

Rules for the Discernment of Spirits

How Ignatius' Rules Help Us:

1. They help us become aware of our inner life.
2. They help us understand what the movements of our inner life mean, where they come from, and where they are leading us.
3. They help us judge the right course of action by indicating which alternative leads us closer to God.
4. They help us know how to act in times of consolation and desolation.

(From *What's Your Decision?*, J. Michael Sparough, SJ, Jim Manney, and Tim Hipskind, SJ, Loyola Press, 2010)

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS

A Foundation

RULE 1

For those moving away from God, or spiritually regressing, the evil spirit tries to convince us that evil is good. It will make self-centred behaviour seem appealing and comfortable. The good spirit, on the other hand, will sting our conscience, raise doubts about the path one is taking, and encourage a different course.

RULE 2

For one who is spiritually maturing and growing closer to God, the spirits use the opposite tactics. The evil spirit will give us doubts about our path, create within us a false sadness about the things that will be missed, and discourage us from our movement toward God. On the other hand, the good spirit will console and encourage our path through peace and joy.

Consolation and Desolation

RULE 3

Spiritual consolation is an increase in faith, hope, love, and interior joy; growing toward God; inflamed with love and peace in one's Creator. All is seen in the context of God, the giver of all good gifts. We may even be moved to tears because of our sins and failures, yet consoled because we know we have an infinitely compassionate and loving God. In consolation we may feel moved to serve and love God more deeply.

RULE 4

Spiritual desolation is the opposite of consolation. We may find ourselves weighed down by a darkness of the soul, disquiet, not feeling hope and love. There may be a dryness in prayer or

a feeling of separation from our Creator. In desolation we may feel despair or selfish, with little desire for the things of God.

Dealing with Desolation

RULE 5

In desolation the evil spirit is trying to derail us and cause us to divert our path from God. Therefore, this is not a time to change or make new decisions. We must stay with decisions we had formerly made in peace and consolation.

RULE 6

While we shouldn't run from the pain, we shouldn't be passive. Become active against the desolation by praying more, making an examination of our lives, caring for ourselves through exercise and healthy eating, or doing good works for others. In short, move your focus from yourself to others. Know that desolation is temporary and will pass (and it's not the same as depression).

RULE 7

While God may seem absent in desolation or doesn't seem to care much for us, we must remind ourselves that the opposite is actually true. God is present, loving us, whether or not we feel that presence in the moment.

RULE 8

Have patience in desolation, knowing that it will pass. We can remind ourselves that consolation has come to us in the past and will come to us again.

Why We Suffer Desolation

RULE 9

Take time to identify the possible cause of the desolation, knowing that God does not cause desolation but may allow it if it comes to us. Ignatius offers three possible reasons:

1. We may have grown tepid in our spiritual life, given into a selfish desire, or neglected our relationship with God in some way.
2. It is a sort of trial of faith, testing our patience and commitment to God despite any dryness, darkness, or absence of spiritual gift. Do we love God or just love God's gifts?
3. It is a reminder of our reliance on God and that consolation is a gift, not something we can own or control.

On Consolation

RULE 10

When in consolation we ought to remind ourselves that we may find ourselves in desolation in the future, so we should cherish this time and remember the graces of it the next time we find ourselves in desolation.

RULE 11

Acknowledge the gift of consolation in gratitude and humility, knowing that all good gifts come from God.

Some Helpful Metaphors**RULE 12**

The evil spirit is like a spoiled child or a bully. Give in and give them what they want and they'll only demand more. The evil spirit can exploit when it senses you're weak or your guard is let down. So stand firm in courage. There's no need to give in or fear the bully.

RULE 13

The evil spirit is like a false lover who uses and objectifies others for their own selfish ends. They want the affair to be kept secret and in the dark. Our tactic against the evil spirit is to bring our fears and temptations into the light by sharing them with a trusted friend, a confessor, or a spiritual director.

RULE 14

The evil spirit is like a military commander who discerns the weak points in their enemy's defences in order to attack. Self-knowledge and humility is important to resisting this attack. An unhealthy amount of pride or complacency makes us even more blind to our weak points.

GUIDELINES FOR MORE SUBTLE DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS

A Foundation

RULE 1

While the good spirit tends to give joy, peace, and encouragement the evil spirit can raise subtle fears, doubts, or dissatisfaction about the course we're taking.

Causes of Consolation

RULE 2

If we experience a sudden consolation and joyful peace without any apparent cause or reason, it is from God.

RULE 3

When consolation does occur because of a cause, like a thought or an event, it may be from the good spirit trying to strengthen and encourage us, or from the evil spirit trying to distract us or cause us to focus on ourselves.

Questionable Consolation

RULE 4

For one who wants to pursue good, the evil spirit is often disguised as an "angel of light" appearing like the good spirit. Our attention may be shifted to other "good" things and we may eventually become prideful or selfish.

RULE 5

The course of a consolation is likely to be from the good spirit if we find ourselves growing closer to God at the beginning, middle, and end. If, on the other hand, we notice the path of our experience begins as good but slowly becomes corrupted and moves toward selfish thoughts and inclinations (and even desolation), it is likely the evil spirit who has hijacked the consolation.

RULE 6

If we gave in to false consolation and were duped by the evil spirit we must resolve to examine what happened and where we might have been led astray. Then, learning from our mistakes, we should get back on track and move forward.

Being Attentive to Our Feelings

RULE 7

If we're maturing in the spiritual life the good spirit is gentle like a drop of water quietly being absorbed by a sponge while the evil spirit is harsh and disturbing like a drop of water hitting a stone.

RULE 8

When we experience sudden unexplained consolation from God (as in Rule 2) and find a sort of “afterglow” of exhilaration and feeling on fire for God, we can be tempted to make quick and rash decisions. Just as we shouldn’t make important decisions in desolation, we should refrain from making big decisions in the extremes of blinding consolation. Wait until things settle and then engage in a thoughtful discernment before making any major choices.

“...We have to decide whether it is new wine brought by God or an illusion created by the spirit of this world or the spirit of the devil. At other times, the opposite can happen, when the forces of evil induce us not to change, to leave things as they are, to opt for a rigid resistance to change. Yet that would be to block the working of the Spirit. We are free, with the freedom of Christ. Still, he asks us to examine what is within us – our desires, anxieties, fears and questions – and what takes place all around us – ‘the signs of the times’ – and thus to recognize the paths that lead to complete freedom. ‘Test everything; hold fast to what is good’ (1 Thess 5:21).”

(Pope Francis, Gaudete et Exsultate, 168)

“Discernment, then, is not a solipsistic self-analysis or a form of egotistical introspection, but an authentic process of leaving ourselves behind in order to approach the mystery of God, who helps us to carry out the mission to which he has called us, for the good of our brothers and sisters.”

(Pope Francis, Gaudete et Exsultate, 175)