

At the beginning of the spiritual journey the ways of the evil spirit are vulgar and open. What is needed at this stage is not so much enlightenment as courage. But as the spiritual journey continues, the tactics of the evil spirit are more subtle: they present themselves under the appearance of good. What is needed at this stage is a more discriminating discernment to distinguish true from false consolation.

In his *Autobiography* Ignatius Loyola describes a spontaneous inner experience that at first seemed to be good but required a more discriminating discernment. At Manresa, after God had freed him from his “dark night,” Ignatius wrote that:

In addition to his seven hours of prayer, he spent time in helping souls who came there to see him about spiritual matters, while the rest of the day he gave to thinking about the things of God that he had read or meditated on that day. But often when he went to bed, great spiritual lights came to him, as did wonderful consolations, taking up most of the time that he had set aside for sleep, which was not much. Reflecting on this loss of sleep, he considered that he had allotted a fixed amount of time each day to converse with God, and then the remainder of the day as well, and thus he came to doubt whether these lights came from the good spirit. He concluded that he was better to set them aside and sleep the allotted time. This he did.

These “great spiritual lights” seemed to be genuine spiritual consolations, but Ignatius sensed that something about them did not feel right since they seemed to be leading him to something less good. He thus questioned if they had their source in God and decided that it was better to ignore them.

Rule 1: A Statement of General Application:

Good spirit: gives genuine happiness and spiritual joy, thereby banishing any sadness and turmoil induced by the enemy

Evil spirit: fights against this happiness and joy by using false reasoning, subtleties and persistent deceptions.

Ignatius begins, not by giving guidelines for spiritual action, but rather by clarifying how the contrasting spirits characteristically operate. Note the diametrically opposed orientations of the two spirits: the good spirit gives genuine consolation whereas the evil spirit gives only deceptive reasoning. The genuine joy given by the good spirit dispels the sadness and turmoil typical of the desolation induced by the enemy. The aim to the enemy here, through deceptive and subtle reasoning, is to purge our soul of its genuine joy and peace. The task in these rules is to unmask this false reasoning.

Rule 3: Consolation WITH Preceding Cause:

“How many tears I shed, deeply moved when I heard your hymns and canticles in the sweetly singing voices of your Church. The voices flowed into my ears and truth poured into my heart, and in my heart a feeling of devotion welled up; tears ran down, and I was happy in my tears.” (St. Augustine, *Confessions*, IX, 6, 14)

To at least some degree, the singing of the hymns and canticles can be said to have caused consolation in the heart of Augustine. Thus they can be described as the preceding cause of Augustine’s consolation.

Rule: When there is a cause, consolation can be given by the good or the evil spirit, but for opposite purposes: the good spirit for our profit, so that we grow and rise from good to better, the evil spirit for the contrary purpose.

Note: In the experience of consolation with preceding cause there is a possibility of deception. Rules 4-6 describe how this deception may occur.

Rule 4: The evil spirit can assume the form of an angel of light: he can propose what seems to us good and holy, but then succeeds little by little in getting his own way, drawing us into his hidden snares.

Rule 5: We should pay close attention to the whole train of our thoughts: If the beginning, middle and end are good and tend toward what is wholly good, it is a sign of the good spirit. But if a train of our thoughts ultimately leads to something evil or less good than what we had previously proposed to do, it is a clear sign that it is coming from the evil spirit.

Note: A spirit is recognized by its fruits, but the fruits can take time to appear. At first, the real quality of an underlying motivation, masked by thoughts which in themselves seem ‘good and holy,’ may be imperceptible. Where deception exists, then, it is identified, not in the thoughts we start with, but in a declining process, a process comprised of both thoughts and feelings. Thus, the influence of the evil spirit can be identified when over a continuous sequence:

- thoughts, seemingly tending toward what is wholly right, lead to other thoughts tending toward what is evil or distracting or less good; or
- what initially gave rise to feelings of peace, tranquility and quiet, now gives rise to being weakened, upset or distressed.

Rule 6: When the evil spirit has been detected and recognized by the evil end to which he leads, it profits us to retrace the whole train of good thoughts he has suggested, looking for their starting point, and noting how he contrived little by little to make us fall away from our state of sweetness and spiritual joy. By recognizing and taking note of this experience we are put on our guard for the future against his habitual deceits. Note: The very experience of being deceived, if reflected upon, contributes to growth in discernment. This underscores the importance of the examination of consciousness.

Rule 7: If our life is truly directed toward God, the good spirit touches us gently and lightly, as when a drop of water falls on a sponge, whereas the evil spirit touches us sharply with noise and disturbance, as when a drop of water falls on a stone.

Rule 2: Consolation WITHOUT Preceding Cause:

Rule: Only God can give consolation without preceding cause. Only God can enter the depths of our person and cause an interior motion which draws us entirely into his love.

The essential difference between consolation without preceding cause and with preceding cause is one of proportion. Consolation with preceding cause is a proportionate effect of considering, contemplating or reacting to ‘something’ (e.g., an idea, a text, an image, a memory, a Gospel story). However, consolation without preceding cause does not depend on anything. It is a gratuitous gift of God and, on our part, impossible to induce. Even if it occurs during ordinary prayer with its ordinary consolation, it will be experienced as breaking into the prayer, not as a natural development of it. It is discontinuous and disproportionate to anything that we may have been experiencing.

In his autobiography *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, the British writer C.S. Lewis describes his experiencing a consolation without a preceding cause when he was a boy:

“As I stood before a flowering currant bush on a summer day there suddenly arose in me without warning, as if from a depth not of years but of centuries, the memory of that earlier morning at the Old House when my brother had brought his toy garden into the nursery. It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; Milton’s ‘enormous bliss’ of Eden (giving the full, ancient meaning to ‘enormous’) comes somewhere near it. It was a sensation, of course, of desire; but desire for what? not, certainly, for a biscuit tin filled with moss, nor even (though that came into it) for my own past. And before I knew what I desired, the desire itself was gone, the whole glimpse withdrawn, the world turned commonplace again, or only stirred by a longing for the

longing that had just ceased. It had taken only a moment of time; and in a certain sense everything else that had ever happened to me was insignificant...

Two pages later Lewis explains his experience:

The reader who finds [this episode] of no interest need read this book no further, for in a sense the central story of my life is about nothing else. For those who are still disposed to proceed I will only underline the quality common to the three experiences: it is that of an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished from both Happiness and Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them: the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again. ... I doubt whether anyone who has tasted [Joy] would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world. But then Joy is never in our power and pleasure often is."

The 'Joy' Lewis experienced – the consolation without preceding cause – was his first intimation of God in his life, and his *Surprised by Joy* is, among other things, the story of his conversion to Christianity.

Rule 8: Consolation WITHOUT Preceding Cause: Deception in the 'Afterglow':

Rule: Although consolation without preceding cause contains no deception, the experience can leave a kind of 'afterglow.' Thus we need to distinguish thoughts and plans which may surface during this time from any content of the consolation itself, since thoughts and plans which arise during the 'afterglow' may come from either the good or the evil spirit.

The case of a man named Philip provides an interesting example of consolation without previous cause.

Philip is a 52-year-old married man who is deeply dedicated to God. For many years he has sought to love God and his family and to witness faithfully to God in the workplace. Over these same years he has developed a deep life of prayer and a growing closeness to God. For some years he had felt drawn to serve as a deacon in the Church. In his prayer one day, he wondered if God might indeed be calling him to this gift of service. In the weeks that followed, he discussed this calling with his wife and children, all of whom supported his interest in the diaconate. He then spoke with his pastor, who likewise encouraged him and suggested making a retreat to discern this call more fully. He welcomed the suggestion and arranged to make an eight-day retreat during the summer.

On the fifth day of his retreat, Philip went out walking along the beach, which adjoined the retreat house. After a while, he sat by the water, thinking of nothing in particular, simply watching the gulls and the waves. Suddenly, he felt God's presence in a powerful and almost overwhelming way, a way he had never known before. He was absolutely sure the experience was from God; he knew it in every fiber of his being. The certainty brought with it a great sense of awe, and he broke into tears. He had never felt so totally loved by God.

The warmth of that grace-filled experience remained with him for the remainder of the retreat, and he continued to reflect upon that great gift of love. He sensed that this new manifestation of God's love was also an invitation to show his own love in a new way. He seemed evident that this new response of love must be the call to the diaconate that he was discerning. With joy in his heart, he understood that his discernment was complete; he now knew that God was indeed calling him to serve the Church as a deacon.

Question: Do you agree that God was indeed calling Philip to serve the Church as a deacon?