

Discernment and Self-honesty: Wisdom from the Benedictines

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The practice of discernment of spirits can increase the self-honesty we need for decision-making in life. Benedictine practices help us notice and reflect on what moves within – imaginings, emotions, inclinations, desires – and then act on that understanding. The Christian tradition of discernment of inner movements began with the desert tradition, continued with Saint Benedict and was given modern expression by Saint Ignatius. The ultimate intention is to grow in loving relationship with God, others and even with self.

Opening Prayer: God desires inner freedom for us

God wants us to be our true selves

—joyous, aware and living each moment to the fullest.

When we are free, we have freedom to love, freedom for service, and freedom to be in an intimate relationship and dialogue with the God who leads each of us toward life.

God desires inner freedom for us:

- To grow in self-knowledge to become more aware of my authentic self and to live out of that authenticity.
- To see myself through the loving eyes of God.
- To accept loving relationships.
- To grow in friendship with Jesus.
- To follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit.
- To discover what God is asking of me.
- To respond open-heartedly to God's invitation.
- To enter into a right relationship with all of God's creation.
- To become a disciple.

Retrieved 10-27-17 from <http://www.loyolapress.com/ignatian-inspiration-god-desires-inner-freedom-for-us.htm>

PowerPoint Presentation, Part 1 Introduction

Growing in interior freedom means:

- Accepting our humanity
- Giving ourselves wholeheartedly to relationship with God
- Becoming free of attachments that are rooted in the false self

Teresa of Avila (1515 – 1582)

“Self-knowledge is the bread that we eat every step of the way in the spiritual life.”

From The Interior Castle

The practice of discernment of spirits can increase the self-honesty we need for decision-making in life.

Benefits of discernment

Spiritual: Our God image more and more mirrors the true God

Non-Spiritual: Our relationships benefit

What is Discernment?

→ the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is not clear (*Merriam-Webster*)

→ the ability to see things for what they really are and not for what you want them to be

Discernment of spirits = discernment of interior movements

These interior movements include:

- thoughts
- imaginings
- emotions
- desires
- feelings

Discernment means

being sensitive to these movements,

reflecting on them,

understanding where they come from *and* where they lead us.

<http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/making-good-decisions/discernment-of-spirits/#sthash.BR0e4uez.dpuf>

- Discernment of interior movements prepares for discernment of individual decisions and for group discernment.
- Thoughts and imaginings are part of INTERIOR MOVEMENTS because they stir up feelings, emotions & moods.

We often don't realize that ideas by themselves are exciting, engaging
– regardless of their spiritual quality.

Why discernment is so countercultural:

We hear: "If it feels good, do it!"

Spiritual bypassing is the use of spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with our painful feelings, unresolved wounds, and developmental needs.

"We have an astonishing ability to fool ourselves, and an equally astonishing ability to cut through what's in the way of seeing more clearly."

Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us from What Really Matters,
by Robert Augustus Masters

The Christian tradition of discernment of inner movements began with the desert tradition, continued with Saint Benedict and was given "modern" expression by Saint Ignatius.

Theological Assumptions for Christian Spiritual Direction

- ❖ We are invited to respond to the initiative God takes in calling us into relationship.
- ❖ We are free to refuse the invitation.
- ❖ God is present in all human experience and can be experienced in our hearts, minds, imaginations, and bodies. *Mary Ann Scofield (1926-2012), Mercy Center, Burlingame, CA*

Emotional Intelligence

1. Sense emotions
2. Understand those emotions
3. Manage / use those emotions skillfully

Based on the work of Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer

Discernment of Spirits:

1. Notice interior movements
2. Understand where they are taking you
3. Act on that understanding

PowerPoint Presentation, Part 2

A Benedictine Foundation for Discernment: Stability & Humility

Humility is related to the Latin word “humus,” which means earth or ground.

Humility joins us to the rest of the human race.

The fruit of humility is naturalness, being ourselves in grace.

A Guide to Living in the Truth: St. Benedict's Teaching on Humility, by Michael Casey, OCSO.

PowerPoint Presentation, Part 3

Guidelines for discernment from the Rule of Benedict

Radical self-honesty &

Manifestation of thoughts to another

Our feelings and emotions do not necessarily reflect reality.

Compelling feelings tell more about our psychological state than our spiritual state.

Unconscious material can erupt with such power that it feels like “the Truth” (even God) unless recognized for what it is.

Discernment is not simply going with a gut feeling.

Radical Self-Honesty

“Is there something about sharing the secret of one’s heart with another person... which liberates in a way that solitary confession in prayer does not?”

Stewart, Columba. [The Desert Fathers on Radical Self-Honesty](http://monasticmatrix.org/commentaria/desert-fathers-radical-self-honesty) available at <http://monasticmatrix.org/commentaria/desert-fathers-radical-self-honesty>

Cooperating with grace in the Rule of Benedict

To disclose our hearts to a wise elder is to dash our thoughts on the rock that is Christ.
(*RB 7.44; 4:50*)

Manifestation of thoughts to another

If humility is truth, then a significant part of its practice must involve bringing out into the daylight of another's judgment whatever is hidden and, therefore, subject to delusion.

A Guide to Living in the Truth: St. Benedict's Teaching on Humility, Michael Casey, OCSO

Christian Spiritual Direction enables the directee

to pay attention to God's personal communication,
to respond to this personally communicating God,
to grow in intimacy with this God,
and to live out the consequences of that relationship.

Adapted from Barry and Connolly, The Practice of Spiritual Direction

PowerPoint Presentation, Part 4

Benedictine practices that support discernment

"We believe that the divine presence is everywhere." *Rule of Benedict, 19.1*

"Listen with the ear of the heart." *Prologue, Rule of Benedict*

4 Steps of *Lectio divina*

Lectio – read slowly
Meditatio – meditate on a word or phrase
Oratio – pray
Contemplatio – rest in God's presence

Lectio Divina on Life adapted from Fr. Luke Dysinger, O.S.B.

We can attend "with the ear of our heart" to our own memories.

Lectio Begin with restful silence,
then gently review the events of a given period of time.
Meditatio Seek a memory which touches the heart.
Recall the setting, the circumstances;
Explore how God seemed present or absent.
Oratio Offer the event to God in prayer.
Contemplatio Simply rest in the presence of God.

Sifting and sorting [discernment] what is of God versus
the urgings of our own ego is a lifetime endeavor.

Interior Freedom, by Ted Dunn

Our desire is to grow in loving relationship with God, others and even with self.

Closing Reflection:

Discernment of Spirits in the Prologue to the Rule of Benedict

The experience of the presence of God in love, evoking a love response, is the heart of the Prologue and a central reality of the Rule.

The means to attain spiritual discernment and spiritual growth include

- listening to the Spirit
- pondering experience
- distinguishing inner tendencies and motives
- some solitude and asceticism
- the humility of self- knowledge and self-honesty
- understanding
- judgment as evaluation and decision, and
- prayer as the abiding relationship with God.

All these means are intertwined in the words of the Prologue.

Listening leads not only to recognizing good as opposed to evil, but also to distinguishing the consolation of God's presence from the comfort of self-satisfaction, and distinguishing the desolation of God's action leading us to growth in Christ from the guilt-ridden alienation resulting from failure to respond.

Love is the motive and the means of spiritual discernment.

The ultimate end is to attain the Kingdom of God.

Adapted from Augusta Raabe, OSB, American Benedictine Review, 23 (1972): 397-423, by Becky Van Ness, Saint John's School of Theology, bvanness@csbsju.edu.

For help finding a spiritual director in the Twin Cities, you could contact Sam Rahberg at the Benedictine Center in St. Paul at srahberg@stpaulsmonastery.org. In central Minnesota, you could contact S. Josue Behnen at Saint Benedict's Monastery at jbehn@csbsju.edu.