

Day 3: BASICS of SPIRITUAL DESOLATION AND CONSOLATION

St. Ignatius of Loyola proposed 14 Rules for the discernment of spirits. These Rules provide a rigorous framework for recognizing the movements the Good Spirit and the enemy, as well as our internal experiences of consolation and desolation, and how to respond to those movements.

Here we look at the first 5 rules – which lay the groundwork for St. Ignatius' spiritual vocabulary, and includes the all-important 5th Rule, which has saved many souls from tragedy.

Below we review each rule, the writing in italics is the actual wording from St. Ignatius.

First Rule: Persons Moving Away from God

The first Rule: In the persons who go from mortal sin to mortal sin, the enemy is commonly used to propose to them apparent pleasures, making them imagine sensual delights and pleasures in order to hold them more and make them grow in their vices and sins. In these persons the good spirit uses the opposite method, pricking them and biting their consciences through the process of reason.

The enemy leads these persons deeper into ruin especially with sensual temptations and pleasures – both real and imagined.

The Good Spirit, always opposed to the enemy, uses biting and stinging of their conscience, and will provide opportunities for repentance without regret if the person is open to a change of heart.

Second Rule: Persons Moving Toward God

The second: In the persons who are going on intensely cleansing their sins and rising from good to better in the service of God our Lord, it is the method contrary to that in the first Rule, for then it is the way of the evil spirit to bite, sadden and put obstacles, disquieting with false reasons, that one may not go on; and it is proper to the good to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations and quiet, easing, and putting away all obstacles, that one may go on in well doing.

The Good Spirit now gives strength, consolation, inspiration, peace and so forth. Especially in the early stages of a persons conversion, the Good Spirit provides many consolations and encouragements.

The enemy now takes the opposite approach, “biting” and saddening the person, making use of the tendencies already present in the person toward sadness and anxiety, with thoughts like “I will never be able to indulge in that vice again.” And the enemy tempts with “lesser goods” and false reasons why it is ok to indulge in a particular vice.

The key is to recognize the deceits of the enemy and turn to God.

Third Rule: Spiritual Consolation

The third: OF SPIRITUAL CONSOLATION. I call it consolation when some interior movement in the soul is caused, through which the soul comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord; and when it can in consequence love no created thing on the face of the earth in itself, but in the Creator of them all.

Likewise, 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 our Lord, or because of other things directly connected with His service and praise.

Finally, I call consolation every increase of hope, faith and charity, and all interior joy which calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord.

This is specifically *spiritual* consolation. For example, uplifting of the heart, inflamed with love for God. Or, any increase in the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Or a new awareness of the presence and goodness of God.

Recognition of these consolations will lead us to seek and find God during the hours of the day (particularly when we take on the practice of the *Examen*).

A golden rule of the spiritual life is to follow consolation. There is one important caveat, especially as we advance in the spiritual life and are trying to decide between different good things, the enemy and our fallen nature can obscure our discernment of consolation, and use spiritual fervor to misguide us into making wrong decisions. St. Ignatius provides additional rules for these circumstances, we mention it here just to bear in mind and to discuss with a spiritual director if and when the time comes.

Fourth Rule: Spiritual Desolation

Fourth Rule. The fourth: OF SPIRITUAL DESOLATION. I call desolation all the contrary of the third rule, such as darkness 37 of soul, disturbance in it, movement to things low and earthly, the unquiet of different agitations and temptations, moving to want of confidence, without hope, without love, when one finds oneself all lazy, tepid, sad, and as if separated from his Creator and Lord. Because, as consolation is contrary to desolation, in the same way the thoughts which come from consolation are contrary to the thoughts which come from desolation.

This is specifically *spiritual* desolation, and often takes these forms:

- darkness and disturbance in soul
- movement to low and earthly things
- disquiet from various agitations and temptations
- moving to lack of confidence, without Hope, without Love

- finding oneself totally slothful, tepid, sad – particularly in undertaking spiritual endeavors. Note the word “totally” – the enemy works to deprive us of all spiritual strength.
- trying to erase past consolation – “it was probably all in my imagination”
- taking away all hope for the future – “in any event, things are never going to work out for me anyway ... I'll always be stuck in this situation ...”
- feeling as if totally separated from one's Creator and Lord. Note “as if” – we are never truly separated

While we are specifically interested in spiritual desolation, nonspiritual desolation (psychological or physiological – e.g. fatigue) can lead to, or at least create fertile ground for, spiritual desolation

The thoughts that come from consolation are contrary to thoughts that come from desolation, and vice versa. This is the heart of discernment of spirits – understanding from whence our thoughts are coming.

Fifth Rule: Spiritual Desolation – A Time for Fidelity

Fifth Rule. The fifth: In time of desolation never to make a change; but to be firm and constant in the resolutions and determination in which one was the day preceding such desolation, or in the determination in which he was in the preceding consolation.

Because, as in consolation it is rather the good spirit who guides and counsels us, so in desolation it is the bad, with whose counsels we cannot take a course to decide rightly.

General considerations:

- When in desolation *never* change plans
- Between consolation and desolation – understanding how to identify and respond to desolation is the greater concern
- Applies to *spiritual* desolation (as opposed to conventional emotional/physical desolation and distress, in which case other responses may be more appropriate – for example, it might be necessary to make certain changes)
- Desolation may last for moments, hours, days, weeks or even longer
- The two threshold questions:
 - Am I in spiritual desolation (see Rule 4)
 - Am I thinking of changing plans that were made when not in desolation?
- This is critical because when in desolation the counsel in our mind is from the enemy.

The hallmark of desolation is that it moves us away from God and to find distraction and pleasure in “low and earthly” things. The “big three” qualities of the *thoughts* that come from spiritual desolation:

- Attempts to redefine spiritual past and future (e.g. “it was as if I never *had* nor ever *would* feel God's Love for me”)
- Universal negatives (e.g. “I had *never* experienced God's Love”)

- Exaggeration (e.g. "I'm a terrible human being" ..."I don't deserve to be loved" ... "this is the worst day")

The first key point is that we must maintain enough spiritual awareness to recognize that we are in desolation. This is not as easy as it sounds. When we're in desolation one of the first thoughts is often "it's all a bunch of smoke and mirrors anyway" and to completely abandon our spiritual training.

And the second key is that when we recognize we're in spiritual desolation to ***make no changes*** - we must remain absolutely faithful to our spiritual practices and not give in to temptations – once we start giving ground to the enemy he redoubles his efforts.

The third key point (which is covered more in the remaining rules, not presented in detail here) – is that when we are in desolation we cling to God. Even if we don't feel His presence, by an act of love (which is to say, in faith and in love and in trust) we keep turning to God and seeking His strength to resist the specific voices and temptations of the desolation.

In time the desolation will pass, and you will come out of it spiritually strengthened because you will have prevailed through God's grace – you will have grown in relationship with God.