

Pastoral Letter on Discernment

Dear Fathers, Brothers and Sisters,

Thy Kingdom Come!

'Discernment' simply means to judge well. To explain it further, it is the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure so as to reach a better understanding/solution to the matter in discussion. The etymology of the English word discernment is from Greek word *aisthesis*, which means moral perception, insight, and the practical application of knowledge. The fundamental definition of Christian discernment is a decision making process in which an individual makes a discovery that can lead to future action. In the process of Christian spiritual discernment God guides the individual to help them arrive at the best decision. It is indeed the ability to see the truth.

God must shed light on the human mind to enable us to understand truth. It is impossible to attain wisdom without God. He gives discernment (Job 12:19-21). Spiritual discernment ultimately has to do with wisdom and the ability to distinguish truth from error. Every Christian must know the authentic so well that, when the false appears, we can recognize it. By knowing and obeying the word of God, we will be trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. We will know God's character and will. This is the heart of spiritual discernment - being able to distinguish the voice of the world from the voice of God, to have a sense that "this is right" or "this is wrong". Spiritual discernment finds off temptation and allows us to "hate what is evil, cling to what is good" (Rom, 12:9). Paul warns when this gift of discernment is not being exercised in the Church, distortion of the truth occurs (Rom. 12:10).

John exhorted believers: "not to believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 Jn. 4:1). 1 Tim. 4:1 tells us: "The spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Thus we are urged to "see to it no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than Christ (Col. 1:8). Paul asserts spiritual discernment as choosing the best from the depth of insight: "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless" (Phil. 1:9-10).

Prayer, humility, truth, justice, love, faith, silence etc are intrinsically connected to our discernment process. They assist one to facilitate the process easy and with indwelling of the spirit. On the other hand emotion, pleasure, search for immediate results are the temptation that block the way in the discernment process. The gift of discernment of spirits is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4-11). It is given by the Holy Spirit to profit God's kingdom. This rare gift will enable a believer to have better understanding of any matter beyond a literal sense. Jesus warns: "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mt. 26:41).

Prayer as living in the presence of God and communicating with God matter utmost important element in the discernment process. Quiet, reflective prayer times are important for the deep listening that discernment requires. The practice of the virtue of humility forbears one to meet any situation with sobriety and serenity. Jesus says: "Truth will make you free" (Jn. 8:32). To speak the truth and stand firm for it, what may come, makes one to be free and transparent. Justice enable one to weigh the pros and cons of the matter in discussion impartial and free of influences. Love and fraternity seek the good of everyone on all occasions. Faith is ultimately guides one to be connected to God and the situation around or circumstances in the right perception and perspective. Silence or stillness of heart is a pre-requisite for any mature human decision if silence haven't been part of our lives, the cacophony of thoughts and feelings can truly become overwhelming. Freedom from distraction so that we can listen deeply to the Lord is what we are looking for.

The following are a few practical tips for making a good discernment: (i). Take time: Think of your discernment as a journey in which you will grow personally and closer to God. The best discernment aren't rushed, but lived in openness and surrender to God. It gives one ample time to reflect, revive and refresh. (ii). Use recourses: Gather information and knowledge about what you are discerning. God wants you to use your head as well as your heart. Focus the balance between pros and cons and avail the counsel of experts/others. (iii). Focus the priority: Even after weighed the pros and cons intellectually you might need space and time to understand how your heart was moved. What should be the first and what should be the last need to be prioritized clearly with 'why' and how. (iv). Ask for guidance/insight: Guidance or insight of an experienced person or a professional is of great assistance. A good director will be understanding and helping you to discover a sense of freedom in your discernment. Ideally, a director or your superior/mentor, will encourage you to examine the many options you have to become more aware of your own motivations and bring your experiences to prayer. (v). Prayer: Ask Jesus the Divine master for the grace of listening to God in his word and in the Eucharist. And remember your vocation is not just God's invitation but your response. Without your "yes" there is no vocation.

Through discernment, we recognize the good and find peace in the decision we make, progressing ourselves to the future that awaits us. The prophet Jeremiah exhorts: "For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not your woe" (29:11). Indeed spiritual discernment is the process of knowing that plan and doing it. God bless you all.

With Good Wishes
Yours devotedly in Jesus Christ,



† Ephrem Nariculam
Bishop, Diocese of Chanda