

THE WAY OF DISCERNMENT

Seeking God's Will for Decision-Making in Daily Life and Life's Major Transitions

A companion guide from the notes and studies of Karen Shields Wright, MS, DC, DM — drawing on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. This piece gathers the practical method of discernment: the three situations in which we decide, the fourteen Rules for everyday living, a step-by-step process, and the Daily Examen.

Discernment: An Orientation

All decisions are a means to an end — but toward what end, with whom, and for whom? A secular definition of discernment is the ability to separate what is important from what is not: judging what is true and ought to be, moving past our limited perceptions through prudence and a reasonable assessment of all the factors. It is both a skill and a methodology.

As a Christian, decision-making involves much more. We draw on the foundation principles of Catholic social teaching — dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity, charity, and justice — and we use discernment to follow God's will. Five centuries ago, Ignatius of Loyola saw that we carry a deep well of self-serving irrationalities and biases (a confirmation bias that seeks reasons to move ahead on what we already want). The most critical element of good decision-making, he knew, was to know one's end goal — and that every decision is a means toward that end.

"The glory of God is a human being fully alive." — St. Irenæus

"Be who God meant you to be, and you will set the world on fire." — St. Catherine of Siena

How God Speaks to Us

God speaks to us through the soul's given faculties — intellect and will — operating throughout the brain/body. We are called to become intentionally aware of our **thoughts** (words and images), our **emotions** (what rises up within us as felt feelings), and our **desires** (those deeper yearnings); to assess and understand their source with the intellect; and to choose with the will what better gives glory to God — based on the Principle and Foundation.

Not every thought or desire is to be acted upon. We have clues: God's will can be found in our clearest, truest desires — the ones God places in our hearts, as if imprinted on the soul, desiring of truth, goodness, and beauty.

Consolation and Desolation: The Felt Compass

Spiritual feelings are feelings seen through the lens of faith. We experience them in two categories — **consolation** and **desolation** — which indicate a direction: either we are moving toward God and God's will (a felt sense of consolation) or away from God and God's will (a felt sense of desolation). We notice these interior movements during and after prayer, discern where they came from, and then choose what to follow.

Do you sense being **drawn** or **driven**?

God draws (gently); the enemy drives (pushes, drives, rushes).

Ask: what 'voice' is speaking, and whose 'voice' am I listening to?

Natural vs. Spiritual

Natural consolation or desolation comes from a cause — external (a film, nature) or internal (a personal insight).

Spiritual consolation is not necessarily felt as arising from an emotion; it is known when it happens, as if coming out of nowhere — we had no part in its arrival — with God as its source and its object. The primary determination of whether it is truly from God is this: **it will be known by its fruits** — the fruits of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control) or an increase of the theological virtues (faith, hope, charity).

The Second Rule: For Those Rising From Good to Better

Of the fourteen Rules, the Second most clarifies the difference between consolation and desolation for those rising from good to better in the service of God. (The parenthetical reflections below are my own.)

“It is proper to the good spirit (God, angels) to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and quiet, easing and taking away all obstacles, so that the person may go forward in doing good.”

Even in correcting us toward becoming our better selves, God desires us to be as we were created to be. We are given the grace to hear it and to act on it: the inner ‘Voice’ — the Holy Spirit — is gentle and soft. Yet if we are moving away, the voice is firm; we are given the grace of awareness and will experience guilt followed by sorrow which is not of God.

“For then it is proper for the evil spirit to bite, sadden, and place obstacles, disquieting with false reasons, so that the person may not go forward to do the good — or push us to go beyond our human capacity.”

We feel driven — the ‘voice’ of the evil one is hyper-critical, self-punishing for not being perfect or for not doing something we should have; feeling of shame or unworthiness for having limitations; or not realizing we set ourselves up with unrealistic expectations.

The Fourteen Rules for Everyday Living

Slightly modified for clarity from Fr. Timothy Gallagher, OMV, *The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide to Everyday Living* (Crossroad, 2005), and a course taken with him. These rules are most proper to the First Week of the Exercises — for becoming aware of the movements in the soul, receiving the good and rejecting the bad.

1. Two contrary methods (mortal sin to mortal sin)

For those going from sin to sin, the enemy proposes apparent pleasures; the good spirit stings and bites the conscience through moral reason.

2. Two contrary methods (good to better)

For those rising from good to better, it reverses: the enemy saddens and obstructs with false reasons; the good spirit gives courage, strength, and consolation.

3. Spiritual consolation

Every interior movement inflaming the soul with love of God; tears drawn to love of the Lord; every increase of faith, hope, and charity, and interior joy that draws toward heavenly things.

4. Spiritual desolation

The contrary: darkness of soul, disturbance, movement toward low things, disquiet, loss of confidence — without hope, without love, feeling separated from the Creator.

5. In desolation, never make a change

Be firm and constant in the resolutions held before the desolation. In desolation the bad spirit guides; we cannot find the right way by its counsel.

6. Act intensely against the desolation

Though we should not change our proposals, we should change ourselves — insisting more on prayer, meditation, examination, and suitable penance.

7. Resist; sufficient grace remains

The Lord leaves us to our natural powers as a trial, but divine help always remains, though we do not feel it. There is sufficient grace for salvation.

8. Be patient

Work to be patient, the contrary of the vexations that come. Trust that consolation will soon return.

9. Three causes of desolation

(i) our own tepidity or negligence; (ii) to test us; (iii) to teach us that consolation is God's gift, not ours to manufacture — guarding against pride.

10. In consolation, prepare for desolation

Store up strength now for the desolation that will come.

11. Humble in consolation, hopeful in desolation

Consoled, humble yourself, recalling how little you can do without grace. Desolate, remember you can do much with God's sufficient grace.

12. Stand strong

The enemy weakens and flees when confronted firmly and directly. But if we lose heart, no beast is fiercer in pursuing its intention.

13. Break the silence

The enemy wants his wiles kept secret. Revealing them to a good confessor or spiritual person breaks their power.

14. Strengthen the weakest point

Like a captain attacking the weakest wall, the enemy probes all our virtues and strikes where we are least defended. Fortify there.

Ignatius' Three Situations for Decision

Ignatius describes three "times" in which a decision may be discerned.

1. Inner Clarity — Consolation Without Cause

God so moves and attracts the will that the soul follows without hesitation, or the possibility of hesitation — as St. Paul and St. Matthew followed Christ. *You simply know it, without cause: a sense of confirmation, as if it just "fits."*

2. Inner Conflict — Testing the Spirits

Much light and understanding come through the experience of consolations and desolations and the discernment of diverse spirits. *Go line by line through the pros and cons of each option, imagining its outcome, and test the spirits: which is more life-giving?*

3. Tranquility — Reason

A time of tranquility, when the soul is not agitated and has free, peaceful use of its natural powers. Two approaches serve here:

- **Analytical** — weigh advantages and disadvantages of each alternative, solely for the praise of God and the good of the soul; choose by the weightier reasons, not by sensual inclination; then bring the choice to God in prayer for confirmation.
- **Imaginative** — three classic questions:
 - i. What advice would I give someone else facing this decision?
 - ii. On my deathbed, what choice would I wish I had made?
 - iii. Standing before God at the last judgment, what choice would I wish I had made?

Steps of Decision-Making Using Discernment of Spirits

- ❖ **PRELUDE** — Seek your better self for inner freedom by practicing the daily Examen. Address inordinate desires or attachments, and rearrange disordered priorities.
- ❖ **OBJECTIVE** — List all facts, the (+) and (–) for each option. Gain outside advice.
- ❖ **SUBJECTIVE** — Look for inner clarity. Listen for the inner movements leading toward consolation — a sense of peace, a contentment. This is where God is leading.
- ❖ **DESIRES** — Look deep within for those inner desires; cherish them, then gently set them aside, along with the negative should ofs, could ofs, and would ofs. Become holy indifferent and let God take the lead.

- ❖ **HARMONY** — Listening within the heart, imagine the two outcomes — dream, spend time in imagination. When head and heart align, where do you feel most alive? Choose that one.
- ❖ **GREATEST SERVICE** — If still neutral, go with the greater option, aligned with your values and best judgment using the cardinal virtues.
- ❖ **CONFIRMATION** — Seek confirmation in a revisit, offering the choice to God, that the Divine Majesty may deign to accept and confirm it.

The Daily Examen as a Daily Retreat

The Examen is a prayerful experience of God. Experience alone does not teach us much; it is when we reflect on our experience that we truly begin to learn. The Examen helps us see God's hand in our daily-lived experience.

Step 1 — Preparation

Slow the mind, calm the body, and gently relax into God's presence. Imagine God welcoming you.

Step 2 — Review the day with gratitude

Ask God to show you the day through Jesus' eyes. Gratitude is the foundation of our relationship with God. Notice the day's joys, delights, and gifts — what you received and what you gave. God is in the details.

Step 3 — Review again; notice your feelings

Notice the moments you were fully alive, at peace, your best self, close to God — times of consolation. Savor the one you are most grateful for. Then recall anything less grateful — draining, frustrating, isolating; bring these before God and ask for the healing you need.

Step 4 — Choose one feature of the day and pray from it

Ask the Holy Spirit to draw you to something God thinks important — a feeling, an encounter, a moment of peace, or something seemingly small. Let prayer arise spontaneously: intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude.

Step 5 — Look to tomorrow with hope

Ask God for grace for tomorrow's challenges. Notice the feelings that surface — doubt, cheer, apprehension, anticipation. Name what you need — strength, energy, patience, courage — and ask for that gift.

The more you practice the Examen, the easier and clearer it becomes — shedding light on the path God has for you.

Damasio explains the **mechanism** of feeling — emotion > felt feelings; Ignatius explains the **discernment** and use of its sources. The body is the instrument on which the soul, through its faculties of intellect and will (the mind operations via brain processes), knows which is which.

Sources & Citations

St. Ignatius of Loyola. *The Spiritual Exercises*. Principle and Foundation [SE §23]; Rules for Discernment [SE §313–336]; Making a Choice / the Three Times [SE §169–189, esp. §175–188]. Translations: Puhl; Fleming.
 Gallagher, Timothy M., OMV. *The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide to Everyday Living*. Crossroad, 2005
 Geger, Barton T., S.J., ed. *A Pilgrim's Testament* (consolation, pp. 114–115, n. 17).
 Catechism: Holy Spirit [CCC §798]; concupiscence [CCC §2515–2516].
 Examen adapted from the Jesuit Institute South Africa.
 Shields Wright, Karen, *The Way of Discernment* (unpublished study notes)