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## ENCOURAGING THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION, PRACTICING DISCERNMENT

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The rich and varied tradition of discernment of spirits is critical to the process of entering a religious community. Here is a close look at the underlying theology and at the process itself.

## Discernment dissected

BY SISTER JANET K. RUFFING, RSM

**T**HE PROCESS OF INCORPORATING a new member into a religious institute is a practical exercise in the discernment of spirits. Some understand discernment of spirits as simply a process or a skill, rather than a life-long relationship with the Holy Spirit. It is helpful for vocation ministers to be aware of the relationship between a theology of the Holy Spirit, religious life, and the practical exercise of discernment of spirits in regard to a vocation to a particular community.

In this article, I'll describe a brief foundational theology of the Holy Spirit in relationship to religious life itself. I'll examine how discernment in the incorporation process draws on themes in the discernment literature in the New Testament and beyond, showing that discernment is developmental in character and recognizes the ambiguity of spiritual experience and interior movements. I'll identify Christian writers on the discernment of spirits, noting the rich and varied focus of their teachings. Having established the spiritual foundations of discernment (the Spirit working within everyone), this article will then describe discernment in the incorporation process as parallel processes of discernment engaged in by the candidate, vocation ministers, and community leaders—all

of whom are engaged in discernment at their unique level of spiritual and psychological maturity and in relationship to their particular responsibilities. Ultimately all discernment, regardless of its challenges, is grounded in and inspired by the Spirit at work in each of the participants' lives.

### Theology of the Spirit and religious life

The discernment of spirits within the incorporation process in religious communities is rooted in an underlying theology of the Holy Spirit, who is currently understood as the "communion bringer" within the Trinity, the church and creation itself.<sup>1</sup> The charism of religious life is understood as a gift of the Spirit to the church. *Vita Consecrata* emphasized the charismatic impulse of institutes of consecrated life, the contemplative and prophetic nature of religious life, and the participation of religious orders in ecclesial communion—which is in turn a participation in Trinitarian communion.<sup>2</sup> We are witnessing in our own times a renewal and development of a theology of the Holy Spirit as Wisdom/Sophia who is always and everywhere at work in creation, in human persons, in the church and in the world and who is the "other hand of God," together with Jesus, the Word of God.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a "Spirit Christology is the foundation for a Spirit theology in the Church."<sup>4</sup>

While religious life is one form of Christian discipleship, it is the Spirit who pours forth the love of God into our hearts, transforms us from within, and impels us toward love of God and love of neighbor. All communion, all community that arises within the church and the world is empowered by this "communion bringing" Spirit. In his mature theology, Yves Congar, one of the theological architects of Vatican II, describes these "two hands of God,"<sup>5</sup> the Word and the

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Spirit as doing God's work together. "The charisms of the Spirit are the basis for the whole life of the church,"<sup>6</sup> and are central to its life. As Denis Edwards explains, "He [Congar] understands charisms as gifts of nature and grace given for the fulfillment of the mission of the church—such as those of preaching, teaching, healing, music, art, peacemaking, and prophetic words and deeds on behalf of human liberation."<sup>7</sup> Congar's pneumatology is also simultaneously an ecclesiology. "The Spirit transforms individual persons, making them daughters and sons of God, but they are transformed precisely as persons-in-communion, as members of the church, the Body of Christ. The work of the Spirit is communion."<sup>8</sup>

Basil the Great in the late fourth century wrote that the Holy Spirit is the Breath of God and always accompanies the Word. Denis Edwards uses this insight of the Spirit as communion bringer and accompanier of the Word to assert that the Spirit accompanies the Word, giving life. This life-giving work refers both to creation, the bringing forth of life biologically, as well as bringing forth the resurrected life in Jesus and eschatological life for all of us. The Spirit as the Breath from God's mouth speaks with the Word of God. In Basil's own words:

Christ comes, and the Spirit prepares his way. He comes in the flesh, but the Spirit is never separated from him. Working of miracles and gifts of healing come from the Holy Spirit. Demons are driven out by the Spirit of God. The presence of the Spirit despoils the devil. Remission of sins is given through the gift of the Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

Just as the Spirit was at work from the beginning of creation and partners with the Word in incarnation and

redemption, so too, the Spirit sanctifies us through her indwelling communion in us. The Spirit illumines us and not only grounds our participation in God-life, but also gifts us with the discernment of Spirits which is correlative with the depth of our transformation in the God-life. Basil poetically describes this process:

When a sunbeam falls on a transparent substance, the substance itself becomes brilliant, and radiates life from itself. So too, Spirit-bearing souls, illumined by him, finally become spiritual themselves, and their grace is sent forth to others. From this comes knowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, apprehension of hidden things, distribution of wonderful gifts, heavenly citizenship, a place in the choir of angels, endless joy in the presence of God, becoming like God, and the highest of all desires, becoming God.<sup>10</sup>

Members of religious communities are thus members of the one church and members of their religious institutes, living as persons-in-relation-to-others, participating in a mutuality of relationship brought about by the communion bringer and transformed over a lifetime into our full destiny as sharers in God's Trinitarian life.

Those who participate in a religious community's incorporation process as candidates, novices and temporary professed, are responding to the movements of the Spirit within them to test a call to the charism of religious life. They

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also test a call to the charism of the institute they choose to join. There are many gifts of the Spirit, and religious life in a particular institute is one of them. Individual members of a religious institute bring their personal gifts to the community, even as they seek to discover the compatibility of these gifts with the institute's way of life. A participant in an incorporation process may discern at some stage that his or her particular gifts will best be expressed in a different context than religious life.

## Rooted in the wisdom tradition

Discernment of spirits within the context of incorporation draws on the rich wisdom tradition of the lived experience of the church, of its mystics and its religious communities, which offer guidance based on theologies of the Holy Spirit.

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The foundation of this tradition occurs throughout the New Testament witness since the earliest Christian communities experienced the action of the Spirit in the life, ministry, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus first of all.

Subsequently, particular local churches developed teachings on discernment and criteria for recognizing the presence of the Spirit in their midst.

The earliest texts in the New Testament, especially Paul's letters to the Corinthians, Romans and Galatians present a rich teaching on discernment which include a developmental awareness of an individual's relationship to the Spirit, the interior transformative work of the Spirit, connatural knowledge of the things of God and discernment of Spirits as a charismatic gift for the good of the community.<sup>11</sup> In the early Christian communities, prophetic and charismatic gifts were experienced as ambiguous phenomena requiring further discrimination from whence they originated and whither they led. In order to discern counterfeit experiences from authentically Spirit motivated ones, Paul identified three potential relationships with the Holy Spirit that members of the community might enjoy. So too, there is an organic development from one level of spiritual development to

another brought about by the Spirit within a person. This developmental notion of the work of the Spirit is echoed again and again throughout the mystical tradition.

## Pauline teaching on discernment

Within these early communities, Paul believed that some members manifested an absence of the Spirit in their lives. Others manifested the presence of the Spirit in their lives, while still others demonstrated that they were guided by the Spirit in a habitual way.

In all three cases, Paul described the observable fruits of these three relationships. They included both dispositions (affective states) and behaviors. For those Paul felt were not relating to the Spirit at all, he contrasted *sarx* (sinful flesh) to Spirit. Paul says in Galatians, "Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing and things like these" (5:19-20).

For those whose lives manifested the presence of the Spirit in their lives, Paul named many characteristics. The most important was the confession of Jesus as Lord, which is empowered by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3). So too, was the ability to address God as *Abba*, (Romans 8:12-17) and justification through the transforming Spirit, (Galatians 3:3).

For those who were most developed, the gift of the Spirit empowered their habitual ability to respond to direction by the Holy Spirit in a pervasive and on-going way in their interior life and ministry. "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God." (Romans 8:14). In Galatians, as well as in Corinthians, Paul offers a list of the fruits of the Spirit. "By contrast the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.... If we live by the Spirit, let us be guided by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22,25).

This relationship with the Holy Spirit is marked by a parallel organic development of spiritual life itself. The Spirit brings about repentance and conversion from a sinful condition. Once established in a converted life growing in the Christ mystery, the work of the Spirit is present in on-going sanctification and transformation until one has become sensitive and docile to the Spirit's promptings so that one then lives by the Spirit's guidance. As a result of these distinct relationships with the Holy Spirit and differing stages of organic development in the life of the Spirit, individual





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persons' capacities for discernment in their own regard and in relationship to another range from nil to highly developed or even charismatically inspired.

As the lived tradition developed, teachings on discernment encompassed a variety of foci, all of which remain significant for discernment in the context of religious life. The fourth century desert immas and abbas, elders living the ascetic life both as solitaries and communities, guided neophytes in this way of life through the discernment they had developed. The medieval/scholastic theological tradition and mystics such as Catherine of Siena comprehensively described the growth of moral life and the development (or not) of the virtues which coalesce in persons as character. Thomas Aquinas elaborated this foundation, relating the gifts and fruits of the Spirit to this foundation in virtue. Ignatius of Loyola, in his rules of discernment of spirits in the Spiritual Exercises, describes interior movements within persons as they engage in the structured process of the Exercises, seeking to discover God's will for them in a vocational or ministerial decision.

The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross, among others, focus more on mystical development and discernment related to contemplative prayer and contemplative life. Liberationist and feminist reflection on discernment take into account social conditioning and social location that will either impede freedom or support clarity of reflection when members of an oppressed or privileged group attempt to discern. Finally, psychological understandings of human persons contribute to the role of the unconscious, negative or positive images of self or of God, and the influence of personality structures on a person's process of discernment.

### **Discerning a calling to religious life**

Discernment of vocation to a religious community understandably incorporates and builds on this general teaching on discernment. The person seeking admission to a religious institute has a relationship to the Holy Spirit who is nudging him or her to explore this way of life. The individual will arrive with his or her own level of spiritual development

and his or her own ability, or lack thereof, to discern interior movements. Likewise, the vocation minister, novice ministers and incorporation ministers will have their particular levels of spiritual development and a developed or undeveloped ability to discern the spirits within themselves, as well as in relationship to another. All those involved in discerning a vocation will have their areas of blindness, as well as their areas of deep insight. All involved in such discernment need to grow in the ability to work with the Spirit, to make themselves available for the Spirit's communications, and

to pray for clarity and guidance from the Spirit.

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From the perspective of the religious institute, the process of vocational discernment to the institute begins with an inquirer's first contact and continues through final vows. It may be helpful to vocation ministers, incorporation ministers and leadership to

recognize that they are engaged in parallel processes of evaluation and discernment from the perspective of the institute and for the sake of the common good. Evaluation focuses on whether or not a person seeking admission to the institute has the basic qualifications as defined in an incorporation plan, usually based on externally documented factors, i.e. age, recommendations, degrees, work history, results of psychological testing, etc. Once admitted, however, incorporation ministers are also responsible for evaluating and recommending to leadership the person's suitability for progressing to the next stage of religious life at this time in her life in this particular institute. Evaluation in this case focuses on whether or not the candidate has fulfilled the requirements for each stage of incorporation related to community living, ministry placements, education, living of the vows, etc.

Discernment focuses on how this particular person might contribute to the community in relationship to his or her personal gifts and appropriation of the community's charism. Discernment of the individual person should focus primarily on the candidate's spiritual maturity and aptitude for religious life within a particular community. Is the candidate flourishing humanly and spiritually within the incorporation

process? Is she able to integrate her new experience with her past history and sense of herself? Is he rising to the challenges presented by living in community and engaging in ministry? Are her struggles typical transition dynamics for anyone in a major life transition, or do they indicate deeper problems? Vocation and formation personnel and leadership are responsible for discernment regarding the person's call to religious life and his or her "fit" with the community. Decisions related to progression through the incorporation process thus entail both evaluation and discernment on the part of the community.

## Parallel processes of discernment for candidate and community

Decisions about admission and progression to full membership must take into account the common good of the community, as well as the good of the person seeking membership. Simultaneously, vocation ministers assist the person in his own personal discernment: helping him gather information, developing a relationship with him, reflecting with him, and observing the congruence or lack thereof between espoused values and actual behavior. Vocation ministers contribute to the person's discernment through formation conversations—sharing observations, raising questions for consideration, etc. They also discern with the person his or her ability to live religious life and to embody the charism of the congregation. But they are always both discerning and evaluating.

The person in the incorporation process is simultaneously discerning for him or herself based on growing self-knowledge, reflection, interior movements, religious experience, desires, experiences with the community and peers, gifts and freedom. He or she benefits from study, interactions with incorporation ministers, experiences of the life and the assistance of a spiritual director (who should have no responsibility for evaluation but only for facilitating the person's vocational discernment and growth in the spiritual life). Thus parallel discernments are going on: the person discerning for him or herself about religious life in this particular community, and representatives of the community discerning for the greater good of the community.

The novitiate period is of critical importance because of the experiential component of living religious life with professed members and peers. A successful novitiate results not just in a deepened identity but a new identity as a Sister of Mercy or a Franciscan Friar, etc. This new identity is



integrated into the novice's life story cognitively, affectively, spiritually and behaviorally. Depending on a person's previous experience of communal living (for instance, in a volunteer experience after college or in a local community of the institute), learning to live interdependently may be a major challenge for adults accustomed to independence.

Only in the live-in situation with novice directors who receive the novices' self-disclosure and who observe their behavior do some major psychological or behavioral issues become apparent in vocational discernment. Capacities for both peer relationships and relationships with authority become clear. If psychological testing raised questions but was inconclusive, the extended live-in experience verifies or contradicts the initial findings. Members of religious communities, as a base-line, need to be able to relate in a healthy way to authority and to peers, both within the community and in ministry settings. Follow up recommendations for further growth at each stage of incorporation need to be taken seriously and acted on before decisions for final vows. It is important to test out a person's potential for growth, as well as a candidate's manifestation of a personality disorder. A personality disorder is unlikely to change or may even be part of the person's basic personality, which is pretty much established by age 35, according to Sister Donna Markham, OP.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, cultural factors can affect discernment at all stages of the incorporation process. Candidates may lack community living skills that once were developed in families. Novices in some novitiates may be challenged by an immersion into a different ethnic culture on top of immersion into religious life culture. Generational and ethnic diversity within the novitiate group brings the challenge of a wider range of cultural norms, often taken for granted and usually unconscious.

Incorporation personnel at all stages need to take into account cultural differences and immerse themselves in the person's ethnic culture enough to distinguish between normative cultural patterns unfamiliar to the formators and psychological tendencies. Incorporation personnel may also need to seek psychological evaluation or supervision from a person of the same or similar ethnicity as the person in incorporation in order to correct for cultural bias, as well as to disallow the use of culture as an excuse to get special treatment. Likewise, attention to culture is important during candidacy and temporary profession if the person's local community does not understand or appreciate her culture and welcome the diversity she brings to the community.



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