

# Chapter Five:

## Discernment of Spirits – Part One

### Probing the Depths by John Paul Thomas

Whether you are making a guided Ignatian retreat or simply want to incorporate his spiritual lessons into your daily spiritual life, understanding some of his basic teachings on the “discernment of spirits” should be a central focus. These methods of discernment are meant to help you understand how God speaks to you, so that you can follow His gentle promptings. They are also meant to help you discern the ways that the evil one tries to mislead you, so that you can reject those agitations and temptations. Few people today are deeply aware of the various movements of God within their souls. Many live day after day in a distracted way, failing to be attentive to God at work. Likewise, many fail to understand that many interior impulses and desires actually are temptations from the evil one. Thus, the discernment of spirits is a way of becoming more and more tuned into the interior life of your own soul by shedding the many daily distractions you have.

Saint Ignatius breaks this teaching on the discernment of spirits into two parts:

*Rules for perceiving and knowing in some manner the different movements which are caused in the soul. The good, to receive them, and the bad, to reject them. And they are more proper for the First Week.*

*Rules for the same effect with greater discernment of spirits. And they are more proper for the Second Week.*

These are the titles of two sections toward the end of the *Exercises* in which you are given a total of twenty-two short, clear, concise and rich rules for discerning the various movements within your soul. These are movements that are caused either by God and His angels or by the evil one and the other demons. The first section above contains fourteen rules, and the second contains eight. Since the first set of rules are proper to the First Week of *The Spiritual Exercises*, we will only consider those fourteen rules in this chapter. The rules proper to the Second Week will be covered in the next chapter.

## What are “Spirits”

Before we even look at the rules of discernment, it is important to address one key question: What does Saint Ignatius mean by “Spirits?” Though not a direct and clear definition, the answer is found throughout the *Exercises* and is also found within the Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church. Essentially, we should understand “spirits” as referring to three *good* influences and their contrary three *bad* influences. The good influences can be seen as God (and His angels), the positive influences within the world, and the virtues. The bad influences are the devil, the world and the flesh.

**Spiritual beings:** First of all, a spiritual being is either Satan and all the angels who fell from grace and now function as demons, or it is God and the good angels who remain in union with God, continuing to fulfill His will and their duty. Angelic beings are those who were created by God as pure spirits. They have an intellect and free will and are capable of either loving God and others, or of turning from God and thus living a life of hate and eternal separation from God. The Bible, in the Book of Revelation, states that a third of the angelic beings created by God turned from God with a definitive sinful choice and are now what the Church refers to as “demons.” Satan is thought to be the highest of these fallen angelic beings and the primary orchestrator of their diabolical activity.

The good angelic beings make up the two-thirds of these spiritual beings who never sinned, but instead they chose to fulfill their purpose of serving God and His holy will. They do so by fulfilling the natural duties they were given. Traditionally, based on Scripture, there are nine choirs (levels) of these angelic beings. Each level has certain functions. The highest level (Seraphim) has the function of surrounding the throne of God and entering into a perpetual worship and glorification of God, eternally crying out “Holy, holy, holy...” as they enter into deep communion with God. The lowest of these (guardian angels) have the duty to communicate to us humans the will of God for our lives and to act as mediators of God’s grace. *The angelic nature:* The nature of these angelic beings provides them with various “natural spiritual powers” which they exercise either in union with the will of God (the two-thirds of the spirits who remained in union with God) or against His divine will (the one-third of the spirits that fell). It’s helpful to understand that, even though one-third of these spiritual beings fell from God’s favor through sin, they still retain their natural angelic powers. One such power is to communicate to us, especially through our imagination, various images and ideas, suggesting, prompting, poking, encouraging, discouraging, etc. Simply put, they have the natural power of communication, and they use it either for our eternal salvation or to destroy it. God permits this insofar as He allows the natural order to run its course in accord with free will.

*Power of influence:* One of the natural powers of these angelic beings of which we should be aware is the power of influence and communication of suggestive thought. For example,

demons have the natural ability to place before your imagination many erroneous thoughts that lead to confusion. For those who are very serious sinners, it may be easy for them to put forth the most heinous suggestions to one's imagination such as: "This person does not deserve to live—kill!" However, most rational and good people would reject such an evil thought right away. Therefore, most often demons put forth more subtle lies, such as "Justice demands that you humiliate this person!" or "This is really not that bad of a sin; God will understand." And for those who are very close to God, these deceptive spirits will be even more subtle. For the person striving for holiness, a demon may put forth some idea that on the surface sounds good...but is actually not God's will. These fallen angels will pretend to be "angels of light" so as to deceive. They may put into your imagination some "good" idea that you should do for God, knowing full well that this or that is not what God wills of you.

The good angels are also constantly "speaking" to you, communicating God's will by their natural abilities. They may inspire you toward mercy, compassion and forgiveness. Or they may stir up courage within you to withstand some evil. Or they may open your mind to more fully understand God's Word, teaching you about the beautiful mysteries of God's inner life and will.

Discernment of spirits is the process of trying to decipher these various angelic communications so as to determine if the thought or impulse you have is from the good spirits (thus, ultimately God's will) or from the evil spirits (thus, contrary to God's will).

For our purposes here, as you consider the teachings of Saint Ignatius on the "discernment of spirits," it is sufficient to understand that there are angelic beings (good and bad) who do communicate with you, influencing you one way or the other, for or against the divine will of God for your life. These rules for the discernment of spirits only apply to the movements in your soul caused by these good or bad spirits, such as your thoughts, feelings, desires, affections, emotions, impulses, etc. It should also be noted that, at times, you may have thoughts and other movements in your soul that come from yourself, caused by your own free will. The rules for "discernment of spirits" do not apply to these thoughts and movements in your soul. Nor do they apply to other natural phenomena such as negative feelings and thoughts that come from depression, physical exhaustion, chemical imbalances, etc., or to positive thoughts and feelings coming from things such as accomplishments, endorphins, exercise, excitement, etc. Only communications of a spiritual nature are included here.

**World:** Traditionally when we speak of the "world" from a biblical point of view, we mean the seductions and temptations that come our way to obtain all that this world can offer. For example, the temptation to worldly power, prestige, money, and the like can very powerfully draw us to act selfishly for these temporary satisfactions in life. So, part of the discernment of spirits is to understand and identify these worldly influences upon your life and, ultimately, to reject them completely.

With that said, you should also be aware of the many good influences you can encounter in this world. For example, you may witness another's heroic virtue, such as an act of profound faith or hope, or any act of Christian charity that inspires one to be more like Christ. Perhaps you turn on the radio and hear an inspiring Christian song, or hear a moving sermon, or witness a person courageously persevering in the face of great persecution. Though the "world" is normally in reference to certain evil influences you encounter in life, there are also many good influences you daily encounter in the lives of those all around us. You should seek out those inspirations and reject those that are not of God.

**Flesh:** The fleshly temptations you encounter each day also make up part of the bad spiritual influences you must reject. These are most obvious and include things such as laziness, lusts, indulgence in food and drink. You will daily encounter "voices," so to speak, that draw you to fleshly comforts that are contrary to the will of God and contrary to your human dignity. These temptations must also be rejected in their totality. Fasting and mortification are of great help in this regard.

On the contrary, there are great helps to fleshly temptations that should be accepted wholeheartedly. This includes the many human virtues you acquire by faithful Christian living, such as temperance, fortitude, prudence and justice. And, of course, the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity will also help you when these virtues become ingrained habits that compel you to act in accord with the will of God.

## **Spiritual Experiences and Thinking**

Another important thing to understand is the relationship between your interior spiritual experiences and your thinking process. Spiritual communications (from both the good and bad spirits) are meant to influence your thinking process and the decisions you make. For example, a temptation from an evil spirit may come in the form of a strong desire to be harsh and critical of another who "deserves" it. That desire will lead to false thinking such as rash judgment. Once that thought is engaged, it grows and opens the door to more temptations of a similar nature. When this happens, the good spirit may stir up a desire for forgiveness and mercy. If this desire is accepted, then the rational thought process may clearly comprehend the great wisdom of mercy and forgiveness, and, thus, this desire and compulsion for good will grow.

In many ways, the end goal of the discernment of spirits is to cleanse your thoughts of errors and to feed your thoughts with Truth. Jesus is the Truth and His perfect will must dominate your mind. When this happens, faith grows and leads to authentic hope and charity. On the contrary, when erroneous thoughts grow, faith, hope and charity are slowly extinguished, and you are left with irrational thinking, feeling and acting.

## Overview of the First Rules for Discernment

The fourteen rules set forth by Saint Ignatius in this first section could be divided more generally into four sections as follows:

1. Initial conversion: Understanding the spiritual experiences in one's soul—one who is *living in serious sin* and who then begins *working intensely to overcome sin* (Rule 1–2).
2. Spiritual Consolation: What it is and how one should think and act when experiencing it (Rules 3, 10, 11).
3. Spiritual Desolation: What it is, where it comes from, and how one should think and act when experiencing it. (Rules 4–9, 11).
4. Tactics of the evil one: Understanding his methods and how one can overcome his temptations (Rules 12–14).

### Initial Conversion

Begin by considering the various interior thoughts and experiences you will go through if you have struggled with one serious sin after another and remain trapped in this cycle. If that roughly depicts your personal moral life, then the information in Rule One and Two as summarized below will be helpful as you seek to break free of all habits of serious sin once and for all.

**First Rule.** *The first Rule: In the persons who go from mortal sin to mortal sin, the enemy is commonly used to propose to them apparent pleasures, making them imagine sensual delights and pleasures in order to hold them more and make them grow in their vices and sins. In these persons the good spirit uses the opposite method, pricking them and biting their consciences through the process of reason.*

**Second Rule.** *The second: In the persons who are going on intensely cleansing their sins and rising from good to better in the service of God our Lord, it is the method contrary to that in the first Rule, for then it is the way of the evil spirit to bite, sadden and put obstacles, disquieting with false reasons, that one may not go on; and it is proper to the good to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations and quiet, easing, and putting away all obstacles, that one may go on in well doing.*

**Serious sin:** Look at your life objectively, meaning, as if you were only a bystander. What do you see? Do you see actions that break one or more of the Seven Capital Sins (or the Ten Commandments)? If so, then you are one who is struggling with going from one serious sin to another.

Right away, you may object and rationalize that your sin is not serious. But that's exactly what the evil one wants you to believe and one of the first traps many fall into. So look at your sin

objectively, as a bystander, and name what you see. If you see one or more serious sins over the past month or two, then pay close attention to these initial rules. Be honest and objective.

*Pleasure:* If you have recently struggled with serious sin, then one of the most common tactics of the evil one is to place before your imagination some deceptive pleasure. The evil one will not tempt by displeasure because it would obviously not work. He uses things that are pleasurable in some base way. Every one of the Seven Capital Sins can produce a very base and distorted form of temporary pleasure. This is what the evil one uses.

How does he use these pleasures? He proposes to your imagination the thought that this or that action will produce some delight and that you want it or need it. He will propose to your imagination the idea that “it’s not that bad” or “this is good.” It could be overeating, rebuking someone in anger, lustful actions, theft of some sort, etc. But whatever it is, your imagination will see this temptation as a good that is pleasurable and, therefore, desirable. And as you continue to indulge in a habit of serious sin, the evil one will provide you with as much empty and deceptive pleasure that he can.

God, and the good angels, will fight for your soul using a contrary method as you indulge in one sin after another. He will prick your conscience, leading you to feel guilty for your sin so that you will know you ought to change. This is a grace and should be acknowledged as such if you want to break free from a cycle of sin. So pay attention to interior feelings of guilt. Not because it’s good to live in perpetual shame. Rather, because good guilt can help to break you out of your cycle of serious sin.

As you begin to break free of habitual sin, and as you begin to live a life of virtue and freedom, both the good and bad spirits will communicate to you in a way opposite to how they would with one who simply goes from one serious sin to another. In this case, Saint Ignatius identifies four actions from the evil one on your soul and seven actions from the good spirits. As for the evil one, he will:

1. Bite your conscience: An action may unsettle you and cause an undue anxiety about serving God.
2. Sadden you: An unexplained sorrow may come over you as you seek to serve the will of God.
3. Put obstacles in your way of virtue: As you see what’s involved in serving the will of God, you may feel overwhelmed and think you are too weak to live a good Christian life of virtue. God’s will seems unattainable.
4. Disquiet your soul with false reasoning: You may be tempted to lose your peace of heart by doubting God’s love or His action in your life. Your thinking may become confused, and you may lose hope.

However, God and the good angels will also act on your soul in these contrary ways:

1. Give courage: Though you see the difficult road of virtue ahead, you may ponder Psalm 23: “The Lord is my Shepherd, there is nothing I shall want.” You know you can walk through the “dark valley” if God is at your side.

2. Give strength: You may sense God saying to you, “My grace is sufficient for you.” You sense that strength welling up within you.
3. Produce consolations: You will experience a spiritual energy, joy and excitement that can only be explained as a grace. “Freedom awaits you.”
4. Bring forth tears: These are not tears of sorrow but tears that heal. Tears will cleanse when you open your heart to God’s cleansing mercy and when you are filled with a holy sorrow for sin. The tears perceive the freedom that awaits.
5. Inspire you: A spiritual clarity will come to you. Things will make sense. You will understand and believe in the will of God more clearly.
6. Bring interior quiet that eases your soul: “Be at peace, all will be well.” You may breathe a sigh of relief as you are made aware of God’s action in your life, knowing that the God of the Universe loves you and is helping you. Anxiety and fear diminish.
7. Eliminate all obstacles: The life of virtue and freedom from sin seems attainable. The path toward holiness is exciting, and you look forward to walking it.

These lists of actions of God and the evil one should be pondered carefully and used to examine your experiences as you strive to conquer sin. Understanding your interior experiences will help you to discern whether your interior experiences are from God or from the evil one. Once you make that discernment, it will be easier to follow the will of God and reject the will of the evil one.

Simply put, when you strive to overcome sin, the evil one will cause what Saint Ignatius calls “desolation” within your soul, and God will cause “consolation.” Understanding the difference between these two interior experiences will help you to choose the will of God and reject the evil one and his lies.

## Spiritual Consolation

“Spiritual Consolation” is one way that God communicates to you His action in your life. It’s His way of leading you, encouraging you and strengthening you to follow His perfect will. In Rule Three, Saint Ignatius identifies the types of spiritual consolation:

**Third Rule.** *The third: OF SPIRITUAL CONSOLATION. I call it consolation when some interior movement in the soul is caused, through which the soul comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord; and when it can in consequence love no created thing on the face of the earth in itself, but in the Creator of them all.*

*Likewise, when it sheds tears that move to love of its Lord, whether out of sorrow for one’s sins, or for the Passion of Christ our Lord, or because of other things directly connected with His service and praise.*

*Finally, I call consolation every increase of hope, faith and charity, and all interior joy which calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord.*

These consolations can be simplified as follows:

1. Being inflamed with the love of God
2. Love of all created things with the Heart of God
3. Spiritual tears
4. Increase of faith, hope and charity

*Being inflamed with the love of God:* This form of spiritual consolation is an interior movement in your soul in which you simply “fall in love” with God. It’s hard to explain why you love—you just do. You may gain some new spiritual insight into the inner beauty and majesty of God, or you may just be made more clearly aware of the fact that God loves you. The result will be a clear and unmistakable love for God. When you experience such a movement within your heart, rejoice, savor it, receive it and bask in its delight. This experience may only be perceived for a moment, or for much longer.

*Love of all created things with the Heart of God:* As your heart is inflamed with a love of God, you will also love all things in this world with a new inspired love. You will love other people, nature and all created things more fully as God loves them. Oftentimes you may “love” things in a selfish way. Your “love” of things is more of a possessiveness. “I want this!” or “I need you!” or “This is mine!” or “I really like doing this.” But God’s grace will lead you to reorder your selfish “love” into a true selfless love. This selfless love will see all people and things in your life from the perspective of the Heart of Christ. You will love them as Christ loves them. This love is not something you necessarily learn; rather, it’s inspired and comes easily to your heart. It’s a gift. And when you receive it, you will realize that it’s simply the love of God alive in your heart, leading you to love all things as He loves them.

*Spiritual tears:* Tears can come from various sources. It is natural, normal and healthy to experience tears at the loss of a loved one or in the face of some other tragedy. But the tears spoken of here are not of a natural order, they are of the supernatural order. They are “spiritual tears.” Consider, for example, the sinful woman who came to Jesus in repentance and bathed His precious feet with her tears. These tears had the effect of cleansing her own heart. They were a gift from God. They are “spiritual” in that the origin of this holy sorrow is an inspiration from God. God’s communication to your soul is so profound that you express this in a bodily way, through tears. Perhaps it is on account of your sorrow for sin, a realization of the depth of suffering that our Lord endured, or a deep realization of His perfect love for you. The key is that this is a communication so deep and spiritually transforming that it is expressed in this bodily way, through tears.

*Increase of faith, hope and charity:* The increase of these three virtues is one of the most telling signs of God’s action in your life. If you perceive that your faith is growing, then this is God acting in your life. Faith is a deep and transforming knowledge of God and His will. It produces

a certitude that cannot be explained through rational powers alone. And as faith grows, it produces an increase of hope in God. Hope also becomes certain. You “know” God is in control and will lead you through all you face in life. Consequently, with an increase of faith and hope, charity is sparked, and you discover within yourself a new love of God and a love of others that is simply there. You just love, and you know this love is possible only by the grace of God.

Regarding the increase of these three virtues, there is no limit to how much they can increase. God wants to bring them to perfection in you. And if they were to be perfected within you, you would be in perfect union with God and His holy will. The perfection of these virtues means that God perfectly possesses you and that the evil one has no hold on you whatsoever. The perfection of these virtues ultimately frees you from every sin, even the smallest spiritual imperfection. Very few attain this level of holiness in this life, but all are called and, by God’s grace, all can achieve this holiness.

**Exercises of thought during spiritual consolation:** Rules Ten and Eleven provide some practical suggestions regarding what you may term “thinking exercises” when you are experiencing spiritual consolation. The first “thinking exercise” from Rule Ten is as follows:

***Tenth Rule.** The tenth: Let him who is in consolation think how he will be in the desolation which will come after, taking new strength for then.*

This rule is quite straightforward. It’s a way of storing up the grace of the spiritual consolation for use during the next time you experience spiritual desolation. This rule is also a way of reminding you that, unless you have achieved absolute perfection of life, spiritual desolation will most certainly return. In other words, the spiritual consolation you experience will not necessarily remain with you forever. So prepare now!

By analogy, recall the Scriptural story of Joseph being sold into slavery in Egypt. After he was elevated to the pharaoh’s service and made second in command, his country experienced a period of abundance of food. The crops produced more than they could use. Joseph was wise and decided to store the extra food for the future in case they experienced a famine. And that’s exactly what happened. But because he prepared, his people survived the drought. This is what you should do with the “abundance” you experience with spiritual consolation. You remember it, make mental notes of how you feel, what you experience and the good resolutions you make. And in the future, when you experience desolation, you should recall the experiences you had at the time of spiritual consolation and use this “food” to endure the trial you encounter as a result of the spiritual desolation.

The second “thinking exercise” Saint Ignatius recommends during a time of spiritual consolation is found in the first part of Rule Eleven:

***Eleventh Rule.** The eleventh: Let him who is consoled see to humbling himself and lowering himself as much as he can, thinking how little he is able for in the time of desolation without such grace or consolation.*

This exercise is a sort of “reality check” for those experiencing a spiritual consolation. Though such a consolation is from God, you, in your weakness, may be tempted to misuse the gift of this grace. Humility will help you to avoid such a trap. Pride will lead you to think that you are more than you are. But this sort of thinking will lead you down the path of pride and is a temptation from the evil one. It will lead you to forget that all is a gift, all is grace and mercy, all glory belongs to God. Therefore, to counter such a temptation, Saint Ignatius encourages you to humble yourself in the midst of every spiritual consolation. In fact, the more powerful the consolation, the deeper you will need to humble yourself before God. This will keep you from going astray in prideful thinking.

If you humble yourself in moments of spiritual consolation, those graces you receive are, in a sense, exponentially magnified. They are magnified because your humility will enable the effects of your spiritual consolations to extend more easily to future moments of temptation. For example, if you experience a spiritual consolation and feel as though you are on top of the world, and as a result you think very highly of yourself, the strength of that consolation will not endure. Thus, the next day, if you are in desolation and experience a testing of that faith, you may fail. But if you did humble yourself during your previous experience of spiritual consolation, the effect is that this grace is stored up and you will be able to face the testing with the enduring strength of that previous consolation. Humility in the midst of spiritual consolation produces a knowledge and right thinking that lasts far beyond the good feelings you have. That knowledge is a deeper form of faith, and that faith will be needed as you endure the trials of life. Faith will lead to hope and charity when needed the most.

## Spiritual Desolation

Saint Ignatius explains the interior experiences of “Spiritual Desolation” in Rule Four in the following way:

**Fourth Rule.** *The fourth: OF SPIRITUAL DESOLATION. I call desolation all the contrary of the third rule, such as darkness of soul, disturbance in it, movement to things low and earthly, the unquiet of different agitations and temptations, moving to want of confidence, without hope, without love, when one finds oneself all lazy, tepid, sad, and as if separated from his Creator and Lord. Because, as consolation is contrary to desolation, in the same way the thoughts which come from consolation are contrary to the thoughts which come from desolation.*

And in Rule Nine, Saint Ignatius gives three causes of spiritual desolation:

**Ninth Rule.** *The ninth: There are three principal reasons why we find ourselves desolate. The first is, because of our being tepid, lazy or negligent in our spiritual exercises; and so through our faults, spiritual consolation withdraws from us. The second, to try us and see how much we are and how much we let ourselves out in His service and praise without such great pay of consolation and great graces. The third, to give us true acquaintance and knowledge, that we may interiorly feel that it is not ours to get or keep great devotion, intense love, tears, or any other spiritual consolation, but that all is the gift and grace of God our Lord, and that we may not build a nest in a thing not ours, raising our intellect into some pride or vainglory, attributing to us devotion or the other things of the spiritual consolation.*

Let’s begin with an explanation of these three causes of spiritual desolation. Once you understand the causes, you will consider the actual interior experiences of desolation.

**First Cause: Being tepid and lazy or negligent**—The first of the three causes of spiritual desolation is your own sin. A clear connection is made between personal sin and the loss of consolation from God. This is the logical consequence of sin. When you sin, you push God out of your life, and when you do that, you lose every clear sense of His closeness. For this reason, if you experience any form of spiritual desolation (as defined in the next section), then you should first examine your conscience to discern whether or not it is a result of your sin. Very often, you will see a connection between some sinful, or even negligent, action you have done and a loss of spiritual consolation and closeness with God. The reason God withdraws His consolation from you in these times is to invite you to change, to convert your heart so as to turn back to God and receive healing from your sin. This loss of consolation is a grace from God to help you become more keenly aware of your sin and turn back to God with all your heart.

*Second Cause: To try us*—If you have examined your conscience and do not see any clear connection between your experience of spiritual desolation and your sin, then you may want to consider that your interior experience of desolation may not be the result of sin but rather is a trial that God is permitting to help you on the road to salvation. Though God does not ever act as the primary cause of an interior trial, He does often permit us to go through interior trials to provide us many possible spiritual benefits.

For example, when you find yourself in a situation of desolation for no apparent reason (meaning, it is not because of your sin), then this is an opportunity (a trial) by which you can manifest a more pure love of God. It's an opportunity to love God out of love alone, not because of any good feeling or consolation.

Additionally, trials like this invite you to establish the truth of your identity as a servant of the great King. A true servant will love and serve the King in good times and difficult ones. If you can love God by your actions, in the midst of the trial of spiritual desolation, then your identity as a faithful servant is more fully established and lived. You will not love God because you “get something out of it”; rather, you will love God because He is your God and worthy of your love. Furthermore, your love of God grows in determination and commitment. It's easy to love when there is a clear benefit (consolation), but it takes determination, commitment and integrity to love when the “benefit” is less apparent. Thus, you are strengthened in your determination to love through all things.

Trials also have the effect of helping you to grow in self knowledge. Specifically, you come to know who you are as children of God and why you do what you do. Why do I love God? Why do I serve Him? Trials help clarify the answers to these questions and purify them in their results.

Lastly, such a trial helps you to understand how close God is to you. At first, the experience of desolation may lead you to “feel” as if God is far away. However, by enduring the trial and by working through it, you will come to an understanding of God's intimate love for you and His closeness on a new level, a level of a more purified faith. You will believe not because of what you feel but because of what you come to know through faith. This will lead you to a new level of hope and love.

*Third Cause: To give us true acquaintance and knowledge*—The third cause of your interior experience of spiritual desolation is a specific type of knowledge: knowing that consolation is beyond your own ability to obtain and maintain. This knowledge enables you to grow in humility and dependence on God. You come to realize that all is a gift for which you must be eternally grateful. You realize that the good feelings of consolation are not a right, they are not something you have earned, they are not something you deserve or have obtained by your own effort. Rather, you realize that without God, you are nothing. Without God's grace and mercy, you can do nothing and cannot obtain the fullness of life. This humble recognition will better prepare you to be more receptive of the unlimited gifts of grace God wants to bestow upon you. This humility reveals to you the truth of who you are and who God is.

After describing the above causes of spiritual desolation, it is time to outline the following interior experiences a person may have in this state:

1. *Darkness of soul:* A trouble within that directly attacks one's faith. A psychological depression or physical exhaustion. A temptation toward spiritual confusion that affects one's faith.
2. *Disturbance:* An interior restlessness. A lack of peace. Recall Saint Augustine's famous words from the *Confessions*, "Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they rest in You."
3. *Movement to things low and earthly:* A temptation to seek "consolation" in things other than God, such as sins of the flesh.
4. *The unquiet of different agitations and temptations:* Unsettled interiorly to such a point that one is tempted by various interior agitations.
5. *Moving to want of confidence:* Self-doubt and uncertainty, especially of God and matters of faith. Approaching life with weakness and a lack of resolve.
6. *Without hope:* Confusion of faith leading to a "felt" loss of hope in God and His will. The lack of motivation to act without receiving "positive feedback."
7. *Without love:* An absence of feeling love, either for God or from God.
8. *Lazy, tepid, sad:* An attack on the spiritual energy that drives one to love and serve God.
9. *As if separated from his Creator and Lord:* A deep and painful experience of the total loss of God. This is perfectly manifest in the humanity of Jesus on the Cross when He cried out to the Father, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?"

Though these experiences of spiritual desolation may at first seem awful and undesirable, they are in fact incredible acts of mercy from God. They give you the opportunity to grow in faith, hope and love in the most pure and deepest way humanly possible. By making acts of faith, hope and love while experiencing these desolations, God makes you strong. He transforms you from being a child to a person who is spiritually mature and unwavering in your Christian walk.

With that said, if the desolation and the temptation that come from that experience of desolation are not fully rejected, you will suffer greatly by being drawn into confusion and sin. This is especially true because the one who fails to reject the desolation also struggles with false thinking, allowing one's own thoughts to entertain ideas that are contrary to the truth. If given into, desolation will lead to thoughts such as giving up prayer, turning from faith, questioning God, being confused about life and giving into despair. But these thoughts must be rejected so that the grace of the trial you go through will produce the good effect God wants to bestow upon you.

Since these temptations are real, Saint Ignatius offers four rules to guide your thinking during the experiences of spiritual desolation. They can be found in **Rules Five–Eight** and in the

second part of **Rule Eleven** of *The Spiritual Exercises*. Read them carefully and return to them whenever you find yourself experiencing any form of spiritual desolation:

**Fifth Rule.** *The fifth: In time of desolation never to make a change; but to be firm and constant in the resolutions and determination in which one was the day preceding such desolation, or in the determination in which he was in the preceding consolation. Because, as in consolation it is rather the good spirit who guides and counsels us, so in desolation it is the bad, with whose counsels we cannot take a course to decide rightly.*

**Sixth Rule.** *The sixth: Although in desolation we ought not to change our first resolutions, it is very helpful intensely to change ourselves against the same desolation, as by insisting more on prayer, meditation, on much examination, and by giving ourselves more scope in some suitable way of doing penance.*

**Seventh Rule.** *The seventh: Let him who is in desolation consider how the Lord has left him in trial in his natural powers, in order to resist the different agitations and temptations of the enemy; since he can with the Divine help, which always remains to him, though he does not clearly perceive it: because the Lord has taken from him his great fervor, great love and intense grace, leaving him, however, grace enough for eternal salvation.*

**Eighth Rule.** *The eighth: Let him who is in desolation labor to be in patience, which is contrary to the vexations which come to him: and let him think that he will soon be consoled, employing against the desolation the devices, as is said in the sixth Rule.*

**Eleventh Rule.** *The eleventh: ...On the contrary, let him who is in desolation think that he can do much with the grace sufficient to resist all his enemies, taking strength in his Creator and Lord.*

## Tactics of the evil one

Saint Ignatius ends his first set of rules by giving three insights into the tactics of the evil one. Understanding these tactics will help you to undermine his evil attack and thwart his oppressive action.

***Twelfth Rule.** The twelfth: ...in the same manner, it is the way of the enemy to weaken and lose heart, his temptations taking flight, when the person who is exercising himself in spiritual things opposes a bold front against the temptations of the enemy, doing diametrically the opposite. And on the contrary, if the person who is exercising himself commences to have fear and lose heart in suffering the temptations, there is no beast so wild on the face of the earth as the enemy of human nature in following out his damnable intention with so great malice.*

The clear advice from Saint Ignatius here is to be strong, confident and filled with faith. The evil one tries to cause fear and anxiety. And when he succeeds in creating this fear, he gains influence and power over you. However, when he and his lies are immediately rebuked with confidence in Christ, then he is greatly weakened and cowers before your faith. The evil one's power to oppress is in direct correlation to either your spiritual strength or your spiritual weakness. When you are weak, he is strong. When you are strong, he is weak.

***Thirteenth Rule.** ...in the same way, when the enemy of human nature brings his wiles and persuasions to the just soul, he wants and desires that they be received and kept in secret; but when one reveals them to his good Confessor or to another spiritual person that knows his deceits and evil ends, it is very grievous to him, because he gathers, from his manifest deceits being discovered, that he will not be able to succeed with his wickedness begun.*

The evil one gains power over you when you keep his evil attacks hidden in fear. However, when you humbly bring his attacks into the light, especially by revealing them to a spiritual director or confessor, he loses power over you. His attacks are like mold. When mold remains in the dark, it grows. When it is exposed to light, it dies. Thus, it is always spiritually fruitful to be open and honest about what you are experiencing on a spiritual level.

***Fourteenth Rule.** ...in like manner the enemy of human nature, roaming about, looks in turn at all our virtues, theological, cardinal and moral; and where he finds us weakest and most in need for our eternal salvation, there he attacks us and aims at taking us.*

The evil one will usually attack you at your weakest point. Therefore, be aware of your weaknesses! If you have struggled with habitual sin, then he will most likely attack there. In fact, anything you struggle with is a potential area of attack from the evil one. Perhaps you

struggle with overextending yourself, or struggle with sins of the flesh, or tend to gossip, etc. Whatever your weakness is, that is where he will attack. If, however, you are very aware of who you are and what weaknesses you struggle with the most, then you will be in a good position to rebuke and overcome his attacks when they come.