

**THE DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS**  
**WEEK 3: IDENTIFYING DESOLATION AND CONSOLATION**

*In many ways, the Discernment of Spirits can be reduced to the task of identifying desolations and consolations, then choosing to follow, or move toward consolation. While this may sound simple, all of the rules, guides and devices that one uses in Discernment help the soul to make this distinction. When one is unfailing in following consolation, one is unfailing in following the Spirit.*

Before beginning with Ignatius's 14 Rules, it is helpful to refresh a few key aspects:

*3 KINDS OF VOICES:*

Good spirits ; Bad spirits ; Our own Voice

*3 APPLICATIONS OF DISCERNMENT:*

<b>General (one's entire life)</b>	<b>Particular (specific area of struggle)</b>	<b>Relationships</b>
The Rules of Discernment are most often considered in a general way, that is, in applying them to one's entire life. If we consider the first rule, <i>Moving from Sin to Sin</i> , this would describe those who are living in a state isolated from the Spirit and are in need of conversion which begins the Way of Perfection.	We can apply the Rules to specific areas of our life that we would be particularly attentive to. An example would be for a priest who struggles with impatience to apply the Rules particularly to impatience. While he may not be living from sin to sin, he may be in a constant state of impatience and in need of conversion in this particular area and may even later experience a time of desolation, when he inexplicably becomes frequently impatient again.	The Discernment of Spirits can also be applied to particular relationships. We may be able to imagine a parent and child who, for whatever reason, have cut off an relationship. This would be like one living from sin to sin. The next step would then be to move from good to better. Relationships also go through periods of desolation and consolation

**RULE 1: MOVING FROM (MORTAL) SIN TO (MORTAL) SIN**

*THE BEGINNING OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE*

Ignatius follows the same observation as Diadochus, that Discernment is integrally linked to and a product of one's progression in the spiritual life. We begin in darkness. Without even the light of baptism, the soul has no hope of seeing the Spirit and lives in a state that goes from one sin to the next. St. Teresa of Jesus uses the image of the soul being in the forest outside of the castle that is God's dwelling. Every soul begins outside of the castle, in darkness and in the midst of all kinds of critters, wild animals and creepy things, without any protection or shelter.

*Evil Spirits:*

Keep the mind occupied by moving from 1 worry to another, not allowing it to settle on good and holy things. Keeping one focused on one's career is a good way to do this.

Keep the person in a constant state of pleasure, which deepens the further that one descends--i.e. there is a constant need for increasing and seeking out new forms of pleasure. This is readily seen in drug addictions and pornography-- The spirit recognizes the lack of food and hungers, but it is feeding entirely on worldly things rather than the things of the spirit which is what nourishes and satisfies. This is why it ravishes for more and remains in this state.

Keep the passions raised, directed toward disordered things, and attention on feeding them.

Thomas Aquinas's list of the passions:

Love; Hate; Desire; Aversions; Joy; Sorrow

Hope; Despair; Confidence; Fear; Anger

The person will be in a state of dis-ease when his physical senses or passions are not in a heightened state of engagement--i.e. one cannot sit in silence or engage in spiritual practices.

*Good Spirits:*

God pricks the conscience in a call to conversion

*One's Own Voice:*

We recognize that not all temptations that keep one in this condition are of evil spirits, who also seek to take advantage of physiological conditions and our fallen human tendencies. In other words, there are real physiological effects and causes of addiction that one's conscience alone does not address, such as:

The Dopamine Cycle

The effects of screen viewing on brain chemistry and development

Chemical and hormonal excitement

Addictive affects of various things: such as we see in various advertisements: "This game is so addictive; "play it just 1 time and you'll be hooked"; the advertisements for Hulu a few years ago that featured aliens sucking out the intelligence of people as they were hooked on watching tv.

## **RULE 2: MOVING FROM GOOD TO BETTER**

For one who has broken away from the state of constant mortal sin and has engaged in progressing in the spiritual life. For Teresa of Jesus, this is the one who has entered into the first rooms of the castle. The soul can finally find shelter, but while he is no longer surrounded by the critters of the forest, some are able to enter into these first rooms--this is why Ignatius describes one as moving from good to better, it is not an immediate jump into perfection. One can also imagine that if there are still critters in these rooms, and the center from where God's voice imminates remains far away, the sounds of the wild things can remain much louder and it can be harder to hear God's voice, or the voice of other good spirits. This is why Ignatius notes that God can be very active during this time, encouraging the soul with many consolations. It is also when one is beginning to hear for the first time and begins learning what good spirits sound like, and how they are different from the voices and influences of the evil spirits that one had been fully accustomed to. In other words, one can easily confuse the two and many of the rules and things that we are used to depending on for discernment, are actually wrong.

One of the most important things for one to do is to recognize that the thoughts we have are temptations and suggestions, either consoling or desolating. Whether a consolation or a desolation tells one of its source.

Because the soul is unaccustomed to the sound of the good spirits, and there will be so many temptations through one's thoughts, it is most important to give most attention in discerning to things of the Knowledge of God and Prayer.

Where one is moving from good to better, the focus is on God carrying the spirit through, rather than one relying on one's own strength, virtue or qualities to persevere.

*Evil Spirits:*

Attempt to deter and distract one from doing good

The temptations may not be to sin, but rather to not do something good

It is important to begin recognize the sounds of the primary spirits, what we also call the 7 Deadly Sins/Spirits

Sloth, Envy and Pride are strongest at this point.

*Good Spirits:*

God encourages and strengthens the soul with consolations:

Received in prayer or moments of doubt

Interior movements

External comments

Experiences of God's Blessings

### **RULE 3: WHAT IS CONSOLATION**

Ignatius defines consolation as an interior movement to God, toward faith, hope and love that is caused by good spirits.

Another way of thinking about consolation:

What the soul experiences in response to the Divine presence as it perceives or senses a particular aspect of God.

What happens when the soul senses God.

In a natural way, that is, a scientific way that follows normal laws of cause and effect, one will sense the presence of God, either through Himself or through His agents who are in union with them, as one moves closer toward Him. Conversely, as one moves further from Him, the consoling sensations will lessen. This is why we can normally say that Discernment is a matter of following consolations and avoiding, or fleeing from desolations. Desolations, we can also see, are what the soul naturally senses in the absence or furtherance from the presence of God. If God is like the sun that is at the center of union, then one naturally feels warmer (consolations) in drawing closer toward Him, and one feels colder (desolation) in moving away from Him.

In a broader sense, we can describe consolation as the communication of God to a person, whether through interior or external means. External consolation would be to experience the blessings of God's favor. One must also be attentive here as success, an appearance of blessing, can also come

from the encouragement of evil spirits who are trying to smooth the way that leads to harm or away from God. External events should never be used alone, but will be accompanied by either interior consolations or desolations, to be judged with virtue, or as they relate to God's commands. Their benefit is most often in helping one sort through times of doubt, or as a way of learning how the Spirit sounds. One may, for example, feel a interior nudge of the spirit, but be unsure of its source, then use the results to learn what kind of movement was experienced.

One learns to identify smaller or subtler consolations largely through experience, as a musician learns the final qualities of music through experience.

#### **RULE 4: WHAT IS DESOLATION**

Ignatius defines desolation as any movement toward our lower nature and inclinations toward doubt, despair, or narcissism caused by the bad spirits.

Like consolation, other ways of thinking of desolation are:

What the soul experiences in the absence of the Divine presence as it perceives this absence either in totality or in particular ways.

What happens to the soul when God is absent from it.

The natural condition of the soul in the absence of God is one of desolation. Feelings of doubt, confusion, uncertainty, fear, agitation, disconnectedness, absence of faith, hopelessness, despair, worry, uncontrolled passion, subjugation, etc. are not punishments, but natural responses to different conditions, just as one may feel cold or the various forms of pain in natural response to injuries, one feels lonely in times of isolation, or a need to be heard when being ignored.

In the broader sense, desolations are the absence of communication with God in a particular way and can be experienced in an internal or external way.

As a matter of natural course, if one moves toward desolation, or allows desolation to direct one's movements, course or decisions, one moves away from God.

Just as one can learn the subtler sounds of consolations through experience, one can become more aware and greater attuned to the presence of desolating spirits through experience. If by one's actions, one increases in desolation, one was tempted, or influenced by a desolating spirit.

We can describe 7 kinds of desolation:

Wrath, Gluttony, Covetousness, Fornication, Acedia, Pride, Dejection (Envy),