

Rules for the Discernment of Spirits

drawn from the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius (The Examen)

The Battle for Spiritual Joy - Responses to consolation and desolation

*Notes from **Consoling the Heart of Jesus** by Fr. Michael Gaitley.*

The key to wielding the weapons of St. Ignatius: **AIR** (*Awareness, Identify, Respond*). As we head into the battle for spiritual joy, this kind of AIR is like a mighty wind at our backs, lifting us forward & blowing sand into our enemy's eyes (Fr. Gaitley).

A = Awareness: *The spiritual life is a roller coaster.*

A big part of the spiritual battle for joy is won simply when we become aware we're in a battle, and that it takes place on a roller coaster with ups, downs, and somewhere in between. Ignatius called the ups *consolation* and the downs *desolation*. The ups are basically when we feel, well, like saints, because we run to prayer, overflow with empathy and compassion for all, practice virtues with great ease, and seem to walk hand-in-hand with God himself. Then we come to the big drop on the roller coaster, and down into the depths of desolation.

Gaitley says *desolation* is basically when prayer feels like eating dust, people easily irritate us, & God seems light years away. Throw in nagging regret, self-loathing, sadness, fear, lack of energy for anything spiritual, and a burning urge for whatever distracts the mind, feeds the belly, and arouses the senses, then we're into a good dose of *desolation*.

The first step to victory in the battle for spiritual joy is to become aware that the spiritual life is a roller coaster through the ups & downs of *consolation* & *desolation*. People usually keep their eyes shut on a real roller coaster, and do the same on the roller coaster of life. This won't do; we can't fight well with our eyes closed, especially in the bizarre battles on a spiritual roller coaster.

I = Identify: *Where am I on the ride?*

Our eyes are open, so look around. Where are we on the ride: up, down, or somewhere in the middle? The main point of **Identify** is to identify what spiritual state we're in. The question is not always easy to answer because spiritual movements of *consolation* & *desolation* often get stirred up with the natural movements of our moods and emotions.

Let's focus on answering a few questions. How's my faith, hope, & charity? Is prayer easy? Are things light & clear or heavy & confusing? Do I have peace & joy? The last question is the golden key that unlocks the mystery of whether I'm in *consolation*, *desolation*, or somewhere in the middle. It also gets to the core of *Consoling* spirituality.

St. Ignatius sees the whole spiritual life as one great effort to remain at peace & in spiritual joy, striving to stay in a spirit of Praise & thanksgiving through good times and bad – perpetual *consolation*. He knows everyone eventually hits the big drop and dives down into *desolation*. Yet, when this happens, he tells us not to give up. In fact, he encourages us to strive to get back to *consolation*. Such striving is what the last point is all about.

R = Respond: *What we can do in consolation & desolation.*

Earlier we said *desolation* comes for us all, so everybody needs hope. Here's where the hope comes in: Ignatius believes there is much we can do to prepare ourselves for the peaceful *consolation* which is a gift from God, and keep it when it comes. His rules for responding are simple things we can do to win the battle for spiritual joy.

Before we get into the response rules it's crucial to keep in mind the 2nd point in AIR: to identify whether we're in *consolation*, *desolation*, or somewhere in between. This point is critically important, because how we respond depends on our spiritual state. One set of response rules covers our conduct in *consolation*, and the other set advises us in *desolation*.

There's only one rule for when we're in the middle: Stay vigilant with eyes open, for an up or down will surely come soon. Let's begin with the response rules for *consolation* because they're the most straightforward.

Response Rules for times of Consolation (Fr. Gaitley)

When prayer is easy, all seems clear, and we're filled with peace and joy because of the closeness we feel to God, then we should strive to do three things:

† **Eat it up!** It is not humility to refuse *consolation*, although some mistakenly do. Such a refusal may even be a lack of humility because God gives His *consolation* for a reason, usually because he sees we need to be strengthened for a coming battle. If we refuse it, we might be routed when the battle comes. Such readiness to accept this gift means we realize we need to rely on God for *everything*.

† **Humble yourself.** As we experience the strength of God's powerful *consolation*, sometimes we may be tempted to think we're the cause of it. Deep *consolation* can give us the ability to overcome vices, to withstand Satan's attacks, and to achieve heights of holiness we normally associate with the greatest of saints.

However, before we decide what to wear at our own canonizations we need to realize the truth which destroys our delusions of grandeur: the strength we feel in *consolation* is God's gift to us. Yet, he often pulls it away because we've begun to live out an illusion that we're super saints. Because He loves us He withdraws His *consolation* to keep us little and in His love and truth. Ignatius tells us to put ourselves in this truth.

† **Listen.** Thoughts & ideas that come into our minds during times of *consolation* tend to originate from the good spirit, that is, from God. It's important to strive to pay attention to what He may be saying to us, not only because God's voice brings sweetness but also because following His will for us is our joy & deepest happiness.

God speaks to us all through Scripture, liturgy, people, circumstances, events, and in many other ways. He speaks more directly to us during times of quiet prayer, mostly with inaudible, interior words or ideas called *lights*. Such interior words are often delicate and quiet.

This place where we meet God in our hearts belongs to another realm quite apart from our normal consciousness. The voice that speaks in this other realm is gentle, mysterious, and so delicate we can easily miss it, even as we pray. Hearing this voice takes practice at listening, interior quiet, and simply spending time in that other realm of prayer. Ignatius warns that when the bad spirit makes every effort to get us to shorten the time we plan to devote to prayer, the best response is to increase it by the same amount.

One last important point about listening to God's voice during times of *consolation*: the words, thoughts, and inspirations we receive in prayer, even in times of deep *consolation*, are **not** infallible. We can make mistakes, not only in interpreting the words but also in discerning their origin. Sometimes the movements taking place in our hearts are simply the activities of our own psychological processes.

Complicating things a bit more, the bad spirit, i.e., the devil or a demon, can appear as an *angel of light* and communicate with us even in a time of *consolation*. Ignatius says the words, thoughts, or inspirations coming to us in times of *consolation* tend to come from the good spirit but not always. So we should be willing to submit our judgment about the origin of what we receive in prayer to a spiritual director and ultimately, to the Church. If it goes against Church moral or doctrinal teaching or Tradition, it certainly did not come from God.

That bad spirit appearing as an *angel of light* can appear through words, thoughts, or inspirations that come in prayer but **not** in the peace and joy of consolation itself. (my experience outside chapel)

Response Rules for times of *Desolation* (Fr. Gaitley)

When we have little or no peace and joy, when praise & thanks is far from our lips, and when it seems we're in a dark, dry desert far from God, we should strive to do three things:

1. **Ask, "Why?"** Once we identify we're in a time of *desolation* our first move is to discover why the *desolation* happened by asking ourselves when it began. We may need to go back as far as a couple months to review it. If we're in the habit of making a daily examination of conscience, it may be easier than it seems. Regardless, it may be helpful to consider some of the contributing psychological factors and supernatural causes of *desolation*.

While *desolation* is a spiritual reality, it's closely linked to natural feelings and moods, including our dark and down emotional states. Things like diet, stress, disappointment, failure, bumps or breaks in marriage or other relationships, a lack of exercise, sunshine, or sleep can add to emotional lows which can easily lead to *desolation*. Recognizing the natural causes of emotional lows can help us grasp why we entered into that time of *desolation*.

Supernatural causes of desolation are not as easy to discover but by the Holy Spirit we can shine light on them.

Why God allows spiritual *Desolation*...

- † As a consequence of sin, as a means to conversion, & as an act of *mercy* – because of my sin *Consolation* withdraws from me; i.e. holding onto pain & anger rather than forgiveness & healing
 1. It's a mercy when God allows us *desolation* due to sin because it gets our attention.
 2. If an examination of conscience shows us the sin causing our *desolation*, then we repent and move on.
 3. If it's not sin causing *desolation* then we fight our *desolation*, and we'll cover that in the next tactic. Meanwhile, we must be aware of something **very** important.
 4. After hearing our sins can be a cause for *desolation*, some little souls can get caught in the trap of thinking that anytime they're in *desolation* it must be their own fault. This can become a slippery slope into deeper *desolation*. If you cannot find a specific thing you did to bring on *desolation*, then do not torture yourself trying to figure it out. God may have allowed it for another reason, perhaps for you to grow in virtue.
- † Neglect of prayer
- † Lack of humility during times of consolation
- † Being uncharitable to my neighbor
- † As a trial or a gift to purify my love if I persevere. Several examples:
 1. Feeling tired, resentful may point to an invitation to increase my prayer about underlying issues
 2. If I feel dryness in prayer then I may need to increase prayer on the related or other primary issue
 3. Our Lord may be asking some uncomfortable & challenging questions:
 - † *Do you love Me or do you love My gifts?*
 - † *Is it My sweetness or is it Me?*
 - † *I want to love you more when you least deserve it!*
 4. God wants to give us the valuable (humbling) self-knowledge of who we are without His grace.
 5. To remind us we're not in battle with the flesh (i.e. liberals or conservatives) but principalities, so we should strive to bless rather than curse.
 6. To receive the gift of humility in the spirit of *Consolation*. Fr. Jim Sorra mentioned *Agere contra* (to act against; to push back) – the thing we don't feel like doing is the very thing we may need to do; *So, if you're repulsed by a leper, then embrace the leper.*

2. **Fight back.** God may allow *desolation* to help us grow in humility or to help train us in the soldier-like virtues of *patience*, *perseverance*, and especially *trust* (the most important virtue in spiritual battles). Before examining *trust* let's look at fighting with the weapons of *patience* & *perseverance* in the context of **Fighting anchored in Hope**.

- † **Fight anchored in Hope.** Without hope it's impossible to fight *desolation*, even with those other two virtues. The enemy tries everything to overcome our hope, so Ignatius gives us three instructions here:

- i. **God never allows more than we can handle.** Even if we don't feel it, God's grace upholds us during times of *desolation*. The grace he gives us in battle is always more than enough to defeat the enemy. Jesus said to St. Faustina, "I am always with you, even if you don't feel My Presence at the time of battle." This thought alone can give us these three virtues to stand strong.
- ii. **Be patient during *desolation*, knowing the time of *consolation* will come soon.** When they see reinforcements racing to their aid, tired soldiers fighting (what seems) a losing battle immediately find new strength. The enemy wants us to lose hope by thinking *desolation* will never end, so he creates the illusion that help will never come. To prevent the terrible tragedy of giving up right on the verge of winning the battle (snatching defeat from the jaws of victory), we need to keep an eye peeled for *consolation*.
- iii. **Think back to times of *consolation*, even as we're fighting desolation.**
 - 1. This not only aids our hope but sometimes even wins the battle right then and there.
 - 2. Keeping a journal can help for two reasons:
 - † The act of writing out the time of *consolation* impresses it more firmly in our minds.
 - † When times of *desolation* return, reading the journal aids in jogging the memory to recall past times of *consolation*, which often increases our Hope.
 - 3. We also need to give primacy to facts over feelings. We need to use reason to know that Jesus is with us through our *desolation*, as He promised Faustina, just as we know the sun still shines behind dark storm clouds.
 - 4. In times of deep *desolation*, the Truth of His Mercy is always within our reach. It's the **Great Truth** to which we must tenaciously cling: trusting the God of Mercy can keep our hope alive no matter how deep the darkness. Because such trust is so powerful a force against *desolation*, we'd do well to spend some time learning about it as a "secret weapon."
- † **Fight with the "secret weapon of trust."** Such trust is an invincible weapon whose power to gain victory is impossible to underestimate, and is so easy to wield it can be used by anyone.
 - i. This secret weapon of trust doesn't even look like trust.
 - ii. On the outside it looks like discouragement and despair.
 - iii. In fact, it's the golden crown of trust and its deepest expression, so let's look at it from both sides.
 - iv. So, the enemy has tied us up, he's gagged our mouths, and he's dragging us down into his hellish camp this secret weapon of trust begins to glow in the deepest recesses of our hearts. And it does this in the form of the prayer *Jesus, I trust in You*.
 - v. These words are total victory because whenever we pray them the enemy has lost.
 - vi. *I have a mustard seed, and I know how to use it.*

3. **Don't listen.** During periods of *desolation* we may not be able to see clearly but we hear plenty, and what we hear is rarely the *consoling* sweetness of God's voice. Instead, we hear the dark words & sinister suggestions of the enemy masquerading as the interior words & ideas which sound so much like what we hear in times of *consolation*. However, we discern their origin not by their sound but by their content which leads to the loss of our peace & joy. Among those destructive words are three classic phrases we'll encounter innumerable times. Let's look at them so we can recognize & reject them in real life. We'll begin by rejecting them even as we describe them here:

- † **Don't "keep it a secret."** The bad spirit has a secret weapon, too, but his is not invincible like ours. It's incredibly weak and easy to defeat if only we have the courage to fight it. What is his secret weapon? The words, "Keep it a secret."

Keep what a secret? His many little temptations, especially those that might embarrass us; that we don't want to reveal. These secret temptations are like little wounds we tend to downplay, not realizing that left uncared for and dirty they can quickly get infected, fester, and eventually lead to spiritual sickness & death. Even little cuts should be seen by a caregiver who can properly clean them and offer the right medication, if necessary. Often a simple cleaning is sufficient to prevent infection.

Likewise, little temptations, especially when they become red (by embarrassing us) and irritating (always on our minds), should be seen by a doctor; a doctor like a priest in the Sacrament of Confession, a spiritual

director, or even a trusted friend. It's amazing how the simple act of revealing temptations and difficulties to such "doctors" is often enough to end the enemy's little tricks and bring total health.

† **Don't "change your decision."** During the darkness of *desolation* we should guard against the suggestion to "change your decision" regarding any thoughtful decision made before the *desolation* came, especially if made during a time of *consolation*. Let's say you decided to take Damien Stayne's *Charism School*, but as the first night draws near clouds of desolation come and you are harassed by the idea of going back on your decision. When the bad spirit tries to trick you this way don't fall for it. Hold to your decision and revisit it only when the time of *consolation* returns. (*my example of dividing this talk into two??*)

† **Don't "Run!"** Fr. Gaitley compares one of the bad spirit's most common tricks to the bad guy in old westerns who slaps the rear of the good guy's horse to send it on a fierce gallop without its rider. When the bad spirit plays this trick on us, instead of a slap on the rear, he shouts, "Run!" – which seems to work just as well. In sending us off and running his goal is to deprive us of the benefit of one of two riders: our reason or Our Lord. He knows if we run off without the guidance of at least one of these we'll be so saddened and discouraged we'll lose the battle for spiritual joy. To prevent this, let's look first at how the bad spirit tries to get us to run away from using our reason, and then how he sends us off and running without Our Lord.

The bad spirit's attempt to spook us from using our reason can occur at any moment – not only during times of *desolation* but also of *consolation* (I should clarify here that this part of the "response rules" applies to both *desolation* & *consolation*). Thus, we should always be ready for this trick – especially if we're zealous about our faith, because the bad spirit knows zealous people fall for it so easily. He also knows they can do a great deal of good for the kingdom of God. He pulls this trick whenever he can, not only because it works so well on them but also because it makes their efforts in God's service much less effective.

To deal with zealous people the bad spirit has to be clever because their fervent love of God and ardent desire to do good protects them from falling for his more obvious temptations to do evil. That's why he wisely tempts them not with bad things but by pointing out some good thing and then shouting, "Run!"

Zealous people often immediately obey, but unfortunately the good things proposed by the bad spirit are usually lesser goods than the good the Lord desires for them. This distraction away from God's more perfect will makes them less effective in God's service and could even end up destroying the greater good.

To foil his plan, we need to reflect on what greater goods we might be sacrificing before we decide to chase after an opportunity to do a good. For example, if we feel an immediate need to do something we just need to be cautious rather than hesitate. This prompting by the bad spirit can come in the form of urgency and compulsion that makes us feel frantic & rushed. That's a lot different from the genuine experience of the good spirit who, even when something is urgent, always prompts us in a patient, gentle way that makes us feel confident and peaceful. (also, drifting into an attractively beckoning idea w/o proper discernment).

Sometimes, instead of getting us to run after lesser goods, the bad spirit tries to get us to chase after truly authentic goods but in an extreme way. His intention is to leave his victims feeling tired and discouraged, since we can live life to the extreme for only so long without collapse. For example...

He might command someone who, before a conversion, listened to violent and impure music, "Throw out all your CDs, now!" He uses the *first fervor* of our conversion to trick us into getting rid of beautiful & uplifting music and other natural consolations which can be great allies in our battle for spiritual joy.

The bad spirit may also push us to run after such goods as prayer & fasting to such an extreme that the spiritual life seems like a joyless drag. He may get us to believe the salvation of the whole world depends on how well we fast, so we secretly dread every fast day because of the weight of the false burden we've accepted. Or he may make us think we have to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect right now, so we burn out our spiritual energies trying to put out the fires of our every vice & imperfection all at once. None of these are the ways of the good spirit.

Unlike the ways of the bad spirit, the good spirit takes us where we are and gently leads us to a life of prayer, sacrifice, and conversion that's balanced and appropriate to the kind of souls we are. The good spirit leads little souls by little steps and helps them attain all through humble confidence.

Remember, we said the bad spirit tries to send us off and running without another rider – Our Lord. This often happens during times of *desolation* but sometimes it's a strange kind of darkness which may or may not be *desolation*. This peculiar darkness is something we all feel because it's our spiritual *thirst*. This thirst is a basic and often deep pain in our lives, and whether it's our natural longing to be free from loneliness or the more ardent, supernatural longing to enter into communion with God (who often seems farther away the closer He comes), it's definitely not easy to endure.

Whenever we're burning with this thirst, be sure the bad spirit is nearby ready to shout, "Run! Run away from the pain! Escape!" He sees the pain of our thirst as an opportunity to get us running to distractions from this pain. Many of these distractions aren't necessarily bad in themselves (music, TV, & food), but sometimes they are (sins of impurity, drug abuse, & suicide). The latter are obvious, but through our thirst even the good distractions can pull us away from the invitation of Our Lord into deeper intimacy with himself. The bad spirit doesn't want us to hear this call so he shouts, "Run!"

Most of us little souls have dozens of distraction habits already ingrained in our lives, so that when we feel this loneliness we might check our e-mail, eat, or watch TV. However, if in this pain of loneliness we always run to these distractions then we might miss hearing His voice and lose the chance to let the Lord transform our heartache & loneliness into spiritual joy – to discover joy with Him in the darkness.

So, how do we experience the joy of solitude with the Lord when we're so used to running away? No worries; the Lord has a strategy. He's so good and merciful He comes after us even when we run. If we allow Him to join us in our loneliness we'd discover our painful longing is merely a small slice of His own. By opening our hearts to Him we can discover our thirst is not an impossible burden but a gift which unites us in deeper friendship with Jesus.

Whenever we burn with longing it may be Jesus inviting us into deeper friendship. Fr. Gaitley suggests that whenever this thirst is especially strong, it may simply be Jesus gazing upon us with longing and love. When we feel this thirst, realize His loving gaze is upon us, and allow our gaze to meet His, then our thirst can become a kind of joy. It will still be pain, but transformed into something beautiful.

Jesus calls us to deeper intimacy with Him through the longing in our hearts. Instead of obeying the bad spirit's command to run when we feel this thirst, try to become quiet, listen, & reflect on the Lord's loving compassionate gaze on us. Run to Him, and share your joy & sorrow in friendship with Him.

Remember, St. Ignatius says we can do much to escape times of *desolation*: Ask "Why?", fight it, and do not listen to the voice of the bad spirit. Remember, too, there's much we can do to stay in *consolation* when it comes, such as eating it up, humbling ourselves, and listening to the inspiration of the good spirit. If, with eyes wide open, we stay in the battle for spiritual joy and fight with these weapons, we'll win battle after battle, confidently and joyfully declaring victory as we make St. Faustina's courageous prayer our own:

I know that I am under Your special gaze, O Lord. I do not examine with fear Your plans regarding me; my task is to accept everything from your hand. I do not fear anything, although the storm is raging, and frightful bolts strike all around me, and I then feel quite alone. Yet, my heart senses You, and my trust grows, and I see all Your omnipotence which upholds me. With You, Jesus, I go through life, amid storms and rainbows, with a cry of joy, singing the song of Your mercy. I will not stop singing my song of love until the choir of Angels picks it up. There is no power that can stop me in my flight toward God.

The certainty of your victory comes from Jesus' own words: ***if only you are willing to fight, know that the victory is always on your side.*** (1560)