

PERSONAL DISCERNMENT: MAKING DECISIONS IN THE LIGHT OF FAITH

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that, if I do this, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. (Thomas Merton, Thoughts in Solitude)

The primary (if not exclusive) aim of the Spiritual Exercises is to prepare a person to make good decisions (options) in keeping with her or his general faith orientation. "The love of God," "the following of Christ," and "the service of our neighbor" are all injunctions consequent to a basic Christian commitment or thrust to our lives, but each includes within itself many different options as well as life-orientations. The aim of personally discerning God's will is for each of us to fit the right option into the particular orientation that is hers or his. As DeVries describes the process, discerning God's will involves "an experiential knowledge of myself in the congruence of (1) the object of choice (or 'option') with (2) my fundamental religious orientation."

Such an "experiential knowledge" begins from within: (a) becoming aware of inner experience, i.e., feelings, some passing, some enduring; conflicts, pressures, confusion, insights; attitudes, tendencies, desires, impulses, orientations; (b) shifting through all this data and sorting out one's inner world, by attempting to name the experience and thereby gain some control over it; and (c) interpreting (in faith) the origins of such experience by determining where it in fact leads the person. This is "discernment of spirits (or movements)" properly so-called. We attempt to discriminate, among the mass of inner movements, those which are merely form ourselves, and those which seem prompted in us by some source ("spirit") outside of us. Then, we further try to discriminate this second group, separating those which seem prompted by the Holy Spirit from those of an "anti-spiritual" nature and source. Such discernment calls for "an interpretation, in faith, of our inner spontaneous urges and movements, and an application of methods and means, so that a person may deepen consolation by following the Holy Spirit. Therefore, by discernment of spirits is meant the process by which we examine, in the light of faith and connaturality of love, the nature of the spiritual states we experience in ourselves." (Malatesta)

The process of sifting and interpreting our inner experience might be likened to a housewife extracting stones from the rice, the farmer distinguishing the wheat from the weeds, the prospector sifting the gold from the sand, the distiller collecting the essence of the fruit.

"Discernment of spirits" is therefore part of, but not the same as, "discernment of God's will." In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius treats of "discernment of spirits" in his "rules" which can be found in ##313-336. His method and means for the "discernment of God's will," on the other hand, are in ##1, 21, 135-189. While his directives for discerning God's will include his directives for the

discernment of spirits, they also clearly go beyond them, by taking into consideration the signs of the times, the external determinants of the needs and authority of the church, lessons learned from one's own as well as others' experience, reasonable projections, etc.

Discernment of God's will. -- In this brief outline, we shall first cover the basic process for discerning God's will; then review the methodology proposed in the Spiritual Exercises by Ignatius; and finally study his "rules" for the discernment of spirits.

Fundamentally, the process of personal discernment involves five steps, each following upon and presupposing the former.

1. DISPOSITION: Being "poised" or ready to do God's will, once it becomes clear to us.

A. Personal attitude required:

- a. The desire ("hunger") to find God's will, insofar as we are able.
- b. Openness and inner freedom: there must always be both possibilities.
- c. Trust that God will make his ways known.
- d. No prejudgments about the outcome.
- e. Readiness and willingness to spend the time and make the effort required.

B. Setting up the proposition to be discerned:

- a. It must be so formulated as to lend itself to only two alternatives: YES or NO.
- b. Both alternatives must clearly be within the parameters of the person's orientation in faith.
- c. The terms of the option should be clear and precise and the disjunction evident.
- d. Most often, either one of the alternatives will involve some risk.

2. GATHERING INFORMATION: Doing the necessary "homework" both before and during the discernment process. Our effort to incorporate faith into the decision-making process goes beyond, but does not preclude, human problem-solving and making use of all the means at our disposal.

A. Assembling all available evidence:

- a. Personal experience and observation.

Personal Discernment continued

- b. Informed reading and consultation.
 - c. Outside expertise and technical input.
- B. Analysis of the data collected:
- a. Lewin's force-field method.
 - b. Holland-Henriot's 4-step analysis.
3. SIFTING OF INNER EXPERIENCE: This is where "discernment of spirits" fits into the "discernment of the will of God." Having done all that might reasonably be expected for human decision-making, the individual now seeks a felt congruence of resonance between one or other option and her/his own perceived faith orientation.
- A. Seeking a deepening awareness of one's individual life-call (or God-given orientation), while praying for Christ's Spirit to enlighten and encourage her or him to know and to do what God wants.
- B. Placing first one, then the other alternative, or option, within this orientation. Does one fit more clearly and freely than the other, leaving the person more at peace? What affective experience is aroused by this effort?
- C. Sifting and interpreting this experience:
- a. Becoming aware of the various and often conflicting feelings, tendencies and inclinations ("movements," "spirits") alive within oneself.
 - b. Separating those whose origin and source s/he is aware of, from those which seem to arise "spontaneously" and "without (apparent) preceding cause."
 - c. Interpreting these "spontaneities" according to where they seem to be leading the individual; i.e., either toward God and a deepening and strengthening of the person's life-call and desire to please God, or away from such a commitment.

For one driven or motivated to follow Jesus, cost what it may, the experience of peace, hope, and courage "at the bottom of the heart, and not just at the top of the head" can be interpreted as true spiritual movements from God, leading us back to God. On the other hand, for such an individual to experience in the depths of her/his heart anxiety, confusion, and uneasiness when a particular option is matched with her/his life-orientation, then the movement seems neither to come from God nor to be leading the individual back to God.

The interpretation of the various feelings and movements within, then, depends upon a clear reading of the basic

- b. It is here, too, that one encounters "experiences of paradox," that is, when one and the same set of circumstances triggers two different, and often contradictory, outcomes, e.g., anxiety "at the top of the head" and deep peace "at the bottom of the heart." These experiences are important, as they often are clear indicators of "consolation without preceding cause."
4. Decision-making: The goal of the entire process, to make a choice of option, without having to look back and second-guess, because of an experienced confidence that, as far as God's will can be known to wo/man here on earth, the outcome of the discernment is in keeping with it.
- A. Basically, an intuitive grasp. Instead of being overly taxing on the brain, or an exercise in willpower, the decision matures and happens, as if flowing naturally from a heart that has become properly disposed. If questioned about the rationale for such a course of action, the individual may be able to say no more than: "Don't ask me why or how; I just know that this option fits."
- B. There would seem to be only three reasons why an individual would not be able to arrive at a decision while using this method: (a) s/he is not yet truly disposed in inner freedom or Ignatian "indifference"; (b) the discernment requires more information, which should be sought; and/or (c) the Lord may not yet be ready to make his will known in this particular area.
- C. Decisive action should follow, once it is clear which option is to be taken. The implications of the decision should be drawn out, and a course or plan of action should be implemented accordingly, making use of available resources (while not neglecting possible sources of resistance as well), and even setting a timetable.
- D. Anxieties and doubts experienced while trying to implement the decision need not be a sign that the original discernment was faulty. Instead, these may be due to resistance (from within and from outside) to the way chosen to implement the decision.
5. Seeking Confirmation: This is a characteristic feature of Ignatian discernment: to continue, even after a given course of action is decided upon, to be in touch with and reflect upon the whole process from beginning to end, so that the individual is not deceived by false generosity and zeal.
- A. The individual is encouraged (by Ignatius) to offer her/his choice to God in prayer so that God might "accept and confirm it, if it is for his greater service and praise." [183]
- B. While the chosen option may now seem to be God's will, only time, circumstances, and (especially) the individual's inner experience of on-going peace-in-action will indicate God's presence and "blessing" in the decision.

- a. The various "signs" of God's presence are traditionally found in Gal. 5, 22: peace, joy, love, disinterested generosity, courage in the face of obstacles, patience and endurance under stress, etc.
- b. Ignatius [331-332] cautions the individual against possible deception, either from false human motivation, or from anti-spiritual forces beyond her/his control. For example, from considerable zeal and charity, an individual may take upon her/himself too much work, and in the course of time become physically exhausted and spiritually "burnt out"; s/he may then experience doubts about the wisdom of her/his first choice, as well as strong resentment against those whom s/he now feels to be taking advantage of her/him; and s/he might end up not only giving up the work but losing all her/his original zeal, charity and enthusiasm. The remedy is to become aware of these subtle changes as soon as possible, and to counteract them, whether or not the original decision is to be revised. Certainly, the individual should look for "the tail of the serpent" and be on guard so that the end of the discernment process leaves her/him better and more deeply committed to God, rather than worse (see Lk. 11, 24-26).
- c. From the above, it would seem to follow that, in the case of options which, once taken, cannot be readily withdrawn, a period of experimentation is advisable (e.g., engagement before marriage, novitiate before religious vows, apprenticeship before actual induction to a long-term appointment). Where such experimentation would not be possible (e.g., selling a possession, giving up a chance to pursue a particular career or field of study, etc.), then perhaps engaging in a bit of "what if . . ." fantasy over a period of time might serve as a way of observing the process of "movements" within. Certainly, Ignatius followed his own rules, while discerning what type of institutional poverty for the ("professed") houses of his order would be "more for the glory of God and the good of souls." The whole process is recorded in his Spiritual Journal.

The Ignatian "Election," according to the Spiritual Exercises. -- It is possible to trace the entire process outlined above back to the Exercises. Without attempting exhaustive citations, let us do so, mainly by referring to the book's numbered paragraphs.

1. Disposition

A. Personal attitude required:

- Annotations [5, 15, 16].
- Aim of the "exercises": [21].
- Principle and Foundation [23].
- Additional directions [73-81]; [130-131].
- Penance and its purpose [82-87].

B. Setting up the proposition:

-The focus of the entire effort: "While continuing to contemplate (Christ's) life, let us begin to investigate and ask in what kind of life or in what state (God) wishes to make use of us." [135]

-The various orientations [169] and options within these orientations [170-174].

2. Gathering Information: (The *Exercises* limit themselves to self-knowledge and seeking personal enlightenment from God. Ignatius presumes that, if the retreatant is allowed to proceed to the "election," then he is sufficiently educated and versed in his personal life-situation to be able to make an "informed" choice, provided he has acquired the proper spiritual disposition.

A. Personal experience . . .

-*Re* sin and "a knowledge of the world" [55-64].

-*Re* Christ and his kingdom [91-98] and the "Ignatian grace," while contemplating the mysteries of Christ's life: "to know . . . to love . . . to serve" [104; 113 etc.].

-*Re* the extent of personal motivation to respond and be committed: the meditations on the Two Standards [136-148] and the Three Classes [149-156] and the consideration on the Three Degrees of Humility [165-168].

B. . . . Analyzed . . .

- "A knowledge of the world" today may require an attempt to go beyond and beneath the appearance of things, from anecdote to analysis, from stories to structures and systems, some good and some bad.

C. . . . and Internalized.

- "Not an abundance of knowledge . . . but rather to sense interiorly (*sentir*) and to relish (*gustar*) . . ." [2].

-Progressively deepening prayer methods:

-Models for meditation [45-54] and contemplation [101-109] . . .

- . . . followed by repetitions: "In doing this, we should pay attention to and dwell upon those points in which we have experienced greater consolation or desolation or greater spiritual appreciation" [62] . . .

- . . . followed by summaries: so named "because the intellect, without any digression, diligently thinks over and recalls the matter contemplated" [64] . . .

- . . . concluded by an "application of the senses," i.e., seeing, hearing, touching, tasting [121-126].

3. Sifting of Inner Experience

A. The various "rules" for the discernment of spirits [313-336], which aim at helping the individual:

-To recognize and discriminate between the various spiritual and anti-spiritual movements, feelings and tendencies experienced within;

-To understand their characteristic features, origins and consequences;

-To remain actively receptive to the inclinations and inspirations of the Holy Spirit; and

-To guard against the deceptions of anti-spiritual forces.

(These rules will be covered in more detail in the final portion of the handout, below.)

4. Decision-Making: The "election" at the heart of Ignatius' second week of the Spiritual Exercises [175f].

A. Three different ways by which such an important decision can be made:

-Through direct action by God [175].

-Through intuition, after a process of discerning the various inner movements [176].

-Through a more rational weighing of the alternatives, in peace and docility [177], by means of one or other of two methods:

-First, with the accent on understanding, to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of both options, while remaining "like a balance at equilibrium" before the overriding aim of God's glory and the good of others, and to choose that alternative which appears to be "more reasonable." [178-183]

-Secondly, by following one's affective response to three "what if" fantasies, to choose that alternative which, in each case, offers more "happiness and joy." [184-188]

B. What to do, in the case of an option already made which cannot be undone, or which the individual cannot bring her/himself to undo. [189]

5. Seeking Confirmation

- A. Ignatius urges the retreatant to seek confirmation of the decision that has been made [183] and gives directions on how to observe reactions within over a period of time to the chosen course of action [326-336].
- B. Throughout the third and fourth weeks of the *Exercises*, in the various contemplations on the passion and resurrection of Christ [190-209; 218-229], Ignatius provides the retreatant with the example of one whose option (the cross) in keeping with his orientation (a "hunger" to do his Father's will) is in fact confirmed by the resurrection experience. Jesus' response of the "third degree of humility/love" ("poverty . . . contempt . . . the cross" [167]) is rewarded in his "great joy and glory" on Easter [219].

Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits. --Ignatius' "rules" for discerning the spirits [313-336] offer us a detailed explanation of spiritual experience, together with rather comprehensive norms for interpreting this experience. "Testing the spirits" was certainly not the invention of Ignatius; see 1 Jn. 4. But he does make a distinct contribution to the history of spirituality especially by his ordering of inner experience for practical guidance, but also by the imagery that he uses, by his identifying the source of these various movements by their orientation, and by the active energy he elicits from the individual in trying to discern between light and darkness, in order to respond to the light in peace. "These rules have proved to be more readily intelligible and widely used than any document on the subject before or since Ignatius wrote them. They are useful both during crucial spiritual experiences and during ordinary daily Christian life." (Toner's Commentary)

In his "rules," Ignatius distinguishes between three levels of inner experience:

1. The promptings and movements of God toward what is good: "the higher things."
2. The promptings and movements, outside and beyond the control of the individual (see Rm. 7), which are opposed to the first level of experience, and can therefore be called "anti-spiritual."
3. The naturally good promptings of the heart, like those found in acts of love and affection, courage, trust, forbearance, etc. Though, as in all created things, these come under God's providence, they are not the "spirits" and movements that are properly the subject of these rules.

The spiritual life is rarely a static experience, with the individual remaining for a long time "on a plateau," though Ignatius does state that there can be periods of relative calm [177]. More often, however, we can expect the spiritual life to resemble the rise and fall of the dancing flame (or the ECG), or the waves and troughs of the sea. In fact, someone has described it as "the rising and falling of the quiet song that always sings at the deep center of the Christian life." Another way of saying this is that the individual usually experiences an alternation of consolation and desolation, an interplay between spiritual and

anti-spiritual forces and movements within. Roustang, in his book, Growth in the Spirit, describes the relationship between God and wo/man in terms of a threefold movement, each stage bringing an experience of consolation:

1. Downward: God's gifts and graces filling the individual with joy and love;
2. Upward: Wo/man's ascending response in attempting to return love for love; and
3. Downward: God's further and increased blessing, experienced as love and peace in the individual.

Counteracting this experience, at each stage, are the anti-spiritual forces, therefore identified and personified as "the Enemy of our human nature":

<u>Spiritual movements</u>	<u>Anti-spiritual movements</u>
1. Joy and love	Sadness
2. "Loftiness of soul"	"Attraction toward what is base"
3. Love and peace	Anxiety

Another way of looking at this same interplay and struggle between "consolation" and "desolation" is the way that Ignatius gives us. For him, it is the Holy Spirit that fosters spiritual growth, while "the Enemy" incites spiritual decline. To match the courageous energies of the retreatant in the first week to change things around and be converted, anti-spiritual forces bring discouragement: faith and hope against despair. To offset the love-inspired search for truth ("discreta caritas") of the retreatant in the second week, there is the deception of the Enemy: love versus false reasoning.

The presence and action of the Holy Spirit, however, is not indicated necessarily by the presence of consolation in the individual who is striving to be faithful to God's will; nor is desolation a sign that God's presence has been withdrawn from such an individual. Desolation, in the sense in which Ignatius uses it, is really the consequence of the struggle between spiritual and anti-spiritual forces. Toner (pp. 273-274) describes spiritual desolation as involving the following five factors:

1. The action of the Holy Spirit . . .
2. . . . enlivening in the individual a living faith, with consequent desire and active striving to be free from sin and to grow in love for God and others . . .
3. . . . countered at the same time by thoughts, feelings and inclinations concerning the apparent loss of faith, hope and charity, and seeming separation from God . . .

4. . . . and these are made use of by anti-spiritual forces, within oneself as well as in the environment, to "move" the individual toward temptation, desolation and discouragement.

5. It is therefore the tension between spiritual and anti-spiritual influences upon the individual that leads to spiritual "desolation" and its attending feelings: darkness, confusion, pained sorrow, anguish, bitterness, emptiness, heaviness, estrangement from God.

Against this background, let us now move on to a schematic presentation of Ignatius' "rules" for the discernment of spirits [313f]:

I. First Set of Rules: "More suited for the first week."

-Rules 1-4 [314-317]: Spiritual and anti-spiritual forces: Their contrary effects and signs. Here Ignatius treats with the opposing movements or "spirits," how they affect motivated Christians, what the signs are of their influence on those who are striving to be free from sin and to grow more like Christ; as opposed to those same "spirits" influence over those who are gradually moving further away from the ideal of Christ.

[314-315] Contrasting fundamental attitudes in the spiritual life, and the influence of the "good and evil spirits" on each.

[316-317] Spiritual "consolation" and "desolation" described.

-Rules 5-14 [318-327]: Following the influence of (good) spiritual forces in time of desolation. Ignatius aims at helping the individual become aware of and respond to the Holy Spirit, even in the darkness of spiritual desolation and temptation. He shows in greater detail how the spirit of darkness attacks spiritually motivated individuals, what strategies are used, so that those individuals may better know how to repel these anti-spiritual forces with the power of the Spirit of light which is always available to us.

[318-322] What to do/not do during times of spiritual desolation:

[318] Hold fast to decisions made before; do not change directions under the wrong influence.

[319] Two characteristic Ignatian "strategies": trust and act; counterattack. See [13, 97, 157] and 1 Pt. 5, 7-9.

[320] Spiritual desolation: a challenge to the extent of our faithfulness.

- [321] Holding on with patience, even while actively resisting.
- [322] Three reasons for desolation: tepidity, trial, true knowledge.
- [323-324] What to do in times of spiritual consolation: "Seek the God of consolations, and not just the consolations of God." (Pascal)
- [323] Do not "cling to" consolation; see Jn. 20, 17.
- [324] Desolation and consolation are part of everyone's spiritual pilgrimage, and should be perceived as such.
- [325-327] The characteristic strategies of anti-spiritual forces, and practical directives for countering them.
- [325] Like a shrewish individual: do not be weak and submit; rather, be prompt, bold and courageous in doing exactly the opposite to what these anti-spiritual influences suggest.
- [326] Like a false lover: be completely open to another, saying the unsaid and even the apparently unsayable.
- [327] Like an enemy commander: know yourself and your weaknesses, for these are where you will be most vulnerable to anti-spiritual influences and forces.

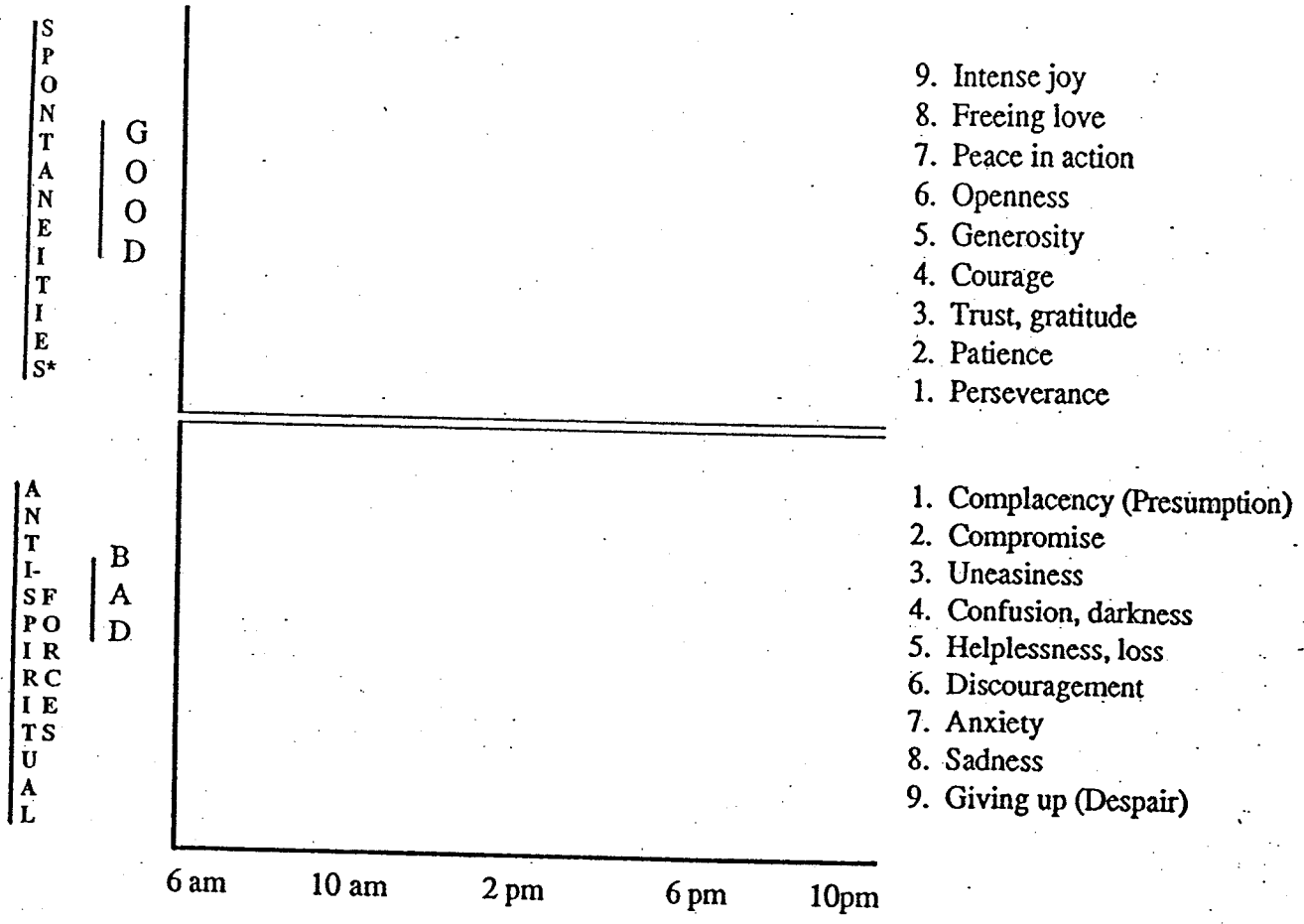
II. Second Set of Rules: "More suited for the second week."

-Rule 1-8 [329-336]: Uncovering and resisting the influence of anti-spiritual forces in time of consolation. Here Ignatius offers the individual directions on how to discern the workings of the spirit of darkness even in and through the apparent light of spiritual joy and peace, and good thoughts, all rooted in faith. He distinguishes two ways in particular by which anti-spiritual forces try to use these experiences of consolation to deceive us, and he suggests ways to uncover this deception in each case.

- [329] We can be deceived, even in times of true spiritual consolation. In fact, such consolation can be an occasion for false reasoning.
- [330] Only God is capable of giving the individual "consolation without preceding cause," which experience is described by Toner in the following way: "It is not merely an untroubled state of affective sensibility, a state of calm unaffected by anxiety, discouragement, uneasiness. It is a certain

euphoric actuation of sensibility -- basically a feeling of well-being which can be specified as different from any other feeling of peace by means of its reference to its ground, which is faith, hope and love."

- [331] "Consolations with preceding cause" are in themselves ambiguous, and must be interpreted according to their orientation and their effects upon us.
- [332] Unless we are careful, we can easily be deceived by a false kind of devotion.
- [333] To counter such deception, we should pay close attention to the whole progression of inner movements leading to action.
- [334] Learn the deceits of anti-spiritual forces by reflecting on personal experience, so that we may be better prepared to recognize them for what they are in the future.
- [335] Contrasting experiences within, arising from the individual's fundamental attitude and orientation, and the influence of one or other of the "good and evil spirits."
- [335] Even in the case of "consolation without preceding cause": (i.e., coming directly from God and therefore altogether good), we nonetheless need to guard against deception in its "afterglow."



*Spontaneities: Experiences whose origins I cannot readily or naturally account for. "It belongs to God our Lord alone to give consolation to the soul without preceding cause, for it is the property of the Creator to enter, go out and cause movement in the soul, bringing it all into love of the divine Majesty. I say without preceding cause: without any previous sense of knowledge of any object through which such consolation would come, through one's acts of understanding and will." SpEx, #330.

"With cause, as well the good Angel as the bad can console the soul, for contrary ends: the good Angel for the profit of the soul, that it may grow and rise from good to better, and the evil angel, for the contrary, and later on to draw the soul to its damnable intention and wickedness. It is proper to the evil angel, who forms itself under the appearance of an angel of light, to enter with the devout soul and go out with itself: that is to say, to bring good and holy thoughts, conformable to such a just soul, and then little by little it aims at coming out drawing the soul to its covert deceptions and perverse intentions. We ought to note well the course of the thoughts, and if the beginning, middle and end is all good." SpEx, ##331-3.

Daily Discernment Chart

1. HAPPENINGS OF THE DAY: events, circumstances, interactions.								
2. MENTAL ACTIVITY: insights, learnings, memories.								
3. PRECONSCIOUS CONCERNS: daydreams, fantasies, distractions.								
4. FORMAL PRAYER: needs, moods, the extent and quality of my hunger.								
5. FEELINGS, ATTITUDES & TENDENCIES WHOSE ORIGINS I AM AWARE OF AND CAN IDENTIFY.								
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a. PREDOMINANT FEELING STATE								
b. EXPERIENCES OF PARADOX								
6. FEELINGS, MOVEMENTS & SPONTANETIES WHOSE ORIGIN I CANNOT ACCOUNT FOR NATURALLY.								

6 a.m.

10 a.m.

2 p.m.

6 p.m.

10 p.m.

Date:

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