

Rules of Discernment

Introduction

Now that we have entered into the days of summer, I would like to use my bulletin column to begin a series on St. Ignatius' Rules of Discernment. I will use the present column to provide the background for his Rules. We will post this series on our parish website as they are published in case you miss a week. I suggest Fr. Timothy Gallagher's book *Discernment of Spirits* as a summer read on this great topic.

St. Ignatius was born in the 15th century (1491) in Spain and lived during the Protestant Reformation. He was born of lower nobility and lived a very worldly life as a young man. He is said to have broke every commandment in a significant way by the time he was thirty. In short, Ignatius was not a man of half measures!

As a young man, Ignatius wanted to become famous. In his quest for glory, he led a band of soldiers to defend the Spanish city of Pamplona against the French. During the battle, a cannon ball struck the wall upon which Ignatius was standing causing him to fall and shatter his leg.

Ignatius was carried to the hospital wherein doctors worked to reset and heal his leg. During the healing, it became apparent Ignatius' broken leg would be shorter than the other. Consequently, he insisted that they re-break the leg and stretch it. Keep in mind that these were the days before anesthesia. It's amazing how much pain he was willing to endure for the sake of his vanity! ☺

As Ignatius was recovering in his bed, he asked for some novels to pass the time. Only two books were available: a book about the life of Christ and another about the saints. He began reading them and took great interest. He began reflecting upon his life. What kind of man am I? What kind of life have I been living? Where is my life heading?

Ignatius vacillated back and forth between his worldly way of living and the possibility of following Christ and a life of virtue. In doing so, he noticed that he enjoyed thinking about both lives. However, over time he noticed a significant difference between the two. Meditating upon a worldly way of living, he felt dry, empty, and discontented. On the other hand, meditating upon a faith-filled life left him content and happy.

Ignatius' reflection on the difference between the two feelings laid the groundwork for his discernment of spirits. That is, he began to understand how certain movements in his heart affected him. Furthermore, he began discerning who was causing these movements and how to respond to them. Over time, Ignatius distilled his reflections into

14 Rules, which are akin to a modern GPS helping to navigate us through the spiritual life.

Ignatius' Rules are practical guidelines that help the faithful grow in their spiritual relationship with God. Just as a doctor is trained to recognize symptoms to identify viruses or diseases, so Ignatius' Rules help us understand the movements in our soul, including who is causing them and how we are to respond to them.

In summary, Ignatius' Rules help us:

- **Become Aware:** Who is speaking to me (God, the evil one, my fallen human nature, the world, etc.)?
- **Understand:** How is it affecting me? Where is it leading me?
- **Take Action:** How do I respond to this movement in my heart? Do I accept or reject it?

Ignatius' Rules presuppose that we have an **interior life**, i.e., we strive to reflect upon our thoughts, feelings, and desires. By becoming aware of the movements in our soul, we can name them and take action.

To conclude these introductory comments, here is a synopsis of Ignatius' 14 Rules. We will begin with rule 1 next week.

- **Rule 1:** Those moving away from God – Enemy proposes pleasure, while the Lord stings to bring about conversion;
- **Rule 2:** Those moving toward God – God encourages while the enemy bites;
- **Rule 3:** Consolation – soul is inflamed with love for God;
- **Rule 4:** Desolation – soul is sad and feels abandoned;
- **Rule 5:** Never make a change while in desolation;
- **Rules 6-8:** Positive steps to diminish desolation;
- **Rule 9:** Reasons why we might be in desolation;
- **Rule 10:** Reasons why we are in consolation;
- **Rule 11:** How we can grow in spiritual maturity;
- **Rules 12-14:** The enemy's tactics during times of desolation.



Goldy pondering the Discernment of Spirits