

Ignatian Discernment of Spirits:

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“Discernment of Spirits”

Definition: A process by which we become *aware* of the movements in our hearts, *understand* where they come from, and either *accept* or *reject* them. (Gallagher, Fr. Timothy. *The Discernment of Spirits*, 17.)

Another way of looking at it is A.I.R.—Awareness, Identify, Respond (Gaitley, Fr. Michael. *Consoling the Heart of Jesus*, 202)

-Discernment is directed toward action: not enough to see and understand what is happening in our life—we must *choose* good and *reject* what is evil.

-Not all “movements” in our heart need spiritual discernment, but only the ones that “affect my life of faith, hope, and love and my following of God’s will” (Gallagher, 24). “Movements” are good if they lead us toward God’s will, and bad if they lead us away from God’s will.

In the Spiritual life, we speak of 3 stages: Purgative, Illuminative, and Unitive

- 1) *Purgative* aims to eliminate serious sin and vice from our life through renunciation and penance
- 2) *Illuminative* is the enlightening of the mind and heart with God’s grace and sacraments
- 3) *Unitive* is ultimately the reality of heaven—experiencing union with God. The saints show us how it is possible to live this reality even while on earth!

Discernment of Spirits helps us progress through the first two stages—the last is a pure gift from God that can’t be achieved with human effort. It can only be *prepared for* by our effort.

St. Ignatius of Loyola proposes “rules” of discernment which help us understand:

- 1) How the spiritual life works
- 2) How the Holy Spirit operates vs. the devil
- 3) What spiritual consolation looks like vs. desolation
- 4) How to fight temptation and become free from spiritual oppression

The first 14 rules are designed to teach us to recognize the Devil’s tactics and overcome them with God’s help and following God’s will for us. The Spiritual life is ultimately about learning to recognize the “voice of the Shepherd” vs. the “voice of the Serpent”—following everything the Shepherd says and rejecting the suggestions of the Serpent! This requires faith in the goodness of the Shepherd and trusting that He desires nothing but good for us, while the Serpent only wants our destruction. One is always trustworthy and the other is always lying to us! If we accept this, then knowing who is “speaking” is vitally important! These rules will teach us how to figure out who is “speaking”.

Rules for Discernment of Spirits: (From Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*)

1 & 2: There are two fundamental directions in the spiritual life—moving toward God or moving away from Him. God and the devil work differently in a soul depending on where it is going!

- 1) If a person is moving away from God, “going from mortal sin to mortal sin,” the evil spirit normally tries to keep them entertained and pleased so that they continue down their current path. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit tries to sting the conscience through reason so that the person feels guilty for their sin and repents. (Think of prodigal son realizing that going home is better than feeding pigs)
- 2) If a person is trying to purify their life of sin and serve God faithfully, it is the opposite. The evil spirit tries to “bite, sadden, and place obstacles, disquieting with false reasons, so that the person may not go forward. And it is proper to the good spirit to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and quiet, easing and taking away all obstacles, so that the person may go forward in doing good.” (Gallagher, 7)

We must become *aware* of the fact that there is a war going on for our souls. There are normal “ups and downs” in life, but not everything has a purely natural cause. Spiritual forces can *amplify* our emotional states or help calm them. That’s why we must first choose to follow God’s commandments if we want to know who is ‘moving’ us. The *same feelings* can be from completely different sources depending on whether we are heading toward God or not! Things which come from God *need to be accepted* and things from the enemy *must be rejected*. Remember that God desires our good and the enemy desires our destruction.

3 & 4: Consolation and Desolation

- 3) Consolation is when “the soul comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord”, or “when it sheds tears that move to love of its Lord, whether out of sorrow for one’s sins, or for the passion of Christ...or because of other things directly ordered to his service and praise,” or an “increase of hope, faith, and charity, and all interior joy that calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one’s soul, quieting it and giving it peace” in God.
- 4) Desolation is the opposite of consolation: “darkness of soul, disturbance...movement to low and earthly things, disquiet...without hope, without love, finding oneself totally slothful, tepid sad and, as if separated from one’s Creator and Lord” (ibid. 8)

5-9: What to do (and NOT DO) during Desolation

- 5) Never change a prior decision! Stay strong in resolutions made during time of consolation. Because while in consolation “the good spirit guides and counsels us more”, while in desolation it is the evil spirit who speaks more frequently to our conscience.
- 6) The only thing that should change is our insistence on prayer, meditation, self-examination, and suitable penance—which should *intensify* during desolation.

- 7) Meditate on the reality that God is giving a *trial* to grow in virtue, which can be done with God's help. Even in the absence of *feeling* like God's grace is there—IT IS THERE. The *feeling* is removed so that we can grow spiritually.
- 8) "let one who is in desolation work to be in patience, which is contrary to the vexations which come to him, and let him think that he will soon be consoled, diligently using the means against desolation (prayer, meditation, examination, and penance).
- 9) 3 causes for desolation: 1) "We are tepid, slothful, or negligent in our spiritual exercises, and so through our faults...consolation withdraws from us. 2) A trial to see how faithful we are without immediate spiritual rewards. 3) "To give us true recognition and understanding...that it is not ours to attain or maintain increased devotion, intense love, tears or any other spiritual consolation, but that all is the gift and grace of God...so that we may not build a nest in something belonging to another, raising our mind in some pride or vainglory, attributing to ourselves the devotion or the other parts of the spiritual consolation."

In other words, while in desolation:

- Ask "Why am I having desolation?"(rule 9) , fight against it, and "don't listen" (Fr. Michael Gaitley, 222)

10-11: What to do during consolation

- 10) Soak it up! Be strengthened and reflect on a plan of action for the next time of desolation
- 11) Humble yourself, remembering how little you can achieve without God's help. Be thankful for the grace and realize where it comes from! (Also, in desolation, remember how powerful God's grace is to overcome the enemy)

In other words, while in consolation:

-Soak it up, Humble yourself, and listen (Fr. Michael Gaitley, 207.)

12-14: How the Devil acts

- 12) image of a woman who cowers in the face of a ferocious man, but if he shows any weakness, "the anger, vengeance and ferocity of the woman grow greatly and know no bounds." Likewise, the Devil stops tempting a soul who resists him firmly by doing the opposite of what he suggests; but if a soul loses heart in the face of temptation, "there is no beast so fierce on the face of the earth as the enemy of human nature in following out his damnable intention with such growing malice." (ibid 10)

-"Resist the Devil and he will take flight" (James 4:7)

- 13) The devil acts like a "false lover" who makes advances to a married woman and tries to convince her to keep his words and actions secret. Such a person's plan is destroyed when the woman exposes his deeds to her husband. In the same way, the Devil tries to seduce souls with temptations and shame them into keeping such temptations to themselves. Yet

if they humbly confess these things to a priest or a wise spiritual friend, the Devil will not succeed in his plan

- 14) The devil also acts as a general, looking for the weakest spot to attack. He examines our virtues (Faith, Hope, Love, Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance) and goes after the weakest one(s)

The final 8 rules are designed to help those who have virtue solidly established resist subtle temptations of the devil. (We won't discuss them now)

How to make a good decision in 3 easy steps (according to St. Ignatius)

- 1) Discern:
 - a. Pray for openness to accept either choice you are considering
 - b. Prayerfully use your reason to
 - i. List all positives and negatives for each choice
 - ii. Imagine that you are advising someone you love who has the same choice to make as you—what would you advise them to do?
 - iii. Imagine you are at the end of your life—which choice would you like to say you made?
- 2) Choose: if one of the choices is obviously better based on the first step, do it! If there is not a clearly better option, choose the one you are inclined to more, trusting in the Holy Spirit.
- 3) Pray for confirmation: Ask God to bless your decision if it is His will for you to do what you have chosen. If you have chosen wrongly, ask God to “close doors” and make it clear that it is not the path for you

How to train your spiritual “ears”

Regular daily prayer and sacramental life (confession monthly if possible), combined with examination of conscience daily. Without examination of conscience, it is impossible to know what is happening in our spiritual life!

Suggested routine (Gaitley,173-177):

-Morning offering, set prayer time (3'oclock remembrance of Divine Mercy is great, or set time of scripture/spiritual reading, rosary, adoration etc.), and evening Examination of conscience (Examen)

-How to do the Examen (Gaitley, 178-182): B.A.K.E.R. (Blessings, Ask, Kill, Embrace, Resolution)

-Go through your day looking for all the blessings and consolations

-Ask God to show you your sins so you can repent

-Look at your sins that day (which 'killed' Jesus on the cross)

-Ask for forgiveness and receive the embrace of Jesus who loves you

-Make a resolution for tomorrow