Reflections for our Discerners at the DeSales University’s Center for Discernment
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11.07.08: The Spiritual Pillar of Discernment

Having written extensively about the intellectual pillar of discernment, which seems to have come to a climax in last week’s encomium of wisdom, I think it would be appropriate to consider more extensively the other three pillars. Let me begin, then, with that of the spiritual. Our web page for the Center offers a good place to start.

Every vocation, it states, is born out of and nurtured by the Spirit of God (see John 15:16). Thus, the seed of every vocation is planted in the ground of our will by God Himself. And although our efforts and those of our parents, the communities in which we were reared and the Church into which we were received all contribute importantly to the nurturance and growth of our vocations, nonetheless the primary cultivator is God Himself. It is vital, then, that the life of a discerner exhibit a specific posture and demeanor reflective of this reality.

Recall my comments in the Afterword to last week’s reflection wherein I spoke of my fleeting illness and subsequent sympathy for Descartes’s view concerning the duality of our human nature. This view is not original to Descartes; that there are two aspects to our person — body and soul, the material and the immaterial, the mutable and the immutable — is something common to both ancient and medieval thought. One particularly potent image that was used in medieval theology to represent man’s duality was that of “horizon.” In this image, the human person was described as that “place” where both sky and earth meet, where “earth” represents his corporeal aspect, and “sky” his spiritual. The beauty of the image was found in the fact that a horizon cannot be defined with respect to earth or sky taken individually. Horizon can only be named and described at the point at which both earth and sky meet. This meeting, then, cannot be understood simply as a mixture or a juxtaposition of the two. From the first to the last there is horizon, and neither earth nor sky, properly considered, exist until horizon exists, giving rise only then to their reality and intelligibility. In this image, one can see that we have departed far from Descartes’s conception of the human person as a soul using a body. Instead, the human person is understood neither as soul nor body. Neither exist before the existence of the human person himself. In our creation, we are established as that at which both body and soul become realities and describable. “Horizon,” so understood, becomes a way not only to characterize ourselves as “place,” but also to compare ourselves with the rest of creation. In this latter sense, the human person is considered to occupy a “middle position” within the whole of creation, being the point at which both heaven and earth, the material and the immaterial, the mutable and immutable, the temporal and the eternal, the animal and the divine, meet. We are, in short, microcosmos, a little universe writ small in our very persons and nature, that place at which both heaven and earth meet and are fleshed out, so to speak, in the going forth into one or the other.

Here, then, is the foundational aspect of the language of directionality as used to describe our nature. Being place, we must go forth, especially as we find that our natural condition is woefully insufficient. As microcosmos, we find ourselves, in the realization of the insufficiency of our little universe, at the very precipice not only of our being, but of reality itself, specifically in the decision that must be made concerning which way we are to face and in which we must stand at every moment of our lives. Do we comport or bear ourselves to the things above or beneath us? Are we directed to and ordered by the eternal and divine things, or to and by temporal and earthly matters? How we answer this question will manifest not only the very core of our individuality, but especially the quality of our love. For it is our love that ultimately bears us one way or the other, that manifests our decision in this regard to the whole world in our every thought, act, word and feeling.
Thus it is critical, in the process of discernment, that we understand the duality, locality, insufficiency and directionality at the heart of our persons, and seek, in a love rightly ordered, to “live in unceasing and intimate union with God the Father through his Son, Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit,” and thus experience the conversion of heart, the turning of mind and the establishment of character required by the vocation to which we are called.¹

Practically, the means by which this direction of spirit, mind and body is effected, are in some ways rather unspectacular. It is advised by the great spiritual masters that we develop, at least, a regular and disciplined regimen of spirit, mind and body (spirit: the daily celebration of the eucharist, the communal praying of the Liturgy of the Hours, our own private prayer, weekly penance, spiritual advisement, lectio divina, the practice of fasting, our devotions, particularly those to the Eucharist, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and Mary — mind: our intellectual studies, and the desire to unite with Wisdom herself — body: a healthy and temperate diet, moderate exercise, an active engagement in amusements, regular and sufficient relaxation and sleep, among other things). We are also encouraged to develop the intellectual, moral and theological virtues, all of which are central to the development of our Christian character, which then allows us to donate all that has been gifted to us to those whom we are called to serve (the human and pastoral pillars of discernment respectively). Through these means, we take up that posture and demeanor specific to the discerner, and we are distinguished not through these activities but rather through the love that they exude, a love founded in the primal decision we make concerning where we stand and what way we face. Finally, as those upon whom the blessed weight of God’s calling has been placed, we must always endeavor to be found ready and waiting for the Master’s call or for His return (see 1 Peter 5, Matthew 24: 42-51/25:1-13; and 1 Thessalonians 5). We must always remember that it is not us who first calls Him, but He who calls us, who loves us out of our natural self-centered subjectivity and into the community of believers and finally, one day, into the Trinitarian community itself. Thus we seek, in these rather ordinary ways, to position ourselves in our daily lives, in the midst of all that is about us, to face the infinite, to attune our hearts, minds, spirits and bodies to the gentle, subtle yet ubiquitous movement of the Spirit, so that we might be found ready in the only way that we ourselves can effect, namely, to wait patiently upon the Lord who in the stillness and silence of our minds and hearts will make known his wish for and of us.

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¹ Augustine understood these matters well. Consider Confessions XIII. ix (10): “My weight is my love. Wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me” in relation to the entirety of the ‘autobiographical’ section of that work, Books I-IX, which then has its climax in Book X. xxvii (38), with: “Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.” One could spend a great many years unpacking all that is contained within this work, something which speaks not so much about Augustine’s personal conversion itself, by rather this conversion as an archetypical vehicle upon which we are all borne in our reorientation to the Father of all.