of this world cannot satisfy the heart; and one single drop of the inner sweetness that the Holy Spirit pours into the soul, delights it utterly and causes it a holy inebriation.<sup>72</sup>*

Finally, I'll mention one last point which I think is essential to discernment.

## Explore

You would do well to *explore* what God might be calling you to. By exploration I mean ask questions, probe, investigate. Ask others how they discerned God's call in their life and if their vocation is fulfilling. Contact the various Religious Orders and ask them if you can have a live-in-experience for a week or so. Attend vocation discernment weekends. If you are not being more proactive about exploring your vocation than you would in exploring a career choice, then you are not giving your relationship with God the priority it deserves.

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 23-24

<sup>72</sup> Cited in *In the School of the Holy Spirit*, p. 25.

If you do these three things faithfully, namely, *pray*, *seek guidance* and *explore*, one day you will “know” in your heart what God is calling you to. When the tug at your heart just won’t go away, you need to act. A sure sign of a vocation is that it is consistent like a dripping tap! Another sign is that you “feel at home” in it, but you will never know this unless you “roll up your sleeves” and explore.

In summary, I would do well to quote Fr Louis Lallement (1587-1635). He says that those who want to be able to discern the inspiration of the Holy Spirit first need to “develop the necessary dispositions” and to follow the inspirations they receive faithfully. Then the inspirations will grow steadily. He continues:

*Secondly, they should cut back the sins and imperfections that, like so many clouds, rob them of the light; they will see more clearly day by day.*

*Thirdly, they should never allow their external senses to go astray and be dirtied by sensuality: then God will open the senses of their souls.*

*Fourthly, if possible they should never go out of their inner selves, or else should return as soon as possible; and they should be attentive to what takes place there. Then they will notice the movements of the different spirits that cause us to act.*

*Fifthly, they should sincerely reveal the whole depth of their hearts to their superior or spiritual director: a soul that possesses this candour and simplicity will never fail to be favoured with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.<sup>73</sup>*

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<sup>73</sup> Cited in *In the School of the Holy Spirit*, p. 74.