



Francis: the discerning pope

Nicholas Austin SJ

13 March 2013 was the date of the historic election of the first Jesuit pope. Jorge Mario Bergoglio SJ took the name of Francis and in the five years since, he has captured headlines, imaginations and hearts worldwide. Nicholas Austin SJ looks at one of the foundation stones of Francis' papacy and, indeed, his life as a Jesuit: discernment. What, according to Pope Francis, does it mean to be a discerning Christian?

When Pope Francis was asked, in the famous interview published by *Thinking Faith*, 'What does it mean for a Jesuit to be elected Pope?' his reply was a single word: 'Discernment.'¹ The value he places on this practice is evident from the way in which he continually returns to the theme in his addresses, homilies and writings. In this month of March, his prayer intention is, 'That the Church may appreciate the urgency of formation in spiritual discernment, both on the personal and communitarian levels.'² Francis's petition for the Church is that it becomes the discerning Church.

What can we learn about discernment from this discerning pope? For Francis, discernment is a dying followed by a rising: it is letting go of one's own plans, certainties and agendas, and allowing oneself to be guided into new life by the unpredictable leadings of the Holy Spirit. This essay will not look at communal or pastoral discernment, but focus on what it means for each individual Christian to be discerning. I will touch on three of Francis' insights into this simple but transformative practice, three reflections that can direct our prayer to become more fully attuned to the creative work of the Spirit in our prayer and in our lives.

Discernment as a new perspective

When Francis spoke to a group of newly ordained bishops, not too long after he was elected pope, he chose the topic of discernment. He offered the following invitation:



I invite you to cultivate an attitude of listening, growing in the freedom of relinquishing one's own point of view (when it is shown to be partial and insufficient), to assume that of God.³

With disarming simplicity, the pope is saying something quite astonishing. He is saying that, through discernment, we can shed our prejudices and limited viewpoints, and take on a new perspective, God's perspective.

We are to be drawn, Francis says, into 'a way of sensing the things of God from within God's own heart.'⁴

Is this presumption, to imagine that we can understand how things look to God? 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts' (Isaiah 55:9). Yet we do not need to read these words from Isaiah as a prohibition against trying to understand God's thoughts. Rather, the prophet challenges us to step out of our own limited viewpoint, and invites us to take on God's very different, far more wonderful perspective. Isaiah asks us to see everything with new eyes, God's eyes.

It is delightful to see a child who thinks they can disappear from view simply by closing their eyes. Rob Marsh SJ points out that, up to the age of about four years, we do not fully appreciate that others have minds with a different perspective from our own. Very young children think others see what they see, feel what they feel. But, at some stage, children shed their 'mind-blindness' and learn that others have

thoughts, desires and perspectives different from their own. What does this tell us about our experience of God? Marsh makes the provocative suggestion that we tend to be mind-blind when it comes to God: 'We think that God knows simply what we know, sees simply what we see; and consequently we rarely stop to ask God what God actually sees or knows or feels.'⁵ The invitation, according to Marsh, is to ask God to remove our mind-blindness and acknowledge God as a real presence in our prayer, with His own perceptions, thoughts and desires. How often in my prayer do I take the trouble to ask God how He feels about what I am telling Him? Even more importantly, how often do I hang around for long enough to notice how He responds? Fortunately, on rare occasions at least, God does break through our self-preoccupation, and succeeds – finally! – in distracting us from ourselves.

From our side, a lively curiosity about how things look to God prepares the ground for discernment. 'How does God look at this situation in my life? What does He want for me in this context? I don't know but I'm excited to find out!' As we hear in scripture, 'Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always.' (1 Chronicles 16:11)

Francis himself is someone fascinated, not by his own navel, but by the gaze of Christ. He frequently exhorts us to be open to the graced experience that has been transformative for him: noticing how God sees the world, how God sees us.

Standing before him with open hearts, letting him look at us, we see that gaze of love which Nathaniel glimpsed on the day when Jesus said to him: 'I saw you under the fig tree' (John 1:48).⁶

By discernment we are invited to notice, to glimpse, to sense how things are 'from within God's own heart.'

Discernment as a spiritual sense

How do we go about attuning ourselves to God's perspective? Modern minds can find it difficult to acknowledge forms of perception other than scientific, rational knowledge. Yet, according to Pope Francis, discernment – perhaps like moral or aesthetic perception – is a kind of knowing that goes beyond rational knowledge:

As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – *sensus fidei* – which helps them to discern what is truly of God. The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression.⁷

Here Francis describes discernment as wisdom, instinct, intuition. As baptised people, we experience a 'connaturality' – an affinity, a resonance – with the spiritual. We have an experiential knowledge about what is of God, and what is contrary, by sensing its consonance or dissonance with the life of the Spirit within us.

Discernment can therefore be described as a kind of spiritual sense. Growing in discernment is like developing a spiritual 'ear' for the 'music of the Spirit'.⁸ The other senses also provide useful metaphors: discernment is a cultivated 'nose' for the presence of God, a sharp 'eye' for the fingerprints of God, an acquired 'feel' for what comes from the good spirit, an educated 'taste' for what savours of the Holy Spirit.

As with all these sensory capacities, discernment is not just a piece of perceptual apparatus, but a facility that can be cultivated. I am far from being a wine connoisseur: I confess I would be unable to tell the difference between a fine vintage and a bottle of plonk. Yet I have also met a professional wine taster who has educated his smell and taste to discern the many aromas, tastes and textures of a wine. Similarly, through attentiveness, we can fine-tune our spiritual senses of discernment, our ability to tell the difference between good and bad 'spirits' in our experience. This cultivated sensibility is precious because it alerts us to what would sabotage our progress and helps us attune ourselves to the life-giving music of the Spirit.

Discernment as gift

Given that facility in discernment can be honed, we may be tempted to imagine it to be a technical skill to be mastered, somewhat like integral calculus. It is true that the wisdom of tradition can offer pointers to guide us. Saint Ignatius Loyola famously wrote a set of 'rules' to help us discern the spirits.⁹ While we can certainly grow in facility in discerning, it is helpful to

note, with Pope Francis, that discernment is not primarily a matter of technique. Even Ignatius's rules are not a recipe for automatic results. For, Pope Francis reminds us, discernment is first and foremost a gift.

When Francis spoke to the group of newly ordained bishops about discernment, he exhorted them to ask for the gift discernment again and again.¹⁰ Francis recalls the famous prayer of Solomon, who famously asked at Gibeon for the capacity to discern (1 Kings 3:5-12). We must, then, 'continually return to Gibeon in prayer', imploring the gift that Solomon valued above long life and riches.

Like any gift, discernment must be received with openness, at the time of the giver's choosing. Francis reflects, therefore, on the need for patience in discernment, a patience that is not passive resignation, but active reliance on God's good timing:

An essential condition for progressing in discernment is to *educate ourselves in the patience of God and his times*, which are never our own. He does not 'bid fire upon the infidels' (cf. Lk 9:53-54), nor does he permit zealots to 'pull the weeds from the field' that they see growing there (cf. Mt 13:27-29).¹¹

Discernment, for Francis, means not rushing ahead of graces given, but learning to follow God's lead.

This waiting on God often requires an act of radical trust in periods of uncertainty and unclarity. The space that the poet John Keats called 'negative capability', that is, 'when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason',¹² is a mysteriously fertile one, in which the seed of discernment can grow and bear fruit. As Francis generously shares from his own experience:

It is true that this trust in the unseen [Spirit] can cause us to feel disoriented: it is like being plunged into the deep and not knowing what we will find. I myself have frequently experienced this. Yet there is no greater freedom than that of allowing oneself to be guided by the Holy Spirit, renouncing the attempt to plan and control everything to the last detail, and instead letting him enlighten, guide and direct us, leading us wherever he wills. (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §280)

A discerning person does not precipitously reach for a resolution, but exercises the 'negative capability' to wait patiently for God's guidance. Once again, what is needed is not a technique that infallibly produces results, but a deeply personal, relational attitude of heart: a trust, an inner freedom, a readiness. 'Here I am, Lord, I have come to do your will.' (Hebrews 10:9)

Letting go and letting God lead us

There is much more that could be said about Pope Francis' understanding of what it means to discern. For example, he describes discernment as a kind of wisdom in the grey areas of life, an ability to discern the wheat amidst the weeds.¹³ Or he sees discernment as urging and guiding us along a path not of instant perfection but gradual progress, asking of us always to take the next, small step forward.¹⁴ And he talks of a discerning Church as a Church of mutual listening, one in which everyone listens humbly to each other so as to listen to the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ We are only just beginning to explore Francis' vision for a discerning Church.

Here I have touched on just three of the aspects of Pope Francis' thinking about spiritual discernment, the graced practice of letting go and letting God lead us. For Francis, discernment is a new perspective, a spiritual sense, a gift. In praying to become more discerning, we can therefore ask God to help us take on His way of looking at things, to give us an ear for the music of the Spirit, and to keep us open, in blessed uncertainty, to the Spirit's promptings as a gift. Francis exhorts all of us to grow in this invaluable Christian practice: 'Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out'.¹⁶ The discerning pope invites us to learn an active receptiveness to the Spirit, 'letting him enlighten, guide and direct us, leading us wherever he wills'.¹⁷

Nicholas Austin SJ teaches Ethics at Heythrop College, University of London. He is the author of [Aquinas on Virtue: A Causal Reading](#) (Georgetown University Press, 2017).

¹ Pope Francis and Antonio Spadaro, 'A Big Heart Open To God', *Thinking Faith*, 19 September 2013, http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20130919_1.htm.

² For the Pope's monthly intentions, see https://clicktopray.org/en/pope_prayers.

³ Pope Francis, *Address to the Bishops Ordained over the Past Year*, 14 September 2014, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/september/documents/papa-francesco_20170914_nuovi-vescovi.html.

⁴ Jorge Mario Bergoglio, 'Writings on Jesuit Spirituality II', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 45.4 (2014), p. 17. Available at <https://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/jesuit/issue/archive>.

⁵ Robert R. Marsh, 'Looking at God Looking at You', *The Way*, 43.4 (2004), 19–28 (p. 22). <http://rmarsh.com/files/looking.pdf>.

⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), §264. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium*, §119

⁸ David Lonsdale, *Listening to the Music of the Spirit: The Art of Discernment* (Ave Maria Press, 1993).

⁹ *Spiritual Exercises*, 313-316. *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. by Michael Ivens (Leominster, England: Gracewing Publishing, 2004).

¹⁰ 'The bishop cannot take for granted the possession of a gift so lofty and transcendent, as if it were an acquired right, without falling into a ministry devoid of fruitfulness. It is necessary to *continually implore* it'. See endnote 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.* Emphasis original.

¹² Henry Edward Rollins, ed., *The Letters of John Keats*, Vol.1, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 193-4. I thank Jack Mahoney SJ for drawing my attention to this connection.

¹³ *Evangelii Gaudium*, §84.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), §305. See <http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/discernment-charged-merciful-love-pope-francis%E2%80%99-amoris-laetitia-love-family-0>.

¹⁵ 'A synodal Church is a Church of listening. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn: the faithful, the College of Bishops, [and the] Bishop of Rome; each listening to the others; and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of truth" (Jn 14, 17), to know what he 'says to the Churches' (Rev 2: 7).' Pope Francis, *Address at the General Synod, on the 50th Anniversary of the General Synod*, 17 October 2015,

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

¹⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium*, §20.

¹⁷ Thanks to Theo Hawksley CJ, Simon Bishop SJ and Frances Murphy for helpful feedback on an earlier draft.