



# How to Discern the Spirits

**BISHOP ROBERT BARRON**

**WORD** **on FIRE.**

# How to Discern the Spirits

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

WORD  on FIRE.

Transcript taken from an interview between  
Brandon Vogt and Bishop Robert Barron.

Cover image: Domenico Piola, *Christ  
Carrying His Cross Appears to Saint Ignatius  
of Loyola*, 1690, Wikimedia Commons.

**Brandon Vogt:** We are discussing how to discern the spirits and, more generally, how to discern the things of God, how to know how and where God's moving in your life, how to make decisions in alignment with God's will. I wanted to start off with this little precursor story. A few days ago on my Facebook page, I posted a message where I acknowledged that lots of people have been asking me, "Which Catholic websites and podcasts and YouTube channels should I follow? They say it's really confusing. There's a huge landscape of so many personalities. How do I know which ones are worth following?" And I said, "Well, what I typically tell people is, first of all, the prerequisites of truth and being faithful to the Magisterium, all that basic stuff. But then beyond that, you need to discern whether this is of the spirit of God. And I laid out a couple ways to do that. One is using the fruits of the spirit: When I listen to this video channel, for example, does it engender love, joy, peace, patience, kindness? Does that person or host exhibit those things? But then the second one, which seemed to be more controversial, is a line I quoted from Saint Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, his great spiritual manual. And the line, really briefly, said, "It is characteristic of the evil spirit to harass with anxiety, to afflict with sadness, and to raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul." And so my point was that if you're experiencing these things, it could be a sign that this stuff, this platform, this channel, this podcast, is of a different spirit than

the Holy Spirit. I thought that was pretty innocuous.

But what I was stunned by in the comment box that followed it was the number of people who made this conclusion after reading all this: “Just follow your feelings, and if it makes you happy, it’s a good thing. If it makes you anxious or sad, it’s a bad thing.” And I went back and forth many times with several commenters, but it seems like this area is fuzzy for a lot of people between discerning spirits and following feelings. And I know both of us want to point out from the beginning, we’re not pitting these two things against each other. Feelings and other sources of discernment aren’t opposed to the movements of the spirit. But I thought that we could dig deep into all of this stuff and make the proper distinction. Let’s start out with a 30,000-foot view. What are the basics we should know about St. Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*?

**Bishop Barron:** St. Ignatius of Loyola, born in 1491 in the Basque country in northwest Spain, wanted to be a court hero, a great soldier, and a worldly figure. Fighting against the French during a battle in Pamplona, he was wounded severely, and during his recuperation, he underwent a reversion, a reawakening of his faith, which led him eventually to a cave in Manresa. While he lived there for nine months, he grew in his ability to understand what God wanted him to do with his life. It was the beginning of

the process of his discernment of spirits and gave rise eventually to the *Spiritual Exercises*, which Ignatius worked on for the rest of his life and became the cornerstone of Jesuit spirituality to this day. When Ignatius was recovering from his wounds, he wanted books to distract him. In the house where he stayed, there were two types of books. On the one hand, there were books of chivalric daring, books about knights and so on, which at first delighted Ignatius, since that was his life. He read them and read them with pleasure. But afterwards, he found himself rather dry and bored and listless. But the other books that were there were about Christ and the saints. And he read those also with great interest, but the difference was that as he mused on *those* stories, he continued to be filled with a sense of peace and joy and purpose.

Anything you do at any time of the day or night is going to fill you with some sense of pleasure, otherwise you wouldn't be doing it. But then how do you feel about it later? Later on, as you think back on that activity or that statement or that bit of behavior, you might think, "Oh gosh, I wish I hadn't have done that" or "Now I feel kind of disappointed with myself and listless" and so on.

Then there are other things that you do that you enjoy, and you think back later and say, "Yeah, that was great. I'm glad I did that. I still feel lifted



up by that.” That in a way is the first rule, the first experience of discernment that Ignatius himself had, and I myself have recommended it for years to people. A lot of people, for example, will experience an attraction to the priesthood or religious life at some point. When you experience that, you are probably feeling, “This is kind of cool. I feel good about this.” But how about a year later? How about even six months later? When you think back on that period, are you still filled with a sense of peace and joy, or do you feel like, “That’s kind of silly” or “That doesn’t do much for me”?

That is how it began with Ignatius, and I think that is still a valid approach. Having had the Manresa experience, having begun the *Spiritual Exercises*, and having directed many people for years, Ignatius develops a number of these famous rules for the discernment of spirits. A basic assumption, still an important one, is that we are all engaged in spiritual warfare. There is the good spirit, the Holy Spirit, but as the Bible itself points out, not all spirits are good spirits. Not all the things that lead us or inspire us or draw us are good. And so we have to do this act of discernment. Is that of the Holy Spirit or is that from a not-so-holy spirit? And that is a permanently important feature of the Christian life. Ignatius and the other great masters help us through that thicket.

**Brandon Vogt:** When I was just getting into my faith as an early Christian, I think the way that I approached God's will was as a sort of binary thing that I either heard and followed or I didn't, and it was quiet. And so I was always just trying to hear God's voice. What does God want me to do? Where is God leading me? But when I discovered Ignatius's approach to this whole thing I realized that there are actually multiple impulses and voices and spirits and promptings going on that require you to sift through them.

**Bishop Barron:** Think of the Gospel of John, where we have the great image of the Good Shepherd, who hears the voice of the sheep and the sheep hear his voice. Think of all the voices that are around us all the time: literal voices from people saying "Hey, do this, do that," and more metaphorical voices, things that are leading us and so on, trying to get our attention. Can we hear amidst all of that the voice of Christ, who is calling us to follow him? That is an aural kind of image, an image of hearing. Think of someone who has a very refined level of musical ability. They say that some of the great conductors, conducting big, 80-piece orchestras, could notice when a violinist had one string out of tune. The great spiritual masters like Ignatius are like that. They have a hyper-refined sense of listening to God. They can hear the voice of the Lord amidst the cacophony of competing voices.



**Brandon Vogt:** St. Ignatius composes these spiritual exercises, and it is often said that they are not so much meant to be read, but something you do and experience, usually in the form of a retreat. In these spiritual exercises, there are several components. You are reflecting on the life of Christ. There are several different types of prayer experiences. But there is one section that's relevant to our show topic here, where Ignatius lists fourteen rules for spiritual discernment. And they are real short and pithy, you can read all of them in two or three minutes, but again, they are meant to be experienced and discussed with a spiritual director. The first two of them I think are among the most interesting little passages in any spiritual book I have read, because what Ignatius describes is that the discernment of spirits operates differently depending on where you are in the spiritual life. If, for example, you are just beginning to be drawn to God but there is still mortal sin in your life, the experiences that you encounter should be approached differently than if you are further on in your spiritual life and you are already committed to following the will of God.

In fact, he says in the first case that when you are still stuck in mortal sin, the evil spirits will make sin appealing and good and you will feel good feelings when you are participating in sinful behavior. On the other hand, good behavior might sting and bite and feel difficult. It feels like you're moving against the

grain in a way. But then in that second scenario where you have a person who is already moving on through purification from sin, it is just the opposite. The evil spirit saddens you and puts obstacles in your way and makes you feel like you are stuck in the spiritual life. You might experience what he calls “desolation,” while the good spirit often consoles you and inspires good feelings in you, especially when you are doing the good. What do you make of that?

**Bishop Barron:** There is an ancient principle, going back to Aristotle, that Thomas Aquinas echoes: *quidquid recipitur secundum modum recipientis recipitur*. It means that whatever is received is received according to the mode of the recipient. And so how is the grace of God received? Read Flannery O’Connor’s stories, if you want some of the graphic details. The grace of God might be received as a terrible upheaval of your life. It might be received as an invasion. It might be something overwhelmingly painful. In that case, God’s grace is trying to set you right. Now turn that around. If you are walking the right path, how is God’s grace going to be received? Like an oasis, a fountain of life.

Consider another great Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross. He says that at the beginning of the relationship with God, God often gives a lot of what Ignatius would call “consolations.” In other

words, you are just starting off on the journey, and you are excited about it, and going to Mass is cool and prayer is inspiring. You read the lives of the saints and you are filled with excitement about it. Good! That is the way John of the Cross describes it: God wants to draw you in at the beginning of the spiritual life. But at a decisive moment, and it shouldn't depress you but actually excite you, God will withdraw those happy consolations. Why? Because you are not meant to fall in love with good feelings about God. You are meant to fall in love with God. There might be happy feelings accompanying the experience of God, but we are not meant to fall in love with those, because then we can get addicted to the good feelings. And when the will of God is leading us in a direction that will not produce good feelings, then we are going to fall away. John of the Cross says that we shouldn't experience that as God abandoning us. No, on the contrary, God is trying to move us to a deeper place. And everyone in the spiritual order is drawn through a time like that. John of the Cross would use the language of dryness or a "dark night of the soul."

I can still remember the excitement of discovering Thomas Aquinas and reading Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* as a sixteen-year-old. It was wonderful to read the story and then to begin to imagine myself walking this spiritual path. It was a great joy. Did that joy stay with me all my life, in

that same sense? No, that fell away because God was drawing me into what it really is like to follow his will. For John of the Cross, that is a certain detachment from the accompanying feelings. For John of the Cross and Ignatius and all the great figures, what is the bottom line? What is awakening in us? A deeper love for God and for neighbor. That is how Ignatius defines a consolation, the same criterion behind Galatians 5. When that is happening, trust it.

Now, what is a desolation? Not, primarily, feelings of aridity. A desolation is something that moves you away from the love of God and the love of neighbor. When you are on that path, get off of it. That is the path you should be wary of. But that is the ultimate criterion: What awakens love in you? What awakens greater love? That is the path God wants you on.

**Brandon Vogt:** I mentioned at the outset this confusion between spiritual consolation and desolation and feelings that a lot of people just reduce the former to the latter. How do feelings fit into this whole thing? I know colloquially we have been using the language of “I feel this” or “I feel that” or you feel God doing this. But how do feelings relate to all this?

**Bishop Barron:** God made us body and soul. He gave us minds. He gave us bodies. He gave us passions.

So they can become vehicles of his presence and his communication. Don't reduce the spirits to that, as though you are just discerning them at the purely emotional level. At the same time, don't reject or denigrate them. God can indeed speak through our feelings. I remember distinctly riding with a kid's enthusiasm to the library to get this big tome of Thomas Aquinas and bringing it home with tremendous excitement to read. I don't want for a second to denigrate that or say, "Oh, how childish." No, God was speaking to me through those exciting feelings because it awakened me, I hope, to a deeper and more abiding love for God and for neighbor. They led me to where I am right now, a life of dedication to the church and to Christ and to God and his people. I think God can and does speak through our feelings. But don't just reduce it. Always be attentive to the whole of your experience.

**Brandon Vogt:** It reminds me of when you have often spoken about St. John Henry Newman's illative sense, of coming to know something not merely from logic or feelings, but the converging synthesis of all these factors. Is spiritual discernment a similar thing?

**Bishop Barron:** Yeah. A question priests get asked a lot is, "How come you became a priest?" Most of us priests don't like that question. It is practically impossible to give a comprehensive answer. I say to

married people who ask that question, “How come you married your spouse?” Of course they will give me a whole congeries of reasons, a whole slew of experiences. And so it is with the priesthood. There is this and that experience and this person and that book and so on. The discerning person assesses *all* of these converging arguments, all tending in the same direction. That is very much what happened to me as I was discerning the priesthood. All these strands came together. But it takes time. I was a seminary formator and rector for a long time. I don’t want someone showing up at seminary, saying, “Hey, Father, I’m ready. I have discerned, I’m ready to go. Ordain me tomorrow.” No, he needs to slow down and really take time to piece it together.

**Brandon Vogt:** Well, let’s close with maybe a practical application of this whole discerning of spirits. I know a lot of people, when they get into the spiritual exercises or the discernment of spirits, have a specific decision or event that they are trying to figure out: Should I become a priest or get married? From the example I used earlier, should I follow this group or this video channel or not? Can you give us maybe an example from your own life of how you have applied this discernment of spirits?

**Bishop Barron:** For my own practical application of discerning of spirits, it was the application of



the criterion of love. What did I think was the path of greatest love for me? And that was priesthood. This is true for married people and anyone that has discerned a vocation. There was something about the desire for the priesthood that *would not let me go*. I won't go into details, but there were times in the process when I did turn away from it. But it came back, and when it came back, it was accompanied by consolations in the Ignatian sense. And then I would move along and maybe turn away again. It would come back once again, with deep consolation. Once I got to the seminary, I was on the beam. That was it. I first started the seminary over 30 years ago and that sense of deep consolation has never left me.

I remember years ago, I had given a homily at a parish on a certain Sunday. It was not a home run, but it was a solid single homily. Then I was driving a half hour north to another church where I had Mass fully intending to give the same homily. I got there a little bit early, so I parked just a bit away from the church. I was musing and praying, and with this extraordinary sense of clarity, I heard a voice say, "Don't give that sermon, give the one from six years ago." Being a priest for a long time, I will come around to previous homilies that I have written, since the Mass readings go around in a cycle. I had an entirely different homily from six years before, and the voice I heard told me to give that one instead. All I can say is that the voice was

accompanied by a deep spiritual joy and excitement. So I did give the other homily. Now, no one came to me afterwards and said, “Father, that was a life-changing homily,” but I nevertheless experienced joy and excitement. That was a sort of on-the-spot discernment. Deep joy and spiritual excitement are something that I have learned to recognize as the mark of the Holy Spirit. Another example is when, in March 2019, it was first suggested to me that I should write a book on the sexual abuse scandal, which later became *Letter to a Suffering Church*. It was nowhere on my radar screen, but the minute my friend made the suggestion to me, I thought, “Yeah, I need to write that book.” I was filled with that same sense of joy and spiritual excitement about it. Ignatius calls it “consolation without cause,” beautifully, like a consolation that comes out of nowhere. What caused that? I don’t know. But it was a sign of the Holy Spirit.

**Brandon Vogt:** Now, we have obviously barely scratched the surface, but if readers want more, there is a really good book called *The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living* by Fr. Timothy Gallagher. He has done a lot of great work, popularizing the Ignatian spirituality for ordinary people, so if you want to dig deeper into this discernment of spirits, this, I think, is the go-to book.

Now for a question from one of our listeners.

Today, we are hearing from Stephen in Salt Lake City, Utah, and he has a question about discernment: *I am currently considering a vocation to the priesthood. However, I'd also like a wife and children. Obviously I can't have both. Bishop Barron, how do I discern which of these impulses is what I want and which of these impulses is what God wants from me? Thank you.*

**Bishop Barron:** This is where things come down to the practical. Think about everything we've talked about, but I would recommend a couple specific things for you. One, go to Mass every day with that question in mind: Lord, what do you want me to do? What path do you want me to walk? Then, at Mass, listen with great attention to the readings for the day and what they are telling you. Second, get a good spiritual director. You have to talk this through. The danger of a hyperstress on discernment of spirits is that it becomes very individualistic and very subjectivistic. It is not just what I am discerning, but it can be what you are discerning together, with a good spiritual friend, as you are both looking outside of yourselves at the issue. So, daily Mass, spiritual direction, spending time before the Blessed Sacrament, and finally, keep the question foremost in your mind: Which of the two paths, as I am envisioning them, is going to lead me to greater love of God and neighbor? That is the one you want. And there are a lot of ways to do that discernment, but that is the question: Which is going

to lead me to a greater love of God and neighbor?  
That is the one that God wants for you.

---

**Subscribe to Bishop Barron's YouTube Channel** at  
<https://www.wordonfire.org/youtube>.

You'll love his weekly Sunday Sermon, the Word  
on Fire Show, and insightful discussions and  
commentaries!