

## Rule 4

### *Spiritual Desolation*

We move further into St. Ignatius' *Rules for Spiritual Discernment* this week. Last week I discussed Rule 3, which concerned spiritual consolation. For Ignatius, spiritual consolation is a gift, where the soul loves God above all else, and loves all created things in relation to God. In consolation, we express "closeness" with the Lord. It is that interior joy whereby we are attracted to heavenly things. In consolation, we experience peace as we delight in God our Creator and Lord.

Let us now look at a contrary experience whereby we feel distant or separated from the Lord, an experience Ignatius calls **desolation**.

**Fourth Rule.** *The fourth is of spiritual desolation. 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.*

In the fourth rule, St. Ignatius provides us with extremely valuable advice for an experience many of us know all too well. We delight and love those moments in life and in prayer when God feels close. The sky is a bit bluer and flowers seem to smile at us. We know, however, that life offers us both happy moments and challenging ones.

St. Ignatius' Fourth Rule describes *spiritual* desolation. He does not refer to non-spiritual desolation experiences such as headaches, depression, favorite sports teams losing, loneliness, or grief. Non-spiritual remedies are needed to address and heal these experiences. Unfortunately, if we do not address non-spiritual desolation, it can easily springboard to spiritual desolation.

Spiritual desolation are those experiences that relate to my personal relationship with God and the pursuit of His will. St. Ignatius says these experiences are precisely the opposite of all that we saw with regard to spiritual consolation. If we are inflamed with God's love and filled with interior joy in consolation, we experience sadness, tepidness, and lack of confidence in desolation.

St. Ignatius provides a number of descriptions that characterize desolation. There is darkness of soul, i.e., the person experiences confusion regarding his or her life of faith. Additionally, there are

disturbances. The person lacks peace. Furthermore, one is drawn to low and earthly things. Instead of being drawn to prayer and service of God, in desolation there is a pull toward material comforts, gratification of the body in many ways, immersion in superficial things, diversion through the media, busyness, etc. In other words, the soul seeks comfort in temporal things given that God feels distant.

St. Ignatius goes on to say that those in desolation move toward lack of confidence, without hope, and without love. Again, if there is “upward push” toward the Lord in consolation, there is a “downward pull” away from hope and love of God in desolation. Moreover, in desolation there is diminished vitality in serving God. Those in desolation feel slothful, tepid, and sad.

Interestingly, St. Ignatius’ wisely includes two key words in this rule. The person feels “as if” he or she is separated from the Lord. Notice that he does not say they *are* separated, but rather they *feel* as if they are separated. The Lord is present, but it *feels* like He is not. In other words, when experiencing the heavy affectivity of desolation, it is important to make an act of faith! “Lord, I know you are here. Help me!”

Finally, St. Ignatius provides invaluable insight when he says that the thoughts that come from consolation are contrary to the thoughts that come from desolation. In consolation, the good spirit is predominantly active in speaking to us. In desolation, however, the enemy or bad spirit speaks to us. In desolation, the enemy peppers us with lies: “God has abandoned you. This is your fault. You have never done anything worthwhile. You will never be healed. God does not love you.” *We reject such thoughts because they are lies.*

**Practically:** God never causes desolation. However, He does permit it in the mystery of His providence. In desolation, it is primarily the enemy who speaks to us. In desolation, the enemy loves to claim your past and future. “You have always failed at this or that.” “You will never overcome this sin.” You cannot bring yourself out of desolation. Only God can do that. However, you can take action by rejecting the lies proposed to you in desolation. And as we will soon see, there are things you should not do (Rule 5) and things you can do to diminish the intensity of desolation (Rules 6-8).



Goldy offers help to those in desolation.