

DISCERNMENT: A RARE BIRD

By BENEDICTA WARD

'Discretion is a very rare bird upon the earth' (Bernard of Clairvaux)

IN THE CHRISTIAN tradition, *diakresis*, discernment, has always been highly esteemed. It has been seen not as merely part of the natural virtue of prudence but as one of the direct gifts of the Holy Spirit, both the way into and the fruit of life in Christ. In the first thousand or more years of Christian living, discernment (also called discretion¹) was discussed with complete unanimity, not because each writer repeated what his predecessors said without further thought but because the practice of Christian life continued to make abundantly clear the nature and purpose of discernment. It would be possible to summarize and examine what each writer has said in chronological order but because of the agreement between them perhaps a more fruitful approach would be to take the main points about discernment upon which there is notable agreement and illustrate this from selected sources over a span of 1,500 years. I use for illustration the experience of the first Christian monks in fourth-century Egypt, and the reflection upon that way of life by John Cassian and John Climacus, some texts from the central Middle Ages, and some material from the fourteenth century in the West, to cover as wide a span as possible.

First, what is 'discernment' in the Christian tradition? John Climacus calls it 'a solid understanding of the will of God',² while for Cassian it is 'the mother of virtues, as well as their guide and regulator'.³ These are somewhat pedestrian descriptions, perhaps, and in them discretion is seen as a quality that orders and arranges the more vivid and dramatic virtues rather than doing anything in itself. Bernard of Clairvaux gives discernment the same quality when he comments on the passage in the *Song of Songs* 'Set love in order within me' (Cant 2, 5).⁴ No-one could accuse Bernard of being lacking in zeal; he was enthusiastic, particularly with regard to asceticism, to such a point that he could be classed with the fools for Christ, those who follow with a single eye the wisdom of Christ so that it is vividly seen as 'folly to this world' (1 Cor 4, 10).⁵ But he was as aware as the desert fathers of the need for this calm and sensible faculty as a point of control for zeal; he calls it

'the moderator of love' and adds 'discretion . . . is not so much a virtue as a moderator and a guide of the virtues, a director of the affections, a teacher of right living'.⁶ Gregory the Great called discretion a nose, 'by which we discern good and evil odours' and he adds, 'he has a small nose who is not able to keep the measure of discernment.'⁷ The image is of a wine-taster sniffing the bouquet of a wine or even of a dog raising its muzzle to sniff out the day before it goes beyond the doorstep. Such a faculty is not in itself the vision of God; it is that which finds the direction to it. So the author of the *Cloud of unknowing*, following Richard of St Victor, says it is Joseph, the beloved son of Jacob and Rachel, the forerunner of the Benjamin of contemplation: 'and he comes! Joseph is born late in time, but his father loves him most of all for without discretion goodness can neither be attained nor maintained.'⁸

Since discernment is valued so highly, how urgent is it for a Christian to have this faculty? Bernard of Clairvaux says it is 'utterly necessary', but this is an assertion within the context of a way of life very specifically directed to prayer: 'the more eager the zeal, the more vigorous the spirit, the more generous the love, so also the greater the need for more vigilant knowledge to restrain the zeal, to temper the spirit, to moderate the love'.⁹ Elsewhere he calls discernment *rara avis*,¹⁰ a rare and elusive quality of perception. John Climacus goes so far as to say that discernment, which he links with 'dispassion' is not essential to salvation: 'Not everyone can attain to dispassion but all can be saved and reconciled to God'.¹¹ Discernment is needed within the whole body of the Church, but is not a possession or a skill attained by individuals, a reminder that Christianity is not the property of an exclusive and sensitive elite but open to everyone, some of whom will be discerning, others not; it is not the equivalent of the enlightened state of the philosopher but a gift of God within the economy of salvation for all. The basic and essential question for each is 'how can I be saved?' and discernment is only to this end, a part of the way to the answer. Gregory the Great suggests that it is even possible to have too much discernment:

there are some who . . . oftentimes exercise themselves more than is necessary in certain enquiries, and are mistaken through over much nicety, whence this is also added, 'or with a great and crooked nose'; for a great and crooked nose is an immoderate nicety of discernment when it has grown up beyond what is fitting and does itself confuse the righteousness of its actions!¹²

Discernment is not to be confused either with curiosity or with a crippling insistence on getting it right in every way before acting.

It is clear from each instance quoted that this God-given light upon conduct has always been valued very highly in Christian life, though never out of context. But granted that discernment is desirable, the next question is how can this quality of life be attained and exercised? How do we know if we have it? It is often said that it is always possible to tell by negative results, when discernment turns out in its effects to lead away from the direct path of charity, that fundamental precept and promise that we 'shall love the Lord' and our 'neighbour as ourselves' (Matt. 22, 37-39). This is surely a rather defeatist way of learning, though in this looking-glass world of Christian life it is so often the only way; as the *Cloud*-author says, 'I have never yet known a sinner come to a perfect knowledge of himself and his basic temperament without having been taught it in the school of God by the exercise of many temptations and frequent stumblings and risings'.¹³ Because humankind is fallen, it is impossible to become discerning easily and naturally by love and concern. Certainly the early writers connect discernment with love, and John Climacus admits that great love can give someone a particularly sensitive insight into another, but as everyone knows, love is not enough. There is a distorting lens in the eye of the soul which sends the most loving discernment awry. Have the early writers anything more to say about rectifying this squint than simply pointing to its dangerous effects? Discernment is above all about inner motive and begins with oneself and here they would say that the first step towards learning true self-knowledge is to be aware that it is lacking, and so the first virtue needed both in order and in priority is humility. John Climacus says, 'the sea is the source of the fountain, and humility is the source of discernment'¹⁴ and in the desert tradition this is a constant theme. This is not a cringing and rather abstract idea in the desert literature but part of the way out from the illusions of a self-centred world towards an understanding of the reality of humankind before the Creator, of sinners before the Saviour. It is learned with consistency and great practical application, and the most important sign of the reality of this humility in all the desert literature is never for one moment to judge others.

A brother in Scetis committed a fault and a council was called to which abba Moses was invited . . . He took a leaking jug filled with water and carried it with him . . . he said, 'My sins run out behind me and today I am coming to judge the errors of another'.¹⁵

This is a refusal to exercise the judgement which condemns others, that killing self-assertion that was the cause and result of the Fall and which continues to damage relationships with God

and with others. This itch to condemn by our judgement can be transfigured into discernment which sees only the mercy and goodness of God in others. The way to allow this 'right judgement in all things' to be formed is through humility of heart which in practice involves a consistent refusal to exercise that self-assertion which forms hostile and negative judgements against the neighbour.

The true 'judgement' of others which is discernment is the God's eye view, which is always positive: as the *Cloud*-author puts it, 'Not what thou art, nor what thou hast been seeth God with his merciful eyes but what thou wouldst be'.¹⁶ The difference between judgement and discernment is admirably illustrated in the life of Margery Kempe, a devout lady from Lynn in Norfolk. Margery's experience of the love of God was expressed in

remarkable faces and gestures, with vehement sobbings and great abundance of tears, so that many people slandered her, not believing that it was the work of God, but that some evil spirit tormented her body or else that she had some bodily sickness.¹⁷

This negative criticism, based on externals only, made her unsure of herself and she began to ask advice from others, thus exercising the self-knowledge that is humility. She went to consult that sober and wise person, Julian of Norwich, and was met with true understanding and positive discernment of her inner motives instead of negative judgement of external phenomena. In spite of the obvious differences of temperament between them, Julian did not rebuke Margery as an irritating and embarrassing hysteric. First she listened to her, and then thanked God for all his work in her; after that she reminded her very gently of the plain and basic virtues of obedience and charity in following Christ and added delicate support for Margery in dealing with her critics: 'Set all your trust in God and do not fear the talk of the world, for the more contempt, shame and reproof you have in this world, the more is your merit in the sight of God'.¹⁸ True discernment is always life-giving and is concerned with motive: external actions vary and can be good or bad at different times and for different people; it is the motive behind them that needs discernment. It is an inner sensitivity that is needed and John Climacus compares it to the sense of smell; he says, 'Everyone with a healthy sense of smell can detect hidden perfumes and a pure soul can quickly recognize in others the sheer fragrance of goodness he himself has received from God'.¹⁹ The results in one filled with this right spirit of discernment always issue in a positive but non-sentimental gentleness which is seen as God-like: 'Just as God protects the world, so abba Macarius would cover the faults that he saw as if

he did not see them and those which he heard as though he did not hear them'.²⁰

This way towards discernment in the Christian tradition is always very practical; no-one simply has discernment for its own sake, it is always known in its exercise in practical situations, whether it is used for oneself or for others. Nor is it an absolute, something that is always the same; on the contrary, it changes with the person learning it. John Climacus says that there are three kinds of discernment: that which is proper for beginners which he calls self-knowledge; another kind of discernment for 'those mid-way along the road' which is 'a spiritual capacity to distinguish unfalteringly between what is truly good and what in nature is opposed to the good'; and then there is for those he calls 'perfect' a discernment which is 'knowledge resulting from divine illumination which with its lamp can light up what is dark in others'. Moreover he says,

for those of us who are untried recruits in the life of the spirit, growth in humility comes out of doing what the Lord wants, for those who have reached midway along the route the test is an end to inner conflict; and for the perfect there is increase and indeed a wealth of divine light.²¹

How does this practical course in discernment continue? The early writers are unanimous in saying that another aspect of humility and self-emptying is to ask advice, to place oneself in the hands of others and therefore to enter into the way of obedience. 'Ask advice humbly of the fathers and brothers', 'everything is to be declared before the elders'.²² This is not necessarily consultation of someone more learned or even more spiritual than oneself and this is an important difference within the Christian tradition from other ways of attaining self-knowledge.

One day abba Arsenius consulted an old Egyptian monk about his thoughts. Someone noticed this and said to him, 'Abba Arsenius, how is it that you, with such a good Latin and Greek education, ask this peasant about your thoughts?' He replied, 'I have indeed been taught Latin and Greek but I do not even know the alphabet of this peasant'.²³

John Climacus says that maybe a guide we choose will be ignorant and stupid and will in fact be wrong about the details of what he suggests, but what God is waiting for is not a right conclusion about a matter but for our suppleness in falling into his hands for him to work in us.²⁴ This attitude of attention to

inner disposition rather than external facts is admirably illustrated by a story from the desert: one day, an old man was walking with a disciple and he saw a small wild boar. He said to him, 'Boy, do you see that buffalo?' He said to the disciple 'Yes, abba'.²⁵ The disciple was not interested in wild animals but in his own reliance on his abba as the one who truly discerned reality, even in such a trivial matter. The point is that the Christian is not looking for wisdom from a master but is seeking to become open to the only teacher of the Christian who is Christ.

The paradox is that in order to learn from him and him only, the blinding pride of self-confidence has to be eliminated and this can only be done by placing oneself in the hands of others. This can apply to long-term issues, such as of the way of life by which to follow Christ or to details of that way. For instance, when Anselm of Canterbury wanted to choose in what way he would best serve the Lord, he placed himself entirely in the hands of Lanfranc: 'He came to him and told him that he was undecided between three courses of action but he would hold to the one that Lanfranc judged the best'. Lanfranc hesitated to give an opinion but took Anselm with him to consult Maurillius, the bishop of Rouen, asking him to discern the right way, thus both testing Anselm's flexibility and trust and also adding another strand, that of the opinion of a bishop, to the situation. In fact Maurillius said that Anselm should become a monk at Bec, something Anselm had already considered and rejected from motives which were particularly self-orientated but, because he chose to receive the decision from the hands of another and not by self-choice, it became for him his own chosen way to God.²⁶ Anselm was not of course choosing by magic, by a kind of sortilege, from a refusal of responsibility; he exercised his mind to its limit to hear what God was asking of him in all the normal ways open to the Christian, i.e. scripture, tradition, doctrine, sacraments, natural order, actual circumstances, conscience, etc. but knowing himself to be blinded by self-will he found it prudent to place himself in the hands of another human being, and to experience in this choice a freedom from self which could then whole-heartedly welcome the choice made. Discernment through others, not for their skill or intelligence but in order to be free to hear the will of God truly, is not confined to individuals. The *Rule of St Benedict* was described by Gregory the Great as 'conspicuous for its discretion'²⁷ and contains directions for consultation between the abbot of the monastery and the brothers; everyone is to be consulted because 'God often reveals what is better to the younger'.²⁸ Nor is it only with regard to major decisions but also in the details of serving

God in daily life that discernment has to be sought; it would be possible to describe the *Rule of St Benedict* in its entirety as a guide to discernment through daily life.

The early writers are also unanimous in saying that 'spiritual' matters need as much discernment as 'material' matters. Man is fallen and his sight is wrong about both equally. To be intent on a spiritual way is not necessarily any better than to be absorbed in earthly affairs. The *Cloud*-author has some scathing pages devoted to the false mystics with their exaggerated external signs of devotion²⁹ and makes it clear that what looks like eager self-denial can come simply from a desire to show off, a longing to feel one is doing something, or from even more basic natural urges. Such things, he says, are in fact very dangerous because they nourish pride of heart in an especially subtle way. The early monastic tradition is filled with examples of those good men who failed because they were intent on their own exercise of austerity rather than letting such things remain linked to humility, charity and flexibility. There is a steady refusal among the desert fathers to trust in anything merely because it is 'spiritual': again and again they told stories of monks to whom the devil appeared as an angel or as Christ, and their instant recourse to humility, saying, 'See if it is not someone else to whom you have been sent; as for me, I am not worthy of it'.³⁰ Cassian has instances of monks renowned for their goodness; their knowledge of spiritual matters was extensive but this also made them open to a world of spirits, not all of them good, and by lack of discernment among them some were led to suicide, murder or despair.³¹ Discernment is more necessary in spiritual matters as in material ones, because the danger is greater and more hidden. Just as telling, and in the same tradition, are the pithy remarks made by the *Cloud*-author in his short treatise *On the discerning of spirits*. For him, the real teacher of Christian virtue which is love is 'a still, loving contemplation' of God: it is by the experience of this 'blind movement of love towards God that a contemplative soul comes more quickly to the grace of discernment which knows how to speak and when to be quiet, when to eat and when to fast, when to mix and when to be alone'.³² Until that point is reached, however, there are signs which will enable a distinction to be made between the motives of the heart in whatever is done or proposed: what is basically necessary, the writer says, is genuine belief that God is faithful and will perform what he has promised: 'really believe you are forgiven'; then, if what you want to do is really because of love of personal comfort and ease, or out of a desire, however secret, for praise and the good opinion of others, it comes from self-love; and

if what we want to do proceeds out of bitterness and desire to belittle others, then it comes from the devil and must be firmly rejected.³³ It is the same teaching as the desert and the early Middle Ages, but here expressed with great directness and vividness.

Discernment in the early Christian tradition, then, was concerned with the examination of motives for each individual in his following of Christ. They would say that when the light of discernment is turned towards oneself, it must be ruthless in its refusal of illusion, however comforting, but when turned towards others it must be truly the light of God which is always positive. It was not perceived as a special or rare ability but a part of Christian life for all, whether in oneself or by consultation with others. It is in fact connected with two aspects of *kenosis*: the cross of Christ and humility. It depends upon faith that when I say I do not know, there is One who always does, which is a real and active knowledge of Christ crucified as risen and victor. God does not impose goodness on anyone, but what he waits for is the humility that can trust what is outside the limiting circle of the self. He waits to be asked and trusted and has given us one another as an immediate way towards this trust. Discernment is not a technique nor is it something high-class in a special spiritual world but it is part of the way of the cross, where each follows in company with 'a great cloud of witnesses': 'Without form or comeliness and nailed to a cross, thus is truth known'.³²

NOTES

¹ Since the eighteenth century, 'discretion' has been increasingly used in connection with good behaviour, especially in speech, but earlier it was synonymous with 'discernment', both coming from '*discretio*' the Latin form of '*diakresis*'. Hence 'discretion' will be used here in quotations with this meaning, as in 'a discretion of spirits'.

² John Climacus, *The ladder of divine ascent* trans. C. Luibhied and N. Russell, (Classics of Western Spirituality, SPCK/Paulist Press, 1982), Step 26 'On discernment', p 229. (Hereafter referred to as 'John Climacus').

³ John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. E. G. S. Gibson, (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, vol. XI, reprinted Michigan, 1973), 2nd Conference of Abba Moses, cap. IV, p 310. (Hereafter referred to as 'Cassian').

⁴ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs* trans. K. Walsh and I. M. Edmonds, (Cistercian Fathers Series 31, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1962), vol 3, p 25.

⁵ I Cor 4, 10. Cf John Saward, *Perfect fools: folly for Christ's sake in Catholic and Orthodox spirituality* (Oxford, 1980), pp 58-79.

⁶ Bernard, *op cit.*, p 25.

⁷ Gregory the Great, *The pastoral charge*, trans. H. R. Bramley (Oxford, 1874), Bk.1, pp 40-42. (Hereafter referred to as *Pastoral charge*).

⁸ 'Benjamin', by the author of the *Cloud of unknowing*, trans. by Clifton Walters in *A study of wisdom* (Oxford, 1980), pp 18-21. Cf. Richard of St Victor, 'The Twelve Patriarchs',

cap. lxxvii in *Richard of St Victor* trans. by Grover A. Zinn, (Classics of Western Spirituality, SPCK/Paulist Press, 1979), pp 124–5.

⁹ Bernard, *On the Song of Songs*, *op. cit.*, p 25.

¹⁰ Bernard, 'Sermon 3 on The Circumcision'.

¹¹ John Climacus, p 240.

¹² *Pastoral charge*, Bk 1, p 141.

¹³ *A discernment of stirrings*, trans C. Wolters in *A study of wisdom* (SLG Press, 1980), p 28.

¹⁴ John Climacus, p 228.

¹⁵ *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. B. Ward (Oxford, 1975/88), Moses 2.

¹⁶ *The cloud of unknowing*, trans. C. Wolters, (Penguin Classics, 1961–82), p 152.

¹⁷ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. Windeatt (Penguin Books, 1985), p 77.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 78–80.

¹⁹ John Climacus, p 240.

²⁰ *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Macarius, 32.

²¹ John Climacus, p 229.

²² Cassian, p 310.

²³ *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Arsenius, 6.

²⁴ John Climacus, p 244.

²⁵ *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Mark the disciple of abba Sylvanus, 2.

²⁶ Eadmer, *Vita S. Anselmi*, ed and trans. R. W. Southern (Oxford, 1962), pp 10–11.

²⁷ Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, 11, 36.

²⁸ *The Rule of St. Benedict*, trans J. McCann, (London, 1952), cap. 3, p 24.

²⁹ *The cloud of unknowing*, caps. 53 and 54, pp 122–126.

³⁰ *The wisdom of the Desert Fathers*, trans. B. Ward (SLG Press, 1981/8), p 50.

³¹ Cassian, caps 5, 6, 7, 8; pp 310–311.

³² *A discernment of stirrings*, p 43.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Guigo of the Chartreuse, *Méditations*, traduction et rédaction par un Chartreux (Sources Chrétiennes, 308, Paris, 1983), Meditation 5, p 104.