

Ignatian Guidelines for Spiritual Discernment

Ad maiorem dei gloriam
For the greater glory of God

General Considerations

Discernment is listening to the movements of one's heart or spirit. It is attending to the motions affecting one's interior life. There are good spirits and bad spirits leading us to either a more authentic Christian life in the Spirit or to greater attachments, spiritual sloth, or sin. Ignatius does not differentiate *spirits* as to whether they originate from one's own consciousness, outside natural influences, or supernatural influences. They all work the same way.

When we are caught up in a life of sin, then the evil spirit will propose complacency, sensual pleasures, or greater attachments to be grasped now or in the future. The evil spirit could also propose decisions that look good on the surface, but betray an inclination away from a more fully authentic life. Good spirits show the absurdity of that direction of life. There is often a *sting* of conscience here. Thus, during times of spiritual complacency (desolation) or sin, the discomfort or *sting* is usually from God.

If we are anxious to live for and please God the opposite happens. Then it's the evil spirits who pose problems and difficulties regarding the true life. They bring false sadness for things to be missed. They produce anxiety about our weakness, and suggest roadblocks in walking the way of the Lord. This could simply be a general discouragement. Good spirits strengthen, encourage, console, and inspire. There is often a deep peace, delight, and joy experienced here. Thus, in a time of *consolation* the sting is from the evil spirit.

Spiritual Consolation (for Ignatius)

1. When we find ourselves on fire with the love of God, and nothing competes with his love;
2. When we are saddened for our infidelities (thus consolation doesn't necessarily *feel* consoling, since you cannot trade truth for comfort);
3. When we find our faith, hope, and love so strengthened that the joy of serving God is foremost in our life.

Spiritual Desolation (for Ignatius)

1. When we are weighed down by a heavy darkness;
2. When we experience a lack of faith, hope, or love;
3. When we have a distaste for prayer or spiritual things;
4. When we have a certain restlessness in being God's servant;
5. When we notice thoughts of rebelliousness, despair, or selfishness as a contrast with the praise and service of God.

Three Reasons We Suffer Desolation

1. It's our own fault, we have become tepid, shallow in faith;
2. It is a period of trial so that we do not confuse faithfulness and service with the joy of getting consolations;
3. God lets us experience our own poverty and need.

Four Guidelines for Dealing with Desolations

1. When weighed down, don't change a previous decision;
2. Fight off the desolation by intensifying prayer, taking on a penance, making a closer examination of oneself;
3. Have faith in God's love, even as it *seems* gone;
4. Be patient and trust in God.

When we experience consolations we should use foresight and savor the strength we receive against times of desolation. We should grow in humility and acknowledge with gratitude the gifts we have received. As we continue to progress in the spiritual life the movements of the good spirit are very delicate, gentle, and often delightful. The evil spirit brings confusion and disturbance. However, if one is spiritually regressing, then this should be reversed whereas the good spirit feels disturbing. In desolation we should know that God's grace is sufficient.

How the Evil Spirit Works

1. The evil spirit behaves like a spoiled child. If we are quick and firm in temptation, the child gives in. If we show hesitation or indulgence the child is merciless in foot stomping or by false displays of affection.
2. The evil spirit will also be like a false lover who seduces for its own reason and also desires that the relationship be kept secret. We do this with our sins. We don't want others to know about them, and we even try to deceive ourselves about them.
3. The evil spirit is like an army commander who will attack us at the weakest point of defense, particularly our pride.

Because we are complex people, it is possible for parts of our hearts/souls to be very zealous for God (in consolation), while other parts are more conflicted or tepid (in desolation). Therefore, one not only has to know one's general pattern of being either in consolation or desolation, but also whether what is being discerned affects a part of our hearts that is in consolation or desolation.

The Role of Indifference

In discerning God's spirit, or making a choice about life, the first thing that we need is *indifference*, that is, complete openness to whatever God wants for us. Anything for the greater glory of God is what one strives for. If God wants me to be wealthy or poor, healthy or sick, go this way or that, be regarded by others as important or insignificant, one doesn't really care. It's God's pleasure that is one's heart's desire.

One must realize that this *indifference* or openness is what the heart cultivates and strives for, but doesn't achieve perfectly. This, Ignatius knew well. In fact, it is often by attending

to strong feelings of ambivalence in following God that we come to interpret God's will for us. Thus, if you can read the signs of desolation and consolation, you can theoretically figure out God's will regardless of where you are at spiritually at any given time.

MODES FOR DISCERNING GOD'S WILL (sometimes these are called *elections*)

I. First Mode

God calls us like St. Paul. It is clear, direct, and unmistakable. Here no discernment has to be done, but only obedience. And, given the power of the call, obedience is not difficult. This is a very rare experience. If this experience happens, still we are to ask:

1. Am I able to doubt God's will here? Is it possible to doubt the experience?
2. Can I recall all the details of the *call* fully, accurately, and certainly?
3. Does all I recall correspond with the teaching of Scripture, the Church, with reason? (For Ignatius, every call corresponds to reason.)
4. Can I differentiate the *experience* with my *interpretation* of that experience? It is only the experience proper that is regarded as the election, not the concomitant feelings, thoughts, etc. that follow the experience.¹

II. Second Mode

This is for a time when we are experiencing consolations or desolations. At this time of interior activity (which could be most of the time) one does a *discernment of spirits*. The Second mode is best if you want to discern God's will about a specific issue.

Discernment Strategy

1. Meditate on the life of Christ.
2. When in consolation (fervor), observe what God moves you to.
3. Meditate on the alternatives of the choice and see how inspired you are with each alternative.
4. When in desolation observe what the evil spirit moves you to and decide the other way.

The movement of the *will* is the core of this experience. While our feelings and emotions are important, they are not the most central concern here. Often as one meditates on the possibilities a desire or *counsel* flows from it, or possibly a practical judgment bearing on the decision or choice.

After one has made a choice, then offer that choice to God for confirmation. Live with the choice for several days (if possible) and see if it continues to feel right. If it doesn't feel right, investigate why that may be. It could be simply an experience of fear—a sign that the bad spirit is tempting you away from it. If it does feel right, see if the decision increases your fervor and delight of the Lord.

¹ With every religious experience there are (at least) three related, but separate moments: 1. The raw experience (often beyond words or concepts); 2. The recollection and reconstruction of that experience into coherency; and 3. The interpretation of that experience. Even an authentic experience from God does not mean that one is free from distorting its meaning.

III. Third Mode

Here no internal drama seems to be going on. We can think clearly but distinguish no real dramatic interior spiritual movements. A third mode is undertaken when the first two are not taking place and you have to make a decision about a course of action and wish it to be under God's guidance. Really, it is possible to combine both types II and III. First, make sure that the time spent in mulling over the issue is a time of tranquility.

For the third mode *reason* is the primary thing to attend to. Ignatius has helpful hints for discerning in this vein:

- A. Making a list:
 1. Clearly place before my mind what it is I want to decide;
 2. Cultivate freedom to chose the end to which I was called, i.e., salvation and union with God;
 3. Pray that God enlighten and move me;
 4. List and weigh the pros and cons;
 5. Consider the more reasonable, which has the weightier reasons, and which holds the weightier motives;
 6. Having come to a decision, turn to God and ask him to accept and confirm it.
- B. Since the love of God should motivate one, check for the greater or lesser attachment that would affect my devotedness to God.
- C. If a friend I cared about had a similar decision, what counsel would I offer?
- D. If at the moment of death in total freedom and clarity what would be the decision I would want to have made now?
- E. I picture myself before Christ when I have died and talk to him about the decision. I choose now the course of action that I feel will give me happiness and joy in presenting it to Christ on the day of judgment.²

If a clear choice comes from this, then bring it to prayer for confirmation and wait until the confirmation comes. Then, like the second mode, try it on for size and see if it feels right. If it does, why? If it doesn't, why not? In all decision-making Ignatius believed that the first and second forms of discernment were the best and clearest and one ought to return there for possible confirmation. In his own life, he did sometimes use the second and third form simultaneously. The intent for all choices is the greater glory of God. If all else fails, then go with what seems to be the choice that would conform you to Christ's lifestyle when on earth.

² For this counsel and even the one above it, one could be tempted to think that the *harder* choice would make one the proudest to bring to Christ. But this isn't what is intended here. One wants to be accountable for the most *authentic* choice, the one what demonstrates the most true freedom and faithfulness to God, and the one what makes one express oneself as the most authentic Christian.

LIMITS TO DISCERNMENT

1. Not Free from Mistakes

None of these methods, even the first, is free from the possibility of mistake. We can always be influenced by things that we are not conscious of. A Christian can take heart, however, since God does not ask that we be *right*, God only asks that we be as true and faithful as we can.

2. Only for Personal Action

Even if we are right in our discernment, we are only right insofar as it affects our decision as to how we *personally* ought to act. We cannot extrapolate God's general will from this.

An example is an early Jesuit, Francis Borgia, whom Pope Julius III was considering making a bishop. Ignatius was consulted by Pope Julius III and underwent a discernment process. He discerned that God's will was that he *counsel* against the consecration, which he did. Consequently Borgia was made a bishop. Ignatius did not think that he had misunderstood God's will or that the Pope had misunderstood God's will. He concluded that it was God's will that he (Ignatius) counsel against consecration, *and* very possibly God's will that Julius make Borgia a bishop. Perhaps God wanted Ignatius to remind Julius that it was against the Jesuit apostolate. It was as a kind of warning against making too many Jesuit bishops. Perhaps God wanted to humble Ignatius, having his counsel contradicted. Perhaps God wanted Borgia, who knew of Ignatius' counsel, humbled and reminded not to lose his Jesuit identity. Who knows? All that Ignatius believed was that it was God's will for him to *counsel* against it.

3. Only Discern within One's Authority

This follows from the above. You can only legitimately *ask* for God's will regarding what you have the power and authority to do. For example, you cannot ask God's will who should be president, but only whom to vote for. In this discernment process, you can only ask about what you should do in a circumstance where you have legitimate authority. In the above case of Borgia, it was in Ignatius' power to offer counsel, but it was the pope's job to decide. Only the pope would have been in the position to discern whether or not to make Borgia a bishop. In the same way, in the case of discerning a priestly vocation, one *can* believe oneself authentically called to priesthood (even in the first mode!). But it is not within one's authority to discern for the Church, nor within one's authority to ordain. The only thing one can discern is whether or not to *present* oneself for ordination. You cannot discern whether or not you should marry another person, but only what God's will is for *proposing* marriage. Naturally, usually God inspires us to do what he has planned for us.