

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

Guidelines for the Discernment of Spirits

Part 10: Consolation without a Previous Cause¹

Now Saul, still breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, that, if he should find any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them back to Jerusalem in chains. On his journey, as he was nearing Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" He said, "Who are you, sir?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

-Acts 9:1-5

Saint Paul's conversion is one of the most well-known stories in salvation history. In an instant, Saul, the great persecutor of the Church, was transformed into Paul, the great Apostle of the Church. Paul's encounter with God was what Saint Ignatius of Loyola would call a "consolation without previous cause."² In paragraph #330 of his Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius writes, "It belongs to God our Lord to give consolation to the soul without preceding cause."

Consolations *without* previous cause are not as common as consolations *with* previous cause. Usually, we can figure out why and how God led us to an experience of His love. We can recognize that a particular prayer, word, relationship, place, smell, song, gift, etc. drew our mind and heart into the consolation of God. However, there are those special times when no previous cause can be determined. In these moments, God pierces through the ordinariness of our lives and draws us into His love for no apparent reason, "without any previous sense or knowledge of any object through which such consolation would come."³ The great blessing of this type of consolation is that we do not need to spend energy and time trying to discern if it's really from God or not. Consolations without previous cause are *always* from God.

The example of Saul's conversion is a very profound one, and might not be something that most of us can relate to. Reverend George Aschenbrenner, in his book, "Stretched for Greater Glory," offers an example with which we might be able to more realistically identify. He writes of the consolation that the famous Catholic novelist, Walker Percy, had during a Christmas Mass.

The Mass was going on, the homily standard... A not-so-good choir of young rock musicians got going on Joy to the World, the vocals not so good but enthusiastic. Then it hit me: what if it should be the case that the entire cosmos had a creator and what if he decided for reasons of his own to show up as a little baby, conceived and born under suspicious circumstances? Well... you can [blame it on] Alzheimer's or hang-over or whatever, but it hit me. I had to pretend I had an allergy attack so I could take out my handkerchief.⁴

While one might be tempted to think that Percy's attendance at Mass was, in and of itself, a previous cause, the fact that the consolation he received was not in *proportion* to his presence at Mass leads Aschenbrenner to suggest that it could be an example of a consolation without previous cause. Such consolations, since we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that they come from God, are experiences that we should take to prayer time and time again in order to savor them with God.

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

² For an explanation of consolations *with* previous causes, see article nine.

³ The Spiritual Exercise of St. Ignatius of Loyola, #330.

⁴ Aschenbrenner, George, S.J. Stretched for Greater Glory. Loyola Press, 2004, pgs. 193-194.