

Discernment of Spirits Part II

(For Part I, please, see the on-line bulletin for Sunday, May 19)

Ignatius has two sets of rules for discerning the movement of spirits: the first set of rules (called “rules for the first week”) has to do with the obvious discernment between the good spirit and the “enemy” as Ignatius calls the evil spirit. The evil spirit will continue to attract a sinful person to more and more of the same behavior, while the Holy Spirit will prick ones conscience.

The “rules for the second week” are where things get more involved, but more interesting. These rules have us pay ever closer attention to our behaviors and the motivation for those behaviors.

Three things are certainly worth noting from the *Spiritual Exercises*:

1. It is characteristic of God to give true happiness and spiritual joy to the soul, and to banish all sadness and confusion brought about by the enemy.

It is the nature of the evil spirit to work against God’s goodness, using false reasoning and deception.

When we seem to be persecuted by the evil one, the best thing to do is to double down on our prayer. When met with spiritual perseverance, the evil spirit gives up and moves on. Also, remember that consolation and desolation will continue to ebb and flow. When in consolation, strengthen your prayer life because desolation will follow. When in desolation, remember that it will not last and that consolation will follow.

2. Only God can give “consolation without previous cause”; that is, if one receives consolation without having prayed for it or done anything that would prompt that consolation, it is from God. If, however, the consolation arises from prayer, fasting, reception of the Eucharist and the like, pay close attention for the consolation could come from either the Holy Spirit or the evil spirit. If from the evil one, then it would be false consolation.

Once, I was walking to the chapel right after a rain. My eyes were drawn to look up through the leaves overhead. The vibrancy of the greens and blues from the sky and tree were as I had never noticed them before; they were literally astounding to me. I had to stop and drink it all in. That could be consolation without previous cause. A pure gift from God.

3. The evil spirit often assumes the appearance of an “angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14). He will begin by tempting us into something ostensibly good and holy. But little by little, he draws us away from what is holy to his own devious desires. We will often end up wondering how we could have been so foolish. We should then think back over the progress of the movement to see where we made a bad choice.

As we make spiritual progress, the movements of the evil spirit become ever more apparent. However, without the grace that only comes from God, we are less able to discern whether something is from God or not. The spirit of God moves in us very slowly and deliberately; quick

decisions, jumping to conclusions, either/or thinking all can lead us to make hasty and bad decisions, which will then lead to desolation.

This has been a very short primer to the discernment of spirits; but I hope it has been helpful. To learn more, go to www.ignatianspirituality.com or find a resource book on prayer written by a Jesuit (preferably).