

GOOD AND EVIL SPIRITS

By HEINRICH BACHT

RESEARCH on the sources of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius has led to a highly important and surprising discovery: what is most characteristic in them, what from the Saint's own personal spiritual experience, has the most distinctively Catholic stamp and derives from a longstanding tradition. I refer to his remarks on the influence of good and evil spirits. It is easy to show that the discernment of spirits holds a central place in the structure of the *Exercises*, at least in the mind of St. Ignatius – though not always in the *Exercises* as they are commonly presented. It is no exaggeration to say that the *Exercises* have in the end no other purpose than this: they are intended, by means of meditation, examination of conscience, silence, mortification and prayer to produce in the retreatant a condition of interior sensitivity (*motiones animae*) in which he experiences the influence of forces both good and ungodly and so makes his personal answer to the 'call' of God in determining his state of life. Provided this kernel of the *Exercises* is preserved, they remain specifically Ignatian exercises; and other meditations can vary and be presented with greater or less detail.

It is likewise evident that this part of the *Exercises* bears the unmistakable impress of its Ignatian origin. The question of how the *Foundation* or the *Contemplation for obtaining love* came to be incorporated into the *Exercises*, may remain controverted; but there can be no controversy on the fact that the 'discernment of spirits' derives from St. Ignatius' own 'election' and belongs to the original structure of the *Exercises*, St. Ignatius bears witness to this himself. In *The Story of the Pilgrim* he explains how that part of the *Exercises* which deals with the 'election' sprang from his experience of 'divers spirits and thoughts' at Loyola after he had been wounded. If one knows the biography of the saint, it will be clear what experience Ignatius is alluding to.

But however clear the biographical reference, it is equally plain that this experience and its pastoral application are linked with the main stream of tradition, itself derived ultimately from the Old and New Testaments by way of monasticism, and still relevant today. By comparing the personal and the traditional contribution,

we can bring out the precise meaning of what the *Exercises* say on 'divers spirits' and on the influence of good and evil spirits on the soul. Let us gather together the more important texts dealing with the matter.

In the *Annotations* Ignatius returns to this theme repeatedly. The length of the 'weeks' into which the *Exercises* are divided, should depend upon how far the retreatant is 'agitated or tried by divers spirits'.¹ When these 'spiritual motions, such as consolations or desolations' are absent, suspicion is aroused that the retreatant has not begun the exercises with due seriousness.² From this we may conclude that for St. Ignatius these movements of desolation are something more than purely physical or psychological weariness or depression. Not only does he exclude natural explanations, but he expressly takes into account a *third force*. Under the disguise of tiredness and depression, it is the 'enemy of human nature' who approaches and takes advantage of the introversion brought on by solitude. The director's task is to uncover the deceits of Satan and so to safeguard the retreatant from misguided choices.³ The vigilant control of all these inner experiences is so important in the mind of St. Ignatius, that from the start of the *Exercises* he refers to the 'Rules for the discernment of spirits'; and although they are to be found only at the end of the book, they are an essential factor in the whole course of the exercises.⁴ Of special importance is the remark⁵ that it does not depend on the will of the retreatant which of the two groups of rules for the discernment of spirits we should take up; the director must take care that someone who is 'spiritually' still in the First Week should not read the rules intended for those who have made greater progress. Ignatius is convinced that a premature use of the second group of rules is not only useless but positively harmful. In the background is the insight of the experienced spiritual director who knows that all truth must be adapted to the dispositions of the learner, and that it depends upon what the Greek called the *καιρος* – the opportune moment.

An immediate consequence is that the director can only carry out his task, if he is 'faithfully informed of the various stirrings and thoughts inspired within the retreatant by the divers spirits'.⁶ Such knowledge is more important for the outcome of the exercises than knowledge of the 'private (*i.e.*, not inspired by other spirits) thoughts

¹ Exx. (Spiritual Exercises) 4.

² Exx. 6.

³ Exx. 7.

⁴ Exx. 313–36.

⁵ Exx. 9.

⁶ Exx. 17.

and sins' of the retreatant. In other words it is by no means necessary for the success of the exercises that the director should also act as confessor; but he cannot fulfil his true function without some insight into the 'spiritual stirrings' which take place in the retreatant. Thus it will be understood that true and genuine exercises depend on the director's powers of discernment. His principal task is not to provide material for meditation – that can be supplied by a book or texts. But in the discernment of spirits, no book can replace the director. St. Ignatius' rules are primarily intended for the director and they are not supposed to replace him. The fact that this elementary truth is obscured – how can such a close contact between director and retreatant be maintained when the exercises are given to large groups? – only goes to show that it is high time we recalled the specific concern of Ignatian exercises.

A review of the texts already quoted reveals a strange hesitation between an 'ontological' and a 'psychological' description of what is happening. St. Ignatius speaks now of 'various spirits' now of 'various thoughts'. Are these spirits simply our representations and feelings? The answer is given in the preliminary annotation to the general examination of conscience,¹ where 'three kinds of thoughts' are distinguished. The first are 'my own, which spring simply from my own liberty and free-will'. The other two 'come from without, one from the good spirit and one from the bad spirit'. Ignatius, then, is very far from holding the view that the whole matter can be discussed in terms of psychology. As a believer in revelation Ignatius' position is one of 'spiritual realism'; for him, reality is not confined to the space-time world of sensible experience. He knows that the influence of supernatural powers is so adapted to the structure of our interior life that it will often be difficult to distinguish between the two orders and to indicate exactly the components of an experience.

For this reason it is not true to say that logic and psychology have no place in spiritual direction. But if a director thought that these two disciplines were sufficient, his judgements in the realm of the 'pneumatic' would be flawed; the recognition of the 'third dimension' is essential.

Once this has been grasped, the danger of confusing spiritual direction with psychotherapy will be avoided. No matter to what extent the psychiatrists and psychotherapists have invaded, or been

¹ Exx. 32.

invited to invade, the domain of the spiritual director, the attempt to supplant the director betrays a profound misunderstanding. Not simply because the doctor deals with disturbed psychic state, whereas the spiritual director deals with 'healthy' and 'normal' people; but above all because in psychotherapeutic treatment the natural value of psychic health is at stake, whereas spiritual direction is concerned with values of the supernatural order.¹ The psychotherapist is concerned with the integration of individual and social relationships in the order of nature; the spiritual director, on the other hand, is concerned with nothing less than leading the Christian to 'the completed growth of Christ'.² In other words the two approaches have as much and as little in common as nature and grace, health and holiness, the realm of man and of God. The good spiritual director must certainly have understanding and experience in the sphere of healthy and disturbed psychic states which are the psychiatrist's exclusive concern – for grace presupposes nature. He must at least know enough to acknowledge the limits of his competence and sometimes to bring in the psychiatrist or hand over a case to him completely. On the other hand even the best psychiatrist is disinclined to undertake the task of the spiritual director, if only because a new dimension is involved which implies a break in continuity with the natural order.

If one expects that St. Ignatius, in the 'Rules for the Discernment of Spirits', should provide a 'science' or a 'biography' of good and evil spirits, one will be disappointed. The faces remain hidden, only the effects are revealed and a criterion laid down by which their origins can be discovered. Ignatius lays great stress on the fact that the spiritual constitution and level of the retreatant must be known in order to judge the processes taking place within him. The indications vary, according to whether the retreatant is a 'beginner' and thus is on the level of the First Week, or whether he has already broken with the world. One who lives under the spell of grave sins is tempted by the evil spirit to remain in a deceptive peace. The evil spirit places before his eyes sensual pleasures and gratifications and tries to distort his judgement on the seriousness of life and the transiency of all things. Everything, on the other hand, which makes such a man unsure and restless and shakes him out of his satisfied

¹ The distinctions involved are found in Scripture, which uses the contrast between *Ψυχικός* and *Πνευματικός*: cf. 1 Cor. 2,14–15.

² Eph 4, 13. ³ Exx. 314.

calm, must be seen, at this stage, as the effect of the good spirit.¹ When, however, a man has begun seriously to free himself from sin and to direct his life towards God, it is the evil spirit who instils in his heart all manner of worried and anxious thoughts. The evil spirit tries, by sadness and scruples, to make progress burdensome and tries to maintain the soul in an atmosphere of weary depression and resignation. And, in such a case, it is a sign of the good spirit when the heart is generous and courageous, when peace and consolation flow into the soul.²

When a man, with the help of grace, has broken the chains of sin and goes forward in the freedom of the children of God, deep inward joy and cheerfulness are signs of the good spirit – they are not incompatible with a life outwardly burdened with pain and distress. The evil spirit attempts to banish inner peace and consolation through deceit. In other words, at this stage, three things form the indispensable criterion in the discernment of spirits: peace, joy and freedom of spirit. Whatever disturbs true peace, impedes joy and checks freedom, cannot come from the good spirit.³

Yet a warning must be given at this point. The evil spirit is a liar. He knows how to assume the appearance of light and thus counterfeit the good spirit. He speaks within a man of great and holy things, but only so as to conceal his own intentions. Then he leads him forward step by step, first in an atmosphere of ambiguity and obscurity and finally to open sin.⁴ It is therefore of fundamental importance that a Christian should pay heed to the course of the movements within him. Many things which, at the start, seem harmless or even admirable, are suddenly transformed and the man becomes aware that the devil has made a fool of him. A good start and a vigorous impetus do not guarantee success in the spiritual life. Constant vigilance and care are needed, so that the evil spirit may not, unperceived, direct the soul from the true path. Not surprisingly the masters of the spiritual life have always praised ‘the guard of the heart and the senses’.

Another consequence is of equal importance. There is no genuine spiritual life and no true spiritual progress without the ability to see through the wiles and the deceits of the enemy. Among the central meditations of the *Exercises*, one, in the mind of St. Ignatius, has a pre-eminent place – and this may be seen in the frequency with which he mentions it. It is the meditation on the *Two Standards*

¹ Exx. 315.

² Cf. Exx. 329.

³ Exx. 332.

⁴ Exx. 333.

which, according to the note which precedes it, must be made several times in the course of a thirty days' retreat. The aim of this meditation is to reveal the tactics of the enemy, to show how he concentrates on those who are striving to give themselves wholly to God. For St. Ignatius the decisive remark is that the evil spirit attracts and tempts men with things which in themselves are indifferent, that is, in no way sinful. The fact that in the meditation possessions and concern about fame and glory are mentioned, is conditioned by the age in which St. Ignatius lived and must not be understood in any exclusive sense. The evil spirit's aim is to limit men's freedom by holding before them the illusion of greater freedom, and so to lead them gradually to his side.

The despicable strategy of attacking under the appearance of good, is also the main theme of the second group of 'Rules for the Discernment of Spirits'.¹ St. Ignatius offers only succinct hints with little development. But one can sense that an apostle of his standing could easily have given a wealth of illustrative examples. He confines himself to the essential; the rest is left to the prudent judgement of the director. One point should be added: no matter how aware St. Ignatius is of the danger to spiritual progress which comes from 'the enemy of human nature', he is far from being afraid of Satan. On the contrary he knows that ultimately the devil is cowardly and powerless. All his strength derives from human anxiety and stupidity by which, to borrow Augustine's language, 'men enter the realm of the chained dog'.²

At the outset we said that this doctrine of good and evil spirits, their influence on the soul and the discernment of them, was deeply rooted in the ascetico-mystical tradition of the Church. In conclusion, this tradition will be sketched out in its broad outlines. One does not need to stress that Ignatius did not need to be consciously aware of his sources. Authentic tradition has its own life and can only with difficulty be exposed to critical judgement. It is a living bond which binds generations together, an atmosphere which supports the individual, without his needing to be aware of it.

It has been rightly pointed out that the essential elements of our theme are already contained in the Old Testament in the accounts of good and evil angels who influence men. This is true above all of the story of the typical temptation in the book of Genesis.³ The metaphysical background of temptation and sin and the deceits

¹ Exx. 333-6.

² Exx. 325.

³ Gen 3, 1-8.

of the tempter have rarely been so vividly depicted; its psychological accuracy is striking. There, if anywhere, that 'spiritual realism' is in evidence, for which the third dimension of God and spirits is acknowledged not simply *as well*, but as inseparably interwoven into experience. Jewish theology, as it is revealed in the uncanonical books of the century before Christ – especially in *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* – developed these ideas intensively, and, it is true, exaggerated or cheapened them with fantasy. It is not surprising that superstition and magic should find fertile sources in these writings. More important for our purpose is that the members of the Qumran sect, whose doctrines are found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, had a richly developed idea of the 'two spirits'.¹ Among New Testament writers St. Paul laid the foundation of later tradition with his fully developed teaching on dominions and powers and his insistent exhortation to watchful struggle against the evil powers of darkness.² The presentation of Satan as one who 'transforms himself into an angel of light'³ runs through the whole of subsequent spiritual literature; it reappears in St. Ignatius.⁴ Nor must we forget how St. John's Apocalypse expresses the history of the world and of salvation as a gigantic combat between the powers of Heaven and Hell, and the combat is worked out too in the hearts of men.

Among post-apostolic writings the *Didache* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* provide the first elements of a doctrine on the discernment of spirits. That is even more true of Origen, who, in his *De Causis*, gives detailed rules for judging inner experiences which read almost like a preliminary sketch of St. Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits.⁵ The ideas of the great Alexandrine became the common property of Eastern monachism, and were further developed. In the life of St. Anthony the Hermit, the themes of struggle with devils and the discernment of spirits play an important part. Evagrius Ponticus was the first to present systematically a synthesis of spiritual experience and theory, but his hellenistic outlook, according to which man is 'spirit' in matter and not really a unity of spirit and matter, weakens his system. Among the writings of Evagrius one expressly deals with 'diverse evil thoughts'.⁶

¹ Cf. *Révue d'Ascétique et de Mystique*, 1955, pp. 297–303.

² Cf. Eph 6, 10–20.

³ 2 Cor 11, 14.

⁴ Exx. 332.

⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar in his book, *Origenes – Geist und Feuer*, Salzburg 1938, pp. 330–341, has collected forty-three rules of this type.

⁶ P. G. 79, 1199–1234; the text was commonly attributed to Nilus, since Evagrius, as a follower of Origen, was suspect.

Here the theme is treated in great detail; and henceforward most of the spiritual writers of the East deal with the matter more or less fully. Through Cassian, the great mediator between East and West, it becomes current in the monastic writings of the West. It must be noted, however, that in Cassian the emphasis has already been changed, for instead of genuine spiritual experience we have the transmission of literary formulas: the *Charisma of Discretio spirituum* is transformed into the virtue of discretion, which ultimately is nothing more than prudence and tact.

The immediate link with the *Exercises* of St. Ignatius is provided by the writers belonging to the so-called *Devotio Moderna*, of whom the author of the *Imitation of Christ* is the best-known. Book III chapter 54 is a kind of summary of all that preceding ages had transmitted on the 'divers movements of nature and grace'. The high esteem in which Ignatius held the 'Gersonite'¹ suggests that here is to be found one of the most important sources of the spirituality of the *Exercises*, but only as far as their literary composition is concerned; since it is unlikely that Ignatius realised, when he had his first spiritual experiences at Loyola, how close he was to the spirit of the *Imitation*.

¹ This was the name often given to the *Imitation*, because its author was thought to be Gerson.

How do you discern between good and evil spirits, and understand the source of your insights, spiritual abilities, etc.? Asked by Ben General Questions discussion.Â How do you discern between good and evil spirits, and understand the source of your insights, spiritual abilities, etc.? Asked by Ben. Possibly Related Posts: What Causes Deja Vu? Have You Had Deja Vu While Dreaming? Black Mass Energy and EMF? Are Mirrors Portals? Is it Possible for a Person to be the Devilâ€™s Child? Yes indeed, evil spirits are experts at deception. Our Lord, speaking of the devil, pointed this out: â€œWhen he [the devil] tells a lie, he speaks in character, because he is a liar and the father of lies.â€ And St. Paul states this explicitly: â€œAnd no wonder, for even Satan masquerades as an angel of lightâ€ (2 Corinthians 11:14).Â The best way to avoid being deceived by duplicitous tempters is to stay focused on the one who is the Truth and the Light: Jesus Christ. If we make the positive, proactive, loving cultivation of our friendship with Jesus into the great obsession of our lives, we will make it very hard for the devil to deceive us.