

"A tour de force of the spiritual life!"

— Kathryn J. Hermes, FSP,
author of *Surviving Depression: A Catholic Approach*

DISCERNMENT

ACQUIRING THE HEART OF GOD



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PART I
Acquiring God's Tastes



CHAPTER 1

The Basis of Discernment

IS IT POSSIBLE FOR A REAL RELATIONSHIP between God and the human person to exist? If so, in what does it consist? Can God and someone truly communicate with and understand one another? What language do they use when they communicate? Is the language univocal, analogical, or dialectical? Does God command while people simply obey and carry out orders? Or, rather, do people on their own decide what might please God based on what they know of the divine commandments and then carry that out? Within the great divine design, is there a space for human autonomy?

The masters of the spiritual life would not approve of beginning our study of discernment by asking these questions that speak of God and the person as two separate realities. Through the work of the Holy Spirit we share in the Father's love through his Son, Jesus Christ.¹ This grace—that is, the presence of God's love in us—makes possible our access to God and to other people created in this love. And that is not all. Such divine indwelling in us means that God is no longer outside our human reality, but becomes—as Pavel Evdokimov says—an internal fact of our nature.²



Therefore, true communication exists between the Lord and us. To assure the freedom of this communication, we must make use of human thoughts and feelings. The Fathers, who usually opted for symbolic language as the language that best expressed divine-human communication,³ described discernment as prayer, truly an art of living *in* the Holy Spirit. So at this point we can define discernment as part of a lived relationship between God and the human person in which one experiences this relationship with God as one of freedom, a relationship in

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himself to us communicates himself with love, and love presupposes the recognition of a "Thou."⁴ God is Love because God is absolute communication, eternal relationship, both in the primordial act of the reciprocal love of the three divine Persons as well as in creation. In discernment, therefore, one enters into a free relationship not only with God, but also with others and even with creation, for from the moment one enters into an authentic relationship with God, one enters into an optic of love that is a living relationship with all that exists.

which one even has the possibility of creating oneself. In this sense, discernment is the art in which humans disclose themselves in the creativity of history and create history by creating themselves.

Discernment, therefore, is a relational reality, just as is faith itself. The Christian faith is a relational reality, because the God who reveals



Having this vision means understanding the interweaving of threads that bind together and connect every part of creation, and from which emerge the essential communion of everything that exists. From the moment that we see the divine reality, all these “threads”—their presence in things, in objects, and in the products of human making—instill in everything new meaning, because all things and all actions are capable of assuming a more profound significance. This is an essentially *sacramental* vision of the world by which, through the things we see, we have access to their truth.⁵ We can now say that discernment is thus the art of understanding oneself while keeping this overall cohesive structure in mind, of seeing oneself in unity because one sees with God’s eyes, eyes that see the unity of life.

Understanding Ourselves in Relationship with God

We believe in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God as an ideal or a concept would not be of great significance for us Christians. We Christians are such because Revelation communicates to us a God who is Three in One. Invoking each Person, we are, in fact, calling on the one God, since each Person exists in a relationship of indissoluble and complete unity with the other two. When we affirm belief in God the Father, we are saying at the same time that we believe in the Holy Spirit and in the Son. The same holds for each of the divine Persons: the reference to each of them automatically embraces their trinitarian communion, referring back to the other two.

In this sense, the first article of the Creed is of primary importance: “I believe in one God, *the Father*.”



To affirm belief simply in God is much more ambiguous than to affirm belief in God the Father. It would be an affirmation about God open to different interpretations, understandings, and even idolatries—from ideas to concepts to figures to rites, from abstraction on one end to a reality that is strictly sensory on the other. Believing in God the Father, however, further signifies that God is truly a reality, that he is beyond any possible manipulation, because “Father” signifies a person, and a person is not a concept but an actual reality.⁶

Saying “Father” indicates a Face, and a face—even if never seen—is always actual and conveys a precise personal reality that is objective in itself. In saying “Father,” we acknowledge the reality of God in three Persons, as well as the reality of their relationship. At the same time, however, to say “I believe in God the Father,” also means affirming an actual identity, revealing an actual Face, because those who pronounce the word “Father” declare themselves children, a relationship revealed precisely by virtue of God’s revelation as Father.⁷

The article of faith “I believe in one God the Father” points out the relationship that exists between us and God, which is precisely a child-parent relationship. Faith, therefore, is our relationship to God as children. This means then that we cannot approach the question of faith with principles or an abstract terminology.

Love Made Real Through Gratuitous Relationships

This God in whom we believe is a Person. We contemplate and adore this God as the Three in One. The three Persons in God give themselves to each other entirely



and with complete freedom. In God exists the most perfect communication. The Three in One reveals himself above all as the absence of necessity. In God, each Person gives himself to the others in an absolutely gratuitous love beyond every law of necessity. When John says that God is love, he affirms that God is free and that love entails adhering freely to the other in love, relating to the other with freedom. Without a relationship of freedom, it is impossible to love. It would be something else all together.

In God the three Persons not only love each other, but each Person also loves the divine nature each of them possesses whole and entire.⁸ Thus each divine Person possesses the nature of God, giving him an entirely personal mark—of the Father, or of the Son, or of the Holy Spirit—in such a way that their relationship also includes the nature that all the Persons possess completely, each in his own way. It is a complex relationship, but a completely gratuitous one, an attachment so gratuitous that John can say, *God is love*.

God's relationship in his most holy Persons is a communication not only in the sense that the divine Persons communicate *between* themselves, but also, above all, in the sense that they *communicate themselves* in a reciprocal love, giving themselves to each other in love. This intradivine communication is not separate from God's communication toward his creation. God not only communicates *with* creation—and above all with humans as created persons—but he *communicates himself*. It is only because God is love that we can come to know God, because love means relationship, that is, *communication*, that is, to *communicate one's self*.⁹



Our knowledge of God is not, therefore, a theoretical, abstract knowledge, but a communicative knowledge, a knowledge within which a self-communication takes place. God communicates himself in a personal way in the gratuitous relationship he has with us. The Holy Spirit—the communicator par excellence of the Most Holy Trinity to the created world—makes God known to us in a personal way, that is, by communicating his life to us in grace. To know God's presence we need to adopt an attitude of awareness.

Such awareness, which we can call sapiential-symbolic, leads to a *life* similar to God's life. Awareness of God is thus also a communication of the art of living. God communicates his likeness to the human person on a created level. The person is made in the image of God. But through the redemption brought about by God himself, and through the Holy Spirit, who communicates to us the salvation won for us by Christ, we are able to know God and to become aware of this knowledge as itself a likeness to God.

God, in a certain sense, communicates to humanity God's own way of being, which is love. Therefore, the human person becomes like God when his or her life is lived in the way of love, that is, in communion, in the image of the Trinity. This way of communion is the life of the Church, of the community; thus it is true that it is the Church that gives birth to us as believers.

To Believe Is to Love

The awareness of God is not, therefore, an abstract theoretical knowledge to which can be given a practical,