



DAY #7: Conference

RULES FOR DISCERNMENTS OF SPIRITS (WEEK 1, PART I [313-324])

Introduction

Welcome to day 7 of the Spiritual Exercises online! I pray it is going well for you. If you had some bumps and bruises along the way, don't worry, it's okay! Hopefully you are starting to settle into a routine of prayer, of meditation of the SE, having gone through the Principle and Foundation, these "fundamental" series of meditations of the SE. Let's begin with a prayer:

Hail Mary...Glory Be...Our Lady...St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Today is another "Conference", rather than a "Points for Meditation", meaning the subject of this talk is more practical. Nevertheless, it can be very helpful to take the time dedicated to prayer to put into practice these timeless rules of discernments.

We are going to begin now with one of the perhaps most important – at least on a practical level – teachings from the Spiritual Exercises: the *Discernment of Spirits* (cf. 313 – 324).

They are divided in two "weeks": here we will consider the first part of the '1st week', from points 313 - 324 (don't worry, we'll review the rest throughout these exercises).

1- IMPORTANCE AND NECESSITY OF DISCERNMENT

On the path to holiness, we are not alone; rather, the grace of God precedes and accompanies us.

Likewise, there are those who want to lead us astray from the path of holiness. If Eve had discerned which spirit was speaking to her, the history of mankind would have been different. We must know that while God does not rest: "*the guardian of Israel never slumbers or sleeps*" (Ps 121:4), neither do the demons rest in seeking our damnation: "*the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, **looking for someone to devour.***" (1 Pt 5:8)

There are also the good angels, who do wish to help us, as St. Raphael helped Tobias (cf. Book of Tobit). Tobias followed and allowed himself to be advised by Raphael, but, as the priest St. Joseph Gabriel of the Rosary (José Gabriel Brochero) says, *if the angel had not been one of the good ones, how **terrible** it would have been for the young man to follow his steps.*

In the words of St. Ignatius:

[32] *I presuppose that there are three kinds of thoughts in my mind, namely: one which is strictly my **own**, and arises wholly from my own free will; two others which come from **without**, the one from the **good spirit**, and the other from the **evil one** (he says this in the context of the examination of conscience)*

St. Columba Marmion says that: *'In every soul there are **three spirits** that try to dominate it:*

- *the spirit of falsehood and blasphemy, which from very early on always suggests the opposite of what God tells us in our ear;*
- *the spirit of the world, which incites us to judge things according to the desire of the senses and carnal wisdom, while the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God (cf. 1 Cor 3:19),*
- *and finally there is the Spirit of God, who always inspires us to lift our hearts above nature and to live by faith. That Spirit then fills us with peace and joy, and produces in us the fruits of which St. Paul speaks (cf. Gal 5:22). The Spirit of God, while reproaching us or inciting us to confusion because of our sins, always fills the soul with peace and filial trust in our heavenly Father. The other spirits dry up our soul... they deliver us to dejection and discouragement.¹*

One thing necessary for whoever wants to be saved is to know how to discern the spirits, in order to follow the good one and reject the evil one.

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE; NOT JUST FOR EXERCISES, NOT JUST FOR BIG DISCERNMENT, BUT FOR ALL THINGS IN LIFE!

Importance of this matter

A) St. Ignatius insists on these rules in such a way that they must be explained to all kinds of retreatants and even in brief exercises, according to the testimony of his experience (although he clearly does not say so). They should be insisted upon at the very times they are to be presented; that is, from the first day (cf. *Direct. ign. autographe*: MI, Directoria doc.1 n.11 and 18 p.72 and 76).

B) And this is understood, due to the intrinsic importance of coming to know and discern the various spirits that battle in the soul:

I) It is an experience that occurs as soon as one wants to begin to serve God; at least, then their influence is felt more clearly.

II) It produces such disorientation and turmoil and can cause such entanglements that many souls lose courage or their direction when they reach this juncture.

III) It is the language with which God frequently speaks to the soul in prayer and in the exercises; therefore, it is necessary to understand this language.

¹ Translated from Abadía San José de Clairval, Carta espiritual de noviembre de 2002 (as seen in P. Gustavo Lombardo, Online Spiritual Exercises, #7).

IV) In general, the interplay of consolations and desolations caused in the soul has a providential meaning that we can summarize in these few words: 'to mature the theological virtues,' or, if you will, 'to mature our psychological condition as children of God.'²

2- HOW DISCERNMENT IS ACQUIRED

"Discernment" is fundamentally an act of two realities: an act of the virtue of prudence and a charism of the Holy Spirit.

The Charism of Discernment

St. Paul lists among the charisms that the Holy Spirit distributes in His Church, the *discernment of spirits* (1 Cor 12:10). This charism is ordinarily reserved for saints and can exceptionally be granted to some sinners.

Discernment as an Act of Prudence

Prudence, has as its proper act the **distinguishing** of good things from bad ones. The Letter to the Hebrews refers to this when it speaks of *distinguishing good from evil* (Heb 5:14). St. Thomas recalls the words of St. Augustine who affirmed that "*prudence is love discerning aright that which helps from that which hinders us in tending to God.*" *Now love is said to discern because it moves the reason to discern.*" (St. Thomas, Summa, II-II, 47)

The primary means of discernment are: prayer, reading the Word of God, meditation, experience, the virtues (especially humility), and knowledge of the rules of St. Ignatius.

3- IMPORTANCE OF THOUGHTS

*" But those who are noble plan noble things,
and by noble things they stand.."* (Is 32:8)

How great are your works, Lord!

How profound your designs!

A senseless person cannot know this;

a fool cannot comprehend!" (Ps 92:6-7)

The Lord knows the plans of man;

they are like a fleeting breath. (Ps 94:11)

² Translated from IGNACIO IPARRAGUIRRE, S.I., *Comentario histórico-pastoral de los Ejercicios de San Ignacio, tendencias y orientaciones de los intérpretes*, BAC, Madrid 1964, pp. 425-426 (As seen in P. Gustavo Lombardo, #7)

St. John of the Cross, in his *Sayings of Light and Love* writes:

"One human thought alone is worth more than the entire world, hence God alone is worthy of it."

"For the insensible, what you do not feel; for the sensible, the sense; and for the Spirit of God, the thought."

Commenting on the "*Lift up your hearts*" of the Holy Mass, St. Thomas cites St. Cyprian who states: "*Hence Cyprian observes (De Orat. Domin. 31), 'The priest, in saying the Preface, disposes the souls of the brethren by saying, 'Lift up your hearts,' and when the people answer--'We have lifted them up to the Lord,' let them remember that **they are to think of nothing else but God.**'*" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 83 a. 4 ad 5)

And St. Thomas himself: "*Now virginity is directed to the good of the soul in respect of the contemplative life, which consists in thinking "on the things of God" [Vulg.: 'the Lord'],."*" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 152)

Relationship Between Thinking and Acting

There is a philosophical principle according to which "*every disorder on the plane of action begins by being a disorder on the plane of the intelligence*".

4- THE RULES OF ST. IGNATIUS

The saint titles this part of the rules as follows:

[313] Rules for understanding to some extent the different movements produced in the soul and for recognizing those that are good to admit them, and those that are bad, to reject them. These rules are more suited to the first week.

"*Rules for understanding to some extent...*", the saint tells us. It is not so easy, we are not talking about mathematics, chemistry... these are **spiritual** things, they are **motions** as he himself tells us.

This is very important, because not having discernment of spirit or not having the necessary recollection to possess discernment of spirit—because sometimes we can know how to discern, but we do not attend to those interior things—is like having the door of our house open, and letting whoever wants to come in! Let them pass, let them take what they want, or do us the harm they want, or the good they want... **Who acts like that?! Who works like that?! Who has their house open like that?! Or their business, or whatever! We all take care of our goods**, well, with even more reason we must take care of our spiritual goods, our soul. And that is why we must watch to see who enters and who does not enter.

1ST RULE

[314] *1st rule. In the case of those who go from one mortal sin to another, the enemy is ordinarily accustomed to propose apparent pleasures. He fills their imagination with sensual delights and gratifications, the more readily to keep them in their vices and increase the number of their sins.*

With such persons the good spirit uses a method which is the reverse of the above. Making use of the light of reason, he will rouse the sting of conscience and fill them with remorse.

So, a person who is far from God, who commits mortal sin, who does not care about the things of God; The devil and his angels will try to keep them from changing that life. As St. Augustine said, who heard in some way the creatures telling him in his process of conversion: *'You are leaving and abandoning us, and how will you live without us?'*

Our very nature—which after original sin remained inclined to sensible things and the like—is as if it shouts at us, encourages us to remain in that sin, and the devil also does his part by showing us that we cannot live without that sin, that I cannot live without that thing that is "so good," he shows us all apparent things, of course.

And on the other hand, God and his angels try to prick our conscience, to move us to conversion, so that we may leave that state of sin.

2ND RULE

[315] *2nd rule. In the case of those who go on earnestly striving to cleanse their souls from sin and who seek to rise in the service of God our Lord to greater perfection, the method pursued is the opposite of that mentioned in the first rule.*

Then it is characteristic of the evil spirit to harass with anxiety, to afflict with sadness, to raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul. Thus he seeks to prevent the soul from advancing.

It is characteristic of the good spirit, however, to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and peace. This He does by making all easy, by removing all obstacles so that the soul goes forward in doing good.

Totally contrary to how the good and evil spirit acted in the first case, it is in this one; Why? Because in this case the person is trying to purge their sins, to seek holiness, to convert. Of course, between these two states of a person—the one who is in sin and does not want to leave, and the one who is intensely seeking to be holy—there are countless in between, but the parameters, so to speak, do not serve to see how the good and evil spirit work. So in principle we would be much more in this case than in the previous one, because we are doing spiritual exercises; we are in a time of conversion. A Christian, a Catholic, must live like this. With its ups and downs, seeking God. Therefore, this rule, if you will, from this point of view is more important than the previous one.

If we are trying to do things well, even with our weaknesses and the like, we must know that the **thoughts that take away our peace**, the thoughts that move us to sadness, to hopelessness, to lack of faith, etc.; they do not come from God. They are from the evil spirit. St. Ignatius will say it so clearly: he seeks to **bite**, sadden, place obstacles with false reasons, with half-truths.

And the thoughts that come with their own motions, with their feelings, that move us to the opposite, that is, to spiritual joy, to hope, to peace, are from God and his angels, because God wants us to continue on that path we have undertaken; and the devil wants the complete opposite, he wants to put sticks in the wheels. This rule is not so difficult to understand, but it is difficult to apply.

So if a thought comes from outside that troubles us, that takes away our peace, we must quickly say: "this is not from God," I must leave it aside, I cannot waste time, if I waste time I am already giving time to the devil; and how many times do we waste time, and that thought that takes away our peace leads us to another and that to another... Why? Because we simply lacked discernment, we failed to see. Many times by putting that thought aside, making a short prayer, continuing with what we were doing; a while passes and a thought comes to us that calms us and we realize that it really was a desolation, that it was not worth it. And if we had sought the solution at that moment we would have done nothing more than complicate the matter even more, "in troubled waters, fishermen gain."

We must not confuse things; we all have a cross, the cross that must be carried each day, which God wants for our sanctification...; it is **not the same as a lack of peace**. One thing is to suffer a cross and have peace, and another is this, we must not confuse them, this is very important. Because sometimes one might say: "no, I must continue with this because it is the cross God wants." No. God does not want that cross, I am fabricating it for myself because I am letting myself be tempted and confused by the enemy...

3RD RULE

[316] *3rd rule. 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.*

Consolation, then, is when in some way everything smiles, where we all want to be Saints, to be good, where offerings do not matter, where everything is truly a great joy. Father Ignacio Casanovas, a great commentator on the exercises, will tell us that: "*Consolation is an experience of the **love of God**.*"

God always loves us, but sometimes we **perceive that love**, and **sometimes we do not**. And just as on the human plane, love makes us happy, both giving and receiving; So also in the spiritual, in our relationship with God. When we feel, when we are convinced that God loves us, it makes us happy, and everything, and everything! smiles. Consolation does not depend on us—generally—but it is good to recognize it, because we must act in a certain way.

Consolation, then: every moment of faith, hope, love, when everything is easy, who does not have those moments of spiritual joy?! Those desires to be holy! In the life of the apostles, for example, it could be said that a strong moment of spiritual consolation was when Peter, James and John were on Mount Tabor with the Lord. Actually, their entire life was a great consolation with the Lord, except for the Passion—which was the great test—but a great consolation was that..., that joy, that peace of seeing the Lord transfigured, "let us make three tents!" said Peter...

*Indeed, "When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy" (Mt 2:10). It is important, my dear friends, to learn to observe the signs with which God is calling us and guiding us. When we are conscious of being led by Him, our heart experiences authentic and deep joy as well as a powerful desire to meet Him and a persevering strength to **follow Him obediently**. (John Paul II, Message for the XX World Youth Day, Cologne 2005, n. 2.)*

4TH RULE

[317] *4th rule. Spiritual Desolation. I call desolation what is entirely the opposite of what is described in the third rule, as 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. For just as consolation is the opposite of desolation, so the thoughts that spring from consolation are the opposite of those that spring from desolation.*

The complete opposite of the previous, Father Casanovas will say it is: "*An experience of the **non-love of God***." Feeling that God does not love us. God always loves us, but there are moments when He hides, does not let Himself be seen, does not let Himself be felt and really everything becomes difficult for us. Everything that was easy before is now **difficult**; or moments of strong temptations, temptations of any kind, of faith, of hope, of charity, whatever; a strong temptation is also a way of desolation and this is really very interesting, and if we have never heard of these things, it opens up a very new panorama for us. Why? And because if not, it would seem that we have a kind of very serious problem inside; sometimes we feel things in one way and sometimes in another. Yes, it is true, there are organic things, there is tiredness and the like, but here there are other things external to us, that influence us, and recognizing them can help us to act. To summarize this about desolation, a short phrase from St. John Berchmans that says: "***Everything that gives us unrest is from the devil.***"

There will be exceptions, but they are such, "**exceptions.**" If we are in mortal sin God is troubling us so that we convert, or sometimes if we do not have much discernment some work of charity that I have to do and find difficult I can take it as unrest, but as a general rule that phrase of St. John Berchmans can help us a lot.

"One of the surest signs to **recognize the illusions of the devil and divine inspirations**, is to see if they incline to **pride** or to **humility**, to self-esteem, or contempt of self, to seeking human honor and praise, or to fleeing from it; and that spirit is more secure from illusions, which inclines to poverty and humility, and flees from worldly riches and honors. And if we pay attention to the histories of past centuries, and to the examples of our times, we will find that in those who have been deceived there has mostly preceded harshness of judgment, little submission to others' opinions, love of singularity, all of which are signs of secret pride, and harbingers of certain falls. Because just as in natural movements, nothing falls except from a height; so it is in the spiritual, as it is written: 'Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall,' and 'before honor goes humility.'" [20] (Fr. La Palma)

Now, what should we do when we recognize these movements?

Actions in time of desolation (x3)

[318] *In time of desolation we should **never make any change**, but remain firm and constant in the resolution and decision which guided us the day before the desolation, or in the decision to which we adhered in the preceding consolation. For just as in consolation the good spirit guides and counsels us, so in desolation the evil spirit guides and counsels. Following his counsels we can never find the way to a right decision.*

Desolation is like being sick, or angry, or drunk. We cannot see clearly. We cannot use our reason well. Our vision is distorted. Our mind may race, reasons may come flying why to act, but let us be simple:

DO NOT DO ANYTHING. CONTINUE AS YOU WERE GOING.

[319] - *Though in desolation we must never change our former resolutions, it will be very advantageous to intensify our activity against the desolation. We can insist more upon **prayer**, upon **meditation**, and on **much examination** of ourselves. We can make an effort in a suitable way to do some **penance**.*

So we aren't passive. We go **against them**. Fight. How? Prayer. Penance. Fasting. Offer up the desolation (devil hates this).

[320] *When one is in desolation, he should be mindful that God has left him to his **natural powers** to resist the different agitations and temptations of the enemy in order to try him. He can resist with the help of God, which always remains, though he **may not clearly perceive it**. For though God has taken from him the abundance of fervor and overflowing love and the intensity of His favors, nevertheless, he has sufficient grace for eternal salvation.*

What do we see? God is again teaching us to **rely entirely on Him**. How? Through faith (he may not **clearly perceive it**). How do we know we have sufficient grace for eternal salvation?

*Therefore, to keep me from being too **elated**, a **thorn** was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to **torment** me, to keep me from being too **elated**. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it **would leave me**, but he said to me, “**My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.**” So, I will **boast** all the more **gladly** of my **weaknesses**, so that the **power of Christ** may dwell in me. (2 Cor 12:7-9)*

[321] *When one is in desolation, he should strive to persevere in **patience**. This reacts against the vexations that have overtaken him. Let him consider, too, that **consolation will soon return**, and in the meantime, he must diligently use the means against desolation which have been given in the sixth rule.*

So be patient, don't stress. Patience. **Patience**, says St. Thomas, is a virtue attached to the virtue of fortitude, which **hinders** a man from **departing** from **right reason** illumined by **faith** by yielding to difficulties and **sadness**. It makes him **bear the evils of life** with equanimity of soul, says St. Augustine, **without allowing himself to be troubled** by vexations (**GarigouL, 99**)

In summary, when we are in desolation the following applies:

- 1 – NO CHANGES (GOLDEN RULE) but resist [318]
- 2 – pray more, do more penance [319]
- 3 – mindful that God has left me (and is still with me) [320]
- 4 – persevere in patience (recalling consolation WILL come again) [321]

Why do we suffer from desolation?

[322] *The principal **reasons** why we suffer from desolation are three:*

The **first** is because we have been tepid and slothful or negligent in our exercises of piety, and so through our own fault spiritual consolation has been taken away from us.

The **second reason** is because God wishes to try us, to see how much we are worth, and how much we will advance in His service and praise when left without the generous reward of consolations and signal favors.

The **third reason** is because God wishes to give us a true knowledge and understanding of ourselves, so that we may have an intimate perception of the fact that it is not within our power to acquire and attain great devotion, intense love, tears, or any other spiritual consolation; but that all this is the gift and grace of God our Lord. God does not wish us to build on the property of another, to rise up in spirit in a certain pride and vainglory and attribute to ourselves the devotion and other effects of spiritual consolation.

So, let's examine what could be the cause. The first is **my fault**, we should see this in examine of conscience. The second and third are that God is allowing it to test us and help give us knowledge of ourselves. In this case, we must endure the desolation with great peace and serenity by praying and working against it, as we saw in rules 318-321.

What to do in consolation?

[323] *When one enjoys consolation, let him consider how he will conduct himself during the time of ensuing desolation, and **store up a supply of strength** as defense against that day.*

[324] *He who enjoys consolation should take care to humble himself and lower himself as much as possible. Let him recall how little he is able to do in time of desolation, when he is left without such grace or consolation.*

On the other hand, one who suffers desolation should remember that by making use of the sufficient grace offered him, he can do much to withstand all his enemies. Let him find his strength in his Creator and Lord.

In other words, get ready! These are extremely important in the spiritual life. Spend some time reading these.

In a later conference we will touch on a few final points St. Ignatius gives on these “Rules for Discernment for the 1st week” [325-327]

Consider taking your time of prayer today to reflect on the importance of discernment, what your life of discernment has been; to seek to understand consolation and desolation, all to be more attentive to the voice of God, which we are learning to hear more and more.

Glory Be... Our Lady of Good Counsel... Pray for us!

