**Discernment: Consolation and Desolation**

What decisions are you faced with today? They could be major decisions, such as whether to accept a job offer, whether go back to school, or how to help a suffering family member or friend. The decisions could seem minor, such as how to spend a weekend or whether to volunteer for an older child’s school event or stay home playing with a younger child. God asks us to bring all of our decisions to him.

Ignatian spirituality has long been associated with discernment—the art of discovering how best to respond to God in daily life. For centuries, people have used St. Ignatius Loyola's rules for discernment to help make wise choices and sound decisions.

The first principle to guide our choices, as St. Ignatius put it, should be this “I want and I choose what better leads to God's deepening life in me.” St. Ignatius's other rules for discernment help us make choices from among attractive alternatives. Of particular importance are the inner movements of our hearts. The Ignatian rules for discernment provide a disciplined and systematic way to reflect on our feelings as we respond to God and to the events in our daily lives. They give us “the gift of the reasoning heart,” in the words of David L. Fleming, SJ, the noted Jesuit spiritual writer.

Ignatian discernment rests on the conviction that God speaks directly to each of us. We can have confidence in our own experience of God as we develop eyes to see and ears to hear.

God has great plans for you. But what are they? Prayerful discernment can help us to recognize what God desires for us. One of the things we can do with the time we have before making a decision is to practice discernment. In essence, discernment is a decision-making process that honors the place of God's will in our lives. It is an interior search that seeks to align our own will with the will of God in order to learn what God is calling us to. Every choice we make, no matter how small, is an opportunity to align ourselves with God's will. In the Ignatian tradition, discernment involves two key words: *consolation* and *desolation*. In consolation, we are moving toward God and experience joy, love, peace, and gratitude, and in desolation we are moving away from God and experience depression, anxiety, and fear.

Here are some of the main symptoms of desolation and the most commonly experienced blessings of consolation.

***Desolation:***

* turns us in on ourselves
* drives us down the spiral ever deeper into our own negative feelings
* cuts us off from community
* makes us want to give up on things that used to be important to us
* takes over our whole consciousness and crowds out our distant vision
* covers up all our landmarks
* drains us of energy

***What to do in Desolation:***

1. Tell God how you feel and ask for help.
2. Seek out companionship.
3. Don't go back on decisions you made in consolation.
4. Stand still and remember your inner map.
5. Recall a time of consolation, and go back to it imagination.
6. Look for someone who needs your help, and turn your attention toward them.
7. Again, tell God how you feel and ask for help.

***Consolation:***

* directs our focus outside and beyond ourselves
* lifts our hearts so that we can see the joys and sorrows of other people
* bonds us more closely to our human community
* generates new inspiration and ideas
* restores balance and refreshes our inner vision
* shows us where God is active in our lives and where he is leading us
* releases new energy in us

***What to do in Consolation:***

1. Tell God how you feel and thank him.
2. Store this moment in your memory to return to when things get tough.
3. Add this experience to your life map.
4. Use the energy you feel to further your deepest desires.
5. Let the surplus energy fuel the things you don't like doing, and do them.
6. Again, tell God how you feel and ask for help.

***Three Circumstances for Making a Decision***

Ignatius thought that decisions were made in three circumstances or what St. Ignatius calls modes.

**First Mode: When there is NO doubt**. In this mode, God’s presence is more overt, more direct. Sometimes the right decision is unmistakably clear. We know what the right choice is. This knowledge is a gift from God. All we need do is act on what we know to be the right direction. God makes the decision perfectly clear, and a person feels an overwhelming certainty that one of the alternatives is the right one. Often this takes some time. We put off acting on what we know we should do.

**Example: Should I go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation? I know God is calling me to this sacrament, but I keep putting it off.**

**Second Mode: When feelings are unsettled**. This mode involves the emotions which are usually conflicted, particularly surrounding a significant decision. We are pulled back and forth between consolation and desolation. We discern God primarily ***through our emotions***. Sometimes our emotions are in turmoil when we ponder various alternatives. We experience many strong feelings as we face the prospect of choosing—fearfulness, confidence, confusion, hope, sadness. Decision-making in these situations means ***observing and interpreting these feelings***. We discern their spiritual meaning and discover how they point to the right choice.

**Example 1-Parent Discerning Action Regarding an Older Adolescent: How much advice should I give regarding son/daughter’s college decision, college major, girl/boyfriend, job decision, Mass attendance?**

**Example 2-Work: Do I tell my boss my serious misgivings about a decision he is contemplating or do I stay quiet and not rock the boat and possibly hurt my relationship with him and my career advancement?**

**Example 3: Friend-Family: Do I attend of my son/daughter’s sporting events or comfort a friend in crisis?**

**Third Mode: When emotions are calm**. This mode involves reasoning and ***calm deliberation***. We don’t feel strong emotions of consolation and desolation. We discern God primarily through our ***mind,*** ***our analysis and reasoning***. Sometimes we approach a decision in a tranquil and settled frame of mind. This is probably the most common decision-making circumstance. Here, the Ignatian approach has us prayerfully weigh the pros and cons of each alternative and conduct some exercises that help us clarify the options.

**Example: Should I go to bible study or should I catch up with tasks at home?**