

# *Walking with Mary on the Path to Holiness*

**Friday, June 12, 2020 ~ Mary and Discernment of Spirits**



I have learned a bit about honey bees since we have become “honey farmers” or beekeepers. One more consoling fact is that honey bees don’t want to sting people. Once they sting a person they usually die. If a bee considers a person a threat to the hive, instead of stinging, the bees will “bump” into the person as a warning. If the possible “dangerous person” continues to move toward the hive, more bees will fly around the person, bumping into them. If the warning continues to go unheeded, then the bees will eventually sting the person in defense of the hive. The key for self-protection when you are near an active bee hive is to know the warning sign – the “bumping”. If you keep moving forward, swatting away the bees, you will eventually be stung. But, if you are aware that bees are bumping into you, understand that this is a warning sign, and act - move away from hive, you will usually be fine.

Awareness, understanding and action – the important trio for discernment for many situations in life. Let’s examine a more “ordinary” event. You are driving on a busy highway. You become aware that traffic is slowing down. You start scanning the road ahead - maybe you see cars stopped on the road, cars shifting slowly from one lane to another, or flashing lights. A-ha – because of your previous experiences, you understand that there is probably some sort of a traffic accident ahead. Depending on what you can see from your particular vantage point, you now have a chance to act – you could move over into the other lane, merely slow down, or maybe take an exit and use other roads to navigate around the accident. On a practical, day-to-day level, we can apply this trio of discernment – awareness, understanding and action - multiple times.

What may be surprising is that this very familiar process should be used in our spiritual life. With the help of St. Ignatius of Loyola and Our Lady, we will examine how this process of awareness – understanding – and action can help us grow in holiness. An excellent resource on this topic is Fr. Timothy Gallagher’s book on *The Discernment of Spirits*.

### **Be Aware**

This step is the “gateway” to all discernment. If I am not aware of my interior spiritual experiences, then it is impossible for me to make conscious decisions about my actions. My life, particularly my spiritual life, becomes a product of “reaction”. Could my reactions be a response to a spirit that is of God? Yes. But can my reactions be a response to the work of an evil spirit, leading me away from God? Yes. Spiritual awareness can help me know which spirit is at work and respond accordingly.

This type of spiritual awareness can be difficult to understand and foster. One reason is that our current culture does not cultivate the practice of interior awareness. Individuals can be very aware of what is going on *outside* of them – but not what is going on *inside* of them. Fr. Gallagher observes: “The goods of the senses are more visible, more tangible, and more readily apparent to us than those of the mind and of the spiritual order. Consequently we are easily drawn ‘without’ towards what our senses can grasp while greater effort is required to attend to the less perceptible world ‘within’.” (Gallagher, 19) The multiplicity of electronic devices that fill the quiet spaces of our lives also hinders the awareness of our “within”. Until we turn off and unplug ourselves from the variety of electronic distractions at our fingertips, we’ll never be able to be attentive to the gentle yet distinctive interior movements of our heart.

As challenging as this can be, the more difficult and at times deeper resistance to becoming interiorly aware is the struggle with self. Many people today are afraid of silence and solitude. Why? It may cause them to have to actually look at themselves – their weaknesses, limitations, and sinfulness – in other words, who they really are rather than the façade they have created, who they wish they were or who they want others to think they are. Fr. Gallagher wrote, “Since to live consciously ‘within’ is necessarily to encounter our human

limitations, it is simpler, though ultimately unsatisfying, to live ‘without,’ to divert our awareness towards what is external” (Gallagher, 20). It takes courage to delve into our interior and become aware of what is moving us and where it is taking us.

This awareness I am speaking about is not the psychological awareness that is usually discussed with professional counselors to help a person make emotionally healthy choices. Nor are we focusing upon moral awareness. This would involve examining our faithfulness or unfaithfulness to Jesus Christ and the Gospel, areas that we would bring to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This moral awareness is of supreme importance to our spiritual life, but not our focus.

So, what is spiritual awareness? These are affective movements of the heart which have a special significance and impact in our life of faith. They are usually spontaneous movements, ones that a person simply finds within their heart. A person becomes aware that “something” is moving in their heart. It could be dryness, happiness, fear, joy, peace, disquiet, uncertainty, desire, anger or loneliness. It could be a lifting of the heart, an encouraging movement. It could be a depressing of the heart, a discouraging movement. What is important in this step to become aware that “something” is moving in my heart.

To help us develop this awareness, we can turn to Our Lady. Since she had an Immaculate Heart, filled with grace, she was probably very aware of the presence of the Lord within her. She worked hard at all the tasks women would have performed her time, but this did not distract her interior awareness of God. Ask Mary to help you become aware of these movements in your own heart as she was aware of these same movements in her Immaculate Heart.

### **Understand**

Though awareness is a great step, and even a courageous step, the consciousness of our “within” is not an end in itself. Fr. Gallagher points out: “Spiritual awareness is directed toward the next step, the moment in which we move from noticing to understanding the

meaning of the interior movements we have noticed.” (Gallagher, 23). The person moves from the heart to the mind. I have to actively reflect on what I have perceived in my heart.

How do I do this? I can ask myself a series of questions: Is this a matter of spiritual discernment? Can I name the affective movement of my heart – is it peace, uneasiness, joy, etc.? Are the stirrings of my heart affecting my life of faith, hope and love and my following of God’s will? Does this movement bear the signs of God (such as joy, peace, encouragement) or not of God (sadness, despair, confusion, discouragement)?

Sometimes this step of understanding can be fairly simple. A clear answer about what spirit is at work in my heart may be obvious. At other times this step may be more complex, particularly if our physical or psychological state clouds the discernment. It can be helpful to find a qualified and experienced spiritual guide who can help you understand the movements of your heart. Our Lady, Spouse of the Holy Spirit, can be a valuable heavenly aid during this process. She whom Scripture tells us “kept all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Lk 2:19), can assist us in our own work of pondering who or what is at work in our heart. As Spouse of the Holy Spirit, she can intercede for us and help us to use the gifts of the Holy Spirit to understand these movements of our heart.

### **Take Action**

We’ve made progress in our spiritual discernment – but we’re not finished yet. Being aware and understanding are not enough – both of these are aimed toward action. In writing about spiritual discernment, St. Ignatius of Loyola uses the two words “accept” and “reject”. If I can see that a spirit is moving me to something that is not of God, I reject this thought and will never consider it again. If I believe it is from God, then I accept the thought and actively pursue it as God’s will. Fr. Gallagher succinctly states: “Everything in discernment of spirits is directed towards action: towards firmly accepting what is of God and equally firmly rejecting what is not.” (Gallagher, 25)

This sounds simple – but is not always easy. This acceptance or rejection may require us to turn away from the familiar, the routine, the easy, comfortable or convenient response. It

can require sacrifice, to make a decision that is not “popular” with other people. Where can we go for help? The Sacraments, especially to our Lord in the Eucharist. Our Lady. Mary was always “yes” to God’s will in her life. She never entertained a thought that would lead her away from God’s Will. Was it always easy? Probably not. As Spouse of the Holy Spirit Mary would have relied on His gift of fortitude to help her reject that which was not of God and to embrace and act on that which lead her towards God’s will. Her Immaculate Heart was set on God throughout her whole life – at the Annunciation, the foot of the Cross, and unto her Assumption in Heaven. She is ready, willing and able to assist us with her prayers, encouragement, grace and Motherly help. We just need to turn to Our Heavenly Mother with our heart, asking her to help us to make it like her own – Immaculate and totally directed to the Lord.

A couple of examples may help illustrate what this spiritual awareness looks like. In the high schools where the Sisters teach, a popular assignment is to have the students participate in Eucharistic Adoration. At first this assignment is not so popular with the high school students: I have to go by myself? What do I do? Are people going to be looking at me? Am I going to be bored? It’s too quiet. I have too many other things to do... and the list goes on. After a few sessions of Adoration, however, some students will begin to notice a change in their heart. They find that they like the silence – it helps them de-stress and refocus on more important things in their lives. They experience a sense of peace in their heart that remains. They begin to look forward to their next adoration time. At the end of the assignment, many students state they want to continue adoration on their own. See the pattern? The student became aware of movements in their heart such as an abiding peace. They understood that these spontaneous feelings were a result of their time in Adoration – it was helping them grow in their faith life and in love of God and others. The students then acted, choosing to continue adoration even after the assignment ended.

A more current example is the Covid19 experience. With the cancellation and closing of practically every activity outside of the home, some individuals and families chose to add a spiritual component to their day. The activities were varied – praying with the Scriptures, reading a spiritual book, praying the rosary or even having an at-home retreat via video

conferences. In their conversations with the Sisters, these individuals said they found peace, strength, encouragement, stability and hope in a situation that was constantly changing and uncertain. They plan to continue this daily spiritual activity and have shared their experience with others. See the pattern? The individual became aware of an affective moment in their heart – peace, strength, encouragement, stability, and hope. They understood that this was a result of this new time of prayer – helping them to grow in the virtues of faith and hope as well as love of God and others. They then chose to act: to continue this period of prayer in their daily schedule as well as to share their experience with family and friends, encouraging them to add a time of prayer in their own lives.

Be aware – understand – act. Helpful tools we use in the ordinary situations we encounter – like honey bees and traffic accidents. But on an even higher level, this basic discernment process can help us move our spiritual life past that of merely “reaction” to that of careful decision and direction. If we are aware, understand and properly act upon those spiritual stirrings of the heart, we can grow in our own relationship with the Lord and become more like Mary, His perfect disciple.

## **Bibliography**

Gallagher, Timothy. *The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living*. New York, Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005.