Rules of Discernment: Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius

There are two sets of Rules for Discernment found in the Spiritual Exercises. One set is for those younger in the faith (Week 1) and those listed here are designed for those more mature in the faith (Week 2).

**What is spiritual discernment?**

**“**The discernment of spirits has to do with distinguishing among the stirrings of our heart that which is of God and that which is not, and how to respond to these stirrings.” *Timothy Gallagher*

**The purpose of the Rules of Discernment:**

Ignatius has two presuppositions when it comes to the Rules of Discernment:

1. God communicates with people through internal feelings (to a lesser extent our ideas).

2. We can be readily deceived by our feelings and ideas.

**There are two key terms (movements) that are a focal point for the rules of discernment. They are consolation and desolation.**

**Timothy Gallagher came up with an excellent paradigm for understanding the role played by the Rules of Discernment. He writes that these rules help one to:**

1. **“be aware”**(noticing what is going on within),
2. **“understand”** (whether this is from God or not)
3. **“take action”** (accept or reject what you have noticed and understood).

**Rule 1**. When you are living with Jesus on the front burner of your life (consolation), you will tend to experience God’s presence as supportive, encouraging, even joy filled, and you will tend to experience the presence of the evil one as bringing dissatisfaction, anxiety, self-doubts, even feelings of pride concerning your walk with God.

**Rule 2**. If you experience the rising of consolation without an external catalyst, this is a consolation you can trust as coming from God. It is called “a consolation without previous cause.” This type of consolation is not given because of anything you did but as a gracious gift from God. This is the only type of consolation that can be fully trusted and entered into without reservation. (However, in rule 8 below, Ignatius will even give some cautionary advice about the period immediately following this type of consolation)

**Rule 3.** When you experience consolation that has an external cause to it (music, Scripture, a sunset, a child’s smile, a work of art, a sermon, a passage in a book…), its source can be the good or evil spirit. Ignatius advised that the source of consolation, even if it flows from something good, may not be from God but can just as easily be from the evil spirit and used for his ends.

**Rule 4**. In case you did not get the message in rule 3, rule 4 clearly states that the evil one can and does appear as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14) and will even use good and holy thoughts to achieve his ends. The days of solely being tempted with something overtly evil are over. Wisdom and discernment are now the order of the day.

**Rule 5**. A good, God-honoring beginning that brings consolation does not guarantee a good, God-honoring ending. Here, you are cautioned to be self-aware and discerning, not only as you make a decision but as you proceed with that decision. You may make a decision based on wisdom that seems like a good decision, but that does not mean you will not fall into the snare of the evil one. The “angel of light’ can begin to subtly divert your attention and course from where you began. If at some point you discover that your heart and mind are far from God, the evil spirit has derailed you.

**Rule 6**. When you realize that you have been deceived, retrace your steps. Go back to the beginning, middle and end of your choice, exploring your attitudes to see where the evil spirit got its hooks into you.

**Rule 7**. When you are proceeding from good to better, you will experience God’s touch as light and gentle, like a drop of water falling on a sponge, but you will experience the evil spirit like a drop of water hitting a stone **-** sharply and with noise and disquiet**.** However, if you are proceeding from good to bad, your experience of God and the evil spirit will be the opposite of what is stated above.

**Rule 8**. Beware of the afterglow of consolation without previous cause. Although consolation without previous cause is without a doubt from God, all that follows from that experience is not necessarily from God. Be careful about making heartfelt commitments and vows to God after such a time; this could very well be the evil spirit sidetracking a holy moment for his own ends. These afterglow feelings are not directly connected to the consolation without previous cause and can be used by the evil spirit to lead you to make decisions that appear to be God-honoring but are not what God is inviting you into. So purpose not to make any decision immediately after an experience of consolation without previous cause.

**Here’s an exercise for us in Awareness, Understanding, and Action…**

*Read through the eight rules above slowly, asking God to draw your attention to something spiritually significant. So, what’s shimmering? What seems most “current” for you right now? After finding your “point of attraction,” meditate on it and pray through it. Finally, determine if there is an invitation to a point of action or resolution?*