

# Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

## Guidelines for the Discernment of Spirits

### Part 8: How Satan Operates<sup>1</sup>

Just how subtle is Satan? In the Book of Genesis, we read how he subtly tricked Adam and Eve into doing the one thing God had asked them not to do. Satan's subtleness can also be seen in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter four, when we read how he tempted Jesus by quoting Sacred Scripture! He is definitely the master of deception. While Adam and Eve were tricked by Satan, Jesus saw through his subtle deception and demanded that he, "get away" (Matthew 4:10).

Saint Ignatius of Loyola was interested in revealing Satan's subtle nature to us. In his Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius shares with us how Satan operates, how he subtly tries to attack us. In an important way, St. Ignatius exposes how the enemy works so that we can be better prepared to defend our faith. Rules twelve thru fourteen in the Spiritual Exercises provide three analogies of how Satan attacks us.

The first of Ignatius' three analogies describes the tactics of the evil spirit as similar to that of a strong-willed woman. While this analogy might have worked four centuries ago, it could easily be misunderstood today. The point that Ignatius makes in this rule is more easily understood using the analogy of a spoiled child. Satan acts like a spoiled child in so much as he takes advantage of any semblance of weakness that we show him. When parents don't regularly and consistently discipline their children, it is likely that they will take advantage of every opportunity to get their way. Satan is the same way. If we repeatedly cave in to his temptations, he will likely become even more demanding of our attention in that particular area of our lives. If we give him an inch, he will take a mile. Like Jesus, we must forcibly command Satan to "Get away!"

Another tactic of the evil one is to pose as a "licentious lover."<sup>2</sup> False lovers never want to be revealed, but rather, they desire to keep their illicit love secret. Similarly, Satan never wants his work to be revealed. He operates in the dark and hates the light. In chapter five of his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul confirms Ignatius' analogy, writing, "Take no part in the fruitless works of darkness; rather expose them, for it is shameful even to mention the things done by them in secret; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light" (Ephesians 5:11-13). The way we guard against such an attack is by keeping our thoughts, words, and actions in God's light, especially by regularly celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation and/or regularly sharing our struggles with a spiritual friend or spiritual director.

Lastly, we read that the evil spirit acts like a very competent army commander.<sup>3</sup> A good army commander is one that knows his enemy's weaknesses. We can be sure that Satan knows our weaknesses. He "looks in turn at all our virtues, theological, cardinal, and moral; and where he finds us weakest and most in need for our eternal salvation, there he attacks us and aims at taking us."<sup>4</sup> One way we guard against this particular attack is by beating Satan at his own game through self-awareness. As we discern our weaknesses, God's grace leads us in fortifying the virtues we need to grow in holiness.

Because Satan's deceptions are very subtle, we must be all-the-more diligent in making our rejection of him clear and consistent. "Blessed is the man who perseveres in temptation, for when he has been proved he will receive the crown of life that [Christ] promised to those who love him" (James 1:12).

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<sup>1</sup> This article is part seven of a twelve part series on the "Guidelines for the Discernment of Spirits" by St. Ignatius of Loyola.

<sup>2</sup> The Spiritual Exercise of St. Ignatius of Loyola, #326.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., #327

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