

Much of what Ignatius Loyola says about discernment highlights interior movements which are directed toward God (consolation) or away from God (desolation). But so that we might avoid spiritual traps, he also describes the tactics of the enemy, i.e., the evil spirit, by observing that the enemy acts:

- like a spoiled child,
 - like a false lover, and
 - like a shrewd army commander.
- A Spoiled Child: The evil spirit often behaves like a spoiled child. If we are firm with such a child, the child will give up his petulant ways, but if we show any indulgence, hesitancy or weakness, the child will be merciless in getting his way. So we must be firm in dealing with the evil spirit from the very beginning. (*Spiritual Exercises* [325])

Two observations are called for:

- the 'snowball effect': When a snowball is just beginning to form as it rolls down a mountain-side, we can put out a finger and stop it; but when it has travelled halfway down the mountain slope, it will be much larger and traveling must faster. It will thus be far more difficult to stop and may, in fact, simply overwhelm us.

"If [the enemy] sees that we are weak and much humbled by these harmful thoughts, he goes on to suggest that we are entirely forgotten by God our Lord, and leads us to think that we are quite separated from him and that all we have done and all that we desire to do is worthless. He thus endeavors to bring us to a state of general discouragement." (letter of Ignatius Loyola to Sr. Teresa Rejadell, June 18, 1536) Do you see the 'snowball effect' at work here?
- the crucial moment: The crucial moment in resisting the temptations of the enemy is when they first begin. If we resist the enemy's temptations firmly when they first begin, they will simply cease. However, if we respond inadequately and thus allow the temptation to linger, then the temptation may grow, 'snowballing' and assailing us with its growing strength. The longer the enemy's temptation is allowed to remain, the harder it will be to resist.

The following example exemplifies this snowball dynamic at work:

Steve has completed seven years of seminary training is approaching ordination to the diaconate, as a preparation for priesthood. He has reached, therefore, the moment of definitive decision for the clerical state of life. His preparation for ordination includes an eight-day Ignatian retreat. Steve welcomes the opportunity to pray more deeply as he approaches this key moment in his life. Steve is an occasional smoker and, before the retreat, decides to abstain from smoking during the eight days.

The retreat begins and Steve dedicates himself to the daily rhythm of prayer. He finds the silence helpful and enjoys the setting of natural beauty that surrounds the retreat house. He experiences times of consolation in prayer and an overall sense of well-being in the retreat.

Question: How would you describe Steve's relationship with God?

After supper on the fourth day, Steve finds that he has lost his former sense of peace. He goes for a walk, but a vague sense of interior disquiet persists.

Question: Steve's loss of his "former sense of peace" and his "vague sense of interior disquiet" – is this desolation? Is it spiritual desolation?

He decides to smoke a single cigarette and does so. He then goes to his room for his final hour of prayer that evening, unhappy that he has broken his resolve to avoid smoking during the retreat. As he begins his prayer, he continues to feel restless and ill at ease. The prayer is distracted and dry, and Steve, finding it difficult, ends the prayer after half an hour.

Question: In his desolation Steve makes two changes in his decisions? What are they?

He awakens late the next morning and almost misses Morning Prayer with the other seminarians. He continues with the times of prayer as planned but finds them empty and burdensome. God seems far away, and Steve becomes increasingly frustrated as he strives to pray. A thought comes to him: “You are about to be ordained a deacon, and you wish to become a priest. Look at you! You can’t even keep a simple resolution not to smoke for eight days. You can’t complete your planned hour of prayer. You are unable to pray after all these years of training. If you can’t even do these simple things, how are you ever going to handle the responsibilities of priesthood?”

Question: Do you see the ‘snowball effect’ at work here?

In the early afternoon, Steve meets as usual with the retreat director and shares openly with the director all that he has experienced since the day before. The sharing relieves his frustration and doubts, and the director helps Steve to discern the spiritual movements at work in him. Steve recovers his peace, continues his retreat with his habitual good will and, a few weeks later, is ordained a deacon. His ordination is the beginning of a rewarding year of diaconate and leads, later, to a fruitful priesthood.

Question: How was Steve able to resolve his desolation?

- A False Lover: The evil spirit’s behavior can also be compared to a false lover. The false lover wants the object of his attention to remain silent about his seductions since silence will allow his seductions to continue. We need to bring such suggestions and temptations into the light of day by speaking of them with our director. (*Spiritual Exercises* [326])

Faithful people occasionally find themselves in a time of spiritual confusion, doubt and discouragement. As this is occurring, they will sense interior promptings such as these:

You cannot speak about this. You can speak about anything else, but not this. You must not speak about this. If you do, the person with whom you speak will never understand you. The person will be shocked that you could be so weak or feel such things in your heart, will lose the esteem that he or she has for you, and will no longer wish to accompany you. The person will criticize you or laugh at you, and will confirm your fears about your spiritual inadequacy. It will be unbearably painful. It is best to say nothing and do what you can to carry this burden.

A moment in the life of Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) exemplifies this rule with great clarity. This is the unexpected ‘storm’ Thérèse experienced the evening before her final vows as a religious. From a very early age Thérèse was utterly certain that God was calling her to Carmelite religious life, and she had pursued this call with unwavering constancy. Both before her entrance and in her first years as a Carmelite, while preparing for her final vows, Thérèse remained totally sure of her Carmelite calling. Then suddenly, the evening before the ceremony, she found herself in a vocational turmoil. Her response to this turmoil reveals her keen spiritual awareness, understanding and capacity for decisive spiritual action. Thérèse writes:

The beautiful day of my final vows finally arrived. It was without a single cloud. However, the preceding evening a storm arose in my soul, the like of which I had never seen before. Not a single doubt concerning my vocation had ever entered my mind until then, and it evidently was necessary that I experience this trial. In the evening, while making the Way of the Cross after Matins, my vocation appeared to me as a foolish dream. I found life in Carmel to be very beauti-

ful, but the devil inspired me with the assurance that it wasn't for me and that I was misleading my superiors by advancing on this way to which I wasn't called. The darkness was so great that I could understand one thing only: I didn't have a vocation. Ah! How can I possibly describe the *anguish* in my soul? It appeared to me that if I were to tell my Novice Mistress about these fears, she would prevent me from pronouncing my vows. And I wanted to do God's will and would return to the world rather than remain in Carmel and do my own will.

As real as this painful scenario appears, Thérèse is keenly aware that a temptation of the enemy is at work: that there is an absurdity to what she is imagining. Her spiritual awareness and understanding in the midst of spiritual desolation are remarkable. As a result, she gains clarity about the interior movements she is experiencing, and her clarity inspires her action:

I made the Novice Mistress come out of the choir and, filled with confusion, I told her the state of my soul. Fortunately, she saw things much clearer than I did, and she completely reassured me. The act of humility I had just performed put the devil to flight since he had perhaps thought that I would not dare admit my temptation. My doubts left me completely as soon as I finished speaking.

Thérèse, however, has not yet finished dealing with the enemy:

Nevertheless, to make my act of humility even more perfect, I still wished to confide my strange temptation to our Mother Prioress, who simply laughed at me. In the morning of September 8, I felt as though I were flooded with a river of peace, and it was in this peace "which surpasses all understanding" that I pronounced my vows.

Question: What might have happened if Thérèse had spoken with no one about her fears? If she had then pronounced her vows, would she still have been "flooded with a river of peace"?

Question: Thérèse could have spoken with a fellow novice. Why was it important that she speak with her Novice Mistress?

- A Shrewd Army Commander: The evil spirit can also work like a shrewd army commander. In his desire to conquer and plunder a stronghold, he carefully explores its fortifications and defenses and then attacks it at its weakest point. In the same way, the enemy of human nature will look for our weakest point and attack us there. (*Spiritual Exercises* [327])

Discerning people don't wait for the enemy's deceptions to begin. They can learn where in their spiritual lives the deceptions are most likely to occur and prepare beforehand. "Know Yourself" (inscription chiseled over the portals of the ancient Greek temple at Delphi): your struggles and conflicts, your strengths and weaknesses, your hopes and fears. You need to know who you are.

The following story offers an example of this:

Sally is a woman of faith and deeply committed to serving the Lord ... and many are grateful for her faith-filled and loving presence in the parish community and at home. She dedicates herself wholeheartedly to her service and, from time to time, exhausts herself. Recently she has worked intensely to fulfill her commitments of service and has become very tired and has begun to feel lonely and a certain interior heaviness. Prayer has become more difficult and she finds herself doubting the value of her service to the Lord.

Question: What doesn't Sally seem to know or appreciate about herself?

Question: If Sally were to speak with you about this, what advice might you offer her?