

## SPIRITUAL AND NON-SPIRITUAL MOVEMENTS OF THE HEART

Discernment of spirits forms us to be attentive to the distinctions among the rich and varied interior movements that a person experiences at every moment. Interior movements of the heart consist of thoughts, feelings, and desires. Saint Ignatius Loyola directs attention to interior movements in the title statement of his Rules for Discernment of Spirits: “Rules for becoming aware and understanding to some extent the different movements which are caused in the soul, the good, to receive them, and the bad, to reject them.” Farther along in the Rules for Discernment of Spirits, Saint Ignatius will describe “spiritual consolation” and “spiritual desolation.” Such distinction presupposes not only the difference between consolation and desolation, but also a distinction between spiritual consolations and non-spiritual consolations, as well as spiritual desolations and non-spiritual desolations. Thus, we can identify thoughts, feelings, and desires that are fundamentally *non-spiritual* in nature. Some of these movements are quite transitory, while others endure as persistent attitudes or judgments formed through significant experiences or relationships and have a lasting impact on one’s posture toward life. In contrast, other thoughts, feelings, and desires are fundamentally *spiritual*, in that they directly pertain to one’s relationship with God in faith and the pursuit of his will. Transitory thoughts, feelings, and desires—fundamentally non-spiritual in nature come and go in reaction to stimuli throughout the course of the day.

Examples:

- Thought: The weather in Omaha is pleasant.
- Feeling: I feel happy when I visit the Omaha zoo.
- Desire: I desire to be outdoors and to enjoy the weather.

More deeply rooted non-spiritual thoughts, feelings, and desires manifest in habitual patterns of perceiving or reacting to different situations. These may be attitudes or predispositions that influence one’s ethos. One may register non-spiritual consolations or non-spiritual desolations that are principally psychological in nature and dependent on such factors as: family relationships, genetic make-up, ethnic temperament, sexual desires, deep moods, cultural assumptions, or significant life experiences.

Examples:

- Thought: Men have to be strong all the time.
- Feeling: Being alone is frightening.
- Desire: I want to be affirmed.

As noted above, certain interior movements directly pertain to one’s relationship with God in faith and the pursuit of His will. These thoughts, feelings, and desires are fundamentally spiritual. Through them, one can become aware of God’s personal presence and respond to the promptings

that come from the Holy Spirit. Such movements in the heart constitute the matter for the discernment of spirits.

Examples:

- Thought: Fidelity to the Church is a noble life.
- Feeling: Receiving Holy Communion gives me joy.
- Desire: I want a more intimate experience of the Father's love for me.

In speaking of the interior movements of the heart, we should be careful to avoid implying or imposing an artificial orderliness on interior experience. At any given time, our thoughts, feelings, and desires may be a cacophony of activity including both spiritual and non-spiritual dynamics. Discernment of spirits helps one to distinguish what is most relevant for the Christian life and how to integrate all the areas of life in faith.

“Since the immense blessings of God can only enter and fit in an empty and solitary heart, the Lord wants you to be alone. For he truly loves you with the desire of being himself all your company.”  
- Saint John of the Cross

“God's Word is addressed to us as we really are, not as we like to present ourselves; he speaks to our heart, not to our mask. It is not only that little bit of us which we have, as it were, colonized and made subject to our control, that is involved in the Christian enterprise: it is the whole man... God is not taken in by our polite little speeches. He knows us through and through, far better than we know ourselves. He hears what we are really saying, he listens to our heart. And if we would learn to keep company with him, we must become the kind of people who are prepared to be heard and addressed at that deep level, which requires a great deal of honesty and humility. Then the Lord can really get hold of us, below the level of our deliberate control... As long as our religion remains at the level of our deliberate, not to say contrived, personality, it is bound to be a rather on-and-off affair. If we allow the Lord to get hold of us at the level of what the Bible calls the heart, below the level of contrivance, then we have a traitor in the camp! We shall become involved with God even in spite of ourselves, there will be something in us undermining our self-built edifice of conceit and self-will, so that it will not be quite so easy for us to go on forgetting God and his commands and promises at every critical moment.”

- Fr. Simon Tugwell, O.P., Prayer, *Living with God*

“The emptiness of thought at such times is not chosen; it is only suffered. As long as we are attentive and turned in longing toward God, however, this absence of thought should not trouble our soul... The limits of our mind in prayer are not shared by our heart's yearning. There is no limitation to our longing for God, and this loving attention we can direct toward God is a primary reality of this prayer. There is no need to seek relief when all is well. We are not so alone as we sometimes may think, nor are we unassisted. Over time the inadequacy of every partial thought about God will simply assert itself more implacably, and that is fine. Rather than seeking glimpses of truth, it is better to accept that an effort to think about God can simply be a distraction. What

we want is God himself, not an idea to tantalize our interest.”

- Father Donald Haggerty, *The Contemplative Hunger*, pg. 179

“An examination of our attitude toward prayer is occasionally necessary. It is possible for us to allow our prayer to become primarily an obligation rather than a real attraction. When prayer is a task to be completed, another work to finish, the effect is a gradual tightening of the heart in coldness. We cannot expect a personal relationship with God if we perceive prayer as a burden. Prayer as the fulfillment of duty will leave us outside the door, in the servant’s quarters. Only prayer returned to over and over as a great passion in search of the Lord’s personal presence and as an offering for others will grant mysterious access to silent communications from God to our soul.”

- Father Donald Haggerty, *The Contemplative Hunger*, pg. 254

## DISCERNMENT

**Discernment of Spirits:** A spiritual activity in which a person becomes aware of interior spiritual movements, applies himself to understanding them (their source and their direction), and then takes the appropriate spiritual action in response to them by accepting the movements that are of God and rejecting those that are of the enemy.

- BE AWARE
- UNDERSTAND
- ACT

“Beloved, do not trust every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they belong to God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can know the Spirit of God: every spirit that acknowledges Jesus Christ come in the flesh belongs to God, and every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus does not belong to God.”

- 1 John 4: 1-3

“After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”

- John 6: 66-69

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way that man is a thief and a robber; but he who enters by the doors is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers... I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me.”

- John 10: 1-5; 14

“Be at peace among yourselves. And we exhort you, brothers, admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Holy Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.”

- 1 Thessalonians 5: 13b-24

“This teaches us to love God for God’s sake, because he is supreme eternal goodness and so deserves to be loved. It teaches us to love ourselves for God’s sake. It teaches us to love our neighbors for God’s sake, not for our own profit or for the joy or pleasure we may find in them but because God created them and loves them. It teaches us to serve our neighbors and help them in a way we cannot serve or help God. Since we can be of no use to God, we must be of service to our neighbors. This is how the perfection of our love is proved. When it is this perfect, no injury or unpleasantness that is inflicted on us, nothing in our neighbors that displeases us, will make us stop loving or serving them, because we will be concerned only with pleasing God.

So this is why God grants all the hardships we experience. The devil, on the other hand, does it for the opposite reason, to lure us away from the impetus of charity. As for us, let’s be wise in the face of the devil’s intentions and follow God’s gentle will.

And let’s counteract the world, which sets about using all its power to hound us with all sorts of scourges: with its lack of firmness and stability, with its poverty. It is so poor that it cannot satisfy our desires. For all the things of the world are less than we; they were all made to serve us, and we were made for God. So let us serve God alone, with all our heart and all our energy, for God is the good who fills our heart and gives it peace.”

- Saint Catherine of Siena

“The Holy Spirit makes us discern between trials, which are necessary for the growth of the inner man, and temptation, which leads to sin and death. We must also discern between being tempted and consenting to temptation. Finally, discernment unmasks the lie of temptation, whose object appears to be good, a ‘delight to the eyes’ and desirable, when in reality its fruit is death.”

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2847

“[Christians need] a spirit of discernment between good and evil so that they have the necessary strength and knowledge to withstand the temptations to evil.”

- Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Response to Book Harry Potter

“We can always take a step forward asking insistently for consolation. In the two Apostolic Exhortations and in *Laudato Si*, I consistently underlined the importance of joy. In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius invites us to contemplate ‘the office of consolation,’ which is the work of the

Risen Christ Himself [Sp. Ex. 224]. This is the true work of the Society: to console the faithful people of God and to help them through discernment so that the enemy of human nature does not rob us of our joy: the joy of evangelizing, the joy of the family, the joy of the Church, the joy of creation.... Let the enemy of our human nature not rob us of our joy, neither by despair before the magnitude of the evils of the world, and the misunderstandings between those who want to do good, nor let him replace it with foolish joys that are always at hand in all human enterprises.

This 'service of joy and spiritual consolation' roots us in prayer. This consists in animating ourselves and animating others 'to ask insistently for God's consolation.' Ignatius formulated this in a negative way in the sixth rule of the first week when he said 'It is very profitable to make rigorous changes in ourselves against desolation' by insisting more on prayer [Sp. Ex. 319] It is beneficial because one is 'worth little in time of desolation.' [Sp. Ex. 324] To practice and teach this prayer of petition and supplication for consolation is the principal service we render to joy. If somebody does not consider himself worthy (something which is very common in practice), he should at least remain persistent in prayer for consolation for love of the message, because joy is constitutive of the Gospel message; he should therefore also ask for it for love of others, for his family and for the world. One cannot give a good piece of news with a sad face. Joy is not only decorative, it is also a clear indicator of grace; it shows that love is active, working and present. For this reason, in an age of instant gratification and unabated consumption, the search for joy should not be confused with the search for 'a spiritual effect,' when our existential identity is more concerned with long lasting effects: Ignatius opens the eyes and wakes us up to the discernment of Spirits to discover the difference between long-lasting joys and transient joys. (Autobiography 8) Time is the key to recognizing the action of the Spirit."

- Pope Francis, Address to the General Congregation of the Society of Jesus

Pope Francis took the words "Remain in the Lord," from the first Reading from the Apostle John, as the starting point for his homily. It is a "counsel for life," the Pope said, that John repeats "almost obsessively." The Apostle shows "one of the attitudes of the Christian who wants to remain in the Lord: to understand what's happening in one's own heart." For this reason he warns us, "Do not to trust every spirit, but test the spirits." It is necessary, the Pope said, to know "the discernment of spirits," to discern whether something helps us "remain in the Lord or takes us away from Him." "Our heart," he added, "always has desires, has cravings, has thoughts." But "are these from the Lord or do some of these things take us away from the Lord?" That's why the Apostle John exhorts us to "test" what we think and desire:

"If this goes along the line of the Lord, it will go well, but if not... Test the spirits to see if they really come from God, because many false prophets have come into the world. Prophets or prophecies or suggestions: 'I want to do this!' But this does not bring you to the Lord; it leads you away from Him. That's why vigilance is necessary. The Christian is a man or a woman who knows to keep watch over his or her heart. And many times our heart, and with so many things that come and go, seems a local market: everything, you can find everything there... No! We need to test things - this is from the Lord, and this is not - in order to remain in the Lord."

What, then, is the criterion to determine if something comes from Christ or from the antichrist? St. John, the Pope said, has a clear "simple" idea: "Every spirit that acknowledges Jesus Christ come in



the flesh belongs to God, and every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus does not belong to God. This is the spirit of the antichrist." But what does it mean, "to recognize that the Word is come in the flesh?" It means "recognizing the path of Jesus Christ," recognizing that He, "being God, He emptied Himself, He humbled Himself" even to "death on the Cross."

"That is the path of Jesus Christ: abasement, humility, humiliation as well. If a thought, if a desire takes you along the road of humility and abasement, of service to others, it is from Jesus. But if it brings you to the road of sufficiency, of vanity, of pride, along the path of an abstract thought, it is not from Jesus. We think of the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness: all three proposals the demon makes to Jesus are

proposals that intended to take Him away from this path, the path of service, of humility, of humiliation, of charity. But the charity accomplished with His life, no? To the three temptations Jesus says no: 'No, this is not my path!'

The Pope then invited everyone to think about what happens in their own hearts. What do we think and feel, what do we desire, do I examine the spirits? "Do I test what I think, what I want, what I desire - he asked - or do I accept it all" without discernment?

"So many times, our heart is a road, everything passes there... Put it to the test! And do I always choose the things that come from God? Do I know which are the things that come from God? Do I know the true criterion by which to discern my thoughts, my desires? Let us think of this and let us not forget that the criterion is the Incarnation of the Word. The Word is come in the flesh: this is Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ who was made man, God made man, who lowered Himself, humbled Himself for love, in order to serve all of us. And may the Apostle John grant us this grace to know what is happening in our hearts, and to have the wisdom to discern what is of God and what is not of God."

- Pope Francis, Homily, January 7, 2014

"I want to add something now. I ask you to work with seminarians. Above all, give them what you have received from the Exercises: the wisdom of discernment. The Church today needs to grow in the ability of spiritual discernment. Some priestly formation programs run the risk of educating in the light of overly clear and distinct ideas, and therefore to act within limits and criteria that are rigidly defined a priori, and that set aside concrete situations: 'you must do this, you must not do this.' And then the seminarians, when they become priests, find themselves in difficulty in accompanying the life of so many young people and adults. Because many are asking: 'Can you do this or can you not?' That's all. And many people leave the confessional disappointed. Not because the priest is bad, but because the priest doesn't have the ability to discern situations, to accompany them in authentic discernment. They don't have the needed formation. Today the Church needs to grow in discernment, in the ability to discern. And priests above all really need it for their ministry. This is why we need to teach it to seminarians and priests in formation: they are the ones usually entrusted with the confidences of the conscience of the faithful. Spiritual direction is not solely a priestly charism, but also lay, it is true. But, I repeat, you must teach this above all to priests, helping them in the light of the Exercises in the dynamic of pastoral discernment, which respects the law but knows how to go beyond. This is an important task for the Society.

A thought of Fr. Hugo Rahner has often struck me. He thought clearly and wrote clearly! Hugo said

that the Jesuit must be a man with the nose for the supernatural, that is, he must be a man gifted with a sense of the divine and of the diabolical relative to the events of human life and history. The Jesuit must therefore be capable of discerning both in the field of God and in the field of the devil. This is why in the Exercises St Ignatius asks to be introduced both to the intentions of the Lord of life and to those of the enemy of human nature and to his lies. What he has written is bold, it is truly bold, but discernment is precisely this! We need to form future priests not to general and abstract ideas, which are clear and distinct, but to this keen discernment of spirits so that they can help people in their concrete life.”

- Pope Francis, Conversation with Jesuits, Poland, July 30, 2016

“Priestly formation is a journey of transformation that renews the heart and mind of the person, so that he can ‘discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect’ (cf. Rom 12:2). Indeed, the gradual inner growth along the journey of formation should principally be aimed at making the future priest a ‘man of discernment’, able to read the reality of human life in the light of the Spirit. In this way he will be able to choose, decide, and act according to the will of God.... This journey of being honest with oneself calls for special care of the inner life by personal prayer, spiritual direction, daily contact with the Word of God, the contemplation of the priestly life in a spirit of faith along with other priests and the Bishop, and all the other means to help to cultivate the virtues of prudence and right judgment. In this ongoing path of discernment, the priest will learn how to interpret and understand his own motivations, his gifts, his needs, and his frailties, so as to ‘free himself from all disordered affections, and, having removed them, to seek out and find the will of God in the ordering of his life with a view to the salvation of the soul.’”

- Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation: Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, #43

“When he [Saint Ignatius] was thinking about the things of the world, he took much delight in them, but afterwards, when he was tired and put them aside, he found that he was dry and discontented. But when he thought of going to Jerusalem...not only was he consoled when he had these thoughts, but even after putting them aside, he remained content and happy....One time his eyes were opened a little, and he began to marvel at the difference and reflect upon it, realizing from experience that some thoughts left him sad and others happy. Little by little he came to recognize the difference between the spirits that agitated him, one from the demon, the other from God.”

- Fr. Tim Gallagher, O.M.V., Saint Ignatius’ Conversion Experience

“The attitude of discernment is a state of constant attention to God, to the Spirit. It is an experiential certainty that God speaks, that God communicates himself, and that my attention to God is already my radical conversion. It is a lifestyle that pervades everything I am and do. It is a certainty that what counts is fixing my gaze on the Lord.”

- Marko Rupnik, *Discernment: Acquiring the Heart of God*, pp. 28-29

“Discernment, therefore, is not a calculation, a deductive logic, or a mechanical technology in which one shrewdly weighs means and ends. It’s not a discussion, nor an inquiry of majority opinion. *Discernment is prayer*, the constant *asceticism of renouncing* my own will and thoughts, working as if

everything depended entirely on me, but leaving everything free. Such an attitude is possible only if one is *enraptured in a wave of love*, because to accomplish this a radical humility is necessary.”

- Marko Rupnik, *Discernment: Acquiring the Heart of God* p. 29

“It is commonly said that one can recognize a spiritual thought by the way it leads to peace and fills one with joy. However, anyone who knows a little about discernment knows that peace, in itself, means nothing. Rather it is necessary to see what kind of peace it is and what brought the peace about. Most of all, in order to test the thoughts that accompany the peace, we need to understand where these thoughts lead us and toward what they orient us.”

- Marko Rupnik, *Discernment: Acquiring the Heart of God*

“The spiritual fathers also warn about the risk of becoming too focused on feelings, pleasures, and joys, even if these come from prayer. This focus on our state of well-being can become so great that we begin to pray only to experience these pleasurable feelings, so much so that we could even forget the Lord while praying, in much the same way that when overflowing with this ‘bubbly’ joy we are more attentive to what we feel than to those with whom we are speaking.”

- Marko Rupnik, *Discernment: Acquiring the Heart of God*

“Spiritual masters teach us that true as it is that we cannot will or not will our feelings, nevertheless there’s a great deal we can do and that most of us do not do. First of all, our will can and should sanction our valid feelings....We can and should also disavow our evil feelings....It’s also true that spiritual feelings cannot arise in us unless our will sanctions our legitimate feelings, and disavows our illegitimate ones. They’ll either evaporate or poison us.”

- Alice von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Feelings*

## SPIRITUAL AND NON-SPIRITUAL MOVEMENTS

**Non-Spiritual Consolation:** An uplifting interior movement (love, hope, joy, peace, etc.) on the natural, psychological level. For example, a person spends time with a friend or in nature and feels his heart uplifted.

**Non-Spiritual Desolation:** A heavy interior movement (sadness, hopelessness, disturbance, discouragement, etc.) on the natural, psychological level. For example, a person worries about an academic project or struggles in a family relationship, and therefore feels anxious or depressed.

**Spiritual Consolation:** An uplifting interior movement (love, hope, joy, peace, etc.) on the spiritual level, that is, on the level of a person’s faith relationship with God. For example, a person prays with Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” and feels his heart rejoice with a warm sense of God’s closeness and faithful protection.

**Spiritual Desolation:** A heavy interior movement (sadness, hopelessness, disturbance, discouragement, etc.) on the spiritual level, that is, on the level of a person’s faith relationship with



God. For example, a person tries to pray but does not feel God's presence. He feels alone and discouraged as though prayer is useless and there is no point in continuing to pray.

## SPIRITUAL CONSOLATION

"Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name!  
Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits,  
who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,  
who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,  
who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's."  
- Psalm 103: 1-5

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, a gentle Father and the God of all consolation, who comforts us in all our sorrows, so that we can offer others, in their sorrows, the consolation that we received from God ourselves. Indeed, as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so, through Christ, does our consolation overflow."  
- 2 Corinthians 3:1-5 (New Jerusalem translation)

"This is why he says, 'I am God, Love.' This sheds light on the priceless mystery of the incarnate Word, who, out of sheer love, was given in such humility that it confounds my pride. It teaches us to look not just at what he did, but at the blazing love this Word has given us. It says that we should do as a loving person does when a friend comes with a gift, not looking at the friend's hands to see what the gift is, but looking with the eyes of love at the friend's loving heart. And this is what God's supreme, eternal, more tender than tender goodness wants us to do when he visits our soul."  
- Saint Catherine of Siena, Letters

"Her love [the soul's] is no longer mercenary. Rather she does as very close friends do when one receives a gift from the other. The receiver does not look just at the gift, but at the heart and love of the giver, and accepts and treasures the gift only because of the friend's affectionate love. So the soul, when she has reached the third stage of perfect love, when she receives my gifts and graces does not look only at the gift but with her mind's eye looks at the affectionate charity of me, the Giver."  
- Saint Catherine of Siena, Dialogue

"That is why it is so important, dear friends, that you learn to live in constant intimacy with God.... Praying means growing in this intimacy."  
- Pope Benedict XVI, Letter to Seminarians

"This is not some enthusiasm, it is something more profound: it is the wonder that comes when we find ourselves with Jesus."  
This astonishment, the Holy Father explained, is the beginning "of the habitual state of the

Christian." Certainly, he noted, we cannot live forever in wonder, but this condition is the beginning which allows a "mark to be left on the soul and spiritual consolation." Actually, the condition of being a Christian should be one of spiritual consolation, notwithstanding problems, pains, sickness.

"The last step of consolation," the Pontiff said, "is peace: one begins with awe, and the minor tone of this wonder, of this consolation, is peace." The Christian, even in the most painful trials, never loses "the peace and the presence of Jesus" and with "a little courage," we are able to say to the Lord: "Lord, give me this grace that is the sign of the encounter with you: spiritual consolation"; and, above all, he emphasized, "never lose peace." We look to the Lord, who "suffered so upon the Cross, but he never lost peace. Peace, this peace, is not our own: it is not sold and we do not buy it." It is a gift of God for which we must beg.

Peace is like "the final step of this spiritual consolation, which begins with a joyful wonder." Wherefore, we must not "trick ourselves with our or others' fantasies, which lead us to believe that these fantasies are reality." In truth, it is more Christian "to believe that reality may not be so pretty."

- Pope Francis, Homily, April 4, 2013

"I call it consolation when some interior movement is caused in the soul, through which the soul comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord, and, consequently when it can love no created thing on the face of the earth in itself, but only in the Creator of them all. Likewise when it sheds tears that move to love of its Lord, whether out of sorrow for one's sins, or for the passion of Christ our Lord, or because of other things directly ordered to his service and praise. Finally, I call consolation every increase of hope, faith, and charity, and all interior joy that calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord."

- Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, 3, Gallagher translation

## SPIRITUAL DESOLATION

"I cry out to you, Lord, in the morning my prayer comes before you. Why do you reject my soul, Lord, and hide your face from me? ... My only friend is darkness."

- Psalm 88: 14-15, 19b

"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why so far from my call for help, from my cries of anguish? My God, I call by day, but you do not answer; by night, but I have no relief."

- Psalm 22: 2-3

"Even when we have to struggle continually with the same failings, it is important to resist the coarsening of our souls and the indifference which would simply accept that this is the way we are. It is important to keep pressing forward."

- Pope Benedict XVI, Letter to Seminarians

Drawing from the reading from Job, the Holy Father noted, “Spiritual desolation is something that happens to all of us: it can be stronger or weaker ... but that feeling of spiritual darkness, of hopelessness, mistrust, lacking the desire to live, without seeing the end of the tunnel, with so much agitation in one’s heart and in one’s ideas... Spiritual desolation makes us feel as though our souls are crushed, we can’t succeed, we can’t succeed and we also don’t want to live: ‘Death is better!’ This was Job’s outburst. It was better to die than live like this. We need to understand that when our soul is in this state of generalized sadness we can barely breathe: This happens to all of us ... whether strong or not ... to all of us. (We need to) understand what goes on in our hearts.”

The solution to spiritual desolation is prayer, the Pontiff said. “What should we do when we experience these dark moments, be it for a family tragedy, an illness, something that weighs us down?”

Noting that some people would think of taking a pill to sleep and remove them from their problems or drinking “one, two, three or four glasses” he warned that these methods “do not help.” Instead, today’s liturgy shows us how to cope with this spiritual desolation, “when we are lukewarm, depressed and without hope.”

The Pope said the way out from this situation is to pray, to pray loudly, just as Job did, day and night until God listens. “It is a prayer to knock at the door but with strength! ‘Lord, my soul is surfeited with troubles. My life draws near to Hell. I am numbered among those who go down into the pit; I am a man without strength.’ How many times have we felt like this, without strength? And here is the prayer. Our Lord himself taught us how to pray in these dreadful moments. ‘Lord, you have plunged me into the bottom of the pit. Upon me, your wrath lies heavy. Let my prayer come before you, Lord.’ This is the prayer and this is how we should pray in our darkest, most dreadful, bleakest and most crushed moments that are really crushing us. This is genuine prayer. And it’s also giving vent just like Job did with his sons. Like a son.”

- Pope Francis, Homily, September 27, 2016

“To understand the virtue of hope, let us note the most common and most dangerous obstacle in the way of perfection. This is discouragement resulting from the faults, the temptations, and the aridities found in every spiritual life. It reduces fervor and generosity, and impedes progress to perfection. While we have confidence, any obstacle can be overcome, and sacrifice is easily made, and our struggles are crowned with victory. But when we grow discouraged, our souls are without energy or support, and thus easily deterred, misguided, and confused. Therefore, Saint Thomas teaches that, although despair is not the greatest of sins...despair is the most dangerous of sins.”

- Luis Martinez, *True Devotion to the Holy Spirit*, pg. 66-67

“There are seasons of joy and seasons of suffering, times of consolation and times of desolation. The reason for these variations is not that God is limited or restricted in his gifts, but that we have need of the sterner experiences. If consolations expand the heart, if they fortify and give courage, desolations, on the other hand, produce precious fruits—fruits that are perhaps even richer and more abundant. God has

put a divine efficacy into pain. Desolations purify us, elevate us, and illuminate us. They prepare our soul for union with God. We see, therefore, that it is his wisdom and goodness which intertwine

consolations and desolations in our life: now he bathes us in solace; now he leaves us uncomforted. Both states are tokens of his divine munificence, proofs of his love for both are most advantageous to our spiritual progress.”

- Luis Martinez, *True Devotion to the Holy Spirit*, pg. 228

“We cannot come to a conclusion about the state of our soul from its suffering or its rejoicing. The spiritual novice will say, ‘When I feel fervor and consolation, everything is very well with me. When I do not, things are going wrong.’ This reasoning is incorrect. Consolations and desolations cannot be taken as a measure of spiritual condition. Both are necessary to health and progress. Consolation indicates, certainly, that the soul has taken a step forward in the spiritual life; but desolation may be a sign that it is even nearer to the summit.

In reality, we should neither look for consolation nor refuse desolation. What we must seek is God; what we must cling to is his holy will. All other goods are secondary. He will send them to us in his own good time.”

- Luis Martinez, *True Devotion to the Holy Spirit*, pgs. 229-230

“I call desolation all the contrary of the third rule, such as darkness of soul, disturbance in it, movement to low and earthly things, disquiet from various agitations and temptations, moving to lack of confidence, without hope, without love, finding oneself totally slothful, tepid, sad, and, as if separated from one’s Creator and Lord. For just as consolation is contrary to desolation, in the same way the thoughts that come from consolation are contrary to the thoughts that come from desolation.”

- Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, 4, Gallagher **translation**