

Discerning God's Will – Augustine Baker

'Your eyes shall see your Teacher. And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it", when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left.'
(Isaiah 30: 20-21)

Steering a middle course is usually sound advice. If we are swayed by extremes we veer from the truth and go off centre. This has been so true in the history of our Christian divisions. Positions have become hardened and it is proving a painstaking journey back to fellowship through the regaining of a balanced assessment of one another. It is all to do with discretion, in the technical, theological sense of the term, keeping to the golden mean.

Discretion, then, is a Christian virtue and particularly a monastic one, and somehow it is an especially Anglo-Saxon trait. Father Augustine Baker, 17th century monk of the English Benedictine Congregation, was quite at home with it. Saint Benedict, in his sixth century Rule, speaks of discretion as *'that mother of virtues'* so the concept is axiomatic in Fr. Baker's teaching as a good son of St. Benedict. It is closely related to the idea of discernment since a wisely-balanced judgement, not being swayed by prejudice, can more readily perceive God's will and put it into practice. Such discernment is obviously of paramount importance both in our personal lives as mature believers and in our dealings with one another ecumenically. With this in mind it is worth spending some moments exploring some of the things Fr. Baker has to say concerning discretion/discernment.

Baker in fact wrote a whole treatise entitled *'Discretion'*, and it is there that we will look first. His main purpose was to teach a Community of Benedictine nuns in the ways of prayer and the spiritual life, but what he has to say is equally helpful today for any Christian believer who is genuinely seeking God. Firstly, a definition:

Discretion is a virtue by which one doth in all things take and hold the mean, and doth avoid the extremes; it doth choose and take that which is reasonable and fitting, and doth leave or forbear 'over much' and 'over little', and so doth choose the middle way, that is

true virtue, and doth avoid the two extremes that are on both sides and are vicious and faulty.

Despite the old-fashioned English the meaning is surely clear enough. Moreover, Baker shrewdly points out that it is up to each of us to get his or her own measure since we are all different. Already we are moving into the area of discernment – the ability to get to know ourselves, our strengths and weaknesses, and consequently what it is that God asks of us, individually. Not everyone has ten talents to trade with. We note as well the hint that we are to mind our own business and not try to ape other people or give in to envy and jealousy:

Because we are all of us different one from another, both in the state of our bodies and in the state of our spirits, therefore must everyone hold that mean that is proper to himself, and not the mean that is proper to another man. For that which is too little for one man, may be enough or over much for another . . . And therefore each one must always regard what is the mean proper to himself, and that he is to embrace, forbearing the extremes.

This is salutary advice in our ecumenical relationships.

“Fine”, we might well be saying, “but how exactly do we achieve this balance and then manage to retain it?” Baker anticipates the question, We must start by recognising what our aim is, the purpose of it all, for only by knowing what the end is can we begin to consider the means. We must remember that Baker is concerned with the most sublime of all ends, union with God for all eternity. We too should not be content with a lesser goal. Since, then, according to Baker, our aim is ‘*God and his perfect love*’, and since this is something beyond the merely natural: ‘*no human or natural wit, knowledge or discretion can enable us to hold the right way or course (which to do is to use discretion) towards the said supernatural end . . . being God and union with him*’. Thus, as Baker clearly states, the end being supernatural so also are the means. Of ourselves we can achieve nothing. All is of God.

And God gives this grace either directly from himself or through an intermediary, ie another person, a book or other similar means, even the instrumentality of an angel if needs be. But of course such a grace is not given haphazardly. We must want to receive it, ask for it and prepare ourselves, in so far as we can, for it. The right disposition is paramount ie humility:

The disposition which is so absolutely necessary in the business is the humbling of herself [ie the soul] before and under God, acknowledging her own blindness and insufficiency in

the business, and craving his aid, who only can bestow the gift . . . Out of his goodness he will bestow it in such measure, times or order, and by such means, as he best knoweth to be most fitting for the soul.

So then, from our own angle, we must be living a life of prayer and self discipline with a genuine desire (that is ‘a purity of intention’) to seek God above all else, never wavering. Then we can confidently trust that we shall know God’s guidance, be graced with the gift of discretion as we ‘*walk towards God and his perfect love and union*’.

These things are deceptively easy to speak about but the holiness to which Christians aspire, at God’s inviting, is a life-long, perilous undertaking, fraught with pitfalls, since ‘sin is always couching at the door’ (Genesis 4:7). It is desperately easy to miss the mark, or overshoot it. That is why the virtue of discretion/discernment is so crucial. Baker describes it as the eye of the soul, the coachman who holds the reins so that the horses move in concert, or indeed the bridle which restrains the horse from running wild. Yet granted all this, are there not times when it is frankly very difficult actually to discern the guiding presence of the Spirit? How are we to act in the face of what Baker calls ‘doubtful cases’, What are the criteria when choice is involved?

We turn now, to the book by which Baker has been best known, namely ‘*Sancta Sophia*’ or ‘*Holy Wisdom*’ a compilation of the gist of his teaching by one of his fellow-monks. Here he observes that even for the long-experienced there are times when the light of the Spirit’s guidance is difficult to discern, seeming to be totally absent in fact. Baker is still predominantly concerned with the inner experiences of the spiritual life and says that he is not speaking about the minutiae of the scrupulous or of matters that can easily be decided, by the teaching of the Church or the dictates of those experienced in these ways and under whose guidance we have placed ourselves. Sometimes natural prudence and reasoning is sufficient to show the way forward, but when all such helps are of no avail, and the matter in hand is significant enough, it is sometimes necessary actively to seek for signs of God’s guidance. Baker enlightens us from his own experience.

Firstly there is a warning to the over-anxious. Too much probing of our motives, in matters that are neither here nor there, disturbs our peace of mind and spiritual progress, and so

should be strongly resisted. That being said he then advises the taking of time, rather than acting on the spur of the moment, when seeking enlightenment:

In such doubtful cases of moment, especially if they concern something to be done, or omitted, or suffered in the future, a devout soul is to avoid all sudden and unadvised resolutions. (Holy Wisdom Sect.2 Chap.7).

This is especially true if we are emotionally involved or if those close and dear to us would be strongly affected. The soul, Baker emphasises, should not be:

in any kind of passion, whether it be fear, anger, grief, or else of tenderness, compassion and kindness etc. and chiefly when herself has an interest of nature, or when persons are concerned to whom she bears a sensible affection or from whom she has an aversion.

In such instances we should wait until the turbulence of our initial feelings has settled, so that we consider things rationally and quell our excessive passionate reactions. Then the soul, Baker explains, will be able *'with resignation to consult God in her recollections, thereby to obtain light from him to discern his holy will'*. Sleeping on it is sound practice lest we act on the spur of a momentary high or low. This is salutary advice in our times when in our feely-touchy culture how we actually feel, now, looms out of all proportion. We have to live with the effects of our decisions once made and more often than not there is no way out from the consequences of our choices.

In his sound practicality Baker continues by saying that we should defer because often enough, if we wait a while circumstances change and the situation resolves itself, ie the Holy Spirit reveals his will *in* the events themselves as they evolve. And continuing in the same realistic way he reminds us of our propensity to decide for ourselves about what we want to do and then claim it is the Holy Spirit's guidance that has shown the way. He is not perhaps quite as blunt as that but it is there between the lines:

In case the soul in her nature be inclined more to the one side of the doubt than the other, she must enforce herself, especially in prayer, to an indifference and resignation in the matter; rather forethinking (and accordingly preparing herself) that God will declare his will for the contrary to that to which her nature is more inclined.

When it comes to praying about the question to be resolved, in fact, Baker seems at first sight to be telling us not actually to do this! What it amounts to is that we should avoid having a conversation with ourselves, weighing up the pros and cons, in what is supposed to be prayer:

In seeking to know the divine will by prayer, let not the person frame a direct prayer about the matter; neither let him in his prayer entertain any discoursing, debating thoughts in his imagination or understanding about it.

and why?

1) Our prayers, which should be pure and internal in spirit, will be turned into a distracting meditation on an external affair, and so the mind comes to be filled with sensible images, and passions perhaps will be raised.

How familiar this all is, and how easily we deceive ourselves into thinking that our own ideas are God's inspiration. But, Baker reminds us:

2) (the) divine light is most effectually and securely, yea, and seldom otherwise, obtained than when the imagination is quiet and the soul in a profound recollection in spirit.

Such prayer is in itself God's gift and is the vehicle by which God reveals himself and his will to his creatures. We must not therefore abuse or misuse it, substituting something of our own contriving in its place:

3) Such discoursing in prayer is anything but prayer, being little more than human consideration and examination of the matter the which, if at all, ought to be despatched before prayer.

And so, Baker advises, if we are earnestly seeking to discover God's will about something important we should simply pray as we always do. The only little indulgence he allows the soul is that 'it may be permitted her secretly and briefly to wish that God would teach her his will about the said difficulty'. All the same, such a brief aspiration is not an opening of the door to our wheedling capacity to manoeuvre things our own way. Baker is concerned with people who are serious about prayer and who **want** God's will absolutely, cost what it may. Thus there is no room, either, for vanity, that is for looking out for and requesting extraordinary means to discover God's will. That way too is fraught with danger:

*Let her be sure to take great care she do not give way to any hope or desire that God should reconcile his will unto her [not hers to **him**, note] by any extraordinary way, as by the ministry of angels, strange revelations, voices etc..*

Such things, if granted would only nourish pride, as all the spiritual Masters say. If, Baker observes, *'such desires should be granted, [to the soul] it would be to her prejudice, and would increase that pride from whence they flowed'*.

So far, so good. We are to wait on God and not act precipitously, but what can we expect from God's side, as it were? Baker suggests two basic ways in which the Spirit enlightens the sincere believer who petitions him. In the first our ordinary understanding is somehow cleansed, by an infusion of divine light, so that the natural reason is enabled to see the way forward clearly. This is the light of supernatural discretion, kindled in the soul by charity. Being free from passions and false images the recollected person is able to receive this divine infusion, itself the gift of the Spirit. Baker describes this inspiration, given to the contemplative pray-er as *'the best and safest light that man can have'* and which is acknowledged as supernatural since it overrides natural reason and clearly reveals how our present proposed actions are related to our final end, union with God. Baker describes this light of the Spirit as something which:

. . . cannot be obtained by study, nor instilled into another by the most spiritual person in the world . . . it is a light that exceeds the efficacy of the ordinary light of faith . . . By this lamp, newly kindled in our understandings by prayer and charity, we clearly discern in each particular action and circumstance, in what manner and how far they have relation and efficacy to dispose us to a perfect union by love with God.

It is not any kind of guidance that we seek, then, when we invoke the aid of the Holy Spirit in prayer. A supernatural end needs a supernatural means.

This leads to Baker's second point. The Holy Spirit does not even need our understanding to work on, as it were. Being God he can act, as no human agent can, directly on our will – *'imprinting a blind, reasonless motion into the superior will'* as Baker puts it, in theological terms, thus *'giving it a weight and propension to one side of the doubt rather than the other'* and this is without any reasons for the choice being perceived in the mind. This is a difficult concept to perceive if it lies outside our experience. Perhaps the nearest we can get is to say that it is similar to what we term having an intuition or a sixth sense, just somehow knowing. In the

realm of the spiritual it implies knowing without a shadow of doubt, but the experience defies words. As always our task is to prepare ourselves to receive God's graces if he wills to impart them, making sure we don't try to force the pace and allow ourselves to be deceived.

Baker brings us down to earth again, however. We may find that it doesn't seem to work and so he suggests, like John Tauler before him that the soul may '*freely and confidently, as it were by lots, make choice indifferently of whether she thinks fit*'. Sometimes we have to take both the plunge and the risk and believe that God will be with us in it all. Then, having decided we have to abide by the choice, without dithering. Such is Baker's advice, substantiated from other writers whom he cites. This is to apply even when our friends try to deflect us and we begin to doubt our own wisdom. We should not scorn God since it is **his** will we have been seeking all along and if we have done our best to discern it we must not then go back on our tracks.

It is all very subtle in fact. God rarely indicates the way in these matters in black and white terms:

God, to keep the soul in humility, does not use to give an absolute assurance of the matter itself simply considered, but only a certainty of being directed and drawn more to one side of the difficulty than to the other, the which is to be chosen and followed as the divine will.

We need to be finely tuned in spirit, therefore, to pick up the nuances. But if they seem absent altogether, then as Baker has said, we must turn again to external means: our own reasoning, advice from a prudent counsellor or even, with due seriousness, tossing a coin to cast lots – provided, Baker adds, that '*in all things we are always intending God's glory and increase in his love*' God **does** reveal his will by natural means as well as by the more subtle ways we have spoken of. In both instances we are blessed by the gift of supernatural discretion (the light of the Holy Spirit) and in both we respond by the grace of discernment.

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