

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

Guidelines for the Discernment of Spirits

Part 3: The First Two Rules¹

Many years ago, a man named Paul came to talk to me about his overwhelming feelings of guilt. When he was a teenager, he had financially assisted his girlfriend in having an abortion. Since then, we had struggled with overwhelming feelings of guilt, shame, depression, and anger. He had asked God for forgiveness many times, but the bad feelings continued to pop back up. It seemed that the more he got involved in his faith, the more the painful memories and feelings would creep back in and wreak havoc. These feelings were affecting, not only him, but his wife and their children, too.

Discernment, according to St. Ignatius of Loyola, begins with determining a person's fundamental stance in life. In his first and second rules of discernment, found in paragraphs 314-315 of the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius explains how one's fundamental stance toward or away from God affects discernment. As we look at these two rules, we will apply them to what we know about Paul's situation. Hopefully, this will help us to see how these rules apply to our own lives and how they lay the foundation for future discernment.

The first thing that must be discerned in the spiritual life is a person's fundamental stance with God. While every human being is a sinner, some people willingly choose to make sin a part of their lives and have no interest in coming to know God, while others struggle to root sin out of their lives while trying to be open to knowing God's love. Before we can discern something we have to know what type of person we are dealing with—is the person fundamentally directed away from God or toward God? This fundamental “direction” will dictate how we experience both Satan and God. Regarding the situation described above, we know that Paul is now directed toward God.

The reason why it is important to determine a person's fundamental stance in life becomes clear and obvious as we read St. Ignatius' first and second rules. When a person is “caught up in a life of sin,” Satan will simply try to maintain the “status quo” in the person's life or will try “to entice [the person] to a future of ever greater pleasures still to be grasped.” God, however, will try to do just the opposite. He will try to get the person to “see the absurdity of the direction” his or her life has taken. Ignatius explains that, “little by little an uneasiness described sometimes as the ‘sting’ of conscience comes about and a feeling of remorse sets in which stimulates change from the evil way.” In summary, then, a person living a life of sin will find that encouragement comes from the evil spirit, while guilt comes from God.

In the second rule, St. Ignatius explains that a person who is fundamentally directed *toward* God will experience just the opposite of the first rule. He writes, “It is the way of the evil spirit to bite, sadden, and put obstacles, disquieting with false reasons, that one may not go on; and it is proper to the good [spirit] to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations and quiet, easing, and putting away all obstacles, that one may go on in well doing.”

Like most of St. Ignatius' writing, these first two rules are practical and obvious—Satan always wants to support and encourage sinfulness, while God wants to lead us out of it. And, God always wants to support and encourage spiritual growth, while Satan wants to lead us out of it.

We know that Paul is now fundamentally directed toward God and therefore, we can discern that the overwhelming feelings of guilt and depression he is experiencing over a past sin is a tactic from Satan to pull him away from God and his family. Without knowing St. Ignatius' first two rules, Paul might have thought that the guilt he was experiencing was from God and that God was either mad at him or had not yet forgiven him. Such an example quickly helps us to see how important these first two rules are in the discipline of discernment.

¹ This article is part three of a twelve part series on the “Guidelines for the Discernment of Spirits” by St. Ignatius of Loyola.