

Rules for Discerning Inspirations

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Ideas occur to us all the time. We often call them 'inspirations,' and consider ourselves 'inspired.' Unfortunately, not every bright idea is a right idea. Not every desire is to be trusted. Ignatius Loyola included a short list of rules for understanding these inspirations so that people might better discern which to follow and which to shun.

What follows is my own paraphrase and reorganization of his rules, which appear in two places. The first set is entitled "Rules for Understanding Movements." The second is entitled "Rules for Scruples." I rely on more current psychological terminology – e.g., 'inspirations' in place of 'movements.' Also, I follow a model of the subject based on functions (insight, judgment, and decisions) rather than on faculties (memory, intellect and will).

Part One: Spiritual Consolations and Desolations

1. The imagination and the emotions normally reinforce a person's stance in life, while reasoning and calculation tend to upset it.

For example, in people leading a generally self-centered life, their imagination and emotions tend to draw them even further from God. Delights and pleasures fill their memories and hopes. Their thoughts, however, tend to sting their consciousness. So they avoid serious analysis of the long-term consequences of their actions, either for themselves or others.

In people leading a generally virtuous life, their imagination and emotions tend to draw them ever closer to God. They joyfully remember good deeds and courageously hope for the best for all concerned. Where they become confused or anxious, it is usually on account of fallacious thinking about what that best might actually be.

2. It is very important to learn, through experience, the meaning of spiritual consolation and spiritual desolation. It is not enough to memorize a definition. Learning the difference is a matter of each person paying attention to his or her own unique, inner experiences and growing accustomed to which ones to trust and which not to. The following descriptions can help us begin to learn about our spiritual dynamics.

Spiritual consolation includes a range of different experiences. At its peak, it is an experience of love for God so direct that everything on earth, including intimate friends and relatives, are loved and appreciated

as gifts of God. More ordinarily, spiritual consolation includes the acts of realization, of appreciation, of compassion, of kindness, and of hope that usually flow from being in love.

Spiritual consolation is not the same thing as feeling happy; it can include feeling grief over genuine tragedy, whether our own or others'. It is an experience of feeling centered, at peace within, full of confidence in God. Finally, spiritual consolation is any inner experience or state that enables us to make balanced judgments about reality and wise assessments of the value of persons, words, and deeds.

Spiritual desolation is the opposite. At its core it is the experience of loving neither God nor neighbor but rather acting out of fear or compulsion. We are "in a mood." We feel dark inside, troubled, anxious, restless, lazy, sad. Or we may feel giddy, scatterbrained, skittish, frivolous, silly. We feel out of touch with our center, separated from God, and alone.

Spiritual desolation is not the same thing as feeling sad. It can include feeling excited or satisfied, but without any connection to heartfelt love beyond oneself. It can include the sense that we're running just for the sake of burning energy. In any case, it becomes difficult to appreciate people and things around us, or to be kind, or to have hope in the future. Our thoughts spin wildly but without giving us any help. Finally, spiritual desolation is any inner experience or state that prevents us from seeing reality in its fullest context and from making balanced judgments.

3. Generally speaking, the reliable realizations, feelings, and proposals that occur to good people have the quality of water penetrating a damp sponge. They begin without notice, quickly and softly filling consciousness and easily directing our attention to what is true and worthwhile. In contrast, the unreliable inner movements have the quality of water falling on a stone. They are violent, noisy, and disturbing; they seem to head off in a variety of directions at once.

In people going from bad to worse, however, the effects are just the opposite: The drift away from integrity feels natural and gentle while the tug toward integrity feels harsh and nagging.

4. Art, architecture, and especially music can evoke either spiritual consolation or spiritual desolation or the tension between them. They can perform this function even when we do not realize it. Because they are related to our imagination and emotions, they tend to reinforce our attitudes rather than change them.
5. When we experience spiritual consolation, it is wise to remember that this consolation is a gift, that we cannot create it for ourselves, and that

without it we are unable to do much of any worth. In particular, we should recall the times when we knew very well what we ought to do but could not bring ourselves to do it. We can recall how much we needed the gift of courage from God at the point. It also helps at this time to consider how we will act later, when spiritual desolation comes.

6. In a time of spiritual desolation, we should not make any decision, but stay with the decision made when we were more at peace.
7. It takes great courage to stand up against the tug toward self-centeredness. If we lose courage and let go of the reins on our hearts, the tug can plunge us into behaviors that we ordinarily are deeply ashamed of. On the other hand, if we do something entirely opposite to what that pull suggests, it soon loses its force.
8. There are several to act energetically against spiritual desolation.
 - If sad, do not withdraw from people but rather make contact.
 - If silly, sober up.
 - If tempted, talk about it with someone. Just as feeling love is no cause for pride, so being tempted is no cause for shame. Candor being the enemy of cunning, once we tell someone else our temptations, their grip on us usually relaxes.
 - If badgered by complicated thoughts, pay close attention and try to see through their fallacies.
 - If upset by feelings that some good you have done is worthless, resist the feelings and rely on the truth that God alone knows the true worth of things.
 - Generally, take greater care than usual in choosing music and a place to dwell.
 - Although in desolation it goes against the grain, we should not slacken our prayer but intensify it. We should not indulge ourselves in excessive eating or excessive recreation or excessive work. In a storm, trim the sails.
9. In spiritual desolation, we can always rely on the truth. We can recall three truths that our faith has taught us:
 - God will never forget us.
 - God's Spirit still prays and works in us.
 - The divine Jesus is still human and suffers his compassion for us.

We can recall the truth that desolation does not last forever, even though it may seem so. "I have faith, even when I say, 'I am completely crushed'" (Ps 116:10).

10. There are lessons to be learned from spiritual desolation. If the desolation is our own fault, because we have been listless in our love and have ignored God, we discover the high cost of spiritual inattentiveness.

Another lesson is the poignant realization that we cannot create spiritual consolation for ourselves and yet we need it for living out a life of love. We learn the lesson of humility, but also the lesson that gratitude should be like the air we breathe.

A third lesson is the discovery of our secret treasures. Particularly when we face a difficult decision, explosions of fear, anger, or anxiety can erupt in us far out proportion to the issue. This is because we may be secretly guarding something very precious, and its life is being threatened by our deliberation. With some reflection we may uncover what we love so much and whether that love is from God.

Part Two: The Angel of Light

These rules will be helpful to people who have made some progress in living more authentically and in scrutinizing their inspirations.

1. It is high virtue to aim at discovering what is objectively the best rather than merely knowing what we feel strongly about. But even higher and more liberating is the desire to know what God is calling us to.
2. If we are generally going from good to better, we often experience deep happiness and spiritual joy which God gives to reveal the divine desire and to energize us for effective love. We also experience deep sorrow and spiritual anguish over the sufferings of others. Our main struggle is with deceptive ideas, complex reasoning, and an overly rational approach to evaluating people and making decisions.
3. The knowledge born of love never brings anxiety, discouragement, or fear. So the thoughts that strike us in desolation can never originate in love, even when their content is true and generally praiseworthy. Likewise, the feelings that occur in desolation cannot be trusted to reveal what is worthwhile, particularly when they're skittish and superficially exciting.

However, although we should mistrust all thoughts and feelings that come in spiritual desolation, we cannot necessarily trust all the thoughts and feelings we experience in spiritual consolation. This is a very important and yet easily forgotten lesson in the spiritual life.

For example, at times the Spirit may, without warning, flood our hearts with a sense of God in such a way that we have no doubt about the source of the experience. Often we experience an unshakable conviction about something specific. At other times, while the experience may not

answer certain difficulties that have been on our mind, we still experience an assurance, a love, a deep-set affirmation that we are filled with God and that we do not walk alone.

Other spiritual consolations illuminate the soul in response to something we have seen or thought. While many of these consolations may be reliable, some are designedly destructive of the soul. We experience being filled with light, but as we try to act on it, we discover that the original inspiration was a door to fear and worry. Like the angel Lucifer, "Bearer of Light," they lead only to darkness.

4. We should pay close attention to the entire course of any spiritual consolation we experience. If we put a good idea into effect and end up anxious and confused, this is a good sign that we have been misled. It helps immensely to reflect on these experiences. Because the feel of misleading consolations differs from person to person, it will help immensely to learn for ourselves the particular 'taste' of those spiritual consolations that tend to fool us.

Even a spiritual consolation that is undoubtedly from God may be followed by thoughts or proposals that are hardly distinguishable from the original consolation. These too should be subject to close scrutiny.

5. Like the wind, the Spirit blows unexpectedly. In situations where duty is absent, the Spirit does not necessarily move us to do every good we are able to. The objective worth of a proposal is not enough warrant for our commitment. This is because the good that God wills is always and exclusively the good that springs from a good spirit.

Even being anxious about the good we cannot do reduces the good we can do.

6. There are times when we want to do something whose merit is not clear, about which we feel neither consolation nor desolation, but which at least is not contrary to the spirit of legitimate authorities. So we often experience a hesitation, thinking that perhaps we are motivated by self-gain or some other less worthy motive.

We should trust the Living Spirit within us. If our idea is consonant with the love of God, or even if it is simply not contrary to the love of God, then we should act on our inspiration. Good people are prone to ignore small inspirations today to think about greater deeds tomorrow. No sense stifling the Spirit because of anxieties about our own virtue and an excessive fear of mixed motives.

- Tad Dunne