



DISCERNMENT

“My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of my hand.” - JOHN 10:27-28

ESTABLISHING THE CONCEPTS

INTRODUCTION TO DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS

Ignatius’s Discovery

Discovering a Sacred World: Ignatius Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises and Its Influence on Education by John J. Callahan, S.J.

<http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/Heartland3/r-discovering.html>

In his Autobiography, Ignatius describes “his first reasoning about the things of God.” As he lay on his bed of pain after the third attempt to fix his shattered leg, he had asked his sister-in-law for something to read. He would have preferred some romances of the time, but all that was in the house was a *Life of Christ* and a *Lives of the Saints*. He read and reread them. Ignatius dreamed about imitating the deeds of St. Francis and St. Dominic. He also dreamed of knightly deeds in service of “a certain lady.” Gradually, he began to notice a difference in the way these competing daydreams affected him. He examined his feelings and found that through these “movements of the spirits” God was at work in his life. When he dreamed of the lady and knightly honor, he was joyful. Later, he found himself dry and unsatisfied. When he dreamed of imitating the saints, he was also joyful. But the joy and satisfaction remained. By analyzing these “spirits,” Ignatius discovered God’s loving desire. He had found “God’s will” for himself.



The conversion of St. Ignatius

Consolation and Desolation

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<http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/making-good-decisions/discernment-of-spirits/introduction-to-discernment-of-spirits/#sthash.z2zWJobb.dpufy>

The feelings stirred up by good and evil spirits are called “consolation” and “desolation” in the language of Ignatian spirituality.

Spiritual consolation is an experience of being so on fire with God’s love that we feel impelled to praise, love, and serve God and help others as best as we can. Spiritual consolation encourages and facilitates a deep sense of gratitude for God’s faithfulness, mercy, and companionship in our life. In consolation, we feel more alive and connected to others.

Spiritual desolation, in contrast, is an experience of the soul in heavy darkness or turmoil. We are assaulted by all sorts of doubts, bombarded by temptations, and mired in self-preoccupations. We are excessively restless and anxious and feel cut off from others. Such feelings, in Ignatius’s words, “move one toward lack of faith and leave one without hope and without love.”



St. Ignatius was a spiritual master whose “Spiritual Exercises” have been used by famous saints for almost five centuries.



ESTABLISHING THE CONCEPTS *continued*

The key question in interpreting consolation and desolation is: where is the movement coming from and where is it leading me? Spiritual consolation does not always mean happiness. Spiritual desolation does not always mean sadness. Sometimes an experience of sadness is a moment of conversion and intimacy with God. Times of human suffering can be moments of great grace. Similarly, peace or happiness can be illusory if these feelings are helping us avoid changes we need to make.

Rules for Discernment

In *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius provides various rules for the discernment of spirits (*Spiritual Exercises*, 313–336). Good and evil spirits operate according to the spiritual condition of the individual.

For people who have closed themselves off from God’s grace, the good spirit disturbs and shakes up. It stirs feelings of remorse and discontent. The purpose is to make the person unhappy with a sinful way of life. On the other hand, the evil spirit wants such people to continue in their confusion and darkness. So the evil spirit tries to make them complacent, content, and satisfied with their distractions and pleasures.

For people who are trying to live a life pleasing to God, the good spirit strengthens, encourages, consoles, removes obstacles, and gives peace. The evil spirit tries to derail them by stirring up anxiety, false sadness, needless confusion, frustration, and other obstacles.

Discernment of spirits is a challenging task. It requires maturity, inner quiet, and an ability to reflect on one’s interior life. Discernment takes practice. It is something of an art. Ignatius Loyola’s rules for discernment provide a framework, not a program. We must be ready to improvise and adjust because God works in each of us so uniquely. That is why most counselors recommend undertaking discernment of spirits with the assistance of a spiritual director.



Discernment means carefully listening to God so we can choose our path in life.

Be Curious:

- How did Ignatius “discover the rules of discernment?”
- What are the rules of discernment for a person in a state of grace? For a person in mortal sin?
- Why do you think that God works through these ways?
- Where have you noticed these rules in effect?
- How can you use the “discernment of spirits” as you think about your vocation?



EXPLORATION

DIALOGUE WITH GOOD SPIRIT AND BAD SPIRIT

Have you ever seen the cartoons in which a little angel is sitting on a character's shoulder, and a devil on the other shoulder? The angel offers good advice, and the devil offers bad advice or temptation. Often this is a silly part of a cartoon, but it is not too far from the truth. St. Paul writes in Ephesians 6: 12.

“For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world ruler os this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens.”



Write a dialogue between yourself, a good spirit, and a bad spirit. Make it serious, not cartoonish. Choose from these scenarios:

1. An unpopular girl is crying near her locker. What would God want you to do? What are you tempted to do? Or not do?
2. You feel called to the priesthood or religious life. What does the devil tell you about that call? What does God tell you?
3. You receive an unusual amount of money for your birthday. What would God want you to do? What are you tempted to do? Or not do?

Write the dialogue as it takes place in your mind. For example:

Me: Geez, that girl is crying again. I wonder what's wrong with her?

Bad spirit: Mock her by saying “boo-hoo” and laugh as you walk by.

Good spirit: Ask her what's wrong.

Bad spirit: Just ignore her.

Me: Yeah, maybe I should just ignore her.

Good spirit: Put yourself in her shoes. Wouldn't you want someone to be kind to you?

Etc.

End the dialogue by describing the actions you end up taking.

VOCAL PRAYER

The Magnificat

My soul proclaims
the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior
for he has looked with favor
on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations
will call me blessed:
the Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his Name.
He has mercy on those who fear him
in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm,
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty
from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has come to the help
of his servant Israel
for he remembered his promise of mercy,
the promise he made to our fathers,
to Abraham and his children forever.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son,
and to the Holy Spirit:
as it was in the beginning, is now,
and will be forever.

AMEN.