

DISCERNMENT

The word '*dokimazein*' used in Holy Scripture generally translated signifies 'to discern on every occasion what is actually the will of God'. It helps us to see through the storms of scientific and political changes, emotions of rationalization and of self-projections. The gift of discernment does not guarantee that a person will make the perfect decision, one that perfectly satisfies one's hopes and desires for oneself and others. In this task, prayer complements the process of discernment. It would not be a mistake to term discernment as equivalent to Prayer. However, discernment in prayer is an aptitude acquired through experience of recognizing the movements embracing them, if they come from God and rejecting them, if they are from the counter spirit.

Through the gift of discernment, a prudent person is not scandalized at the mystery of other persons, of situations, and of God. For the Lord has created the universe and people so wonderfully that one can never exhaust comprehending through one's intelligence their complex beauty. The praying person knows well the designs of God and lives courageously and peacefully. He interprets the signs in favor of God's plan and lives in communion with His design and will.

Many things have changed long since. We have the new communication systems like fax, phone, smart phone, e-mail etc. E-mail has now come in also to accelerate the change. It is far easier to type a quick message on the computer than to write a letter, type the address on the envelop, stick the stamp and take it to the post box. The message is instantly received and can be instantly answered in easy dialogue over oceans and continents. The highly complex world of widespread economic inflation, computer technology, instant worldwide communication, constantly changing job markets, ever more prolonged education for developing skills, and of nuclear energy for building or destroying the world in a matter of seconds has resulted in a lot of confusion in our minds and hearts. When making decisions, we feel weak and lonely in mind and heart before the vast, threatening and fast moving computer and cyber world. But God in His wisdom, reassures the one who prays, that He cares for him and leads him to a definite destiny. As a result, the praying person experiences a confident expectancy of God's assistance in the decision about to be made.

The Greek word '*dokimazein*' literally signifies 'to discern' 'to prove' 'to test' 'to check'. It is a word with multiple meanings. We cannot zero in on one single meaning to the word when it is applied in prayer or spiritual life. Moreover, the English word 'discernment' that is very often and frequently used in spiritual life cannot fully explain or translate every element that is contained in the Greek word '*dokimazein*'. Discernment

can be a realistic possibility only within the theistic vision of the universe. The word “discern” (*dokimazein*) has its origin in the marketing system of the Greek culture. Transactions in the market were done using gold, silver and bronze coins. One had to test the authenticity of the metal by biting the coin before it was accepted for transaction. We know that the precious metal is always soft in nature. Certainly, if the coin had been a genuine one it would make a tooth mark on it; if it were false it would not. Hence the word “*dokimazein*” meant testing through biting.

Here we analyse a passage from the writings of St. Paul to better understand the *intricacies of discernment*.

Text: I Thessalonians 5,19-22

“Do not restrain the Holy Spirit; do not despise inspired messages. Put all things to the test (*dokimazete*): keep what is good and avoid every kind of evil”. This text gives us ample evidence that a Christian has to be open to the Spirit of God. This text in fact ends with a series of exhortations (cfr. The 5:12-22) to build up the community (cfr. v. 11). Paul offers also a series of concrete practical counsels to live a worthy life in the presence of the weak (vv. 14-15). This follows an invitation to cultivate a quality fundamental to Christian life, that is to be happy, to pray and to do the “will of God in Christ” (vv. 16-18). This theme ends with an exhortation.

“Do not Restrain the Holy Spirit”

This invitation not to restrain the Holy Spirit is similar to an advise in the letter to the Ephesians “do not make God’s Holy Spirit sad” (Eph 4:30). The main thrust of this invitation is not to put any obstacle on the way of the Spirit of God in the community of the faithful. The Spirit is light and fire (cfr. Rom 12:11; II Tim. 1:6). The activity of the Spirit in the community is highly charismatic. This charismatic activity of the Spirit is not any gift bestowed in isolation, rather a presence of the Spirit that contributes to the edification of the community. That is why Paul insists “since you are eager to have the gifts of the Spirit, you must try above everything else to make greater use of those which help to build up the Church” (I Cor 14:12). The gifts of the Spirit should be used to the edification of the community. “Though we are many, we are one body in union with Christ, and we are all joined to each other as different part of the body. So we are to use our different gifts in accordance with the grace that God has given us. If our gift is to speak God’s message, we should do it according to the faith that we have...” Rom 12:5ff). Therefore, we understand that the gift of the Spirit is not for personal satisfaction or glory but for the edification of the Church. Any gift misused can hurt the Spirit of God and prevent His free outpouring on the community.

(to be continued...)

14. DESCERNMENT II

Discernment helps us to see God's presence and proclaim the good news to our neighbours. Hence, we need to heed to the voice of God.

“Do not Despise inspired Messages”

Prophecy is regarded as one of the charismatic gifts (cfr. I Cor 12:4-11) received for the good of the community. This gift occupied prominent place among the charismatic gifts. In the building of the body of Christ, this gift gains importance after the gift of apostolate (cfr. I Cor 12:28). According to Paul, the gift of prophecy signifies the understanding of the great mystery of Christ. That is why he writes: “if you will read what I have written, you can learn about my understanding of the secret of Christ. In past times mankind was not told this secret, but God has revealed it now by the Spirit to his holy apostles and prophets” (Eph 3:4-5).

Prophecies were mainly referred to the divine mysteries (cfr I Cor 13,2) or to the understanding of the Mystery of Christ (cfr. Eph 3,4-5). This understanding of the mysteries or the Mystery was towards the edification or exhortation of the Christian community (cfr. I Cor 14,3). According to Pauline Christology a prophet is the ambassador of God and revealer of God's will. He is the one who announces, “here and now” the exigencies of the will of God in the community of God. The one who

despises prophecy shows little respect to God and is not regarded as a friend of God. Such a person was considered an outcaste in the community of believers.

In this connection it is right to know how the first community was very vulnerable to the prophecies and messages. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians saying "I beg you brothers, not to be so easily confused in your thinking or upset by the claim that the Day of the Lord has come. Perhaps it is thought that we said this while prophesying or preaching, or that we wrote it in a letter. Do not let any one deceive you in any way. For the Day will not come until the final Rebellion takes place and the Wicked One appears, who is destined for hell" (II The 2, 3-4). This is a strong reminder as to how they need to be vigilant and careful of the ways of the wicked. Therefore, prophecy should be examined. "Two or three who are given God's message should speak, while the others are to judge what they say" (I Cor 14, 29). The invitation to prudence and discernment of the prophetic messages is not entirely new to the Scriptures. We have evidence of this even in the O.T. for example: Dt. 18,21-22; Jer. 23,13-17. John in his letter precisely warns the believers to be very careful in accepting the prophecies: "my dear friends, do not believe all who claim to have the Spirit, but test (*dokimazein*) them to find out if the spirit they have comes from God. For many false prophets have gone out everywhere" (I Jn 4,1). The only criterion to discern (*dokimazein*) the authenticity of the

message is “the one who acknowledges that Jesus Christ came as a human being” (I Jn 4,2).

“Put all Things to the Test”

The word “*dokimazein*” finds its proper context here in this verse. It is an invitation to test, prove, taste or examine everything before despising or discarding it. This in fact is a positive process of discernment by which the authenticity (*dokimos*) of the thing at our disposal is examined. When a thing is false (*adokimos*) it is rejected. That is why Paul is very keen on keeping what is “good”. Anything that is good comes from God and what is evil from the evil one. Paul exhorts the believers to “avoid every kind of evil” (I The 4,22). This particular verse leads us to the conclusion of the first letter to the Thessalonians “May the God who gives us peace make you holy in every way and keep your whole being spirit, soul and body – free from every fault at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (I The 4,23).

In putting everything to the test requires that a Christian see always the good of the other. It is the law of Charity that determines in fact the essence of discernment (cfr. Mt 5,38-48; Lk 6,27; Rom 12,17-21; I Pt 2,19-21). The testing should be done in the spirit (***tooth***) of charity and only this can lead a Christian to true prayer. When a thing is tested in the light of charity there is cause for joy and that is why Paul says “Be joyful always, pray at all times, be thankful in all circumstances. This is what

God wants from you in your life in union with Christ Jesus” (I The 4,16-17).

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