

# Bernardine Discernment: between the Desert Fathers and Ignatius of Loyola<sup>1</sup>

by

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## *1. Recovering a Theological and a Spiritual Context*

“Discernment” or more precisely “discernment of spirits” is a reality whose importance, and even urgency, our epoch has yet to discover. Thomas Aquinas mentions it only indirectly in his *Summa Theologiae*, in the questions on the gifts of the Spirit and in those on the charisms.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Saint Paul had emphasized discernment among the living energies that sustain the Church in its members: “to another the discernment of spirits” (1 Cor 12:10). Still, for various reasons that would be difficult even to list here, interest in discernment and its continuing importance in speculative and practical theology seems to have faded in the course of centuries.

It is spirituality, specifically Ignatian spirituality, that, after World War II, with Hugo Rahner and the series and periodical *Christus*,<sup>3</sup> made the rediscovery of *discreta caritas* in the loving freedom of the believer. The Greek Fathers were the first to write on discernment. Among the first volumes to appear in

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<sup>1</sup>This article was originally presented at the Cistercian Studies Conference of the Medieval Congress, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, in May 1998. The present English version has been prepared in the light of a revised French version.—Trans.

<sup>2</sup>Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (henceforth cited only by part, question, and article if applicable) I<sup>a</sup> II<sup>ae</sup> 68 on the gifts of the Holy Spirit; to this we should add 70 on the fruits of the Spirit, II<sup>a</sup> II<sup>ae</sup> 8 and 9 on the gifts of understanding and knowledge, and 45 on the gift of wisdom; as for the charisms, they are explained in questions 171–8 of the same part: “Charisms at the Service of Revelation.” He never mentions “discernment of spirits” as in 1 Cor 12:10.

<sup>3</sup>By Hugo Rahner we have *Ignatius von Loyola und das geschichtliche Werden seiner Frömmigkeit* (Graz, 1947); ET *The Spirituality of St. Ignatius Loyola* (Newman, 1953; rpt. Loyola UP, 1980) 36–45, and chapter 3, “The Mystical Transformation of St. Ignatius into a Man of the Church” (46–112). With regard to the periodical *Christus*, founded in 1954, a perusal of the first volume, especially the contributions of Fr. Giuliani, the founding editor, should be enough to convince us that it basks in the same climate (see, for example, 62–76 of issue 4: “Les motions de l’Esprit.”

*Sources Chrétiennes* was #5 in 1943, *Oeuvres complètes* of Diadocus of Photice, an authority on the subject (his *Oeuvres complètes* has seen three revisions<sup>4</sup>). More recently, Père Jean-Claude Guy, SJ, editor of the *Apophthegmata* of the Desert Fathers,<sup>5</sup> has, especially in his edition of the Latin text of the *Spiritual Exercises*,<sup>6</sup> clearly shown that Ignatius of Loyola was their spiritual heir through Cassian. An ice floe begins to appear. Quite recently a thesis in dogmatic theology was defended at the Catholic University of Lyon. The title of the book written from this thesis is quite significant; in English it is *A Different Knowledge of God: Discernment in Ignatius of Loyola*.<sup>7</sup>

In short, discernment is a part of the patrimony of faith and Christian charity. As such it is always living, even though it be technically forgotten. Recently it has received an infusion of new life through one school of spirituality. Instead of being confined to pure Christian practice, all its doctrinal and effective potential in the theological domain should be made clear.

At least one witness is missing from this history that we have briefly sketched out: Saint Bernard. And he is a witness who can never be completely separated from the Cistercian tradition as a whole. It is important to fill this gap if we really want to promote spiritual discernment in the Christian awareness of our time. Is not Saint Bernard an extraordinary link between the wisdom of the Fathers and that which supports our faith today? To be frank, without his support underlying the decisive but too abbreviated witness of Thomas Aquinas, the cause of spiritual discernment as an actual benefit to the Church would not be won. I say this with all due deference to the Jesuits, of course!

## 2. Chief Characteristics of Discernment of Spirits

We must begin with what is well known and go on to what is less well known. I will begin, then, with the agreement between the Desert Fathers and Ignatius of Loyola on the meaning of "discernment of spirits." This agreement is clear enough. I purposely use the Pauline term in preference to simple "discernment" and even "spiritual discernment," which lacks any semantic backing and can often mean just about anything. I will flesh out this agreement

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<sup>4</sup>Edouard des Places was the editor; the later editions were 1955, 1966, and 1997; Cerf, in Paris, is the publisher.

<sup>5</sup>In addition to a thorough study on the textual tradition: *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des "Apophthegmata Patrum"* (Brussels, 1962), and his edition of the *Apophthegmes des Pères*, which began to appear in *Sources Chrétiennes* in 1993 with vol. 1 (SCh 387), Père Guy had published a small anthology which has continued to be widely read: *Paroles des anciens. Apophthegmes des Pères du désert* (Paris: Cerf, 1976). He has also edited the *Institutions Cénobitiques* of John Cassian, SCh 109 (Paris: Cerf, 1965).

<sup>6</sup>*Exercices spirituels. Texte définitif (1548)*, traduit et commenté par Jean-Claude Guy (Paris, 1982), *passim*, but see especially the "Notes complémentaires" 169-70.

<sup>7</sup>Sr. Sylvie Robert, *Une autre connaissance de Dieu: Le discernement chez Ignace de Loyola, Cogitatio fidei* series 204 (Paris, 1997).

by using a number dear to Saint Bernard, the “four” of the four dimensions of charity: “the breadth and the length, the height and the depth [Eph 3:18].”<sup>8</sup>

A. Discernment of spirits is both similar to and different from the cardinal virtue of prudence. It is like prudence in being evidently an activity of the intelligence and, more important, of an intelligence occupied with *agibilia*, that is to say, with everything that has to be done repeatedly in our life. However, discernment of spirits does not consist in analyzing concepts, as happens in a science or a discipline like philosophy, or in organizing a program, or in the makeup of a decision; it consists, instead, in evaluating feelings through the concepts that express them. When we speak of feelings, we immediately speak, in one way or another, in line with various images, of feeling happy or of the opposite, feeling sad.

B. This evaluation of feelings is not made according to moral good or evil, however correctly the conscience perceives them. It is directly eudaimonic. It is concerned with the actual duration of the happiness induced. Here the intelligence is not after a better happiness than pleasure (a pleasure that should be moral happiness)<sup>9</sup> It discovers how to avoid being deceived about true happiness by an error resulting from a counterfeit of freedom. It distances itself from feelings, not in order to reject them, because they would be only sentiments and therefore, by definition, not conformed to the good, but in order to find out what it is they offer: lasting happiness or a happiness that is only a “Deceptive Star.”<sup>10</sup>

C. The discerning intelligence has the absolutely precise task of finding the truth that is involved in the quest for true happiness in all the *agibilia*. The enemy, that is, the devil, in whatever way the speculative intelligence may

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<sup>8</sup>On the philosophical and theological underpinnings of the fourfold symbolism in Bernard’s works, it is absolutely indispensable to read the chapter by B. Michel: “La philosophie. Le cas du *De consideratione*,” *Bernard de Clairvaux: histoire, mentalité, spiritualité. Colloque de Lyon–Cîteaux–Dijon*, Sch 380 (Paris: Cerf, 1992).

<sup>9</sup>I refer to the excellent analysis of “respect” in Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason* 1.3: “The Incentives of Pure Practical Reason”; ET: Lewis White Beck, *Library of Liberal Arts* 52 (Bobbs–Merrill, 1956) 74 and following. This Kantian “respect” is not a way of going beyond the pure *du sollst*. It is only a consequence in moral judgment, an *a posteriori* of purity itself. In a sense, then (there is nothing beyond the moral law for moral man), Kant’s viewpoint is like Bernard’s; by ignoring the problems of discernment and delusion, he distances himself from them, at least in this particular work. This agreement between the Cistercian and the philosopher of enlightenment has the advantage of clarifying the profundity of the reflection at which Saint Bernard’s positions are found.

<sup>10</sup>*Deceptive Star* is the title of a Russian movie about the collapse of the Soviet regime, produced by Nikita Mikhalkov in 1994. It is a graphic portrayal of our sad ability to let happiness deceive us.

perceive his reality,<sup>11</sup> proves useful here, insofar as he forces the combat to be relocated mentally from the moral battleground to the theological. In fact the glory of the moral domain is that of clarifying the irrepressible freedom of each person. Its incurable weakness is that of leaving us to ourselves in our ambiguities. In order to escape that, we would have to find such an able support, that, not satisfied with safeguarding our freedom, it would promote it by letting us understand happiness correctly, a happiness that really corresponds here and now to our free desires and wishes. By myself I am deceived by the infinite complexity of spirits, but help is at hand. With God and his good spirits, the angels, I can be more clever than the Evil One. The first step, then, is not to believe that everything produced inside me, such as thoughts attached to my feelings, really comes from me. A significant part of these thoughts could, in fact, come from spiritual forces other than me. And so the moral debate is self-enclosed. In this self-enclosure discernment forces me to find a good and wise friend, in order to rid myself of deception. Ever and again that is the strategy, though it be clothed in all kinds of different modalities and is for that very reason difficult to interpret. We are led willy-nilly to think of Proteus.<sup>12</sup> Discernment of spirits is the art of detecting, using the criterion of lasting happiness, which are the good spiritual friends and which the bad. These correspond to the word *spirits* in the First Letter to the Corinthians. There is nothing intellectual in the conventional (and misleading) sense of the term in this. Nevertheless, there is an intelligence at work that becomes supreme when it relies on God who is supremely intelligent.

D. Here we touch the strictly theological quality of discernment (where God himself speaks). Its purpose is not the building of anything like a system or *summa*. I am free from illusion and can feel some true happiness. Its purpose is to experience as the unique condition of real moral victory the goodness and wisdom of God, which make me know what is most common, daily, and vital—the goods that accompany or fail to accompany this desire for happiness inherent in human nature (see Qo 3:1-13).

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<sup>11</sup>The authentic spiritual person does not waste time asking whether the devils exist. One knows through personal experience and through spiritual counseling that the ability to uncover their action is a valuable asset. On the one hand it allows us to keep the devil from stifling our consciences; on the other hand it helps us to find the only sure foothold in these encounters: the fact that arguing with the devil or with ourselves serves no other purpose than that of getting entangled still further.

<sup>12</sup>See Vergil's *Georgics* 4:388–529 on the fantastic battle, for which Aristeus has to prepare himself mentally, against the soothsayer who keeps changing his appearance, in order to wrest the secret of his own misfortunes from him: “Verum, ubi correptum manibus vinclisque tenebis / tum variæ eludent species atque ora ferarum” (405–6). This text by Vergil gives us a glimpse of the kind of discernment of spirits promoted by the consultation of oracles of every description in the pagan religions of the Mediterranean.

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It would take too long to try to prove it here, but this viewpoint is that proposed by the classic in the field, Athanasius's *Life of Antony*.<sup>13</sup> This work is a real compendium that makes all the thoughts of the Fathers on discernment accessible to us. It is likewise the viewpoint of Evagrius of Ponticus,<sup>14</sup> of Cassian,<sup>15</sup> and of the "Rules for Discernment of Spirits" ten centuries later in the *Spiritual Exercises*.<sup>16</sup> Now on to Saint Bernard!

#### 3. Bernardine Discernment

Our exposition of the broad outlines of discernment of spirits, which we have seen to be a permanent fixture of the Church's tradition over the course of a thousand years, has naturally placed us in an intellectual climate that we sense to be close to Bernard's. Nevertheless, this impression must be made more precise. We must not linger for an analysis of vocabulary, for that would take too long. Let us merely take note of the fact that in all the works of Saint Bernard the words *discerno* or *discretio* occur 239 times;<sup>17</sup> moreover, there are seven linkings of *discretio* with *spiritus* or *spirituum*. Here is one of the most interesting passages:

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<sup>13</sup>Athanasie d'Alexandrie, *Vie d'Antoine*, SCh 400 (Paris: Cerf, 1994); διακρίσεις πνευματικῶν found at four strategic places: 22.3, 38.5, 44.1, and 88.1 (196–7, 238–9, 254–5, and 360–1 in the Greek–French); ET: St. Athanasius, *The Life of Saint Antony* (ACW 10: 39, 52, 57 and 92); Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1980) 48, 60, 64, and 94. All the demonology employed in this classic must surely be interpreted along the lines of discernment of spirits.

<sup>14</sup>*Traité pratique ou le moine*, ed. A. and C. Guillaumont, SCh 170–71 (Paris, 1971) and *Le gnostique ou À celui qui est devenu digne de la science*, ed. A. and C. Guillaumont, SCh 356 (Paris, 1989); ET: trans. John Eudes Bamberger, *Evagrius Ponticus: Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*, CS 4 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1972) and Jeremy Driscoll, ed. *The Mind's Long Journey to the Holy Trinity* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1993).

<sup>15</sup>Especially the second conference on discretion by Abba Moses; *Conferences*, ed. E. Pichery, SCh 42 (Paris, 1966) 109–137; ET: trans. Boniface Ramsey, *John Cassian, Conferences*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1985) 60–80.

<sup>16</sup>Ignatius of Loyola, *Exercices Spirituels*, ed. E. Gueydan (*Christus* 61), especially "Règles pour sentir et reconnaître les diverses motions que se produisent dans l'âme, les bonnes pour les recevoir et les mauvaises pour les rejeter," 183–189 and "Règles visant le même effet avec un plus grand discernement des esprits," 190–193; see also in the "Vocabulaire" (215–245) the words *Affections*, *Consolation*, *Désolation*, *Discernement*, *Esprits*, *Motions*. ET: *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, ed. Anthony Mottola with an Intro by Robert W. Gleason, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964): "Rules for the Discernment of Spirits: First Week," 129–32; "Second Week," 132–34. On the relation between Ignatius of Loyola and the Desert Fathers see Dominique Bertrand, "Il ruolo dell'intelligenza nella vita spirituale. Evagrio e Ignazio di Loyola," *L'antropologia dei maestri spirituali*, dir. Charles André Bernard (Turin, 1991).

<sup>17</sup>See the *Thesaurus Bernardi Claravallensis*, CC (Brepols: Turnhout, 1987).

Who can keep watch over his inward thoughts so closely and so assiduously, whether they merely occur to him or whether he is their author, as to be able to decide clearly which of the heart's illicit desires are the fruit of his own frailty [*morbum mentis*], which an insinuation of the devil [*morsum serpentis*]? I believe this is more than mortals can achieve, unless by the light of the Holy Spirit they receive that special gift which the Apostle lists with the other charisms under the name of discernment of spirits.<sup>18</sup>

Everything is there. It is rare for Bernard and for the subject we are concerned with, that everything be collected in this way, especially the explicit mention of the devil. However, since it is not possible for us to evaluate the meaning of the words here, our method will be to have direct recourse to certain texts or themes, reversing the order of the four characteristics we have analyzed above. And so we present discernment according to Bernard in its theological bedrock, as it is deployed strategically and anthropologically, giving intelligence its proper place at the end, as it is used among the *agibilia*.

#### A. *On Loving God*: the Theological Dimension of Discernment

The treatise *On Loving God* includes the "Letter to the Carthusians" (Dil 34-40) at the end,<sup>19</sup> which is one of Bernard's earliest works; this treatise presents us with one of Bernard's most theoretical syntheses. The theory found in these pages does not consist, however, in an atemporal exposition. It is made up of descriptions that I would call without hesitation phenomenological; for they are a blend of psychological analysis and of reflection on its theoretical underpinnings. Human love for God comes weighted with all the paths we travel in order truly to arrive there, and this journey does not happen without these very paths leaving their mark on the permanence of God's love for us. Here we are quite close to discernment defined by its theological significance: that is, God shows himself to be love by teaching people to love him with all their being. I insist on this "with all their being." I offer two texts in explanation. The first marks the paradoxical beginning of the road according to our theologian of discernment. Before citing it, in order to bring out its originality, I will sum up in this: the first stage of loving God is loving oneself egotistically. Bernard writes:

Since we are carnal and born of concupiscence of the flesh, our cupidity or love must begin with the flesh, and when this is set in order, our love advances by fixed degrees, led on by grace, until it is consummated in the spirit, for "Not what is

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<sup>18</sup>SC 32.6; SBOp 1:229-30; *On the Song of Songs II*, trans. Kilian Walsh, CF 7 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1976) 138.

<sup>19</sup>Ep 11; Sch 431:458-59; SBOp 7.52; trans. Bruno Scott James, *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, CF 62 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1998) 41 (Ep 12 in this edition); hereafter Letters.

spiritual comes first, but what is animal, then what is spiritual” (1 Cor 15:46). . . . Thus man first loves himself for himself because he is carnal and sensitive to nothing but himself. Then when he sees he can not subsist by himself, he begins to seek for God by faith and to love him as necessary to himself.<sup>20</sup>

Starting from this very bad beginning, embedded in flesh but for that reason perfectly real, what is reached is nothing less than the deification of human affectivity. That is the second text, a very short one. Three or four other Latin words sum it up: “sic affici deificari est.”<sup>21</sup> As we have been reminded, between the setting out and the goal there is progress “by fixed degrees” that are proper to the journey.<sup>22</sup>

### B. The Strategy of *On Precept and Dispensation*

If there is one question that continues to show the necessity for reflection and discernment on the part of religious men and women, it is obedience with its extremely thorny corollary, a *transitus* from one abbey to another. It is well known that Saint Bernard had to deal with these problems, which he had encountered in various places and at various times, in one of his longest treatises, *On Precept and Dispensation*, written during his forties.<sup>23</sup> He found it necessary to blaze a new trail by undertaking an extremely original interpretation of Mt 6:22–3: “If your eye is sound. . . .” Bernard proposes here a surrealist analysis of the “four eyes.” I will select the following passage from this extensive exegesis (Pre 35–42) to whet your appetites:

Just as the truly simple eye [Mt 6:22] requires both love of the good and knowledge of the true, so the evil eye is the result of the two opposite qualities: blindness which prevents one from recognizing the truth and perversity which leads one to love evil. Between this double good which is neither deceitful nor deceived and this double evil which is both perverted and perverse lie two intermediate states. One of these is good, for its inner eye retains its good zeal and is not party to the deception of which it is the ignorant victim. The other is evil

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<sup>20</sup>Dil 39; SBOp 3:152; Emero Stiegman, *On Loving God: An Analytical Commentary*, CF 13B (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1973, 1995) 40. See also Dil 23; SBOp 3:138; CF 13B:25.

<sup>21</sup>Dil 28; SBOp 3:143; CF 13B:30.

<sup>22</sup>See note 20 above.

<sup>23</sup>See, for example, Ep 1; SBOp 7:1–11; Letters 1–10. The problems apparently come up again in the *Apology*, which is closely related to Ep 1; see SCh 425:50–55 (“Introduction”).

for although it is not opposed to the knowledge of the true, malice makes it insensible to the love of the good.<sup>24</sup>

I believe that everyone will be edified by these lines and by Bernard's ability to complicate things in order to clarify them. It is truly the intelligence that is in question here, so zealous to avoid deception. In this analysis, our strategist in discernment distinguishes four "eyes": the simple eye, the good but deceived eye, the evil but informed eye, and the evil eye that is both evil and ignorant. Bernard concludes:

I believe it was to him [the evil eye that lacks both good zeal and true judgment] and to his opposite who possesses these two qualities which he lacks, that Truth was referring when he spoke of the simple and the evil eye which render the whole body either radiant or wrapped in darkness [Mt 6:22]. The other two we have mentioned have something of darkness and something of light, and hence cannot be classified as totally pervaded by either.<sup>25</sup>

These stunning analyses, touched on so briefly here, allow us to perceive at least this fact: Bernard refuses to reduce the problem of making choices, whatever they be, to a simple purification of intention, a mistake that, according to him, Peter the Venerable made on several occasions.<sup>26</sup> In every question, Bernard sees a still higher question that finds its solution only in the Holy Spirit,<sup>27</sup> namely the question of harmonizing intellect and will in true concrete love. His refusal to oversimplify explains and upholds the importance of the vocabulary of discretion that we have outlined above and its constant preoccupation to avoid a charity that is unaccompanied by interior restraint, applied precisely to that which charity is.

### C. *The Sermon on Conversion to the Clerics: The Anthropology of Intelligence*

Furthermore, this refusal agrees perfectly with the message of the *Sermon on Conversion*, which belongs to these same years, Bernard's glorious forties.

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<sup>24</sup>Pre 37; SBOP 3:279; trans. Conrad Greenia, *Treatises I: On Precept and Dispensation*, CF 1 (Spencer, MA: Cistercian, 1970) 133. SCH has published both Pre and Conv in No. 425 (Paris, 2000); see 228–31 (#37).

<sup>25</sup>Pre 40; SBOP 3:281; CF 1:135.

<sup>26</sup>See Ep 28 by Peter the Venerable, to which Bernard makes more than allusions in *On Precept and Dispensation*, especially in 41 (SBOP 3:281; CF 1:136). Here he shows that the *bona intentio* is not enough, using an exegesis of Rm 14:23 ("quod non est ex fide peccatum est") that favors the role of the intelligence much more than Peter does. For Ep 28, see Giles Constable, ed. *The Letters of Peter the Venerable* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1967) 52–101 (especially 60, 62, and 66). Sr. Françoise Callerot, who co-edited *De Precepto et Dispensatione* in *Sources Chrétiennes*, has drawn my attention to this point.

<sup>27</sup>See notes 18 and 19.

In counterpoint to an exegesis of Matthew's eight beatitudes running through the whole development, this Sermon sets the stage for the dramatic relationships among the three powers of the human soul: reason (supported by the intellect),<sup>28</sup> will or desire, and memory. Reason is the first to be influenced by the beatitudes, but it succeeds only with great difficulty in bringing back to itself, or to God, the rebellious will, a real fury, strikingly sketched out:

Then the crazy old hag leaps up and, completely forgetting her ailments, storms out with her hair standing on end, her clothes torn, her breast bare; she picks at her sores, grinds her teeth, goes rigid and infects even the air with her poisonous breath. Anyone still keeping his reason would be disconcerted at such insult and assault by the wretched will.<sup>29</sup>

Despite everything the will calms down, after reason stops its moralizing and arouses in her an infinite desire for happiness.<sup>30</sup> I will not attempt a longer citation of this remarkable work, lest my exposition be too long, but I do want to emphasize the following points: the form of Bernardine discernment is sketched out for us little by little, and Bernard's own portrait as a spiritual companion is also traced out. He is, indeed, capable of being a spiritual companion, because he has taken up an immemorial tradition of the Church and made it his own. Bernard's idea of human salvation by God is strictly complete, excluding neither flesh, nor body, nor passions, nor feelings. His vigorous conception of faith allows him to turn the human being with its guiding faculties (intelligence first and foremost) back to the flesh, taking into account all the feelings, as well as all the internal and external complications that belong to the fleshly condition. Finally, the culminating point of this whole strategy of conquest on the part of the complete human being destined to enjoy God is that love is never reduced to mere love, but those who are called to "love without measure" (Dil 1) are reminded that love's greatness is to be led by the intelligence, that is to say, to be also wisdom, goodness, and happiness.

Here I will clarify only one point. Bernard knows the devil's ability to hurt, just as he knows that the angels are beneficial.<sup>31</sup> Therefore his ideas about the relational foundation of discernment, through the relations of spiritual beings, are in complete continuity with those of the Desert Fathers. Still, his primary

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<sup>28</sup>The word *intellectus* is used only this one time in the Sermon (11); SBOp 4:84; CF 25:44; its use here is most interesting.

<sup>29</sup>Conv 10; SBOp 4:82; CF 25:43.

<sup>30</sup>On this whole passage, see my contribution, "*Littérature et vérité. Aux clercs, sur la conversion et les textes parallèles,*" to the volume *Maisons de Dieu et hommes de l'église. Florilège en honneur de Pierre-Roger Gausin* (Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne) 73–82.

<sup>31</sup>On angels and devils, see, for example, among other passages, SC 5; SBOp 1:21–26; CF 4:25–31. Here he distinguishes four kinds of spirits: those of animals, good and bad angels, humans, and God; this short treatise, sermon 5, does not lack consequences for spiritual accompaniment in its theological opinion that angels and devils cannot act directly on the human mind: SC 5.8; SBOp 1:24–25; CF 4:29–30.

interest is in the interior movements of the thoughts and feelings. In short, while recognizing his agility in analyzing the detours taken by our souls, Bernard's own contribution to the development of the time-honored doctrine of discernment is his taking into account the complexity of the human condition with which discernment is forced to deal, thus demonstrating its necessary benefits. In that way the position he adopted with regard to questions of angelology or demonology is understandable: they should not blind us to the essential thing. Discernment does not give us that kind of knowledge. Here is the continuation of the passage from Bernard's writings that we began quoting earlier:

I certainly have not received the power to distinguish with certitude between what springs from the heart and what is sown there by the enemy . . . I am fully certain that I bear them within, but by no means certain which to attribute to the heart, which to the enemy. But this problem, as I have said, entails no danger.

But where the error is dangerous, even fatal, there we are provided with a rule that is certain: not to attribute to ourselves what comes from God within us, thinking that the visit of the Word is no more than a thought of our own.<sup>32</sup>

#### D. Confronting the *Agibilia*: the *Letters*

More and more specialists are taking account of the importance of the Letters in the whole of Saint Bernard's work. Bernard carefully watched over the publication of these Letters, which have the advantage of being full of all sorts of problems of social or personal life, each one more insoluble than the other. Such is human life in the condition of the flesh where God's love manifests itself in the deification of the feelings. Therefore, the Letters reveal the true meaning of his other writings, which were always initially spoken if only by the writer dictating to his secretaries. Bernard never wrote for the sake of writing, just as he never spoke for the sake of speaking. For Bernard there was always someone to help, whether it was a person, a community, or a potentially wider public, reached by the carefully prepared, authentic editions of his works. Since, therefore, he wanted to help people, Bernard became a master of discernment. He was not merely a theorist of discernment, as the preceding considerations have shown him to be, but he was also a practitioner always ready to help. Therefore it is always interesting to read the Letters, and they are enlightening for his entire work. They illustrate the practitioner who is a credible theorist only because he is first of all an experienced practitioner.

On this point I would draw your attention to Bernard's courage and its matrix, his intelligence. The specialists usually do not know how to reconcile

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<sup>32</sup>SC 32:6-7; Sch 431:460-61; SBOp 1:230; CF 7:139. See note 18.

the naked passion revealed in so many letters with the perfection of expression that can be the result of an extremely conscious effort to write well. As an alert, willing, and intelligent writer, Bernard displays his own emotions and feelings, which then interact with the emotions and feelings of his interlocutor, the addressee. Using his intelligence, he expresses his anger and intense experiences of affection all over again. Such is, properly speaking, the role of "the simple eye," becoming simple to help another or a great number of others to do the same. All this amounts to saying that the vitality and vivacity of the Letters, and consequently of all his writings, must be interpreted in terms of discernment. In other words, it must be interpreted according to the intelligence that learns from God on every occasion how to love well, how to be happy, and how to benefit others.

I hope you will excuse me for not quoting anything from Bernard's correspondence on this point. In fact, what I have proposed here is not one aspect among others but a general instrument of interpretation.

#### *4. Conclusion*

I will conclude with some brief remarks. To begin with, the exposition you have just read is open to criticism. It certainly is not a proven thesis. It is no more than an indication of a possible field for future research. I am human enough to think it might be a fruitful one. Why?

Here is the first element of an answer to that "why." This line of research permits a rediscovery of Bernard through his intelligence. We already recognize him as a man of astonishing and admirable affection, even passion. Through the half-open door of discernment of spirits, he will reveal himself as a person who reflects, thinks, and understands the life of the passions in a way that does not quench that life, but abets its progress ultimately to deification. In this way, to use an example intended to shock, Bernard is no longer Abelard's enemy, but his most faithful friend, wishing only to give him "the simple eye."

There is a second reason for considering discernment as a way of entering into the thought and the mind of our author. The rediscovery of Bernard's decisive role in the development of the doctrine of discernment from the Desert Fathers to Ignatius of Loyola isolates and encircles an important moment of maturation. Without disregarding the role of the devil and the angels in the complex processes going on in the feelings, our theologian, who is also a practitioner, has situated everything within the human nature of one whom God is helping to be fully human. Let us return to the phrase quoted above with regard to Bernard's vocabulary of discernment.<sup>33</sup> Between the source called "the fruit of his own frailty" (now healed by grace) and that called "an insinuation of the devil," Bernard, following his own historical moment and his

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<sup>33</sup>See the text quoted on page 330 and identified in note 18.

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personal talents, focused his "inner eye" on what belongs to human nature properly speaking, in its primary relationship with God. We touch here the deep conscious humanism of the abbot of Clairvaux and more generally of the whole spiritual movement that arose from Clairvaux.

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