

St. Ignatius of Loyola taught us about interpreting the spiritual meaning of our emotional life. His vision of spirituality encompasses not just the rational mind, but the whole person. Through his own experience, he discovered that both God and the evil spirit were speaking to him through his interior movements, that is, movements of the soul or the heart which are spiritual. Such interior movements are sensible, that is, they can be perceived by the interior senses (for example, you can sense when you feel an interior peace, joy, or sadness and agitation). Ignatius acknowledged contrasting experiences of what he describes as 'consolation' and 'desolation.'

Consolation is a heartfelt experience of God's love that energises and uplifts us, giving new ease in loving and serving the Lord, and which instils joy and gives peace.

Desolation is a spiritual affliction of the enemy marked by affective heaviness that instils sadness and depletes energy for living.

Consolation and desolation can either be spiritual or non-spiritual. St Ignatius taught that if we want to discern effectively, we need to make decisions based upon *spiritual* (not *non-spiritual*) interior movements for reasons we will shortly explain.

Spiritual consolation (such as happy, uplifting motions of the heart), are emotions which can be distinguished by the way they have a direct impact on one's life of faith and pursuit of God's will. As for non-spiritual consolations, though they are not strictly spiritual in themselves, they may (but not always) serve as a springboard for specifically spiritual consolations. Examples of *non-spiritual consolations* are the peaceful sense of rest a man feels when he ceases to apply himself to his work, or the kind of relief and satisfaction that a woman feels after she expresses to a difficult fellow worker words she has long held within.¹

¹ cf. Fr Timothy Gallagher, OMV, *The Discernment of Spirit Spirits – An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living* (New York: Crossroad, 2009), pp. 49-51.

An example of *spiritual consolation* is the experience St Thérèse of Lisieux had in the garden of a Carmelite monastery which her sister, Pauline, describes:

Descending the steps leading into the garden, she saw a little white hen under a tree, protecting her little chicks under her wings; some were peeping out from under. Thérèse stopped, looking at them thoughtfully; after a while, I made a sign that we should go inside. I noticed her eyes were filled with tears, and I said: “You’re crying!” She put her hand over her eyes and cried even more. “I can’t explain it just now; I’m too deeply touched.” That evening, in her cell, she told me the following, and there was a heavenly expression on her face: “I cried when I thought how God used this image in order to teach us his tenderness towards us. All through my life, this is what he has done for me! He has hidden me totally under his wings! ... My heart was overflowing with love and gratitude.”²

An example of spiritual desolation is feeling agitated while trying to meditate on Scripture which leads you to feel that your prayer is a waste of time. An example of non-spiritual desolation is feeling physically tired after a hard day at work.

Understanding the difference between *spiritual* and *non-spiritual* consolation and desolation is important to discernment because it prevents a person from drawing spiritual conclusions from non-spiritual movements on one hand, and on the other, to gain strength from genuinely spiritual consolations in keeping with God’s desires for you. For example, you wake up on a cold morning nice and warm under snug blankets. Despite having set the alarm clock to wake you so that you can be up in time to fulfil important responsibilities that day, you conclude: “Ohhh, it’s sooo cozy under these blankets. I think God wants me to stay in bed!”

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² John Clarke, O.C.D., trans., *St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1977), p. 60.