

A Dance in Harmony with God: Ignatian Discernment in the Spiritual Exercises

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Discernment in Christian religious experience incorporates a tradition that can be traced back to Pauline writings. In 1 Corinthians 2:15, Paul discussed discernment through the Spirit, and in Galatians 5:22 he described the fruit of the Spirit. This tradition was manifested by Ignatius of Loyola in the sixteenth century. He got inspiration in his own life experience and elaborated discernment into two sets of rules in the Spiritual Exercises. (In this article, I use the translation of the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius in David L. Fleming's *Draw Me into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading of the Spiritual Exercises*.) Discernment characterizes Ignatian spirituality; in a particular way, it helps people to dance with God in harmony, that is, integrate the decisions of life into the relationship with God. This article will focus on various levels of discernment in the Exercises, namely habitual discernment, awareness of movement, and choices and actions. Then I will move to the process of discernment of spiritual movement, explain how to read the sign of spiritual movement, and discuss patterns of spiritual movement interpreted by ancient psychology and contemporary psychology.

Various Levels of Discernment

The Spiritual Exercises assume three levels of discernment. According to Katherine Dyckman, Mary Garvin, and Elizabeth Liebert, the first level is a habitual discernment, and a person practices it in all the contemplations and meditations. The second meaning appears in the Rules for Discernment of Spirits [313–336]; it focuses on awareness of movements of inner feelings and thoughts, as well as evaluation in terms of the interaction with God. The third meaning can be found in the section on election [169–189], which stresses choices and actions towards God. These three levels of discernment are interrelated and interdependent (Dyckman, Garvin, and Liebert, 248). In this sense, each level is the base for the next one. We might say that the dynamics among these three levels move people to encounter with God. That is, people are

on the path of relating awareness of emotion and cognitive patterns in their mind, then understanding the direction in which God is leading, and finally making an election or a decision in their life to move towards God.

Though Ignatius writes two sets of rules for discernment respectively in the Spiritual Exercises, Jules Toner argues, "The second set is continuous with the first, a coherent development of the latter. The reason for separating the rules into two sets ... is purely practical and extrinsic to the rules themselves, namely, the need of the persons being counseled [8-10]." In this sense, as spiritual directors we should always follow the need of the spiritual directee, trying not to restrain the directee from being led by God. So the determination about which set of rules to be applied comes from the kinds of temptations occurring in the spiritual directee (Dyckman, Garvin, and Liebert, 253). Therefore, what has happened within a person's interior world is vital in spiritual direction. The following sessions will discuss the process of discernment in terms of spiritual movement—that is, consolation and desolation—within a person.

The Process of Discernment of Spiritual Movement

In the introductory statement of Rules for Discernment, Ignatius writes about what he calls "Rules for perceiving and knowing in some manner the different movements which are caused in the soul, the good, to receive them, and the bad to reject them [313]." This title merges a threefold paradigm: be aware, understand, and take action (Gallagher, 16–26). In other words, the process begins with noticing what is happening in one's inner spiritual experience, moves to reflecting on what has been noticed, then recognizes what belongs to God and what does not, and finally takes actions to accept that which belongs to God, while rejecting what does not (17).

In general, the first step of discernment is being aware. First of all, people begin with being attentive to habitual emotional patterns; then, through moral awareness, they reach spiritual awareness, which is the central part of this

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process. On the basis of this process, people can be led to reflect and discern a relationship with God. Ignatius refers to this process as awareness of spiritual movements [313] (see Gallagher).

John Veltri defines spiritual movements as interior reactions of mind. These reactions float in and out of our consciousness. He expounds, "Spiritual Movement includes feelings and emotions, the meanings within them, spontaneous thoughts, the direction of the above, and a faith context" (Veltri, *In the First Week*, 7). Based on this definition, spiritual movements are not simply the feelings and thoughts themselves but rather the fluctuations and trends of feelings and thoughts that happen within oneself in a faith context.

The trends of these inner reactions are consolation and desolation, language Ignatius employs to describe different movements of spirituality in the first set of rules for discernment. In a sense, consolation and desolation concern spiritual realities (Dyckman, Garvin, and Liebert, 254), which embodies our interaction with God.

The following sections will focus on the core meaning of spiritual consolation and desolation and then on how to read the signs of these movements and offer interpretations of spiritual movement from the argument of contemporary psychology.

Spiritual Consolation

Ignatius employs the words *spiritual consolation*, not simply *consolation*, in notation [316]. Timothy Gallagher considers spiritual consolation as "happy, uplifting movements of the heart directly impacting our life of faith and our following of God's will" (Gallagher, 49). In other words, only those uplifting experiences that have direct and immediate reference to our life of faith and pursuit of God's will are called spiritual consolations. For example,

when people visit the Niagara Falls, they might watch and be fascinated by its magnificence; this is a consolation. However, when thoughts and feelings come to them and lead them to sense God's eternal love in which He creates and disposes of Mother Nature for all creatures, it is this moment when people experience spiritual consolation. The point is, when thoughts and feelings direct a person to God's love, a spiritual consolation occurs. Veltri puts it well: "An intense interior experience in itself is not consolation but its perceived and accepted relationship to God" (Veltri, *In the First Week*, 9). That is, spiritual consolation encourages and intensifies experiences of relating to God (Dyckman, Garvin, and Liebert, 255).

Ignatius offers a series of examples of spiritual consolation. He describes it as "to become inflamed with the love of her Creator and Lord ... shed tears ... increase of hope, faith and charity" [316] (Ivens, 214). All these phenomena share the same character; as Ignatius notes: "A deep down peace comes in just our living life as 'being in my Father's house' [315] (c)." When a person comes back to his or her father's house where he or she grew up, there are feelings of deep peace, complete relaxation, and profound safety. These feelings simply flow from a person's heart and signal that he or she is home. This is exactly the sign of spiritual consolation coming upon us.

Fleming notes that when we are saddened, even to the point of tears, for our infidelity to God but at the same time thankful to know God as Saviour, such consolation often comes in a deep realization of ourselves as sinners before a God who loves us [316] (b) (249). Veltri emphasizes: "Such experiences may indicate a deep relationship with Jesus and release one from the narrow bonds of egotism. Of course, all tears are not a sign of consolation but only those that move one to the love of God" (*In the First Week*, 9).

The process begins with noticing what is happening in one's inner spiritual experience, moves to reflecting on what has been noticed, then recognizes what belongs to God and what does not, and finally takes actions to accept that which belongs to God, while rejecting what does not.

Besides, as spiritual directors we should bear in mind that not all consolations are accompanied with intense feelings. Ignatius writes, "I give the name consolation to every increase of hope, faith, and charity, to all interior happiness which calls and attracts to heavenly things" [316]. We must notice different dimensions of consolation; even though there is pain or dryness on a felt level, consolation exists if one experiences an increase of faith (Veltri, *In the First Week*, 10). The main point is to sense God's presence, with a deeper faith perspective. Based on one's faith perspective, a person could "accept and perceive painful, dry or sad experience as having some meaning in terms of her relationship with God" (10). It is wise to keep in mind that the relationship with God is always the central essence of consolation and desolation.

We should also be careful about consolation with natural desolation. This refers to the natural experiences that are perceived and accepted as part of a faith-filled context, but at the same time manifest turmoil and struggle (11). The Holy Spirit may use many means to promote spiritual growth, even difficult or painful feelings. This is the so-called "painful consolation" (Dyckman, Garvin, and Liebert, 255).

Spiritual directors also need to be aware of counterfeit consolation. Veltri puts it very well: in counterfeit consolation, "you have a deep-felt awareness of life's meaning represented by the Principle and Foundation, but your awareness is separated from the awareness of your own personal, here-and-now, real-life, historically rooted experiences" (*In the First Week*, 2). The here-and-now, real-life situation might be neglected if the spiritual directee is in counterfeit consolation. It is necessary for spiritual directors to see the possible deception of an apparently good direction. The evil spirit sometimes disguises as an angel

and makes one move away from God [332]. Spiritual directors should be aware that positive feelings do not necessarily mean a real spiritual consolation from God.

As for consolation without preceding cause [330], it is a spiritually self-aware person in the God-given experience itself (Ivens, 230). Compared to consolation with a reason [331], Ivens notes, "consolation without cause does not depend on such an object or activity. It is gratuitous and impossible to induce" (230). As directors, we would not just pay attention to the definition, but contemplate and discern the directee's inner spiritual experience, thus to recognize the directee's direction towards God.

Spiritual Desolation

Once more, Ignatius does not define desolation but offers examples. He indicates in notation [317] that "Desolation" is the name I give to everything contrary to what is described in Rule Three" [317] (Ivens, 216). Veltri writes, "In desolation, the directee's overall affectivity is still oriented to God, but now, with respect to these transient movements, the spiritual directee herself does not experience or recognize God's presence and feels or perceives that God is no longer around to help her" (Veltri, *In the First Week*, 10). Maureen Conroy writes, "Even" these movements away from God ... are a result of God's loving actions: the light of God's permeating love is lighting up the darkness of our unredeemed self" (xi). In other words, there is a gift from God even when a person is undergoing spiritual desolation.

There is one phenomenon that spiritual directors need to know. They should be very careful to distinguish spiritual desolation from psychological depression. Veltri notes, "Psychological depression may in fact lead to desolation, but the one is not the other" (*In the First Week*, 10).



A person who is clinically depressed may still experience spiritual consolation. He or she may sense God's presence in a meaningful way to accompany him or her in the depression episode.

However, in some cases, people have a serious inordinate attachment to the extent that it has an effect on spiritual health. The first set of the rules describes the case of those going from mortal sin to mortal sin. In Veltri's view, "These are persons living in an orientation of serious spiritual disorder" (2). Discernment of spiritual movement is a good method to increase awareness of desolation resulting from inordinate attachment. But we should remember that if the inordinate attachment is too serious and becomes a mental illness, like the person described in notation [314], it is better to refer the person to a psychiatrist before spiritual direction. In general, spiritual direction is for someone who is basically and overall oriented towards God. Therefore, as spiritual directors, we should be familiar with the sign of spiritual movement before we decide to give someone spiritual direction or refer him to a psychiatrist.

Read the Sign: The Fluctuation of Thoughts and Feelings

What does one need to do if she wants to be aware of spiritual consolation and desolation? Wilkie Au suggests that we pay attention to the "continuity of thoughts during reflection, the concomitant feelings constantly reacting to these thoughts" (21). The thoughts and feelings are usually concomitant in our psyche; therefore, they consist of significant signals for reaching our spirituality. The discernment of spiritual movements is not simply focused on thoughts or feelings themselves but on the *direction* to which these feelings and thoughts lead. On the one hand, positive feelings like peace, joy, and hope might be welcomed, but it is more significant to understand whether or not these feelings indicate harmony in the direction towards God. On the other hand, negative feelings like

fear, anxiety, and doubt might not be welcomed, but it is still important to recognize the direction. Au suggests that negative feelings may "signal premature closure of the discerning process and one should continue it till inner harmony is produced through the alliance of thoughts and feelings" (21). If the thoughts and feelings are directed towards God, inner harmony in the psyche and content of the soul will be recognized.

In addition, Au suggests applying a holistic approach from more aspects to read the signs. He writes, "A holistic approach to discernment takes seriously the knowledge-bearing capacity not only of the mind, but also of the body, emotions, senses, and imaginations" (16). In other words, not only are signs in the psyche important but also signs of the body and spirituality. For instance, the spiritual director needs to help the directee to be aware of his bodily expressions and symptoms, because bodily reactions usually reveal affective situations. These signs may also indicate the spiritual movements within the spiritual directee. So all the feelings, thoughts, drives, and even dreams might be an important source of divine guidance (16).

Patterns of Consolations and Desolations: Interpretation of Ancient and Contemporary Psychology

In general, a sign indicates something is happening. So understanding the meaning of the sign leads us to a deeper level so we can explore the interior world. We must answer an important question: What are the sources of thoughts and feelings that cause consolation and desolation in the human psyche? Ignatius was not a psychologist, but he adopted the psychology in the sixteenth century to understand and explain the phenomenon of the human psyche. Psychology in Ignatius's time claimed that insanity was a case of influence by the devil. People believed angels caused thoughts directly and spirits caused feelings directly (Veltri, *In the Second Week*, 1). In this view, thoughts

caused by the good and evil spirits would be understood as emotions surfacing from our psyche. And thoughts caused by the good angel and by the bad angel refer to ideas coming to us from outside ourselves (27).

In the first set of rules for discernment, Ignatius uses the term *spirit* because the kinds of temptations like "sensual delights and comforts" described in notation [314] (Fleming, 247) are those "associated with more obvious trends of feelings and emotions arising from Inordinate Attachments" (1). In the second set of rules, Ignatius uses the term *angel* more frequently than the term *spirit*, because the temptations like pious thoughts and holy desires [332] are intended for a more mature spiritual directee. To a more mature spiritual directee, the bad angel can only "enter her psyche with light-filled temptations of thought, in other words, some misinformation" (247).

In this view of psychology, the first set of rules [313–327] focus on dealing with inordinate attachment, which is more about feelings and emotions. For Ignatius, the evil spirit is mostly associated with feelings, even with urges and impulses. Even the evil spirit is associated with some thoughts, because these thoughts connect to feelings. To act against the evil spirit, Ignatius suggests being faithful and discovering the source of desolation [317–322].

The second set of rules deals with thoughts resulting from misinterpretation and misinformation [329, 332]. These rules indicate the importance of discovering the false reasoning and logic [333–334]. As Veltri explains, "The Bad Angel is associated primarily with insight—false knowledge, false understanding, some sort of intellectual guidance that masquerades as light" (In the Second Week, 2).

In this sense, angels and spirits cause thoughts and feelings in the psyche, and these patterns of thoughts and feelings could form habitual behaviors or even influence us when making an important election. Ignatius notes,

"The choice or decision has not been made as it should have been if there has been a certain discorded attachment involved ... [172]." In general, Ignatius believes spiritual desolation comes when one is dominated by an inordinate attachment, thus impacting on one's decision-making process. Veltri exemplifies, "The Second Class of Persons [154] is a good example of being dominated by such an Inordinate Attachment. When such an attachment begins to be manifested during the Exercises journey, it is often through Desolation" (12).

Compared to ancient psychology, how do we understand spiritual consolation and desolation in terms of contemporary psychology? Judith Roemer and George Schemel argue, "Bad spirit, good spirit in the context of discernment can be considered metaphorical. We might use other words today because we live in an era that has a pertinent psychological vocabulary" (Schemel and Roemer, 232). Therefore, in the following sections, I will discuss patterns of consolation and desolation through the lens of contemporary psychotherapy theories in order to consider the possibilities for dealing with desolation in making Exercises.

Trace the Sources: Core Needs

Based on contemporary psychotherapy theories, there are many arguments to explain the fluctuation of thoughts and feelings, as well as how they affect behaviors. These theories could be applied to understand the sources of the fluctuation, especially the patterns of desolation, which is dominated by disordered affections or disordered tendencies [1, 172]. According to psychoanalysis theory, disordered affections or sinful tendencies could be in the unconsciousness level, where an emotional complex exists and has an effect on behaviors. In other theories, it could be a shadow of personality (Jungian therapy), unfinished business (Gestalt therapy), unsecured attachment (object relations theory), irrational belief (cognitive therapy), life-traps (schema-focused cognitive therapy), and so on.

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Among these theories, cognitive therapy focuses on irrational belief, which results from wrong logic and inappropriate inference. In Ignatius's language, it is the evil angel, masquerading as angel of light [332], who leads to deceptive thoughts. Jeff Young developed a model called schema-focused cognitive therapy to help us understand deceptive thoughts, namely deeper patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving needing intervention (Smith, 1).

Young argues that when core needs of humankind are not adequately met, we are in the face of various life-traps. He notes, "The life-traps are organized around five core developmental needs, such that when any of these are not adequately met, certain corresponding life-traps are likely to develop." In Young's view, life-traps are also known as early maladaptive schemas, and these schemas are "comprised of memories, cognitions, emotions, and body sensations" (1).

Young claims the first need is connection. If one experiences emotional disconnection in early life, he is predisposed to the abandonment, emotional deprivation, and mistrust and abuse life-traps. If the need for autonomy is not adequately met, one is likely to have developed the life-trap of dependence. When parents do not set the need for realistic limits properly, one may lead to the life-trap of entitlement. Self-directedness helps a person to identify and express feelings, and if this need is not satisfied, it results in a subjugation life-trap. If parents emphasize duty over pleasure, the child may develop the life-trap of unrelenting standards because the need for spontaneity and play are forbidden (7-8). The way people satisfy the five core needs effects how they react to the environment. So if the needs are not met adequately, a life-trap will be an obstacle in our spiritual journey and form patterns of desolation.

Young also indicates that these life-traps are kept alive by the process of maintenance, avoidance, and compensation (8). These three processes reinforce irrational beliefs, thus keeping people trapped in certain patterns of behaviors. At this point, it is obvious that psychological disorder and spiritual disorder are very often interwoven. In any case, it is important to be aware of the core needs, how we meet them, and how the desolation patterns result from unsatisfied needs.

Approaches to Dealing with Life-Traps

John Cecero suggests various prayer types to facilitate a change of irrational belief. For instance, *lectio divina* helps one to repeat God's word through images, phrases, and symbols to receive the reassurance of God's faithful and eternal love. In this way, the spiritual directee gets a new perspective. In other words, the spiritual directee's cognitive patterns have been changed from irrational beliefs to God's truth.

Point-counterpoint dialogue helps the spiritual directee to argue with God about the validity of a life-trap. The spiritual directee could list her own beliefs on the life-trap and then make another list from God's view. This dialogue could change the spiritual directee's distorted cognitive system and let God's words reframe it.

Another example is the inner healing contemplation. In the imaginative prayer, one imagines asking for healing in front of Jesus and then sees Jesus's light and strength to heal him. When one experiences the presence of Jesus's love in this inner healing contemplation, both his cognitive and emotional levels are touched by God.

Using schema-focused cognitive therapy, it is possible to help patients determine the life-trap and receive interventions from the psychotherapist. However, in making Exercises, a spiritual director usually does not intervene with psychotherapy techniques. A spiritual director helps a directee with various prayer types. The spiritual directee turns to God and receives his grace to heal the irrational belief and feelings that accompany them, thus letting God open the trap.

Conclusion

Discernment of spiritual movements and of making an election forms a journey bringing us back to our Father's home. The dynamic in discernment is like a dance; by listening to the music—God's voice—we attune ourselves to the music and find the rhythm and then let God lead us to dance towards him. This harmony is similar to what William A. Barry writes: "The best criterion by which to discern God's action in one's life is the sense of a developing inner and outer harmony" (81). Therefore, the art of discernment will familiarize us over time with patterns of God's love and of demonic selfish love.

The Spiritual Exercises do not give a description of one's lifelong spiritual journey; rather, they give a way of under-



"On Foot" — Alan Tibbetts

standing and dealing with the transient moments within the journey (Veltri, *In the First Week*, 6). In this way, every transient moment in harmony will prove God's presence in one's life. ■

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