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07. Discerning the action of the Holy Spirit

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Discerning the action of the Holy Spirit

To M. Douai, a seminarian¹

Father Libermann, who had just opened the novitiate at La Neuville, was very gifted as a spiritual director, a fact that he recognised himself. In this letter to M. Douai,² he shares his experience of the working of the Holy Spirit. He describes how this action can be clearly distinguished from that of other "spirits".

La Neuville, December 31st, 1841

My dear Brother,

You are a lucky man to have shared a small part of the cross of Jesus. Persevere and grow stronger in his love. This is a precious moment for you, a time of graces and blessings. It seems that Jesus has chosen this occasion to establish his reign and his love within you. Once he has corrected all that is defective and has taken over your soul completely, he will be able to do with you what he wants. But if he had done everything as you wanted, who can tell how much trust you would then have put in him.

Be aware of your limitations and the in-built opposition of your nature to the plans of God - even at those times when you really want to be faithful. His Spirit is always at work in your soul, gently but firmly, while your own spirit has its particular miserly agenda. But the Spirit of God, while acting firmly, fills you soul with gentleness and peace; he gives you the life of Jesus, a life of love which is calm but powerful.

When the Holy Spirit is at work in us, our hearts are burning and united to God without any worries or self-love. We feel humbled, not just before God but before all creation. My dear

¹ N.D.III, pp. 87-90; L.S. II, pp. 598-602

² See the index

friend, we are so blessed when we feel the power of the Holy Spirit and the influence of the love of God. Everything turns into love within us: our actions, the least and the greatest movement of our soul; our love for God himself, before whom we are in a permanent state of adoration and nothingness; our love for all others, without a trace of bitterness or being judgemental. Our mind is calm, with no desire to act against those who contradict, persecute or torment us in any way. Whether these people are good or bad, whether they agree with us or not, whether they are right or wrong, nobody will be able to prise us away from our peace and confidence in God.

My dear friend, I am telling you all these things so that you will be able to distinguish between what is coming from God and what is a product of your own human activity. If you have learnt to profit from these difficult occasions, you will find that you will be able to make this distinction. This is the very reason why Jesus has allowed you to suffer briefly on the cross.

Take great care not to inflate your own importance or to have an exalted opinion of yourself. Neither should you wish for great things to happen to you or through you. The cross is made to humble us into our nothingness, to place us under the feet of Jesus and of all those who, in his goodness, he allows to crush us, even if it is a Caiphas or a Pilate. If you want Jesus and his love to be the Master of your soul, be ready to kiss the feet of all those who want to trample you into the ground. Put yourself totally into the hands of Jesus, and ask him to live alone in you. Invite him to destroy your own human life and prevent you from ever returning to your former complacency.

Here is another way of telling whether an inspiration comes from the Lord or from your own activity. When Jesus is working through his Spirit, he comes to us through our will to set things in motion; our intellect is well aware of His action but it is not imprinted there. The Spirit of God always acts in the

same way: his work is strong but gentle and does not agitate, but always leads towards union with Our Lord. In short, there is no disorder in the way He works.

But when it flows from our own activity, or when our own activity gets mixed up with it, our intellect is the starting point of the action. The will also plays a part; sometimes, one even sees that the source of our action is in the will and even in the grace that touches us. But at the same time, one is aware that the immediate cause of the action is not the will but the intelligence.

This rule applies to every aspect of our spiritual life. All our perfect feelings, all the divine inspirations that Jesus sends us, in proportion to the holiness of our lives, must first of all reside in the will and only then, in the intellect.

May Jesus, our loving Master, bring all these things about through his cross, and may our dear Mother, Mary lead you along that path of perfect love, in which I am your devoted servant.

F. Libermann, priest.