

# Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

## Guidelines for the Discernment of Spirits

### Part 9: A Guide for a More Subtle Discernment<sup>1</sup>

Mary is a young mother with two small children. She has become more active in her faith since her kids started Catholic school. She finds herself wanting to grow stronger in her faith and is ready to deepen her prayer life. One day, while quietly praying before the Blessed Sacrament, Mary is overcome with a deep desire to pray more each day. It is as though waves of warmth wash over her body. God seems very close. At that moment, a small voice challenges her to pray for three hours a day. Grateful that God has spoken to her, she commits herself to praying for three hours each evening.

God would want all of us to pray more, right? Maybe not. Rules twelve through fourteen in the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola describe the subtlety of Satan's attacks. Satan's nature can be *so* subtle, that Ignatius dedicated an entire section of his Spiritual Exercises to exposing some of the subtleties. Entitled, "Rules for the Same Effect with Greater Discernment of Spirits," Ignatius thought that a more detailed explanation of Satan's subtle nature would be particularly beneficial for Christians who were advanced in their spiritual journey.

There are two particular types of consolation that Ignatius is interested in explaining to us. I will address the second type in this article and the first type in the next one.<sup>2</sup> One form of consolation, as described in paragraph #331, is referred to as consolation "with cause." This is the most common form of consolation. It is consolation with a recognizable cause. For example, if we find ourselves driving down the road and we see a beautiful rainbow in the sky and we are overcome with an awareness of God's love for us, then our consolation was "with cause." In other words, God used the rainbow to draw our hearts into His love.

While consolations "with cause" can come from God, there is always the danger that they can originate from the evil spirit who is trying to deceive us. This is what Sacred Scripture is referring to when it teaches us that Satan can appear as an "angel of the light."<sup>3</sup> Saint Ignatius also mentions this fact:

It is proper to the evil angel, who forms himself under the appearance of an angel of light, to... bring good and holy thoughts...and then little by little he aims at...drawing the soul to his covert deceits and perverse intentions.<sup>4</sup>

This is the type of temptation that we face as seasoned Christians. Satan knows better than to tempt steadfast Christians with blatant sins; so instead, he tries to thwart Christians by tempting them with "good things" that subtly lead them away from God. The example at the beginning of this article is a case in point.

Mary thought that the invitation to pray three hours a day had come from God, but in reality it was a suggestion from the evil spirit. Her time spent in prayer took her away from her responsibilities as a wife and mother. It quickly led to problems with her family. Since the "consolation" she experienced at church was "with cause" (i.e. she was in prayer, dwelling on her desire to grow spiritually), then her experience needed to be carefully discerned and scrutinized. We must do the same thing whenever we experience consolations with a previous cause. Satan desires to use things that appear "good" (i.e. false consolations) to subtly lead us away from the good that God desires for us.<sup>5</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> For an explanation of consolation, see article #4 in this series.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:14.

<sup>4</sup> The Spiritual Exercise of St. Ignatius of Loyola, #332.

<sup>5</sup> In article 11 of this series we will look at Ignatius' suggestions for how to discern if a consolation with previous cause is from God or not.