

Ignatius of Loyola

(1491-1556)

Ignatius was born in the family castle of Loyola in the Basque country of Spain. His family belonged to a long line of nobility, and Ignatius reflected his refined upbringing throughout his early life. He participated in all the revelry of royalty – gambling, dueling, romance – and worldly attraction.

In 1517 he took service in the army and in May of 1521 received a leg wound in a border skirmish with the French. He returned to Loyola to recuperate and found himself able to do nothing but read. He happened upon a book called *The Life of Christ* and was converted as a result. He also read *The Imitation of Christ* and the stories of St. Francis. He concluded by asking, “Could I not do what Francis did?” He then resolved to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, disposed of all his worldly goods, and clothed himself in sackcloth.

His ship was detained in Manresa, however, and he was forced to remain there for a year. During that time he had several profound mystical experiences that led him to begin sharing his faith with others. He also penned a large portion of *The Spiritual Exercises* during his stay in Manresa, and carried these notes with him as he continued the journey to Jerusalem. Ignatius would later become famous for these simple yet profound instructions on how to take a spiritual retreat. His “exercises” became the standard for Jesuit retreats and have remained so to this day.

THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES OF ST. IGNATIUS

Different Movements

The following are some rules for perceiving and understanding the different movements that are produced in the soul — the good that should be accepted; the bad that should be rejected.

The enemy is accustomed ordinarily to propose apparent pleasure to those persons who go from mortal sin to mortal sin. He thus causes them to imagine sensual delights and pleasure in order to hold them more and more easily and to increase their vices and sins. The good spirit acts in these persons in a contrary way, awakening the conscience to a sense of remorse through the good judgment of their reason.

This takes place in those who earnestly strive to purify themselves from their sins and who advance from good to better in the service of God our Lord. For these persons it is common for the evil spirit to cause anxiety and sadness and to create obstacles based on false reasoning, thus preventing the soul from making further progress.

It is characteristic of the good spirit to give courage and strength, consolation, tears, inspiration, and peace, making things easy and removing all obstacles so that the soul may make further progress in good works.

Tears Inspired by Love

I call it *consolation* when the soul is aroused by an interior movement which causes it to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord and consequently can love no created thing in this world for its own sake, but only in the Creator of all things. It is likewise consolation when one sheds tears inspired by love of the Lord, whether it be sorrow for sins or because of the Passion of Christ our Lord, or for any other reason that is directly connected to his service and praise. Finally, I call consolation any increase of faith, hope, and charity and any interior joy that calls and attracts to heavenly things, and to the salvation of one's soul, inspiring it with peace and quiet in Christ our Lord.

I call *desolation* all that is contrary to the third rule, as darkness of the soul, turmoil of the mind, inclination to low and earthly things, restlessness resulting from many disturbances and temptations which leads to loss of faith, loss of hope, loss of love. It is also desolation when a soul finds itself completely apathetic, tepid, sad, and separated as it were, from its Creator and Lord. For just as consolation is contrary to desolation, so the thoughts that spring from consolation are the opposite of those that spring from desolation.

Stand Firm and Constant

In time of desolation one should never make a change, but stand firm and constant in the resolution and decision which guided him the day before the desolation, or to the decision which he observed in the preceding consolation. For just as the good spirit guides and consoles us in consolation, so in desolation the evil spirit guides and counsels. Following the counsels of this latter spirit, one can never find the correct way to a right decision.

Although in desolation we should not change our earlier resolutions, it will be very advantageous to intensify our activity against the desolation. This can be done by insisting more on prayer, meditation, frequent examinations, and by increasing our penance in some suitable manner.

One who is in desolation must strive to persevere in patience which is contrary to the vexations that have come upon him. He should consider, also, that consolation will soon return and strive diligently against the desolation.

Why We Are in Desolation

There are three reasons why we are in desolation. The first is because we have been tepid, slothful, or negligent in our Spiritual Exercises, and so through our own fault spiritual consolation is withdrawn from us.

The second is that God may try to test our worth, and the progress that we have made in his service and praise when we are without such generous rewards of consolation and special graces.

The third is that he may wish to give us a true knowledge and understanding so that we may truly perceive that it is not within our power to acquire or retain great devotion, ardent love, tears, or any other spiritual consolation, but that all of this is a gift and a grace of God our Lord. Nor does God wish us to claim as our own what belongs to another, allowing our intellect to rise up in a spirit of pride or vainglory, attributing to ourselves the devotion or other aspects of spiritual consolation.

The Sufficient Grace

A person who is in consolation ought to think of how he will conduct himself during a future desolation and thus build up a new strength for that time.

A person who is in consolation should also take care to humble and abase himself as much as possible. He should recall how little he felt he was worth in the previous time of desolation when he was without such grace or consolation.

On the other hand, a person who is in desolation should recall that he can do much to withstand all of his enemies by using the sufficient grace that he has and taking strength in his Creator and Lord.

A Show of Determination

The enemy is weak in the presence of strength, but strong if he has our will. He will lose courage and take flight when we make a show of determination. In like manner, if we lose courage and begin to retreat, the anger, rage, and vindictiveness of the enemy becomes great beyond all bounds.

The enemy will lose courage and take flight as soon as a person who is following the spiritual life stands courageously against his temptations and does exactly the opposite of what the enemy suggests. On the contrary, if a person begins to take flight and loses courage in the midst of fighting temptation, no wild beast on earth is more fierce than the enemy as he pursues his evil intention with ever-increasing malice.

A False Lover

The enemy also behaves like a false lover who wishes to remain hidden and does not want to be revealed. For when this deceitful man pays court, with evil intent, to the daughter of some good father or the wife of a good husband, he wants his words and suggestions to be kept secret. He is greatly displeased if the girl reveals to her father, or the wife to her husband, his deceitful words and depraved intentions, for he then clearly perceives that his plan cannot succeed.

In like manner, when the enemy tempts a just soul with his wiles and deceits, he wishes and desires that they be received and kept in secret. When they are revealed to a confessor or some other spiritual person who understands his deceits and evil designs, the enemy is greatly displeased for he knows that he cannot succeed in his evil design once his obvious deceits have been discovered.

The enemy's behavior is also like that of a military leader who wishes to conquer and plunder the object of his desires. Just as the commander of an army pitches his camp, studies the strength and defenses of a fortress, and then attacks it on its weakest side, in like manner, the enemy of our souls studies from all sides our theological, cardinal, and

moral virtues. Wherever he finds us weakest and most in need regarding our eternal salvation, he attacks and tries to take us by storm.

An Angel of Light

It belongs to God and his angels to bring true happiness and spiritual joy to the soul and to free it from the sadness and disturbance which the enemy causes. It is the nature of the enemy to fight against such joy and spiritual consolation by proposing (seemingly) serious reasons, subtleties, and continual deceptions.

Also, it is characteristic of the evil one to transform himself into an angel of light, to work with the soul in the beginning, but in the end work for himself. At first he will suggest good and holy thoughts, and then, little by little he strives to gain his own ends by drawing the soul into his hidden deceits.

It is well for a person who has been tempted to examine afterward the course of the good thoughts that were suggested to him. Let him consider their beginning and how the enemy contrived, little by little, to make him fall from the state of sweetness and spiritual delight that he was enjoying until he finally brought him to perverse designs. With the experience and knowledge thus acquired and noted, one may better guard himself in the future against the customary deceits of the enemy.

An Open Door

In those who are making spiritual progress, the action of the good angel is gentle, light, and sweet, as a drop of water entering a sponge. The action of the evil spirit is sharp, noisy, and disturbing, like a drop of water falling upon a rock. In those souls that are going from bad to worse, the action of these two spirits is the reverse.

The cause for this difference of action is the disposition of the soul which is either contrary or similar to the spirits mentioned above. When the disposition of the soul is contrary to that of the spirits, they enter it with noise and disturbances that are easily perceived. When the disposition of the soul and that of the spirits are similar, they enter silently as one coming into his own house through an open door.

BIBLE SELECTION

Psalm 91 (NRSV)

You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust."

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;
he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.

You will only look with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.

Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling place,
no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.

For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.

On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honor them.
With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.

BREATH PRAYER

(Inhale) "Jesus, I sit in your shelter ..."

(Exhale) "... I dwell in your protective shade."

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. Consider your understanding of the presence and work of angels and demons in the realm of good and evil. Has Ignatius of Loyola's teachings on discernment helped clarify or confuse your understanding? Reflect on how these ideas connect with your personal beliefs and experiences.
2. Reflect on the feelings of consolation and desolation as described by Ignatius of Loyola. Have you ever experienced these states in the way Ignatius explains? Take a moment to share your personal experiences with both consolation and desolation, and consider how they have influenced your spiritual journey.
3. Optional Stretch Exercise: Ignatius of Loyola suggests that the devil targets our vulnerabilities. Yet, we have the power to counter this by identifying our weaknesses and actively working to fortify them. This week, prayerfully focus on uncovering your weakest areas, and commit to strengthening them. Consider what spiritual disciplines might aid you in this effort.

REFLECTIONS FROM RICHARD J. FOSTER

There is a four-part structure to the Ignatian spiritual retreat. The first week is given to the contemplation of our sin in the light of God's love. The second week centers on the life of Christ, the third week on the death of Christ, and the fourth week on the resurrection of Christ.

*Many readers would be uncomfortable with various details of *The Spiritual Exercises*, but I want to commend this four-part rhythm to you. We need a deeper musing upon our perennial knack for disobedience and God's unbounded habit of mercy. We need a richer contemplation upon that Life that shows us the way so we may follow "in his steps." We need a fuller meditation upon that Death that sets us free. We need a more profound experience of that Resurrection that empowers us to obey Christ in all things.*

Excerpts taken from *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups* (Richard J. Foster & James Bryan Smith, Editors. HarperCollins, 1993.)