THE DAILY BREAD

The Acts of the Apostles



Discernment of Spirits

A FORMATION BOOK BY

Kendall Peterson

The Everyday Apostle

THE DAILY BREAD

Spiritual Warfare

Discernment of Spirits

Reading the Movements of Your Heart

✦ ✦ ✦

A Daily Bread Formation Book

The Everyday Apostle

INTRODUCTION

The Voices Inside You

Sit still for a moment and pay attention to your own interior life, and you will notice it is not silent. There are movements in there: pulls and stirrings, attractions and aversions, moods that rise and fall, thoughts that arrive unbidden, a sense of being drawn toward one thing and repelled from another. Some of these movements lift you toward God, toward hope, toward love, toward life. Others pull you down, toward discouragement, toward anxiety, toward the things that leave you empty. And most men move through their days with no idea that these interior movements can be read, that they come from identifiable sources, and that learning to tell them apart is one of the most important skills in the whole spiritual life.

This skill has a name: the discernment of spirits. It is the art of recognizing the different movements that arise in the human heart, understanding where they come from, and knowing how to respond to each. The name sounds esoteric, but the reality is intensely practical, because a man is being pulled and pushed interiorly all day long, and whether he knows it or not, he is constantly responding to these movements, following some and resisting others, and the quality of his whole life depends heavily on whether he follows the right ones. The man who cannot discern is at the mercy of every interior movement, unable to tell the pull of God from the pull of the enemy from the pull of his own disordered desires. The man who can discern has learned to read his own interior life, to recognize God's movements and follow them, and to recognize the enemy's and resist them. This is not a minor spiritual refinement. It is close to the center of the spiritual battle.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God. — 1 John 4:1

That command, to test the spirits, assumes exactly what this book is about: that the movements within us come from different sources, that not every interior pull is from God, and that a man must learn to test them rather than following each one blindly. The great teacher of this art in the Christian tradition is Saint Ignatius of Loyola, who, out of his own long experience of paying attention to the movements of his heart, worked out a set of rules for discernment that the Church has treasured for five centuries. This book is a guide to those rules, translated for the ordinary man and his ordinary interior life.

It is worth pausing on how much of a life is quietly shaped by these unexamined movements. A man does not usually decide, in a clear act of reason, to grow discouraged and abandon his prayer; he simply follows a desolation he never named, letting it carry him, and one day realizes he has stopped praying and does not quite know why. He does not usually reason his way into a bad decision; he follows a pull he mistook for his own good judgment, and only later discovers where it led. A great deal of what happens in a man's spiritual life, and much of what happens in his ordinary life, is the result of following interior movements he never examined, never named, never questioned. He was steered by them, unknowingly, and called the steering his own choices. To learn discernment is to bring this whole hidden process into the light, to stop being unconsciously steered by movements from sources he cannot see, and to become instead a man who reads the movements, knows their sources, and chooses which to follow. This is a kind of freedom most men never attain, the freedom of a man who is no longer at the mercy of his own unexamined interior life, and it is worth the effort it takes to gain.

We will look at what discernment is and the three sources of our interior movements. We will learn the two central realities, consolation and desolation, that a man must learn to recognize. We will study the rules for what to do in each, especially the crucial rules for desolation, which can save a man from some of the worst mistakes of his life. We will see how the enemy works differently on different men, and how he disguises himself as an angel of light. And we will connect all of it to the daily practice of the Examen, which is discernment's training ground. This book belongs in the spiritual warfare section of this library because discernment is, in large part, how the spiritual battle is actually fought, in the reading and the answering of the movements of the heart.

The aim is that you learn to read the voices inside you, to tell which are from God and which are not, and to respond to each as a man who has learned the rules of the interior battle rather than one blown about by every movement he cannot name.

CHAPTER ONE

The Three Sources

Where the Movements Come From

The foundation of discernment is understanding that the movements within you do not all come from the same place. The tradition identifies three sources of the interior movements a man experiences, and learning to think in terms of these three is the beginning of discernment.

From God and His Good Spirit

Some interior movements come from God, drawing a man toward himself, toward faith and hope and love, toward the good, toward his true peace and his true purpose. These movements are the action of God and his good spirit within a man, the gentle drawing of grace, the promptings of the Holy Spirit, the interior stirrings that lead toward God and life. The whole aim of the spiritual life is, in a sense, to learn to recognize these movements and to follow them, to become responsive to the God who is constantly drawing, so that a man's life comes increasingly under the guidance of the good spirit within him. Much of discernment is learning to recognize the distinctive character of God's movements, so that a man can follow them with confidence.

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. — Romans 8:14

From the Enemy

Other interior movements come from the enemy of the soul, the evil spirit, who works to draw a man away from God, toward discouragement, toward sin, toward the false and the empty. This is a reality the modern man is tempted to dismiss, but the whole Christian tradition, and the plain teaching of Scripture, affirms that there is an enemy who tempts, who accuses, who discourages, who works through the interior movements to draw a man away from God. The enemy does not usually announce himself; he works subtly, through movements that can feel like they arise from within a man himself, which is exactly why discernment is necessary. A man who does not know that some of his interior movements come from an enemy will follow them, thinking they are simply his own thoughts and feelings, and be led astray. Learning to recognize the enemy's characteristic movements, and to resist them, is a central part of the discernment and of the spiritual battle.

From Ourselves

And many interior movements come simply from ourselves, from our own temperament, our moods, our bodily state, our habits and wounds and desires. Not every movement is from God or the enemy; much of what stirs within us arises from our own psychology, our fatigue, our hunger, our history, the ordinary weather of a human interior life. This matters, because a man can misread an ordinary bad mood as a spiritual desolation, or an ordinary good feeling as a divine consolation, when in fact it is just the effect of a poor night's sleep or a good meal. Discernment includes learning to recognize what arises simply from ourselves, so as not to over-spiritualize the ordinary fluctuations of temperament and body. Wisdom in discernment means neither dismissing the genuine

action of God and the enemy nor attributing to them what is merely the ordinary weather of the self.

How Ignatius Learned This

The whole Ignatian art of discernment was born from one man's discovery of these differing sources in his own experience, and the story, told more fully in the book on the Examen, is worth recalling here. Ignatius, recovering from a battle wound with nothing to read but a life of Christ and a book of saints, noticed that his daydreams came in two kinds: dreams of worldly glory and dreams of serving God like the saints. Both were pleasant in the moment, but he observed that the worldly daydreams left him dry and empty afterward, while the dreams of serving God left a lasting peace and joy. From this simple observation, that different interior movements leave different traces, that they can be told apart by their fruits, that some lead to lasting peace and others to emptiness, grew the entire tradition of Ignatian discernment. Ignatius had stumbled onto the fundamental truth: that the movements of the heart come from different sources and can be distinguished by careful attention to their character and their fruit. Everything in this book is a development of that first discovery, made by a bored soldier paying honest attention to the aftertaste of his own daydreams. And what he discovered, any man can discover, by the same honest attention to the movements within him.

CHAPTER TWO

Consolation and Desolation

The Two Realities to Recognize

At the heart of Ignatian discernment are two realities that a man must learn to recognize in his own experience, because nearly all the rules concern how to respond to them. They are called spiritual consolation and spiritual desolation, and it is essential to understand them precisely, because they are easily confused with mere good and bad feelings, which they are not.

Spiritual Consolation

Spiritual consolation is any interior movement that draws a man toward God, that increases his faith, hope, and love, that brings him a deep peace and joy in the things of God, that lifts his heart toward his Creator. It is not the same as mere pleasure or good feeling; a man can feel pleasant for entirely worldly reasons that have nothing to do with God. Spiritual consolation specifically orients a man toward God, quickening his love,

strengthening his hope, drawing him upward and onward in the spiritual life, often bringing a deep and quiet peace, sometimes tears of devotion, always a movement toward faith and love and God. When a man experiences consolation, he feels drawn to God, capable of virtue, hopeful, at peace in the deepest part of himself even amid external difficulty. This is the movement, whatever its intensity, that lifts a man toward God, and learning to recognize it is half of discernment.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness. — Galatians 5:22

Spiritual Desolation

Spiritual desolation is the opposite: an interior movement that draws a man away from God, toward darkness, turmoil, discouragement, and the lower things. In desolation a man feels his faith, hope, and love grow cold; he feels distant from God, listless in prayer, tempted to discouragement and even despair, drawn toward the empty and the sinful, sad and restless and heavy in the things of God. Again, this is not the same as mere unpleasant feeling; a man can feel bad for ordinary reasons. Spiritual desolation specifically turns a man away from God, dampening his faith, draining his hope, cooling his love, drawing him downward toward discouragement and the lower things. When a man is in desolation, God can seem absent, prayer can seem pointless, the spiritual life can seem not worth the effort, and he feels pulled toward giving up, toward comfort, toward sin. Learning to recognize desolation for what it is, an identifiable spiritual state with characteristic marks, is the other half of discernment, and it is the more urgent half, because the rules for desolation can save a man from grave error.

Why the Distinction Is Everything

Everything in discernment turns on learning to recognize which of these two states a man is in, because, as we will see, the right response to each is different, and often the opposite of what a man′s instinct would suggest. The man who cannot tell consolation from desolation is like a sailor who cannot tell a fair wind from a storm; he will make decisions in the storm that he should only make in calm, and follow movements in the darkness that will wreck him. But the man who has learned to recognize consolation and desolation, and who knows the rules for each, can navigate his interior life with a skill that protects him from the enemy′s most effective tactics and keeps him following the movements of God. The whole practical power of discernment flows from this basic recognition, so a man does well to learn these two realities thoroughly and to watch for them in his own experience until he can name them readily.

Not the Same as Moods

It bears repeating, because the confusion is so common, that consolation and desolation in the spiritual sense are not the same as good and bad moods, and mistaking the one for the other leads a man badly astray. A man can be in a cheerful mood for entirely worldly reasons, a good meal, a sunny day, a bit of success, and this is not spiritual consolation, because it does not draw him toward God. A man can be in a low mood from fatigue or stress or a gray sky, and this is not necessarily spiritual desolation, because it may have nothing to do with his relationship to God. The distinction is in the direction: spiritual consolation, whatever the accompanying mood, draws a man toward God, faith, hope, and love; spiritual desolation, whatever the accompanying mood, draws him away from them. A man can even be in a difficult mood, tired and burdened, and yet be in genuine spiritual consolation, drawn toward God in the midst of the difficulty; and he can be in a pleasant mood and yet in spiritual desolation, subtly drawn away from God even as he feels fine. Learning to look past the surface mood to the underlying spiritual direction, toward God or away from him, is essential, because the enemy is glad to hide a desolation under a pleasant mood, or to convince a man that an ordinary low mood is a spiritual crisis. Watch the direction, not merely the feeling, and the two realities become possible to tell apart.

CHAPTER THREE

The Rules for Desolation

What to Do in the Darkness

Of all the wisdom of discernment, the rules for desolation are the most practically important, because desolation is where men make their worst spiritual mistakes, and because the right response to desolation is almost always the opposite of what a man's instinct tells him. Learn these rules and you will avoid errors that wreck many spiritual lives.

Never Make a Change in Desolation

The first and most important rule is this: in time of desolation, never make a major change; hold to the decisions and commitments you made in time of consolation or peace. This single rule has saved countless souls from disaster, because desolation is precisely the state in which a man is tempted to abandon what he committed to when he saw clearly. In desolation, prayer feels pointless, so a man is tempted to quit praying; the spiritual life feels not worth it, so he is tempted to abandon it; a commitment he made in a time of clarity now feels like a mistake, so he is tempted to reverse it. And the rule says:

do not. The desolation is distorting your vision; the decisions you made in consolation or calm were made when you could see truly, and you must hold to them now, when you cannot. Whatever you are tempted to change or abandon in desolation, hold firm, wait for the desolation to pass, and do not let the darkness undo what the light established. This one rule, faithfully kept, protects a man from most of the worst decisions of the spiritual life.

Consider how this plays out in a real life. A man commits, in a time of clarity and peace, to a serious rule of prayer, to weekly Confession, to a hard but right course in his marriage or his work. For a while it goes well. Then desolation comes, as it always does: the prayer goes dry, the effort feels pointless, the whole commitment now seems, in the gray light of the desolation, like a mistake he made in a burst of unrealistic fervor. Every instinct tells him to scale it back, to quit, to reverse the decision. This is the exact moment the rule addresses, and the rule is emphatic: do not. He made that commitment when he could see clearly, in consolation or calm, and the desolation is not showing him a truth the consolation hid; it is distorting a vision that was clear before. If he quits now, he will almost certainly regret it when the desolation lifts and he sees clearly again, and wonders why he abandoned something good in a passing darkness. So he holds firm, keeps the commitment through the dry stretch, changes nothing, and waits. And when the desolation passes, as it does, he is grateful he held on, and stronger for having done so. This is the rule in action, and a man who learns it will be spared a long series of regrets.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering. — Hebrews 10:23

Act Against It

The second rule is to act against the desolation rather than yielding to it. Since desolation pulls a man toward doing less, praying less, giving up, the response is to do the opposite: to pray more, not less; to lean into the spiritual practices the desolation makes him want to abandon; to insist, against the pull, on continuing and even intensifying the good he is tempted to drop. This acting against, this deliberate resistance to the direction desolation is pulling, both strengthens a man and often shortens the desolation, because the enemy, seeing that his desolation is producing more prayer rather than less, has less reason to continue it. When you feel the pull to give up, do the opposite: hold your ground and press forward, adding a little to your prayer rather than subtracting from it, refusing the direction the desolation wants to take you.

Be Patient, and Remember It Will Pass

The third counsel is patience, remembering that desolation is temporary and will pass, and that consolation will return. Desolation feels permanent while it lasts; a man in it can genuinely believe it will never lift, that God has departed for good, that this is simply how things are now. It is not. Desolation passes, as all weather passes, and consolation returns in its season. Remembering this, a man can endure the desolation with patience, holding on, waiting it out, trusting that it will end, rather than making desperate decisions out of the false belief that it is permanent. The man in desolation should say to himself: this will pass, God has not abandoned me, I have only to hold on and wait, and the light will return. This patience, grounded in the knowledge that desolation is temporary, is one of a man's chief supports in the dark times.

Why God Allows It

It helps, finally, to understand why God permits desolation at all, because knowing its purposes helps a man endure it rightly. God allows desolation for good reasons: to test and strengthen a man, teaching him to serve God not for the sake of good feelings but out of pure fidelity; to keep him humble, showing him that consolation is a gift he cannot manufacture or deserve; and to deepen his reliance on God rather than on his own spiritual comfort. The desolation, rightly endured, does a man good, purifying his love, teaching him to seek God rather than God's consolations, strengthening the fidelity that holds on in the dark. So a man need not panic in desolation or conclude he has done something wrong; often the desolation is God's own work, forming him more deeply, and his task is simply to endure it faithfully, holding to his commitments, acting against the pull, waiting in patience for the return of the light, and trusting that the dark time itself is being used for his good.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Rules for Consolation

What to Do in the Light

Consolation seems to need no rules; when a man feels drawn to God, at peace, full of faith and love, what is there to do but enjoy it? But discernment has wisdom for the times of consolation too, and neglecting it leaves a man unprepared for the desolation that will follow and vulnerable to the enemy's subtler tricks.

Store Up Strength for the Desolation to Come

The first counsel for consolation is to use it to prepare for the desolation that will come. Since a man knows that desolation follows consolation as surely as night follows day, the time of consolation is the time to store up strength for the coming darkness: to deepen his resolve, to lay in the spiritual resources he will need, to remember, while he can see clearly, the truths he will be tempted to doubt in the dark. A man in consolation should say to himself: this will not last, desolation will come, and I must use this light to prepare for that darkness, fixing in my mind now the commitments and truths I will need to hold onto when the darkness makes me doubt them. This foresight, using the good times to prepare for the hard ones, is a mark of the discerning man, and it means that when desolation comes, he meets it braced and ready rather than blindsided.

The wise store up knowledge. — Proverbs 10:14

Stay Humble

The second counsel is humility, remembering in consolation that it is a gift, not an achievement. The danger of consolation is that a man begins to take credit for it, to think he has earned it by his spiritual efforts, to grow proud, and pride is the great destroyer. So in consolation a man should remain humble, remembering that the consolation is a free gift of God that he did not manufacture and does not deserve, receiving it with gratitude rather than pride, and remembering how little he could do in the time of desolation, when the gift was withdrawn. This humility keeps consolation from becoming an occasion of the pride that would poison it, and keeps a man grateful and dependent rather than self-satisfied.

Discern the Source Even of Consolation

And there is a subtler wisdom: even consolation must sometimes be discerned, because not every consolation comes from God. The enemy can produce a kind of false consolation, a good feeling that leads, in the end, toward something bad, and a man must learn to discern the source even of his consolations by examining where they lead. This brings us to one of the most important insights in all of discernment, which the next chapter takes up: that the source of an interior movement is often revealed not by how it feels at the start but by where it leads in the end. A consolation that begins sweetly but leads, by its trajectory, toward pride, or away from God, or into something disordered, did not come from God, however good it felt at the outset. Learning to trace the trajectory of an interior movement, and not merely to feel its initial quality, is essential to mature discernment, and it is the enemy's disguise as an angel of light that makes it necessary.

There is one further distinction Ignatius drew about consolation that helps a man discern its source: consolation that comes with a clear preceding cause, and consolation that

comes without any preceding cause, arising suddenly and wholly as a gift. A consolation that arises directly from God, without any prior thought or object a man engaged, drawing him wholly and suddenly into love, carries a special certainty, because in it there is no room for the enemy to have inserted himself; it comes straight from God. But when a consolation follows from some preceding thought or reflection or object, a man must be more careful, because here the enemy can work, prompting a good-seeming thought that produces a good feeling that leads, in the end, astray. This is subtle territory, and a beginner need not master its every nuance; the practical point is simply that consolation with a cause, following from something a man was thinking or doing, deserves the same tracing of its trajectory as any other movement, watching where it leads before trusting it fully. The enemy can counterfeit consolation, and the counterfeit is unmasked, as always, by where it tends. Even our sweetest interior movements, then, are read within the whole art of discernment, traced to their endings, tested against the truth, and not simply trusted because they feel good.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Angel of Light

How the Enemy Disguises Himself

The most dangerous tactic of the enemy is not the obvious temptation to obvious evil, which a serious man can usually recognize and resist. It is the subtle temptation disguised as good, the enemy appearing, as Scripture warns, as an angel of light. Understanding this tactic is among the most important lessons in discernment, especially for the man who is genuinely trying to follow God.

The Enemy Adapts to the Man

The enemy does not work the same way on every man. On the man who is moving away from God, deep in sin and heading deeper, the enemy has an easy task, and he works to keep the man comfortable, proposing pleasures, quieting the conscience, making the wide road smooth. But on the man who is seriously moving toward God, the enemy cannot easily tempt to obvious evil, which such a man would reject; so he changes tactics, and works instead under the appearance of good. This is crucial for the serious man to understand, because it means that the more he progresses, the subtler the enemy's attacks become, no longer crude temptations to obvious sin but refined suggestions dressed as good, even holy, things. The man advancing toward God must therefore be

more discerning, not less, precisely because the enemy has shifted from the frontal assault, which failed, to the disguised approach, which is far harder to detect.

Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. — 2 Corinthians 11:14

Good Beginnings, Bad Endings

How does a man detect the enemy disguised as good? By tracing the trajectory of the movement, watching not only where it begins but where it leads. A temptation from the enemy disguised as good will often begin well, with a genuinely good or holy suggestion, but if followed, it gradually turns, leading the man, by degrees, toward something disordered, or discouraging, or proud, or away from God, until at the end it arrives somewhere the good beginning concealed. The tell is the trajectory: a movement that begins good but ends badly, that starts with a holy thought but leads by steps into turmoil or pride or excess or discouragement, reveals its true source in its ending, however good its beginning appeared. This is why the discerning man learns to watch where his interior movements lead, to trace the whole arc and not merely feel the initial quality, because the enemy hides his hand in a good beginning and reveals it only in the bad end. When a seemingly good movement leads a man, over time, toward anxiety, or pride, or excess, or coldness toward God, he has learned to recognize the angel of light for what it is.

An example makes the tactic concrete. A man who has taken up prayer and fasting begins to feel drawn to do far more, to pray for hours, to fast severely, to take on heroic penances, and the suggestion feels holy, even inspired. Where could such a desire come from but God? But watch the trajectory. If he follows it, the excessive regime leaves him exhausted, irritable with his family, neglectful of his duties, and secretly proud of his spiritual achievements, and before long it collapses entirely and he is worse off than before, discouraged and further from God. The beginning looked holy; the ending was pride, the neglect of duty, and collapse. That trajectory reveals the source: it was the enemy disguised as an angel of light, using a good-seeming desire to lead the man, by degrees, into pride and excess and eventual ruin, which he could never have proposed directly to a man seriously seeking God. The good spirit, by contrast, would have drawn the man toward a sustainable, humble, duty-honoring practice that bore quiet fruit over time. The difference is not in the holy-seeming beginning, which both could share, but in the ending, toward which each was tending all along. This is why the discerning man always traces the whole arc, and is suspicious of the holy-seeming suggestion that would lead him, if followed, toward pride, or excess, or the neglect of his real duties, however luminous its beginning.

The Marks of the Two Spirits

Ignatius gave a further clue in the characteristic feel of the two spirits at work in a man moving toward God. In the man advancing toward God, the good spirit tends to bring courage, strength, consolation, peace, and a lifting up, gently supporting his progress; while the enemy tends to bring anxiety, sadness, false obstacles, and a gnawing disturbance, working to halt his progress. So in the man seriously moving toward God, a movement that brings peace, courage, and quiet strength tends to be from the good spirit, while a movement that brings anxiety, turmoil, discouragement, and disturbance tends to be from the enemy, even when it wears a pious disguise. The gentleness and peace of the good spirit, against the disturbance and anxiety of the enemy, is one of the surest marks by which a man moving toward God can discern the source of his interior movements. Watch, then, for the quality of peace or disturbance, and for the trajectory toward or away from God, and the enemy's disguise begins to fail.

CHAPTER SIX

The Examen as Training Ground

Where Discernment Is Learned

Discernment is not learned from a book alone; it is learned by practice, by the daily attention to one's interior movements over months and years, until a man develops a trained instinct for reading them. And the great daily school of this practice is the Examen, the prayer of reviewing the day, which the companion book in this library treats at length. Here we connect the two, because the Examen is where the rules of discernment become a living skill.

Daily Practice in Reading the Movements

The Examen, as that book describes, includes a review of the day in which a man notices the interior movements he experienced, where he felt drawn toward God and where he felt pulled away, the consolations and desolations of the day. This daily review is precisely the practice ground of discernment. Each night, in the Examen, a man practices recognizing consolation and desolation in his own experience, tracing where the movements led, noticing the characteristic marks of the good and evil spirits, until, through daily repetition, the recognition becomes second nature. The rules of discernment that seem abstract on the page become concrete and instinctive through the nightly practice of the Examen, where a man applies them, again and again, to the actual movements of his actual days. A man who wants to grow in discernment should therefore

pray the Examen faithfully, treating it as the daily gymnasium in which the discerning instinct is trained.

Test everything; hold fast what is good. — 1 Thessalonians 5:21

From Daily Movements to Major Decisions

This daily training bears its greatest fruit in the major decisions of life. The man who has spent months and years reading the small movements of his ordinary days, learning through the Examen to recognize consolation and desolation and to trace their sources, has developed exactly the sensitivity he needs when a genuine crossroads comes. Facing a major decision, he can bring his discerning instinct to bear, praying over the options, noticing which brings the deep peace and consolation that tends to mark God′s leading and which brings the disturbance and desolation that tends to mark a wrong turn, applying the rules of discernment to the choice before him. The great decisions of a life, a vocation, a major commitment, a significant change, are navigated far better by the man who has trained his discernment daily than by the man who reaches the crossroads with no such skill. So the daily Examen is not only for the small movements of ordinary days; it is the long training that prepares a man to discern rightly when the great decisions come, and to find, in them, the leading of God.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wisdom and Cautions

Practicing Discernment Rightly

Discernment is powerful, but it can be practiced badly, and a few cautions keep a man from the errors that discernment, wrongly handled, can produce. The subtlety that makes discernment valuable also makes it possible to go wrong, and humility about this is itself a mark of good discernment.

Do Not Over-Analyze

The first caution is against over-analysis, the turning of discernment into a paralyzing, anxious scrutiny of every interior flicker. Discernment is meant to free a man, not to trap him in endless self-examination, and a man can misuse it by becoming so preoccupied with analyzing his every movement that he is paralyzed, unable to act, lost in interior scrupulosity. This is itself often a tactic of the enemy, who is glad to see a man so tangled in analyzing his interior life that he cannot move. Discernment should be light, not

obsessive; a man notices the movements, applies the rules with a certain ease, and gets on with living, rather than subjecting every stirring to anxious dissection. If discernment is producing anxiety and paralysis rather than peace and freedom, it has been misused, and the remedy is to hold it more lightly, trusting God, and to seek the counsel of a wise guide.

God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control. — 2 Timothy 1:7

Seek a Wise Guide

The second and most important caution is that discernment, especially in significant matters, should not be practiced in isolation, but with the help of a wise and experienced guide. A spiritual director, a wise priest, a mature and trusted Christian who understands the interior life, can see what a man cannot see in himself, can check his discernment against an experienced eye, and can save him from the self-deception to which we are all prone when reading our own hearts. This is the consistent counsel of the whole tradition: that in important discernment a man should seek guidance, submitting his reading of his own interior movements to someone wiser, precisely because it is so easy to deceive ourselves. The man who discerns entirely alone, trusting only his own reading, is vulnerable to error and to the enemy's subtler deceptions in a way that the man who submits his discernment to a wise guide is not. Especially for major decisions, and always when a man is uncertain, the counsel of a wise guide is not a sign of weak discernment but of mature discernment, which knows its own limits and seeks the help God provides through others.

Ground It in the Church and the Scriptures

Finally, all discernment must be grounded in and checked against the objective truths of the faith, the teaching of the Church and the Scriptures, never set against them. Genuine discernment never leads a man to act against the clear teaching of the Church or the commandments of God; a supposed interior movement that would lead a man to sin, or to defy the Church's clear teaching, is by that very fact revealed as not from God, however it presents itself. The interior movements are read within the objective framework of the faith, not against it, and where a movement conflicts with the clear moral teaching of the Church, the teaching decides, and the movement is rejected. This grounding protects discernment from becoming a private guidance system that a man uses to justify whatever he wants; true discernment always operates within the truth God has revealed, and a movement that leads outside that truth is thereby known to be false. Keep discernment always tethered to the Church and the Scriptures, and it will not lead you astray.

CONCLUSION

The Trained Ear of the Heart

Return to where we began, to the movements inside you, the pulls and stirrings that fill your interior life and that most men never learn to read. This book has offered the tradition′s wisdom for reading them: that they come from three sources, God, the enemy, and ourselves; that they take the two great forms of consolation and desolation, which a man must learn to recognize; that desolation has its rules, above all never to make a change in the darkness, to act against the pull, and to wait in patience for the light to return; that consolation, too, has its wisdom, to store up strength and stay humble; that the enemy disguises himself as an angel of light, revealed by the trajectory of the movements he prompts and the disturbance he brings; and that all of it is learned through the daily practice of the Examen and practiced rightly with humility, a wise guide, and grounding in the Church.

What all of this builds, over time, is a trained ear of the heart, an instinct for the interior life that can hear, in the movements within, the voice of God and distinguish it from the voice of the enemy and the noise of the self. This is one of the great achievements of the spiritual life, and it does not come quickly; it is built slowly, through daily attention, through the faithful practice of the Examen, through the humble seeking of guidance, through years of learning to read the movements of the heart. But the man who builds it possesses something of immense value: the ability to navigate his interior life with skill, to follow the movements of God and resist those of the enemy, to make the great decisions of his life in the light of a trained discernment, to fight the spiritual battle where it is actually fought, in the reading and answering of the movements within.

So begin to pay attention. Learn the two realities, consolation and desolation, and watch for them in your own experience. Learn the rules, above all the rules for desolation that can save you from grave error. Pray the Examen daily, and let it train your discernment. Seek a wise guide for the important discernments, and keep everything grounded in the Church and the Scriptures. And over time, you will find developing in you the trained ear of the heart, the discerning instinct that can hear the voice of God amid the noise, and follow it, through the consolations and the desolations, toward the God who is always, beneath all the movements, drawing you to himself.

The voices are inside you, and they can be read. Learn to read them, and you will have gained one of the great skills of the spiritual life, and a weapon for the battle that is fought, finally, in the movements of the human heart.

✦ ✦ ✦

Discernment of Spirits: Reading the Movements of Your Heart is part of The Daily Bread Library.

The Everyday Apostle · everydayapostle.com