

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

Guidelines for the Discernment of Spirits

Part 5: Four Guidelines for Dealing with Desolation¹

What do you do when your life becomes “out of control” and filled with turmoil or depression? I did not realize it until six years ago, but I shop. I hate shopping. I try to avoid shopping at all costs. I will even suffer through a diet rather than going shopping for looser fitting clothes! Yet, when life begins feeling out of control and I’m experiencing a lot of uncertainty and turmoil in life, I feel a compulsion to shop. Psychologically, shopping gives me a chance to be in control of *something* in my life when I don’t feel in control of many other things. I’m sure many people share my shopping solution, but other people might have different solutions, like alcohol, drugs, sex, internet, work, chat rooms, or thousands of other things. Regardless, none of these things is a healthy approach to dealing with what can be called “desolation.”²

In rules five through eight of his Spiritual Exercises, Saint Ignatius offers four guidelines to help us deal with desolation in a spiritually healthy way. The first suggestion that Ignatius offers is to never make a change when we’re experiencing psychological desolation. This is a very commonsensical suggestion. Like a ship caught in a storm, it is dangerous for us to change direction while in desolation. Saint Ignatius encourages us to simply continue with the good commitments and decisions that we had previously made (before the desolation).

In addition to not making changes, Ignatius suggests that we deepen our commitments to prayer, penance, and other good spiritual practices. By doing so, we directly confront the desolation rather than turning toward other (unhealthy) things.

Thirdly, times of desolation are always opportunities to be strengthened in faith. Consolation is often accompanied with good-feeling emotions, while desolation is not. It is often very dry, barren, and unpleasant. This is the perfect atmosphere for us to demonstrate to God that we love Him, not for the good feelings that He gives us, but rather, because we know *by faith* that He has first loved us. We may not *feel* Him present, but we make ourselves present to Him in prayer knowing through *faith* that He is with us.

Lastly, desolation is always a time for us to grow in patience. Satan wants nothing more than for us to turn to something, anything, other than God during times of desolation. Therefore, we must be patient. Rather than filling our emptiness with shopping or feeding our desolation with ice cream, we must patiently remember that consolation will come, eventually.

Every human being experiences desolation. Saint Ignatius offers us some practical and solid spiritual advice for these difficult times—don’t change previous good decisions, choose to go against the desolation, nurture faith, and wait patiently. Ignatius did not come up with these guidelines arbitrarily, but through much experience and prayer. Throughout the centuries they have been a great source of encouragement and wisdom for many Christians. They are offered to us now as wonderful tools for us to grow in our relationship with Christ. It is never enough, though, for us to just *know* such guidelines, we must be willing to implement them. The best way for us to do that, is to be keenly aware of how we ordinarily run from desolations. As we become aware of our patterns of behavior in desolation, we can begin to implement Ignatius’ suggestions in place of them.

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

² By “desolation,” I am referring to psychological desolation and not the spiritual desolation of moving away from God. This is what St. Ignatius addresses in rules 5-8.