

P. Filip De Rycke¹

Sint-Janscentrum in 's-Hertogenbosch (The Netherlands)

Everything Done with a Pure Intention is Perfect Love. Elements of Discernment of the Spirits in Santa Teresa de Jesús

Summary

Saint Teresa of Ávila intrinsically connects discernment of the spirits with her principal theme of inner prayer. The main constituents of her doctrine of prayer (obedience, humility, charity, detachment) also represent key motifs in her view on discernment. From this perspective, Santa Teresa's sparse assertions can be integrated into a coherent doctrine on discernment of the spirits, founded in her deep religious experience. Discernment emerges as the core of Christian life and the genuine way in which the Divine Friend gives light for choices that make human persons grow in virtues and in inner freedom.

Keywords: Prayer, obedience, humility, charity, detachment

Streszczenie

Wszystko, co robi się z czystą intencją jest doskonałą miłością. Elementy rozeznawania duchów według św. Teresy od Jezusa

Święta Teresa z Avili łączy rozeznawanie duchów z jej głównym tematem wewnętrznej modlitwy. Główne elementy jej doktryny na temat modlitwy (posłuszeństwo, pokora, miłość, dystans) stanowią również kluczowe motywy w jej spojrzeniu na rozeznawanie duchów. Z tej perspektywy skąpe stwierdzenia Świętej Teresy mogą być włączone w spójną doktrynę rozeznawania duchów opartą

¹ P. Filip De Rycke (ORCID 0000-0002-4239-4269) – is a priest of the diocese 's-Hertogenbosch (The Netherlands), the former rector of Sint-Janscentrum 's-Hertogenbosch. He holds a doctorate in theology and works in the formation of future priests. The author wishes to sincerely thank fr. dr. Carlos Noyen ocd for his encouragement and adequate remarks to the content, and fr. Colin D. Jones, lic. theol., for the wearisome work of the textual corrections. E-mail: filip.derycke@ruhr-uni-bochum.de.

na jej głębokim doświadczeniu religijnym. Rozeznawanie jawi się jako rdzeń życia chrześcijańskiego i ważny sposób, w jaki Boski Przyjaciel daje światło dla wyborów, które sprawiają, że ludzie wzrastają w cnotach i w wewnętrznej wolności.

Słowa kluczowe: modlitwa, posłuszeństwo, pokora, miłosierdzie, dystans

The topic of discernment is rather dispersedly treated in the writings of Saint Teresa.² Nevertheless, the judges of the Roman Rota, having heard the testimonies about her life in view of her beatification and canonisation, concluded that the Spanish mystic had received from God this specific grace.³

Saint Teresa's teachings on discernment can be treated from different angles. As this has been done already by other studies, we will only present some aspects of it, without any pretence of exhausting either the topics with which we are dealing or the presentation of Teresian texts.⁴ The higher mystical gifts, which might require specific criteria for discernment, are also left out of consideration.

² Abbreviations are conform this edition: The Spanish edition used is that from *Santa Teresa de Jesús, Obras completas*, ed. E. de la Madre de Dios, O. Steggink, Madrid ²1967. Abbreviations are conform this edition: A: *Apuntaciones*; CC: *Cuentas de Conciencia*; CE: *Camino de perfección* (edition from El Escorial); CV: *Camino de perfección* (edition from Valladolid); Cta: *Cartas (Letters)*; E: *Exclamaciones*; F: *Fundaciones*; M: *Moradas (Interior Castle)*; MC: *Meditaciones sobre los Cantares (Concepts of Divine Love)*; V: *Vida*; VD: *Visita de Descalzas*; Vej: *Vejamen*. English quotations are borrowed from the translation of *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, transl. K. Kavanaugh, O. Rodriguez, Washington ²1987.

³ *Relatio Trium Rotae Auditorum Deputatorum: Articulus XXII*, in: *Procesos de beatificación y canonización de la Madre Teresa de Jesús VI. Últimos pasos de la S. Congregación de Ritos hacia la Beatificación y Canonización (1609–1622)*, ed. J. Urkiza, Burgos 2016, p. 562 (Biblioteca Mística Carmelitana, 40); cf. Tomás de Jesús Sánchez Dávila, Diego de Yepes, *Vida, virtudes y milagros de la bienaventurada virgen Teresa de Jesús (1606)*, 3,28,15–27: 'De la gracia de discreción de espíritus', ed. M.D. Sánchez, Madrid 2014, p. 707–713, expanding Ribera's *Vida* with the testimonies of the canonical processes (Francisco de Ribera, *Vida de Santa Teresa de Jesús (1590)*, 4,25, ed. J. Pons, Barcelona 1908, p. 510–511); see also S. Ros García, *Teresa de Jesús: Palabra en el tiempo*, in: *Vítor Teresa. Teresa de Jesús, doctora honoris causa de la Universidad de Salamanca (Ediciones de la Diputación de Salamanca. Serie Catálogos 213)*, ed. M.C. Hernández, Salamanca 2018, p. 51.

⁴ Authors have chosen various perspectives to cover the topic (cf. bibliography). A survey of the way in which Saint Teresa treats discernment in her distinct writings is given by Oswaldo Escobar Aguilar. Different criteria in relation to her growth in mystical experiences are presented by Herraiz García and by Yamanouchi. Comparative perspectives are chosen by Silva y Mora, Santiago Perez, and Thompson (based on *gender and genre*), cf.

A primary challenge is the delimitation of the semantics of ‘discernment’ in the works of *La Madre Fundadora*. The word *discernimiento*, which may be considered as the technical term for the discernment of the spirits, is not testified in the writings of the saint from Ávila.⁵ To indicate the concept of discernment, Saint Teresa uses different words,⁶ such as *discurrir* (e.g. V 11,16) or *consideración*.⁷ Prominent too is the term *discreción* [sc. *discrición*: V 11,16], a concept that Teresa inherited from patristic⁸ and medieval theology.⁹ The Spanish saint also places importance on further expressions that are immediately related to the New Testament origin of the concept, such as ‘the power of distinguishing spirits’ enumerated among the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Cor 12:10, as well as the exhortation about the spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood in 1 Jn 4:1.6. In conformity with these biblical texts, Saint Teresa speaks of the ‘talent in discerning spirits’ (*talento de conocer espíritus*: V 39,10) with a threefold

Herraiz. Perez situates Saint Teresa in the context of the 16th century Spain, while Facundo Sebastián Macías concentrates on the theological background. Randle offers a commented reading of her writings, distinguishing between experience (V, F, CC, *Cartas*) and doctrine (*Camino*, MC, M).

⁵ As a matter of fact, it is also lacking in the texts of Saint Ignatius, see S. Arzubalde, *Discretio*, in: *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Ignaciana I*, ed. J.G. de Castor, e.a., Bilbao/Maliaño 2007, p. 623. The verb *discernir* and its Latin equivalent *discernere* are attested in Saint Ignatius, as are the respective Spanish and Latin substantives *discreción* and *discretio*.

⁶ Cf. O. Escobar Aguilar, *Manual de discernimiento teresiano. “Talento de conocer espíritus”* (V 39,10), Bogotá 2015, 53 (Ensayos Serie Espiritualidad).

⁷ *Yendo con consideración todo es amor perfecto* (‘Everything done with a pure intention is perfect love’): CV 7,7; cf. CE 11,6. *Consideración* figures here in the same context as *discreción*.

⁸ In the *Way of Perfection*, Saint Teresa refers to John Cassian’s story of the death of Heron in his *Collatio 2,5* (*De discretione*, in: *Patrologia Latina* 49,529–531), thus commenting on the story: ‘Discretion is very necessary in all’ (*en todo es muy necesario discreción*): CV 19,13. *La Santa* also quotes Cassian (without a direct reference to *discreción*) in: A 4 [5]; cf. the testimony of Petronila Bautista during the process of beatification and canonisation (Ávila, 1610) about Mother’s reverence for Cassian’s *Collationes*, p. 591 (*Biblioteca Mística Carmelitana*, 19). For Cassian’s view on discernment, see G. Bardy, *Discernement des esprits*, in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité III*, p. 1251.

⁹ For the discussion about the legacy of Meister Eckhart and the definition of *discretio spirituum* in saint Thomas Aquinas, see W.L. Anderson, *The Discernment of Spirits. Assessing Visions and Visionaries in the Late Middle Ages (Spätmittelalter, Humanismus, Reformation 63)*, Tübingen 2011, p. 89–91. O. Escobar Aguilar, *Manual*, 57 has remarked that, amongst Saint Teresa’s writings, the *Book of her Life* contains the most references to the classical terminology of discernment, maybe based upon her readings (o.c., p. 60).

division of spiritual powers. Biding for a free decision of the human will is the Spirit of God,¹⁰ against whom the evil spirit is fighting.¹¹ But apart from these two, certain phenomena can also be the fruit of the human spirit itself. *La Madre* mentions the different actors in the *Book of her Life*:

I also want to explain the difference that lies between what comes from the good spirit and what comes from the bad spirit and how the locution can also be an apprehension of the intellect itself – which can happen – or the spirit itself speaking to itself (V 25,2).¹²

1. Prayer as the inner key to discernment

The discernment of the spirits is not mainly a matter of a careful application of adequate methods. Saint Teresa stresses that it is a talent and a special gift that comes from the Lord.¹³ *La Madre* expresses this dimension of the divine action in the process of discerning between good and evil at the very beginning of her famous comparison of prayer as the watering of the garden of the soul. She states:

Beginners must realize that in order to give delight to the Lord they are starting to cultivate a garden on very barren soil, full of abominable weeds. His Majesty pulls up the weeds and plants good seed (V 11,6).

This image, which hearkens to the Lord's parable about the weed among the good seed¹⁴ immediately brings a strongly christocentric dimension, connecting the topic of discernment with the heart of the Theresian spirituality, i.e. the love of the 'most sacred humanity of Christ

¹⁰ Santa Teresa calls him e.g. *buen Espíritu* or *Espíritu de Dios*: V 23,5,16; 24,3; 25,2; cf. V 13,18; she also mentions the *ángel bueno* [de luz]: V 14,8; 34,6; CV 38,2; 1 M 2,15; 5 M 1,5.

¹¹ E.g. *mal espíritu*: V 23,11; *ángel malo*: V 34,6; *demonio*: CV 38,2; 1 M 2,15; 5 M 1,5.

¹² *La Santa* stresses that it is vital to 'use discernment to observe when these bodily disorders may be the cause' (V 11,15), using the platonic imagery of the *alma encarceladita*, l.c.; cf. CC 54,9 [5,11] on the *cárcel deste cuerpo*; CV 30,6; CE 52,3; et al.).

¹³ V 33,10; 6 M 9,11; see also V 22,18 (cf. CV 19,13); V 26,2.

¹⁴ Mt 13:24–30; 36–43. Connected with this simile of the garden is also the image of the dungheap in V 10,9 (alluding to Mt 12:43–45; Lk 11:24–26). In this text, too, Saint Teresa stresses the activity of Christ in discernment and the transformation of the soul.

as the gate by which believers must enter if they desire His sovereign Majesty to show great secrets' (cf. V 22,6¹⁵).

At the same time, the comparison about the garden links discernment to the practice of prayer, which is 'the door to the greatest favors' (cf. V 8,9¹⁶). Much like discernment itself, prayer, according to Saint Teresa, is not primarily a technique, but a personal encounter with the Divine Friend, who actively abides in the garden of the soul. The way through which this encounter is realised, and the means by which one arrives at the heart of prayer, is none other than the conformity of man's will with the will of God. It is in this conformity, operated by love,¹⁷ that the core of the greatest spiritual perfection (see 2M 8) and therefore also the goal of discernment of the spirits (according to its classical definition¹⁸) can be found.

2. Listening to the voice of the Friend

Both these dimensions deserve closer attention insofar as they link the analogy of the garden with the concept of discernment. We will return to the relation of discernment with prayer when focussing on the attitudes of humility, love, and detachment. Firstly, however, we must pay attention to the primary aspect of God's action in the process of discernment as well as the consequences that follow from it.

In her description of the criteria for discerning the origin of the higher mystical phenomena, Saint Teresa stresses the fact that, when

¹⁵ The image of Christ as the gate is from Jn 10:7.9. See also the love for the humanity of Christ linked with prayer in V 24,2.

¹⁶ Cf. 1 M 1,7; see also 2 M 11; V 7,1; 11,16; 23,2.

¹⁷ F 5,10; cf.: 'the soul's progress does not lie in thinking much but in loving much': F 5,2; cf. 4 M 1,7. Saint Teresa gives in this context an important digression on the topic, because 'perhaps we don't know what love is. I wouldn't be very surprised'; see also 1 M 2,17.

¹⁸ 'Par le discernement des esprits, il s'agit donc de découvrir la volonté du Père': P. Penning de Vries, *Discernement des esprits. Ignace de Loyola*, Paris 1979, p. 18. Different authors have stressed the connexion between discernment (, love) and the will of God in the Theresian spirituality, cf. O. Escobar Aguilar, *Manual*, op. cit., p. 18; 35; C. Santiago Perez, *Spirituality, discernment and tradition in Ignatius Loyola, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross*, Houston (TX) 1991, p. 92.

locutions are authentic, the human person adopts the attitude of listening. Words are spoken to this person with a clarity that comes from God (V 25,3). Making abstraction of the specifically auditory character of the phenomenon of locutions, the aspect which *La Madre* emphasizes here is emblematic for a fundamental dimension of the discernment of the spirits.¹⁹ Since it is the genuine human reaction to divine revelation as such, the attitude of listening is also the primary act in discernment.²⁰

From this perspective, it becomes clear why the topic of obedience has such a prominent place in Saint Teresa's teachings (cf. F 5,5). The act of faith, basically marked by the dimensions of listening to and answering the voice of God, is concretised in the vow of obedience and in the religious submission of the intellect and will, to which she often refers in the context of discernment. Therefore, in accordance with the word of the Lord ('Whoever hears you hears Me'²¹), God's will is manifested through the ecclesiastical ordinary, the superior, the visitator, and the confessor (cf. 6M 3,11). Also included in this list of authorities are the doctrine of the Sacred Scriptures and the precepts of the Church, of which she says: 'If anyone were to see that I went against the slightest ceremony of the Church in a matter of faith, I myself knew well that I would die a thousand deaths for the faith or for any truth of Sacred Scripture'.²²

¹⁹ In V 15,4–5, Saint Teresa uses the image of a little spark (*centellica*) as a sign for discernment (together with quietude and recollection). Similarly to locutions, the notion of the spark also points to a source that is external to the mind, i.e. the Spirit of God.

²⁰ This aspect would later be developed in Newman's doctrine of conscience as 'the voice of God in the nature and heart of man, as distinct from the voice of Revelation' (John Henry Newman, *A Letter Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk on Occasion of Mr. Gladstone's Recent Expostulation*, New York 1875, p. 72). In the attitude of listening to the voice of God also lies the theological foundation for the interrelatedness between discernment and *sensus fidelium*, that is stressed by D. Mieth, *Unterscheidung der Geister*, in: *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (3. Ausgabe) X, p. 445.

²¹ Lk 10:16, quoted in F 5,12; cf. 6 M 3,11. Important – and not without humor – in this context is the passage V 26,5: 'As often as the Lord commanded something of me in prayer and my confessor told me to do otherwise, the Lord returned and told me to obey my confessor; afterward His Majesty would change the confessor's mind, and he would agree with the Lord's command'.

²² V 33,5; cf. 25,12–13; 40,1; CC 58 [53/57],7; cf. V 31,4.

God's will becomes known through these intermediating, authoritative instances. Yet some distinctions need to be made, based on Saint Teresa's own life experience. Having had to cope for years with the human weakness and incredulity of these instruments of the divine will,²³ she promotes a loyal, but not enslaving, obedience, one that is guided by the search for the truth as the ultimate goal in the midst of possible contrary advices. *La Madre* also urges the use of the intellect, as evidenced in the charming stories in *F* 1,3-4 (the testing of obedience by ordering to plant a rotten cucumber being a reasonable intention in itself), although she ultimately subordinates such reasonings under authentic religious inspirations.

Especially meaningful in this context are the requirements that *La Madre Fundadora* lays out for a good confessor. In her writings, the confessor also functions as a spiritual director, and in regard to his counsel she advises complete openness (V 38,1²⁴). In her numerous passages on this topic, she mentions different qualities that the confessors should have: 'prudence – I mean good judgment – and experience' (V 13,16²⁵), being 'very learned and good servants of God' (V 39,3²⁶), 'holy and spiritual' (CE 7,2), 'virtuous and observant of holy customs' (V 5,3), 'very learned and, if possible, also spiritual... [instead of with] little

²³ The doubts of Saint Teresa's confessors and spiritual friends are a recurrent theme in the *Book of her Life*; cf. V 23,11; 29,4; cf. H. Martin, *Discernement des esprits*, in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité III*, p. 1284.

²⁴ Cf. V 26,3; 30,4, see also a similar advice regarding the visitorator in VD 22.

²⁵ Saint Teresa greatly stresses that the confessors should have experience (cf. V 34,11; 40,8), as she testifies about herself: 'I shall say nothing about things of which I don't have much experience' (V 18,8); cf. V 23,12.

²⁶ See also V 26,3. In CC 53 [4/3] (*Account of her spiritual life for the Inquisitor of Seville*, 1576), Saint Teresa enumerates the *letrados* with whom she dealt in confession. Discussing the intellectual qualities of the confessors, *La Madre* shows a great sense of humor as well as a stunning depth of insight in the human spirit when affirming: 'Half-learned confessors have done my soul great harm when I have been unable to find a confessor with as much learning as I like. I have come to see by experience that it is better, if they are virtuous and observant of holy customs, that they have little learning. For then they do not trust themselves without asking someone who knows, nor do I trust them; and a truly learned man has never misguided me': V 5,3. These observations coincide with Saint Teresa's abhorrence of wiseacres, as is expressed in her *Letter* 146,2 to María de San José in Sevilla, from Toledo, November 19th 1576 (*Dios libre a todas mis hijas de presumir de latinas*).

experience and fearful' (6 M 8,[8-]9). From their respective viewpoints, these various qualities refer to one and the same reality: the directors need to have an inner affinity with the spiritual realities because, as she writes with a pun: 'So many are wrong, as I said, in wanting to discern spirits without having them'.²⁷ In this, *La Madre* echoes a basic insight of Saint Paul, who states that his proclamation of the gospel was 'in terms learnt from the Spirit, fitting spiritual language to spiritual things' (1 Cor 2:13²⁸). An inner kind of affinity with the spiritual word is necessary for the discernment of the spirits,²⁹ and the qualities mentioned show how this can be acquired.

The intellectual capacities so highly esteemed by *La Madre* in her confessors can also be applied individually in order to discern the will of God. In the context of the trying of the spirit, Saint Teresa also speaks about the relevance of good literature for the growth in spiritual life (cf. V 23,13).³⁰ It's interesting, however, that the life of the *Madre Fundadora* shows not merely the impact which reading books can have on discernment, but also the benefits of writing. Her confessors ordered her to 'put down in writing all the good and bad things' (V 23,15) as a way to perceive the inner logic and the basic lines of her personal spiritual life.³¹ Nevertheless, neither intellectual analysis nor introspection have the adequate range to cover the entire process of discernment. As Saint

²⁷ *Y erran muchos, como he dicho, en querer conocer espíritus sin tenerle: V 34,11, referring to V 13,14; cf. V 25,13.*

²⁸ An interpretation of the different text critical alternatives gives J.A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians* (Anchor Yale Bible 32), New Haven/London 2008, p. 181.

²⁹ See also V 25,10; Cta 178,13 [182,9] (To don Lorenzo de Cepeda in Avila; from Toledo, February 10th, 1577). This same conviction is expressed in a very strong way by Saint Pedro de Alcántara in the letter he wrote to Saint Teresa after she consulted him about the poverty of the reformed Carmelite convents: 'For sure I was frightened that You put under the judgement of learned men what is beyond their possibilities; were it a lawsuit or a case of conscience, it would have been good to ask for the opinion of lawyers and theologians, but matters of perfection of life can be treated with no one except who lives it', April 14th, 1562, p. 125 (Biblioteca Mística Carmelitana, 2).

³⁰ Surveys of the books that influenced Santa Teresa are offered by T. Álvarez, *Cultura de mujer en el s. XVI. El caso de Santa Teresa*, Burgos 2006 and by D. de Pablo Maroto, *Lecturas y maestros de Santa Teresa*, Madrid 2009.

³¹ See e.g. CC 53,7 [4,6] regarding this commission of the confessors.

Teresa's image of Christ as a Living Book shows (V 26,5), the ultimate Truth revealed by the Lord is found in the personal encounter with Him in prayer.

3. Self-knowledge in true humility

The meaning of prayer is the second element in which Saint Teresa's comparison of the watering of the garden of the soul sheds light on the process of discernment. This topic can be approached from the perspective of three distinct qualities, all of which necessarily accompany the process of prayer: 'The first of these is love for one another; the second is detachment from all created things; the third is true humility, which, even though I speak of it last, is the main practice and embraces all the others' (CV 4,4).

La Madre learned the importance of humility from her spiritual readings, particularly those of Pope Saint Gregory I and Cassian.³² According to her conviction, discerning spirits and true humility are joined to such an extent that whoever has both talents 'will not be deceived in this matter, for such a person judges by the good effects, resolutions, and love; and the Lord gives light that these may be recognized' (V 39,10³³). Humility is the genuine attitude of a creature in front of God.³⁴ When combined with mortification and obedience, and when given by the Spirit of the Lord (cf. F 8,9), humility makes a person apt to understand and discern the spiritual realities.

In this regard, humility is linked with self-knowledge, whose importance is shown by its prominent place in the very opening chapters of the book of the *Interior Castle*, where it is treated alongside the theme of creation. Repeatedly, *La Santa* turns back to the topic, stressing: 'We

³² Pope Gregory, whose *Moralia* Saint Teresa quotes in V 5,8 stresses the importance of humility, as does Cassian, *Collatio* 2,10 (*De discretione*), in: *Patrologia Latina* 49,537–538; cf. Id., *De coenobiorum institutis* 4,9, in: *Patrologia Latina* 49,161–162 (see also *supra* on saint Teresa and Cassian).

³³ Cf. similar convictions in V 28,10. On humility in *Santa Teresa*, see e.g. V 13,1.3; 15,14; 19,14–15 (false humility); 23,10; [28,14;] CV 15,1 (= CE 22,1).

³⁴ See CE 46,2 (CV 28,2), referring to saint Augustine, *Confessiones* 10,27.

shall never completely know ourselves if we don't strive to know God' (1 M 2,9). In this, Saint Teresa situates herself in the tradition of Christian spirituality, in which the *know thyself* of ancient philosophy³⁵ was amended with its counterpart of the knowledge of God.³⁶ The importance of self-knowledge does not exist in the mere fact of introspection, but in the recognition of the dignity of our original vocation and the weakness of our fallen nature, which consequently leads to the understanding of how much we cost the Lord in His suffering and death (2 M 11³⁷). The relevance of self-knowledge for discernment lies therefore in the acceptance of our misery and grandeur and in the fact that both become the factual context in which the creature has to practice the will of God.

³⁵ See e.g. the γνώθι σαυτόν from Chilon of Sparta (the seven sages in *Diels-Kranz*, 73a,1–2.γ); on the neoplatonists, see R. Sorabji, *The Philosophy of the Commentators 200–600 AD. A Sourcebook I: Psychology (with Ethics and Religion)*, Ithaca (NY) 2005, p. 134–171.

³⁶ Cf. Saint Augustine: *noverim me, noverim te (Soliloquia 2,1,1)*; see J.L. Cancelo García, *Influencia de san Agustín en santa Teresa [Mística y místicos]*, Burgos 2014, p. 88–92) and saint Francis of Assisi: *Chi se' tu, o dolcissimo Iddio mio? e che sono io, vilissimo vermine e disutile servo tuo?* (cf. *The Considerations on the Holy Stigmata III*, in: *St. Francis of Assisi. Writings and Early Biographies*, ed. M.A. Habig, Chicago [IL] 1983, p. 1444). Very interesting is Saint Catherine of Siena, who also associates discernment with humility and self-knowledge: *la virtud dela discrecion tiene su rayz e[n]la caridad y no es otra cosa sino vn verdadero conocimiento que el alma tiene d[e] si y de dios: Epistola 129*, in: *Obra delas epistolas y oraciones de la bien auenturada virgen sancta catherina de sena de la orde[n] de los predicadores. Las quales fueron traduzidas d[e]l toscano en nuestra lengua castellana por mandado del muy Illustre y Reuere[n]dissimo señor el Cardenal despaña Arçobispo dela sancta yglesia de Toledo, etc., Fuero[n] i[m]primidas en la su villa de alcalá de henares: por... arna= [sic] guille[n] de Brocar [1512] (fo. 120) (= letter 173, in: *Epistolario de Santa Catalina de Siena. Espíritu y doctrina [Biblioteca Dominicana 1] II. Cartas 169 a 381*, ed. J. Salvador y Conde, Salamanca 1982, p. 672), cf. letter 28 (ed. Alcalá fo. 25); see also Catherine's *Dialogo 9* and 99. For the diffusion of Catherine's *Dialogo* (whose chapters 9–64 originally were published as *Tratado de la discreción*), see Arturo Jiménez Moreno, *El Diálogo de Santa Catalina de Siena en una biblioteca nobiliaria castellana del siglo XV*, in: *Modelos intelectuales, nuevos textos y nuevos lectores en el siglo XV. Contextos literarios, cortesanos y administrativos, primera entrega (Publicaciones del Semyr. Documenta 4)*, ed. P.M. Cátedra, Salamanca 2012, p. 295–310.*

³⁷ Against this background, the meaning of the rhetorical opposition in *F 5,16* becomes clear.

4. The fruit of good works

Being herself endowed with the highest mystical gifts, Saint Teresa stresses that supreme perfection doesn't lie in these phenomena but in a total surrender to God's will, which is, at the same time, the essence of discernment. The strength which brings fallen mankind to the completion of God's will by forgetfulness of itself and a desire to please God can come only from love (cf. *F* 5,10), one of the main qualities that accompanies prayer.³⁸

Throughout her works, Saint Teresa enumerates different kinds of works which sprout from pure love.³⁹ As the fruit of the inner intentions, these works constitute, according to the Gospels, the criterium for discernment *par excellence* (cf. Mt 7:15-20; Lk 6:43-45). *La Madre* echoes this biblical principle in a strong way⁴⁰ when she denies the misconception that union with God exists in spiritual delight – 'No, Sisters, absolutely not; works are what the Lord wants!' (5 M 3,11) – and refers to the works of mercy.⁴¹ Charity towards other people is one of the main criteria for discernment, as *La Madre* points out, in reference to the Gospels: 'Here in our religious life the Lord asks of us only two things: love of His Majesty and love of our neighbor. These are what we must work for'.⁴²

Nevertheless, love is not so much a decisive aspect of discernment in the quantity of its works, but rather in the quality of it, as *Santa Teresa* writes: 'Love alone is what gives value to all things; and a kind of love so great that nothing hinders it is the one thing necessary'.⁴³ This qualitative concept of love as a goal in itself hearkens to a similar notion of qualitative liberty, which states that a conscious choice for the good effectively makes man more free, whereas bad actions

³⁸ See CV 4,4.

³⁹ See e.g. V 40,1; CV 4,5-9.12; 6,4-9; 7,3.8.

⁴⁰ See V 14,8; cf. V 39,10; 6 M 8,8.

⁴¹ Cf.: 'The birth always of good works, good works' (7 M 4,6).

⁴² 5 M 3,7(-8), referring to Mt 22:34-40; Mk 12:28-34 (Dt 6:4-5); cf. MC 7,3.6.8; E 2,2; CV 4,7 (CE 6,4); 5 M 3,12; 7 M 4,12.

⁴³ *Excl.* 5,2; referring to Lk 10:40-42. This statement is close to the Thomistic principle of love as the form of all virtues: *Caritas est forma virtutum, motor et radix*: St. Thomas Aquinas, *De Caritate*, art. 3; cf. Id., *Summa Theologiae* II-II,23,8.

enslave.⁴⁴ Accordingly, the choice between good and evil is not indifferent, but has an impact on the moral integrity of the human person. This constitutes a sound criterium for discernment, in the sense that good is whatever makes a human person interiorly more free, more virtuous, and more apt to love according to God's will. A similar conception of discernment underlies Saint Teresa's statement that 'everything done with a pure intention (*consideración*) is perfect love'.⁴⁵

5. The determination to become completely detached

Saint Teresa returns to the topic of this higher, inner freedom in conjunction with discernment in a passage which is related to the third aspect of prayer: detachment. 'After I beheld the extraordinary beauty of the Lord, I didn't see anyone who in comparison with Him seemed to attract me or occupy my thoughts. By turning my gaze just a little inward (*los ojos de la consideración*) to behold the image I have in my soul, I obtained such freedom in this respect that everything I see here below seems loathsome when compared to the excelling and beautiful qualities I beheld in this Lord' (V 37,4).

Saint Teresa's notion of the all-surpassing splendour of the Lord corresponds with Saint Paul's motif of the transcending glory of Christ mentioned in 2 Cor 3:6-11, a passage that is also linked with freedom (3:17). According to *La Madre*, obtaining this inner freedom is closely related with 'the determination to follow the way of the cross and not desire consolations, since the Lord Himself pointed out this way of perfection saying: take up your cross and follow me'.⁴⁶ Pointing explicitly to Jesus as the model, and to the *imitatio Christi* as the way, *La Santa* offers here

⁴⁴ For the distinction between qualitative and quantitative liberty, see S. (Th.) Pincakers, *Les Sources de la morale chrétienne: Sa méthode, son contenu, son histoire (Studien zur theologischen Ethik 14)*, Fribourg/Paris 1985.

⁴⁵ CV 7,7 (CE 11,6), cf. *supra* for the original text. We are close to the *dilige, et quod vis fac* from saint Augustine, *In Epistolam Ioannis ad Parthos tractatus decem* 7,8.

⁴⁶ V 15,13, quoting Mt 16:24, cf. Mt 10:38; Lk 9:24. Cf. V 11,17 (on the Cross and the *libertad de espíritu*).

a clear criterium for discernment, decidedly indicating the cross as the ultimate criterium for human choices. Decisions should not be oriented toward the inner worldly realm which passes away but rather toward the Kingdom of God which never ends.

Saint Teresa's interpretation of divine signs as indications to support discernment originates from the same context. Instead of containing messages in themselves as pseudo-magical realities, *La Madre* describes their meaning as foretastes and pledges (CV 30,6 [CE 52,3]) of the kingdom to come. Thus, it makes no sense to search for such indications with an inner-worldly scope, because the signs which the Lord gives as a help for discernment and whose significance is accessible through humility and detachment⁴⁷ are of the same kind as the fruits that the Israelites brought back from the Promised Land, namely, foretastes of the future and an encouragement to persist on the laborious path thereto.⁴⁸

Therefore, one of the clear signs indicating the way of the service of the Lord can become precisely the contradiction, with which the devil tries to interfere, whether internally or externally.⁴⁹ This opposition from the evil spirit can only be countered by a detachment from all utterances of self-love as honor, property, or delights. It is precisely through this inner disinterest, determined to work and to suffer (F 5,3), that one is freed from all fear of the devil.⁵⁰ In a way similar to that which has been treated above concerning obedience, discernment is now comprised of a dialogue between, on one hand, the prevenient grace of God, which invites and encourages, and, on the other hand, the answer

⁴⁷ Cf. CV 31,11 (CE 53,7); see also R 4 [58],11 (Sevilla, 1576).

⁴⁸ 6 M 5,9, referring to Num 13:18–24.

⁴⁹ See e.g. V 36,20 (referring to an apparition of saint Pedro de Alcántara and to the letter that he had written to her, see *supra*) and Cta 131,5 [134] to fray Jerónimo Gracián in Sevilla, from Toledo, October 21st, 1576.

⁵⁰ V 25,21; cf. 15,14; 22,16 ('the determination to become completely detached'); F 18,4–6; MC 7,4 (on fear for persecution and on the 'discretion' the world honors but that is a shelter for many imperfections); CC 26 [43],1 (Ávila, 1572). On the contrast between love for vanities and genuine love and fear of God as 'signs that even the blind see', cf. the rhetorically well-structured passage CV 40,2–3 [9] (CE 70,2–3).

of the free will of man.⁵¹ The all-surpassing beauty of God enables the soul to free itself from earthly attachments, infusing an inner certitude⁵² and the fruits of light and peace (cf. V 25,3⁵³). Being a gift from God, these consolations are at the same time an expression of the conformity of decisions and actions with the created nature of mankind and its heavenly vocation. As such, they constitute indications for discernment, invigorating it with ‘a great and very resolute determination to persevere until reaching the end, come what may, happen what may, whatever work is involved, whatever criticism arises, whether they arrive or whether they die on the road, or even if they don’t have courage for the trials that are met, or if the whole world collapses’.⁵⁴

6. Discerning with Teresian humanism

Even when it is not the main topic of her writings, Saint Teresa leaves no room for doubt: ‘Discretion is very necessary in all’.⁵⁵ Since it is a compass for the soul to gradually live in greater conformity with God’s will, discernment also helps the human person to grow in inner freedom and in the living of the virtues. At the same time, the graces, obtained through discernment, are not merely given for the benefit of an individual person, but they have a communal scope, as is illustrated by the

⁵¹ Cf. CV 16,5 [9] (CE 26,2) about ‘giving ourselves to His Majesty with the determination with which He gives Himself to us’.

⁵² See the *supra* cited text from V 37,4. On this certitude, see also e.g. V 20,16; 25,7; 27,5; 37,7; 5 M 1,9; 6 M 2,3; 6 M 4,6. In 6 M 3,5–7, Saint Teresa enumerates ‘the surest signs from God that can be had’ as ‘certitude, peace, interior delight’ (6 M 3,10), cf. 6 M 3,16; see also MC 2,1 on false peace. *La Madre Fundadora* enumerates in a quasi Ignatian style different kinds of effects, consolations and desolations in e.g. V 25,10–13; 23,5 (clean conscience); 39,10. The difference between *contentos* (the sensible ‘consolations’ of beginning prayer) and *gustos* (‘spiritual delights’, being infused consolations as a pure gift of God’s grace) does not need to occupy us here.

⁵³ See also V 37,7 on the effect of light in the soul; and CV 19,13 (CE 32,5) on the desires that are given by God and which bear light, discretion (*discreción*), and measure.

⁵⁴ *Una grande y muy determinada determinación*: CV 21,2 (CE 35,2); cf. V 25,12. On this topic, see M. O’Keefe, *The Way of Transformation. Saint Teresa of Avila on the Foundation and Fruit of Prayer*, Washington D.C. 2016, p. 133–152.

⁵⁵ *En todo es muy necesario discreción*: CV 19,13.

relationship between the specific mystical gifts of the *Madre Fundadora* and her mission to renew the Carmelite Order. The effects of God's Spirit become visible in the community, be it by acts of charity, intentionally done, or by the very superabundance of His love, which – through the life of individually gifted persons – flows over in the community.

With respect to discernment and personal growth, Saint Teresa gives the important warning that the soul does not grow in a manner similar to the body, i.e. linearly, but rather with its ups and downs, ultimately asserting that 'there [is] on this journey [not] a soul so much a giant that it has no need to return often to the stage of an infant and a suckling' (V 13,15).⁵⁶ This and similar statements of *La Madre* testify to her deep insight into the human person,⁵⁷ a quality of the mystic which is also very clear from her attention for human qualities and needs⁵⁸ and – by all aspirations for radicality – from her repeated refusal of excesses and rigourism.⁵⁹

This dimension is clearly articulated in Saint Teresa's emphasis on the personal character of man's spiritual life and therefore the absence of stereotypes in discernment. She expresses this in V 13,13 (quoting Jn 14:2): 'just as there are many mansions in heaven, there are many paths'. Of great importance therefore are self-knowledge – as has already been demonstrated –, a genuine understanding of a person's talents⁶⁰ and

⁵⁶ See also the exhortation in V 15,12, referring to V 13,15.

⁵⁷ A stunning and humorous example of *La Madre's* understanding of human nature is offered in CV 10,5–6 (CE 15,3–4), commenting upon her exhortation that the sisters 'came to die for Christ, not to live comfortably for Christ': 'Do not fear; very seldom will we lack discretion in this matter, for our confessors will at once be afraid that we may kill ourselves with penances. And the lack of such discretion is so abhorred by us that I wish we'd be so discreet in everything'.

⁵⁸ Cf. V 13,1 ('strive in the beginning to walk in joy and freedom'); 25,14 (on gentleness [*sauvidad*] whose absence is a sign of the evil spirit); CV 7,6–7 (CE 11,6) (on weaknesses, recreation, etc.).

⁵⁹ See e.g. F 18,10 and the fierce dispute that arose after Saint Teresa's death between Nicolás de Jesús María Doria, on the one hand, and the defenders of the legacy of *La Madre Fundadora*, on the other: Saint John of the Cross, Jerónimo de la Madre de Dios Gracián and María de San José Salazar; cf. E.J.M. Montalva, *La herencia teresiana (Logos 18)*, Madrid 1975, p. 279–377.

⁶⁰ F 18,7: 'For discretion and knowledge of each one's talents are very important in these matters'; cf. 6,2; V 28,1.

progress,⁶¹ and the resolution to do what is in man's power (*Way* 1,2⁶²), implying at the same time the engagement of all proper faculties and the acceptance of personal limits.

In relation to discernment, this also requires the toleration of and sometimes the choice for what – from a human point of view – seems to be inefficiency, miscalculations, and eventual failures. Very often, a clear judgement can only be obtained through a living experience, which implies the risk of mistakes.⁶³ In that case, the only true reactions are patience and endurance, which help one in carrying the noxious effects of wrong decisions as a cross that will lead to new life.⁶⁴ Indeed, the human condition of fallen nature cannot give any assurance against errors.

⁶¹ In V 39,10, Saint Teresa encourages looking 'at the improvement and progress of souls and not at their age'. In a similar way, she stresses in *Vej* 6 that spiritual perfection is no requirement for the soul to start searching for God (referring to Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan woman and the Canaanite woman in Jn 20:11–18; 4:7–42; Mt 15:21–28; Mk 7:24–30).

⁶² *La Madre* refers in this context also to the historico-culturally determined confines for women in 16th century Spain ('I realized I was a woman and wretched and incapable of doing any of the useful things I desired to do in the service of the Lord': *Way* 1,2; cf. V 23,13, etc. – see for this topic M.M. Banbridge, *Mujer/es*, in: *Diccionario de Santa Teresa. Doctrina e Historia [Diccionarios Monte Carmelo]*, ed. T. Álvarez, Burgos 2017, p. 820–825). Nevertheless, the story of Saint Teresa's life also reveals a woman with extraordinary talents and, most of all, demonstrates how God's strength makes women and men surpass limits when they are determined to do his divine will.

⁶³ This is illustrated by the case of doña María del Corro, the famous *beata* of Sevilla whom Saint Teresa accepted as a novice in the Carmel of Sevilla and who denounced *La Madre* at the Inquisition after her dismissal; cf. E. de la Madre de Dios, O. Steggink, *Tiempo y Vida de Santa Teresa*, Madrid 31996, p. 634–635; p. 652–655 (§§ 410; 425–428). People can disappoint expectations, as shown by the attitude taken towards Saint Teresa and her legacy by e.g. Ambrosio Mariano de San Benito Azzaro de Clementis, Nicolás de Jesús María Doria, father Garcíavarez, Beatriz de la Madre de Dios Chavez, and Juan de la Miseria Narduch.

⁶⁴ According to Saint Teresa's expectations and in spite of her urgent requests to involve 'Rome' in the reform of the order and the erection of a proper province (cf. *Cta* 120,21 to Jerónimo Gracián in Sevilla, from Toledo, September 20th, 1576), Gracián's reluctance to do so brought a real persecution over the Discalced, a persecution which the *Madre* could only suffer patiently, in surrender to God's will, while she waited for better times to come; cf. B. Mujica, *Paul the Enchanter. Saint Teresa's Vow of Obedience to Gracián*, in: *The Heirs of St. Teresa of Ávila. Defenders and Disseminators of the Founding Mother's Legacy (Carmelite Studies 9)*, ed. C.C. Wilson, Washington D.C./Rome 2006, p. 21–44. See CV 19,12 on patience: 'for in every event the best we can do is leave ourselves in the hands of God'.

Nevertheless, God, who Himself conveys the talent of discernment as a means to grow in knowing and living his will, also ‘knows how to draw good from evil; and the road along which the devil wanted to make you go astray will be to your greater gain. Thinking that God grants you such wonderful favors, you will force yourselves to please Him more’ (6 M 9,13). Thus, one is able to reach the goal of discernment, albeit not by the ‘royal road to heaven’⁶⁵ but by ‘another short cut’.⁶⁶ In all this, however, one must keep in mind Saint Teresa’s warning: ‘don’t let anyone deceive you by showing you a road other than that of prayer’.⁶⁷

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⁶⁵ CV 21,1 (CE 35,1).

⁶⁶ V 22,11; cf. this similar idea expressed in F 18,6; CV 17,2 (CE 27,2); 3 M 2,13; 6 M 7,12.

⁶⁷ CV 21,6 (CE 36,2).

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