

## **Our Carmelite Promise: The Holy Spirit & Discernment**

Last month we had the first of several talks on our Carmelite Promise. As mentioned, the friars feel this is a neglected topic in on-going Secular formation. These talks over the next few months will hopefully address that concern. Once again let us briefly revisit the words of our Promise:

I [ ], inspired by the Holy Spirit, in response to God's call, sincerely promise to the Superiors of the Order of the Teresian Carmel and to you my brothers and sisters, to tend toward evangelical perfection in the spirit of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, obedience, and of the Beatitudes, according to the Constitutions of the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites, for [3 years/rest of my life]. I confidently entrust this, my Promise, to the Virgin Mary, Mother and Queen of Carmel. (Constitutions)

Our first talk parsed these words to provide a broad outline for what we can probe and reflect on in greater detail. First, we discussed the role of our Lady of Mount Carmel as our contemplative model. Then we reviewed the nature of a promise, what it means to make one and what our dispositions toward it should be. Lastly, we focused on the role of the evangelical counsels and beatitudes as the means we employ to put our call into action. Today, though, I'd like to focus on the first two phrases of Our Promise: inspired by the Holy Spirit and in response to God's call since they lie at the heart of discernment.

All our Carmelite teaching is designed to make us docile to the workings of the Holy Spirit as our Constitutions and Ratio show. These documents teach us that the Holy Spirit is our principal educator to whom:

the one called to life in Carmel, aware of the indwelling grace of the Spirit, should strive to become ever conscious of that ineffable Presence. It will lead us to knowledge of truth, especially with regard to a personal vocation (Ratio #16).

*So the purpose of discernment is quite simple: to help us make good life decisions. And discernment requires us to do two things: listen and respond. And what better example of this do we have than our very own St. Therese who told us:*

Jesus has no need of books or teachers to instruct souls; He teaches without the noise of words. Never have I heard Him speak but I feel that he's within me at each moment . . . guiding and inspiring me with what I must say and do. (Story of a Soul, Pg 179)

These words of Therese refer to her ability to perceive the language of the heart ... God's voice within us. Her intuition was heightened to a very profound degree.

Notice the type of words we are using in the context of discernment: hearing ... listening ... awareness ... perception ... consciousness ... intuition ... inspiration. How do we get to the point where we become more in-tune to these characteristics of our soul? This is no easy task.

Discernment is a spiritual art form requiring grace upon grace so that we may come to listen and respond correctly. So first we should begin by examining some of the conditions required for us to become docile to the workings of the Holy Spirit. Father Garrigou-Lagrance provides this wonderful synopsis on Carmelite teaching:

To be docile to the Holy Spirit, we must first hear His voice. To do so recollection and detachment from the world and from self are necessary as are the custody of the heart, the mortification of self-will and personal judgment. *If silence does not reign in our soul, if the voice of excessively human affections troubles it, we cannot of a certainty hear the inspirations of the interior Master.* For this reason the Lord subjects our sensible appetites to severe trials and in a way crucifies them that they may eventually become silent or fully submissive to our will animated by charity. If we are ordinarily preoccupied with ourselves, we shall certainly hear ourselves or perhaps a more perfidious, more dangerous voice which seeks to lead us astray. Consequently our Lord invites us to die to ourselves like the grain of wheat placed in the ground. (Three Ages of the Interior Life, Vol 2, pg 233)

Thus, to hear divine inspirations we must *learn to cultivate an attitude of silence*; but even then the voice of the Holy Spirit will remain mysterious. At first we perceive it as indistinct and obscure, in St. John of the Cross' terms. Later, with time, practice and grace, the workings of the Spirit may become more clear and certain as we enter the light of His illumination . . . the fruit of contemplation.

As Father Garrigou-Lagrance alludes, in discernment we must learn to distinguish three distinct spirits: the thoughts and feelings that originate in our *natural self*, those that are *of God* and those *of the devil*.

Theologians show us our natural spirit is a consequence of original sin and leads us to seek self in all things. In Carmelite teaching, it predisposes us to sensory excess by resisting mortification, fearing trials and seeking pleasures of all kinds. And our spirit suffers too through deeply ingrained egoism that must be pulled up by the roots so that we become less reliant on our personal opinions and preferences which so often lie at the root of our conflicts with others. In short, we must learn to be wary of trusting too much in self.

The devil, recognizing our weakness, seeks to exploit our natural self to his advantage. He appeals to our pride by inflating our opinion of our self and he causes charity to grow cold by inducing us to acts of self-love. His spirit is marked by anxiety ... fear ... agitation ... dissension ... confusion ... doubt ... insecurity ... even despair. We can always tell his presence in our soul for he enters, as St. Ignatius teaches “like a banging gong.”

The spirit of God, on the other hand, is the opposite of this. He inspires us to humility not pride; *selfless* giving not *selfish* seeking. His spirit fosters charity, zeal and all the virtues to blossom ... growth in which St. Teresa teaches is the only true test if a prayerful experience is from God. He gives us patience in trial, love of the cross and love of enemies. His gift is peace - with our selves and others. More so, He gives a peace that is grounded in true interior joy.

So how can we begin to sort out the various spirits that are continually at work in our souls? Well, St. Ignatius’ Spiritual Exercises are one of the Churches greatest teachings on the discernment of spirits . . . a wonderful complement to what our own Carmelite masters show!

Following is a brief overview of some of the basic principles of discernment from the Ignatian and Carmelite traditions; the purpose of which is to help us “distinguish inspiration from instigation and grace from temptation so as to be able to respond to the one and resist the other.” (Fr. Hardon, Discernment of Spirits)

### **ATTITUDE**

The first principle of discernment has to do with our attitude. Attitude, according to Father Hardon, is an almost un-definable term that encompasses all aspects of our spiritual life. In short, *our attitude is what leads us to seek God’s will in all things.* And learning to seek His will, of course, is what our life in Carmel is all about.

In the context of discernment, our attitude is primarily focused on the first spirit mentioned: *our natural spirit.* All of us are almost continually bombarded by an array of thoughts, feelings, urges and impulses that float in and out of our consciousness and influence our actions. And more often than not ... at least in the beginning of our spiritual life ... we are blissfully un-ware of this. The result is that we become prisoners of our subconscious, causing us to instinctively respond to our deep seated nature almost like animals. This condition of our fallen nature makes discernment of our attitude exceedingly difficult. Until, that is, we train ourselves to

habitually monitor the “first movements” of our soul to determine which direction our spirit is pointing: toward God or the devil.

And for this, St. John of the Cross is most instructive. St. John teaches the importance of moderating our passions; the roots of which can be found in our first movements. We need to become aware how our exterior senses – seeing, hearing and so on – are the gateways to our soul that allows our interior sense of imagination to create “forms and images” that are often distortions of reality. And should our will cling to these distortions we become susceptible to sinful action. So dangerous is it to fall prey to first movements that are less than virtuous that St. John devotes much of his ascetic teaching of the active night of spirit on combating our deep seated impulses and passions.

The solution, as previously mentioned, is to seek habitual recollection and custody of the heart. Tellingly, St. John gives us his core teaching on this in the context of the purification of our memory . . . the faculty principally responsible for leading us astray by serving up the distorted thoughts and feelings that must be accepted or rejected by our will. As he teaches, “there is no way to union with God without annihilating the memory as to all forms” (Ascent Book 3, Chapter 2). His method, which I view as the theology behind the more simple teaching of Brother Lawrence and The Practice of the Presence of 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. They should not think or look on these things for longer than is sufficient (Ascent Book 3, Chapter 15).

In short, we pray in all times and in all ways. There’s no surer way to take our mind off ourselves than to put it on another: God or our neighbor. And true prayer that is “other-focused” begins in *affection* and leads to *simplicity*.

So recollection begins as the Prayer of the Heart. It is a loving conversation between friends; the intimate sharing of all one’s joys, hopes, sorrows and fears; deep, meaningful and profound friendship; a continuous, interior dialogue; a colloquy, or sometimes just a brief aspiration. And it is, in St. Teresa’s teaching, the way of prayer that should become our normal state.

But the Prayer of Heart isn’t the end of the road. No, the fruit of affection is the Prayer of Simplicity: those brief and intermittent times when the soul becomes so utterly filled with Christ that dialogue is no longer helpful; in fact it’s a hindrance. These are the “I look at Him and He looks at me” times. The soul possesses Him in full and words become redundant; silent

interior adoration is the way we speak at such times. Though not yet infused contemplation, it is as close to it as we can come while our prayer is still in an active state.

## PEACE

The second principle of discernment has to do with interior peace. Here the focus is discerning the spirit of God as He guides our thoughts and feelings. Fr. Hardon provides this wonderful synopsis of Ignatian teaching:

One of the best, in fact *the best way*, of distinguishing between temptation and grace is to find out whether it brings peace or anxiety to our soul. This is the way He directs us: when He speaks and when we wish to know whether it is He who is leading us, let's remind ourselves that the sound of grace is peace. The form of grace is peace. The taste of grace is peace. The effect of grace is peace, or summarily, the name of grace is peace (Fr. Hardon, Discernment of Spirits).

Thus, when discerning some major life decision an important consideration is the degree to which peace flows from that decision. And consolation is the sign of that peace; it is the essential go or no-go indicator we need prior to acting on any inspiration we receive.

In his Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius describes three forms consolation might take:

- 1) An intense interior experience of joy through which the soul comes to be inflamed with love of God
- 2) An experience of sadness or sorrow through tears which, likewise, move one to the love of God
- 3) Any increase of faith, hope or love which attracts us to heavenly things, bringing quiet and peace to the soul

However, it would be a naïve application of the discernment of spirits to assume the simple presence of peace means our decision is in conformity to the will of God. No, there is such a thing as *counterfeit consolation* and *false peace* that come through the devil acting as an angel of light. Spiritual persons, in particular, are at great risk to these cunning maneuvers. So our peace must be tested. To do this, St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises show us we must examine two additional aspects: whether the peace we receive is with cause or without cause.

All of us have probably experienced consolation with cause: for example, gazing upon a beautiful sunset and having our hearts moved to the love of God or, perhaps, kneeling before the tabernacle and feeling inspired to a particular course of action. Certainly this could be the working of the Holy Spirit . . . but we must also be aware that the simple presence of a "cause"

of our consolation means the possibility of misunderstanding of God's action and intent due to the filtering we do in our natural spirit.

St. John of the Cross addresses this in his teaching on successive locutions . . . or more simply those times we feel our thoughts are inspired. As he teaches,

Anyone having this experience cannot help but think that these thoughts come from another. This is one of the Holy Spirit's methods of teaching (Ascent Book 2, Chapter 29)

However,

The light is often so delicate and spiritual that the intellect does not succeed in being completely informed by it; and it is the intellect that forms the ideas of its own power. Consequently, the thought is often false (Ascent Book 2, Chapter 29)

Thus, the risk to spiritual souls is great. We "baptize our opinion" as the working of the Holy Spirit leading us to say "God told me" or "God answered me." (Ascent Book 2, Chapter 29) Embraced this way, consolations *with cause* can be a serious obstacle to divine union. Our Carmelite attitude toward them should be one of detachment and not being so quick to trust our interpretation. In Ignatian terms, these spirits must be tested through confirmation by other means; typically the opinion of a wise and competent guide . . . or, as St. Teresa would say: a "learned man."

Contrast this, now, with consolation *without cause* ... the loving, peaceful inflow of God into our soul regardless of what we were doing at the time. St. John of the Cross teaches the way we perceive this is as a "touch:" a sudden and unexpected remembrance of God that brings great peace ... delight ... certitude and tranquility to our soul. Since we experience touches as coming from out of the blue, they can always be trusted for they are, by nature, infused:

These touches engender such sweetness and intimate delight in the soul that one of them would more than compensate for all the trials suffered in life, even though innumerable. Through these touches individuals become so courageous and so resolved to suffer many things for Christ (Ascent Book 2, Chapter 26).

And our approach toward them differs from the peace flowing from consolation *with cause*:

Since this knowledge is imparted to the soul suddenly, without the exercise of free will, individuals do not have to be concerned about desiring it or not (or interpreting correctly) . . . I do not say that people should behave negatively regarding this knowledge as they should with the other kind (Ascent Book 2, Chapter 26).

## **CONFIDENCE**

The third principle of discernment of spirits concerns confidence. If the precondition for being able to distinguish inspiration from temptation is an attitude of the heart for a ready willingness to do God's will . . . and if our decision is confirmed by His peace . . . then we should trust completely that He will never deceive us or lead us astray. So once we have discerned what God wants we are to go ahead and not look back by re-examining things. Our Saints teach us God will never inspire us to do more than we can handle. This is not to say, though, that things will always be easy. The Gospel and all of Scripture are very clear on that!

The true test of our confidence concerns the flip side of consolation . . . *desolation*. Desolation may come through God's hand as a means to wean us from attachment to consolation or it may be a manipulative tactic of the devil preying on our natural weaknesses. Regardless the source, St. Ignatius describes desolation as:

a darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness rising from many disturbances, and temptations which lead to want of faith, hope and charity. The desolate soul is wholly slothful, tepid, sad and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord. (St. Ignatius, Spiritual Exercises #317)

If this sounds similar to the way St. John of the Cross describes the Dark Night, it's because it is! Both Ignatius and John use the terms of the *purgative*, *illuminative* and *unitive* ways throughout their teachings. Their meanings, though, are a little different.

St. John of the Cross is concerned with broad stages of our life that span months or years where one of these ways tends to be the dominant characteristic. And the Dark Nights are the crisis points that mark our transition from one way to another. So too is it with St. Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises but his concept of time is quite different. With him we are not speaking so much of a broad stage of our life but rather the differing modes of our decision making process. So any discernment we make will likely have discrete purgative, illuminative and unitive moments. And desolation is a big part of that . . . a mini-night as it were.

And both Ignatian and Carmelite spirituality teach a similar response to desolation: we are to persevere. Cycles of consolation and desolation are part of the purifying process by which we become spiritually free. St. Ignatius provides simple instructions on how to behave in desolate times; guidelines that will be very familiar to us Carmelites:

- wait patiently and trust that God will return in due time in consolation;
- immerse ourselves more deeply in prayer and, most important
- do not change the course of action we decided on but stick with it.

Attitude . . . peace . . . confidence: three necessary conditions in discerning spirits in making good life decisions. The purpose of which is to make us ever more in-tune to the understanding

of God's will. We listen . . . test . . . and respond. Though in the beginning our discernment may seem very methodical and mechanical, with time, practice and grace we can come to an almost intuitive grasp of these concepts. Thinking and analyzing is slowly replaced by knowing, perceiving and doing: the fruit of prayer and especially contemplation.

In short, we don't think much but love much.

Saints of Carmel . . . pray for us that we may always discern His will in our lives and that the Holy Spirit may be our constant companion, guide, teacher and friend . . . leading us always to Christ our Lord and the Father who sent Him. Amen.