

All My Liberty

Chapter 12: Discernment of Spirits

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The Rules for the Discernment of Spirits reveal St. Ignatius as a diagnostician of the spiritual life, whose principles of analysis were born of the interior struggle he experienced at Loyola, which ended in his conversion and began his dedication to the service of God. They were further refined, also from experience, during the subsequent years of conflict with the powers of evil battling for the mastery of his soul and against the apostolic work he had launched to check the forces of the Protestant rebellion.

More than any single part of the Exercises, the Rules for Discernment are autobiographical. But they are of universal application because they embody those elements of asceticism without which the *militia Christiana* would be doomed to failure. In the spirit of the Exercises, they bring the Two Standards out of the realm of history into the private life of every sincere follower of Christ. Their primary function, however, is to serve as necessary means for making a right Election. Inevitably the exercitant will be agitated by contrary spirits in the course of the retreat. Unless he learns to distinguish between these opposing forces and knows how to overcome the devil and respond to the inspirations of God, he can scarcely make a good Election and, to that extent, will profit only minimally from the Spiritual Exercises.

St. Ignatius' Rules of Discernment presuppose three kinds of interior movements which a person may experience. The first type is produced by the person himself and arises from the innate powers of his own mind and affections. The other two are induced by intelligent powers outside the person, and may be good or evil. If good, the operating agent is God

or one of His obedient spirits; if evil, it is the devil in some form or another.

Consequently two kinds of discernment are logically demanded in the spiritual life. We should be able to distinguish our native thoughts and sentiments from those produced by forces outside of ourselves, and among the latter know the differences between inspirations that originate with God and temptations which come from the devil. The first discernment is not so important because all our interior movements are subject to the influence of God and are never completely isolated from the contrary activity of the devil. On the other hand, it is highly practical to be able to judge between alien personalities operating on our minds and wills, and know how to resist the machinations of the evil spirit.

In speaking of "movements" in the soul, we can refer to those which precede a deliberate action of the will, those involved in the actual choice itself, and those which follow. The discernment of spirits most properly refers to the antecedent motions of mind and will which, in a sense, impel the appetitive faculties in the direction of good or evil. It makes a world of difference whether these impulses are from God or the devil. Without forcing the will, they solicit my consent, and consequently my decision, for or against a given impulse, will be objectively good or bad according as the spirit which suggested the choice was divine or diabolical. In a subordinate way, the movements which follow an act of human choice are also worth discriminating as valuable signs that my choice was correct or otherwise; if correct, to repeat and confirm the decision, if wrong to change or revoke what I had decided.

There are two sets of rules in the Exercises, fourteen and eight, respectively. The former are more suited to the purgative stage in the spiritual life, the latter more suitable for the Second Week, or the illuminative way. In practice, they are equally valid for any level of spirituality and afford an insight into spiritual experience which

is more than coldly intellectual; its full discrimination requires the whole man, including his sentiments and affections. Also the rules do not pretend to give a complete analysis of our interior motions, but only “to some extent,” to be supplemented by learning, prayer and personal experience.

Underlying Principles

Three elementary principles underlie the rules of St. Ignatius for the discernment of spirits. If these principles have been duly grasped, the rules themselves are quite simple in the light of what we know from revelation about God and the evil spirit.

FIRST PRINCIPLE: “God and the Angels, and the Devil, Act According to their Respective Natures”

Catholic theology defines God as infinitely good and powerful, all pure and holy, all wise and truthful. His angels share in these perfections according to their capacity, and never contradict them. But the devil is just the opposite. He is confirmed in wickedness and the personification of Evil. He is the father of lies who uses all his intelligence to fight against God and everything holy. Accordingly when God acts upon the soul, His mode of operation will be characteristically different from that of the devil, and vice versa, so that each reveals his proper nature. Two of the rules of discernment are based upon this principle.

Divine Omnipotence Acting without a Preceding Cause: Since only infinite power can directly produce an effect without a proportional natural cause, one index of divine activity on the soul is the presence of consolation “without any previous cause.” For “it belongs solely to the Creator to come into a soul, to leave it, to act upon it, to draw it wholly to the love of His Divine Majesty.” [1] Other rules need to be applied to recognize the source of consolation “preceded by a cause,” e.g., by previous

reflection and prayer, which may be induced by the good or wicked spirit. But in the absence of antecedent causation, the agent must be God Himself exercising His sovereign power over the human spirit.

Reaction of Similar and Dissimilar Natures on Contact: Experience tells us that persons who are similar in character easily get along together, whereas opposite temperaments tend to clash and grate on each other. Hence the common description of compatible and incompatible personalities. The same holds true between human beings and the invisible characters of the spirit world.

Four combinations are possible: the human person may be good or bad, and in each case he may be acted upon either by the spirit of God or the powers of evil. In two cases, the combination is compatible and the consequent reaction agreeable. Thus “in souls that are progressing to greater perfection, the action of the good angel is delicate, gentle, delightful. It may be compared to a drop of water penetrating a sponge.” And conversely, “in souls what are going from bad to worse,” where “the disposition is similar to that of the (evil) spirits, they enter silently, as one coming into his own house when the doors are open.” But where opposites meet, the reaction is entirely different. When a God-fearing man is assailed by the devil, “the action of the evil spirit is violent, noisy, and disturbing. It may be compared to a drop of water falling on a stone.” Correspondingly when the good spirits are trying to shake a sinner out of his lethargy, “they enter with noise and commotion that are easily perceived” as alien to their nature. [2]

SECOND PRINCIPLE: “The Good and Evil Spirits Act for Contrary Purposes”

More than just acting according to their respective natures, the good and evil spirits operate on human souls for diametrically different ends. The good spirits, whether God directly or His angels and saints, are uniquely

interested in guiding men to their eternal destiny in the beatific vision. All the light and inspiration they offer are intended to lead us closer to God. The devil and his minions intend the very opposite. Condemned to hell themselves, they envy our lot as adopted sons of God and heirs of heaven. In the permissive will of providence, they can incite us to sin and, if we allow them, cause our destruction by death in the enmity of God.

Consolations from the Good Spirit: Consistent with God's intention of leading us to Himself, one means He employs is to give us consolation in His service. According to St. Ignatius, "I call it consolation when an interior movement is aroused in the soul, by which it is inflamed with love for its Creator and Lord and, as a consequence, can love no creature on earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of them all." Again "it is consolation when one sheds tears that move to the love of God," for whatever reason "that is immediately directed to the praise and service of God." And finally, consolation is "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." [3] God and His spirits, therefore, appeal to the fundamental instinct in human nature, which desires "joy, peace and quiet," first to wean us away from creatures and then invite and attract us to the love of heavenly things.

The Devil Induces or Capitalizes on Desolations: Among the obstacles which the devil places to impede our progress in virtue are the whole complex of negative sentiments which St. Ignatius calls by the general name of desolation, and which he describes 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, hope and charity." The desolate soul is "wholly slothful, tepid, sad and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord." [4] This

description is meant to be inclusive and allows of varying degrees of duration and intensity.

It would be wrong to assume that the devil always directly intervenes to produce a state of desolation. Unless supported by divine grace, fallen human nature is quite capable by itself of depressing the spirit and dragging a soul down to the point of despair. But even where the devil may not be responsible for inducing desolation, he is always ready to exploit it for his own malicious ends. The devil, says Francis de Sales, uses unholy sadness as the breeding ground for all kinds of evil. "It disturbs the soul, disquiets her, arouses vain fears, disgusts her with prayer, overpowers the brain and makes it feeble, deprives the soul of wisdom, resolution, judgment and courage, and crushes her strength." [5] Ascetical writers consider this the most valuable weapon in the devil's armory, to make the service of God appear burdensome and discourage our perseverance in good.

With the same end in view, "it is characteristic of the evil one to fight against such happiness and consolation" as God and His angels may produce in the soul, "by proposing fallacious reasoning, subtleties, and continual deceptions." [6] Here we see the conflict of the Two Standards brought into the arena of the human heart, where the forces of evil are in open battle with the grace of God.

The Devil Tries to Hide his Evil

Designs: Prominent among the devil's tactics are the efforts to conceal his evil intentions. Ignatius compares him to a false lover who tries to remain hidden and does not want to be discovered. The analogy is perhaps the strongest in the Exercises, but unmistakable. "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 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, whenever the devil is tempting a soul, “he earnestly desires that his wiles and seductions be received and kept secret.” [7]

As long as a person keeps the temptations to himself, the devil can easily overcome his resistance and lead him into sin. One reason is the close relation between dependence on the external structure of the Church and the dispensation of internal grace. If a man refuses to seek counsel from those who can assist him, he exposes himself to the dangers of illuminism, which derives from spiritual pride, and produces the excesses so familiar outside the true faith.

THIRD PRINCIPLE: “The Spirits Adapt Themselves to the Persons They Are Trying to Influence”

Something has already been seen of the way God and His angels, as well as the devil, adapt themselves to different persons in order to lead them to their respective ends. But St. Ignatius goes into considerable detail to analyze this principle of adaptation, especially on the part of Satan in regard to his prospective victims.

How the Good Spirit Adapts Himself to Good People and to Sinners: By good people, St. Ignatius understands “those who go on earnestly striving to cleanse their souls from sin and who seek to rise in the service of God to greater perfection.” They are not necessarily living in the state of perfection and, on occasion, may fall into sin. But their habitual disposition is oriented towards obedience to God and a desire to keep in His friendship. With such people, the good spirit adapts himself accordingly, and seeks by every means to “give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and peace. This he does by making everything easy, by removing all obstacles so that the soul may go forward in doing good.”[8]

This is a law of divine Providence, that while proving His servants with all manner of trials, He

always accompanies the cross with the gift of His peace, to make the trial bearable and internally sweet. Any other course of action would be unwise, not to say unjust, on the part of God. Christ declared that His yoke is sweet and His burden light; He told His followers not to be troubled or afraid, but always to be in peace. He promised, already in this life, a taste of heavenly beatitude to the poor in spirit, the pure of heart and to those who suffer persecution for justice’s sake. If even in the natural order there is anticipated pleasure in the right use of the faculties of mind and sense, would this be contradicted in the order of grace, where the Holy Spirit of peace and joy dwells in the souls of the just, inviting them to use their supernatural powers according to the will of God?

In St. Ignatius’ vocabulary, sinners are “those who go from one mortal sin to another,” or simply “from bad to worse.” With such persons, God and His angels act in a different way, by adapting themselves to the needs at hand. Where good people need to be encouraged in the practice of virtue by spiritual delectation, sinners must be discouraged from their evil habits by drastic shocks and warnings. “Making use of the light of reason,” if faith has grown weak, the good spirit “will rouse the sting of conscience and fill them with remorse.” [9]

Again the method agrees with all that we know of God’s mercy toward sinners. Since His purpose is to make them realize their sad condition, He uses means that fit the situation. Worry and anxiety over their past life, suffering and pain created by their sins, fear of death and the punishments that follow, are graces of mercy calculated to stir the sinners’ complacency and bring them back to God.

The Devil’s Adaptation to Different Kinds of Persons: As might be expected, the devil acts at cross purposes. With those who are habitually in sin or not seriously intent on serving God, “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.” [10] Any other course of action would militate against his aim, to keep the sinner in his sin and oblivious of the voice of conscience.

But with good people, the demoniac strategy becomes more cunning and, in fact, so clever that most of the Rules of Discernment deal with this single issue. Allowing for minor differences, two kinds of good people are the object of devilish instigation: those moderately faithful in the practice of virtue, and those living in greater or less perfections. Satan’s tactics are different for each class.

Without limiting this method to those of ordinary virtue, the devil normally attacks such people by creating difficulties in their service of God. He seeks to “harass them with anxiety, afflict them with sadness and raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings to disturb their souls. Thus he seeks to keep them from advancing.”

[11] More graphically, the devil acts like the commander of an army who explores the defenses of the enemy and attacks at the vulnerable point. He “investigates from every side all our virtues, theological, cardinal and moral. Where he finds the defenses of salvation weakest and most defective, there he attacks and tries to take us by storm.” [12] In doing so, he invariably disquiets the soul that wants to be faithful to God, and by this sign can easily be recognized.

With persons more advanced in the way of perfection, the devil is more oblique. Where open attack would fail, he simulates the spiritual joys given by the good spirit in order to lead people astray. “He will pose as an angel of light and begins by suggesting thoughts that are suited to a devout soul, but ends by suggesting his own … Afterwards he will endeavor little by little to finish by drawing the soul into his hidden snares and evil designs.” [13]

Since the tactics are more shrewd, they are also more difficult to discover. Hence the need of

tracing the whole series of thoughts animated by the pseudo-consolation. When the devil uses the “open attack” method, his presence can be seen immediately in the disturbance he arouses in the soul. But when the method lies under cover of pious thoughts and consolations, it may take some time and examination before the devil is identified. According to St. Ignatius, when any course of thoughts suggested to us terminates in something evil or distracting, or less good than we had formerly done or proposed to do; when they end by weakening or disquieting the soul and destroy the peace and tranquility it enjoyed before, no matter how holy or spiritual the thoughts may be, they should be suspect as coming from the devil.

One difficulty that bears some explanation is how to apply the Rules of Discernment when, as often happens, a person may be substantially faithful to the precepts of the Gospel but more or less careless in the spiritual life. How can he use the rules for consolation and desolation if he is not so bad as to be going “from mortal sin to mortal sin,” nor so good as to feel he is “earnestly rooting out his sins and advancing daily from good to better”? Do the rules apply to him? Emphatically, yes. The general principles which govern the respective action of the good and evil spirits are the same, whether they operate on a person who is entirely good or bad, or on someone only mediocre and lax in virtue.

With due proportion, the spirits act in comparatively the same way towards tepid souls as they would towards those who are steeped in sin. The devil tries to inspire false security and deceptive peace of mind, while God and His angels seek to arouse the sluggard from tepidity. However, a subtle detail should be added. In order to use the rules effectively I must have at least some notion of my basic spiritual condition, how faithful I am to grace and in what areas I am negligent in the service of God. When a prospective course of action comes to mind (or has been undertaken) and it gives rise to anxiety and disquiet, I must inquire in what direction the

anxiety is leading. Does it tend to inhibit or to assist what I know in conscience is the better part of me? If it hinders, the devil should be suspected; if it assists, the presence of God may be assumed. The same holds true when a sense of peace and tranquility occurs. If this favors and makes easier the practice of things which reason and faith have always told me are God's will, the good spirit is most probably active; if it hinders this side of my moral life, the devil is most likely the agent.

Evidently the discernment becomes increasingly difficult if a person has been less faithful to the dictates of conscience and the inspirations of grace, because the fundamental norms for discernment (his ordinary spiritual attitude) are obscured. On the other hand, the greater his moral fidelity, the more easily will he detect the evil spirit as hindering his normal disposition to avoid sin at all costs and the more surely can he recognize the good spirit as encouraging his habitual intention to please God.

Ascetical Action Following on the Discernment

St. Ignatius was not content with giving a set of rules to distinguish good and evil spirits in their influence on the soul. He carried the discernment to its natural conclusion by offering a definite plan of action, or reaction, once the spirit is recognized.

How to Act in Consolation: Assuming that a spiritual consolation is known to be from God, to derive maximum profit from this visitation a man should first "consider how he will conduct himself during the time of desolation, and store up a supply of strength as defense against that day." [14] No doubt this storing of energy comes especially in the form of grace, to be prayed for in times of consolation; but it also means anticipating the future by thoughtful planning and fidelity to established habits, which

are sure to be tested in the coming period of dryness and desolation.

Unless we are careful, in times of spiritual fervor we may be tempted to indulge in pride and presumption due to over-confidence. Consequently, "he who enjoys consolation should take care to humble himself … and recall how little he is able to do in times of desolation when he is left without [special] grace or consolation." [15] Otherwise, we run the risk of undertaking practices beyond our strength, or neglecting prudent safeguards of virtue that we thought was unassailable.

How to Act in Desolation: The basic rule to follow in times of spiritual depression is "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." [16] Otherwise the whole benefit of the Exercises can be lost. To what purpose would a man raise himself to the third mode of humility and make the Election if a day or so later, under the spell of despondency, he went back on his decision? *Mutatis mutandis*, the same holds true for any resolution we make in the spiritual life – never to change it under the stress of desolation.

Instead of changing our mode of action, we should rather "intensify our activity against the desolation," by means of prayer, meditation, and additional penance. Equally profitable is reflection on the purpose that God has in permitting the devil to depress our ordinary fervor. He may want to remind us that "we have been tepid and slothful or negligent in our exercises of piety"; or may wish to try us "to see how much we are worth"; and certainly because "God wants to give us a true knowledge of ourselves," in order to make us more humble and better disposed to receive His graces and heavenly blessings. [17]

Just as sensible devotion tends to make us presumptuous and requires the corrective of humility, so desolation leads to discouragement and should be neutralized by whatever may strengthen our confidence in God. Under trial, we must “strive to persevere in patience,” and remind ourselves that “consolation will soon return.” If we neglect to bolster our spirits in this way, we may give in to the demands of lower nature on the pretext that we have undertaken too much, and abandon certain practices in the spiritual life that we needed years to cultivate.

Courage in Resisting the Devil: As a cardinal principle in demonology, the devil is powerless against the grace of God. St. Ignatius compares him to a woman quarreling with a man. As long as he shows himself determined and fearless, she will give in and run away. “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 suggest.” [18] But if we lose confidence in divine help and cringe before the devil’s assault, “no wild animal on earth can be more fierce than the enemy of our human nature.”

Manifesting the Devil’s Intrigues: Since the devil wants to keep his machinations hidden, no single method of dealing with temptations is more valuable than to act against this urge to secretiveness. “If one manifests (these intrigues) to his confessor or to some other spiritual person who understands the devil’s 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.” [19] Sharing these internal experiences with a competent spiritual guide will require humility; but humility merits grace to recognize the devil’s strategy and resist his instigations. It is also a mark of prudence to seek advice from accredited sources when the mind becomes troubled by vexatious thoughts, as happens in strong temptation; but again the proper use of our

reason disposes the soul for divine assistance to overcome the enemy’s designs.

Chapter 12 **References**

- [1] *Second Rules for Discernment of Spirits*, Rule 2.
- [2] *Ibid.*, num. 7.
- [3] *First Rules*, num. 3.
- [4] *Ibid.*, num. 4.
- [5] St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, New York, 1923, p. 269.
- [6] *Second Rules*, num. 1.
- [7] *First Rules*, num. 13.
- [8] *Ibid*, nn. 1-2.
- [9] *Ibid.*
- [10] *Ibid.*
- [11] *Ibid.*
- [12] *First Rules*, num. 14.
- [13] *Second Rules*, num. 4.
- [14] *First Rules*, num. 10.
- [15] *Ibid.*, num 11.
- [16] *Ibid.*, num. 5.
- [17] *Ibid.*, num. 9.
- [18] *Ibid.*, num. 12.
- [19] *Ibid.*, num 13.

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