

Ignatian Discernment of Spirits

Good versus Evil Spirits

At the heart of the process of discernment introduced by Saint Ignatius of Loyola is the realization that all humans are influenced by good and evil spirits. This terminology may sound archaic to us until we realize that Saint Ignatius (1491–1556) grew up in Spain at the end of the Medieval Period. Today we depend on the language of modern psychology to describe influences on our own egos and our good or evil impulses. This is not to rule out the possible influence of demonic forces, which the Church certainly recognizes. Nonetheless, no matter what the influences in our lives may be, we are ultimately responsible for our choices. But how do we distinguish good from evil impulses?

What are some of the “voices” that influence your choices today?

Spiritual Consolation: Experiencing Good Spirits

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22–23).

When we feel the presence of God (especially in the form of Gifts of the Holy Spirit as described in Galatians 5:22–23) and we experience a deep sense of gratitude for God’s presence and forgiveness in our lives, we are experiencing “consolation” or “good spirits,” in the language of Saint Ignatius. We might think of “consolation” as a personal Pentecost experience. At these times we know the presence of God is real because we find ourselves “fired up” with the love of God, with a desire to do good and an increased ability to resist evil. Often we experience consolation most strongly during times of prayer, but it can occur during work or play as well.

When have you experienced a sense of exhilaration, with a desire to do good and avoid evil?

Spiritual Desolation: Experiencing Evil Spirits

Evil spirits are those influences that leave us feeling disconsolate: anxious, restless, doubtful, frustrated, bombarded by temptations, and alone. Ironically, evil spirits come to us disguised as an “angel of light,” according to Saint Ignatius. It’s true! Evil often appears to be attractive, pleasurable, fun, or exciting. The problem of evil is a serious matter. As future leaders it is important for us to realize that many people—even in prominent positions—allow themselves to be deceived into thinking that evil is the “angel of light.” Attraction to evil negatively affects our decisions and impedes our ability to do God’s will.

When in the recent past have you chosen what appeared to be fun or pleasurable but proved to be a choice that left you deeply dissatisfied?

NOTES



Be Grateful Always

Much of what happens to us in life is beyond our control—except our attitude toward it. We always have a choice about attitude. Saint Ignatius believed that the correct attitude (or “disposition”) is always gratitude to God for everything—wealth or poverty, health or sickness, a long life or short life, and so on. Finding God in all things, in his view, is the goal of life. A grateful disposition will open our hearts to experience God’s consolation. Then we can choose wisely for our good and for the good of all, confident that we are doing God’s will.

Are you able to be grateful for *everything* in your life?

Never Make an Important Decision in Times of Desolation

Only when we feel connected to God and to our own inner self are we in a position to make an important choice in life. We should never make an important choice during times of desolation (in frustration, anger, and so on) because these are invariably poor choices. Always look for signs of God’s consolation when making a significant choice. The experience of peace and self-confidence, even when the choice may demand a great deal of us, is certainly a sign of God’s presence in that choice.

Have you ever made a choice when you were depressed or frustrated? What was the outcome?

The Context of the Church

Saint Ignatius had a strong personality and a strong streak of stubbornness. Yet he clearly understood himself to be a member of the Body of Christ, the Church, made one by the Eucharist. Saint Ignatius expected all of his followers in the religious order he founded to practice what he called “thinking with the Church.” He even required all priests with final vows to take a vow of obedience to the Pope. For Ignatius discernment would always take place within the Church community and for the good of the Church. Today we would also add the dimension of social justice that must extend beyond the Church. We must also ask ourselves whether our decisions positively contribute to peace and justice in the world.

What can you do to “think with the Church” today in order to build a more peaceful and just world?

How can these “rules” for discernment help you to make better choices?

