

Rules for the Discernment of Spirits – First Week – [325-327]

With commentary adjusted from Fr. Timothy Gallagher, OMV, and Ignacio Casanovas, SJ

Today we will continue with the rules for the discernment of spirits of the First Week. To finish up the rules, Ignatius gives us three ways that the devil usually acts. He compares the devil to a woman, to a deceitful lover, and to an enemy commander. Each analogy highlights some aspects of how the devil tries to deceive us and lead us astray.

“This part of the rules begins the fourth and final section of the rules of discernment for the first week. The point is to have us see into the depths of our enemy’s character and his way of working in souls.” Casanovas says that these three rules are the only section that could be called ‘literary,’ meaning, it’s written in a more embellished and flowery way. As we’ve said, in the rest of the Exercises, Ignatius gets right to the point: he doesn’t mince words, and everything he writes is precisely measured. Here, however, we see a richness of expression and picturesque images, with a certain reminiscence of Ignatius’ days as a knight and his life in the military.

Casanovas goes on to say that the best commentary that could be made on these points, is simply to recommend that they be read over and over, because the more they are read, the more flavor they acquire, and, besides, the teachings contained in them couldn’t be more straightforward and clear.

The point is, too, that we see that in the Ignatian method, we’re not meant to be passive, just sitting by. There is a war going on for our souls, and we need to take an active part in defending ourselves and attacking our enemy.

[325] The enemy conducts himself as a woman. He is a weakling before a show of strength, and a tyrant if he has his will. It is characteristic of a woman in a quarrel with a man to lose courage and take to flight if the man shows that he is determined and fearless. However, if the man loses courage and begins to flee, the anger, vindictiveness, and rage of the woman surge up and know no bounds. In the same way, the enemy becomes weak, loses courage, and turns to flight with his seductions as soon as one leading a spiritual life faces his temptations boldly, and does exactly the opposite of what he suggests. However, if one begins to be afraid and to lose courage in temptations, no wild animal on earth can be more fierce than the enemy of our human nature. He will carry out his perverse intentions with consummate malice.

** When you preach to women, generally speaking, they don’t like this comparison. However, if you ask, and if they’re honest, usually they’ll admit that it’s true. The point is that the devil is a weakling, but, if we give him a little room, he takes it and keeps going. Again writing to Teresa, Ignatius says:

“Not only this, but *if he sees that we are weak* and much humbled by these harmful thoughts, he *goes on* to suggest that we are entirely forgotten by God our Lord, and *leads us* to thinking that we are quite separated from him and that all that we have done and all that

we desire to do is entirely worthless. He thus *endeavors to bring us* to a state of general discouragement.”

What happens often is the *snowball effect*: if we can stop these thoughts at the beginning, nothing happens. But, if we give in to them, we get more and more anxious and nervous. The devil knows this, so he keeps going and going and going . . . and if we don't stop, he won't either.

Don't forget: the devil has no scruples: he will be in hell for all eternity, and if he can get us there with him, he'll be happy. However, if he sees that we aren't going to fall, the next best thing he can do is frighten us into thinking that we've sinned, so that we'll be miserable and not as effective in God's service. There are many cases where people come to confession, all tormented because of temptations that they have had. Sometimes, this is because the temptations are very disturbing, meaning, to do very foul, very base things. However, it's just a temptation. Likewise, sometimes people are frightened thinking they consented to a sin of thought; this borders on the topic of scrupulosity, but, since the devil likes to make us miserable, sometimes this is where he gets involved. In this, we can follow the advice of Fr. Fuentes, who cites Fr. Benedict Groeschel.

In *La castidad ¿posible?*, he writes:

In any event, many people are disturbed when faced with this type of imagination, incapable to determine their degree of consent (and feeding, often, unhealthy scruples).

To them Father Groeschel suggests a practical examination of three questions:

- (a) Have I voluntarily increased my imagination?
- (b) Have I physically responded to it, either through voluntary sexual stimulation or acts to increase fantasy, for example, by looking at provocative objects?
- (c) When I realized what I was doing, did I refuse to direct my attention to something else?

If the answer to all these questions (especially the last one) is clearly and unequivocally yes, then I think - says said author [Groeschel] - that the person is guilty (...) Without an affirmative answer to these questions, I would presume that nothing morally wrong was done.' You can not commit a mortal sin in a purely accidental way.”¹

“That enemy of our nature is the devil,” writes Casanovas, “that lion who prowls around looking for someone to devour. Even more personal, the devil is each one of the temptations that comes to us. If we are filled with the Ignatian spirit, we will easily overcome them, but, if we are frightened or cowardly, they will conquer us.”

¹ 73 in the cited text.

[326] Our enemy may also be compared in his manner of acting to a false lover. He seeks to remain hidden and does not want to be discovered. If such a lover speaks with evil intention to the daughter of a good father, or to the wife of a good husband, and seeks to seduce them, he wants his words and solicitations kept secret. He is greatly displeased if his evil suggestions and depraved intentions are revealed by the daughter to her father, or by the wife to her husband. Then he readily sees he will not succeed in what he has begun. In the same way, when the enemy of our human nature tempts a just soul with his wiles and seductions, he earnestly desires that they be received secretly and kept secret. But if one manifests them to a confessor, or to some other spiritual person who understands his deceits and malicious designs, the evil one is very much vexed. For he knows that he cannot succeed in his evil undertaking, once his evident deceits have been revealed.

“Our enemy has no sense of nobility, nor how to be upfront and frank. Those who are beginners need to be led by the hand by their superiors and directors, just like little children need help walking and so hold on to their parents’ hands. However, we must keep in mind that our parents will never know the temptations that we are suffering if we don’t reveal them to them with honesty and trust. Hence it follows that the devil’s treachery consists in closing our mouths and convincing us that we’re doing just fine by going it alone. These suggestions to keep our mouths shut are born from embarrassment, shrinking, and vain fear, and sometimes from presumption and exaggerated self-confidence. We must open our hearts and present these imaginations, and the devil and the temptation will take flight.”

** A deceitful lover likes to work in silence. When we reveal these things humbly to our confessor or spiritual director, they often disappear.

Here’s a text from Saint Therese of Lisieux, taken from *Story of a Soul*, that describes this perfectly; it’s a text that we cited partially earlier, when we were talking about *desolation* and what it does to us:

“Shortly before my profession I received the Holy Father's blessing, through the hands of Brother Simeon; and this precious Blessing undoubtedly helped me through the most terrible storm of my whole life.

On the eve of the great day, instead of being filled with the customary sweetness, my vocation suddenly seemed to me as unreal as a dream. The devil—for it was he—made me feel sure that I was wholly unsuited for life in the Carmel, and that I was deceiving my superiors by entering on a way to which I was not called. The darkness was so bewildering that I understood but one thing—I had no religious vocation, and must return to the world (!!!! This is Saint Therese of Lisieux we’re talking about! The saint, doctor of the Church, co-patroness of the missions! She only “understood” one thing, and it was completely and utterly wrong! *That’s* how the devil works!). I cannot describe the agony I endured. What was I to do in such a difficulty? I chose the right course, deciding to tell my Novice Mistress of the temptation without delay. I sent for her to come out of choir, and though full of confusion, I confessed the state of my soul. Fortunately she saw more clearly than I did, and

reassured me completely by laughing frankly at my story. The devil was put to instant flight by my humble avowal; what he wanted was to keep me from speaking, and thus draw me into his snares. But it was my turn now to ensnare him, for, to make my humiliation more complete, I also told you everything, dear Mother, and your consoling words dispelled my last fears.

[327] The conduct of our enemy may also be compared to the tactics of a leader intent upon seizing and plundering a position he desires. A commander and leader of an army will encamp, explore the fortifications and defenses of the stronghold, and attack at the weakest point. In the same way, the enemy of our human nature investigates from every side all our virtues, theological, cardinal and moral. Where he finds the defenses of eternal salvation weakest and most deficient, there he attacks and tries to take us by storm.

“Our enemy,” writes Casanovas, “has the cleverness of a thief, and he knows the best time and place to attack us. He knows perfectly well our weak points of our supernatural life, and he assaults us wherever we are least careful. We must be attentive and cautious. If the head of the household knew when the thief was coming, he would stay awake waiting so that he didn’t get into the house to steal. We must also be awake and make a good review of all the possible entrances, all the possible doors in the house of our soul so that the devil cannot enter in and find us unprepared.”

This is a two-fold implication for us: First, know yourself! If you tend to pride, know that the devil will use that and play off of it. Have a response prepared.

At the same time, use his attacks to your advantage. If he’s tempting you in some way, see why that is. He sees a weakness there that he wants to exploit. Use his attacks to find your weaknesses and strengthen them.