

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

Guidelines for the Discernment of Spirits

Part 12: Final Thoughts on Consolations¹

When a bright camera flash goes off in our face we can often see continued flashes for several seconds. While these secondary flashes are directly caused by the primary flash, they don't always look exactly like the first one. They might change in color or shape as they fade from our senses. This is a good analogy of the spiritual experience that Saint Ignatius of Loyola warns us about in paragraph #336 of his Spiritual Exercises.

While a particular consolation that we have experienced might have undoubtedly come from God, we must be careful not to assume that all of the "aftereffects" are also from Him. Ignatius warns that we should discern the aftereffects of a religious experience and not rush in making "various resolutions and opinions which are not given immediately by God our Lord..."²

I remember having a wonderful experience of God my second year of graduate school. It was one of those consolations without previous cause. It was an overwhelming affective experience of God's unconditional love for me. I wasn't looking for it or expecting it, yet God revealed His love! Since I didn't know what to do with the experience and didn't have words to describe it, I began making resolutions. I began to box up all of my belongings. I wanted to leave behind everything worldly. I stored my television, stereo, appliances, and every creature comfort, all at four o'clock in the morning!

God had not asked me to exchange sleep for packing boxes. Yet, the "secondary flashes" of my experience of God's love propelled me to do something, anything. Saint Ignatius shows his wisdom in warning us to discern *every* part of our experience of consolation, not just the beginning of the consolation. We must discern each aftereffect of God's consolation. Since Satan cannot rob us of authentic consolation, he will always try to derail us in the time following our experience of God's love.

Over the past year, there have been twelve articles that have explored, in a simple and even deficient way, the extraordinary wisdom of the Spiritual Exercises. I believe that the extraordinariness of Ignatius' contribution to the spiritual wealth of our Church is in a large part due to his very practical approach to our relationship with God. His writing has encouraged and guided thousands of Christians for centuries and I hope that these brief articles have continued that encouragement and guidance.

If you are interested in reading more about the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, I recommend the following books:

Stretched for Greater Glory by Fr. George Aschenbrenner, S.J.

Discovering Your Personal Vocation by Fr. Herbert Alphonso, S.J.

Weeds Among the Wheat by Fr. Thomas Greene, S.J.

Draw Me Into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises by David Fleming

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

² The Spiritual Exercise of St. Ignatius of Loyola, #336.