

# Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

## Guidelines for the Discernment of Spirits

### Part 1: An Introduction of St. Ignatius<sup>1</sup>

The old saying, “Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future,” speaks a lot of truth. Often, when we reflect on the lives of the saints we are struck by their other-worldly perfection and holiness. We might find ourselves struggling to see how we could ever follow their amazing example. However, an injured army soldier, Ignatius of Loyola, saw the heroism of the saints, not as an example too difficult to follow, but as a challenge to boldly imitate. He knew the sinfulness of his past, but was driven by the hope of a holy future. Thanks to his boldness, we have great spiritual instruction and guidance to help us on our faith journey!

Over the next twelve months, I will be writing a series of articles on St. Ignatius of Loyola's “Guidelines for the Discernment of Spirits.” These guidelines are practical helps to understanding how God is working in our lives and how Satan usually tries to interfere in our lives. Ignatius' own spiritual journey was the foundation for his guidelines, so it is important for us to know a little about his life and, therefore, understand the faith that inspired the lessons.

Ignatius was born in 1491 A.D. at the castle of Loyola in Spain. At a young age, he was enamored with lofty dreams of winning glory and being famous. He joined in all of the sins that were associated with handsome young men of his time. In 1517, Ignatius entered into service in the army. During a battle with the French in 1521, he was injured by a cannon ball and was taken to Loyola to recuperate. In order to pass the time during his recovery from the injury, Ignatius asked for some romance novels to read. Such books were his favorite pastime and reflected his love for worldly chivalry and fame. Thankfully, no such novels were available, so he was brought copies of the lives of Christ and the saints. This was the beginning of God's lesson in discernment.

Ignatius noticed that when he read romance novels he was left feeling dry and empty (desolation), however, when he read the lives of Christ and the saints he was left feeling joy and peace (consolation). One night, while he was meditating on this new awareness, “he saw clearly,” as his biography states, “the image of Our Lady with the Holy Child Jesus.” The sight led him to renounce his sinful past and deepened the conversion that was happening in his heart.

In the following years, Ignatius grew in his awareness of the role of desolation and consolation in his relationship with God. He came to understand that spiritual consolation was from God and was something that he needed to embrace and respond to, whereas spiritual desolation was from Satan and he needed to reject it and turn toward God. From this seemingly simple awareness, God developed in Ignatius' mind and heart a very advanced understanding of the discernment of spirits.

At the end of July, 1556, the founder of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), Saint Ignatius of Loyola, died in Rome. He left the Church with written notes about what God had done in his life and what he had learned about avoiding Satan's attack and living in God's peace. Thankfully, Ignatius' awareness of the good and evil “movements” in his heart did not die with him, but has been offered to us as an example of how we can also discern these movements in our own hearts in the hope of knowing their source—God or Satan.

For the next twelve months, we will take a look at the practical and deeply insightful advice that Saint Ignatius left for us. He was a saint who was deeply aware of his past sins and a sinner who was heroically willing to submit to the saintliness that God desired for his future. As saints with a past and sinners with a future, all of us can benefit from the wisdom of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is part one of a twelve part series that I am writing on the “Guidelines for the Discernment of Spirits” by St. Ignatius of Loyola.