

2nd Sunday in Advent C + 8 December 2024 + Perseverance in Prayer & Discernment

As we continue our Advent Pray and Prepare program today, recall how last week we spoke about prayer from the heart. I shared a simple way of this relational prayer, which can be remembered by the acronym ARRR, that is, **A: Acknowledge** that you are always in the presence of the God who loves you. Then acknowledge the thoughts, feelings and desires deepest in your heart. **R: Relate**, or talk about, these inner movements of the heart with the God who loves you. **R: Receive** from the God who promises to send the Holy Spirit to those who ask of Him. **R: Respond**, as you are led, to the Father's initiation of love.

I also mentioned last week that the hardest part of prayer is *receiving*, because it requires patient listening, and patience is hard! So today, we will consider a way of *listening*; that is, of "discernment of spirits," as taught by the spiritual master St. Ignatius of Loyola. St. Ignatius begins by defining his teaching as "rules for becoming aware and understanding to some extent / the different movements which are caused in the soul, / the good, to receive them, and the bad, to reject them." Each of these elements are very important.

First, these rules are founded upon becoming *aware* of what is going on in our soul, and that is very difficult in a "loud" society. It's easier just to scroll on the phone and zone out, ignoring what is going on in your soul. Next, he says that awareness should help us to *understand, to some extent, the....movements of the soul.* Meaning, we will never be able to plumb the depths of our souls completely this side of heaven, but that doesn't mean that we must not at least try! And once we are aware of what is moving in our souls, the rule is simple: that is, *receive* the good; *reject* the bad. More on that in a moment.

One final note: these "rules" only work for someone who is sincerely trying to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. And here is what I mean: Let's think consider a "party animal", a "prodigal son" before conversion. He is living the life of lust and debauchery, without a thought or care about the Commandments of God. In such a person's soul, the Holy Spirit will sting his conscience so as to encourage conversion. The devil will do the opposite: he will encourage the party animal to go deeper in sin and vice. So for the prodigal, the good to be received is the pain of a stinging conscience; the evil to be rejected is the temptation to more sin.

Hopefully, most of us are not in that place. Hopefully we are all striving to be closer to God each day. In this case, the Holy Spirit will work differently. The Holy Spirit will give courage, strength, consolation, and peace. These are gifts to be received. But the evil spirit will sadden, place obstacles, disquiet, and rob us of peace. These are temptations, and they must be rejected. So now let's dive a little deeper into such movements.

First, we will consider what St. Ignatius calls 'Spiritual Consolation.' These are *movements of the soul, caused by God, causing the soul to be inflamed with love for its Creator and Lord.*

These are not just "good feelings" you get from external events, such as winning a basketball game or eating pizza! Rather, they are *not* caused by any created thing but by

God Himself. These movements increase faith, hope and love. They call us and attract us to heavenly things and to the salvation of our souls; they quiet the soul, giving it peace. Here, the Holy Spirit is primarily active, so we should always receive spiritual consolations.

On a side note, it should be said that some people have a skewed theology of suffering. That is, they think we always need to be suffering in order to please God, as if God is somehow satisfied by our pain. That is simply not true. Now, sometimes the right thing to do is to endure suffering, such as standing up for the truth in spite of ridicule. But God is pleased by our willingness to suffering for doing good, not by the pain itself. God is not a monster.

Now, at the other end of the movements of the soul is “Spiritual Desolation,” which is all that is contrary to consolation. It is a darkness, disturbance, or disquiet of soul that attracts to earthly things. The soul feels *as if* without faith, hope and love. It may feel slothful, tepid, sad, *as if* separated from our Creator. In such desolation, the evil spirit is primarily active, and so we need to reject the lies of desolation. And this is critical: the feelings of desolation are what they are: we can’t do a lot about the feelings. But we must *reject the lies* that the feelings suggest, and rather assert the truth: that we are *not* separated from God, that He still loves us, it will get better, the sadness is not forever, and we will find peace again.

It is important to note that spiritual desolation is *permitted* but *not caused* by God. Why? St. Ignatius offers 3 causes of spiritual desolation: **1.** because we have become lazy in our “spiritual exercises.” For instance, if we skip Mass & daily prayer, and watch junk on tv, the natural result is that our soul will grow desolate! **2.** to remind us that we do not *earn* consolations. They are gifts that we should treasure. And **3.** To try us and extend us. We will never grow if we are not tested. If we only serve God and love Him when the going is easy or when we get something from it, then our love is shallow, and needs to be purified.

So what can we do in times of desolation? Again, 3 things: **1.** never make a change in your commitments that you made in a time of consolation. In times of desolation, we are being bombarded with lies, so do not quit your job or your marriage or your spiritual exercises. Rather, **2.** work against the desolation! This is hard, but if we feel no desire for spiritual things, we should pray and go to Mass or Confession even more. If we feel slothful and sad, we should do some act of kindness for someone else. And **3.** Be patient: wait upon the Lord.

Now all of this may seem a little theoretical, but it is actually incredibly helpful when put into practice. How often do we make bad decisions in times of desolation, only to regret them later? How often do we ignore or reject consolations, thinking we don’t deserve them or doubting their authenticity? God is always at work in our souls, and if we are aware of His work, we can come to understand both His ways and ourselves more and more. As we do that, we will fulfill the deep desire of St. Paul’s heart for the Church in our 2nd reading today: *that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and ... perception, to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.* Because He is coming again someday, so let us pray and prepare for that great and glorious day!