

IGNATIAN DISCERNMENT TOOLS

Introduction

Discernment is certainly an aspect in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius and is utilised within a Retreat, but also outside it as well. Ignatian Discernment has skill, but also a methodology. An individual requires skill to be able to interpret the spiritual senses and inner movements, within their heart. The methodology occurs when these skills (and other tools) are utilised in making real-life decisions. In Ignatian Discernment an individual must see God as a friend and desire to follow the will of God and thus conform with the Father's will for his greater glory. God wants a deep and sincere joy for his creature (who is loved deeply), but the decision-maker needs to be open to the Heavenly Father's presence. Silent prayer is essential.

In addition, there are specific words associated with Discernment in the Ignatian tradition. These include Election, Consolation, Desolation, Indifference, Good Spirit and Evil Spirit.

Spiritual Consolation and Spiritual Desolation

Both Spiritual Desolation and Spiritual Consolation are a component of life and our faith journey. St Ignatius has provided valuable information, through his experience of Spiritual movements. Spiritual Desolation occurs when an individual senses dryness in prayer, distance from God, and a weakening of faith, hope, and love. They become confused, and to give praise, reverence, and service to God becomes difficult. The false spirit ("also referred to by Ignatius as the 'evil spirit' or 'enemy of our human nature'") is associated with the devil and is predominately present in Spiritual Desolation. In Spiritual Desolation it is essential that the person preserves in spiritual practices, including prayer, meditation, and penance. Spiritual Desolation is the opposite of Spiritual Consolation.

When an individual experiences an increase in faith, hope, and love, and thus becomes closer to God, they are in Spiritual Consolation. There will also be a sense of peace and tranquillity. Spiritual writers have mentioned with Spiritual Consolation; an 'afterglow' can occur sometime afterward and making choices at this moment can lead to Spiritual Desolation. Predominately, the 'true spirit' (also known as the 'good spirit') operates in Spiritual Consolation, but the 'evil spirit' can be hidden, where good and holy feelings, thoughts, and

motivations can seem good, but eventually leads an individual away from God's will.¹ Lonsdale provides excellent detail on feelings and experiences associated with Desolation and Consolation (See Appendix I). The 'Discernment of Spirits' will be discussed after the 'Election.'

The Election

The Election occurs in the Spiritual Exercises at the end of the Second Week [Sp. Ex 169 – 188], and the Exeritant, is discerning the will of God. A person cannot be persuaded to undertake the Election since they do have the choice. Also, the Retreatant (because of the First Week) should be aware of their disordered affections and aspire to overcome them. The *Official Directory* states: "It is very important that a person entering upon the election endeavour to be free from every inordinate affection and absolutely indifferent to all things, desiring solely to follow God's holy will, whatever he may discover it to be."² The Exeritant should also be within the Second or Third Degree of Humility [Sp. Ex 166 & 167], since this is the level of indifference required. Indifference is unselfish love for God, neighbour and a desire to give glory and praise to God. Therefore, an individual has trust in God and is obedient to His will. If the Retreatant does not have the required level of indifference, there can be continuation of the Spiritual Exercises, with a hope of change, or they can end, after a brief interval.

The First Time

The First Time occurs when God moves the soul, and there is no doubt. In this, God chooses, rather than the Exeritant choosing. The person is 'moved and drawn' to a particular decision. However, this does not limit the freedom of choice. Using a New Testament example, it is similar to St. Paul being called to follow Christ. In the First Time, most authors would agree that high and intense Consolation occurs, without cause. However, Toner still believes that this needs to be tested, with the following questions:

- "Am I unable to doubt, even if I really wanted to, that what is shown me is truly God's will?"

- Do I recall what has been revealed to me, with complete accuracy; no additions or subtractions? Does the insight received have clarity? If the response to any of these two questions is 'No,' patient prayer is required.
- With the insight received, is it in accordance with the Gospel and Church teachings? If not, it is not from God.
- Is it your will or God's will? There is to be pure charity and no selfish motivation on your part.
- "Does a second and/or third mode of election clearly and strongly conflict with the first-time judgment?"³ If time permits, test the First Time, with the Second Time Election and the Third Time Election. "If strong second-time and third-time evidence should conflict with the first-time experience, the genuinity of the latter is at least suspect."

Toner does not consider reason to be above divine revelation, but sees the need to test the First Time experience to make sure that it does not originate from another source.

The Second Time

A person not moved by God in the First Time, undertakes the Second Time, where "light and understanding are derived through experiences of desolations and consolations and discernment of diverse spirits [Sp. Ex 176]." The Second Time is the most common among Retreatants. Lonergan mentions that Ignatius, encourages the Exercitant to daydream intentionally, with the following procedure:

- "Picture Christ in action and read passages from the lives of the saints.
- Picture yourself imitating Christ, first as a priest or a religious and then as a married person."
- At the end of each contemplation reflect

The Retreatant can ask themselves these questions:

- What movements did you experience?
 - Was Consolation experienced?
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- In imagining, were you energised, when insults, affronts, and humiliations emerged? This is a component of following Christ.
- Did you experience Desolation, when you imagined yourself following Christ closely?
- Did your mind wander when considering a particular vocation, and did you lose interest in this choice?
- “Is the Consolation and Desolation truly spiritual?” Consolation and Desolation is spiritual when it is God centred.
- Did the evil spirit cause the consolation? Consolation comes from the evil spirit if it does not flow in its entirety (from beginning to end). The evil spirit will weaken faith and disrupt one’s peace.
- Am I moved to a particular choice, since God wills the choice?
- “Did the impulse and the counsel to a particular act come during the spiritual consolation itself or immediately before or after the consolation? If before consolation or in its ‘afterglow,’ chances are that, the impulse and counsel are flawed. Only when the impulse and counsel come during the spiritual consolation itself can one judge the whole experience to be from the Holy Spirit.

Toner, mentions that the Exercitant should only reflect on the insight received in the experience once it has occurred and that a decision should only be made in the Second Time when numerous Consolations have happened. Relying on one Consolation is not enough. Also, one can list the advantages and disadvantages of making a particular choice for God’s service.

The Third Time

The Third Time occurs when the Exercitant is still unsure of God’s will for them. Therefore, no clarity beyond doubting. In this type of discernment, the individual must not be plagued with Consolation and Desolation, hence a time of tranquillity. They should also be free of the following: “worry, preoccupying concerns, fatigue, distracting surroundings, anguish, anger, or any other highly exciting emotions of delight,” etc. They will utilise their natural faculties, using “insight, reason, imagination, memory and in this, will list the disadvantages and advantages of different alternatives in serving God. Marian Cowan in her book titled: ‘The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola: A Handbook For Directors’, provides good questions to help in this process (See attachment II). It’s essential to note that this is not an

intellectual exercise since the Retreatant has a desire to find God's will and the heavenly Father will guide their natural faculties.⁴

Once a decision is made, it is tested with Ignatian imaginative meditation. One imagines that there is someone similar to themselves, and they need to provide them with advice [SpEx 185]. The second mediation requires the Exercitant to imagine themselves on their death bed and looking at their past, asking themselves, what would I have chosen? [SpEx. 186]. Finally the Retreatant will imagine judgement day, look back at their decision, and ask, was the decision full of generosity, fidelity, and courage, or selfishness? [SpEx 287]? Therefore the Third Time utilises a variety of natural faculties to make a decision, and it is then also taken to prayer as well.⁵

How To Confirm A Decision?

The Election process is comprehensive and there are many 'checks and balances' in the process. However, Ignatius mentioned that a decision could be confirmed, through using meditation and contemplation, where the Exercitant asks God to confirm if their decision is following His will. In addition, if a decision is following God's will, alternatives could be offered so that God can show His preference. If a Retreatant, uses the Third Time, they may also confirm through Second Time evidence. Therefore, a decision can be clarified in a variety of ways.

Discernment of Spirits

St Ignatius believed that there is a battle for our soul, with the false spirit (evil spirit) moving an individual away from God and therefore the devil's work is linked to Spiritual Desolation (dryness in prayer, distance from God and a weakening of faith, hope and love). Satan can use Spiritual Consolation (a movement towards God, with faith, hope and love and a sense of peace and tranquillity), for his purpose. The prince of lies disguises himself as an angel of light with the intention to entrap. Through life and in the decision-making process, both Spiritual Desolation and Spiritual Consolation can be experienced, and Ignatius, in his brilliance wrote rules associated with these movements.

NOTES

APPENDIX I: EXPERIENCES & FEELINGS OF CONSOLATION & DESOLATION

SPIRITUAL CONSOLATION	SPIRITUAL DESOLATION
<p>“A sense of confidence in God and in the love of God for the world and for me;</p> <p>any experience which leads to a deepening and strengthening of that confidence;</p> <p>an appreciation of my life and all that it contains as God's gift;</p> <p>a sense that a person or an event in my life is a gift or an "epiphany," a place where I meet God; an attraction to the greater good;</p> <p>a movement of love or desire toward God;</p> <p>a sense of being at peace and in harmony with God, others and myself;</p> <p>an awareness of being a sinner and of needing and receiving God's forgiveness;</p> <p>rejoicing in weakness in the sense in which Paul describes the experience (2 Cor 12);</p> <p>an experience of inner, personal freedom or liberation;</p> <p>a desire and movement toward loving and serving others in the name of Jesus;</p> <p>a longing to be part of the struggle for the reign of God, at whatever cost to myself;</p> <p>a readiness to follow Jesus even to the cross;</p> <p>a felt knowledge of the presence of God in creation and history.”</p>	<p>“a sense that one's life is empty and meaningless; a state of self-disgust, self-hatred;</p> <p>a weakening or a loss of confidence in God and in God's love, with a resulting feeling of profound discouragement;</p> <p>a movement of love or desire which takes us away from God;</p> <p>a sense of being at odds with God and with oneself; a time when God seems to be absent;</p> <p>being trapped in a circle of remorse and guilt at one's own weakness and sinfulness; an attraction to what is less good;</p> <p>an. inability to accept or trust in God's forgiveness; a reluctance or real unwillingness to love and serve others in the name of Christ;</p> <p>an aversion from whatever has to do with the reign of God;</p> <p>feeling revolted by or fearful of the prospect of following Christ, and especially by the cross;</p> <p>an experience of being not-free, of being paralyzed by fear, anxiety, attachments, addiction;</p> <p>a sense that God is absent from the world and from the events of one's life;</p> <p>an apparent inability to meet God at all.”</p>

Source: David Lonsdale, *Listening To The Music Of The Spirit*, 74 – 76.

APPENDIX II: THE THIRD TIME (ELECTION) QUESTIONS

- I. “Do you feel that you have enough maturity, as a person and as a Christian, to make a decision in complete freedom? What reasons might make you doubtful about this maturity?”
- II. What graces do you think you have received from God since your childhood? It would be well to make a kind of global review of the history of God in your life.
- III. Concretely, since you have been old enough to understand and to will, what have you wanted to do with your life?
- IV. In the light of the retreat, how do you judge desire?
- V. If this desire seems to you to conform to the ideal of the Gospel, what obstacles seem to oppose its realization? State obstacles that arise from other people, from circumstances of life and, in particular, from yourself - childhood or youth, education, temperament, faults, and so on.
- VI. In the past, has this desire given you joy and peace? In what circumstances? And now, in the light of the love of Christ, what effect does this desire have on you?
- VII. Is there, in your estimation, a special motive that seems to incline you in one direction rather than another? Before God, how do you judge this motive?
- VIII. How do persons who know you well - for example, parents, friends, priest, counselors - react to your desire?
- IX. What effect does the thought of rejection of this desire produce in you?

It would be well, as a help to oneself, to answer these questions in writing, doing so as simply as possible and dropping out any questions to which there seems to be no answer.”

Source: Marian Cowan and John Futrell, *The Spiritual Exercises Of St. Ignatius Of Loyola: A Handbook For Directors* (New York: Le Jacq Publishing Inc, 1982), 80 – 81.

APPENDIX III: DREAM THE OPTIONS

WHICH DREAMS LEAVE ME IN CONSOLATION?	WHICH DREAMS LEAVE ME IN DESOLATION?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Which of these dreams leave me filled with holy and wholesome desires? • Which leave me with a sense of closeness to God? • Which leave me filled with faith? With hope? With love? • Which make me want to go out and proclaim them to the world and especially to my mentors and companions? • Which leave me with a deep-down peace and tranquillity? With a sense of rightness? With a fits-like-a-glove sort of feeling?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Which leave me without faith, hope and love? • Which leave me without a sense of God’s closeness? • Which leave me disquieted and agitated? • Which leave me with no passion and no zeal? With a sense of boredom and tepidity? With no energy? Feeling deflated? • Which fill me with deep-down anxiety and fear? • Which are the dreams I am not very excited to talk about with my mentors or companions? Which are the ones that I avoid mentioning to them?”

Source: Thibodeaux, *God’s Voice Within: The Ignatian Way to Discover God’s Will*, 171 – 172.

Dealing with Spiritual Desolation (Spiritual Exercises, 313-327)

- The First Rule: The person is progressing from one mortal sin to another, and the devil will utilise their imagination to tempt them with sensual delights and pleasures so that they will remain entrapped. Whereas, the good spirit will prick their conscience.
- The Second Rule: The individual is moving away from sin and thus closer to God. Purification is occurring. “The evil spirit will bite, sadden, and place obstacles, disquieting with false reasons, so that the person may not go forward.” Whereas the good spirit will offer “courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and quiet, easing and taking away all obstacles, so that the person may go forward in doing good.”
- The Third Rule: The Person is inflamed with love for the Creator and Jesus, and will shed tears for sins and also at the Lord’s Passion. This is a form of Spiritual Consolation, that will increase, faith, hope, and love.
- The Fourth Rule: The individual will experience Spiritual Desolation, being agitated by temptations, and see a weakening in faith, hope, and love. He/she will be sad and lack enthusiasm.
- The Fifth Rule. An individual in Spiritual Desolation should never make a change. “Because, as in consolation, the good spirit guides and counsels us more so in desolation the bad spirit, with whose counsels we cannot find the way to a right decision.”
- The Sixth Rule. A person in Desolation should intensify prayer, meditation, and penance.
- The Seventh Rule. An individual in Spiritual Desolation should ponder that the Lord has left them there for spiritual growth so that they can become aware in agitations and temptations that the Lord’s divine help is within them.

- The Eighth Rule. A person experiencing Spiritual Desolation needs to have patience, realising that Consolation will come and utilise the advice provided in the sixth rule.
- The Ninth Rule. An individual can experience Spiritual Desolation for the following reasons: I. Laziness and negligence in spiritual matters (e.g., prayer); II. A test of faith, with the removal of Consolation; III. God making them aware that they are not in control. A person does not attain from the Creator but receives a gift/gifts.
- The Tenth Rule. An individual in Consolation must consider “how they will conduct themselves in the desolation, which will come after, taking new strength for that time.”
- The Eleventh Rule. When in Consolation, one must be humble, realising that God’s grace is needed in Desolation.
- The Twelfth Rule. A metaphor is utilised, but to summarise, one needs to be firm when experiencing the temptations of the evil spirit. Therefore, be firm and do not lose heart in the temptations, since the enemy will pursue. Do not give in! David Flemming uses the metaphor of a spoilt child.
- The Thirteenth Rule. Another metaphor is utilised and means that people not only have to be open and honest with themselves, but others as well. In complete transparency the evil spirit flees. This certainly is the case in Spiritual Direction.
- The Fourteenth Rule. A metaphor is used and informs an individual that they need to strengthen their weakest points since the enemy (the devil) will search for the weakest points in one’s theological, cardinal, and moral virtues.

These are the main rules needed for discernment,

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Note: The above is part of an essay on discernment by Fr. Nathan McKay

Other Resources on Discernment

Discernment

- **Discernment of Spirits with Fr. Mark Thibodeaux, SJ - MAGISTALK Ep 5 with Dan Finucane & Ian Peoples**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYKMOO8wXMY>

- **Pope Francis' Fourteen Catechesis on Discernment**

<https://schoolofmary.org/pope-francis-catechesis-on-discernment/>

Spiritual Consolation

St Ignatius gives us this definition of spiritual consolation: "I call it consolation when an interior movement is aroused in the soul, by which it is inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord, and as a consequence, can love no creature on the face of the earth for its own sake, but

only in the Creator of them all. It is likewise consolation when one sheds tears that move to the love of God, whether it be because of sorrow for sins, or because of the sufferings of Christ our Lord, or for any other reason that is immediately directed to the praise and service of God. Finally, I call consolation every increase of faith, hope, and love, and all interior joy that invites and attracts to what is heavenly and to the salvation of one's soul by filling it with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord" (Sp. Ex. 316).

It is of utmost importance to understand what spiritual consolation really is and what it is not. If we don't, we could end up thinking we are being spiritually consoled when in reality we are dealing with some natural cause of contentment. The casual observer might be wondering why this is such a big deal until he realises that it is key to discerning God's presence in our lives. Indeed, God speaks to us, or rather, gets His will across to us in a variety of ways. One of them is to give us a spiritual relish for heavenly things that will draw us further along the path of conversion and perfection. If, however, we confuse such spiritual relish with the natural way in which we can feel good because we happen to be in good health, have a happy family life, a pleasant job, good food and nice friends, then we are clearly open to thinking that when we have those things we are good and holy, and when we don't, we are sinful. That is bad theology and can lead to a spiritual wasteland.

This is why St Ignatius wants to make it exceedingly clear that true spiritual consolation consists first and foremost in the love of God, and not just any love, but a love that is inflamed, that burns like a fire and does not want to go out. It is a fire that prevents us from loving any creature on earth for themselves. This is true even of the most sacred and true of human loves, such as the love between husband and wife, between mother and child, between the closest of friends. When a soul is truly inflamed with this pure love and pure consolation, even though his/her love for another person may be very great indeed, it remains clear to them that it is always second to the love of God. If their love is true, it is so only because there is first of all the love of God in whom and for whom we love that other person.

It is not uncommon to encounter people who seem almost offended that we would love them for God's sake. It's almost as if this would mean they are not worthy of love on their own merits. Actually, such a love does not devalue, but rather increases the value of love for neighbour. For any love of another person, however sincere and natural, is only as good as that person, and we know that all creatures will vanish like the grass of the field. If however, we love God first and foremost and in Him and for Him we love others, then our love for them takes on an entirely new dimension. It deepens, blossoms and endures, even in the midst of trials and sufferings in the relationship.

It may also be a surprise that St Ignatius places tears among spiritual consolations. When our love for God has grown to the point that our sins cause us to weep, or when we shed tears because of how much Christ has suffered for us, then, even though there is a certain sorrow involved, it is a sorrow that causes consolation because it establishes us in the truth, grounding us once again in the One who is the source and fulfilment of all our desires. As St Paul writes: I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting (2 Cor 7:9).

Finally, anytime that we are moved to heavenly things and to the practice of true virtue, then we are experiencing spiritual consolation. How crucial this is will become apparent as we go along. For now, let's just point out that our God is a God of consolation. It's the enemy, the devil, who is eternally sad and desolate. God is eternal joy, and He seeks to share that joy with those who love Him. This is why St Paul commands us to rejoice and why it is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. May such spiritual joy always be ours.

Spiritual Desolation

In our last instalment we considered St Ignatius' teaching on spiritual consolation. This month we move on to the consideration of spiritual desolation. "I call desolation... : darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness rising from many disturbances and temptations which lead to want of faith, want of hope, want of love. The soul is wholly slothful, tepid, sad, and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord" (Sp. Ex. # 317).

Just as the good spirits seek to help us advance towards God by removing the obstacles which lie in our way, giving joy and peace, so the enemy seeks to halt our progress towards God. He does this by creating obstacles. Just as a runner can be prevented from advancing by a material hurdle placed on his path, so there are spiritual obstacles that can prevent our going to God and progressing in the ways of the Spirit.

Darkness of soul. God is light, St John tells us (cf. 1 Jn 1:5), and when He is present in a soul, He brings that light and clarity with Him. One feels the confidence one might imagine on a bright spring day. We see things as they are, without illusion. When the Enemy is in control, it is quite the opposite. Since he is in eternal darkness, he can only create darkness around him. Under the influence of this darkness, truths that were formerly held with great conviction are no longer clear. All was limpid before, but now all is dark. It's as if someone had just turned out all the lights. And where there is no light, progress becomes impossible until the light returns, at least enough for us to see the next step.

Turmoil of spirit. This turmoil or confusion goes with the darkness. Just as a person in a bright room is seized with uncertainty if the lights go out suddenly, so the soul formerly walking by the clarity of divine light finds itself troubled in spirit when that light disappears, and the darkness seems to envelop all things.

They say that Satan fishes in murky waters. That is certainly true, and it is why we will be told in a subsequent rule that when in such a state of mind we should not make any changes in our good resolutions but hold firm to those taken before when we were in the light.

Inclination to what is low and earthly. This is a sign of desolation that few people are prone to recognise for the simple reason that their lives are often immersed in the earthly and sensual.

Source:

Ab Austro (Newsletter of Notre Dame Priory)