

How to Allow the Holy Spirit to Lead our Parishes

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Diving into the Deep End

Before you jump into a lake for the first time, you usually wade into shallow water, first. Then, you wade around to get a feel for where the lake gets deeper. This approach enables you to ascertain if there are any protruding rocks or debris below the surface of the water. You certainly don't want to jump into the deep end of the lake before you check that the way is clear. An introduction to a talk usually serves a similar purpose. An introduction provides broad brush strokes regarding the main themes that will emerge in the talk. Consequently, you become better prepared to engage with the up-coming content, lest you suddenly end up beyond your depth of understanding.

How to Allow the Holy Spirit to Lead our Parishes

This talk will be unusual, then, as the conference organisers have asked me to dive in the deep end right from the outset! The topic? Essentially, it's about communal discernment. Among the *charisms*¹ of the Holy Spirit that St Paul identified, discernment is one of these gifts (1 Cor. 12:10). Discernment is also a *skill* “because it can be developed and honed by prayer and practice.”²

In this talk, I'll be identifying how the baptised, together with their Parish Priest, can be attentive to the interior movements of the Holy Spirit. We'll see how this contemplative approach helps the discernment group to allow the Holy Spirit to lead their Parish. Indeed, if we're to bring about faith renewal in parishes, we need “to be guided by the Spirit” (Gal 5:18; Rom 8:14). Having said this, as only about an hour has been allocated for this talk, there's risk that you'll leave thinking that not much is involved in discernment. Whereas, in fact, discernment is a profound spiritual exercise. Essentially, important dispositions are required and as the apostle St John said, “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 Jn. 4:1 NIV). To assist you further, then, the transcript of this talk will be made available online. If you want to delve more deeply into it, the transcript includes footnotes and appendices, including a practical step-by-step guide on how to engage in communal discernment.

You Can't Swim in Shallow Water

Having introduced the analogy of wading into the shallow water first before we plumb the depths, there is at least one shallow end that you need to avoid. The shallow end of communal discernment is no place to swim. This body of water has no depth, precisely because it's *superficial*. On this point, I'm referring to the misguided, pre-conceived ideas of communal discernment that some people have. Some people use the word “communal discernment” as a pretentious means of grasping for their disordered attachments. Clearly, this approach is no way to spread the Gospel, for such people attempt to enslave others with their own disordered emotional needs. Such people struggle to appreciate that exercising *indifference* is essential to discernment.

Indifference does not involve being *blasé*, *careless*, and *apathetic*, but being *detached*, *impartial*, *unbiased*, and *interiorly free* from the things that don't lead us closer to God. Among other important dispositions, St Ignatius of Loyola taught that we can only discern God's desires for ourselves if we're not “reaching a decision through some disordered affection”

¹ *Charism* comes from the Latin word, *charis*, which means *gift*. As Theology Professor and Spiritual Director Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM PhD explains, “Its author is the Holy Spirit ... God desires to provide the tools and support for all people to live in such a way that they live out their destinies as God's beloved children, so we can assume that the gift of discernment is given in some measure to all who ask for it.”

Elizabeth Liebert, *The Soul of Discernment: A Spiritual Practice for Communities and Institutions* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 19.

² Liebert, *The Soul of Discernment*, 19. More specifically, Brian J. Gallagher explains that such skill requires *contemplative* prayer: “The contemplative nature yearns to know what is real, what is true, and what is good – ultimately what is of God – in one's experience. Because discernment is concerned with what is of God, I argue that a contemplative approach is basic to the practice of discernment and to the process of becoming discerning.”

Brian J. Gallagher, *Communal Wisdom: A Way of Discernment for a Pilgrim Church* (Bayswater, VIC: Coventry Press, 2018), 23. Likewise, Theologian Walter Burghardt, SJ STD (1914-2008) referred to contemplation as “a long loving look at the real.” Walter Burghardt, “Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real” (paper presented at the National Federation of Spiritual Directors, Camarillo, CA 1975).

(*Spiritual Exercises*, [22]).³ Indifference is epitomised in the parable of the treasure hidden in a field. The man who finds the treasure hides it again, goes off happy, sells everything he owns and buys the field” (Mt. 13:44). This man exercises indifference in relation to everything he owns, as he knows that all his material possessions are *nothing* compared to God, to whom he is united. Indeed, *God is his treasure*; hence, he prays Psalm 16, “My happiness lies in you alone” (Ps. 16:2 GP).

St Ignatius understood that indifference is an essential “means of preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections and then, after their removal, of seeking and finding God’s will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul” (*SpEx*, [1]).⁴ Indeed, the salvation of souls is the ultimate treasure that should motivate every effort in parish renewal.

Example of Indifference in Communal Discernment

To illustrate how indifference is needed in communal discernment, I’ll give you an example. I heard someone tell me about a pastor in the USA who was put in an awkward position. He received a letter from his local Council that notified him of a Development Application (DA) to build a brothel just across the road from his church. He sought advice from one of the committees in his Parish. Surprisingly, every single committee member strongly advised the priest not to make any objection to the DA. *What was their rationale?* “If the Council approves the DA,” they said, “the Parish would have an opportunity to provide pastoral care for the prostitutes and their clients.” Clearly, this rationale didn’t square with a priest’s call to participate in Christ’s identity as the Good Shepherd. As a *good* shepherd sees a menacing wolf approaching his sheep, can you imagine him, thinking: “I think this wolf deserves a fair go. I won’t defend my sheep from his blood thirsty teeth, but you know what? I can put bandaids on the sheep who survive and nurture them back to health.” Needless to say, the answer to this question is self-evident. *So, what prevented the committee from seeing what the Parish needed to do?*

Before I answer this question, let me explain two important factors about *synodality*. We’ve heard much about the synodal process given that the Plenary Council has just taken place in Australia. When Pope Francis first explained the synodal process, he emphasised that it is “an exercise in mutual listening.”⁵ The first factor about synodality that warrants our attention is this: the motions deliberated by the Plenary Council need to be submitted to the Synod of Bishops and ultimately be decided upon by the Bishop of Rome.⁶ Even outside of the Plenary process, priests do well to engage in similar mutual listening by consulting their parishioners.

³ *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* ed. George E. Ganss et. al. (New York: Paulist Press, 1991). In-text citations of the *Spiritual Exercises* are made in this talk by virtue of being central to this topic. The numbers in square brackets in the text of Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* refer to their standard paragraph numbering. Hereafter, *Spiritual Exercises* will be abbreviated as *SpEx*.

⁴ This citation, and all quotes from the *SpEx* hereafter, are from: *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl, SJ (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

⁵ cf. Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome, Paul VI Audience Hall, 18 September 2021. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210918-fedeli-diocesiroma.html>

⁶ cf. Address of His Holiness Pope Francis during the Ceremony Commemorating The 50th Anniversary of the Institution of The Synod of Bishops, Paul VI Audience Hall, 17 October 2015. www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html

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Communal discernment can take place, then, in a Parish Pastoral Council, Finance Committee or any other committee, even a general assembly of all the parishioners. We must remember, though, that synodality is not a parliament, nor is it *congregationalism*.⁷ Rather, each pastor is responsible for the Parish.⁸ When the Parish Priest consults his parishioners, they *make* a decision in result of their consultative discussion. The pastor's responsibility is to *take* the deliberative decision, which may or may not exactly mirror the parishioners' advice. Nonetheless, this process involves the parish priest taking his decision with the benefit of his listening to the grass roots.⁹ Additionally, as this decision-making process is *transparent*, "Those who will be affected by a decision should have the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process and express their view before the decision is taken, to the extent that this is possible and appropriate."¹⁰

Ideally, any synodal process culminates in a consensus. However, consensus doesn't lead to truth; rather, truth leads to consensus. Even so, such a general agreement cannot always be found. After all, consensus is a means, not an end. In fact, Brian J. Gallagher, MSC PhD contends: "I do not believe that majority opinion is necessarily a sign of the Spirit of God." Because "the communal experience of the [Holy] Spirit and of any spirits not-of-God" that affect the group are "distinct from the many separate individual experiences of the spirits."¹¹ Nonetheless, by inviting everyone to provide their advice, parish priests give their parishioners a greater incentive to engage in the Church's mission. Accordingly, Pope Francis declared: "The world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church of the third millennium."¹²

⁷ According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Congregationalism" is "the Christian movement that arose in England in the late 16th and 17th centuries," which "emphasizes the right and responsibility of each properly organized congregation to determine its own affairs, without having to submit these decisions to the judgment of any higher human authority, and as such it eliminated bishops and presbyters. Each individual church is regarded as independent and autonomous."

Jenkins, Daniel T. "Congregationalism," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9 April 2021.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Congregationalism> Accessed 26 July 2022.

⁸ Canon 515 §1 of the *Code of Canon Law* stipulates that each parish is to be entrusted to the care of a *parochus*, who serves as the shepherd of the community under the authority of the bishop.

⁹ Although this presentation pertains to communal discernment in parish life, if you are responsible for a diocesan agency, a Catholic institution that provides education or social welfare, a religious institute, or an association of the lay faithful, you would not need to use much imagination to appropriate how communal discernment can be implemented in your own context.

¹⁰ 5th Plenary Council of Australia, 2nd General Assembly (3-9 July 2022), Final Decree: *At the Service of Communion, Participation, and Mission: Governance*, № 3.

<https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/FINAL-Decree-7-At-the-Service-of-Communion-Participation-and-Mission-Governance.pdf> In the same paragraph, this Final Decree adds: "As decision-making authority in the Church is most often exercised by the ordained, there should be careful attention to ensuring that the voices of lay women and men, as well as Religious, are heard and considered on all matters, especially those that impact distinctively on them (cf. *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, Nos 105,104; *Evangelium Gaudium*, № 102)."

¹¹ B. Gallagher, *Communal Wisdom*, 34. He adds: "God's Spirit in a group may be quite a different experience from the experience of any one member of the group, from any experience reached by a vote of members, and from the result of any apparent consensus in a group." Essentially, "group unity does not mean that all members of the group necessarily have the same opinion, as in consensus. Rather, all agree to abide by the group decision" (*Ibid*, 35).

According to President of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities Michael J. Sheeran, SJ PhD, authentic group discernment "rejects the creation of 'us' and 'them'." Additionally, it "rejects the demonising of those with whom we disagree or those we find ourselves fearing" as it "transcends the need to play politics or persuade others of our view."

Michael J. Sheeran, "Ignatius and the Quakers," in *The Way Supplement*, Vol 68, Summer (1990): 91. See also Michael J. Sheehan, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1 December 1996).

¹² Address of His Holiness Pope Francis during the Ceremony Commemorating The 50th Anniversary of the Institution of The Synod of Bishops, Paul VI Audience Hall, 17 October 2015.

Another important factor about synodality is worthy of note. In addition to consulting those who are within his Parish, the Parish Priest does well to consult people outside of his community and summon their collaborative assistance, too, when appropriate. Thus, when the pastor in the USA whom I referred to earlier received the letter regarding the DA, he also sought advice from his Diocese's Communications Office, which among other things, is the agency in his Diocese that specialises with the Church's presence in the media. The pastor was advised to go to the media so that his objection against the DA would be effective. Indeed, a strong objection was needed. Despite the fact that US Government's guidelines don't permit brothels to be built right next to a place of worship, the Council went ahead and allowed the developer to get so far as to submit his DA.¹³

At that stage, the Director of the Communications Office – a fervent Catholic lay woman – had been in the media for over 30 years. So, the priest knew she would have good judgment. She told him, “There's a journalist I've known for 20 years who has written many articles for newspapers against such DAs to good effect. I can assure you that this man is a journalist whom you can trust.” The priest discussed this advice with the members of the committee in his Parish. But, they were all against this advice, too, and they became very anxious. *Why?* Because they were afraid of what their non-Catholic friends and acquaintances would think of them if the church where they worshipped ended up in the newspaper. They didn't want to be seen by the general public to have been part of the Parish's effort to voice its objection against the DA to build a brothel. In this context, this fear that influenced the Parish committee members consisted of what St Ignatius calls a “disordered affection.”

Testing Spirits by their Direction and Origin

Let me explain. Think of the word *dis-ordered*. Your heart can be *ordered* towards God or away from God. The committee's fear was *mis-directed* away from God towards the spirit of the world. It's OK to experience fear, but how we respond to this feeling or any other interior movement – even subtle feelings – is what matters. Because spirits always have a *direction* (i.e., an intended trajectory), either towards God or away from God). To give other examples, what spirit would move me to feel humble gratitude in response to God's love, which I did nothing to merit? What spirit would be moving me if I took delight in your suffering? As Brian Gallagher clarifies, “the direction in which the spirit leads is the surest sign of which spirit is operating.”¹⁴ In other words, we can test the origin of a spirit by testing its direction. According to this understanding, the Parish committee's fear was *dis-ordered*. Clearly, their interior reaction was not ordered towards God, nor the plight of those who are vulnerable to sins against chastity with authentic compassion. Rather, it became evident over time that their fear appeared to be ordered towards their own reputation in accord with worldly esteem. Their motivations may have varied from one member to another. By and large, however, they indicated that they

¹³ As the 5th Plenary Council of Australia states: “Our communal worship witnesses to unity and hope in a fractured world increasingly hostile to public acknowledgement of God.”

5th Plenary Council of Australia, 2nd General Assembly, Decree 5: “Communion in Grace: Sacrament to the World,” № 6. <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/FINAL-Decree-5-Communion-in-Grace-Sacrament-to-the-World.pdf>

¹⁴ Brian J. Gallagher, *Discernment of Spirits: The Corner-stone of Formation of Spiritual Directors*, doctoral thesis (Melbourne, VIC: University of Divinity, 2018), 106.

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were afraid that people in the general public who are subject to an anti-Christian sentiment would read the newspaper article and think poorly of them for advocating for Gospel values. Their worldview appeared to be influenced by the mass media in the manner well described by Robert Francis Prevost, OSA, who is renowned for being media savvy:

Western mass media is extraordinarily effective in fostering within the general public enormous sympathy for beliefs and practices that are at odds with the Gospel ... The sympathy for anti-Christian lifestyle choices, that mass media fosters is so brilliantly and artfully engrained in the viewing public that when people hear the Christian message it often inevitably seems ideologically and emotionally cruel by contrast to the ostensible humaneness of the anti-Christian perspective.¹⁵

As disciples of Jesus, the pastoral decisions we make need to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, not by the spirit of the world. Accordingly, Pope Francis explained, “The worldly spirit drives us to concentrate on our own problems and interests, on our need to appear relevant ... Let us invoke [the Holy Spirit] each day, so that he can remind us to make God’s gaze upon us our starting point, to make decisions by listening to his voice.”¹⁶ Our attempt to be faithful to the Gospel is “not to measure how far the world lives from the truth [the Good News] contains, but in order to attract the world, to enchant it with the beauty of love, to seduce it with the beauty of the offer of freedom which is given by the Gospel.”¹⁷

If the members of the Parish’s committee had exercised indifference, they would have enjoyed the interior freedom to think with “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). St Paul speaks of this need to remain detached from the spirit of the world. “Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you,” he says, “but let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind. This is the only way to discover the will of God and know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do” (Rom. 12:2).

As we clarified earlier, indifference doesn’t mean that we remain *apathetic*. Rather, indifference is the disposition by which we can be free to act according to God’s desires. Theology professor Dean Brackley, SJ PhD (1946-2011) clarifies that such interior freedom provides “the capacity to sense and then embrace what is best, even when that goes against our initial inclinations.” Essentially, indifference “is neither stoic in passiveness nor the extinction of desire that some currents of eastern religions advocate.” Rather, indifference “means being so passionately and single-mindedly committed, so completely in love, that we are willing to sacrifice anything, including our lives, for the ultimate goal.”¹⁸ Accordingly, we pray in Psalm 63: “Your love is better than life itself.” Imagine how *meaningful* this Psalm was to Jesus when he prayed to his Father, “Your love is better than life itself” (Ps. 63:3).

¹⁵ Intervention of Fr Robert Francis Prevost, OSA during the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, Holy See Press Office, *Synodus Episcoporum Bulletin*, XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 7-28 October 2012 (English Edition).

https://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_25_xiii-ordinaria-2012/02_inglese/b11_02.html

¹⁶ Homily of his Holiness Pope Francis, Solemnity of Pentecost, St Peter’s Basilica, Sunday, 5 June 2022.

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2022/documents/20220605-omelia-pentecoste.html>

¹⁷ Address of Pope Francis to a Meeting of the Congregation for Bishops, Bologna Hall, 27 February 2014, № 6.

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/february/documents/papa-francesco_20140227_riunione-congregazione-vescovi.html

¹⁸ Dean Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 12.

Indifference, thus understood, disposes us to be like “a good shortstop” in a baseball game, as we’re “ready to move in any direction at the crack of the bat.” Obviously, “we are not indifferent to murder or adultery. Nor are we indifferent to our spouse, family, church, or anything else that serves the ultimate goal here and now.” On the contrary, once we are determined that something is more conducive to the goal than the alternatives, God expects us to pursue what we’ve chosen *passionately*.¹⁹

If a person isn’t aware that he’s lacking interior freedom, he simply cannot discern. The Founder of the Christian Spirituality Program in Creighton University Richard Hauser, SJ (1968-2018) emphatically taught, “Without having experienced a spiritual awakening, discernment is impossible.”²⁰ I believe Hauser is correct because if we’re not consciously aware of our desires that are complicit with the dark spirit, these “deceptive desires” (Eph. 4:22 ISV) will hijack the discernment process.²¹ If you want to read further examples that illustrate what can happen when authentic conversion and interior freedom are lacking, you can look at *Appendix A*.

Desire for God is Foundational to Discernment

You must not underestimate how foundational desire for God indeed is for sound group discernment. Let me give you an example. Imagine you’re attending a meeting of the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC). The Parish Priest is seeking advice about how well the Parish’s Confession times best serve the needs of the parishioners. One of the members of the PPC expresses her concern: “Allocating 30 minutes before the Vigil Mass for the Confession schedule isn’t enough. I, as a single mother, can become easily delayed by the needs of my children from being able to get to Confession on time. My baby suddenly needs a nappy change. Or, my four-year old son loses his shoe and can’t find it. Or, I need to run after my pet dog Rex, lest he become lost, because Rex has bolted down the street when I opened the front door of my house to go to my car! Many other instances like these pop up without warning. Consequently, by the time I arrive in the church, Confession is over and the Vigil Mass has started. If more time was allocated for Confession, I’d have a better chance of getting to the church on time.”

Another member of the PPC *scoffs* at what this single mother said: “You don’t know what you’re saying! You’re treating this problem as if it’s outside you, but you hold the solution within you. All you need to do is get your children in your car earlier.”

This parishioner doesn’t realise that her lack of sensitivity towards the single mother is influenced by what she feels about Confession. She hasn’t been to Confession for over 10 years,

¹⁹ Brackley adds: Ultimately, “we need a radical interior freedom in order to ‘want and choose’ what is more conducive to this goal,” for, “in the course of following our particular commitments, we must be free to move on when the supreme goal requires it.” Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, 12.

²⁰ Richard Hauser, SJ, “Discernment of Spirits,” 2015, Creighton University, Omaha, NE, USA, class lecture.

²¹ Disciples of Jesus who are spiritual awake are not to be confused with the people who claim to be “woke.” So called “wokery” is an ideology of rupture with fundamentalist and even cult-like characteristics that operates underneath “Cancel Culture,” which often undermines Gospel values. See Noelle Mering, *Awake, Not Woke: A Christian Response to the Cult of Progressive Ideology* (Gastonia NC: TAN Books, 2021).

as she feels rather threatened by the prospect of having to confess her sins. Nor has she ever spoken to God about her fear of Confession. She deems feeling threatened by Confession to be *unwanted* because it's an unpleasant emotion, but by avoiding and disowning her fear, unbeknown to herself, she ends up projecting her discomfort onto the single mother by moralising: "You should be more aware of what's within your control rather than blaming your circumstances." Signs of the dark spirit are evident in this parishioner's comments, for in addition to blaming the single mother, she *devalues* her. Indeed, we have reason to suspect that the bad spirit is at work when we feel *inferior* in response.

By way of contrast, this member of the PPC could have thought to herself, "I haven't been to Confession for 10 years. I know I'm afraid of confessing my sins, but if I'm going to be attentive to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us in this meeting, I need to put myself in the shoes of this woman who values the Sacrament of Reconciliation. I might even learn something from her that may help me move beyond my fear, as I want to be close to God." In addition to exercising indifference, this example also illustrates the importance of us having union with God as our ultimate goal in discernment.

Rose Mary Dougherty, SSND (1939-2019), who was a renowned formator of spiritual directors, emphasised: "The intention of seeking God together for one another ... becomes the litmus test for difficulties that come up in individuals and the group." Accordingly, she offers the following questions for the group to reflect upon:

- "How prayerful were we during the session? What was the quality of our silence? Our attention to God? What seemed to take us from attention to God?"
- "How did the difficulties affect the seeking? Do they obscure it by preoccupation with group maintenance? In spite of, or perhaps because of the discomfort they induce, do the difficulties make the seeking more authentic, the trust in God more real?"²²

When Desire for God Becomes More of Less Inverted

In communal discernment, sometimes the group's desire for God becomes more or less inverted.²³ In this situation, the members of the group might be mirroring the tendencies that exist among the parishioners in the wider worshipping community. This "mirroring dynamic"²⁴ is also known as a "parallel process,"²⁵ as what the group experiences first-hand among themselves *parallels* what they need to deal with among the parishioners in the wider

²² Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction*, 54, 68.

²³ Dougherty explains:

During the meetings, this prayerful atmosphere and attentiveness to the Divine is likely to be disrupted by a number of things. It may be disrupted by self-consciousness, a need to appear competent or to get one's point across, fear of criticizing or of being criticized, need to solve problems, analyse situations, or to offer "help," to discuss an issue raised by the presenter theoretically rather than staying focused on the presenter's concerns in the issue. Such distractions are bound to occur from time to time, and it is unrealistic to expect to maintain a constant contemplative attitude in any setting. However, it is possible to keep reminding oneself of the priority of the Divine, and thus to call oneself "back" to this essential Center whenever attention has been taken away.

Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction*, 95.

²⁴ Maureen Conroy, *Looking into the Well: Supervision of Spiritual Directors* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1995), 24.

²⁵ cf. Melvine C. Blanchette, *The Art of Clinical Supervision*. Eds. Barry K. Estadt, John R. Compton, and Melvine C. Blanchette (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 84; David A. Steere, *The Supervision of Pastoral Care*. Ed. David A. Steere (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002), 85, 88.

community. In other words, the group sees how the parishioners in the wider worshipping community relate to one another reflected like a mirror among themselves in the discernment group.

Here's an example. As most parishes have a PPC, the following interaction among the members of such a group illustrates this dynamic. The PPC members notice that their desire for God has shifted towards competing for one another's attention and approval. This shift emerges as some members push for the Parish to adopt a pastoral initiative that doesn't arise within the context of the agenda for that meeting. They insist that the Parish's position of Youth Coordinator should be made redundant so that the Parish could invest in stock market shares. Additionally, their advice derives from much self-interest, as they own an investment broker company. Other members try to point out that conflict of interest appears to be at play. In this situation, the PPC need to be attentive to how they are relating to one another. Seeking one another's attention and approval might be mirroring the problem that they know exists among some groups and individuals within the Parish who are inward looking and self-serving.

Affective maturity and trust needs to exist among the members of the group for these dynamics to be brought to the surface and explored; otherwise, all the members will remain non-the-wiser about what spirit is affecting the whole group. You can expect this kind of dynamic to be at play because whether they like or not, PPC members represent the wider Parish, and parishioners influence them accordingly.²⁶ Regarding this dynamic, Brian Gallagher explains:

Groups too, are tempted away from life, away from God. Our vulnerabilities, our weak spots, are ripe ground for spirits not-of-God, appealing to the group's vulnerability ... The voices of the counter spirits, the spirits not-of-God, tend to be louder, more demanding and in some sense more inviting, because of the group's vulnerability.²⁷

You might be quick to identify this example of the mirroring dynamic to be a problem; however, if the PPC are sufficiently self-aware, they can use this parallel process to good effect for the Parish. Specifically, when the PPC engage in solid reflection upon their emotional needs that are operating underneath their conversation, they can experience a spiritual awakening. Consequently, rather than be inwardly looking and self-serving, the PPC can receive enlightenment on how they can move beyond the impasse of their obscurity and frustration to a deeper understanding regarding how the Parish can engage in pastoral outreach.

This example illustrates a formidable means by which we can discover how we can allow the Holy Spirit to lead our parishes. This example is quite relevant to our era characterised by rampant individualism, for such individualism in secular society can influence the Church. In his pre-conclave speech, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio cautioned: "the church, as an institution, is often tempted into a kind of 'theological narcissism'."²⁸ Consequently, many

²⁶ According to systems theory, Liebert explains that a community "may mask some of the non-personal aspects of a group's behaviour, so we may not think of them as structures. Yet communities – groups with high social cohesion and shared values and norms – do act and respond in many ways more like a whole person (that is, a system) than as a collection of individuals. This observation can sometimes be extended to communities.

Liebert, *The Soul of Discernment*, 41.

²⁷ B. Gallagher, *Communal Wisdom*, 30-31.

²⁸ Thomas C. Fox, "Francis Pre-Conclave Remarks Echo in First General Audience" in *National Catholic Reporter* (27 March 2013). <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/francis-pre-conclave-remarks-echo-first-general-audience>

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Christians lack the ability to work together as a community to evangelise.²⁹ If the PPC's desire for God becomes more or less inverted, the following questions for reflection that Dougherty offers are apt:

As a listener for the others, where did my words or my silence seem to be coming from? A place of trust? A place of competition? My need to feel superior to others or appear learned? Am I willing simply to offer a question, an idea, or an image to a person for their consideration and then let go of it, or do I keep on pushing it? Do I listen to the questions of others, or do I hold onto my agenda for the person?³⁰

Reflecting on questions such as these releases the PPC members from their shackles. Consequently, they're no longer in collusion with the parishioners in the wider worshipping community who may be complicit with the dark spirit. Thus, they're no longer restricted from evangelising. This example illustrates how the PPC can discern the deeper needs of the Parish, as opposed to superficial ones. This example also demonstrates that authentic and transformative relationships primarily take place on the emotional and spiritual plane rather than simply the intellectual level.³¹ Whether you're aware of it or not, the emotions and passions that the good spirit and the bad spirit engender influence the decisions we make.³²

Authentic and transformative relationships is also the consequence of the group making their desire for God foundational to discernment.³³ Regarding this contemplative attitude, Spiritual Director and Pastoral Supervisor Maureen Conroy, RSM DMin affirms: "This gazing is done in God's presence, which allows inner truths to reveal themselves in a caring and contemplative atmosphere. It is God who guides the revelation of unfree areas. It is God who brings darkness into the light and purifies the polluted waters."³⁴

This example also illustrates how our desire for God is a *reciprocation* of God's desire for us. For as St John of the Cross taught, "In the first place it should be known that if anyone is

²⁹ Not long before he became Pope Francis, Cardinal Bergoglio asserted:

There is a tension between the center and the periphery ... We must get out of ourselves and go toward the periphery. We must avoid the spiritual disease of the Church that can become self-referential: when this happens, the Church itself becomes sick. It's true that accidents can happen when you go out into the street, as can happen to any man or woman. But if the Church remains closed onto itself, self-referential, it grows old. Between a Church that goes into the street and gets into an accident and a Church that is sick with self-referentiality, I have no doubts in preferring the first.

Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio spoke these words in an interview with the longtime Vatican correspondent Andrea Tornielli, of Turin's *La Stampa*. Cited in Alexander Stille, "Pope Francis Against Rome" in *The New Yorker* (14 March 2013). <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/pope-francis-against-rome>

³⁰ Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction*, 54. Regarding trust in particular, Dougherty observes: "...there must be a basic trust in God's Spirit at work in ourselves and other participants as well as in the group process" (*Ibid*, 57).

³¹ cf. Steere, *The Supervision of Pastoral Care*, 105. Steere's observation resembles St Ignatius' counsel to have greater reverence for the will than for the intellect when we are encountering God (cf. *SpEx*, [3]).

The merit of having reverence for affective criteria is not limited to where we feel *attracted*, for paying attention to experiences of *resistance* also has its reward. Accordingly, St John of the Cross declares: "before reaching this degree [by which the intellect and will are integrated without any cognitive dissonance], it is more common to experience the touch of burning in the will than the touch of understanding in the intellect."

The Dark Night in The Collected Works of John of the Cross, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1991), Ch. 13, № 2. See also *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 3, №s 49-50.

³² See the following works of St John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, Ch. 13, № 2; *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 3, №s 49-50; *The Ascent of Mt Carmel*, Bk III, ch. 16, №s 2, 5, 6; *The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 20 & 21, №s 9-11.

³³ Dougherty explains: "Faith sharing is a way of helping us claim and clarify our experience of God. The praying presence of others as we claim our experience can support us in living out our faithful response to God."

Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction*, 84-85.

³⁴ Conroy, *Looking into the Well*, 46-47.

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seeking God, the Beloved is seeking that person much more.³⁵ When God's love is heartfelt within ourselves, we can't help but want to respond to his desires for us. Consequently, interior freedom results, which correlates with St Paul's axiom: "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17).³⁶ This liberation is not only freedom *from* what prevents us to listen to God speaking in and through the group. For this grace also affords us to experience freedom *for* this depth of listening. Essentially, this interior freedom is the fruit of *humility*. St Alphonsus Liguori provides a comical image to illustrate the necessity of indifference:

He who prays to God to enlighten him ... but without indifference, and who, instead of conforming to the divine will, would sooner have God conform to his will, is like a pilot that pretends to wish his ship to advance, but in reality does not want it to: he throws his anchor into the sea, and then unfurls his sails. God neither gives light nor speaks his word to such persons.³⁷

Communal Discernment

In addition to individual discernment, communal discernment also requires indifference. As this conference is focusing on parish renewal, the objective of communal discernment in this context is to distinguish prayerfully what God desires for your Parish. Essentially, this undertaking involves discerning God's desires *together*. This undertaking is in stark contrast with someone who asks himself, "What do *I* want to do?" Or, "What do *I* want my Parish to do?" Rather, communal discernment consists of asking ourselves, "What does God desire for the Parish?" and "What is God saying not only to me individually but to me *through the group*?" What Clara Geoghegan asserted about this matter is worthy of note. Clara lectures in Church History and is a Co-director of the Sienna Institute Australia, which is famous for its *Called and Gifted Workshop*. She maintains:

Discernment is not about me or you. It is about how the Holy Spirit wants to work through each of us – in our Church, in our families, in our workplaces, in our social gatherings, in our society, so that we can transform the cultures and societies in which we live to reflect the kingdom of God. It is about dying to self, so that we may have life in abundance.³⁸

³⁵ *The Living Flame of Love* in *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1991), stanza 3, № 28. There's an additional consequence to our intimacy with God. Essentially, we are more likely to become acutely aware of the tendencies within ourselves that are incongruent with God's desires for us: "God's love in Jesus has become the treasure beyond all value, and what a grace it is to know indescribable pain when deprived of that treasure."

George A. Aschenbrenner, *Quickening the Fire in Our Midst – the Challenge of Diocesan Priestly Spirituality* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002), 90.

³⁶ Mark E. Thibodeaux, SJ observes that consolation, Ignatian indifference, and spiritual freedom mean almost the same thing. In a diametrical manner, desolation, disordered attachments, and spiritual unfreedoms are approximately equal. Although we could easily come up with some slight distinctions among these terms, they are equal enough to respond to them in the same way according to their origin and direction.

Mark E. Thibodeaux, *Ignatian Discernment of Spirits for Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Care: Going Deeper* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2020), 21.

³⁷ Cited in Joseph Bolin, *Paths of Love: The Discernment of Vocation According to the Teaching of Aquinas, Ignatius, and Pope John Paul II*. St John of the Cross also notes the result of lacking indifference:

Many of these beginners want God to desire what they want, and they become sad if they have to desire God's will ... Hence they frequently believe that what is not their will, or brings them no satisfaction, is not God's will, and, on the other hand, that if they are satisfied, God is too. They measure God by themselves and not themselves by God, which is in opposition to his teaching in the Gospel that those who lose their life for his sake will gain it and those who desire to gain it will lose it [Mt. 16:25].

The Dark Night of the Soul in *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1991), Bk. I, Ch. 7, №s. 5-6.

³⁸ Clara Geoghegan, "Preoccupations Led to Important Gaps," *The Catholic Weekly* (17 July 2022): 17.

Because our objective is to listen to God speaking *in* and *through* the group, Dougherty explains that we need to depend on our prayer, not on our knowledge of each other person.³⁹ In this sense, communal discernment is like group spiritual direction. Communal discernment differs to receiving one-to-one spiritual direction in two ways, as Dougherty describes. Firstly, “The faithfulness of the group to its purpose is not the responsibility of any single person but rather of all the members together.”⁴⁰ Secondly, rather than one individual, “The group becomes a spiritual director for each person in the group.”⁴¹ Having said this, communal discernment does require one person to facilitate the discussion.

Identity in Christ is Foundational to Discernment

Being attentive to the activity of the Holy Spirit is essential to authentic discipleship – not only as individuals, but as a parish – without which your local church might as well be a non-religious charitable organisation or some other Non-Government Organisation.

Communal discernment is a *hallmark* of Christian disciples for another reason, which I’ll explain this way. What *we do* as authentic disciples of Jesus is an expression of *who we are* in Christ. We’ve seen how a pastor needs to be grounded in his graced identity so that he can be faithful to his call to participate in Christ’s identity as the Good Shepherd. In addition to priests, participating in Christ’s identity is also the vocation of the laity. Indeed, God calls all the faithful to bear Christ to the world by virtue of the Sacrament of Baptism. Ultimately, our mission can only be fruitful if we are grounded in Christ’s identity. George Aschenbrenner, SJ went so far as to assert: “Until [our] identity [in Jesus Christ] has been cultivated, serious discernment is not possible.”⁴²

An individual who is not grounded in his identity won’t feel comfortable to be himself when he is pressured to conform to others who possess opposing values. This dynamic can also occur in a group. If a group isn’t grounded in their identity in Christ, its members won’t feel safe to be themselves. Essentially, if a group feels that they need to conceal who they are, they

³⁹ cf. Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction*, 63.

⁴⁰ Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction*, 65.

⁴¹ Having stated this, Dougherty adds:

discernment occurs differently in the two direction settings. In one-to-one spiritual direction, discernment happens primarily through our willingness to invite another into our discernment and our attempts to articulate the God-noticings in our lives. In group spiritual direction, although there is usually less time for attention to individuals, people often become aware of God’s ways in their hearts as they hear how God seems to be present for *others* and as they become conscious of God’s presence with them *as a group* ... As they take the sharing of others into the resting place of shared silence they seek to respond to what has been disclosed out of that prayerful place.

Rose Mary Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 34-36 (emphasis added).

Further to this quote from Dougherty, I will continue to share her insights from her book, *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment*. Although this seminal work of hers is, as the title suggests, on group spiritual direction, her insights correlate closely with group discernment. I trust that this correlation will become more apparent over time. Having said this, there are significant differences between group spiritual direction and group discernment. Most essentially, as with one-to-one spiritual direction, group spiritual direction helps each member discover more deeply how God gazes upon them *individually*, and how each person’s desire for God in their prayer reflects their desires. Although group discernment helps each member be more open to how God gazes upon them, too, this openness is not in aid of discovering what God’s desires are for them as *individuals*, but for *them as an advisory group* and *the Parish’s mission as a whole*.

⁴² Aschenbrenner, *Quickening the Fire in Our Midst*, 86. Likewise, Liebert counsels: “A group, like an individual, may feel it is time bound to make a decision, while recognizing that it doesn’t have the grounding it needs to do so. This recognition can be the wake-up call that the group needs to seriously nurture its spiritual identity.” Liebert, *The Soul of Discernment*, 29.

may not really believe in their gifts and virtues. Rather, they may feel like phonies and frauds. Go back to the example I provided about the parish committee that advised their pastor to voice no objection against the brothel from being built next to their church. Their advice illustrates that they didn't feel safe for the community of the Church to be true to their identity in Christ; namely: "the light of the world." Essentially, "A town on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house" (Mt. 5:14-15 NIV).

In light of this understanding, Dougherty provides a caution: "If the group has gradually taken on a new identity, this needs to be acknowledged. It might happen that people have not been aware that the group has shifted its focus."⁴³ For example, you may have heard of Catholic institutions that provide education or various forms of social welfare that have changed over time, such that their Catholic identity is no longer prominent or integral to the services they provide. Hopefully, knowledge about what discernment truly is will help prevent this shift from happening. Sound discernment will also help Catholic parishes, diocesan agencies, institutions, and associations of the lay faithful step more and more into their core function akin to their unique identity in Christ.⁴⁴

In addition to unity, what's a reliable signifier that a Christian community has a strong *identity*, whether that community be a family, a parish, religious community, educational institution, or seminary? May I suggest that the reliable sign is the *frequent sharing of memories*. If you'd like to know why, you can read **Appendix B**.

Discernment and Decision-Making are Related but Distinct

Another mistaken notion about discernment some people have is to think that engaging in discernment and making a choice are the same exercise. If you make this mistake, you're attempting to swim in shallow water. In contrast, the love of God is deep. The primary objective of discernment is not making good decisions. Rather, discernment is a means by which we can give primacy to our relationship with God in a world that would otherwise distract us; or worse, deceive us.

⁴³ Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction*, 69.

⁴⁴ For advice on how a discernment group can prayerfully discover their identity in Christ, see B. Gallagher, *Communal Wisdom*, 43-49.

We're called to participate in Christ's identity in many other ways. Essentially, the way Jesus relates to his Father and to us in a manner by which he is faithful to his Father, is wide-ranging and profound. *When you look at Jesus looking at you, whom does Jesus see?* Indeed, we receive our identity from our relationship with Jesus, just as Jesus receives his identity from his relationship from his Father, which is affirmed by the interior movements of the Holy Spirit within his Sacred Heart. What takes place in Christ's heart can take place in ours; namely: divine love in a human heart. As our relationship with Jesus is both personal and communal, we also discover our identity by living in communion with the Church's catechetical, liturgical, sacramental, pastoral, and social life.

In addition to knowing our identity cognitively, this affirmation of our identity takes place on an intuitive level, which St Ignatius calls "intimate understanding" (*SpEx*, [2]), "intimate knowledge" (*SpEx*, [104], [233]), "deep knowledge" (*SpEx*, [63]), and "intimate perception" (*SpEx*, [322]). Regarding such intuition, Suzanne Baars explains: "When one receives the loving gaze of the Father, one experiences a *felt* sense of his own worth." Consequently, "one is strengthened to be himself. Then, he 'knows' his identity through intuition, which is more profound than knowing it through reason alone." Therefore, "God's love itself is the *author* of one's feelings of worth, of feeling lovable and secure." Suzanne Baars in *The Priest as Beloved Son*. Ed. James Keating (Omaha, NE, USA: IPF Publications, 2015), 39-40.

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Without the gift of discernment, then, we could end up falling for a counterfeit of God's goodness, truth, and beauty; or worse, worship a false God. If discernment was primarily about making choices that procure favourable results, then discernment could easily amount to no more than superstition. On the contrary, "daily living relationship with God is the precondition for good discernment."⁴⁵ Indeed, the Christian life requires us "to integrate the decisions of life into [our] relationship with God."⁴⁶ God is the ultimate point of reference in discernment, without which the choices we make mean nothing, for our decisions are not ends in themselves, but a means to a greater union with him. As you can see, discernment is not like a tool that you pick up and put down; rather, it's a lifestyle.

Dougherty explains: "Somehow, as the work of Saint Ignatius and others has come down to us through the years, we have separated the will of God from God."⁴⁷ Consequently, "discernment has come to mean a search for God's will which we must find in a game of hide-and-seek."⁴⁸ In contrast, the reality is, as religious historian and theologian Philip Sheldrake asserts, discernment "is a matter of attitude and of relationships – the quality of how we relate to our own self, to other people, to created reality, [and] to God."⁴⁹ Thus, the primary objective of discernment is to be attentive to God's self-revelation in order to deepen our relationship with him. As you can see, discernment is fundamentally a *relational* exercise, that is, it takes place in response to the ardent love God has for us.⁵⁰ Hence, Thomas Dubay, SM PhD (1921-2010), who was a renowned retreat director and author, concludes: "Techniques [in discernment] are undoubtedly useful in some situations, but without gospel holiness of life, they remain sterile."⁵¹

⁴⁵ Lonsdale adds: "To attempt to 'do discernment' in a vacuum, as it were, by simply following a set of instructions without the foundation of [a] living relationship with God is a misunderstanding of what discernment is and an impossible task."

David Lonsdale, *Dance to the Music of the Spirit* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1992), 43-44.

⁴⁶ Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises: A Handbook for Retreat Directors* (Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 1998), 129.

⁴⁷ Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction*, 25. Similarly, Liebert explains that referring to God's desires for us as "God's will" has not helped us appreciate the significance of being in relationship with him:

Most Christians have been taught that "God's will" is something that we should seek and follow. But the term "God's will" too easily evokes something static, immutable, and transcending creation ... Since we are created in the image of God, we are able to participate, with God, in the creation of our future ... discernment concerns human agency in relationship to the divine ... We exercise this co-creative potential through our choices, limited though they may be. It also means, significantly, that there is no such thing as a minutely detailed template called "God's will" that exists outside space and time, immutable and largely unknowable ... It is this understanding that I am trying to evoke by using the phrase "God's call" in place of "God's will."

Liebert, *The Soul of Discernment*, 20-21.

⁴⁸ Dougherty adds: "We often equate discernment with a skill which we must master rather the gift of God's love which guides us home to Love." On the contrary, the "discerning attitude is a way of gradually coming to live out of our desire for God in all of life."

Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction*, 33.

Dougherty also clarifies: "decision making is only one facet of discernment," for "discernment doesn't only have relevance for times of decision making. It is a stance, a way of being in all of life."

Rose Mary Dougherty, *Discernment: A Path to Spiritual Awakening* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1993), 6, 31.

⁴⁹ Philip Sheldrake, *Befriending our Desires* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 105.

⁵⁰ Thomas Dubay asserted: "discernment is a complex matter;" yet he affirmed, "it must also be simple." After all, "St Paul supposes that ordinary people may attain a perfect knowledge and wisdom and understanding (cf. Col. 1:9)." Saints such as the "Curé of Ars undoubtedly could detect the Spirit far better than a learned but unloving theologian ... Among the biblical signs that characterise those who are led by the Spirit, those to whom the Father reveals his mysteries, we find humility, love, obedience."

Thomas Dubay, *Authenticity: A Biblical Theology of Discernment* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 54.

⁵¹ Dubay, *Authenticity*, 54-55

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Regarding such holiness, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger affirmed: “Saints, in fact, reformed the Church in depth, not by working up plans for new structures, but by reforming themselves. What the Church needs in order to respond to the needs of man in every age is holiness, not management.”⁵² I agree with Professor of Systematic Theology Gill K. Goulding, CJ PhD who contends that a group should only undertake communal discernment if it is characterised by “the growth in personal holiness of its members.”⁵³ Likewise, Dubay declared: “Techniques and processes may be useful, but, like recipes, without ingredients they are useless.”⁵⁴ In other words, what ingredients are to a recipe, prayer is to discernment.

Dubay’s observation is indeed correct because the “discernment of spirits is linked to the decision making process,” yet “is distinct from it . . . Judging where interior movements come from and what they mean can be distinguished from making judgments about what they reveal about God or God’s will or the content of one’s decisions in life.”⁵⁵

If you break down the word discernment into the two Latin words from which this word is derived, you get *dis* (“apart”) and *cenere* (“to separate”). Accordingly, to discern means “to separate apart” in order to distinguish what is affecting and informing our motivations when we are faced with more than one choice. If both options are attractive, the best choice might not be obvious; hence, discernment enables us to distinguish our diversity of feelings,

⁵² Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report, An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church with Vitterio Messori* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 53.

⁵³ Gill K. Goulding, *A Church of Passion and Hope: The Formation of an Ecclesial Disposition from Ignatius Loyola to Pope Francis and the New Evangelization* (London: Bloomsbury, T&T Clark, 2016), 230-231. Similarly, Liebert affirms: “The formation of a group that expects to grow in the understanding of the spiritual life is fertile ground for communal discernment.”

Liebert, *The Soul of Discernment*, 179 (endnote 14).

⁵⁴ Dubay adds: “discernment is an enlightened encounter with God, which is a real meeting of persons, and not simply the right application of abstract principles. Processes and techniques, then, only constitute about two percent of discernment.” Dubay, *Authenticity*, 16, 79, 80, 123.

⁵⁵ Roger Haight, *Christian Spirituality for Seekers: Reflections on the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 58. This view is both implicit and explicit in the writings of Jules J. Toner, SJ and Timothy M. Gallagher, OMV STD: both of them have published separate books on the topics of the discernment of spirits and the discernment of God’s will; and both explain why these rules are related but distinct.

Jules J. Toner, *A Commentary on Saint Ignatius’ Rules for the Discernment of Spirits: A Guide to the Principals and Practice* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2002), 14-17; Jules J. Toner, *Discerning God’s Will: Ignatius of Loyola’s Teaching on Christian Decision Making* (St Louis, MO: The Institute for Jesuit Sources, 1991), 137-138; Timothy M. Gallagher, *Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005), xv; Timothy M. Gallagher, *Discerning God’s Will: An Ignatian Guide to Christian Decision Making* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 5, 86, 90.

Other commentators of like mind regarding the distinction between discernment and decision-making include: United Methodist ministers Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca J Laird, who state:

Christian discernment is not the same as decision-making. Reaching a decision can be straightforward: we consider our goals and options; maybe we list the pros and cons of each possible choice; and then we choose the action that meets our goal most effectively. Discernment, on the other hand, is about listening and responding to that place within us where our deepest desires alone with God’s desire.

Michael J. Christensen, PhD and Rebecca J Laird, DMin eds., *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life* (London: SPCK, 2013), xvii (the Forward was written by Robert A. Jonas).

Author Jim Manney, who maintains: “discernment and decision making are not synonymous in the Ignatian tradition.”

Jim Manney, *What Do You Really Want?* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2015), 112.

B. Gallagher, who argues: “familiarity with the unique ways of God’s Spirit and spirits not-of-God in one’s experience is pre-requisite to any process of Christian decision making.” Thus, “discernment of spirits and discernment of God’s will are quite distinct processes;” nevertheless, “an ability to discern the spirits underpins any discernment of God’s will or Christian decision making.” Essentially, “The principles and practice of discernment — relationship with God, the contemplative approach, openness to the Spirit, and an attitude of indifference to all alternatives — are basic pre-requisites to the processes of decision making.” Additionally, “discernment is primarily about relationship with God, not about decision-making.”

B. Gallagher, *Discernment of Spirits*, ii, 1, 41.

conflicting desires, and contrasting thoughts. Consequently, we're able to perceive what is moving us interiorly, understand our motivations, and assess the reasons that provide the rationale for the best decision. Making wise choices doesn't always come easier for prayerful people. On the contrary, St Teresa of Ávila, the great mystic Carmelite nun of the 15th Century, cautioned: "the deceptions and illusions the devil brings on contemplatives are not few."⁵⁶ "Not few" appears to mean "not rare" in light of my own experience.

Is Discernment the Usual Basis for Making a Moral Choice?

To help you further avoid the shallow end of the lake, let me address one more misguided notion about discernment. Some people think discernment is a means of seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance in making a choice between something that is morally good and something that is morally bad. I don't need to discern, for example, if I, as a consecrated celibate, should take a woman out, alone, to watch a movie. Or, if you're a student, you don't need to discern if you need to cheat an exam.⁵⁷

Who would think that choosing between something that is clearly morally bad and something that is morally good requires discernment? Let's face it, this way of thinking is very congenial for people whose thought is misguided by *moral relativism*. Yes, discernment does involve a *subjective* process; still, we must not overlook the fact that *objective criteria* is also involved in the discernment process. Ultimately, God has given to us divinely revealed objective truth in the Ten Commandments, the teachings of Christ and his Church's Magisterium, traditions, and the liturgy to help us make morally good choices. As Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM PhD explains: "God, the author of all good, cannot be calling us to do that which contradicts God's very nature ... In our contemporary world, however, what constitutes a moral evil is often not immediately clear. In this situation, discernment may indeed help us to clarify how to respond."⁵⁸ If you'd like to learn more about how the Holy Spirit can guide us in such ambiguities, you can read *Appendix C*.

Criteria for Discernment

A good number of Catholics are aware that we can be guided by the Holy Spirit by engaging in the discernment of spirits. Such discernment takes place quite profoundly on an *affective* level, that is, by paying attention to our heart's interior movements. However, many people are ignorant of important teachings of the apostle St John that compliments the *affective* criteria of discernment. Dubay draws attention to "Johannine thought on how we may detect the false and true," a method that in addition to an *affective* criteria, also includes *doctrinal*, *communal*, and *obediential* criteria. Before we look at the affective criteria, which is subjective, let's look at this objective criteria.

⁵⁶ *The Way of Perfection in The Collected Works of St Teresa of Ávila* (Vol. 2), trans. Kieren Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1980), Ch. 40, № 4.

⁵⁷ Jacques Philippe succinctly explains:

A divine inspiration cannot ask us to do something that contradicts what the Word of God teaches and asks of us. This means not the Word of God as compiled by each individual's fantasy and interpretation, but Holy Scripture as transmitted and explained by the teaching authority of the Church. For example, a divine inspiration cannot ask me to commit acts that the Church considers immoral. In the same way, true inspirations always go in the direction of a spirit of obedience to the Church.

Jacques Philippe, *In the School of the Holy Spirit* (Cleveland, OH: Scepter, 2007), 47.

⁵⁸ Liebert, *The Soul of Discernment*, 20. In addition to the guidance we receive from divine revelation, Liebert provides contemplative guidelines on page 41 of this book of hers that take into account social analysis and systems theory.

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Firstly, regarding the *criterion of doctrine*, St John taught that people moved by the dark spirit “profess erroneous doctrine and refuse to obey their leaders in the faith;” whereas, people moved by the Holy Spirit “possess true doctrine and listen to those who articulate the community’s teaching (1 Jn. 4:2-6).” Indeed, “the world shows that it’s not of God in its refusal to heed his spokesmen (1 Jn. 4:6)” and “men refuse the proclamation of the Church because they have previously refused God himself (1 Jn. 3:1).”⁵⁹

You might be aware that the Synod of Bishops in Germany has caused some controversy, as they have motioned for changes to be made to doctrine and morals, despite their being held within the universal tradition of the Church.⁶⁰ In response, Pope Francis used satire in his attempt to disarm this threat to Church unity by saying to the Chairman of the German Bishop’s Conference Bishop Goerg Bätzing in June 2022: “In Germany, there is a very good Evangelical Church. We don’t need two.”⁶¹ Subsequently, the Holy See issued a statement in July 2022, which includes the following clarification:

...the “Synodal Way” in Germany does not have the power to compel the bishops and the faithful to adopt new ways of governance and new approaches to doctrine and morals ... it would not be permissible to initiate new official structures or doctrines in the dioceses, which would represent a wound to ecclesial communion and a threat to the unity of the Church.⁶²

As for the *communal criterion* of discernment, are there evangelical marks by which a community can itself be known as possessing the Holy Spirit, as being authentic to their identity in Christ as a community? St John provides a resounding and surprising yes to this question by recalling Jesus’ intimate prayer to his Father: “With me in them and you and me, may they be so completely one that the world will realise that it was you who sent me” (Jn. 17:23). You might think that such remarkable unity is merely an ideal; that it is humanly impossible. Yet, this unity is patterned after the absolutely perfect one-ness of the Blessed Trinity! This very unity is a primordial mark of the presence of the Holy Spirit in a group. In fact, this sign of the Holy Spirit’s presence is one of the most radical of biblical teachings on discernment.⁶³ You’ll find more information about why unity is an important criterion for communal discernment in *Appendix D*.

⁵⁹ Dubai, *Authenticity*, 111.

⁶⁰ Pope Francis reminded the Church in Germany: “The universal Church lives in and of the particular Churches, just as the particular Churches live and flourish in and from the universal Church. If they find themselves separated from the entire ecclesial body, they weaken, rot and die. Hence the need always to ensure that communion with the whole body of the Church is alive and effective.”

Pope Francis, *Letter to the Pilgrim People of God in Germany* (29 June 2019), № 9.

<https://www.plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/LETTER-OF-THE-HOLY-FATHER-FRANCIS-to-Church-in-Germany.pdf>

⁶¹ Antonio Spardaro, SJ, editor, “Pope Francis in Conversation with the Editors of European Jesuit Journals” in *La Civiltà Cattolica* (Vol. 6, 14 June 2022): № 6, art 12. DOI: 10.32009/22072446.0622.12

<https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/pope-francis-in-conversation-european-jesuit-journals/>

⁶² Holy See Statement, 21.07.2022. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2022/07/21/220721e.html>

Pope Francis reminded the Church in Germany in 2019 of the caution he had expressed in a meeting he had with the German bishops in 2015: “one of the first and greatest temptations in the Church was to believe that the solutions to current and future problems would come only from purely structural or bureaucratic reforms, but that, at the end of the day, they would not have touched the vital nuclei that need attention” (Pope Francis, *Letter to the Pilgrim People of God in Germany*, № 5).

⁶³ Dubai, *Authenticity*, 172. Accordingly, B. Gallagher affirms: “Pre-requisite to communal discernment is personal prayer, mutual respect and love, openness to one another and trust in one another’s good will ... God’s Spirit always builds community, ‘the test of unity’.”

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As for the *criterion of obedience*, there's so much in Sacred Scripture on this criterion of discernment. Thus, the problem regarding obedience is one of superabundance. How do I not overwhelm you with Scriptural citations regarding this criterion of discernment, yet offer enough to achieve full impact? What the Bible reveals about the activity of the Holy Spirit among ecclesial communities and their leaders could be summarised with a fundamental principle. Specifically, they who believe that they are following the inner inspirations of the Holy Spirit are under illusion if they refuse to fulfil the outer directives provided by religious authority. Although the indwelling Spirit does enlighten us from *within*, to safeguard against any illusion, the Holy Spirit's inspirations must always be confirmed from *without* (Lk. 10:16; Acts 20:28; Gal. 1:8). As God identified himself with his representatives in both the Old and New Testaments, cooperation with them is a sure sign that the faithful are truly in accord with God's desires.⁶⁴

Subsequent to the Incarnation, Jesus, appropriated this fundamental principle to the apostles in whom he invested the authority he received from his Father: "Anyone who listens to you listens to me; anyone who rejects you rejects me, and those who reject me reject the one who sent me" (Lk. 10:16). Jesus so identifies with the decision of those he sends, that whatever Peter and the other apostles bind or loose on earth is bound or loosed by God himself in heaven (Mt. 16:19; 18:18). As the apostles are Christ's representatives, the apostle St John declares, "Those who know God listen to us; those who are not of God refuse to listen to us. This litmus test helps us to discern (*dis-cenere*: "to separate") the spirit of truth from the spirit of falsehood (1 Jn. 4:1,6).

St Paul also affirmed obedience to be a criterion of discernment. He professed the Church to be "the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15). Accordingly, St Paul clearly instructed the disciples that they're not to accept a teaching from a messenger from heaven if it contradicts what they have received from the apostles (Gal. 1:6-9; 1 Cor. 14:37-38).⁶⁵ As we noted regarding indifference, the obediencial criterion of discernment also requires humility.⁶⁶

A disobedient person cannot claim to be listening to Christ because the word *obedience* comes from the Latin word *ob-audire*. "Ob" intensifies the word to which it is prefixed, while

B. Gallagher, *Communal Wisdom*, 38.

⁶⁴ Dubay, *Authenticity*, 175. Accordingly, St Ignatius of Loyola urged his priests:

And so, my dear brothers, try to make the surrender of your wills complete. Through his ministers, freely offer to your Creator and Lord the freedom he has bestowed on you. Think it no small fruit of your free will that you are able to restore it totally in obedience to the one who gave it to you. In this you do not lose it; instead, you perfect it, wholly conforming your own to the most certain rule of all rectitude, God's own will.

Ignatius of Loyola: Letters and Instructions, ed. John W. Padberg, et al (St Louis, Mo: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), "To the Members of the Society in Portugal, Rome, 26 March 1553," 415.

⁶⁵ Dubay, *Authenticity*, 176-178, 226. St Teresa of Ávila provides us with a noteworthy example that attests to the authenticity of her mystical encounters. Though the Lord would give St Teresa directions in a vision, she would not carry them out until her spiritual director approved them. Moreover, if his judgment went contrary to what the saint's vision had indicated, she would unhesitatingly obey her spiritual director. This policy the Lord Himself approved.

cf. Elvira Sarmiento, Banez, Padre, OP, and Michigan Carmelite of Grand Rapids, *Depositions of the Processes of St Teresa of Jesus* (Flemington, NJ: Carmel of Flemington, NJ, 1969), 17.

⁶⁶ St John Cassian said: "True discernment is obtained only when one is really humble. The first evidence of this humility is when everything done or thought of is submitted to the scrutiny of our elders," that is, "if we do not presume to decide anything on the basis of our own private judgement."

John Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1997), II, 10-11.

“audire” means to “listen.” Hence, *obedience* means to “listen attentively” or to “perceive deeply.” To help us listen attentively to what Christ reveals through his Church, St Ignatius of Loyola included a section in the *Spiritual Exercises* entitled, “Rules for Thinking with the Church” (*SpEx*, [352-370]). If you would like to know what some of these rules are that St Ignatius wrote and how they are still relevant to us in the 21st century, you will find them in **Appendix E**.

As for **testing spirits with affective criteria**, Dubay affirms that this criterion of discernment is also revealed in Sacred Scripture: “St Paul numbers among the charisms given in the Church (the context speaks of miracles, prophecy, tongues) that of ‘the ability to distinguish between spirits’ (1 Cor. 12:10 ESV).”⁶⁷

On this point, we’re now ready to dive in the deep end of the lake. In the event of doing so, we would do well to address the misconception that some people have, who don’t trust their feelings. They believe that human passion clouds reason and clarity and that our emotions thereby mislead or even deceive us in our attempt to perceive the truth with sound judgment. There’s some truth to this belief, which is why the discernment of spirits needs to begin with the *doctrinal, communal, and obediential* criteria.

This ‘oxygen’ of objectivity ensures that our feelings don’t misguide us. As Margaret Silf declares, the discernment of spirits is like an “inner compass.”⁶⁸ Yet, directions are *useless*, unless you have a *point of reference*. Specifically, you need to know *where* you are located on the map.⁶⁹ Accordingly, when Adam sinned, before God asked him whether he had eaten the forbidden fruit, God asked Adam, “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:9). In other words, “Where are you in our relationship? What is your orientation of heart: towards me; or away from me?” For a compass to be of any use, you also “need to stand still and let the [compass] needle come to rest.”⁷⁰ Accordingly, Dubay cautions, “the individual who spills himself out in sense stimulations, who is engulfed in mass media, is never a person of deep prayer.”⁷²

Orientation of Heart

If there’s only one thing you remember from this talk, take note of this: being aware of what direction your heart is oriented (i.e., towards God or away from God) is fundamental to discernment. When you engage in the discernment of spirits, then, a factor that is even more important than being attentive to which spirit is moving you interiorly is your *orientation of heart*. Basically, when we’re moving towards God, the Holy Spirit is met with *welcome* and the dark spirit is met with *resistance*; whereas, when we are moving away from God – even

⁶⁷ Dubay, *Authenticity*, 110.

⁶⁸ Margaret Silf, *Inner Compass – An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1999), 97-103.

⁶⁹ cf. Silf, *Inner Compass*, 100.

⁷⁰ Silf, *Inner Compass*, 99. May stresses, “Most of us live in a world of overstimulation and sensory overload.” The excessive stimulation of our senses is analogous to spending “so long hammering [metal] in a noisy foundry that we can no longer hear the soft whisper of a breeze.”

⁷¹ Gerald G. May, MD stresses, “Most of us live in a world of overstimulation and sensory overload.” The excessive stimulation of our senses is analogous to spending “so long hammering [metal] in a noisy foundry that we can no longer hear the soft whisper of a breeze” (cf. 1 Kgs. 19:12-13).

Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2004), 150-151.

⁷² Thomas Dubay, *Fire Within* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 140.

in a small unredeemed area of our life – the Holy Spirit is met with *resistance* and the dark spirit is met with *welcome* (cf. *SpEx*, [314]). Like a magnet, God’s love attracts us, sure! But when you place a magnet next to another magnet in a direction that’s incongruent with the magnetic field, they will not attract but repel. In **Appendix F**, you can learn more about this dynamic in St Ignatius’ own words, as this appendix features some of the rules he wrote on the discernment of spirits, which in addition to individuals, are particularly relevant to group discernment.

In addition to the rules he wrote on the discernment of spirits, St Ignatius also wrote rules on making a choice, which you learn about in **Appendix G**. Lastly, in **Appendix H**, you will find a step-by-step guide on how you can have a *spiritual conversation* in order to engage in Ignatian group discernment. This practical resource will help you to appropriate what Pope Francis recommends by communicating the love of God not only through prayer and reason but also action.⁷³

In conclusion, I can attest that communal discernment can be profoundly moving and inspiring. At other times, it can be messy, but it’s worth undertaking because of the apostolic fruit that it yields.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: What Happens when Conversion and Interior Freedom are Lacking

The Apostle Peter’s Need for a Spiritual Awakening

On page 7, we noted that only the spiritually awakened can discern. Such an awakening is evident in St Peter’s conversion. Prior to his awakening, St Peter told Jesus, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you” (Mt. 26:35). Yet, on three occasions, Peter denied that he knew Jesus after he was arrested, even “with an oath” (Mt. 26:72) and “calling down curses on himself and swearing” (Mt. 26:74). Jesus was aware of this resistance in Peter, as he predicted that he would deny him three times (Mt. 26:34). However, Peter had no insight regarding his fear of death, most likely because he deemed the natural repugnance to suffering to be an unwanted feeling. When Peter became spiritually awakened, he became aware of the incongruity between his self-acclaimed courage and his cowardice that he had disowned. This second conversion of Peter also awakened his desire to close the gap between his cowardice and his utter dependence on the Holy Spirit, who among his gifts, gives courage.

⁷³ cf. Anthony M. Maher, *Theology and the People of God* (Strathfield NSW: St Pauls Publications, 2021), 61. Maher is referring to the motto in the Church’s tradition that Pope Francis affirmed: “*Lex Orandi est, Lex Credendi, Lex Vivendi.*” This motto is a Latin phrase that translates: “the law of what is prayed [is] what is believed [is] the law of what is lived.” In other words, liturgy is not distinct from belief, nor is belief distinct from Christian practice, because prayer, belief, and Gospel living are integral to one other.

Pope Francis, apostolic exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate (On the Call to Holiness in the Modern World)*, 19 March 2018, Nos 66, 137.

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gudete-et-exsultate.html

In addition to being spiritually awakened, we need to grow in interior freedom in order to discern, as noted on pages 2-7. In this regard, we can learn from what monkeys teach us:

Catching Monkeys

When we lack interior freedom, we would have to question whether our intellect as human beings is more superior to monkeys. Because without indifference, we're at risk of losing our "freedom and glory as the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). Let me explain with an analogy. Zookeepers find monkeys to be amongst the easiest animals to catch in the wild. All the zookeeper does is find a hole in a rock-face that is just large enough for the monkey to insert his hand. Then, the zookeeper puts nuts laced in salt into the hole. There is no trap. No wires. No springs. No electronic devices. Only just what I described. The zookeeper simply needs to get out of view by hiding nearby. Because every monkey loves nuts and craves for them all the more when they are salted, when the monkey sees the zookeeper approaching, rather than pick at them and put the nuts into his mouth a few at a time, the first thing the monkey wants to do is grab all the nuts into his hand and run off.

But, here's the dilemma. Monkeys lack the intelligence to know that when they clench their fist, their hand enlarges. Nor are they aware that their enlarged hand operates like a dovetail joint. With their hand now larger than the opening to the hole in the rock, they cannot free their hand to escape. Additionally, because they are so attached to the salted nuts for which they are craving, the harder they clench their fist, the harder they must pull their arm; although to self-defeating avail! Also due to such craving and attachment, at no point does the monkey ever think that it could let go of the salted nuts. How can we summarise this analogy? Pardon the pun, but in a 'nutshell' the monkey has grasped and clung to a fleeting good at the expense of his freedom.

Appendix B: Memory and Identity

On page 13, we noted that in addition to unity, a reliable signifier that a Christian community has a strong identity is the *frequent sharing of memories*. I gained this insight from Bishop Gregory Homeming, OCD. When the then Fr Greg Homeming was the Provincial of the Discalced Carmelites, he was required to travel to all the monasteries in his religious order in Oceania. Upon doing so, he noticed that the monasteries that were the most vibrant in their capacity to enliven faith among the laity in their surrounding areas were those in which the nuns frequently shared memories of one another and the common experiences of their fully enclosed community. What is it about memory that is so powerful? The answer is well explained by Professor of Systematic Theology Robert J. Schreiter, CPPS Theol.dr:

So much of our identity is tied up with memory ... What we choose to remember, and how we remember it, is central to the making of our identity. That is why the loss of memory, either through cerebral accident or the onset of illness or age, can be so frightening. Not to be able to remember means we no longer know who we are.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ cf. Robert J. Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation – Spirituality & Strategies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 44, 73.

Ultimately, when we share memories of one another, we develop a deeper understanding of our own identity. Similarly, when we share the memories we have in common within a given community, that community's identity is deepened, consolidated, and strengthened. Knowing that memory engenders this powerful influence enables us to see how significant Jesus' request was at the Last Supper: "do this in memory of me" (Lk. 22:19 NAB). By remembering Christ's Life, Death, and Resurrection, we are actually participating in his identity. When we know who are in Christ, engaging in his mission is sure to follow, for participating in his mission is the very expression of our identity as his disciples.

Participating in Christ's identity is principally established through *identification* with Jesus. Our greatest degree of identification with Jesus takes place when our intellect, will, and memory are integrated as a fruit of our contemplation of Christ. As with any person, such identification with Jesus first begins to take in the *memory*.⁷⁵ When sufficiently purified, our memory has the capacity to take the form of Christ upon contemplating his word. Consequently, in addition to the grace of Christ, the modalities of his memory within his heart can become our own. Such contemplation has great significance, for St Justin Martyr – one of the first in the early Church to describe how the Gospels are proclaimed in a liturgical context – referred to the Gospels as the "memoirs of apostles."⁷⁶ When St Paul said he wants to be another Christ, he was more or less saying that he wants Christ's memory to be his own memory. If his words, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20 ESV-CE) were rephrased with the words, "It is no longer my memory, but Christ's memory in me," the meaning of his assertion is interchangeable, for as we have seen, so much of our identity is tied up with memory.

You know that encountering Christ is essential to becoming an authentic and fervent disciple of Jesus. This connection between *graced encounter* and *discipleship* correlates with the connection between *memory* and *identity*. An essential component of contemplating Christ is remembering him, is it not? Whenever you have encountered Christ in the past, would any of these religious experiences ever have been possible if the discernment group did not remember Jesus in some way? When a group remembers aspects of Christ's story and these aspects converge with the remembrance of correlating facets of the group's own story, such *identification* with Jesus unsurprisingly results in the *imitation* of Jesus. Thus, yet again, you can see the correlation between identity and mission. As you can see, remembering Jesus, both individually and communally, has a very important place in a spirituality of evangelisation.

Appendix C: Discernment and Self-Deception

On page 16, we noted that choosing between something that is clearly morally evil and something that is morally good does not rely on the discernment of spirits but on the moral guidance we receive from Christ and his Church. However, when we are subject to self-

⁷⁵ In making this assertion, I am not claiming that the memory is more important than the will in the process of conversion. Many of the *Spiritual Exercises* have as their objective to dispose the retreatant to conform his or her will to God's calling (cf. *SpEx*, [1], [3], [32], [50], [51], [52], [89], [175], [189], [234], [369]). Purification of the will is the most important in the process of conversion, for without such purification, the will becomes displaced.

⁷⁶ *The First Apology of Justin*, 65 cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, № 1345.

deception, God-given means of guidance, including the infused virtue of prudence, are not enough to avert moral decline and make progress in the Christian life.⁷⁷ In this event, we do indeed need the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Psychodynamics that mirror self-deception include but are not limited to: dissociation from reality; repression; projection; denial; rationalisation; and transference resistance.

We could go into more detail about these psychodynamics of self-deception, but if we did, we would move beyond our main topic. Nevertheless, I would do well at this point to make two important clarifications. Firstly, I am not questioning the importance of the cardinal virtue of prudence, nor the divinely revealed Ten Commandments, nor the Church's Magisterium. Rather, we do well to see that although the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that it is "prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience,"⁷⁸ we cannot exercise our conscience based on anything accurately intelligible if we have not been attentive to our experience and understood it, especially experiences of self-deception.

Secondly, while self-deception can result in egregious behaviour, without self-awareness and self-knowledge, it usually clouds our judgement in subtle ways at first that could, without discernment, remain hidden from our perception. The prophet Jeremiah epitomises the Biblical understanding of the human heart's propensity for self-deception in his assertion, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). Accordingly, King David asked God, "Behold, you desire truth in the inward being; therefore, in the secret of my heart teach me wisdom" (Ps. 51:6 GP).⁷⁹ Likewise, King Solomon prayed: "So give your servant a *discerning heart*⁸⁰ to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong" (1 Kings 3:9; see also 2 Chron. 1:10). Consequently, King Solomon attested, "I prayed, and understanding was given me; I called on God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me" (Wis. 7:7).

When we engage in individual and communal discernment, we need such wisdom for making sound judgment. By engaging in discernment, then, we become attentive to the interior movements of the Holy Spirit. "When affections are congruent with God's ways," Conroy, affirms, "then consolation is experienced. When affections are 'inordinately attached' to something other than God's ways, desolation occurs."⁸¹ Such discernment enables us to render our hearts to become more open to the Holy Spirit's guidance, without which we would continue to be subject to self-deception. Dougherty explains, "Specifically, this means that each member's attitude would be 'contemplative,' a relaxed but very attentive listening to one another and to one's own inner responses, and looking for the presence of the Holy Spirit in

⁷⁷ "Have confidence in the Lord with all thy heart, and lean not upon thy own prudence. In all thy ways think on him, and he will direct thy steps" (Prov. 3:5-6 D-R)

⁷⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, № 1806.

⁷⁹ King David most likely prayed this petition after the prophet Nathan awakened his disquieted conscience after he had slept with Bathsheba and sent her husband Uriah the Hittite into the thick of a military battle to be killed (cf. 2 Sam. 11:14-12:14).

⁸⁰ *discerning heart* (emphasis added) in Hebrew, *lebh shomea*, means "a listening heart."

⁸¹ Maureen Conroy, *The Discerning Heart – Discovering a Personal God* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1993), 14.

what is happening moment-by-moment.”⁸² As you can see, discernment is not for the fainthearted. Since discernment is the *fruit* of grace, it requires *living* a life of grace.

Resistance Blinds Us

Basically, all forms of self-deception are the result of *resistance*. What is resistance? Two things are fundamental to this dynamic in the spiritual life. Firstly, resistance is a discomforting interior reaction that often escapes our awareness given that we deem such reactions to be *unwanted*. Secondly, this kind of interior reaction can be more or less complicit with the dark spirit. Thus, resistance is dissonant with God’s self-communication.⁸³

William A. Barry, SJ and William J. Connolly, SJ (1925-2013), both of whom practiced as psychologists and spiritual directors, explained that the more subtle resistance is, the greater decline can ensue because “resistance is more successful when it goes unnoticed.”⁸⁴ For example, when Jesus asked the rich young man to “sell everything you own and give the money to the poor ... then come, follow me” (Mk. 10:21), “At that statement his face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions” (Mt. 19:22 NAB). The most unfortunate aspect of the rich young man’s encounter with Jesus is not that he felt sad, but that he was most likely unaware that he was sad.⁸⁵

Evidently, the rich young man’s interior reaction was not attributed to Jesus instilling sadness or fear within him because Mark tells us: “Jesus looked steadily at him and loved him” and even promised him “treasure in heaven” (Mk. 10:21). There’s no scaremongering or fear tactics here. We would be mistaken to think that Jesus, standing before him, was not offering the rich young man an opportunity to encounter the consolation of the Holy Spirit in his own Person, and within his conscience. This observation is consistent with that of Dominican theologian Yves Congar who argued the importance of remembering: “no action can be

⁸² Dougherty adds: “Normally, this [contemplative attitude] involves a willingness to refrain from leaping into the discussion with the first thing that comes to mind; to stand back a bit and try to sense and respond to the Spirit’s movement, allowing responses to surface gently rather than grasping for them. Anything that the group finds helpful to this attitude should be encouraged.

Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction*, 95.

⁸³ cf. William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 39, 71, 86.

⁸⁴ Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 97.

George A. Aschenbrenner, SJ explains: “Because Christ’s way is opposed to the Satanic way of darkness, it might seem easy to detect. But it is not always easy. The mentality of Christ is usually countercultural to many of the natural attractions in your heart. For this reason, you need great courage to choose the difficult option enlightened as Christ’s loving truth.”

George A. Aschenbrenner, *Stretched for Greater Glory – What to Expect from the Spiritual Exercises* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004), 91.

⁸⁵ cf. *Letters of St Ignatius of Loyola*. Trans. W. J. Young, SJ (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1959), 25. Barry and Connolly explain that people subject to resistance “do not readily express feelings in prayer. They believe them unworthy.” They perceive such feelings to be “nonfacts, obstacles to be overcome so that worthy feelings can eventually be placed before God. So, they try to ignore them, try not to notice them. As a result, they have nothing to say to God.” Barry and Connolly add:

As they are called to speak the truth to God, these feelings may threaten to emerge into awareness. But since such feelings are unacceptable, they do not notice them, and as a result experience confusion. Unaccepted feelings can also come into consciousness obliquely. “I could feel very sad and discouraged about it, but that would be dumb.”

Because he feels sadness is improper, the person does not let himself notice that he is sad. Instead he reflects on the unreasonableness of being sad. The sadness, then, because it goes at least partly unnoticed, prevents him from listening to and responding to God.

Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 75.

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attributed to the Holy Spirit independently of the Father and the Son.”⁸⁶ Indeed, the rich young man was encountering Christ *in* the Holy Spirit, for as St Paul says, “the Lord is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:17; cf. 1 Cor. 15:45).

In addition to the rich young man, another example that illustrates the dynamic of resistance is the response of the Sanhedrin and the High Priest when they heard the deacon St Stephen accuse them: “You stubborn people, with your pagan hearts and pagan ears. You are always *resisting* the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do” (Acts 6:13; 7:1, 51). These religious leaders “were *infuriated* when they heard this,” to such an extent that they “ground their teeth at him” (Acts 7:54). “Love,” as St Paul said, “*delights* in the truth” (1 Cor. 13:6), but as these elders did not love Jesus, rather than take delight in St Stephen’s words, they were so *put off* by them that they stoned him to death. Thus, this deacon became the first martyred saint. Had these religious leaders loved Jesus, their hearts would have been like the apostles on the road to Emmaus, who said, “Did not our hearts *burn within us* as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?” (Lk. 24:32).

In addition to this heartfelt burning love for God, Scripture provides a number of other instances where the Holy Spirit moves people interiorly. To give just a few examples:

- the Blessed Virgin Mary said in her Magnificat, “my spirit *exults in God my saviour*” (Lk. 1:47);
- her cousin Elizabeth “was *filled with the Holy Spirit*” when John the Baptist “leapt in her womb” (Lk. 1:41);
- the prodigal son’s conversion began when “*he came to his senses*” (Lk. 15:17) regarding his poverty, which put him in touch with his need for his father. Gratitude begins when entitlement ends.⁸⁷ Evidently, his heart was also moved with *humility* because he felt *unworthy* of his father’s love, as he rehearsed saying to his father, “I no longer deserve to be called your son” (Lk. 15:17, 19); and
- Zacchaeus “was *anxious* to see what kind of man Jesus was” (Lk. 19:3).

As you can see from these examples, when our hearts are in harmony with the interior movements of the Holy Spirit, far from misleading or deceiving us, “the affective movements of the heart carry divine truth.”⁸⁸ As we have seen, however, we can be misled by our emotions if our heart is disoriented away from God.

What we are considering about our need for the Holy Spirit’s guidance is also consistent with the teaching of St John of the Cross: “No matter how earnestly beginners in all their actions and passions practice the mortification of self, they will never be able to do so entirely – far

⁸⁶ Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), II, 67.

⁸⁷ Steven Furtick declares, “Gratitude begins where our sense of entitlement ends.” Steven Furtick, *Crash the Chatterbox: Hearing God’s Voice Above All Others* (Colorado Springs, Co: Multnomah Books, 2014), 189.

⁸⁸ James Keating, *Regenerating Seminary Theology – Intimacy with the Mind of Christ*. Ed. James Keating (Omaha, NE, USA: IPF Publications, 2010), 17. (James Keating is the Director of Theological Formation for the Institute for Priestly Formation.)

from it – until God accomplishes it in them passively by means of the purgation of this [passive] night [of the senses].⁸⁹ In other words, only the Holy Spirit can heal our imperfections, thus enabling us to be faithful to the Ten Commandments. “In this cure,” St John of the Cross asserts, “God will heal them of what through their own efforts they were unable to remedy.”⁹⁰ This healing takes place when the Holy Spirit makes contact with the lost depths of the soul that lie underneath our emotional attachments and neurotic symptoms.

In the event that the interior movements of the Holy Spirit attempts to heal our wounds, resistance can result if we lack the dispositions that are necessary to be receptive to grace. Being attentive to our experiences of resistance, then, is essential to sound discernment, as such experiences provide us with an invitation to monitor our heart’s orientation and dispositions. To give a few examples, if you have not responded to opportunities to exercise charity for a parishioner in serious need due to feeling bored, your boredom may be a sign of the presence of resistance. Likewise, if you refrained from spending time in prayer because you were sad but you weren’t aware that you felt sad, or refused to apologise to a parishioner whom you had been short with because you were angry but you weren’t aware that you felt angry, these behaviours may also be signs of the presence of resistance. Given that we can often remain unaware of our resistance, we need the help of the Holy Spirit, as Toner explains:

Recognition of God-given authority and the evident calls of charity in concrete situations are not enough if I am to live as fully as I can a life of Christ-like obedient love. Only the Holy Spirit who speaks to me in my own heart as well as through authority and the evident needs of my neighbour can lead and guide me to such a life.⁹¹

Hauser gives further clarification on our need for the Holy Spirit’s guidance:

What criteria can we use to recognize the Spirit within our experience? We know it is not adequate to look at external actions to see whether the Spirit is active. We can perform externally good actions for very poor motives, and therefore not be under the influence of the Holy Spirit ... Our criteria for recognizing the presence of the Holy Spirit must then be directed at our inner experiences.⁹²

Essentially, these inner experiences require discernment (see Hos. 14:9; Prov. 28:7; Ps. 119:66; Phil. 1:9-10; Heb. 5:14). Without discernment, we are likely to remain unaware of our experiences of resistance. In this event, the strength of our motivation to follow Christ is weakened. This detrimental effect is true for both individual and communal discernment. We could go into more detail about the signs of the presence of resistance in individuals;⁹³

⁸⁹ cf. *The Dark Night*, in *The Collected Works of John of the Cross* trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1991), Bk. I, ch. 7, №. 5.

⁹⁰ *The Dark Night*, Bk. I, ch. 3, №. 3.

⁹¹ Toner, *Commentary on St Ignatius’s Rules for the Discernment of Spirits*, 4.

⁹² Richard J. Hauser, *Moving in the Spirit – Becoming a Contemplative in Action* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 30.

⁹³ Barry and Connolly identify numerous signs of the presence of resistance in a person: fear, especially fear of losing approval; resentment and holding a grudge; disappointment; a sense of worthlessness; discouragement; disturbance; unexpressed anger, subdued rage, unrelenting listlessness; boredom and depression (non-clinical); a constantly cheery, emotionally unnuanced experience of prayer; persistent repetition of the same pattern of response; falling asleep in prayer; discordant notes that sound in prayer; prayer is reduced to rational reflection; blindness to certain facets of life or to the obvious meaning of a text of Scripture; blandness in speaking to God or not expressing to God other important affective attitudes; doubts about the reality of prayer and the possibility of ever knowing whether or not one has experienced God; avoidance of prayer and of appointments

however, since we are not focusing on *individual* discernment but *communal* discernment, I would do well to describe the signs of the presence of resistance in a group setting. Having said this, Dougherty clarifies: “Resistance is subtle and often hard to name. Signs that might point to resistance in one group merely indicate in another group a lack of familiarity with the process.” However, resistance “is particularly true when a group seems to be renegeing on its responsibility to care for the intentionality of the group, allowing such responsibility to fall solely on the facilitator or another in the group.”⁹⁴

Knowing about the signs of the presence of resistance that emerges within communal discernment is helpful for two reasons. Firstly, these signs call for a greater need to engage in sound discernment before making a decision; otherwise, the choice that the discernment group recommends the Parish Priest to take may be discordant with God’s desires.

Secondly, rather than give up, understanding the dynamic of resistance can prevent the group from becoming discouraged and actually provide the incentive to persevere. While resistance is not good in and of itself, it is a good sign. Let me explain with a simple analogy. Like the resistance of water against the turned rudder of a ship, God can only steer us if we are moving. Accordingly, Barry and Connolly explain: “Resistance is no crime, but a necessary concomitant to any effort at growth.”⁹⁵ Moreover, resistance indicates that grace, albeit yet to be received so long as the resistance remains, is being offered by God. More specifically, resistance indicates that God is drawing nearer in his desire to transform our wounded humanity into a place where he can dwell. On this point, Dougherty attests:

I often find that when individuals or groups have been particularly open and vulnerable with God in a given session, they tend to do some back-pedaling in the next meeting. They may criticize the process, undermined the facilitator, or become very passive. Such behavior may be a sign that things are going almost too well. It reflects the natural part of the process of growing openness to God. When a group recognizes this it can be the source of real celebration. If such behavior persists, however, it may need special attention.⁹⁶

Intuiting the Difference Between Good and Evil

Sometimes, a group might identify a legitimate reason to engage in discernment to understand the difference between what is morally good and morally wrong on an intuitive level. Specifically, they may want to grow in their interior freedom by apprehending the reason for a particular moral teaching and thereby become more passionate in embracing the truth. In this event, the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Christ and his Church are the group’s starting point. Then, the group’s discernment helps them to appropriate those divinely revealed teachings to the Parish’s mission, thus helping the parishioners to become more

with the spiritual director, or repeated lateness for appointments; discussions with a spiritual director of everything but prayer experience; desires to quit spiritual direction; and keeping some kind of secret with the semi-conscious thought: “There is something I do not want God, or my mentor/director/supervisor—or frequently enough myself—to know about.” The resistance begins to occur when the “secret” gets close to the surface of awareness.

cf. Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 73-76, 86-87, 110-111.

⁹⁴ Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction*, 70.

⁹⁵ Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 98.

⁹⁶ Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction*, 70.

faithful as disciples of Jesus. Notice, however, discernment is undertaken in this context not to make a moral choice, but to deepen their esteem for that moral teaching behind that choice.

For example, given that a growing number of couples are not practising their faith, when I was the Parish Priest of Our Lady of the Rosary Parish, Fairfield, I consulted the PPC about this pastoral concern. Our starting point was the doctrine of covenantal commitment, for God has divinely revealed free, total, faithful, and fruitful love to be his desire for Marriage. This doctrinal starting point led us to appreciate on an affective level the beauty of Marriage as a sacrament. Consequently, we looked for ways spiritually mature married couples, not just the clergy, could mentor engaged couples in their preparation for Marriage. In result, the Parish implemented the *SmartLoving* marriage preparation programme. Amazingly, in addition to reserving their living together until after their Wedding, every couple that undertook the *SmartLoving* marriage preparation programme became more active in their local worshipping community, some of whom also participated more frequently in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The fruits of our discernment on how the Parish could appropriate the teaching of Christ and his Church on Marriage for the Parish's mission were clear.

Evil Can be Disguised as Good

Although we do not usually need to engage in discernment to distinguish what is morally good from what is morally wrong, discernment is required when making this distinction is not immediately apparent. Indeed, good reasons can become pretence for what is morally wrong, or at least the good can become a decoy or counterfeit for the best. Thus, the enemy does not primarily distort what is bad, but what is good for his own ends. Accordingly, St Paul asserts: "Satan himself goes disguised as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14). St Ignatius explains that this disguise "is a mark of the evil spirit" who "begins by suggesting thoughts that are suited to a devout soul, and ends by suggesting his own." Specifically, "he will suggest holy and pious thoughts that are wholly in conformity with the sanctity of the soul" only to "endeavour little by little to end by drawing the soul into his hidden snares and evil designs" (*SpEx*, [332]).⁹⁷

For example, a parish priest is advised by his PPC to employ an Operations Manager to free him up from his many administrative duties so that he could provide his parishioners with spiritual formation. The Parish has the money to expand its human resources; however, as the Parish Priest esteems poverty as a Gospel value, he doesn't want the Parish to spend the sizeable amount of money required to employ someone with qualifications and experience in Business Management. Consequently, he fails to see that the advice his PPC provided him would help him move the Parish from a maintenance model to a missionary model. Spending less money is usually a good thing, but this good desire of his becomes the enemy of the best, as a priest who provides spiritual formation is far more effective in forming intentional disciples than a priest who is chained to his desk.

⁹⁷ *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl, SJ.

My experience has taught me that any one of the following twelve signs indicate that “the evil spirit” may have, as St Ignatius teaches, “assume[d] the appearance of an angel of light” to bring about his “hidden snares” and “evil designs” (*SpEx*, [332]):

- *isolation, self-reliance, and lack of collaboration*, or the other extreme of being *co-dependent* with an individual (rather than engaging in communal participation);
- proceeding *rashly* (instead of proceeding with *prudence*);
- collaborating with others with *blind* trust (rather than *mindful* trust);
- making decisions *independently* (as opposed to *consulting* appropriate people);
- *compulsivity* and/or *lack of detachment* (in divergence to exercising *indifference*);
- being carried by *frenetic* energy (this anxiety-driven spirit differs to energy that is *calm* and *indefatigable*);
- feelings characterised by *intensity* (in distinct contrast to *profundity*);
- feeling *driven* (which is unlike feeling *drawn*);
- becoming *egocentric* like the cat that got the cream (which is dissimilar to feeling *surprised and humbled* when an unexpected opportunity presents itself unsolicited);
- being *wilful* (as distinct from being *willing*);
- *crumbling* when an objective did not eventuate (as opposed to experiencing *appropriate disappointment*); and
- talking much about *myself* when receiving spiritual direction (rather than *God*).

Appendix D: Unity is an Important Criterion for Communal Discernment

Among the communal criterion of group discernment, we noted on page 17 that unity is significant sign of the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in the group. Yet, as Dubay observes, “In our day we are so accustomed to disagreements, divisions and polarizations that we find it difficult to understand the remarkable insistence of the New Testament on *perfect* unity in community (Jn. 17:23), on having oneness of mind (1 Cor. 1:10; Phil 2:1-2),” and “on agreement regarding doctrine (Acts 2:42; 4:32).” However, Dubay does well to observe: “The members [of a faction], or at least some of them, are not living the gospel, are not led by the Holy Spirit.” For St Paul “argues that he knows the Corinthians are worldly because they are divided (1 Cor. 3:1-3). Division is a proof of communal immaturity, for the Spirit brings peace and harmony (Gal 5:22), whereas worldliness brings factions and dissensions (Gal. 5:19).”⁹⁸ Jesus cautioned that every kingdom, city, or house divided against itself cannot survive (Mt. 12:25). Accordingly, St Paul had admonished the Galatians that factions and divisions were numbered among the sins of idolatry, sexual irresponsibility, orgies and sorcery.

⁹⁸ Dubay adds:

Basic divisions in the community post three important problems for community discernment. If a divided community does not possess the Spirit in so far as it is divided, how can it possibly detect his mind? If co-action follows co-seeing (as it surely does), Factions cannot produce anything coherent and unified and clear. They can produce only generalizations that promote individual projects. How then can a group describe itself and its way of life? How can a religious congregation hold a chapter in which the net result will not be vague, least common denominator generalizations? Enlightened decision-making requires criteria by which proposals are evaluated. Divided group lacks these criteria because it has no shared vision. How then can it detect the finger of the Spirit?

Dubay, *Authenticity*, 49-50.

How to Allow the Holy Spirit to Lead our Parishes

A community beset with the wrangling, factions and feuds did not have the Spirit within it, for the Holy Spirit brings love, joy, peace and harmony (Gal. 5:18-22).⁹⁹

Regarding these sins that are contrary to the fruits of the Holy Spirit, St Paul cautions: “I warn you now, as I warned you before: those who behave like this will not inherit the Kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:21). Ultimately, divisiveness against Church unity constitutes grave matter because Jesus prayed sincerely: “May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me” (Jn. 17:21). How can the world be convinced that Jesus was sent by the Father if we, as his disciples, are not united among ourselves? Indeed, by working against our unity in Christ, we: (1) misrepresent the profound intimacy and unity that takes place within the communion of Persons within the Blessed Trinity; (2) our efforts to spread the Gospel loses credibility; and (3) souls could thereby become lost. Indeed, much grave matter is at stake in these ways when Christian unity is undermined.

In contrast, unity is a consequence of disciples in a community being open to the light and love of God, thus they become “one in heart and mind” (Acts 4:32). Indeed, they drink a shared vision from the one Spirit of unity.¹⁰⁰ As we’re living in a distinctly secular era, discernment enables the proclamation of the Gospel to be motivated by a theology that unites rather than an ideology that divides.

Appendix E: Rules for Thinking with the Church

Regarding the *obediential* criterion of discernment noted on pages 18-19, the following information about St Ignatius of Loyola’s teaching is worthy of note. He provides eighteen rules for thinking with the Church (*SpEx*, [352-370]). These rules help foster an obedient response to the guidance the Holy Spirit provides us through the Church. For the sake of brevity and because of their significance, I have featured the first and thirteenth rules below, together with a brief commentary on them:

The First Rule

“We must put aside all judgment of our own, and keep the mind ever ready and prompt to obey in all things the true Spouse of Christ our Lord, our holy Mother, the hierarchical Church” (*SpEx*, [353]).

Notice how St Ignatius refers to the hierarchical Church as “true Spouse of Christ” (cf. Eph. 5:32) and “holy Mother” (cf. Rev. 21:2-3). Michael J. Buckley, SJ PhD (1931–2019), who was a philosophical theologian, notes: “Both [terms] indicate a unique kind of love: Christ’s care for the Church with a love that is nuptial; and the Church’s care for its members with a love that is maternal.”¹⁰¹ Clearly, St Ignatius’ love for the hierarchical Church is evident in his use of these endearing terms. These images of the Church also expresses his assurance that she is worthy of our trust. Goulding underscores the depth of theological meaning in this

⁹⁹ Dubay, *Authenticity*, 174.

¹⁰⁰ Dubay, *Authenticity*, 174-175.

¹⁰¹ Michael Buckley, SJ, “Ecclesial Mysticism in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius,” *Theological Studies*, Vol. 56 (1995): 458.

first rule: “What does Christ give to the Church which constitutes it is his spouse? The Holy Spirit. What does the Church instrumentally and sacramentally communicate to its members, the gift of which directs their lives and governs them? The Holy Spirit.”¹⁰²

In addition to giving us reason to have greater confidence to follow Christ, the important place the Church has to guide us in faith and morals even enables us to love the Church. St Augustine said that he fell in love with the Church before he fell in love with Christ.¹⁰³ There is no anomaly with St Augustine’s experience because as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms, the “Church’s faith precedes, engenders, supports, and nourishes our faith.”¹⁰⁴

The Thirteenth Rule

If we wish to proceed securely in all things, we must hold fast to the following principle: What seems to me white, I will believe black if the hierarchical Church so defines. For I must be convinced that in Christ our Lord, the bridegroom, and in His spouse the Church, only one Spirit holds sway, which governs and rules for the salvation of souls. For it is by the same Spirit and Lord who gave the Ten Commandments that our holy Mother Church is ruled and governed” (*SpEx*, [365]).

The founder of the Institute of Jesuit Resources George E. Ganss, SJ PhD (1905-2000), provides an important clarification about the thirteenth rule:

Notice that Ignatius does not state that we ought to believe that white is black. Instead, he writes that “what *I* see” (*que yo veo*) “as white, I would believe to be black;” and the Latin Vulgate in 1548 translated this by “what appears to my eyes as white.” In other words, the error would be in my hasty subjective judgment and not in the Church, because the Church is governed by the Holy Spirit and cannot err in her solemn definitions.¹⁰⁵

Appendix F: Rules on the Discernment of Spirits

To assist us further to distinguish the “good spirit” from the “evil spirit,” St Ignatius provides rules for the discernment of spirits in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Before we look at these rules, however, we need to possess a clear understanding of Christian anthropology. Such an understanding is foundational to our ability to discern the difference between consolation and desolation. Indeed, “a sound theological anthropology,” Professor of Moral Theology and Spirituality Dennis J. Billy, CSsR, PhD maintains, is “one which takes into account all of the dimensions of human existence,” which is consistent with “St Paul’s tripartite body/soul/spirit anthropology (1 Thes. 5:23).”¹⁰⁶ On a basic level of understanding, psychological awareness is of the body, moral awareness is of the mind, while spiritual awareness is of the spirit. This understanding does not mean that being attentive to experiences that are spiritual are of a Christian’s only concern. On the contrary, Timothy Gallagher affirms that psychological awareness increases our moral and spiritual self-awareness. Additionally, the developed or underdeveloped quality of each of these types of awareness will strengthen or slow the growth

¹⁰² Goulding, *A Church of Passion and Hope*, 25.

¹⁰³ cf. St Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk. 6, art. 4-5.

¹⁰⁴ CCC, № 181.

¹⁰⁵ *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* ed. Ganss et. al., 432.

¹⁰⁶ Dennis J. Billy, *Regenerating Seminary Theology – Intimacy with the Mind of Christ*. Ed. James Keating (Omaha, NE, USA: IPF Publications, 2010), 158-159.

of the others.”¹⁰⁷ Gerald Gordon May, MD (1940-2005)¹⁰⁸ explains why these three levels of awareness influence one another. Like Timothy Gallagher, May maintains that the interior movements which “are beyond our comprehension and personal will are more clearly spiritual.” Yet, he clarifies: “This distinction cannot be made too arbitrarily, for there are, as always, many overlaps and blurred boundaries.”¹⁰⁹

The Teaching of George A. Aschenbrenner, SJ STL (1932-2021)

Fr George Aschenbrenner was the former director of the Jesuit Center for Spiritual Growth and co-founder of the Institute for Priestly Formation. He contributed valuable insight that sharpens our ability to discern the spirits, which he described in language that we can readily understand: “In a life of mature spirituality discernment always acknowledges, distinguishes, and then interrelates three different dimensions of human existence: external behavior, inner spontaneity, and what I call the core of the soul.”¹¹⁰ Below is a summary of his teaching on these three dimensions, which I present in a manner that is integral to my own understanding. As we shall see, his teaching is vital for appropriating St Ignatius’ rules on the discernment of spirits correctly.

First Dimension: Behavioural and External

Aschenbrenner denoted the first anthropological dimension as *behavioural and external*, establishing this dimension is observable, yet superficial. Ultimately, this level of human activity poses a question of meaning that human behaviour cannot answer by itself.¹¹¹

Second Dimension: Skin of the Soul

Regarding the second anthropological dimension, Aschenbrenner calls this very real arena of rational or affective spontaneity the “skin of the soul.” As for the affective aspect of this second dimension, he differentiates it from the first dimension of external behaviour, yet acknowledges that emotions can be expressed in certain behaviours and that they also influence and motivate them. Additionally, he distinguishes the second dimension from the third: the spontaneities of thinking and feeling in the second dimension skitter their way across the skin of our souls; however, they never strike to the core of the soul, which is the third dimension. Rather, we can discern these impulses, images, and moods by their *intensity*. Additionally, these spontaneities seem to come and go with a bedevilling arbitrariness. This skin of the soul consists of spontaneous, unintentional experience; thus, it is characterised by the unpredictability of shifting sands and is not capable of the rock like dependability of the core of the soul.¹¹²

Upon listening to Aschenbrenner speak at a seminar run by the Institute for Priestly Formation (IPF) in Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska, USA in 2013, I did not like the term “skin of

¹⁰⁷ T. Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 23.

¹⁰⁸ May was an American Psychiatrist and Theologian who, in addition to providing psychiatric treatment, supervised the program for training spiritual directors.

¹⁰⁹ Gerald G. May, *Care of Mind. Care of Spirit* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 183-184.

¹¹⁰ Aschenbrenner, *Quickening the Fire in Our Midst*, 91.

¹¹¹ cf. Aschenbrenner, *Quickening the Fire in Our Midst*, 91-92.

¹¹² cf. George Aschenbrenner, *The Hidden Self Grown Strong – the Collected Essays of Father George Aschenbrenner, SJ* (Omaha, NE: IPF Publications, 2018), 146; idem, *Quickening the Fire in Our Midst*, 92.

the soul” at first, as I considered skin to be too thin to adequately symbolise a ‘layer’ in our human nature. However, I quickly took interest in this term when he explained that, as with our body, skin is that by which we literally *feel* what we come into contact with and encounter. May’s observation concurs with Aschenbrenner’s demarcation of the core of the soul from the skin of the soul. Specifically, May differentiated the “outer, sensory aspect” and the “inner, spiritual aspect” of the soul.¹¹³ Although delineated, these sensory and spiritual dimensions are associated to some degree. The Church’s tradition has long held that just as we have five external senses, we also have corresponding internal spiritual senses of touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing.¹¹⁴ St John of the Cross taught that the spiritual senses “are spiritual revelations or visions, which are given only to the spirit without the service and help of the senses.”¹¹⁵

In the IPF seminar, Aschenbrenner also taught that there are fourteen “inhabitants” of the “skin of the soul;” namely: the Capital Sins and their contrary virtues: pride which is countered by humility; envy which is reorientated by benevolence; anger which is diffused by gentleness; avarice which is reversed by generosity; gluttony which is regulated by temperance; lust which is sublimated by chastity; and sloth which is transformed by zeal.

Another difference between the skin of the soul and the spiritual feelings which take place in the core of the soul is worthy of note. Psychological feelings that take place in the skin of the soul influence our motivations; yet, unlike spiritual feelings in the core of the soul, they are not *engaging* or *relational*. For example, if am bored with you, I am not open to engaging with you; whereas, if I risk sharing my anger or sadness, I am indeed relating to you what is personal and unique to me.

Aschenbrenner further explains that although the spontaneities of psychological feelings happen at a deeper level than external behaviour, our identity is not entirely determined by what we think or feel in this dimension. This assertion does not deny that these spontaneities of thinking and feeling play a real and important role in the development of human and spiritual maturity, for our head and heart do indeed need to be integrated. Still, rational and affective spontaneities find their sound direction only in relation to the soul’s completely clear and transparent core. For unlike what we experience in the core of the soul, what we feel in the first two dimensions is never equal to who we are. Thus, we cannot simply trust and follow the spontaneous flow of our feelings and thoughts, which we experience within this dimension, as they can be in opposition to our deepest, truest identity, as revealed and professed in Christ. Otherwise, we can easily be swept into making a false judgement about ourselves when we are

¹¹³ May adds: “Thus John [of the Cross] divides the dark night of the soul into two basic parts: the dark night of the senses; and the dark night of the spirit.

Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2004), 80.

¹¹⁴ See also: Origen, *Contre Celse*, I-II cf. SC 132, Paris: Cerf, 1966 (English translation: www.newadvent.org/fathers/0416.htm); Origenes, and R. P. Lawson, *Origen, The Song of Songs* [English translation of *In canticum canticorum*], *Commentary and Homilies* (Dublin: Newman Press, 1957), 95, 142; Augustine, *In Joannem*, 26, 3; PL 35, 26, c. 1608 (English translation: <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701.htm>); St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 142, 2; Teresa of Ávila, *The Book of Her Life*, 7:7; idem, *Spiritual Testimonies*, 59, № 3; John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanzas 14 & 15.

¹¹⁵ St John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanzas 14 & 15, № 15. For example, we speak of our heart being “touched” by God, that we can “see” or “hear” Jesus while meditating on the Gospels, or that we can “smell” the sweetness of God’s love. We pray in the Psalms, “Taste and see that the LORD is good” (Ps. 34:8 NIV).

subject to the passing influence of thought and feeling. What is needed, then, is precisely an honest facing and interpretation of these experiences, for such thoughts and feelings in their spontaneity cannot validate themselves; rather, they will need to be tested and interpreted against our core identity.¹¹⁶

Third Dimension: The Core of the Soul

The first two dimensions of human experience correlate with St Paul's reference to his "unspiritual self" (Rom. 8:18) of which he attests that "I cannot understand my own behaviour" (Rom. 8:15). These dimensions contrast with what he refers to as "my true self" also expressed as "my inmost self" in "which I dearly love God's law" (Rom. 8:20, 22). This true, inmost self correlates with the core of the soul, the final dimension that Aschenbrenner demarcates. He explains that in the core of the soul, we encounter the utterly unique, deepest part of every human person. This core of the soul plays a crucial role in the process of discovering our true self in the beauty of Christ. Allowing ourselves to be led further into this core of self facilitates a wonderful process of simplification. Life's complexities fuse into an undaunted simplicity. A noisy world hushes into a resounding quiet, and a polluted heart is stripped clear and clean. Additionally, the deeper we are led into our soul's core, our experience of God and of ourselves becomes more profound, personal, and unique. Unlike the impulses, images, and moods on the skin of the soul that are characterised by their *intensity*, what we experience in the core of the soul is known by its *profundity*. What further distinguishes the core of the soul is that evil cannot reach it; rather, God has reserved our deepest centre for himself alone and the beauty of his creative love in all its uniqueness. A buried treasure, a pearl beyond price, a hidden self revealed in Jesus waits to be discovered, to be embraced, and to grow strong.¹¹⁷

In contrast, Aschenbrenner expresses concern regarding the consequences of a person who is not drawn into his innermost core:

Deficient appreciation for this inner beauty and truth can mislead a person to ragged self-esteem, and even to a misshapen self-loathing. Something similar can also happen in our relationships with others. To perceive others in a similar prejudice against their inner beauty and truth can spark quick personal judgments that are uncharitably false and damagingly misleading.¹¹⁸

Saints and Scholars in Accord with Aschenbrenner's Teaching

Aschenbrenner's teaching is consistent with that of St John of the Cross. Referring to the "flames of tender touches" of the Holy Spirit that "suddenly touch the soul," John of the Cross observed that "the more interior [the flame] is, the more secure, substantial, and delightful, because the more interior it is, the purer it is. And the greater the purity, the more abundantly,

¹¹⁶ cf. Aschenbrenner, *Quickening the Fire in Our Midst*, 92; idem, *The Hidden Self Grown Strong*, 154.

¹¹⁷ cf. Aschenbrenner, *Quickening the Fire in Our Midst*, 93; idem, *The Hidden Self Grown Strong*, 144-145. Aschenbrenner's assertion that evil cannot enter the core of the soul is consistent with the teaching of John of the Cross who taught: "God's dwelling is in secret," for "the devil cannot reach the area of this embrace, nor can the human intellect understand how it occurs. Yet it is not secret to the soul itself that has attained this perfection, for within itself it has the experience of this intimate embrace. It does not, however, always experience these awakenings."

The Living Flame of Love, Stanza 4, № 14.

¹¹⁸ Aschenbrenner, *The Hidden Self Grown Strong*, 143.

frequently, and generously God communicates himself.”¹¹⁹ Such delight is encountered in a manner that is incomparable to physical pleasure and psychological gratification. Accordingly, Richard of St Victor attests:

I boldly affirm that one single drop of these divine consolations can do what all the pleasures of the world cannot. The pleasures of this world cannot satisfy the heart; and one single drop of the inner sweetness that the Holy Spirit pours into the soul delights it utterly and causes it a holy inebriation.¹²⁰

French Retreat Master and author Jacques Philippe emphasises, “*This peace sometimes dwells only in the very deepest part of the soul, while questions and worries remain at the human and psychological level, but it is there and it is recognizable.*”¹²¹ St Teresa of Ávila likened the soul to “a castle made entirely out of diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms.” In the “first rooms souls are still absorbed in the world and engulfed in their vassals,” which are the *senses* and *faculties* through which the external world is apprehended. She explains that worldly attachments are like dealing with insects and vermin within the outer rooms and that reptiles prevent many people from entering the castle through prayer and reflection. Evidently, these attachments render us to become tone deaf to our inner core, for she concludes: “You must note that hardly any of the light coming from the King’s royal chamber [i.e., the core of the soul] reaches these first dwelling places [i.e., the senses and the faculties].”¹²²

Consequent to learning about the different dimensions of human existence that we have studied in accord with Christian anthropology, an explanation of Jules Toner and Timothy Gallagher is worthy of note. Clearly, we need to demarcate the experience of consolation and desolation as “spiritual” and “non-spiritual.” Specifically, Gallagher considers “*nonspiritual desolation*” to be either “*physically based*” or “*psychologically based*.”¹²³ This demarcation does not mean that God only speaks to us through our spiritual experiences. On the contrary, May affirms: “The fact is, of course, that God often speaks to us and works in us through our psychological experiences,” that is, “psychological reactions to spiritual experiences,” including “mood changes in response to experience that is seen as *God-initiated*.”¹²⁴ Nonetheless, “psychological observations,” May asserts, “supplement, rather than substitute for, traditional methods of discernment.”¹²⁵ In other words, the discernment of spirits requires a specifically *spiritual awareness* of how our heart is moved interiorly as disciples who have faith in Jesus Christ. Timothy Gallagher clarifies that such spiritual awareness has special significance for our life of faith and pursuit of God’s desires for us.¹²⁶ Knowing this difference prevents us from

¹¹⁹ *The Living Flame of Love in The Collected Works of John of the Cross*, Stanza 1, № 9.

¹²⁰ Cited in Jacques Philippe, *In the School of the Holy Spirit* (Cleveland, OH: Scepter, 2007), 23-24.

¹²¹ Philippe, *In the School of the Holy Spirit*, 52-53 (emphasis added).

¹²² *The Interior Castle in The Collected Works of St Teresa of Ávila* (Vol. 2), trans. Kieren Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1980), First Mansion, Ch. 1, №s. 1, 5-8; Ch. 2, № 14. See also *The Way of Perfection*, Ch. 29, № 12.

¹²³ T. M. Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 61.

¹²⁴ May, *Care of Mind. Care of Spirit*, 41, 102, 107 (emphasis added).

¹²⁵ May, *Care of Mind. Care of Spirit*, 110.

¹²⁶ cf. T. Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 21-22.

drawing spiritual conclusions from natural feelings on one hand, and on the other, to gain strength from genuine consolation.

To illustrate the need for this important distinction to be made between interior movements that are attributed to *natural* causes and those that are essentially *spiritual*, consider the following example. You wake up on a cold winter morning, nice and warm under snug blankets. You had set the alarm clock so that you can be up in time to fulfil important responsibilities for a person in serious need that day. You know of no one else who is able to help this person, nor anyone who is equipped to do so. When the alarm clock wakes you, you first become aware of how nice and warm you feel under snug blankets. Then, you become aware of how tired you are given that you got to bed later than usual. In considering that the time has arrived for you to get out of bed, you remember past experiences when you were exposed to the cold. Consequently, you encounter worrisome prospects of getting out of bed. In response, you conclude, “Oh, it’s *so cosy* under these blankets! I think God wants me to stay in bed!”

Clearly, you would not be giving primacy of relationship to God in this instance. Rather, your decision involves a direction away from God insofar as the choice contravenes the demands of charity.¹²⁷ In this instance, you would be inordinately attached to the physical pleasure you experience in your sleep. Additionally, you mistook your psychological feelings for spiritual consolation. In contrast, sound discernment of consolation that informs our decisions involves giving more attention and credence to spiritual feelings than to natural ones. Without acknowledging that spiritual experience is beyond the realm of traditional psychological evaluation, we can make a number of false conclusions. “There are,” May specifies, “spiritual experiences that are mistaken for primary psychological changes, psychological phenomena that masquerade as spiritual experiences, and a host of other combinations.” Nonetheless, in “all of these [combinations] one may detect *classic God-given consolations*,” as well as “desolations as described in historic spiritual literature.”¹²⁸

As we shall see below when we study St Ignatius’ rules on the discernment of spirits, the third rule describes experiences of consolation in terms of pleasant feelings; whereas, in the fourth rule, he describes desolation in terms of unpleasant feelings. Having stated this, pleasant feelings are not intrinsic to consolation, nor are unpleasant feelings inherent to desolation. Rather, as Brian Gallagher explains, what defines experiences of consolation is that they are always movements towards God, always life-giving; whereas, desolation is a movement away from God.¹²⁹ This explanation is vital, for as Brian Gallagher asserts, “emotions, in themselves, do not define which spirit is operating.”¹³⁰ His view is consistent with a school of thought that consists of the following Ignatian scholars and commentators on the *Spiritual Exercises*:

¹²⁷ “If a man who was rich enough in this world’s goods saw that one of his brothers was in need, but closed his heart to him, how could the love of God be living in him?” (1 Jn. 3:17). See also: *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, Nos. 2088-89, 2091, 2094.

¹²⁸ May, *Care of Mind. Care of Spirit*, 41, 107 (emphasis added).

¹²⁹ cf. Brian Gallagher, *Communal Wisdom*, 16. See also:

¹³⁰ B. J. Gallagher, *Set Me Free* (Bayswater, VIC: Coventry Press, 2019), 96.

How to Allow the Holy Spirit to Lead our Parishes

Aschenbrenner;¹³¹ William W. Meissner, SJ MD (1931-2010), who was a professor of psychoanalysis and training and supervising analyst;¹³² Michael J. Buckley, SJ PhD (1931-2019), who was a philosophical theologian;¹³³ Psychologist Lawrence J. Murphy;¹³⁴ Spiritual Director and Pastoral Supervisor Maureen Conroy, RSM DMin;¹³⁵ Religious historian and theologian Philip Sheldrake;¹³⁶ Katherine Marie Dyckman, SNJM PhD (1931-2015); Mary Garvin SNJM DMin; Liebert;¹³⁷ and Mark E. Thibodeaux, SJ.¹³⁸

A different school of thought defines consolation with feelings that are intrinsically pleasant. Among these Ignatian scholars and commentators include Jules Toner, SJ¹³⁹ Piet Penning de Vries, SJ STD (1928-1995),¹⁴⁰ John J. English, SJ (1924-2004),¹⁴¹ William A. Barry, SJ PhD,¹⁴² Lachlan M. Hughes, SJ,¹⁴³ and T. M. Gallagher.¹⁴⁴ As we shall see, there are significant reasons to believe that this school of thought are not completely correct.

¹³¹ Aschenbrenner declares that any interior movement that is felt as an incarnation of resolutely setting our heart on following God's love is understood as consolation. Thus, these challenging interior movements are to be embraced, claimed, and followed. Whereas, any interior movement that deflects from our resolute desire for God's love and moves us toward self-idolatry is understood as desolation. Accordingly, these interior movements are to be rejected and courageously withstood. cf. George A. Aschenbrenner, *Quickening the Fire in Our Midst*, 174.

¹³² William W. Meissner received the Oskar Pfister Award from the American Psychiatric Association in 1989 and the William C. Bier Award from the American Psychological Association in 2001 in recognition of his outstanding contributions to the psychology of religion. Meissner states: "Consolation and desolation are not to be conceived in terms of the pleasure-principle, but rather in terms of the reality-principle which governs the ego-functions or reality-orientation, organization and synthesis." William W. Meissner, "Psychological Notes on the *Spiritual Exercises*." *Woodstock Letters*, 92 (1963): 359.

¹³³ Michael J. Buckley provided an analysis of the "structure or internal unity" of Ignatius' rules on the discernment of spirits in which he observes:

Consolation is in the interior movement of emotionality, feeling, or sensibility whose term is God – a man is drawn or driven to God. The primary instance of such an experience is that of the love, but it can also include the tears of remorse, any sensible increase of faith, hope, charity, and a joy whose effect is quiet and peace in God. Desolation is precisely the opposite, that is, any movement of emotionality or sensibility whose term is evil, whether that affectivity be painful as a troubled mind or comfortably cynical as a movement to distrust. Consolation and desolation [in the rules for the First Week] do not identify necessarily with pleasure and pain ... They are obvious states of affectivity, but they are not denoted by this sensible or even spiritual enjoyment, but by their direction, by their terminus.

Michael J. Buckley, "The Structure of the Rules for Discernment of Spirits," *The Way* (Supplement № 20, Autumn 1973), 19, 28-29.

¹³⁴ Laurence J. Murphy affirms: "Affectivity in the first week is judged by its obvious direction; namely: consolation, if it leads to God; and desolation, if it leads away from God."

Laurence J. Murphy, "Psychological Problems of Christian Choice." *The Way: Supplement 24* (Spring 1975): 34.

¹³⁵ "When affections are congruent with God's ways," Conroy affirms, "then consolation is experienced. When affections are 'inordinately attached' to something other than God's ways, desolation occurs."

Maureen Conroy, *The Discerning Heart – Discovering a Personal God* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1993), 14.

¹³⁶ cf. Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 111.

¹³⁷ "Consolation and desolation," according to Dyckman, Garvin, and Liebert, "are neither *simply* happiness and sadness, nor an 'up' or 'down' mood. Though these feelings may play a role ... consolation is the affective reverberation of the Holy Spirit that draws towards God, and desolation is the affective reverberation of the antispiritual that pulls in the opposite direction."

Katherine Marie Dyckman, Mary Garvin, and Elizabeth Liebert, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women* (New York: Paulist, 2001), 254.

¹³⁸ Thibodeaux observes that consolation can at times feel "difficult."

Thibodeaux, *Ignatian Discernment of Spirits for Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Care: Going Deeper*, 25.

¹³⁹ cf. Toner, *A Commentary on Saint Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits*, 109–21; 284–90.

¹⁴⁰ cf. Piet Penning de Vries, *Discernment of Spirits According to the Life and Teachings of St Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. W. Dudok van Heel (New York: Exposition Press, 1973), 14ff.

¹⁴¹ cf. John English, *Spiritual Freedom: From an Experience of the Ignatian Exercises to the Art of Spiritual Guidance*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1995), 127.

¹⁴² cf. William A. Barry, *Spiritual Exercises and the Encounter with God* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1992), 81.

¹⁴³ Lachlan M. Hughes declares, "to be moved legitimately by spiritual affectivity is itself necessary to the Ignatian process; and this is not the same as simply being moved by [any other] feelings."

Lachlan M. Hughes, "Affectivity, Conscience and Christian Choice." *The Way: Supplement 24* (Spring 75): 39.

¹⁴⁴ cf. Timothy M. Gallagher, *Spiritual Consolation: An Ignatian Guide for the Greater Discernment of Spirits* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007), 49.

The first school of thought noted above, which maintains that pleasant and unpleasant feelings are not intrinsic to consolation and desolation respectfully, is consistent with Christ's teaching. Referring to how to discern the erroneous teaching of false prophets, Jesus taught: "You will be able to tell them by their fruits" (Mt. 7:16). Accordingly, Brian Gallagher attests, "my experience suggests that the spiritual director's listening carefully to the experience behind the word 'peace' and noting the fruits of acting upon the experience is all the more important," for "the direction in which the spirit leads is the surest sign of which spirit is operating."¹⁴⁵

Regarding the rules on the discernment of spirits for the *First Week*,¹⁴⁶ Buckley emphasises: "Consolation is any interior movement of human sensibility – irrespective of the cause – whose direction is God ... whether its presence is experientially pleasant or not." Thus, he cautions: "Mix these up and you have a monster on your hands." For example, the person "who feels at peace in cruelty is sick, or the religious who experiences joy in infidelity is pathological."¹⁴⁷ As you can see, making decisions on the flawed premise that pleasant volitional impulses are intrinsic to consolation can result in poor choices, even egregious ones. Accordingly, Buckley argues: "Men with their arms locked, singing bawdy songs on their way to the local whorehouse, are in desolation for Ignatius," for in the fourth rule on the discernment of spirits, he taught that desolation engenders "'any movement to base and earthly things'." In light of this understanding, Buckley cautions: "both good and evil can console the soul, but they engage it in a process whose end is either development or destruction."¹⁴⁸

Regarding the misunderstanding that pleasant feelings are intrinsic to consolation, Thibodeaux notes: "the reason this misconception is so persistent is that we do indeed *usually* feel good in consolation and *usually* feel bad in desolation. It's an understandable mistake, then, to reduce such states to those feelings."¹⁴⁹ However, as explained on pages 19, 40-45, whether our heart is oriented away from God or towards God determines how we perceive consolation and desolation to be interiorly moving us.

What adds to the complexity of discerning the difference between consolation and desolation is that remaining faithful to what we feel God is asking of us can sometimes feel discomfiting and morally hard. Sheldrake refers to the manner by which we encounter the Holy Spirit in this state as "hard consolation."¹⁵⁰ Similarly, Dyckman, Garvin, and Liebert, call this experience "painful consolation."¹⁵¹ Liebert also states that this form of consolation consists of "negative feelings."¹⁵² Thibodeaux refers to this experience as "difficult consolation," yet he clarifies further that it can be either "dramatic" or "placid" according to the degree by which it is felt. Thibodeaux provides the following examples of difficult consolation: "we might experience

¹⁴⁵ B. J. Gallagher, *Discernment of Spirits: The Corner-stone of Formation of Spiritual Directors*, 106.

¹⁴⁶ The rules St Ignatius provides on the discernment of spirits for the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises help us understand how the good spirit and the bad spirit operate for those who are beginning their spiritual journey. Whereas, St Ignatius provides rules in the Second Week to shed light on how these spirits move people interiorly who are advancing deeper in their spiritual life in ways that are even more subtle than in the First Week.

¹⁴⁷ Buckley, "The Structure of the Rules for Discernment of Spirits," 35.

¹⁴⁸ Buckley, "The Structure of the Rules for Discernment of Spirits," 34.

¹⁴⁹ Thibodeaux, *Ignatian Discernment of Spirits for Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Care: Going Deeper*, 25.

¹⁵⁰ Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires*, 111.

¹⁵¹ Dyckman, Garvin, and Liebert, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women*, 255.

¹⁵² Elizabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 129.

grief, psychological depression, righteous anger, and fear, yet still be in sync with God and have great desires for faith, hope, and love. We might be suffering from unrequited love or from dry prayer. We might – despite our best efforts – have failed at something important to us and are terribly sad about it. These kinds of experiences happen to us all the time.”¹⁵³

Gabriel of St Mary Magdalen, OCD (1893-1953), who was a renowned confessor and spiritual director, also provides insight regarding the nature of discomfiting consolation:

The theological virtues are practiced essentially by the will. When they are accompanied by feeling, the practice of them is pleasant and consoling; but when the act must be made by the will alone, then this exercise is dry and cold, but is not for this reason of less merit; on the contrary, it is even more meritorious and therefore gives more glory to God ... this is the moment to repeat with Job, ‘Although He should kill me, I will trust Him’ (Job 13:15). We must not deceive ourselves, thinking we can go through these trials without having to fight against discouragement, against temptations to distrust, and perhaps even to despair; this is the reaction of nature which rebels against that which wounds it.¹⁵⁴

In addition to *deceptive* consolation noted on page 28 whereby “Satan himself goes disguised as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14), experiences of *hard, painful, negative, or difficult* consolation further demonstrates that pleasant feelings are certainly not intrinsic to consolation. Likewise, deeming unpleasant feelings to be inherent to desolation can also result in self-deception. Unpleasant feelings can in fact be a psychological response to an interior movement of the “good spirit” which originated in the core of the soul, thus bringing about a “sting of conscience” (*SpEx*, [314]). This sting is not attributed to desolation, but consolation, for St Ignatius affirms: “in consolation the good spirit guides and counsels us” (*SpEx*, [318]). Therefore, if we make decisions on the flawed premise that unpleasant feelings are intrinsic to desolation, we may end up attributing to the dark spirit what the Holy Spirit is actually bringing to our attention in our conscience. Consequently, rather than refrain from choices that are morally wrong, we could erroneously conclude that the dark spirit is attempting to mislead us.

Now that we have laid a Christian anthropological foundation that is fundamental to our ability to differentiate consolation from desolation, we are ready to introduce St Ignatius’ rules on the discernment of spirits. Buckley asserts, “No author either before or after has offered such concise codification of discernment.”¹⁵⁵ Essentially, St Ignatius taught that “in consolation the good spirit guides and counsels us;” whereas, “in desolation the evil spirit guides and counsels” (*SpEx*, [318]).¹⁵⁶ To assist us distinguish these spirits, then, we will study the fourteen rules St Ignatius wrote for the First Week¹⁵⁷ of the Spiritual Exercises. Although

¹⁵³ Thibodeaux, *Ignatian Discernment of Spirits for Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Care: Going Deeper*, 25-26, 41-42.

¹⁵⁴ Gabriel of St Mary Magdalen, *Divine Intimacy: Meditations on the Interior Life for Every Day of the Liturgical Year*, trans. From the 7th Italian edition by the Discalced Carmelite Nuns of Boston (Rockford, Ill: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1996, № 248 “The Test of Hope,” 742.

¹⁵⁵ Michael J. Buckley, “The Structure of the Rules for Discernment of Spirits” *The Way* (Supplement № 20, Autumn 1973), 26.

¹⁵⁶ Although the evil spirit guides us in desolation, St Ignatius taught that we can learn salutary lessons from this experience. Specifically, desolation can awaken a lax conscience (*SpEx*, [314]) and bring tepidity to light ([322]). Thus, desolation highlights our hidden resistance to full self-identity, as well as those areas in our being that prevent growth in our affective and spiritual maturity. Harvey D. Egan, SJ notes that desolation exposes our emotions that are disordered and allows us to work out inordinate attachments, to allow healing in much the same way that a person works out a cramp in the muscle. Harvey D. Egan, *The Ignatian Mystical Horizon* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1975), 76.

¹⁵⁷ This study will be limited to the rules for the First Week with only a few gleanings on the rules for the Second Week, which is for people who are more advanced in their spiritual journey. Rather than study extensively the rules for the Second Week

St Ignatius wrote these rules for spiritual directors to assist them guide their directees, they can also provide valuable assistance to those who facilitate communal discernment meetings or assemblies. Regarding this matter, Brian Gallagher attests:

In the ministry of individual spiritual direction, we've found it imperative that the spiritual director notice movements in themselves at the same time as listening to the person who comes for spiritual direction. These inner movements in the listening director will often be the first clue to recognising the spirit in the experience being shared. So, too, in a facilitator's listening to a group's sharing: the inner movements that the facilitator notices in themselves, properly interpreted by the facilitator from past experience (i.e., intuition), give the clue to recognising the spirit operating in the group.¹⁵⁸

With this understanding, Brian Gallagher provides a general description of what desolation feels like within a discernment group: "In times when the group has unwittingly taken a wrong direction, the invitations of God's Spirit will be challenging, even disturbing and unsettling. For some groups, to hear and follow these invitations of the Spirit can be quite painful."¹⁵⁹ Using a term developed by Harrison Owen, he adds that desolation causes: "soul pollution,"¹⁶⁰ which can take root "in organisations – characterised by burnout, stress, absenteeism, employee turnover, and various forms of addiction," thus "blocking any awareness of group spirit."¹⁶¹

As for how a discernment group generally experiences consolation, Brian Gallagher declares, "communal consolation will surely show itself in relationships, relationships within the group and relationships beyond the group. The group's ministry will bear even greater fruit."¹⁶²

Upon having noted these general observations regarding how a discernment group are moved interiorly by the bad spirit and the good spirit, we will now study the depth of insight St Ignatius provides for testing these spirits.

St Ignatius' Rules on the Discernment of Spirits

First Rule

In the case of those who go from one mortal sin to another, the enemy is ordinarily accustomed to propose apparent pleasures. He fills their imagination with sensual delights and gratifications, the more readily to keep them in their vices and increase the number of their sins.

With such persons the good spirit uses a method which is the reverse of the above. Making use of the light of reason, he will rouse the sting of conscience and fill them with remorse (*SpEx*, [314]).

We will now look at this rule one phrase at a time according to what spirit is at work.

here, appropriating these more advanced rules to personal and pastoral experience is best undertaken in a conversation with a spiritual director who is trained in the Spiritual Exercises.

¹⁵⁸ B. Gallagher, *Communal Wisdom*, 27.

¹⁵⁹ B. Gallagher, *Communal Wisdom*, 28.

¹⁶⁰ Harrison Owen, *The Power of Spirit* (San Francisco, CA: Berret-Koehler Publishing Inc., 2000), 2, 7.

¹⁶¹ B. Gallagher, *Communal Wisdom*, 33.

¹⁶² B. Gallagher, *Communal Wisdom*, 28-29.

1. *The Movements of the “Enemy” in the First Rule*

“... from one mortal sin to another”

This rule is not limited to someone who is frequently lapsing into serious sin, for Jules Toner, SJ held that St Ignatius saw “mortal sin” to be what “we are accustomed to call the “capital sins,” which “are primarily sources or tendencies giving rise to sinful acts.” This means St Ignatius’ reference to “mortal sin” in the first rule can constitute not only “grave,” but “light sins”¹⁶³ in an unredeemed area of a person’s life.

In the case of the rich young man (whom we began to consider on pages 24-25), he went away sad not because he was *literally* “going from one mortal sin to another” (*SpEx*, [314]), for when Jesus spoke of the commandments, he answered: “Master, I have kept all these from my earliest days” (Mk. 10:20). Rather, his reaction was attributed to the subtleties of *resistance* (which we explained on pages 24-25). Although the rich young man had kept the commandments, he appeared to experience a “sting of conscience” (*SpEx*, [314]) in response to his “disordered affections” (*SpEx*, [1]) that were entangled with his wealth, as “his face fell” (Mk. 10:22).

Hence, in addition to a person who is habitually committing serious sins, the first rule is describing a person who is pursuing a direction *away from God*, even in the subtleties of habitual venial sin. This relational orientation is significant because even minor fluctuations of heart away from God can impede the ability to discern which spirit is moving us interiorly. Regarding this matter, St Alphonsus Liguori said, “Every sin produces darkness in the understanding. Hence, the more sins are multiplied by a bad habit, the greater the blindness they cause.”¹⁶⁴ Likewise, Scripture attests: “my sins close in on me until I can hardly see” (Ps. 40:12). This blindness results because our moral life is not separate from our intellectual life. Ultimately, we are less inclined to be convinced by the truth if we are not living it, for the way we live influences the way we think. Archbishop Fulton Sheen explained this dynamic well:

Pour water into the red glass and it looks red; pour it into a green glass and it looks green; pour it into a black glass and it will look black. When you pour truth into mind *A* and pour it into mind *B*, it does not have the same effect, though it is identically the same truth. *A* may accept it, and *B* does not. The difference is not in the truth; rather the difference is in the mental soil in which the seed of truth is planted. It is not ignorance alone that is the cause of unbelief. Another and more important cause is behaviour ... A French infidel once said to Pascal, “If I had your principles, I would be a better man.” Pascal said, “Begin with being a better man, and you will soon have my principles.” If we do not live [according to the way] we think, we soon begin to think [according to the way] we live; we make a philosophy to suit our bad behaviour ... men often question truth because they hate it in practice. If they changed their lives they would change their thinking. Scepticism is not an intellectual position but a moral position.¹⁶⁵

Jesus was particularly mindful of this dynamic when he spoke to those whose lifestyle was contrary to the Gospel. Jesus reminded them, then, what the Prophet Isaiah had said: “You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest

¹⁶³ Toner, *Commentary on St Ignatius’s Rules for the Discernment of Spirits*, 52.

¹⁶⁴ St Alphonsus Liguori, Sermon 20, № 3 (Rockford, Illinois: TAN Books and Publications, Inc., 1982).

¹⁶⁵ Fulton Sheen, *Life is Worth Living* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 254.

they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart” (Mt. 13:14-15).

“... the enemy is ordinarily accustomed to propose apparent pleasures. He fills their imagination with sensual delights and gratifications”

Notice in what faculty the enemy operates in the first rule. Specifically, the enemy works in the *imagination*. The Holy Spirit communicates himself to us through our imagination when we are moving towards God. Contrariwise, while moving away from God – even if such movement is subtle – the enemy, not God, appeals to our imagination. Regarding this matter, the rich young man provides us with an example regarding this aspect of the first rule, too. Basically, his attachment to his riches suggests that he was accustomed to *imagine* their benefits. Indeed, the enemy works in the *imagination* of people who are moving away from God, even if that movement is because of a small reticence in an unredeemed wound.

The pleasures the enemy is accustomed to propose consist of a sense of happiness, but such enjoyment is only illusory (“*apparent*”) because they do not last long. Nor are these pleasures in conformity with what is authentically good due to a distortion or misuse of what is good. Fundamentally, St Ignatius taught that when “a decision in the matter under deliberation is made,” it must not be “because of any sensual inclination” (*SpEx*, [182]). This pleasure contrasts with the joy that accompanies virtue. Authentic joy is derived from intimacy with God because joy is a “fruit of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁶⁶ Such intimacy is the fruit of our sincere efforts to give primacy to our relationship with God out of which our desire to follow his call emerges. Authentic joy is attributed to the good spirit evident in all the other rules on discernment of spirits. However, in the first rule, the contrary is experienced: joy accompanies vice, not virtue; happiness is experienced in doing what is contrary to God’s desires, not in pursuing them.

Questions for Reflection:

- If a father tries to encourage his child to avoid evil and do good by rewarding him with gifts when his child *misbehaves* (not when he behaves), how could his child ever grow in virtue and experience authentic joy?
- In the same way, if a person is experiencing pleasure in doing the very things that displease God, how is this pleasure going to assist him to discern God’s desires for him?

2. The Movements of the “Good Spirit” in the First Rule

“Making use of the light of reason, he will rouse the sting of conscience and fill them with remorse.”

Remember, St Ignatius is describing either a person who is either literally moving from one mortal sin to another, or a person whose fundamental direction in life is indeed moving towards God, but whose heart has fluctuated away from God in a small unredeemed area of his life. Such a person experiences a sense of happiness in doing what is contrary to God’s desires; whereas, he experiences a “sting of conscience” when he begins to encounter the

¹⁶⁶ “...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22).

grace of conversion. The bad spirit operates in the *imagination*; whereas, the good spirit works in the *conscience* in the first rule.¹⁶⁷

While the Holy Spirit afflicts our conscience when we are moving away from God to any degree, this sting of conscience is not caused directly by the Holy Spirit. Rather, our disordered affections cause God's consolation to feel disturbing. Nature itself bears witness to this dynamic. When sunlight shines on wax, it makes it soft and subtle, but when the same sunlight shines on mud, it cracks and hardens it. The converse is also true, as St Teresa of Ávila attests: "Since His Majesty was not waiting for anything other than some preparedness in me, the spiritual graces went on increasing in the manner I shall tell. It is not a customary thing for the Lord to give them save to those with greater purity of conscience."¹⁶⁸ Perhaps one of the gravest errors of modernity is that many people simply think that because they believe that God exists they will always be headed in the right direction. However, a correct understanding of the first rule of the discernment of spirits more than suggests otherwise. Ultimately, our orientation of heart in relation to God in each given moment determines which trajectory we will move: either towards God; or away from him.

To give an example, consider a child who has been raised to value a tidy room, but his bedroom is in a mess. As the child experiences "delights and pleasures" in playing computer games, he feels sad by the prospect of cleaning his room which leads to laziness. Consequently, when God enlightens the child's rational power of judgement regarding his untidiness, he feels a "sting of conscience." This enlightenment from God does not derive from anything bad (for God never has any bad will), but because the child's lack of goodwill has caused him to misapprehend God's true nature.

Timothy M. Gallagher, OMV STD explains that the conscience is afflicted by fear, shame, torment, bitterness, and restlessness that give rise to an anguished longing for liberation, which prepares the moment of new turning to God.¹⁶⁹ Accordingly, the Psalmist says: "To fear the Lord is the first stage of wisdom" (Ps. 111:10). Margaret Silf well articulates the essential nature of the "sting of conscience":

The web of falsehood holds us captive at a deeper level of consciousness. It slowly and insidiously programs us to operate from false reference points until we almost feel at home and comfortable in doing so ... The word almost is significant. The problem with operating out of falsehood is that it always leaves us with a twinge (or perhaps even a surge) of spiritual desolation. In some way that we cannot articulate, our deepest desire – which has

¹⁶⁷ Michael J. Buckley explains that compared with rules 2-14 in the First Week, when one's heart is orientated away from God in rule 1, the dark spirit operates in a different manner. Specifically, the evil spirit's:

line of causality now moves up from affectivity to thoughts," not "down [as the good spirit does] in this first rule from preternatural influences through human imagination and rational intentionality into affective states ... What is enormously important to notice is that the vectors in religious experience, the causal lines, can either move down, as they do in this first rule from preternatural influences through human imagination and rational intentionality into affective states, or they can move up, as they do in the fourth and fifth rules ... For a man moving through purification [i.e., moving towards God], the modes of temptation are dialectically reversed, and the instrumentality of evil is no longer imagination but thought.

Michael J. Buckley, "The Structure of the Rules for Discernment of Spirits" *The Way* (Supplement № 20, Autumn, 1973), 27-28.

¹⁶⁸ *The Book of Her Life in The Collected Works of St Teresa of Ávila* (vol. 1), 2nd Ed., trans. Kieren Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1987), ch. 9, № 9.

¹⁶⁹ cf. T. Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 36.

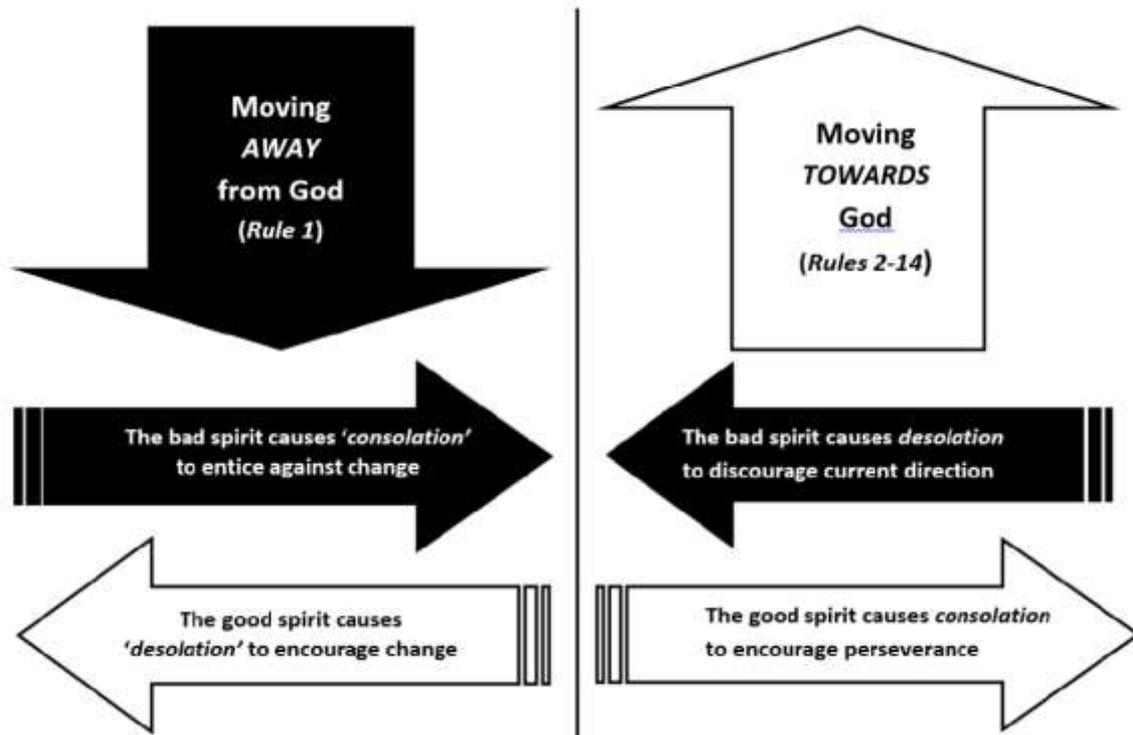
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to do with being who we truly are – is being frustrated, and our hearts are registering their protest through feelings of turmoil and discontent.¹⁷⁰

“... the good spirit uses a method which is the reverse of the [bad spirit].”

Although these are not the last words St Ignatius states in the first rule, commenting on them here is ideal because if we are to understand why the good spirit uses a *contrary method*, we first need to understand the method that the Holy Spirit uses (hence our earlier analysis of the “sting of conscience”). This contrast constitutes a fundamental tool in discernment because we can expect that if one spirit acts in one way, the other will act in exactly the contrary way. As we shall see, this contrast is also fundamental to the subsequent rules on the discernment of spirits.

If the enemy works in the *imagination* of people who are moving away from God, even if that movement is because of a small reticence in an unredeemed wound, the good spirit works in their *conscience*. The enemy seeks to induce a sense of comfort, delight and pleasure in order to *prolong* the person’s present direction away from God; whereas, the good spirit will not leave such a person in peace in order to move the person to *change* the present direction, turning in a new way toward God.¹⁷¹ Just as the good spirit always uses a “contrary method” to the bad spirit, the methods which both the good and bad spirits use in a person who is moving away from God is *contrary* to the methods they use in a person who is moving toward God (as illustrated below).



If you ignore the “sting of conscience” because you mistakenly consider that you are moving towards God, you will misappropriate St Ignatius’ rules. Specifically, knowing that the Holy Spirit uses “carrots” in the second rule, you will consider that your discomforting feeling

¹⁷⁰ Margaret Silf, *Inner Compass – An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1999), 194-195.

¹⁷¹ cf. Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 36-37.

is of the evil spirit. Thus, you will be subject to the first rule where the Holy Spirit contrastingly uses “sticks.”¹⁷² This misappropriation of the Holy Spirit’s activity leads to resisting his interior movements. Furthermore, if you ascribe to the evil spirit what the Holy Spirit intends you to perceive in your *dissonant* interior reactions (dissonant because your will is contrary to God’s desires for you¹⁷³) you will become more and more impervious to God’s self-communication.¹⁷⁴

Questions for Reflection:

- From what you have learned in the first rule, can you see why the affective criteria of discernment needs to be supplemented with the *doctrinal*, *communal*, and *obediential* criteria of discernment noted on pages 16-17?
- How do the following words of Francis Thompson’s poem, *The Hound of Heaven* correlate with the activity of the good spirit in the first rule?

Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand,
Outstretched caressingly?¹⁷⁵

Second Rule

In the case of those who go on earnestly striving to cleanse their souls from sin and who seek to rise in the service of God our Lord to greater perfection, the method pursued is the opposite of that mentioned in the first rule.

Then it is characteristic of the evil spirit to harass with anxiety, to afflict with sadness, to raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul. Thus he seeks to prevent the soul from advancing.

It is characteristic of the good spirit, however, to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and peace. This He does by making all easy, by removing all obstacles so that the soul goes forward in doing good (*SpEx*, [315]).

1. The Movements of the “Enemy” in the Second Rule

“... sadness”

St Ignatius explains that the enemy instills within those who begin to grow in their faith and virtue a sense of *sadness* with respect to God, to prayer, to the love of others in God, that is, to everything involved in the pursuit of God’s will. This kind of sadness is not the praiseworthy sorrow (known as *contrition*) that leads to repentance (2 Cor. 7:9), but a sadness which is experienced on account of being invited by Jesus to let go of those things one is attached to in the effort to conform one’s life with the Gospel.

Questions for Reflection:

¹⁷² Silf, *Inner Compass*, 150, 162, 164.

¹⁷³ “When our interior life is consonant with God’s life, we experience consolation ([316]). When our inner life is dissonant with God, we experience desolation ([317]).”

Maureen Conroy, *The Discerning Heart – Discovering a Personal God* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1993), 14.

¹⁷⁴ Toner states: “Since all the rules are about these motions, any obscurity or inaccuracy about the motions will obscure or falsify our understanding of the scope and purpose of the rules.” Furthermore, “the movements of the Holy Spirit “which of themselves tend to have a constructive effect can be ignored, resisted, or even misused, and so be the occasion for sin and regression in the Christian life” (*Op cit.*, 39-40).

¹⁷⁵ Cited in T. Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 37, which also features a good commentary on this poem.

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- When you first began to value your faith, did you experience any degree of sadness? If so, what was your sadness attributed to? Recall the nature of the sadness you experienced.
- If you are currently experiencing any sadness, is this feeling associated in any way with what you are discerning (i.e., does considering God's desires for you make you sad in any way)?

“... *obstacles*”

St Ignatius describes the enemy's tactics as a biting, gnawing action that triggers a sense of anxiety in those who are trying to follow Christ. His tactics also diminishes peace and undermines delight in God's service.

Questions for Reflection:

- Recall any of the *obstacles* you encountered which prevented you from being in touch with God's desires for you, obstacles that were part of your life due to the enemy's influence (these may be physical or moral obstacles that pertain to you and/or others).
- How did these obstacles make you feel? Recall these feelings especially in terms of how they disheartened you from following Christ.

“... *fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul.*”

St Ignatius states that the enemy uses *falsehood to disquiet* those who are going on intensely purifying their sins and rising from good to better in the service of God. Timothy Gallagher states that these may be associated with: misperceptions of events in our daily lives; difficult interactions with others; burdensome situations during work or at home; and emotional tendencies toward anxiety or sadness already present within us.¹⁷⁶

Questions for Reflection:

- What were the *false reasons* the enemy tried to conceive within your mind (i.e., reasons why you should not follow Christ)?
- How did these thoughts *disquiet* you (i.e., what emotions did they cultivate)?
- Did any of the false reasons manifest themselves within thoughts relating to speaking to someone about your struggles? For example, were you subject to notions such as the following thoughts that Timothy Gallagher represents?

You cannot speak about this interior trouble. You can speak about anything else, but not 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 now 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 yourself to carry this burden.¹⁷⁷

2. The Movements of the “Good Spirit” in the Second Rule

¹⁷⁶ cf. T. Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 43.

¹⁷⁷ T. Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 161.

“... courage and strength”

St Ignatius said that the good spirit gives “courage and strength” to those who are trying to follow Christ.

“... consolations, tears, inspirations, and peace.”

St Ignatius taught that the good spirit also gives “consolations” and “tears.” These tears are healing, strengthening, blessed tears that physically express the consolation of the heart in God. Furthermore, St Ignatius says the good spirit gives “inspirations.” Timothy Gallagher states that these inspirations are given to those progressing toward God to assist them with the gift of *spiritual clarity* upon which he notes: “We have seen that the enemy fosters *disquiet* in the hearts of committed persons through false reasons. The action of the good spirit quiets anxieties and instils peace in the Lord.”¹⁷⁸

... removing all obstacles”

In all of the above interior movements, St Ignatius says the good spirit is at work, “easing and taking away all obstacles.” Timothy Gallagher explains that this ease counters the enemy’s tactic of “placing obstacles” in the way of a person progressing toward God.¹⁷⁹

Third Rule

Spiritual Consolation. I call it consolation when an interior movement is aroused in the soul, by which it is inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord, and as a consequence, can love no creature on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of them all. It is likewise consolation when one sheds tears that move to the love of God, whether it be because of sorrow for sins, or because of the sufferings of Christ our Lord, or for any other reason that is immediately directed to the praise and service of God. Finally, I call consolation every increase of faith, hope, and love, and all interior joy that invites and attracts to what is heavenly and to the salvation of one’s soul by filling it with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord (*SpEx*, [316]).

Commenting upon these words of St Ignatius, Timothy Gallagher explains that dedicated persons often undergo a kind of conflict. Their hearts have chosen God’s love and desire to serve him, yet they experience a struggle between their desire to serve God and their attractions toward certain places, relationships, occupations, institutions, and similar “created things,” which, if followed, would distance them from God whom they desire to follow. In the gift of this second form of spiritual consolation, such struggles fade. Their hearts do not love these “created things” the less but rather with a new freedom, now consonant with their love for God. A weight is lifted, and their whole being is integrated into their response to God’s call.¹⁸⁰

Being attracted to “heavenly things” naturally leads to letting go of other things, even things which in themselves are not morally wrong. Although this involves letting go, it is with “joy” that the man sells all that he has in order to buy the field in which the treasure is buried (Mt. 13:44). This joy, as the *Song of Songs* expresses, is consistent with what it is to be in love

¹⁷⁸ T. Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 45.

¹⁷⁹ T. Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 45.

¹⁸⁰ Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 53.

because “for love, a man will give up all that he has in the world, and think nothing of his loss” (Sg. 8:7 KB).

Fourth Rule

Spiritual Desolation. I call desolation what is entirely the opposite of what is described in the third rule, as darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness rising from many disturbances and temptations which lead to want of faith, want of hope, want of love. The soul is wholly slothful, tepid, sad, and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord. For just as consolation is the opposite of desolation, so the thoughts that spring from consolation are the opposite of those that spring from desolation (*SpEx*, [317]).

In the fourth rule, while describing several forms of desolation, St Ignatius refers to “temptations,” however, by doing so, he does not want us to believe that all forms of desolation are temptations. Essentially, we experience desolation in the *senses* as a *spiritually desolate emotion*; it is not an inclination of the *will* to do something morally wrong.¹⁸¹ For example, feeling *disquieted* by distractions when you attend Mass on Sundays may not necessarily mean that you are tempted to stop going to Mass in the event of feeling this form of desolation. However, Timothy Gallagher asserts, “this distinction should not be overstressed,” for while desolation is neither morally good nor morally wrong, it can sometimes become “a fertile seedbed of temptation.” Additionally, “Both spiritual desolation and temptation are the work of the enemy, and both have the same ultimate purpose: to harm us spiritually and hinder us from “rising from good to better in the service of God our Lord.”¹⁸²

The fourth rule encapsulates the experience many people have during the stage of their discernment where they become confused. A key to gaining clarity in the midst of experiencing contradictory thoughts is to pay attention to the good and bad spirits that are generating them. Accordingly, Buckley explains: “Certain affective-conditions, consolation and desolation, can spontaneously generate commensurate thought: ‘the thoughts that spring from consolation (*que salen de la consolación*) are contrary to the thoughts which spring from desolation (*que salen de la desolación*)’.”¹⁸³

While clarity can be gained by recognising the pattern by which *spiritual consolation* consistently emerges during the times when God’s desires are being perceived, further clarity and confirmation can be gained by the *opposite inclination* (i.e., a detraction from God’s desires) that emerge in time of *spiritual desolation*. For example, a Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) may be confused in result of the contrasting thoughts that emerge in their discussion about whether or not their Parish should be amalgamated with a neighbouring Parish so that they can share their resources and minimise duplication. However, when the PPC becomes attentive to the interior movements that emerge in these discussions, they notice that they

¹⁸¹ As a means of explaining that no dimension of moral responsibility can apply to experiences of desolation, St Ignatius declared: “I am not going to be condemned because of what the [involuntary] evil thoughts and the weaknesses of the bad angels, the flesh, and the world bring before my mind.”

Letters of St Ignatius of Loyola, trans. W. J. Young, SJ (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1959), 25.

¹⁸² T. Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 149-150.

¹⁸³ Buckley, “The Structure of the Rules for Discernment of Spirits,” 27.

experience desolation when they present arguments for the Parish to remain as it is. In contrast, they notice that they experience consolation when they consider the prospect of the amalgamation.

Characteristics of Consolation and Desolation in the Third and Fourth Rules

Patrick O’Sullivan SJ (1931-2022), who was an Australian spiritual director, described how the interior movements of consolation and desolation affects us in the following contrasting ways. Regarding consolation, there is a real sense of our own worth such that we experience a renewed confidence and encouragement to faith, a sense of being in harmony with oneself and with God, times of true creativity. Hope comes alive; the lights go on. There is a genuine feeling of movement: ‘I can do something about this. It hasn’t got to be like this. I want to do something and I can do something.’ Something lifts from us; we feel lighter, liberated. We also grow in compassion and sensitivity to the needs of others.

In contrast, when we are subject to desolation, there is a loss of the sense of our own worth. We are down on ourselves and speak about ourselves in ways that we would never dream of speaking about anyone else. Hope is blighted and fades away; the lights go out. There is a feeling of being stuck or trapped, of having nowhere to go or going round in circles, of being down in a big black hole. The movement leads us, and then leaves us; it never leads anywhere. There is a pervasive sense of heaviness.

There are two words in particular that betray the bad spirit at work in us: “If only...” In contrast, the good spirit leads us into the present moment, and so into reality; whereas, the bad spirit leads us away from present reality, either through regrets and resentments about the past (e.g., ‘If only I’d passed that exam, I’d be so much better off now’). Or, through fears and anxieties about the future (e.g., ‘If only I get that position, everything will be alright.’) The words, “If only...” express an attitude that undermines our capacity to be involved in the present moment. This suits the bad spirit perfectly, because reluctance to face reality breeds frustration and confusion, and takes away our peace. By contrast, under the action of the good spirit, we are grateful for the past, open to the present, and look to the future in trust.¹⁸⁴

Fifth Rule

In time of desolation we should never make any change, but remain firm and constant in the resolution and decision which guided us the day before the desolation, or in the decision to which we adhered in the preceding consolation. For just as in consolation the good spirit guides and counsels us, so in desolation the evil spirit guides and counsels. Following his counsels we can never find the way to a right decision (*SpEx*, [318]).

There is great wisdom in this fifth rule. The decisions we made when we were in desolation are often the decisions we later regretted. Desolation is a part of everyone’s spiritual life, yet our secular culture has conditioned many people to desire immediate satisfaction and sensory experience, which can often result in rash decisions.

Sixth Rule

¹⁸⁴ cf. Patrick O’Sullivan, *Sure Beats Selling Cardigans* (Ringwood, VIC: Aurora Books/David Lovell Publishing, 1995), 102-103; idem, *Prayer and Relationships* (Melbourne, VIC: David Lovell Publications, 2008), 111-2.

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Though in desolation we must never change our former resolutions, it will be very advantageous to intensify our activity against the desolation. We can insist more upon prayer, upon meditation, and on much examination of ourselves. We can make an effort in a suitable way to do some penance (*SpEx*, [319]).

The sixth rule helps us to see the merit of deepening our contemplative prayer (especially the *Daily Examen* prayer),¹⁸⁵ and our resolve to act against the human passions that are at odds with Christian values by doing some suitable penance. According to St Ignatius' teaching, a "suitable" penance is one that involves doing "exactly the opposite of what [the dark spirit] suggests" (*SpEx*, [325]). In this event, we choose to "*agere contra*" i.e., "to act against" (*SpEx*, [97])¹⁸⁶ the tendencies that may prevent us from perceiving and pursuing God's desires. For example if you are feeling angry towards another member in a discernment group, a suitable penance would be deal with your anger so that you do not act out of it and relate moderately to the other person.

This need to appropriate some penance as a means by which we can counter the disordered affections that hinder consolation, as taught by St Ignatius, is evident in Luís Gonçalves da Câmara's writings. He was the early Jesuit to whom St Ignatius of Loyola dictated the content of what would eventually become the saint's "autobiography." He wrote that St Ignatius claimed that practicing "mortification and abnegation [of the will] makes it possible for someone to easily pray more in a quarter of an hour than a non-mortified person in two hours."¹⁸⁷ Similarly, St Teresa of Ávila described the fruit she experienced consequent to her own ascetic practices. After performing some mortifications that she received from her confessor, she wrote: "My soul began so to feel any offense I committed against God, however small, that if I was holding on to some superfluous thing, I could not recollect myself until I gave the thing up."¹⁸⁸

Seventh Rule

When one is in desolation, he should be mindful that God has left him to his natural powers to resist the different agitations and temptations of the enemy in order to try him. He can resist with the help of God, which always remains, though he may not clearly perceive it. For though God has taken from him the abundance of fervor and overflowing love and the intensity of His favors, nevertheless, he has sufficient grace for eternal salvation (*SpEx*, 320).

As rules 8-12 are easier to appropriate to personal and pastoral experience than the other rules in the First Week, I have provided a copy of them below without a commentary:

Eighth Rule

When one is in desolation, he should strive to persevere in patience. This reacts against the vexations that have overtaken him. Let him consider, too, that consolation will soon return, and in the meantime, he must diligently use the means against desolation which have been given in the sixth rule (*SpEx*, 321).

¹⁸⁵ For information on the Daily Examen prayer, go to: <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen>

¹⁸⁶ *Agere contra* is a significant principle in the spiritual life, as St Ignatius refers to it often. See *SpEx*, [13], [16], [146-147], [157, 167], [319], [324-325], [350-351].

¹⁸⁷ Luís Gonçalves da Câmara, *Remembering Iñigo: Glimpses of the Life of Saint Ignatius of Loyola: The Memorial of Luís Gonçalves da Câmara*, trans. Alexander Eaglestone and Joseph A. Munitiz (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2004), 2 March 1555, §255, 149.

¹⁸⁸ *The Book of Her Life in The Collected Works of St Teresa of Ávila* (Vol. 1), trans. Kieren Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1987), Ch. 24, № 2.

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Ninth Rule

The principal reasons why we suffer from desolation are three:

The first is because we have been tepid and slothful or negligent in our exercises of piety, and so through our own fault spiritual consolation has been taken away from us.

The second reason is because God wishes to try us, to see how much we are worth, and how much we will advance in His service and praise when left without the generous reward of consolations and signal favors.

The third reason is because God wishes to give us a true knowledge and understanding of ourselves, so that we may have an intimate perception of the fact that it is not within our power to acquire and attain great devotion, intense love, tears, or any other spiritual consolation; but that all this is the gift and grace of God our Lord. God does not wish us to build on the property of another, to rise up in spirit in a certain pride and vainglory and attribute to ourselves the devotion and other effects of spiritual consolation (*SpEx*, 322).

Tenth Rule

When one enjoys consolation, let him consider how he will conduct himself during the time of ensuing desolation, and store up a supply of strength as defense against that day (*SpEx*, 323).

Eleventh Rule

He who enjoys consolation should take care to humble himself and lower himself as much as possible. Let him recall how little he is able to do in time of desolation, when he is left without such grace or consolation.

On the other hand, one who suffers desolation should remember that by making use of the sufficient grace offered him, he can do much to withstand all his enemies. Let him find his strength in his Creator and Lord (*SpEx*, 324).

Twelfth Rule

The enemy conducts himself as a woman. He is a weakling before a show of strength, and a tyrant if he has his will. It is characteristic of a woman in a quarrel with a man to lose courage and take to flight if the man shows that he is determined and fearless. However, if the man loses courage and begins to flee, the anger, vindictiveness, and rage of the woman surge up and know no bounds. In the same way, the enemy becomes weak, loses courage, and turns to flight with his seductions as soon as one leading a spiritual life faces his temptations boldly, and does exactly the opposite of what he suggests. However, if one begins to be afraid and to lose courage in temptations, no wild animal on earth can be more fierce than the enemy of our human nature. He will carry out his perverse intentions with consummate malice (*SpEx*, 325).

Thirteenth Rule

Our enemy may also be compared in his manner of acting to a false lover. He seeks to remain hidden and does not want to be discovered. If such a lover speaks with evil intention to the daughter of a good father, or to the wife of a good husband, and seeks to seduce them, he wants his words and solicitations kept secret. He is greatly displeased if his evil suggestions and depraved intentions are revealed by the daughter to her father, or by the wife to her husband. Then he readily sees he will not succeed in what he has begun. In the same way, when the enemy of our human nature tempts a just soul with his wiles and seductions, he earnestly desires that they be received secretly and kept secret. But if one manifests them to a confessor, or to some other spiritual person who understands his deceits and malicious designs, the evil one is very much vexed. For he knows that he cannot succeed in his evil undertaking, once his evident deceits have been revealed.

In the thirteenth rule, St Ignatius counsels that the bad spirit operates in the dark. You can expect, then, that those who are complicit with the enemy hide their agenda in the dark themselves. Accordingly, Jesus said, “though the light has come into the world men have shown they prefer darkness to the light because their deeds were evil. And indeed, everybody who does wrong hates the light and avoids it” (Jn. 3:2). Such wrongdoing can take place in a discernment group in more or less harmful ways. To give an example of a sinister aversion from walking in the light, some members of a discernment group form a faction (as noted in *Appendix D*).

An example of avoiding the light that can take place somewhat inadvertently is conflict of interest. Nevertheless, undeclared conflicts of interest can result in activities that undermine Gospel values. Therefore, members of a discernment group would always do well to declare transparently any conflict of interest that they consider might become an issue. Conversely, those who remain in the dark are incapable of discerning God's desires, for as Jesus said, "he who walks in the dark does not know where is going" (Jn. 12:35). To save us from the wiles and seductions of the dark spirit, Jesus said: "I, the light, have come into the world, so that whoever believes in me need not stay in the dark any more" (Jn. 12:46).

Fourteenth Rule

The conduct of our enemy may also be compared to the tactics of a leader intent upon seizing and plundering a position he desires. A commander and leader of an army will encamp, explore the fortifications and defenses of the stronghold, and attack at the weakest point. In the same way, the enemy of our human nature investigates from every side all our virtues, theological, cardinal and moral. Where he finds the defenses of eternal salvation weakest and most deficient, there he attacks and tries to take us by storm (*SpEx*, [327]).

In addition to individuals, the fourteenth rule applies to groups, as every group has its own weakest point. In fact, Brian Gallagher maintains that in communal discernment, the group's vulnerability is critical. As with personal discernment, groups also have places of *unfreedom* and vulnerability. The dark spirit operates in individuals most frequently via false meanings that they ascribed to themselves. These messages sound credible because they appeal to the person's vulnerable spot. Likewise, a group listens to false messages *as a group*. Few groups seem aware of this bias in themselves and the risk of their listening to false messages.¹⁸⁹

One example of a group's "weakest point" that can loom large in a community is a student suicide in the Parish's High School. In response, fellow students and their parents, teachers, and pastors can carry a heavy sense of shame, as they are left wondering if they could have done something to prevent such a tragedy. If the community does not rally in support to shore up this "weakest point," communal discernment can become impaired. Essentially, people who are affected by this or any other weakest point in their community need to be afforded help to process their discomfoting feelings therapeutically, especially those related to shame. As Brackley observed, "Encouragement sometimes means affirming appropriate anger and challenging fearful silence, inaction, and self-effacement when the situation calls for their opposites."¹⁹⁰

If such help is not provided, the community can become preoccupied with a sense of inadequacy and end up defining itself in terms of failure. Consequently, such humiliation can deteriorate unwittingly into false-humility, which can stifle the community's capacity to give public witness to their faith.

¹⁸⁹ cf. B. Gallagher, *Communal Wisdom*, 49.

¹⁹⁰ Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, 123.

Brackley explains that when governed by false-humility, we refuse to credit our good works or take our ideas and desires seriously. Thus, good people are kept from acting on their inner authority, even though such authority often coincides with the movement of the Holy Spirit. By leading them to experience excessive self-doubt, the enemy tries to make some people see defects where there are none, in order to harass them and even drive them to desperation. Additionally, false-humility fosters sins of omission and blocks creative action. In the name of ‘humility’ and ‘equality,’ people with false-humility can bury their talents, stifle their initiatives, and/or fall to carping from the sidelines.¹⁹¹ Notice how a group that remains unaware about how their “weakest point” is affecting them can allow the dark spirit to undermine their identity in Christ, which, as explained on pages 12-13, is essential for sound discernment.

St Teresa stresses that the signs of false-humility cannot be detected by empirical principles or abstract learning, but by paying attention to the particular manner by which they cause *disturbance*.¹⁹² She adds, “afterward, when I am freed from them, I know clearly that the feelings are foolish,” upon which she concludes, “false-humility ... is one of the most painful, subtle, and beguiling inventions of the devil that I have known.”¹⁹³

This understanding of the beguiling activity of the dark spirit that attacks our “weakest point” and “tries to take us by storm” (*SpEx*, [327]) is worthy of note. Essentially, the devalued self-image that a group possesses in relation to their “weakest point” is often predicated on emotion, not logic; in fact, this self-definition consists of “fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul,” which St Ignatius identifies to be intrinsic to desolation “to prevent the soul from advancing” (*SpEx*, [315]).¹⁹⁴

Even with this understanding, however, detecting the unpleasant affective criteria within the desolation associated with the group’s devalued self-image is not easy. Nonetheless, Brian Gallagher explains that groups can discover and name their group vulnerability by looking at the group’s history of living in a discerning way by monitoring the communal decisions that they made.¹⁹⁵ Paradoxically, we need to be mindful of our “weakest point,” not run from it and avoid it, for “[God’s] power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9 NIV).

¹⁹¹ cf. Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, 111-114, 119, 134, 136-137, 142.

¹⁹² cf. *The Book of Her Life* in *The Collected Works of St Teresa of Ávila* (Vol. 1), trans. Kieren Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1987), Ch. 30, №. 9.

¹⁹³ *The Book of Her Life*, Ch. 30, №. 9. See also *The Interior Castle*, First Mansion, Ch. 2, №. 10.

¹⁹⁴ Liebert provides the following example of how self-image was operating in that of: (1) her religious congregation’s administration as an institution; (2) some of her fellow religious sisters; and (3) herself:

...several years ago I began to notice some of my as-yet untenured faculty colleagues struggling with speaking what they felt would be unpopular observations or holding positions that would contradict those of the administration. I kept thinking, *I wish they would speak; we need their wisdom*. I would even tell them that privately, but they continued to hesitate, thinking about their future tenure reviews. About the same time, at a faculty retreat devoted to long-range planning, we were asked to stand in a line in the order of our hiring. I was startled to see that I was only fifth from the head of the line, with almost two dozen strung out behind me. One day as I was praying about the situation of one of my junior colleagues, I realized that I had power that I could use on his behalf. In my inner dialogue with this personal power, I realized that I was a senior faculty person and I should start acting like one. The image of myself as “senior faculty” now comes to me frequently, as I ponder how I should use my influence as a member of the faculty. This image has changed the way I relate to myself, my faculty colleagues, my administration, and the institution itself.

Liebert, *The Way of Discernment*, 103.

¹⁹⁵ B. Gallagher, *Communal Wisdom*, 69.

Appendix G: Rules on the Discernment of God's Will¹⁹⁶

On page 20, we noted that St Ignatius of Loyola provided rules on the discernment of God's will. In these rules, he identifies the following three *times*¹⁹⁷ in which a sound and good choice may be made. Although St Ignatius developed these rules for individual use, Liebert recalls "the deliberation of the first Jesuits [who] extended the application of the Rules for Discernment of Spirits and Rules for Making an Election to group decision making."¹⁹⁸

[175] THREE TIMES IN WHICH A SOUND AND GOOD CHOICE MAY BE MADE

The first time is when God our Lord so moves and attracts the will that without doubting or being able to doubt, the devout soul follows what is shown it, as St Paul and St Matthew did in following Christ our Lord.

[176] *The second time* is when sufficient clarity and understanding is received through experience of consolations and desolations, and through experience of discernment of different spirits.

[177] *The third time* is one of tranquillity, when one considers first for what purpose man is born, that is, to praise God our Lord and save his soul, and, desiring this, chooses as means to this end some life or state within the bounds of the Church, so that he may be helped in the service of his Lord and the salvation of his soul. I said a tranquil time, that is, when the soul is not agitated by different spirits, and uses its natural powers freely and tranquilly.

[178] If election is not made in the first or the second time, two ways follow as to this third time for making it.

We will now look at the rules noted above (*SpEx*, [175-178]) one at a time.

THE FIRST TIME

[175] *The first time* is when God our Lord so moves and attracts the will that without doubting or being able to doubt, the devout soul follows what is shown it, as St Paul and St Matthew did in following Christ our Lord.

Fundamental Elements to Examine:

1. *The first time* is an experience that can arise suddenly, outside of any formal process of discernment.
2. This experience does not consist of an extended process of discernment; rather, it is God's freely bestowed gift, which is received *passively*.
3. St Ignatius refers to the immediate response of St Paul along with St Matthew in following Christ's call as examples to illustrate what to expect in the "First Time" election. These

¹⁹⁶ St Ignatius' *Rules for the Discerning God's Will (SpEx, [175-188])* cited in this appendix consist of the translation of Timothy M. Gallagher, OMV, *Discerning the Will of God – An Ignatian Guide to Christian Decision Making* (New York: Crossroad, 2009), 141-144. For a similar step-by-step guide developed by the monastic tradition, see: Margaret Mary Funk, *Discernment Matters: Listening with the Ear of the Heart* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 133-139.

¹⁹⁷ Some Ignatian commentators attempt to adapt the term "time" to "modes" of discernment. However, I prefer St Ignatius' use of "time" because this term denotes that the Holy Spirit moves us in response to God's initiative, thus occurring in *God's time*, whereas, "mode" fails to denote this divine initiative; on the contrary, it can give the false impression that discernment is of our own doing.

¹⁹⁸ Liebert, *The Soul of Discernment*, 41.

apostles were attracted “without doubting or being able to doubt.” Given that the volitional impulse in the “First Time” election is so profound, this inclination clearly appears to be intrinsic to consolation “without any previous cause” (*SpEx*, [330]).¹⁹⁹ French Theologian Bertrand de Margerie, SJ (1923-2003) assumes that this correlation exists. Specifically, he declares that during the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises or in the *unitive way*,²⁰⁰ experiencing consolation without any previous cause during the First Time election is not unusual.²⁰¹ Likewise, Michael Evans, SJ PhD (1954-2014) suggests: “It is natural to assume, as most exponents of the Exercises do, that the First Time will ordinarily be a time of consolation, even of consolation ‘without preceding cause’ [330].”²⁰² Similarly, Thibodeaux acknowledges, “Ignatius never equates this ‘first time’ with the experience of consolation without previous cause.” Nevertheless, he affirms: “it seems obvious that [St Ignatius] is speaking about the same thing, or at least that they are closely related.” Thus, he concludes: “we should carefully apply the rules for consolation without previous cause as we begin to take action in this First Time.”²⁰³

4. St Ignatius counsels us in the second rule among the rules on the discernment of spirits for the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises, that we do well to be particularly attentive to consolation when it emerges in moments “without any previous cause” (*SpEx*, [330]). In this counsel, St Ignatius means that if there was nothing significantly spiritual enough occupying our mind immediately prior to experiencing the spiritual consolation, (i.e., something which could have awakened the feeling or understanding), then we can be more confident that such consolation came from God. If we were engaged in some form of spiritual activity immediately prior to an inexplicable experience of consolation, we would do well to be attentive to whether or not the consolation was “unexpected” as well as “disproportionate”²⁰⁴ to such spiritual activity.

As an example, Brackley affirmed: “Praying or reading Scripture might ‘cause’ consolation, but the consolation will be disproportionate to the effort expended. It will

¹⁹⁹ Regarding the introductory observations St Ignatius provides for the Spiritual Exercises, Buckley argues: “the fifteenth annotation suggests such a consolation as pivotal: ‘God works with the soul embracing her to his love and praise and so disposing her for the way in which she can better hereafter serve.’ For Ignatius this moment is self-authenticating, a movement of total affectivity and feeling towards God.”

Buckley, “The Structure of the Rules for Discernment of Spirits,” 33.

²⁰⁰ The *unitive way* is the last stage of the spiritual life, which takes place after the first and second stages known as the *purgative way* and *illuminative way*.

²⁰¹ cf. Bertrand de Margerie, *Theological Retreat* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1976), 155. This observation is consistent with what Ignatius teaches insofar as he clarifies that the First Time election is experienced by “a devout soul” (*SpEx*, [175]).

²⁰² Michael Evans, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises: Text and Handbook for Retreat Directors* (Leominster, Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 1998), 136. See also: Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, 139; English, *Spiritual Freedom*, 212.

²⁰³ Thibodeaux, *Ignatian Discernment of Spirits for Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Care: Going Deeper*, 65.

²⁰⁴ Harvey Egan, SJ taught that if a profound encounter with God did have a previous cause, but it was “unexpected” and “disproportionate,” then this experience would be characteristic of consolation without any previous cause.

Harvey Egan, *Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1984), 65. Egan’s view is consistent with that of Francisco Suárez SJ PhD (1548-1617), who was a renowned Spanish philosopher and theologian. Suárez considered this disproportion to be key to consolation without any previous cause on the basis that disproportionate movements of affect and will provide even surer evidence of divine influence. He defines such disproportion to be when we are attracted more forcefully than the object itself that attracts us, especially when we are attracted to sublime things that are counter to our natural inclinations.

cf. Francisco Suárez, *De Religione Societatis Iesu*, L. IX, Cap. V, N^{os} 38-41 ed. Vives, 1860, *Opera omnia*, t. XVI, 2. See also: Maureen Conroy, *The Discerning Heart*, 152; T. M. Gallagher, *Spiritual Consolation*, 53; Toner, *Discerning God’s Will*, 127ff; Thibodeaux, *Ignatian Discernment of Spirits for Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Care: Going Deeper* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2020), 54.

seem to arise from nowhere. The disproportion reflects the gratuitousness that characterizes God's activity."²⁰⁵ In this event, a person is drawn totally in love of God's divine majesty, or is touched to such an extent that he is moved to tears. "Every devout Christian," Thibodeaux claims, "seems to have an occasional inexplicable moment of consolation that seems out of proportion to any of the 'causes' that might have precipitated it." From his own experience, Thibodeaux gives examples of such moments: "when I felt that I was more joyful than I had a right to be, more hopeful than the moment called for, more at peace than this world could ever promise." He adds: "Spontaneous, punch-drunk joy" in such experiences are "far out of proportion to any of my ordinary reasons to be happy that day." Thus, he concludes: "Clearly, this is an experience wholly different from typical consolation." Yet, he also notices different degrees of profundity are encountered in this phenomenon: "One could experience dramatic consolation without previous cause or placid consolation without previous cause."²⁰⁶ Irrespective of what degree this encounter is dramatic or not, Brackley claims: "I see no good reason to suppose, as some do, that consolation with cause necessarily differs in character or intensity from consolation without cause – apart from its unexpectedness."²⁰⁷

5. St Ignatius taught in the eighth rule on the discernment of spirits for the Second Week: **"When consolation is without previous cause, as was said, there can be no deception in it, since it can proceed from God our Lord only."** However, in this rule, he immediately adds the following caution:

...But a spiritual person who has received such a consolation must consider it very attentively, and must cautiously distinguish the actual time of the consolation from the period which follows it. At such a time the soul is still fervent and favored with the grace and aftereffects of the consolation which has passed. In this second period the soul frequently forms various resolutions and plans which are not granted directly by God our Lord. They may come from our own reasoning on the relations of our concepts and on the consequences of our judgments, or they may come from the good or evil spirit. Hence, they must be carefully examined before they are given full approval and put into execution (*SpEx*, [336]).

6. In light of this teaching of St Ignatius, Brackley cautions: "We must attend closely to how our thoughts progress during and after consolation" because **"one must distinguish carefully between the original consolation and its afterglow."** Frequently during "this afterglow period," he clarifies:

...other thoughts, attractions, and practical proposals arise, not directly from God, but from our own inclinations or mental habits. Or they might come from the enemy. We need to examine closely the ideas and plans that arise during this time when it is so easy to suppose that every idea is inspired by God.²⁰⁸

Brackley provides a caution that is particularly relevant to communal discernment:

Although these rules on consolation without any previous cause refer to movements in individuals, they also apply to groups. The founder of a religious community may have experienced divine inspiration, but that is no guarantee that the community will continue to follow God's lead. Subtle and insidious forces can latch on like parasites to genuine

²⁰⁵ Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, 138-139.

²⁰⁶ Thibodeaux, *Ignatian Discernment of Spirits for Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Care: Going Deeper*, 54-56.

²⁰⁷ Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, 139.

²⁰⁸ Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, 140-141.

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religious experience and turn religious movements and organizations complacent, or even demonic.²⁰⁹

Due to such deception, Thibodeaux stresses that we need to treat false consolation for what it really is; namely, *desolation*. Additionally, Thibodeaux warns: “People in false consolation are living in a pleasurable fantasy and will resist any movement out of that fantasy.”²¹⁰ This understanding helps us to see why **receiving regular spiritual direction is essential to appropriating the rules on the discernment of spirits correctly.**

7. Genuine consolation without any previous cause may occur not only in dramatic ways, but in quiet, hidden ways, yet with a deep certitude that cannot be doubted. Regarding “personal relationship with Mystery” which is “profoundly moving,” May observes: “It seems that the more subtle the *way* of experience, the more powerful the *effect* of the experience may be.”²¹¹ Accordingly, English Cardinal, theologian, and poet St John Henry Newman (1801-1890) affirmed: “It may be a law of Providence that God speaks more softly the more he promises.”²¹² These observations of Newman and May are consistent with St Teresa of Ávila’s teaching: “You are not accustomed, Lord, to bestow on a soul grandeurs and favors like these unless for the profit of many.”²¹³
8. Some commentators consider consolation without any previous cause to be a common experience; whereas, others see it as rare and reserved to persons of exceptionally holy lives.²¹⁴ Settling this dispute among commentators on the *Spiritual Exercises* regarding what degree of frequency consolation without any previous cause is experienced is in the best interest of sound discernment. For as we have seen, this profound grace is correlated with the “first time” election. Ignatian commentators make their differing opinions based on pastoral experience. While reflecting on pastoral experience can shed valuable light on this phenomenon, we can expect the divergence of opinion to vary in accord with the difference within the respective experiences themselves. However, the following psycho-theological insight of May helps us to see why the “First Time” election is not rare for individuals:
 - a) According to May’s clearly articulated observations, consolation without any previous cause shares the same characteristics and effects of what he denotes as *unitive experiences*.²¹⁵ Thus, another reason why many people do not notice their experiences of this inexplicable grace can be found in May’s observations: “there are ample reasons why the mind would *not* choose unitive experience even if it could.” May is referring to “the shadow side of spirituality.”²¹⁶ Regarding this shadow, May explains: “**spiritual longing and spiritual experiences are very threatening to the way we view ourselves.**” In other words, in this encounter, we feel God’s affection to be

²⁰⁹ Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, 141.

²¹⁰ Thibodeaux, *Ignatian Discernment of Spirits for Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Care: Going Deeper*, 93-94, 96.

²¹¹ Gerald G. May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1982), 306.

²¹² John Henry Newman, *University Sermon* (1834) cited in Hans Urs Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory: Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, Vol. II (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 135.

²¹³ *The Book of Her Life*, Ch. 18, № 4.

²¹⁴ cf. James Walsh, “Discernment of Spirits,” *The Way*, Supplement 16 (Summer 1972), 64; Hervé Coathalem, *Ignatian Insights*, trans. Charles McCarthy 2nd ed. (Taichung, Taiwan: Kuanchi Press, 1971), 187-188.

²¹⁵ cf. May, *Will and Spirit*, 36, 53-56, 92, 113, 136, 144, 252-253, 276, 310, 314-315; idem, *Care of Mind. Care of Spirit*, 37, 171, 357.

²¹⁶ May, *Will and Spirit*, 55, 92. Just as every light casts a shadow, below the threshold of conscious awareness are interior reactions that resist what we value. The ultimate gift God gives is participation in his own divine life; however, in the gift, often there is some shadow, for although the gift is from God, we human beings are broken. Consequently, we cannot receive the goodness of God’s gift as well as we otherwise could because of the shadow.

threatening, as we have a self-image that is incongruent with the interior movements of the Holy Spirit.²¹⁷ Consequently, May adds, “There is much in our spirituality of which we would rather not become aware. If we would keep our self-images intact, there is much [about what God communicates in unitive experiences] that would have to be repressed, denied, or distorted.”²¹⁸

- b) This insight of May helps us recognise the virulent degree of resistance that can occur in an uncanny manner in accord with the observation of Michael Casey, OCSO: “Sometimes the best evidence for the authenticity of a spiritual experience is a frantic tendency to run as fast as possible in the opposite direction.” Basically, “the variation in our experience is the result of our own innate state of interior division.”²¹⁹ In this event, the consolation is suppressed only to re-emerge involuntarily in *displacement*,²²⁰ such that the grace remains unnoticed.
- c) May observed that unitive experiences occur more frequently than many people would otherwise think because they can be *subtle*.²²¹ Having stated this, unlike beginners in the spiritual life, May explains, “there is considerable evidence that although highly experienced contemplatives may not have more unitive experiences, they do at least recognize those experiences more often.” For they “are usually less constantly caught up in self-defining activities.” Additionally, while narcissistic, erotic, and filial love support and maintain self-image, being receptive to agapic (i.e., divine) love destroys

²¹⁷ Although self-image is often expressed in love, when a person grows in sanctity, the self who is expressed is not himself, but Christ as St Paul attests (Gal. 2:20). Ultimately, our greatest fulfilment is not found in fabricating our own identity by making ourselves according to our own image, but in being fashioned according to God’s image and likeness, thus participating in his divine nature. Yet, we often resist this growth in sanctity because, as May explains, a “dying image of self, or a dying belief in such an image, must be accompanied by a dying of one’s images of the world as well. It is not an easy business.” May, *Will and Spirit*, 103.

²¹⁸ May adds: I have carefully used the terms *self-image* or *sense of self* rather than *self*, because one’s perception of self is always both inaccurate and incomplete.”

May, *Will and Spirit*, 92, 122-123.

²¹⁹ Michael Casey, *Grace: On the Journey to God* (Strathfield, NSW, Australia: St Pauls Publications, 2018), 46-47.

²²⁰ *Displacement* is a defence mechanism in which a person redirects a negative emotion from its original object to a recipient he perceives to be less threatening. Regarding this reaction, May explains that avoiding sacrifice can be a form of displacement: “Due to the “absence of self-definition” in unitive experiences, May observed that most people can “remember only one or two major unitive experiences in their lives; some initially deny having had anything even remotely resembling such an experience.” However, upon carefully questioning his directees to reflect, “virtually everyone,” he observes, “can begin to recall increasing numbers of unitive experiences that had somehow been ‘forgotten.’ This kind of forgetting is a result of repression,” but can be recalled “with just a little bit of encouragement.” However, “[s]ome people have greater difficulty,” because they “feel considerable resistance against talking about such experiences once they have been recalled ... in spite of their beauty.” Consequently, “we seek out indirect and sometimes distorted ways of trying to satisfy our spiritual longing. The fact is, all of us would very much like to find ways of experiencing unity without having to sacrifice our self-definition ... Displacement may well be the most common spiritual defense of our times ... Here we seek to assuage our spiritual hunger through some physical, mental or interpersonal activity that is not as threatening.”

May provides some examples of such displacement. “Spiritual manifestations of energy often find erotic expression” because in this response “one can enter into some kind of fusion [with one’s image of God] without having to sacrifice self-image.” As a result, “people can spend months or years displacing their spiritual longing onto interpersonal sexuality.” Ultimately, “sensations of affection for the other person can be utilized as signals to redirect one’s attention towards the divine, and the energy of attraction can be channelled into more panoramic and less singular loving.” Another example is that “we might seek to fill the void in our hearts by drinking, overeating, or taking drugs. Or we may seek meaning through hard work, intense relationships, or powerful conquests rather than through the more self-abandoning paths of spiritual growth.” May, *Will and Spirit*, 88-89, 93, 95, 100, 145. See also 195-196.

²²¹ We must not overlook that these graced moments occur more frequently than we would otherwise think if we expected them to be always dramatic. Having stated this, even referring to these “rather dramatic experiences of union,” May observes: “Before one begins a life of conscious prayer, such experiences happen so quickly one completely fails to recognize them.” May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 126. See also: Thibodeaux, *Ignatian Discernment of Spirits for Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Care*, 25-26, 41-42.

any self-definition.²²² Having stated this, May maintains: “The experience of union and its concurrent unconditional love is deeply threatening even to the most well-adjusted, secure, and individuated self-image.”²²³

- d) Although proficient contemplatives tend to have favourable dispositions, May asks the question: “If self-image is so effective and zealous about protecting itself, how do spontaneous unitive experiences ever occur at all? How do they manage to get by all of the ego’s defenses?” May provides this answer: “In most instances, it appears that the ego is surprised by the experience, caught off guard while it is either occupied with something else or simply resting from self-defining activities.” Essentially, “it is only while self-image sleeps that unconditional love is realized.”²²⁴ This observation May provides correlates with what the Song of Songs exhorts: “Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires: (Sg. 8:4 NIV).
9. **That the most profoundly consoling experiences of grace can be met with resistance and self-deception is consistent with St Ignatius’ caution:** “the course of thoughts suggested to us [in consolation without any previous cause] may terminate in something evil.” These deceptive thoughts may be “distracting, or less good than the soul had formerly proposed to do.” Consequently, such thoughts “may end in what weakens the soul, or disquiets it; or by destroying the peace, tranquillity, and quiet which it had before,” or “it may cause disturbance to the soul.” Such experiences “are a clear sign that the thoughts are proceeding from the evil spirit, the enemy of our progress and eternal salvation” (*SpEx*, [333]). For this reason, St Ignatius advises: “**We must carefully observe the whole course of our thoughts [after experiencing consolation without any previous cause].** If the beginning and middle and end of the course of thoughts are wholly good and directed to what is entirely right, it is a sign that they are from the good angel” (*SpEx*, [333]). This careful observation of our spiritual experiences is necessary, lest we repress, deny, or distort what God communicates to us through them.

²²² May, *Will and Spirit*, 252. *Agapic love*, which is the highest form of love, destroys self-image because the agapic image and likeness of God in whom we are made is often in stark contrast with our own self-images. Most pertinent to this contrast, each Person of the Blessed Trinity are not absorbed and invested in self, but in one another. To state this more clearly, the Father has no self-image, nor does the Son, nor does the Holy Spirit. Each Person has no self-definition; rather, they define themselves by One another. During Jesus’ baptism, when the Father spoke “from the cloud,” he did not say, “Listen to me;” rather, he said, “This is my Son, the Chosen One. Listen to him” (Lk. 9:35). Thus, the Father attests not to himself, but to his Son. Regarding the Holy Spirit, Jesus said: “when the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth, since he will not be speaking as from himself but will say only what he has learnt” (Jn. 16:13). Thus, the Holy Spirit witnesses not to himself, but to the Son. Similarly, Jesus said: “the works my Father has given me to carry out, these same works of mine testify that the Father has sent me” (Jn. 5:36). Thus, the Father does not bear witness to himself; rather, his Father commissions his Son. Indeed, as David Vincent Meconi affirms: “the Father does not have His own self-possessed divinity separate from the Son and the Spirit. There are no ‘autonomy’ in God because the identity of each person is intelligible only in relationship.”

David Vincent Meconi, *The Priest as Beloved Son*, ed. James Keating (Omaha, NE, USA: IPF Publications, 2015), 63.

²²³ May, *Will and Spirit*, 113, 125. Being willing to participate in Christ’s self-emptying (Phil. 2:6-7) is required for union with God to be attained. In the Son of God’s self-emptying, he embraces his spiritual poverty, for it is the paradigm of his filial receptivity. In other words, the Son of God’s self-emptying is not just a foregoing of self-definition, but a means by which he can be receptive to the Other-gifting of his Father, such that he said, “The Father and I are one” (Jn. 10:30). Accordingly, Jesus said, “the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing” (Jn. 5:19). These words of Jesus also reveal that his foregoing of self-definition reciprocates the same self-less disposition initiated by his Father. As Professor of Dogmatics Margaret M. Turek, STD affirms, “Christ’s assenting self-surrender is the flawless mirror in which the Father’s authority can be seen as a modality of utterly selfless, other-directed love.”

Margaret M. Turek, *Balthazar’s Approach to a Theology of God the Father: Theology at the Service of Spirituality* (Menlo Park, CA: St Patrick’s Seminary and University), 53.

²²⁴ May, *Will and Spirit*, 92, 113, 125, 170, 205, 252. See also May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 131.

10. A number of theologians support the view that **dramatic experiences consolation without any previous cause provides the *summit* (i.e., the most advantageous vantage point) for discernment.** Ultimately, such inexplicable consolation provides a valuable *point of reference*, which can by contrast expose pleasant feelings that are not of God, especially those that *do* have a previous cause. Thus, this gift undermines the deception which otherwise thwarts authentic discipleship. Less dramatic experiences in their profundity may fail to function sufficiently as a point of reference. German Theologian Karl Rahner, SJ PhD (1904-1984) argued that consolation without any previous cause is the *sine qua non* of all discernment of spirits and discernment of God's will.²²⁵ Likewise, Ernest E. Larkin, OCarm STD (1922-2006), who was an American professor and spiritual director, maintained: "The consolation without previous cause is the root of all discernment through affective movements."²²⁶ Likewise, Brian Gallagher argues that consolation without previous cause "is a first principle of affective discernment since it offers a touchstone for interpretation of one's experience" because "it is unquestionably a gift of the spirit of God."²²⁷ This argument concurs with Professor Emeritus of Systematic and Mystical Theology Harvey D. Egan, SJ DTheol,²²⁸ Associate Professor of Spirituality Brian O'Leary, SJ,²²⁹ and J. English.²³⁰ The teaching of these theologians are consistent with St Teresa of Ávila's observation. She taught that **discernment becomes less problematic when deeper experiences of union with God are encountered:** "If the devil should counterfeit God's favors [in the lowest kind of union], this [pseudo-delight] will be known by the fact that these good effects [from God in the deeper experiences of union] are not caused [by human activity], but just the opposite."²³¹ She adds, "In my opinion, if this experience is authentic, it is the greatest favor our Lord grants along this spiritual path, at least among the greatest."²³² Here, St Teresa is not referring to the experience of profound consolation in itself, but its effect in being a point of reference for discernment.²³³

²²⁵ cf. Karl Rahner, *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (New York: Herder and Herder 1964), 130-131, 158-160, 164, 167.

²²⁶ Ernest E Larkin, "What to Know About Discernment," *Review for Religious*, Vol. 60, № 2 (2001): 33.

²²⁷ B. J. Gallagher, *Discernment of Spirits: The Corner-stone of Formation of Spiritual Directors*, 33, 98.

²²⁸ Professor of Systematic and Mystical Theology Harvey D. Egan, SJ DTheol refers to consolation without previous cause as an "unexpected, disproportionate consolation" which is "the paradigm of all consolations," as it "a first principle against which all other consolations can be measured."

Harvey Egan, *Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1984), 65.

²²⁹ Brian O'Leary writes of "the foundational faith experience which reveals who we are before God" referring to it as "a 'touchstone' for evaluating any new experience."

Brian O'Leary, "Discernment and Decision Making," *Review for Religious*, Vol. 51, № 1 (1992): 60.

²³⁰ John English sees consolation without previous cause as "the touchstone for all other experiences of consolation."

English, *Spiritual Freedom*, 220.

²³¹ *The Interior Castle*, Fourth Mansion, Ch. 3, № 10. See also *The Book of Her Life*, Chs. 14-15.

²³² *Spiritual Testimonies Testimonies in The Collected Works of St Teresa of Ávila* (Vol. 1), 2nd Ed., trans. Kieren Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1987), 59: "The degrees of infused prayer," Seville, 1576, № 6. Having stated this, progress in the spiritual life is not attributed to this enjoyment of consolation in and of itself, but by following Christ.

²³³ Accordingly, Jesus reprimanded St Teresa with the words, "While one is alive, progress doesn't come from trying to enjoy Me more but trying to do My will."

Spiritual Testimonies, 15: "Enclosure and the will of God," Avila, St Joseph, July 1571.

God also said to St Teresa: "Don't think, daughter that union lies in being very close to me. For those, too, who offend me are close, although they may not want to be. Neither does it consist in favors and consolations in prayer, even though these may reach a very sublime degree." Consequent to receiving this locution, St Teresa concluded: "I understood that [union] consists in the spirit being pure and raised above all earthly things so that there is nothing in the soul that wants to turn aside from God's will; but there is such conformity with God in spirit and will, and detachment from everything, and involvement with Him, that there is no thought of love of self or of any creature."

11. **By virtue of its inexplicable profundity, consolation without any previous cause affords us with a point of reference** that serves to function like a *touchstone*²³⁴ or an *acid test*.²³⁵ Put another way, this point of reference becomes like a set of scales on which we can weigh all other consoling feelings according to their degree of profundity. More specifically, consolation without any previous cause is like a tuning-fork of known key: “I know that this note is middle C,” for example. Consequently, we can compare other notes to middle C. Similarly, if a person has heard beautiful harmony in music in general, then he will instinctively be able to detect a dissonant note. This point of reference enables us to discern the difference between pleasant feelings that are in response to the interior movements of the good spirit or that of the dark spirit, even when such dissonant nuances are subtle.²³⁶
12. The process Rahner recommends regarding the benefit of this touchstone experience is a kind of prayerful experiment. This process consists of remembering our deepest experience of God’s grace and the matter to be discerned. Thus, we are able to test to see if a potential decision sits well within our innermost being where we are most open to God; or, if by contrast, it compares more closely to more superficial experiences of peace.²³⁷ Similarly, Barry suggests mystical experiences “could be used as a kind of touchstone for discerning new experiences of God. However, they might need the help of another person like a spiritual director to see the possibility of such use.”²³⁸
13. **There is reason to suggest that Jesus expects us to experience the peace he gives as a point of reference** because upon saying, “Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you,” he clarifies that it is “a peace the world cannot give” (Jn. 14:27). In other words, all other peace is superficial by comparison. St Paul also appears to see peace as a significant point of reference for discernment, as he says: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts”

Spiritual Testimonies, 25: “The nature of union,” № 1.

²³⁴ A *touchstone* is a piece of fine-grained dark schist, fieldstone, slate, lydite, or jasper which metallurgists and jewellers used as an age-old method for testing the purity of a precious metal. This test is conducted by rubbing, for an example, various gold alloys, such as 18 and 24 karats on the touchstone. The touchstone is flat and smooth, yet coarse enough, such that a microscopic but visible deposit of the gold is deposited on it. Then, by rubbing the metal to be tested on the touchstone alongside the marks made by the 18 and 24 karat gold, this metal’s purity can be determined in comparison to the colour of the known metals.

²³⁵ The *acid test* is also an age-old method which is used to add clarity when testing the purity of gold. After the metal to be tested is rubbed against the touchstone, various acids are applied to the mark. The basis of this test is that pure (24 karat) gold resists the strongest of acids in the testing kit. Thus, depending on which of the five different concentrations of nitric and hydrochloric acids dissolves the mark of the metal deposited on the touchstone, the metal can be determined to be 24, 22, 18, 14 karats or lower.

²³⁶ Clearly, St Ignatius was aware that profound experiences of consolation can afford such a delicate point of reference. Indeed, his tasted insight regarding this ability to discern is evident in the following guidance he provides:

In souls that are progressing to greater perfection, the action of the good angel is delicate, gentle, delightful. It may be compared to a drop of water penetrating a sponge. The action of the evil spirit upon such souls is violent, noisy, and disturbing. It may be compared to a drop of water falling upon a stone. In souls that are going from bad to worse, the action of the spirits mentioned above is just the reverse. The reason for this is to be sought in the opposition or similarity of these souls to the different kinds of spirits. When the disposition is contrary to that of the spirits, they enter with noise and commotion that are easily perceived. When the disposition is similar to that of the spirits, they enter silently, as one coming into his own house when the doors are open (*SpEx*, [335]).

²³⁷ Karl Rahner, “The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola” in *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (London: Burns and Oates, 1964), 155-6.

²³⁸ Barry adds that the “touchstone experience at the river Cardoner enabled [Ignatius] to discern wheat from chaff in other experiences.” Barry concludes: “we need to savor and nourish the memory of such experiences and tell them to our spiritual director.”

William A Barry, *Allowing the Creator to Deal with the Creature: An Approach to the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1994), 100-101.

(Col. 3:15 NIV), for “that peace of God, which is so much greater than we can understand, will guard your hearts and your thoughts, in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7). St John Chrysostom appealed to the literal Greek in Colossians 3:15. He understood St Paul to be counseling us to allow God’s peace to *βραβεύετω*, that is, “*be the umpire*” in your hearts.²³⁹ The role of an umpire is to *arbitrate*, that is, to provide an authoritative, independent judgement. That this peace of Christ is a God-given point of reference is clearly revealed in this understanding of St Paul’s words. Essentially, no individual can make an *independent* judgment on his own behalf without conflict of interest. To be independent, such a judgment must come from someone else, who, in this case, is the Holy Spirit, by virtue of the point of reference the peace of Christ affords.²⁴⁰

14. In the event that judgment is made in the result of a ‘touchstone’ experience, the interior guidance received is in a sense both ‘independent’ and ‘authoritative.’ However, for this judgement to be truly independent, **the decision needs to be made only after discussing the graced moment with a spiritual director.**²⁴¹ Prior to then, all inspirations and inclinations should be treated as ‘dead in the water,’ as the saying goes, for inner-authority needs to be subject to certain limits in order to be authentic. Ultimately, as noted about the *obential* criterion of discernment on pages 18-19, the decisions we make in response to graced moments need to be consistent with the teachings of Christ and his Church.²⁴² When we follow all these forms of guidance through the community of the Church faithfully, the fact remains that this infused grace affords us with a remarkable point of reference to discern personal decisions, especially regarding matters that would otherwise be beyond our mental ability to comprehend.
15. If the “first time” election is encountered in communal discernment, the following three essential elements would need to be applicable:
 - (i) something is shown to the group;
 - (ii) the group is drawn to what is shown (“God our Lord *moves and attracts the will*”); and
 - (iii) the group cannot doubt that what is shown, and what so draws the will, is truly in accord with God’s desire (“without doubting or being able to doubt”).
14. If God does not choose to give this gift of immediate clarity, then he is calling us to discern in other, more active ways.

²³⁹ Cited in D. J. Leahy, *The Epistle to the Colossians in A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (London: Thos Neslon & Sons, 1952), 1136.

²⁴⁰ Regarding “the peace of God” (Phil. 4:7), Biblical theologian Thomas S. Moore explains that it “surpasses our *abilities* to understand and it surpasses our *efforts* to establish our own peace.” Thus understood, this profound peace clearly cannot be fabricated. Yet further reason is evident, then, that this profound peace is indeed a point of reference above all others. Moore also explains that *εἰρήνη τοῦ Θεοῦ* (“peace of God”) “goes well beyond a Roman concept of peace. It is the peace Paul himself had experienced in coming to know his Messiah.”

Thomas S. Moore, *Philippians: An Exegetical Guide for Preaching and Teaching in Big Greek Idea Series IV* ed. Herbert W. Bateman (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregal Publications, 2019), 234.

²⁴¹ John of the Cross declared: “As often as [God] reveals something to a person, He confers upon his soul a kind of inclination to manifest this to the appropriate person ... This is the trait of a humble person: he does not dare deal with God *independently*, nor can he be completely satisfied without human counsel and direction.”

Ascent of Mount Carmel, Bk II, ch. 22, Ns. 9, 11 (emphasis added).

²⁴² Teresa of Ávila was also mindful of the need for objective authority. Writing about what she expected of a spiritual director, Teresa declared: “he ought to limit himself to seeing to it that in both exterior and interior matters the soul walks in conformity to the natural way through the use of reason; and in supernatural experiences he should see that it walks in conformity with Sacred Scripture” (*The Book of Her Life*, Ch. 34, Ns. 11).

Questions to consider, which summarise the points above to assist the group to discern:

- 1 What specifically was shown to the group? In the experience, what *specifically* did God reveal?
- 2 In the experience, was there a clear attraction and drawing of the group toward what was shown?
- 3 Was it truly impossible for the group to doubt that this experience was of God?
- 4 For St Ignatius, discernment, even according to the “first time,” is never done in isolation. If the facilitator of the group is not formed in the ministry of spiritual direction, has the group spoken with a spiritual director about their experience?
- 5 St Ignatius taught that discernment is not complete until a person, or in this case, a group, acts upon what is prayerfully considered. So, has the group, as the grateful recipient of this gift, acted upon it?

THE SECOND TIME

[176] *The second time* is when sufficient clarity and understanding is received through experience of consolations and desolations, and through experience of discernment of different spirits.

Fundamental Elements to Examine:

1. The “second time” presumes that the group has the dispositions necessary for discernment.
2. A group must understand and recognise their experiences of consolation and desolation. In rules 3-5 of discerning God’s will (*SpEx*, [316–318]), St Ignatius provides ample descriptions of these precisely for this purpose (see *Appendix F*).
3. The often-confusing clash of attractions and resistances gives way to spiritual clarity by virtue St Ignatius fourth rule on the discernment of spirits:

...For just as consolation is *contrary* to desolation, in the same way the *thoughts* which come from consolation are *contrary* to the thoughts that come from desolation” (*SpEx*, [317]).

4. If the discernment group only paid attention to their thought processes in their discussions, they may end up with little clarity – or may even become confused – by the arguments that they present for and against their deliberations. However, as the example on page 48 illustrates, this fourth rule enables the discernment group to gain further clarity by helping them to see that consolation consistently emerges in the group during the times when they consider God’s desires for the Parish. Whereas, in *contrast*, desolation consistently emerges in the group when their deliberations are more or less complicit with the dark spirit. Thus, by way of contrast, the bad spirit’s interior movements become the backhanded compliment of the enemy. As being attentive to such patterns is required, the “second time” of discernment may need to take place not just in one meeting but over several meetings. For unlike the “first time” of discernment, the “second time” is not given by God in one moment, nor is it received passively, but is a process the group actively engages in over a period of time.
5. Consolation is not always experienced in an extraordinary way. It can often manifest itself in *subtle* ways, which many people thereby easily miss.

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6. St Ignatius states that we should pray regularly on the life of Jesus in the Gospels. In so doing, we should be attentive to our spiritual experience, that is, to review it. We would do well to review it in writing as St Ignatius himself did when he was discerning. St Ignatius also recommended that we discuss the nature of the consolation and desolation with a spiritual director.
7. If you have done all that the “second time” of discernment requires, but do not find “sufficient clarity and understanding” for discernment, then, St Ignatius says, you will need to discern according to the “third time” below (see *SpEx*, [177]).

Questions to consider which summarise the points above to assist a group to discern:

- 1 Does the discernment group possess the *disposition* St Ignatius describes, i.e., being indifferent in order to be open to what God desires? Is the group using the spiritual means to grow in that disposition (regular participation in the Mass, frequent recourse to Confession, meditating on Sacred Scripture, penance, acts of charity, devotion to Mary, daily examination prayer)? Does the group seek spaces of *quiet* that assist discernment?
- 2 Am I attentive to my spiritual experience? Are the inclinations and disinclinations of my heart truly spiritual (as opposed to non-spiritual)?
- 3 Was I engaged in some form of spiritual activity immediately prior to the spiritual consolation, which may have awakened the feeling or understanding? Alternatively, was the spiritual consolation *without any previous cause*, or at least *disproportionate* to the spiritual activity I was engaged in beforehand?
- 4 Is each member of the group speaking of their discernment with a spiritual director?
- 5 Has any experience of consolation or desolation *recurred*? If so, has it recurred *enough* throughout several meetings so that a clear pattern of inclination to one option when in spiritual consolation has emerged?
- 6 Is the judgment further confirmed by the opposite inclination in time of *spiritual desolation*, i.e., the time when the *bad spirit* guides and counsels?
- 7 Has each member been attentive to the *thoughts* regarding what they are discerning, which emerge from spiritual consolation and spiritual desolation?
- 8 Has the group refrained from making any decision when it was in spiritual desolation, but remained firm and constant in keeping with the inclinations and thoughts it experienced in spiritual desolation?

THE THIRD TIME

[177] *The third time* is one of tranquillity, when one considers first for what purpose man is born, that is, to praise God our Lord and save his soul, and, desiring this, chooses as means to this end some life or state within the bounds of the Church, so that he may be helped in the service of his Lord and the salvation of his soul. I said a tranquil time, that is, when the soul is not agitated by different spirits, and uses its natural powers freely and tranquilly.

Fundamental Elements to Examine:

- St Ignatius taught that when God has not shown his will by the “First Time” of discernment (clarity beyond doubting), and when sufficient clarity and understanding have not been given through the “Second Time” (i.e., experiencing a pattern of consolation and desolation), the group is to proceed to this “Third Time” of discernment (*SpEx*, [178]).
- The “Third Time” of discernment is not based upon experience of consolation and desolation, but on consideration of *advantages* and *disadvantages* for God’s service related to either option.
- One must review the *reasons* that support one or other option and attempt to identify toward which option the greater weight of reasons inclines.
- Critical to this mode of discernment is the understanding that one must consider *spiritual* reasons, that is, reasons based on faith and the greater service of God. In St Ignatius’ vocabulary, these are reasons that suggest that the option being considered will be for God’s greater glory (i.e., this option, more than the other, will serve to make God known and loved in human hearts).
- The discernment group must only employ this time of discernment when the members are calm and tranquil so that they can reflect well on the reasons for each alternative. This means neither being stirred by spiritual consolation nor troubled by spiritual desolation (“not agitated by different spirits”) and so the person employing this time “uses its natural powers freely and tranquilly.”
- The members of the discernment group should not attempt the “third time” if they are *not* calm, i.e., not in “a tranquil time.”
- Notice from St Ignatius’ words that we begin this “third time” with a *consideration* and a *desire*. We *consider* the foundation on which all discernment is built: divine love that has given us being and purpose and that calls us “to praise God our Lord” with our lives and so rejoice in eternal communion with God. Through this consideration, we clearly perceive that all true discernment is the choice of “a means to this end.”

[178] If election is not made in the first or the second time, two ways follow as to this third time for making it.

Let us have a closer look at the *two ways* St Ignatius describes in the *third time* (*SpEx*, [177]):

THE FIRST WAY TO MAKE A SOUND AND GOOD CHOICE CONTAINS 6 POINTS

First Point. The first point is to place before myself the thing about which I wish to make a choice, such as an office or benefice to be accepted or refused, or any other thing that may be the object of a choice that can be changed.

[179] *Second Point.* The second. It is necessary to have as my objective the end for which I am created, that is, to praise God our Lord and save my soul. In addition, I must be indifferent, without any disordered attachment, so that I am not more inclined or disposed to accept the thing before me than to refuse it, nor to refuse it rather than accept it, but that I find myself like a balance at equilibrium, ready to follow whatever I perceive to be more for the glory and praise of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul.

[180] *Third Point.* The third. To ask of God our Lord that he be pleased to move my will and place in my soul what I ought to do in the matter before me that would be more for his praise and glory, using my intellect well and faithfully to weigh the matter, and choosing in accord with what is pleasing to his most holy will.

[181] *Fourth Point.* The fourth. To consider by way of reasoning how many advantages or benefits accrue to me if I have the office or benefice proposed, solely for the praise of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul; and, on the contrary, to consider in the same way the disadvantages and dangers there would be in having it. Then to do the same in the second part, that is, to look at the advantages and benefits in not having it, and, in the same way, at the disadvantages and dangers in not having it.

[182] *Fifth Point.* The fifth. After I have thought and reasoned in this way about every aspect of the matter before me, I will look to see toward which alternative reason inclines more; and, in this way, according to the greater movement of reason, and not through any sensual inclination, I should come to a decision in the matter under deliberation.

[183] *Sixth Point.* The sixth. Having made this choice or decision, the person who has made it should, with much diligence, turn to prayer before God our Lord and offer him this choice, that his Divine Majesty may be pleased to receive and confirm it, if it is for his greater service and praise.

Fundamental Elements to Examine:

1. See the counsel St Ignatius provides noted above (*SpEx*, [177]).
2. Place before the group what you want to make a choice about:
3. Consider the *advantages* and *disadvantages* of either option. St Ignatius' practice and the experience of many suggest the value of doing this in writing.
4. As the group reviews what they have written, the group is likely to perceive more clearly where the preponderance of reasons lies. Such writing also facilitates sharing with a spiritual director who accompanies the discernment.
5. Ask God for the grace to know and embrace the better choice.

**[184] THE SECOND WAY TO MAKE A SOUND AND GOOD CHOICE
(6 Rules and a Note)**

First Rule. The first is, that that love which moves me and causes me to choose this thing must descend from above, from the love of God; so that the one who chooses should first of all feel in himself that that love, greater or lesser, that he has for the thing he chooses, is solely for the sake of his Creator and Lord.

[185] Second Rule. The second, to look at a man whom I have never seen nor known, and, desiring all perfection for him, consider what I would tell him to do and choose for the greater glory of God our Lord and the greater perfection of his soul; and I, doing myself the same, follow the rule which I propose for the other.

[186] Third Rule. The third, to consider, as if I were at the point of death, what procedure and norm of action I would then wish to have followed in making the present choice; and guiding myself by this, make my decision entirely in conformity with it.

[187] Fourth Rule. The fourth, looking and considering how I will find myself on the day of judgment, to think of what decision I would then wish to have made about the present matter; and to adopt now the rule that I would then wish to have followed, so that then I may find myself in full satisfaction and joy.

[188] Note. Guided by the rules given above for my salvation and eternal peace, I will make my choice and my offering to God our Lord, in accordance with the sixth point (i.e., [183] above) of the first way of making a choice.

Fundamental Elements to Examine:

1. See the counsel St Ignatius provides noted above (*SpEx*, [177]).
2. Common to all these six rules are their way of testing the group as it discerns, such that it helps the group gain an objective view, thereby helping them to choose with greater freedom.
3. The choice the group makes in accordance with these rules is not between eternal loss and eternal life. The choice being made is not between good and evil, but between two goods, one of which promotes God's greater glory. The judgment will concern whether or not the choice the group makes will enable the Parish to love God *fully* who loves the parishioners infinitely, or whether the group has loved with *reservation*.
4. As with the note (*SpEx*, [188]), ensure this way of discerning is done within prayer.

Questions to consider, which summarise the points above to assist the group to discern:

- 1 Is the choice the group are considering to make based on *spiritual, faith-related reasons*?
- 2 Before the group begins this discernment, has the group researched well the options in this choice? Does the group *know the relevant information*, so that their consideration of advantages and disadvantages will be solidly grounded in the real situation?
- 3 As the discernment group begins this discernment, is the heart of each member truly at *peace*? Does each member of the group possess the required *disposition* so that they can use their natural powers *freely* and *tranquilly*? Thus, each member would do well to ask themselves:

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- is my heart calm and at peace?
 - am I neither stirred by spiritual consolation nor troubled by spiritual desolation?
 - am I free from any passion or attachment which often confuses and obscures judgment?
 - am I open to what God wants?
 - am I like “a balance at equilibrium” between the two options, ready to choose whatever I perceive to be more for the glory and praise of God and the salvation of my soul?
- 4 Does each member of the group sense the love that God has for them, guiding them in their discernment? Have they renewed their desire for the *end* to which their choice will be a *means*, namely, to respond with love to God’s infinite love, to promote God’s greater glory in human hearts, and to progress toward the joy of eternal communion with God?
 - 5 Is the group spiritually free, open to either option, like a balance at equilibrium, ready to choose whatever they perceive to be for God’s greater glory?
 - 6 Has the group sought God’s help in prayer before they consider the advantages and disadvantages of either option?
 - 7 Has the group carefully considered each option? Has the group taken the initiative to list these advantages and disadvantages in writing? Are these associated with *faith-based* reasons?
 - 8 Does the group see which option is favoured by a preponderance of reasons? Does the group see this clearly? If not, has the group used the “second time” (*SpEx*, [184-188]) of the “third time”?
 - 9 Has the group discussed their considerations with a spiritual director?
 - 10 When the group has chosen one option, have they offered this choice to God that he may be pleased to receive and confirm it? Have they received such confirmation?

Appendix H: Ignatian Discernment Through Spiritual Conversation²⁴³

This procedure should be facilitated by a person recognised by the Church to be prayerful and gifted with the charism of discernment

- **Allocate 15 to 30 minutes for the group to pray about the concern/issue/question which requires a decision**
- **1st Round of Conversation**
 - Round of personal sharing [fruit of prayer]. What were the main interior movements, modes/feeling/insights in your prayer and experiences throughout the day?
 - **Active listening:**
 1. Profound welcome of the other.
 2. How is the Holy Spirit speaking to me/us through the other person?
 3. How are you affected [not primarily what you think] about what is said?
 - **Intentional speaking:**
 1. Speak from your prayer [not from someone else's]
 - **Practical matters:**
 1. Speak one after the other. After the first person speaks, each succeeding person speaks in a clockwise direction around the room.
 2. Each person's contribution to the conversation is timed.
 3. No comments or cross-talk [even in one's own sharing]. No discussion at this stage.
- **2nd Round of Conversation** (where the communal movements of spirits starts to emerge)
 - **Reflective Sharing:** How were you affected interiorly by what you heard in the first round? For example:
 4. What did you hear in the first round?
 5. Were you struck by a common theme?
 6. Did you experience harmony/dissonance with the others as they shared?
 7. What emotions are you feeling now?
 - **Practical matters:**
 1. Popcorn style.
 2. Short intervention.
 3. Speak only once.
 4. No cross talk.
 5. Not a chance to say something you forgot to say in the first round.
- **Third Round of Conversation**
 - **Open Discussion:**
 4. Name the spiritual movements recognised in the second round of conversation.
 5. Keep the same attentiveness and sincerity of the previous rounds.
 6. If there is a question to be considered or feedback to the larger group, this is when a communal response may be formulated.
 7. Popcorn style.
- Conclude with a *Glory be*.

²⁴³ This procedure was developed by Jesuit and Ignatian Spirituality Australia Ltd, 102 Mona Vale Road, Pymble, NSW, 2073. Used with permission.

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Acknowledgments

All quotes from Scripture are from the *Jerusalem Bible* (© Alexander Jones, London: Doubleday, 1966), unless otherwise noted with the following abbreviations:

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| ESV-CE | English Standard Version Catholic Edition (Conference of Catholic Bishops of India, © Crossway, 2018). |
| D-R | <i>Douay-Rheims Bible</i> (public domain). |
| GP | <i>Grail Psalms</i> (copyright © Ladies of the Grail, England, 1956). |
| ISV | <i>International Standard Version</i> (Copyright: © 2011 The ISV Foundation). |
| KB | Knox Bible (© Archdiocese of Westminster, 2012). |
| NAB | New American Bible (© United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002) |
| NIV | <i>New International Version</i> ® (© 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc®). |