

7. January 2023

On the discernment of spirits  
(Part I)

1 Jn 3:22 – 4:6

*Whatever we ask we shall receive from God, because we keep his commandments and do what is acceptable to him. His commandment is this, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and that we should love one another as he commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments remains in God, and God in him. And this is the proof that he remains in us: the Spirit that he has given us. My dear friends, not every spirit is to be trusted, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets are at large in the world. This is the proof of the spirit of God: any spirit which acknowledges Jesus Christ, come in human nature, is from God, and no spirit which fails to acknowledge Jesus is from God; it is the spirit of Antichrist, whose coming you have heard of; he is already at large in the world. Children, you are from God and have overcome them, because he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are from the world, and therefore the world inspires what they say, and listens to them. We are from God; whoever recognises God listens to us; anyone who is not from God refuses to listen to us. This is how we can distinguish the spirit of truth from the spirit of falsehood.*

Today's reading is about the discernment of spirits, which precedes the division of spirits, which we will discuss a little later... In St. John's letters, we are in good hands when it comes to discernment, for his words leave no room for ambivalence. Clarity is part of the discernment of the spirits, for it is only from this that the respective conclusions can be drawn.

Already the first statement in today's text shows us a clear path, which for us Christians is - or at least should be - the most natural thing: Only those who keep God's commandments can be sure that the Holy Spirit will be able to work in them and that God will dwell in them. As long as a person does not keep God's commandments and does not make every effort to live according to them, he will remain in darkness as regards the knowledge of God: the Holy Spirit will not be able to penetrate him; he will have to struggle, in the first instance, to bring him to conversion.

Perhaps we tend to forget this reality, when we are accustomed to an environment in which the binding character of God's commandments for each person is no longer taken into account. True knowledge goes beyond being able to list the ten commandments or knowing something about the biblical contents - even the Devil knows the commandments of God! However, true knowledge means loving them and wanting to keep them. *"Whoever holds to my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me"* - the Lord tells us (Jn 14:21).

It is the indwelling Spirit who invites us to understand God's commandments more and more deeply and to keep them better and better. He would not be content if we were to keep them reluctantly. He wants to make us understand the goodness of the commandments and to lead us to believe in Jesus and to love one another according to his new commandment (cf. Jn 13:34). He wants us to understand that this is where true joy lies.

But what does the Spirit of God ask of us when we know that other people do not keep God's commandments? Today, even in the Church, there is a widespread attitude of not daring to even make such a statement, for fear that one might be "judging" the person by saying that he or she is not living according to the commandments.

However, to recognise and acknowledge an objective transgression of God's commandments is by no means a judgement; rather, it is a realisation of reality, which is necessary.

If the Spirit of God in us impels us to the observance of the commandments, it is impossible that He should be indifferent when another person attempts against them... If it happens that in our Church a spirit spreads which does not dare to call sin by its name, then it is not the Spirit of God who is at work here, but another spirit. This is what the discernment of spirits teaches us, and this conclusion has its consequences.

For if we allow ourselves to be led by this other spirit, we will not only become more and more confused, but we will also cease to take responsibility for sinners in our prayer: we will no longer pray ardently for their conversion or offer sacrifices in that intention, simply because we no longer identify sin as such or because we relativise its destructive power.

Let us take a concrete example: the Church, until now, has always taught us that sexual relations before marriage are sinful. Today, in not a few Catholic circles, it is no longer

considered sinful. Consequently, there will be less and less encouragement to receive communion only after having received forgiveness for this sin in the sacrament of confession.

And what does this mean in relation to the worthy reception of Holy Communion? Everyone can reflect on this for himself and draw the appropriate conclusions.

In these examples, we can already encounter that spirit of Antichrist of which the Letter of John speaks, because it is he who tries to relativise and justify sin and, in the end, to present it as if it were a good deed. Let us remember, for example, that abortion - which is nothing more and nothing less than the murder of a child - is spoken of as if it were a woman's free choice.

In next Monday's meditation, we will return to this theme, with some more on the discernment of spirits.