

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

Guidelines for the Discernment of Spirits

Part 4: Consolation and Desolation¹

I was recently reading a book by Henri Nouwen. He made the point that many Americans today don't think it is possible to be both sad and joyful or sorrowful and happy. Yet, these realities can and do coexist in our lives. Saint Ignatius of Loyola, by better defining the various emotional and spiritual movements in our lives, helps us to see the possibility of seemingly contradictory feelings coexisting.

In the second article of this series, I wrote about how varied and vast our mood swings can be and how important it is for us to be intimately aware of them. In rules three and four of his Spiritual Exercises, Saint Ignatius describes two particular spiritual movements, consolation and desolation, and helps us to understand how our feelings are related to our spiritual growth. He defines spiritual consolation as: "an interior movement [that] is aroused in the soul, by which it is inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord, and as a consequence, can love no creature on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of them all. It is likewise consolation when one sheds tears that move to the love of God, whether it is because of sorrow for sins, or because of the sufferings of Christ our Lord, or for any other reason that is immediately directed to the praise and service of God. Finally, I call consolation every increase of faith, hope, and love, and all interior joy that invites and attracts to what is heavenly and to the salvation of one's soul by filling it with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord." In short, spiritual consolation is anything and everything that authentically leads us closer to God.

St. Ignatius defines spiritual desolation as "what [ever] is entirely the opposite of what is described [as consolation], as darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness rising from many disturbances and temptations which lead to want of faith, want of hope, want of love. The soul is wholly slothful, tepid, sad, and separated as it were, from its Creator and Lord. For just as consolation is the opposite of desolation, so are the thoughts that spring from consolation the opposite of those that spring from desolation." In short, spiritual desolation is anything and everything that leads us away from God.

Spiritual consolation and desolation are different than *psychological* consolation and desolation. Psychological consolation and desolation are grounded strictly in feelings and are, therefore, morally neutral. They might help to lead us closer to God, but they may not. An example will help us to better understand the differences between these two types of consolation and desolation.

Buying a new motorcycle may bring me great happiness, but I might find myself distracted in prayer, thinking about the bike instead of God. I might also start spending more time riding than praying. While I am happy about the new bike (psychological consolation), it is actually leading me further away from God (spiritual desolation).

Another example can help to further explain. If I lose my job I might feel a terrible depression and hopelessness (psychological desolation). However, the hopelessness might lead me to reach out to God in a more explicit way, praying for a deeper trust in Him (spiritual consolation).

Of course, there are also times when spiritual consolation is paired with psychological consolation, as well as spiritual desolation paired with psychological desolation. As mature Christians, we must be willing to consciously discern these movements so as to better respond to God. Regardless of what we are "feeling" emotionally or psychologically, we must be interested in growing spiritually closer to God.

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