



God's Voice Within: The Ignatian Way to Discover God's Will

By Mark E. Thibodeaux SJ

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God's Voice Within is intended for people who know that there is more to the spiritual life than they are currently experiencing and are ready to take the next step in their walk of faith by making effective discernment—specifically Ignatian discernment—a daily practice.

Ultimately, *God's Voice Within* teaches us to discern what is at the root of our actions and emotions, which in turn allows us to respond to God's promptings inside us rather than unconsciously reacting to life around us.

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Editorial Review

From the Back Cover

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By learning to discern what is at the root of our actions and emotions, we are well prepared to respond to God's promptings inside us rather than unconsciously reacting to life around us.

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Foreword: Decision Making by Heart

James Martin, SJ

What should I do?

How many times have you asked yourself that question today? How about during this week? this month? this year? over the course of your life?

In a sense, it is *the* question we ask ourselves, again and again. It applies to major decisions: *Where should I go to college? What should I study? What career path should I take? What job should I take?* It applies to decisions about our personal, and most intimate, relationships: *How should I treat my parents? How should I respond to a friend in crisis? What should I do about the problems in my marriage?* And it applies to more common, but no less stressful, situations: *When should I confront my annoying boss? How should I approach that soured relationship in my family? What should I do about my crazy neighbor?*

But decision making is not only about “shoulds.” It also concerns our heartfelt wants, our deepest desires, our holy longings. If we are self-reflective people, we ask ourselves other questions as well: *Who do I want to become? What do I most want to do with my life? Who is God calling me to be?*

Most of us would agree that these are essential questions. But if we’re honest, most of us would also admit that these questions can be difficult, stress inducing, even terrifying. Sometimes we get paralyzed by such questions, and fearing the need to make important decisions, we postpone them, avoid answering them fully, or simply ignore them. Decisions can overwhelm us.

If only, we think, there were an easy-to-use guide to help us make these big, overwhelming, life-changing decisions—and the small ones, too.

Fortunately, there is.

St. Ignatius of Loyola was a sixteenth-century soldier-turned-mystic who founded the Catholic religious order known as the Jesuits. As you’ll soon read, Ignatius was a keen student of human nature, a beloved spiritual master, and a superb decision maker. Through his own experiences (both in his daily life and in his prayer), he came to understand an important truth: God desires for us to make good decisions and will help us do so. All we need to do, besides having a good intention, is not only rely on our (literally) God-given reason but also pay attention to the movements of our heart, which was also given to us by God. St. Ignatius poured his considerable insights on decision into his great spiritual classic, *The Spiritual Exercises*.

The sum total of these insights on making a good decision is known as Ignatian discernment. Ignatius’s way includes well-ordered series of practices, techniques, and skills that understand that good decision making is a combination of faith and reason. You trust your heart, as one Jesuit once said, but use your head, too.

In the past, however, Ignatian discernment was too often presented as overly complex, full of complicated strategies and arcane techniques, cloaked in high-flown language, almost as if you needed to have a PhD and a flowchart just to begin to understand it. And that’s too bad, because Ignatian discernment isn’t that complicated. An authentic spirituality is a simple spirituality. After all, when asked about the kingdom of God, Jesus gave his disciples stories about weeds and wheat, not a six-hundred-page theological treatise! His were profound, mysterious answers but were still able to be understood by his listeners.

That’s why this book is so welcome. As you will soon discover, Mark Thibodeaux, SJ, is one of the friendliest, most welcoming, and most accessible guides to decision making you could imagine. Using abundant examples from his own life (and his own considerable experience helping others in spiritual direction) as well as from the life of Ignatius, he opens up the riches of Ignatian discernment to help you to decide what you should (and shouldn’t) do. Or where you want (and don’t want) to go.

Mark’s facility with Ignatian spirituality is evident to anyone who has ever met him. One of the liveliest and most lighthearted Jesuits I know (and a good friend), Mark is the perfect example of how holiness leads to joy. His full life—as a teacher, a spiritual director, a novice master, and a priest—shows that by making good

decisions, we can bring ourselves closer to God. And moving closer to God means moving closer to a life of peace—and joy. It’s almost impossible to feel downhearted or downcast when you’re with Mark, and some of the times in my life when I’ve laughed the loudest have been with him.

But Mark would no doubt be embarrassed to have the focus placed on him. He would probably move our attention to St. Ignatius, who would shift the focus where it belongs: God. Ultimately, this book is centered on God: how God can help us make important decisions, how God can move our hearts to “discern” well, how God can be found in all the different “spirits” that move our lives. How God’s voice can be found within.

God wants us to make life-giving decisions, and so God will help us to that end. That’s one of the underlying themes of this useful, accessible, and entirely enjoyable new book.

So the next time you say to yourself, with some distress, *What should I do?* don’t despair. Take a deep breath, pick up this book, use your head, and trust your heart.

James Martin, SJ, is a Jesuit priest, culture editor of *America* magazine, and author of the best-selling books *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything* and *My Life with the Saints*.

1

Why Read This Book?

You are probably reading this book because you have recognized a need in your own life for wiser discernment. We tend to think of discernment as decision making, but discernment goes much deeper and broader than simply making choices. True discernment teaches us to make honest assessments of our situations and problems. True discernment teaches us to be self-aware; otherwise, we will get in the way of our own wise choice making. True discernment is not only a matter of reason but also a matter of spirituality. It involves every aspect of our person, from emotion to analysis, from desire to resistance, from personal will to personal prayer.

Discernment would be simple if we could identify the five, or twelve, or twenty-five fail-proof steps to making good choices. But choices are not the result of mere rational exercise; choices come out of who we are as well as out of what we think. That is why discernment is not a system but a process, and it’s a process we must learn, and apply, and then learn some more.

The Ordinary, Daily Decisions

You make hundreds of decisions on a daily basis—ordinary choices about ordinary things.

- **How you will fill up your day:** Should I work hard today or take it easy? In my work, how do I distinguish between what’s most important from what’s irrelevant?
- **How you might serve Christ:** Should I spend the afternoon visiting my elderly aunt, writing my congressperson, or working on this important project? Should I again wash my family member’s dirty dishes or push him to do it himself? Should I write a check to this charity or save my money until I’m financially secure? Should I spend more time in prayer or get more work done today?
- **How you might take good care of yourself today:** Should I take the morning off or get right to work? Should I allow myself dessert, or should I abstain? Should I see a doctor about this pain, or should I toughen up and see if it goes away on its own? Should I go for a run this evening or spend more time with the people I love? Should I watch the game on TV this afternoon or play with my kids in the backyard?
- **How you will relate to other people:** Should I confront my friend about this problem, or should I let it go? Should I check up on my son in college or wait for him to ‘check in’ himself? Should I defend myself

when criticized today, or should I listen quietly and consider what is said? Should I apologize for my behavior or stand up for it?

- **What sort of attitude you should have:** At work, should I be ambitious and assertive or quiet and humble? Should I challenge the boss or suck it up? Should I push those under my authority to work harder, or should I ease up on them? At home, should I stay angry at this family member, or should I let it go? Do I allow myself to be sad about this loss, or should I dry my tears and get on with it?

You are well aware of the consequences of these seemingly insignificant choices. If you say the wrong thing at the wrong moment to the wrong person—which you often do—you might well set off all-out war. You know that if you ease up on your work, those who demand more of you will be angry or disappointed. You know that your elderly aunt will not be around forever and that your children will grow up too fast. You know that you're good to no one when you let yourself burn out and never allow yourself to relax. You know that God wants you to be good to yourself, to treat yourself occasionally, but you are also aware of your own temptations to overindulge.

More crucial than those consequences are the extent to which these seemingly small and insignificant daily choices define who you are as a person. Are you lazy, hardworking, or a workaholic? Are you a pushover, lovingly firm, or downright bossy? Are you passive, prudent, or overaggressive? Are you self-loathing, realistic about yourself, or self-serving? Are you kind, cold, or a flatterer? You know well that all of these important questions about your character—about who you are as a person—are defined at least as much by the small daily decisions as by the big momentous ones.

Also, you are aware that the accumulation of these small decisions, added to the totality of others' decisions, may eventually yield disastrous or glorious results. We pollute the earth one bag of trash or one corporate-waste policy at a time. A Hitler rises to power, not all at once and by force, but over time and with the support of ordinary citizens.

African-Americans in the 1960s did not suddenly gain full rights through one momentous decision but rather through a series of small decisions made by ordinary people—people such as Rosa Parks, who, one ordinary day, decided to have a seat in the front of the bus, and by ordinary white people who gradually chose to resist prejudice within themselves when the likes of a Rosa Parks sat beside them on the bus.

When an earthquake devastated the nation of Haiti in 2010, a person could contribute to relief efforts simply by cell-phone texting the word Haiti to a certain number. This method of donation was promoted everywhere on TV, radio, and the Internet. Ordinary people, while surfing the Web, flipping channels on TV, or sitting at a stoplight, each pledged a mere ten dollars to relief efforts. In a matter of days, millions of dollars were raised.

You know that ordinary people's choices—of which leaders to support and oppose, of how to feel about the person sitting on the bus beside them, of how to spend ten measly dollars—literally changed the course of world history. As a Christian, you feel compelled to make the right choices no matter how small those choices might seem on any given day. You are confronted with scores of such choices every single day of your life, and yet you have spent little time considering how to go about making these decisions. You have no method for making such decisions. Instead, you simply take a stab in the dark—or worse, you let life dictate to you how you will act. You have a sense that you should be proactive in the way you decide to behave in one moment or another, but you have no idea of how to go about consciously, prayerfully deciding such things.

The Big Decisions

You look back on your life and see that there were momentous choices that propelled your life in irrevocable directions:

- The choice to break up with or marry someone
- The choice to stay in your hometown or move to a distant city
- The choice to pursue this career or that one
- The choice to have this many children or that many
- The choice to attend this church or that one
- The choice to have sex or to abstain
- The choice to stop drinking or smoking or to have “just one more”
- The choice to enter the seminary or to pursue family life

You know that in some of these momentous choices, you actually discerned well and acted assertively on that good discernment. But you are also painfully aware of the bad choices you made—the bad marriage, the wrong career move, the terribly hurtful sin you chose to persist in. And you are aware of the times you simply ignored the opportunity to choose. You are aware that—through your often-unconscious choice not to decide—you let outside circumstances dictate the trajectory of your life and the lives of others. By not deciding, you watched important opportunities slip away; you allowed injustice to prevail in the world and in your family and community; and you found yourself in unhappy and unhealthy relationships, careers, and living situations.

You look back on the momentous choices of your life, and you know how crucial it is to choose well. And yet you do not know how.

The Larger, More Excellent Life

You believe in a God who loves you and wants what’s best for you. You believe in a God who offers you abundant blessings but leaves it up to you to choose to say yes to those blessings. You believe that God has an infinite storehouse of grace-filled opportunities for you, and you do not want to pass them up. You know that God has given you skills, resources, and building blocks for you to help build the kingdom of heaven here on earth, and you greatly desire to roll up your sleeves and get to work.

You have a vague sense that God is calling you to higher spiritual places—to loftier pursuits and more noble causes—but you do not know exactly what God is calling you to do, and you do not know exactly how to say yes to those callings. You earnestly desire to learn how to hear God’s voice of invitation within you. You trust in God’s promise to lead you to greener pastures, but you have yet to learn to recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd and to distinguish that voice from those of the false shepherds leading to dead-end places. You know that God is calling you, in your ordinary choices and in your extraordinary ones, too. You sense that these callings are coming from within the stirrings of your own heart, and you crave nothing more than to learn to discern well those inner stirrings and to learn to respond boldly to that inviting Voice within. That is why you must read this book.

What Is Ignatian Discernment?

St. Ignatius of Loyola is one of Christianity’s most important teachers of discernment. And yet Ignatius himself did not write a systematic, step-by-step, follow-the-recipe sort of guide to making a decision. He knew that every decision carries with it so many variables that a cookie-cutter method would be contrived and clunky. Humans are simply too complex for a one-size-fits-all discernment manual.

Instead, Ignatius set out to teach people how to become a kind of person who, through a sort of learned intuition, could detect the sources of one’s thoughts, emotions, and actions. Through that discernment of the sources, which he called the discernment of spirits, a person can determine God’s will in any given situation. In other words, once a person can recognize the motivations moving her toward one particular choice or

another, then the work of coming to a decision becomes easy: she simply chooses the option that comes from God. OK, maybe the choice still isn't always easy, but the point is that the tricky part is not in the act of choosing option A, B, or C but rather in creating an internal skill—an Ignatian intuition—of recognizing the motives attracting and repulsing you toward or away from any given option. Ignatian discernment, then, isn't so much about what to do but about who to be. It's about becoming a person in tune with the movements that lead toward God. The doing will flow from the being.

In John's Gospel (John 10:1–5), we learn that sheep know the voice of the shepherd to whom they belong. They recognize his voice and follow that voice. They will not follow a stranger, because they know that the stranger's voice is not the voice of their good shepherd. The great Bible commentator William Barclay gives a vivid description of this image. In first-century Palestine, each shepherd had a unique call that his own sheep recognized immediately. Sometimes at night, several flocks were herded together into a cave for protection. In the morning, how would the sheep be sorted? The shepherds would stand a distance from one another and begin calling their sheep. By hearing the various voices, the sheep could immediately detect the voice of their shepherd and follow him (William Barclay, *Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 57).

In any given situation, whether in an ordinary day or in a day of momentous decision, there are many voices in your head and heart proposing to you a variety of actions, reactions, or nonactions. The Ignatian method of discernment teaches you how to fine-tune your spiritual senses so that you can more readily detect and move toward the voice of the Good Shepherd, distinguishing that voice from all the others.

What You Can Expect

This book is divided into three major parts. Part 1 (chapters 2–3) introduces the reader to St. Ignatius of Loyola and tells how he came to develop his method of discernment. It then introduces the two types of voices, the true spirit and the false spirit, and the two states of being, consolation and desolation, which accompany these voices. The reader learns to detect consolation and desolation by learning the characteristics of these two opposing states of being.

Once you are able to detect the spirits within you, what are you to do with them from day to day? What do you do when you find yourself in desolation, that is, under the influence of the false spirit? What do you do when you are in consolation, that is, under the influence of the true spirit? Part 2 (chapters 4–5) presents Ignatius's teaching on how to respond to the state of being in which you find yourself on any given day. How can you use this Ignatian intuition to make a big decision? Part 3 teaches the methods of determining God's will through recognizing the source of the voices pulling you toward or away from any given option. It presents the disposition you need to work toward before beginning to discern (chapter 6), the path a typical discernment usually takes (chapter 7), and the work you must do after coming to a decision (chapter 8). At the end of the book you'll find an index of the figures, stories, and prayer exercises used throughout the book, a glossary of Ignatian terms, a listing of Scripture passages that address the topic of discernment, an annotated bibliography of books on Ignatian discernment, and the primary text of Ignatius's *Rules for Discernment of Spirits*.

In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength. . . . [The Lord] will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. . . . Your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." (Isaiah 30:15, 19–21)

Part 1

The True and False Spirits

In addition to being universally regarded as one of the great mystics of the church, St. Ignatius of Loyola is sometimes called “the world’s first psychologist.” Long before the world had an understanding of the psyche and a vocabulary to describe the interior life, Ignatius seemed to have a grasp of what goes on deep within our thoughts and emotions. He did not have a psychological vocabulary to work with; instead, he used the language of spirituality and mysticism. I suspect that even if he’d possessed the vocabulary of psychology, he would have chosen to describe our inner movements in terms of good and evil. Why? Because he was convinced that, psychology notwithstanding, all our thoughts, feelings, and actions are moving us either closer to God or further away from God. The church believes this still.

But how did “Ignatian spirituality” get started? What was Ignatius of Loyola’s first inkling that we humans experience subtle movements in our souls?

It all started with a cannonball.

Iñigo de Loyola was born into a noble family of the Basque region of Spain around the year 1491. His upbringing was full of the stuff of medieval court life: gallant battles, alluring women, shining armor, all-important honor, sword fights, card games, and lots of alcohol—not a great start for a saint! Iñigo was known for his tremendous passion and zeal, but he squandered it on selfish pursuits and petty, doomed battles.

In 1521, he found himself rousing his fellow soldiers to keep fighting in defense of the fortress of Pamplona, despite their imminent defeat. When a cannonball hit Iñigo in the leg, the Spaniards immediately gave up the fight. The conquering army allowed Iñigo to be taken back to his castle in Loyola to recover. This fiery soldier was to spend many weeks alone in bed with nothing to do.

In his boredom, he asked for novels about romance and noble warfare, but there were only two books in the house—one on the lives of the saints and another on the life of Christ. During those long lonely hours in bed, Ignatius found himself deep in the revelry of daydreams. Sometimes, he would dream of himself as a heroic nobleman: fighting important battles for a feudal lord, winning the hand of a lady of high nobility, holding prestigious positions in a mighty kingdom. Other times, his religious books would lead him to imagine himself as a new St. Francis or St. Dominic: fighting battles against the prince of evil; pledging undying loyalty to the heavenly Lord; asking Mary, the mother of Christ, to be his queen.

Then one day he had an epiphany: he noticed an important distinction between the way he felt after his chivalric dreams and the way he felt after dreaming of religious life. Referring to himself in the third person, Ignatius describes this extraordinary moment of insight:

There was this difference, however. When he thought of worldly matters, he found much delight; but after growing weary and dismissing them, he found that he was dry and unhappy. But when he thought of . . . imitating the saints in all the austerities they practiced, he not only found consolation in these thoughts, but even after they had left him he remained happy and joyful. He did not consider nor did he stop to examine this difference until one day his eyes were partially opened, and he began to wonder at this difference and to reflect upon it. From experience he knew that some thoughts left him sad while others made him happy, and little by little he came to perceive the different spirits that were moving him; one coming from the devil, the other coming from God.

—*A Pilgrim’s Journey: The Autobiography of Ignatius of Loyola*, 48

This recognition of “the difference between the two spirits that moved him” became the foundation of Ignatius’s lifelong exploration of how a person discerns God’s will. He came to believe that God, in infinite love and compassion for us, is at all times stirring our hearts with desires to do great deeds of life and love while another spirit leads us to lower dreams and moves us to act against the life-giving inspirations of God. Ignatius discovered that if a person could simply discern between these two spirits—the one pulling toward life and the other pulling away from life—then that person would know God’s will. He noticed that the pull toward the good has distinctive characteristics that reveal God, its ultimate source. The pull away from God, too, has distinctive characteristics. The more a person can detect these characteristics, the easier it is to recognize and follow the true spirit toward life in God.

The Two Spirits

The next two chapters will explore the characteristics of these two spirits: **the false spirit**, often referred to by Ignatius as “the evil spirit” or “the enemy of our human nature,” and **the true spirit**, often referred to as “the good spirit.”

It is important to understand that Ignatius’s idea of the false spirit seemed to be broader than what is commonly referred to as the devil, although the devil would surely be included in the definition. Jesuit Father William Huete puts it this way: The false spirit equals the devil plus the trauma of tragic circumstances such as cancer or hurricanes, plus destructive experiences and behaviors, plus psychological baggage, plus emotional weaknesses, and so on. The false spirit is anything that draws me away from God and from God’s loving plan for the world.

Likewise, when referring to the true spirit, Ignatius was speaking not only of the Holy Spirit but also of anything else that would draw me closer to God. The true spirit equals the Holy Spirit plus good in the world, plus happy life circumstances such as good health or sunny weather, plus life-affirming experiences and behaviors, plus psychological well-being and strength.

The false spirit: The “inner pull” away from God’s plan and away from faith, hope, and love. The false spirit is also referred to as “the evil spirit” or “the enemy of our human nature.”

The true spirit: The “inner pull” toward God’s plan and toward faith, hope, and love. It is also referred to as “the good spirit.”

When I snap at my father, is it because the “devil” moves me to do so or because of some childhood psychological wound or because I didn’t get a good night’s rest last night? My answer to this question is yes! All these factors combine to pull me away from God. This influence, we call the false spirit or the evil spirit. Using Ignatius’s understanding of the interior life, we say that when a person is under the influence of the false spirit, he or she is in a state of desolation. We will explore this in detail in chapter 2.

Likewise, if I’m kind to my father one day, is it because of the Holy Spirit within me or because my father raised me well or because I had a good night’s sleep? Again, my answer is yes! The convergence of these factors pulls toward life affirmation that we call the influence of the true spirit.

A person under the influence of the true spirit is in a state of consolation, which is the topic of chapter 3. With this understanding of desolation and the false spirit and of consolation and the true spirit, the next chapters will explore the characteristics of each spirit and the state of being associated with it.

Desolation: The state of being under the influence of the false spirit.

Consolation: The state of being under the influence of the true spirit.

2

Characteristics of Desolation and of the False Spirit

I call desolation . . . 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 Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius**, Rules for Discernment of Spirits, First Week, #4

Pondering those contradictory daydreams of chivalry versus religious life, Ignatius came to see that a person could determine God's will by recognizing the source of the movements within. When he recognized a movement as coming from the false spirit, he labeled it so and presumed it was not a movement toward God's will. When he recognized an inner movement as coming from the true spirit, he acknowledged the will of God in that movement and followed its lead. Much later in his life, after he became good at recognizing these movements, Ignatius set down in writing the characteristics of the false and true spirits and of desolation and consolation.

It would be tempting to think of desolation as feeling bad and consolation as feeling good—these definitions are close to what a dictionary would give. But in Ignatian spirituality, desolation and consolation involve much more than the feelings themselves. There are times, for example, when a person is in consolation precisely because he or she is feeling sorrow for past sins, grief for a lost loved one, or anger for an injustice toward the poor. Likewise, the experience of desolation might actually be accompanied by feelings of happiness, comfort, or excitement.

So how do we tell the difference between desolation and consolation? Let's begin with desolation, the topic of this chapter. Here's an overview:

I am in desolation when I am empty of

- faith, hope, and love
- the sense of God's being close to me

and when I am filled with some combination of

- "disquietude" (restlessness) and agitation
- boredom and "tepidity" (apathy)
- fear and worry
- secrecy

Empty of Faith, Hope, and Love

I call desolation . . . darkness of soul . . . inclination to what is low and earthly . . . want of faith, want of hope, want of love.

—*SE*, Rules for Discernment of Spirits, First Week, #4

I know that I'm in desolation when I find myself preoccupied with the small: petty resentments, irrational worries, superficial pleasures, or low-reaching goals. When I prayerfully look back on my day (Ignatius would say, "When I pray my Examen"), I ask, "What have been the primary things on my mind and in my heart, today? What were my goals for the day?" Once I name those things that took up my time and psychic energy, I can then ask, "Did those thoughts, feelings, and goals lead me toward being a person of greater faith, hope, and love, or did they lead me away from these virtues?" These are simple questions, and by pondering them, I'll know fairly quickly which spirit has driven my day.

The examen: A quick daily reflection on the spirits that have stirred my thoughts, emotions, and actions this day.

This doesn't mean that every part of my day needs to be filled with heroic actions. Perhaps I spent the day doing housework or gardening or changing the oil in my car. I'm not asking myself how big or how heroic my actions were but rather, "Did these actions lead to greater faith, hope, and love?" For example, if I spent

the day doing housework, the question would be “Why did I do housework? Was it out of love for my family or out of avoidance of something else I was supposed to accomplish today?” If I spent the day feeling sad about my friend’s moving away, I ask myself, “Was the sadness my way of acknowledging my great love for my friend, or was it a self-indulgent refusal to get on with my life?” The movements beneath the thoughts, feelings, or actions will reveal the true spirit stirring me today.

Sometimes it’s important to take these three virtues apart and look at them individually.

- **Faith:** Did my actions today give me greater trust in God, in the church, or in the God-given people of my life—or did they lead to unproductive and paralyzing doubts?
- **Hope:** Have the feelings I’ve been experiencing lately led me to greater optimism for the future and deeper confidence in God’s providence—or have they led to despair and to forgetting that God will take care of me, no matter what?
- **Love:** Have the things that have preoccupied my thoughts today really led me to greater love of my neighbor—or have those thoughts coaxed me into isolation, secrecy, passivity, or aggressiveness?

Empty of the Sense of God’s Closeness

I call desolation . . . [a sense of the soul’s being] separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord.
—SE, Rules for Discernment of Spirits, First Week, #4

The word desolation has its roots in the Middle English *de sole*, which translates as “to be made alone, to be forsaken or abandoned.” Part of the experience of desolation is the sense that God is distant from me. I can’t feel a strong sense of God’s presence. I feel spiritually abandoned and alone. I say the “sense” of God’s absence or the “feeling” of being abandoned by God because faith assures me that God never abandons me. If God did so, I would cease to exist. God is always near, always watching and loving me—always acting for the good in my life. But I don’t always feel that divine love. I can’t always sense God’s presence in my heart.

A young seminarian going through a bit of desolation described a prayer time during which he meditated on Christ as the Good Shepherd. “I found myself doubting,” he said, “if I really am one of those sheep in Christ’s arms.” It was a strange thing for such a prayerful seminarian to say, but that’s how it felt at the moment. For long periods of his life, prayer came with ease and gave him a sense of God’s nearness, but at this moment of desolation he felt only an abandoned emptiness in his prayer. His words to God felt like dry bones; his petitions seemed to be unheard and unanswered. He was alone in the room, seemingly with no God to comfort him.

This unhappy sense of dryness in prayer is not unusual among people of faith. Jesus himself cried out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” The psalmist speaks of his soul as “a dry and weary land” (Psalm 63:1) and asks:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;

and by night, but find no rest.

—Psalm 22

St. Thérèse of Lisieux once referred to herself as an abandoned toy of the child Jesus. Mother Teresa of Calcutta endured very long stretches of prayer with no sense of the Father’s presence. Frustrated by God’s frequent “absences,” the mystical writer Thomas à Kempis once exclaimed to God (and I paraphrase), “If

you absent yourself one more time, I'll break every commandment in the book!" These examples reveal that such an experience is normal in a life of prayer.

I am truly in the depths of desolation not simply when I experience dryness in prayer but also when I have lost the sense of hope and faith that this will ever change. In desolation, I am drawn to question not just this moment but my entire relationship with God. I will begin to wonder if my whole experience of God is just a sham, something I made up in my head. I will question the existence of God, or at least the existence of my friendship with God. I remember once, during a particularly dry retreat I was going through, telling my retreat director, "I'm not sure that I really know how to pray." I could tell that the director was laughing inwardly at this comment; from his more objective point of view, he knew how silly this doubt was. But in my heart the false spirit had me convinced that my years and years of prayer were nothing but an imaginative exercise—an intellectual fantasy.

Full of Disquietude and Agitation

I call desolation . . . darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit . . . restlessness rising from many disturbances and temptations.

—*SE*, Rules for Discernment of Spirits, First Week, #4

Ignatius noticed an unsettled quality to desolation and to the movements that came from the false spirit. He said that if a person is going "from good to better"—that is, praying and truly seeking the will of God—then the movements of the false spirit will leave her feeling uneasy, unsettled, and agitated. There will be a noticeable lack of peace in her heart. The negative feelings of fear, anger, laziness, and so on, will bother her and will seem larger than they really are. She will falsely believe that her negative emotions have got the best of her—and believing this will make it true.

Inner disturbance or restlessness—what Ignatius called disquiet—may well be the most revealing characteristic of the false spirit because it is the disquietude about the other characteristics that reveals its source. Note in the quotation above that Ignatius does not worry so much about "many disturbances and temptations" but rather about "disquiet from various agitations and temptations." There will always be agitations, negative feelings, temptations, and upsetting thoughts. What the discerner needs to pay attention to is the extent to which these negative movements within him disturb his peace of mind.

If I set out to have no negative moods, thoughts, or feelings, I'm setting myself up for failure. These experiences are simply part of what it means to be human. But I can pray about and work on my perceptions of and attitudes toward those negative moods, thoughts, and feelings. Often, I cannot control the way I feel about something. For example, if you say something hurtful to me, I'm going to feel hurt. Denying it will simply make it worse. But I can control my attitude about those feelings. If the hurt feelings become the driving force of my attitudes and actions—if they lead me to pessimistic conclusions about my life, and if they ultimately dictate how I act—then I am operating under the influence of the false spirit and am in desolation.

A Native American legend tells of an elder explaining to his grandson that there are two wolves within him struggling for control of his actions. One wolf is the true spirit, and the other is the false spirit. The young grandson asks, "And which will win, Grandfather?" The old man answers, "The one I feed." This is precisely the point. I do not have a choice about having the two wolves within me. This side of heaven, I must deal with inner negativity. But I do have some choice in my attitude toward that negativity.

A couple of examples might help to illustrate the point.

An Unwelcome Passenger

Recently, I took a twenty-six-hour bus trip from New Orleans to St. Joseph, Missouri. I was on my own and decided to use this trip as a time of prayer and reflection. Not long into the trip, in the midst of my prayer, I

noticed the presence of a bit of anger about a past incident. The incident that elicited the anger was not very significant, and I knew, looking at it objectively, that it was not of great consequence. I therefore set out to dismiss these petty feelings of anger. But as the bus trip went on, despite my best efforts, the anger inside me grew and grew. In fact, it seemed that the more I tried to get rid of the anger, the angrier I felt.

Time went by, and the anger remained. Meanwhile, as my bus traveled from one city to another, I noticed that as I sat by the window with an empty isle seat beside me, one person would get on the bus and sit there for a while and then would get off at the next stop; then another would sit in that seat, then another, and so on. With one person I might have a lengthy and friendly conversation, and with another there might be silence the entire time. With some amusement I thought, I feel like I'm having fifty first dates, each of them lasting about three hundred miles!

Meanwhile, I began to realize that my anger just wasn't going away. I prayed some more about this and suddenly found myself speaking directly to my anger: "OK, anger, it seems as though I can't get you off the bus. I suppose that you insist on being one of my dates. So, I consent to your staying around a while. You can stay and sit beside me quietly while I pray, as long as you don't make too much noise and as long as you don't try to sit in the driver's seat." True to form, like my other dates, anger sat beside me for about three hundred miles and then, on its own, got off the bus.

"Agitations" will come and go in life. I can't stop them from coming. And often, when I make great efforts to kick them off the bus, they simply become more obstinate. Because I focus all my attention on them, they have now moved into the driver's seat. But if I allow the good spirit of Peace and Quiet to drive the bus, it isn't so distressing that Anger is a fellow passenger.

Here is another example of how the false spirit sometimes attempts to let the "agitations and temptations" rule a person's life and bring about disquietude.

A Case of Righteous Anger

I once counseled a troubled young man named Frank, who seldom smiled and who had few friends. Early in my pastoral counseling sessions with him, he began to let loose pent-up feelings about his being victimized years before. In these early sessions, Frank had the liberating experience of finally acknowledging what had happened to him and how it made him feel. He was filled with righteous anger—that is, anger that he had a right to—and expressing this anger out loud for the first time (as opposed to repressing it as he'd always done before) brought him some peace and satisfaction. I was pleased and knew that these "controlled explosions" in the safety of my office were from the true spirit.

But as the weeks went on, I noticed that Frank was not letting go of that anger. Instead, he was feeding and being fed by his anger. It was anger that got him out of bed in the morning and anger that led to his brooding silences among his peers at school.

I began to recognize two opposing movements within Frank. Acknowledging and expressing his anger in a spiritual context was coming from the true spirit. Disquiet about that same anger was coming from the false spirit. In order for Frank to follow the path of the true spirit, he would have to find ways of accepting the past event and his present feelings about the event. But he would also have to come to peace within himself about his present emotions. He would have to consent to having anger as a passenger on the bus without allowing the anger to drive the bus.

Confusion: A Subcategory

Confusion is such a common experience within desolation that we might be tempted to think of it as a distinct characteristic of desolation. But confusion in and of itself is not the problem. God never promises us certainty; omniscience belongs to God alone. Most of the time, a healthy discernment process will go through one or more periods of ambiguity and uncertainty. In fact, this is often a necessary stage in the course of good discernment. The problem, then, is with our reaction to this lack of clarity. Confusion

becomes a desolating experience when we allow ourselves to be upset about not knowing—when our uncertainty or lack of knowledge leads to disturbance within us.

Nonetheless, unsettling confusion is indeed a common telltale sign of desolation. A person in this state is missing the forest for the trees. He loses his perspective of the ultimate goal of life, which is defined by St. Ignatius as “praise, reverence, and service of God our Lord.” The confusion of desolation causes a person to get bogged down in the details of the journey while forgetting the ultimate destination. It’s a failure to “keep your eyes on the prize.” Otherwise, the state of not knowing would not be unsettling and therefore not desolating.

Consider the story of Peter walking on the water to meet Jesus. As long as Peter was focused on Jesus, he walked with ease. If he were asked at that moment, “How is it that you are walking on water?” he would not know the answer. But his lack of understanding about water walking did not keep him from doing so, as long as he focused on Jesus. It was upon “seeing the wind” that Peter grew afraid and began to sink. The moment he took his eyes off Jesus, he was lost.

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Peter answered, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come!” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:22–31)

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