

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

Guidelines for the Discernment of Spirits

Part 2: Movements of the Spirits¹

“Father, one minute she was laughing, the next minute she was crying!” The young man who came to visit with me was struggling to understand his new girlfriend’s emotions. The man, who did not appear to be very in-touch with his own feelings, was being overwhelmed by his girlfriend’s expressive emotions. It reminded me that all human beings go through a gamut of emotions every day, yet, many of us are not very conscious of these emotions. We don’t often take time to pay attention to our feelings or prayerfully evaluate where they come from or why we’re having them.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola grew in his awareness of his emotions. In fact, he understood them to be much more than emotions, but “movements” within his heart. During his lengthy stay at Loyola, recovering from a cannonball injury, Ignatius learned to pay attention to what was going on interiorly—in his heart and mind. By doing this, he became aware of a spiritual discernment that became the cornerstone of his relationship with God and others.

The phrase, “discernment of spirits,” refers to a person paying attention to the movements within his heart and mind and trying to figure out whether they have a good or evil origin. Ignatius used the terms “evil spirit” and “good spirit” to label the origin of the movements in our lives. By knowing whether or not a particular feeling is from the evil spirit or good spirit, a person can determine how to respond.

All “movements,” whether good or evil, can come from within a person or from outside of a person; their origin can be traced to us, other people, evil spirits, or the Holy Spirit.² For example, if I find myself angry, it might be because of my own sin or it might be because someone cut me off in traffic. If I don’t know the origin of my anger, then I don’t know what to do with it. If the origin of my anger is my disappointment at my sinfulness, then God might want to use it to lead me toward contrition and a new resolution not to sin. However, if my anger is at a driver that cut me off in traffic, then God might want to use it to encourage me to grow in humility and charity.

Just as God wants to use the movements within us to draw us closer to Himself, Satan wants to use them to lead us away from God. For example, if the origin of my anger is my disappointment at my sinfulness, then the evil spirit will probably try to foster an even greater discouragement, which will lead me further from God. If my anger is at the person who cut me off in traffic, the evil spirit will encourage me to express that anger and grow in self-righteous pride. Notice that, in the end, the origin did not dictate the outcome, but rather, how I decided to respond to the movement!

The first step in the discernment of spirits is growing in our awareness of our interior life—our thoughts, emotions, desires, motivations, etc. In the upcoming articles, we are going to look very specifically at the guidelines that St. Ignatius wrote in order to help us discern where these interior movements come from and how we can use them to respond to God in a deeper way.

In preparation for the upcoming articles, I invite all of us to grow in our conscious awareness of our emotions. This is not an easy task for Americans—we have a horribly shallow vocabulary of feeling words. However, there are some great lists on the internet of feeling words that can help us to begin to understand and distinguish the movements in our hearts.³

¹ This article is part two of a twelve part series on the “Guidelines for the Discernment of Spirits” by St. Ignatius of Loyola.

² Obviously, the Holy Spirit is only capable of producing good movements and the evil spirit is only capable of producing authentically evil movements. However, it might take a lot of discernment to determine these origins.

³ www.advocatesforyouth.org/youth/health/relationships/feelingwords.htm