



Discerning the Signs of the Times

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1. Discernment

Discernment is, today as always, crucial. So, we must reflect on this issue again and again, in order to keep alive the awareness of its importance, as well as to put discernment back into practice every day. In this paper, I will try to articulate my meditation on two possible levels of discernment, i.e., personal and social.

1.1 Personal Discernment

Our lives are embedded in the chronological time of a particular historical period; within such temporal flow and historical incarnation, women and men are faced on a daily basis with all the existential situations that may happen. Meanwhile, people ponder, and their spirits brood (Ps 77: 7) over what they are experiencing, on how to deal with and make sense of it.

Actually, discernment is linked to this sort of figured bass (*basso continuo*), to this incessant meditation on oneself, on particular events, and on life in general. Every human being ponders upon what is right to think, say and do, and all of them are confronted with the great voices of mankind, past and present; in this way, what is new and what is old

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is brought out of the treasure of wisdom (Mt 13: 52); besides, all human beings can also open themselves to an obedient listening to God.

Then, when the moment of a decision arrives that requires one's own discernment, everything that has been previously ruminated and digested somewhat condenses: an act of synthesis precipitates, triggering one's taking his or her own decision. It all happens like in that old story of the Japanese painter who, having been asked by his master to paint a crab, spent a long time in meditation, just to finally make - in an almost instantaneous gesture - all his artwork, in its entirety and perfection¹.

Despite its swiftness, sometimes this process takes place in a calm and spontaneous way, flowing effortlessly like oil. On the contrary, other times people flounder about in the darkness, and when the crucial moment inexorably comes they have to instantly jump up and choose, as a flash in the night; in such a case, they have totally to rely on the unconscious powers of life and possibly on God's support. In the nakedness of uncertainty, or better clothed only with sincerity of heart, one has to abandon and forget themselves in the darkness. Finally, there are even situations when a decision is simply impossible: while one stands still paralysed and stunned, time goes on and things happen as they should; anyway, as an impotent spectator of the events, one can live even such paralysis in purity of heart and mind, and possibly in God.

Ultimately, this variety of decisional «kinetics» depends on the fact that life is, and is not, in our hands: life is risky, and the danger of taking the wrong decision is always impendent upon us². The important thing is to take risks honestly, in conscience, accepting the possibility of making mistakes; in particular, the believer will have to take risks before God, but a God who will support his or her groping in the dark, and will comfort the torment of such obscure discernment.

Meanwhile, the musical drone of reflection on what has happened and happens must go on, constantly to check the direction of one's path, to make the necessary adjustments, and to find a hidden meaning even

¹ I found this anecdote narrated by Italo Calvino (1993: 62) without further reference.

² In a slightly different way, Derrida (1999) claimed that decisions are always marked by some undecidability and even impossibility; if we knew precisely what to do, they simply would not be decisions, but the mere application of some definite rule. This point had already been made by Heidegger in his lectures on the origin of the work of art (Krell 2011: 116).

in our errors and falls. Many believers will do that under the gaze of God, always gracious and merciful, loving and forgiving; for many other people it will occur within the universal *Ātman* which Indian music symbolises precisely through a sustained note or chord.

1.2 Transition

In this long, constant and never ending exercise of examination and scrutiny, in our living and reflecting upon life, it is of great consolation to count on the help of a spouse, a friend, or a spiritual director who knows you intimately and lovingly accompanies you in your journey. This is especially true of Christian marriage, where the first and fundamental person you deal with in discernment is your spouse; he or she, in fact, was raised by God to a living sacrament of salvation for the partner, whose life he or she shares in a truly intimate and tender way; here discernment, as a talented player, touches mysterious non-verbal and non-intellectual strings: actually, it involves body, mind and soul, because the two become one flesh (Gen 2: 24).

Widening the circle, we find the support of the community, whether civil or ecclesial; we do not live alone, but always rely on each other and confront with one another: paraphrasing Paulo Freire (1970), men and women make their discernment together through the mediation of the world. All occasions and places of confrontation, be they spontaneous or institutional, can be of great help and reassurance; at times, they even rise to the height of prophetic voices; and, even if it is not necessary to automatically and immediately refer such prophecy to God, a believer can always argue that, *a quocumque dicatur*, i.e., regardless who says it, any honest and sincere reading of the signs of the times is from the Spirit.

Obviously, this communal discernment has its own risks. Especially in new situations, where analogies with past experiences are not readily available, and vagueness and uncertainty reign, it is easy to lose one's bearings, misunderstand or simply not to see the signs of the times. It is a paradoxical situation, since it occurs precisely where discernment would be most useful and necessary. To further complicate the situation, incrustations accumulated in the past, the historical legacy of sins, spiritual opacities and insincerity of heart, as well as an atavistic fear to

walk like blind people on unknown ways, are to be added; evidently, all these factors may obstruct the understanding of the signs of the times, so that it is hard to discern the right path and follow it creatively.

In the words of John of the Cross, even for a believer the personal and communal discernment takes place in the dark light of the flame of love, or in the bright darkness of the night of faith. A faith that in this time (*saeculum*) is always troubled by doubts about its consistency and legitimacy; a faith that is always a leap of faith, an existential hazard, a decision to be renewed day by day, in the hope to finally see God face to face, without any further need to interpret obscure signs and enigmatic mirrors.

1.3 Social Discernment

With these remarks on sharing one's personal discernment, we can now move towards a second kind of discernment, one we can call – as if crossing wider and wider concentric circles – communal, social and human (in the sense that it involves the whole mankind).

The first observation to be made is that such discernment is much needed, since we suffer from a severe lack of it. Many people would add that this is especially true for our times, which in their opinion are the worst of all; yet, it is difficult to believe that the times in which one has to live, and if necessary criticise, are somehow (im)morally special and unique, or more degenerate than before; first, because all times have been so judged by someone or other, and second because the probability of having been born in precisely the worst times ever is almost negligible. So, we can provisionally say that there is as much lack of discernment today as ever.

The reason for such deficit of discernment is difficult to discover, above all because of its multifarious and heterogeneous character. Anyway, an important aspect is linked to the way itself interpersonal discernment operates. In fact, in comparison with personal discernment, it results from a broader, more detached, and less *in medias res* reflection. That is, since it is worldwide in its spatial extent, forward-looking and farsighted in its temporal extension, and cautious and thoughtful in drawing conclusions, this discernment is hardly palatable to people who

(absolutely legitimately) prefer to engage locally, and who have neither the knowledge nor the tools to tackle larger levels of inquiry and action.

However, it must be acknowledged that here a sort of intuitive sensibility may be more useful than specialist skills and extensive knowledge. In fact, one has to grasp subtle signs, listen to the murmur of tiny whispering sounds (1Kings 19: 12), and spot the seeds which are dormant in the dark or are just starting to germinate. So, one needs a peculiar receptivity to origins and beginnings, to the secret making of the *golem* in the depths of the earth (Ps 139: 16).

For many believers, in particular, the task is to listen obediently (*ob-audire*) to the Spirit, letting themselves go like leaves in the wind, without even knowing where they are driven towards; and yet, they must never lose sight of the new that is coming, according to the biblical admonition: “See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Is 43: 19). It must not be inferred that lukewarm quietism or debasing inertness will ensue from a similar decision-making process, as if one had to kneel at the feet of an absolute ruler, saying: “You order, I will execute”. On the contrary, at least for what concerns the God of the biblical Patriarchs and of Jesus of Nazareth, the believer can dialogically face God (Gen 18: 22 ff), decide together with the Spirit (Acts 15: 28), and even vigorously debate with Him (Ex 32: 32). The believers are co-creators, co-builders, and *synergoi* of God (1Cor 3: 9), not out of pride and arrogance, but because God wanted them to be such; they are not passive performers, yes-women and yes-men, but friends of God and, in the words of Pavel Evdokimov (1972), God’s co-liturgists and co-poets³. So, their being in the image and likeness of God is also revealed in that they have received from Him creative and po(i)etic powers of fecundity and generativity.

³ I would not pass under silence the depth of the concept of co-liturgy: from an etymological viewpoint, liturgy means the action (*ἔργον*) of the people (*λαός*), so to be co-liturgist of God etymologically means that people are invited to perform the sacred action all together, as well as together with God.

2. Signs of the Times

At this point, the question must be addressed about what properly a sign of the times is. Obviously, the reflection on this point is very rich, yet human beings have to tackle it again and again, aiming at thoughts and words both new and suited – once again – to the times they live in.

2.1 *Signs of the times as indexes*

At first sight, a sign of the times is not like a road sign. This would in fact mean that someone already knows the road, that is, the future, so that he or she can address us in the right direction; but the fact is that no one knows the road, and the future is open.

Obviously, one can think that it was God Himself who placed the signs; in this case, however, we should more properly speak of (divine) signs *in* the times. That is, it would not be the times themselves to show us certain signs; rather, it would be God to place within history certain signs that human beings, as sensitive and educated interpreters, could recognise. The situation would be comparable to those conventional signs which are placed along mountain trails: they are there, but only those who know the code can take advantage of them; moreover, it might happen that only expert climbers would see them, while occasional amateur tourists would pass by without even noticing them.

This has an interesting consequence: namely, it is quite possible that certain signs of the times are such just for some people or communities, that is, for those initiates able to understand the code. Therefore, the uninitiates might well say that they saw no signs, and this would be legitimate on their part; that is, nobody could blame them for guilt or blindness. Not only that, but the uninitiated need not automatically coincide with the unbelievers: in fact, first of all we can serenely admit that sometimes God has His reasons to send a sign only to some believers, rather than to all of them; furthermore, we can even imagine that God sends certain signs only to certain unbelievers, who recognise those signs as signs of the times, and draw apt conclusions, without the need to admit that it was God who sent them: the Spirit blows where it wills (John 3: 8), and it is not up to us to place any confessional fence around Him.

To return to our previous question, a sign of the times is like a weather phenomenon announcing the imminence of another (Lk 12: 54-56). However, even here it is necessary, so to speak, a certain expertise; that is, we must take into account our past experience of the weather, the understanding that certain phenomena are announced by some special signs, and the estimate that a certain fact happening now will be followed by a given future phenomenon. In other words, both the signs of the weather and the signs of the human times have, from a Peircean viewpoint, the nature of an index: “An index is a representamen which fulfills the function of a representamen by virtue of a character which it could not have if its object did not exist, but which it will continue to have just the same whether it be interpreted as a representamen or not. For instance, an old-fashioned hygrometer is an index. For it is so contrived as to have a physical reaction with dryness and moisture in the air, I know that the little man will come out if it is wet, and this would happen just the same if the use of the instrument should be entirely forgotten, so that it actually ceased to convey any information” (Peirce [1997]: 170).

Obviously, we must distinguish those phenomena which are simply concomitant from true causal links, in order to avoid, as Tolstoy remarked in the epilogue of *War and Peace*, mistaking the smoke of the locomotive for the cause of its movement. However, the real problem lies elsewhere, namely, in the fact that history – provided one does not reduce it to nature – is not made of meteorological or other natural phenomena, nor does it seem to obey natural laws. At least according to various schools of thought, history does not in principle admit the possibility of scrutinising signs and making predictions, being at most a field for *ex post* explanations or retrodictions; and actually, futurologists have almost always proven unsuccessful.

2.2 Signs of the times as syncategorematic signs

Apart from Peircean semiotics, and especially with regard to personal discernment, it is also possible to think of the signs of the times as «syncategorematic signs» dotting the course of our lives. In grammar and logic, the syncategorematic signs, also known as imperfect symbols, are those signs which in themselves do not mean anything, but that

- on entering a proposition - link the categorematic meaningful signs (nouns, adjectives and verbs), allowing the production of new propositions. In formal and symbolic logic, the syncategorematic signs are divided into connectives (and, or, not, if ... then) and operators (for example, the quantifiers); in grammar we have pronouns, adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions, while in some linguistic theories – which are here of particular interest – even the punctuation marks are considered as syncategorematic signs (Bunge 1974: 52).

For what concerns discernment, a first syncategorematic sign to be examined is the question mark, which can even be considered as an image and metaphor for it. Actually, questioning is quintessential to discernment: not only I question myself about my situation, but the reality I am living challenges me, while God Himself - gathering together two syncategorematic signs - is perhaps asking me right now: “Why?”. After all, if we feel the need to reflect on discernment, it is precisely because man questions (Rahner 1957) and our *Sitz-im-Leben* challenges us. Secondly, discernment itself may lead one to examine his or her times in the light of certain logical connectives rather than others: for instance, sometimes we feel and discern the need for an “and ... and” (*et ... et*) approach, while in other cases an “either ... or” (*aut ... aut*) imposes itself; consequently, certain times and situations require an inclusive *and*⁴, while others lead us to irrevocable choices between alternatives admitting of no mediation. Besides, discernment may involve the «colouring» or modulation of certain categorematic verbs (i.e., certain choices and human actions) through the use of syncategorematic adverbs; for example, we do not always realise enough how certain conflicts can be exacerbated or tempered by a different use of adverbs⁵. Finally, I would mention the proposal of new punctuation marks by French writer Hervé Bazin (1966): in particular, he suggested the love point (*point d'amour*) to mark the expression of affection and love; thus,

⁴ In this sense, it should be remembered Hans Urs von Balthasar's “catholic *and*” (1990: 82).

⁵ In this sense, I know no better representation of the adverbial power than the impressive effect that the adverb “sweetly” (*doucement*), obstinately accompanying each action of Marceline, has in *Zazie dans le métro* (Queneau 1959); indeed, Raymond Queneau was a master in the exploration of the most reckless rhetorical and linguistic techniques.

this sign could be compared to those signs of divine love that so many believers discern in their own lives.

And it is precisely the punctuation that may most deeply and subtly evoke God's action in one's personal existence, as well as in human history: after all, even though punctuation is in itself silent and nonsignificant, yet it gives breath, colour and intonation to the expression of ideas and feelings. It is as with God, incomprehensibly hidden (*Deus absconditus*) and silent, yet always present and life-giving: a God ready to articulate and punctuate the ages of mankind and the most momentous steps of history, to remind us the right hierarchy of values, to arouse feelings and emotions; in a word, a God capable to give an ultimate and definitive direction and meaning to our life.

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