

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

Guidelines for the Discernment of Spirits

Part 6: Three Causes of Desolation¹

“I don’t know why I did that…” Many people do many things without discerning the motives, or causes, for their actions. In fact, all of us have probably said or thought those very same words, “I don’t know why I did that.” Saint Paul even had similar thoughts when he wrote, “What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate” (Romans 7:15). We might find ourselves very angry or depressed, but rather than discerning why we feel that way, we simply act on our emotions, often causing great hurt to ourselves and others.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola thought it was very important for people to reflect on the *causes* that influence them. In rule #9 of his Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius was particularly concerned with the causes of desolation.² He discerned three particular causes that help us to know how to respond to the difficulties and pain that come with psychological desolation. The very first cause Ignatius mentions is our need for conversion.

If we have found ourselves in a spiritually and emotionally difficult and/or painful place, then it might be because we have become “tepid, lazy, or negligent” in our prayer life.³ In this way, the very first two questions we have to honestly ask ourselves are, “Have I maintained my discipline of prayer lately?” and “Have I been sinning more lately?” If laziness, negligence, and sin are present, then there is a need for conversion in our lives. We should go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, do penance, and recommit ourselves to the discipline of prayer.

If sin has not increased in our lives, and our prayer has been steady, then there are two other possible causes for desolation. It might be that God is testing our faith. He is finding out whether we love *Him* or simply the *feelings and gifts* He gives us. God is testing whether we are willing to continue the discipline of prayer even when we can’t “feel” Him near us or sense that He’s listening to us. Many of the saints wrote that prayer is the most affective and powerful during these times of dryness and desolation because it is founded on faith rather than feeling. Saint Ignatius encourages us to keep a regular practice of prayer, penance, and devotion when we are faced with these tests from God.

Another reason why we might be experiencing desolation in our lives is because God desires for us to grow in humility. It can be a time for us to remember that we cannot control God. We cannot control “great devotion, intense love, tears, or any other spiritual consolation, but that all is the gift and grace of God our Lord.”⁴ It is very tempting to try to control our relationship with God. Desolation can be an opportunity to be reminded that we rely *completely* on God. In this way, we grow in humility. Pride tries to control; humility surrenders.

Every single human being experiences times of desolation in life. While these times are never easy or enjoyable, they can be blessed opportunities for conversion, faith, and humility. Therefore, the next time we’re feeling desolation, let’s remember to discern the cause rather than simply acting on the pain and then offering the all-too-popular regret, “I don’t know why I did that…”

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

² See part three for a definition of “desolation.”

³ Rule #9-1

⁴ Rule #9-3