

LCW 2006 Discernment Talk 1

The Enemy

The topic of freedom is complicated because we are complicated. Think of all that happens in your mind and heart—your complex, flowing, conscious life. There are all sorts of noises, all sorts of thoughts and feelings. Some are at the center of our consciousness, some at the periphery. They fade in and out; they all flow together. Often you can't distinguish one thought from another, one moment from the next. We are pushed and pulled from all sides. We can do things without realizing what it is that is moving us. Imagine someone in a room reading. There is far-off music. She's barely aware of it. Then she shuts the book and does something else. She's only half aware or unaware that the noise on the periphery is moving her. I decide to fast for 36 hours. Maybe I'm not aware of why or how I came to that decision but if I reflect a bit—in the midst of all the noise in my mind, I conclude that, yeah, so-and-so told me she fasted for 36 hours once a week and I thought, I can do that too.

In the Christian life, we need to grow in our discernment. To “discern” means to perceive as separate and distinct, so think of the multitudinous, clamorous and not-so-clamorous elements of your consciousness. The first step in discernment is knowing, distinguishing what, among all the many things going on in our head, is moving us. It's important to realize first of all what is moving us. Why did I get up and move? Why did I stay up late even though I said I was going to bed early? Why did I quit? Guilt can move us, compassion can move us, a thought —I'll be a bad mother if... -- can move us.

It's okay to take time to stop and think and reflect on what moves us. It's worth the time! Sometimes, looking at what moves us can be a very scary thing. We'd rather just be tossed to and fro than stop and take a good look at what's going on inside. So many things move us: the Lord, the Enemy, other people's needs (real or imagined), our inordinate desires for the esteem of others, for self-sufficiency, etc. Don't be afraid. It's a good thing to know what is moving us and it's our choice whether we are going to respond or not respond.

It takes reflectiveness and skill to be aware of what is going on inside, what moves us and who or what is the source of those inner movements. It's kind of like a jigsaw puzzle. You pick out the edge pieces—we've set boundaries to our lives (I'm in the POP, I'm married, etc.) but the whole inside of the puzzle still has to be pieced together. As you put more and more pieces together, it gets easier and easier. That's how it is with discernment. It's hard at first, but in some ways it gets easier. We begin to recognize the lies and the temptations of the Enemy: I know that voice; I used to think that thought was me, but I've learned that it was the Enemy and now I'm not listening.

It's important for us to come to understand our own hearts and be able to read them. Ultimately no one else can do this for us. 1 Cor. 2:11: "The depths of a man can only be known by his own spirit, not by another man." We'll talk about this more. Your head can be a big help, a key player, but he can't know what's going on in your mind and heart unless you tell him.

Not only is it important for us to understand ourselves, but we also need to understand more about our Father and the Enemy. In the recent past we've talked a lot our Father. In this talk I want to examine how the Enemy works and his strategies. You could say that this talk is a personality profile of the Enemy. Understanding the Enemy and his strategies will, in turn, enable us to see more clearly what we can do to fight back.

Let's begin by looking at some Scripture passages. Jn. 8:44ff: "He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

The Enemy lies to us. He lied to Eve in the garden. He said, "You will not die" when you eat of the tree. In Revelation 12:9 he's called the "deceiver of the whole world". He's very good at lying and deceiving, and he knows that the most effective lies are half-truths. "Did you see your impatience? You can't have a real relationship with God until you get over your impatience." Do you see his strategy? You do tend to be impatient. It's true, but he uses a small piece of the truth against you. That's what Satan did in the wilderness with Jesus. "Throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will give his angels charge of you," and "On their

hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.” He uses a portion of Scripture against Jesus.

Because he’s a liar and a deceiver, he often raises obstacles backed by false reasonings that disturb the soul. “If I choose to be single for the Lord, I’ll die alone, probably in a sparsely furnished room, lit only by a bare light bulb.” “If I tell Nano what I’ve been thinking, she’ll probably ask me to leave the Sisterhood.” He prompts us to imagine huge obstacles. These obstacles fill our minds and blot out all joyful past experiences and all reasonable expectations for the future. He makes everything look dark and devoid of any contentment or delight. He will make the next step look too hard or too dangerous. He makes mountains out of molehills.

He also fights against our happiness and joy, given by God, by proposing specious arguments, subtle and persistently fallacious reasonings. I’m at school, I’ve just joined the community and I’m full of joy and consolation. He says, “You’re not doing anything useful. The community is all about purposeful action and you’re studying English literature. You don’t really fit in.”

“Fallacious” means embodying a fallacy, misleading. A fallacy is any reasoning which fails to satisfy the conditions of logical proof or violates the laws of valid argument. “Specious” means outwardly pleasing; showy and, hence, apparently but deceptively fair, just or correct; appearing well at first view; plausible. On occasion, I’ve had the experience of telling my head about what’s going on in my mind—I’m in turmoil and I’m trying to explain it to her and she just says, “Huh?” Usually that’s a sign that I’m not making any sense and I’m revealing fallacious reasonings to her. False reasoning is often a sign of the work of the Enemy.

In Revelation 12:10 Satan is called “the accuser of our brethren” and he is the one “who accuses them day and night before our God.” In Hebrew the word “Satan” means “adversary” or “accuser.” It has legal connotations. It is used of a man who brings an accusation against another in a law court. In Job, God says that Job is a blameless and upright man, but the accuser says, “No. He only appears blameless and upright because you, God, have protected him and blessed him. When the going gets rough, you’ll see his true colors.” Satan accuses Job. Satan

is like a prosecuting attorney, but one without a shred of mercy in him. He's wants the full rigor of the law in every case.

He's a bit like Javert in the book *Les Miserables*. Javert is the police inspector hunting down Jean Valjean, who is a really good man but a convict. After serving time in the galleys, Jean Valjean takes on a new identity and starts a new life. Javert hunts him down and unmask him. Victor Hugo describes Javert at that climactic moment, "Javert, without stirring, without moving, without approaching, became terrible. No human feeling can ever be so appalling as joy. It was the face of a demon who had again found his victim. The certainty that he had caught Jean Valjean at last brought forth upon his countenance all that was in his soul. The deformity of triumph spread over his narrow forehead. . . . Javert was at this moment in heaven. . . . He was surrounded and supported by infinite depths of authority, reason, precedent, legal conscience, the vengeance of the law, all the stars in the firmament; he protected order, he hurled forth the thunder of the law . . . standing haughty, resplendent, he displayed in full glory the superhuman beastliness of a ferocious archangel." "Guilty!" cries Satan, "Guilty."

In fact, not only is Satan a prosecuting attorney, but he's also a corrupt one. Satan longs so much to see men brought before the law and declared guilty that he'll put temptation in men's way so that they will fall and he'll be able to accuse them. And when they don't fall, when there's no evidence for conviction, he'll make it up; he'll lie and accuse. Because of his narrow, one-sided devotion to the law, he misunderstands and misrepresents God. He tells lies about God.

Psalm 109.2: "For wicked and deceitful mouths [of Satan and his cohorts] are opened against me with lying tongues. They beset me with words of hate, and attack me without cause. In return for my love they accuse me, even as I pray. So they reward me evil for good, and hatred for my love."

So, those accusing voices in your thoughts, constantly pointing out how you fall short, how you miss the mark, how you don't measure up—those are from the Enemy. Those accusing voices in your head can be so familiar that you don't even recognize them as the voice of the Enemy.

That's why we need discernment. The Enemy says to us, "You can never be like so-and-so." "You can't love." "You're not lovable." "You are forever alone." "You're stupid."

But God's words are different. God's word brings life. God says **you** really matter. Romans 8:1: "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." You have drawn near to God. You have experienced his presence. You can do that because of Jesus. The sacrifices of the Old Testament didn't perfect the conscience of the worshiper (Heb. 9:9), but Jesus offered himself to put away sin (Heb. 9:26). He died to do away with the consciousness of sin, that constant nagging sense of falling short, not measuring up, being imperfect, so don't hold on to it and don't let the Enemy rob you of your birthright. That's why the author of the letter to the Hebrews tells them to draw near with hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience (Heb. 10:22). Our Father is beyond all rules, all laws, all standards. In the place where he dwells there is no measuring rod; there are no rules, no law. Jesus has led you to the place where there is no law and no sin, no missing the mark, or falling short, or not measuring up, no condemnation or accusation. There is no accusation in Christ.

That's not to say you won't goof up—but when a correction comes in Christ there is no accusation, no condemnation—just help to change. The correction doesn't have to do with YOU. (Remember here the Love of God talks, especially Talk 3, "YOU.") You might have to talk more at breakfast or stop exaggerating or whatever, but it's not that you are a deficient person, flawed, lacking, not measuring up.

Here's another Scripture passage about the Enemy. "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith..." Sometimes when we encounter him he is like a roaring lion, but in reality he's a paper tiger. He's a coward, and you can, by faith, resist him. When you resist him, he will flee from you. He's like a yapping dog that runs away with his tail between his legs when you raise your voice at him. The Enemy is like a weakling, especially before a show of strength. He's a bully. He's got a loud bark, but he's really a coward. If, in a quarrel, you show determination and fierceness with a coward, the coward will lose courage and go away. On the other hand, if you let him have his

way and you flinch, he becomes a tyrant. If you face him, he just slinks away, but if you show weakness, he'll be all over you, like a raging beast. If you lose courage and begin to flee, all the anger and vindictiveness and the rage will surge over you in boundless measure. If you begin to be afraid and lose courage in temptation, no wild animal on earth can be fiercer than our Enemy. He feeds and grows strong on our timidity, cowardice and discouragement.

The Enemy is like the proverbially shrewish woman:

He is a weakling before a show of strength, and a tyrant if he has his will. It is characteristic of a woman in a quarrel with a man to lose courage and take to flight if the man shows that he is determined and fearless. However, if the man loses courage and begins to flee, the anger, vindictiveness, and rage of the woman surge up and know no bounds. In the same way, the Enemy becomes weak, loses courage, and turns to flight with his seductions as soon as one leading a spiritual life faces his temptations boldly, and does exactly the opposite of what he suggests. However, if one begins to be afraid and to lose courage in temptations, no wild animal on earth can be fiercer than the enemy of our human nature. He will carry out his perverse intentions with consummate malice (Spiritual Exercises, 325).

We'll come back to this in future talks. It is true that the Enemy is a coward and he does flee when we put up a bold front, but that's very hard to do. It's very hard to do the exact opposite of what he suggests. If he is whispering in your ear that God has left you, it is very hard to pray an extra ten minutes, for example. If he is tempting you to judge a sister, it is very hard to spend extra time with that sister, getting to know her. That might be the last thing you want to do.

The Enemy is also like a very smart military commander. A commander and leader of an army will encamp, explore the fortifications and defenses of the stronghold, and attack at the weakest point. The Enemy investigates us. He's very smart and very observant. He can understand from the way we act how we are put together and he gets really good insights into what makes us tick. He then uses this knowledge to attack us at our weak points, the places where we are most vulnerable. He goes for the underbelly.

So, you should be equally as shrewd. You should know the weak spots in your defense and shore them up. Self-knowledge is really important in fighting the Enemy. For example, let's say I know that when I hear my sister being honored on her birthday I usually go away from the

evening feeling sad. If I'm not careful I might say something critical about her the next day. That means I've got a weak spot in my defenses: I'm prone to envy. So, if I know this, I can go into a birthday celebration armed and ready. I can send in extra soldiers to guard this spot. Of course, such knowledge presupposes a certain amount of experience. For example, I've been to a number of birthdays and noticed a pattern! Conversations with your head can give you a jump-start on self-knowledge. It's not that she is going to be criticizing you, pointing out your weak spots, but if you just start talking about what you are experiencing—even if it is all a jumble and not very coherent – she can help you make sense out of it all. Her experience in the spiritual life can be like a lever for you. It can make you stronger and able to do more, in this case, to fight more effectively.

I know that in the past a lot of my desolations have begun with the thought, “You're really an odd duck.” That may sound funny, but I have to be on guard. Whenever I'm especially vulnerable—I'm tired, I've just accomplished something good for the Lord, I'm desolate, whatever—I need to send extra soldiers to the “odd duck” weak spot in my defenses. And as soon as I hear any words or any thoughts that sound anything like “odd duck” my antenna immediately goes up. Usually the Enemy is involved. So, self-knowledge coupled with increased fortifications are key. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

As soon as I start talking about weak points in our defenses, we can get off kilter. We can think that we need to perfect ourselves in order to beat the Enemy. We might mistakenly think, I'm prone to envy, so how can I root this out of me? Why am I like this? What's the cause? How can I get over it? Or why am I so afraid of being an odd duck? How can I change this aspect of my character? We can end up being suckered into a project of self-improvement. Don't let that happen. We can't perfect ourselves. We can't make ourselves invulnerable. It's chasing after windmills. After we begin to see weak points in our defenses – which is a good thing – then the Enemy comes in and uses our new insight against us. He wants us to embark on a self-improvement project, which focuses our attention on ourselves.

So, as Paul DeCelles said in the “Christ in You” talks, don't sift the dirt. If you'll remember, Paul was pointing out that the life of Christ is like a plant growing out of the ground, out of

Adam. He said, “Don't be dismayed by the dirt out of which Christ is growing. We can become distracted by the life of Adam and end up sitting down, sifting the dirt, removing every pebble and dirt clod, progressing to smaller and smaller sieves. That's not what the Father wants. That's not his way. The other night I was watching Notre Dame play Rochester. It was a big game and Notre Dame won because Rochester ended up playing Notre Dame's game. When we end up sifting the dirt we are playing Satan's game. It's no sin to sift dirt, but it's not the Father's game.”

It's better to think of ourselves like a hand. It's got its strong parts and its weak parts. Your index finger is strong, your pinky is weak. Your pinky is never going to be as strong as your index finger. The important thing is to know that. Don't try to lift something or carry something heavy with your pinky. If you are playing the piano you might want to do exercises to strengthen it, but be real. It's never going to be as strong as your index finger. Don't waste your time trying to make it so. Guard your weak points and strengthen them, but don't get bogged down in self-improvement projects. Self-improvement projects are dead ends.

Although the Enemy's normal strategy is to attack us at our weak points, sometimes he attacks at our strongest points. If he can get away with one big punch, the fight is over. Sometimes that happens. One of your great personal strengths might be your honesty, so he might try to get you to steal from the Sisterhood. He's trying to give you a knockout punch. “Wow,” you might say, “I just experienced a horrible temptation.” We are back to the roaring lion—this head-on, even violent temptation—face it promptly and boldly.

Here's another thing about the Enemy. He is the quintessential cockroach. He hates the light. John 3:20: “Everyone who does evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God.”

He's like a man who is out to seduce a woman. The Enemy is like someone who calls your house in the daytime. You are a married woman at home. It's 11:30 A.M. George calls. You just met him. He's a friend of your husband. “How are you, Edith?” “Fine, George. What can I do for you?” George gives some lame excuse for calling and then makes a slightly off-color

remark, something that is a double entendre. He puts you on the defense. You don't want to say he's a bad person or hang up on him. After all, maybe it was your fault. You read into it something he didn't mean. Still, he kept you on the phone about 10 seconds too long and he said something he shouldn't have said, but you don't say anything or hang up in his ear. Your husband, Fred, comes home and you don't mention it to him. About three days later, you get another phone call. It's George again, only this time he's a good deal more brazen. In fact, what's happened is that he knows you are compromised. He's already called you once and you didn't tell Fred about it. There's a little extortion that can go to work here. He gets a little bolder and eventually he makes a big proposition. Fear is operating. I didn't tell Fred in the first place, I can't tell him now and George isn't that bad looking...

Suppose that when the first phone call comes in, Edith does something different. She is surprised. The call did go 10 seconds too long and George did say something he shouldn't have said. But when Fred comes home, Edith says, "Fred, the funniest thing happened. George called and he said...." So it's over. Fred talks to George or he tells Edith, "Next time he calls blow a whistle in his ear."

The Enemy works that way, laying traps for us, seducing us and trying to keep all his activity in the dark, under cover. If through fear or greed or shame he can persuade us to keep quiet about what is going on, he's won half the battle. He can keep working at us. So, in order to fight, it's helpful to be open and eager to talk about what the Enemy is doing in your life. You've got to be smart about who you talk with. Imagine someone being courted by an artful swindler. He might feel uncomfortable about what is going on, but if he chooses to confide in someone who isn't very savvy, he might still get swindled. It's important to realize that very holy people encounter some of the gravest temptations. Jesus was tempted. He must have talked about his temptations in the wilderness; otherwise we wouldn't know about them.

"Our Enemy may also be compared in his manner of acting to a false lover. He seeks to remain hidden and does not want to be discovered. If such a lover speaks with evil intention to the daughter of a good father, or to the wife of a good husband, and seeks to seduce them, he wants his words and solicitations kept secret. He is greatly displeased if his evil suggestions and

depraved intentions are revealed by the daughter to her father, or by the wife to her husband.

Then he readily sees he will not succeed in what he has begun. In the same way, when the enemy of our human nature tempts a just soul with his wiles and seductions, he earnestly desires that they be received secretly and kept secret” (*Spiritual Exercises*, 326).

So how do you fight? Reveal the temptations. Bring them into the light. Tell your head. That will foil the Enemy, because he knows he can’t succeed once his deceits have been revealed.

Here’s a first-person account I ran across that illustrates the Enemy’s activity.

For several months we had lived in our new home some miles from the city when my decision to go on a weeklong retreat came up. Matt, my husband, agreed to be home with the family. It was holiday time, and there would be older children home as well. The day I was to leave, two friends from our former parish in the city came out unexpectedly. I prepared dinner, we all had a good family time, and were having fun; and then it was time for one of the children to drive me into the city so that I would be there at the specified time.

I met the Sister who was to direct this retreat. I was the only person on retreat in that huge building—just me and the whistling radiator. I met with my director once a day; she gave me points for meditation and we talked about the prayer afterwards. It went pretty well until the fourth day.

At that point the thought came that I belonged at home; I was selfish to be away from my family; prayer is better within the home and at work rather than on my knees in an empty room with a hot, whistling radiator. This thought unsettled me. None of the meditations went well. I could not find light in Holy Scripture. I was restless and roamed the room like a caged bear. I went through my notes, the papers I had brought, flipped through the Bible, cleared out my purse. In it were two thin dimes. Placing them on the dresser, I looked at them, remembered the pay phone near the main entrance, and began to think about home. I said nothing to the Sister whom, I decided, I did not like and who, I now thought, most certainly did not know beans from bones about prayer, life, or people in general. The time passed slowly, the dimes became more tantalizing; and during one prayer session, I picked them up and decided to call home when the hour was completed.

This I did. I was calling to ask my husband to come and bring me home. He was stunned to hear my voice. I told him what I thought and suggested that I come home. He said very firmly, “Stella, you are there for the family, not for yourself. Go back to your prayer and I will pick you up in four days.”

I was crushed. We both hung up. I returned to my room, knelt by the bed and wept. My hands went to the Bible on the bed and I opened it with no purpose whatsoever. It was opened to Ephesians 6:10-16. I read it. Lights came on in my head, and I realized, slow learner that I am, that what had been going on was a siege, with the Enemy manipulating me in my weak areas.

When my next conference time arrived, I laid everything on the table to the Sister, everything from my personal feelings to the phone call, to the Scripture. From that point on, the entire retreat changed. Prayer became alive and fruitful....

Do you see how the Enemy wanted the temptations to be kept secret and how the boldness of Stella's husband lessened his grip and opened her to the Holy Spirit?

So it's very important to be open with your head. Of course, in order for that to happen you have to come to know reflectively and with clarity what is going on inside yourself. Very few people come to this kind of self-knowledge and clarity except by trying to tell someone else about it. We are back to openness. Thus, the two steps of 1) gaining knowledge of what is going on in ourselves and 2) revealing it to another become fused into one. Openness fosters self-knowledge and self-knowledge in turn fosters openness. And light—openness and revelation—sends the Enemy fleeing.

WLC Discernment Talk 2

Now I want to encourage you all to be patient. Our topic is complicated. We, as individuals, are complicated and the people we are pastoring are complicated. Also, we all have varying degrees of familiarity with this topic. For some it might be a review, for others everything I say might be brand new. I'm going to try my best not to assume too much. I'm going to move through our topic carefully, with lots of examples, in this talk and four more talks. These talks are meant to teach a particular subject. It's going to be some work to listen to them. We'll have lots of time for questions. This morning, I was laying a foundation and tonight I'm going to continue the process of laying a foundation. We're still at the basement level.

Discernment of spirits is complicated. As I said last time, think of all that happens in our minds and hearts, our complex, flowing, conscious life. There are all sorts of noises, all sorts of thoughts and feelings inside us. They move us to do things. It takes reflectiveness to be aware of what is going on inside, our inner movements, the things that move us. It takes skill to discern who or what is the source of those inner movements. Is it the Holy Spirit? The Enemy? Our physiology? Our environment? For example, why am I buying this teeth-whitening kit? Ten years ago it would never have dawned on me to be dissatisfied with the color of my teeth. Could it have anything to do with the media? All sorts of things are influencing us.

We want to know who or what is the source of these inner movements. Is a particular inner movement something that we should oppose because it's from the Enemy or is it something that we should collaborate or cooperate with and be encouraged by, as in the case when things are from the Lord?

I'm going to be talking in depth about discernment of spirits. I'll be using Ignatius a lot and his rules for discernment of spirits. These rules occur as notes or a kind of addendum to the *Spiritual Exercises*. The *Spiritual Exercises* are a set of instructions for a thirty-day retreat which centers around coming to know and love Jesus more. (They are very easily misunderstood so I don't recommend that you just pick them up for casual reading.) Anyway, often this retreat is used when someone is trying to make an important decision in his or her life.

The *Spiritual Exercises* are a tool –not the only tool – for discerning God’s will. Note, I just complicated matters. There are two types of discernment: discernment of God’s will and discernment of spirits. The larger topic is discerning God’s will. We are going to be talking about the smaller topic, discernment of spirits, but right now I’m trying to give you the lay of the land. I want to make some general comments about discerning God’s will because I think they will help us understand discernment of spirits better.

If you are concerned about discerning God’s will, learning to recognize the movements of your soul and then discerning their origin is very important. I’m experiencing all sorts of things in my mind and heart. If I am making a choice it’s really important to know, out of all the things I am experiencing, which are from God and which are from the Enemy. If I can figure that out, I can then use these inner motions to help me figure out what the Lord is up to and what the Enemy is up to. This will, in turn, help me in my discernment of God’s will.

One of the remarkable things about discernment of spirits is that one is looking at “feeling states.” As we’ll see words like “anxiety,” “tears,” “peace,” “joy” and “sadness” come up a lot. Is this peace from the Lord or from the Enemy, for example?

Actually, it is kind of amazing. We all know that emotions can often lead a person astray, but during this retreat that Ignatius devised, he is working primarily with matters of the heart. For example, when making a particular exercise one is often directed to ask the Lord for certain feelings, joy or sorrow, for example. In fact, the *Spiritual Exercises* deal primarily with one’s desires. They are designed to take people – even people who are far from God or lukewarm – and in a month bring them to a place where they desire what God wants. The whole strategy is to stir up love.

It is really quite a stunning strategy. Imagine: you’ve got a person who has an important decision to make. You might reasonably expect someone to lead that person to quiet his heart and calm his emotions so that he can think clearly, reasonably, without being disturbed by his heart. Now, clear thinking plays a role – we won’t talk about that until the last talk – but primarily, fundamentally, the *Spiritual Exercises* are about love.

You could ask, “Isn’t that dangerous?” After all, our emotions are so prone to excess. They seem so wild sometimes, so out of control. Compare a person walking with a person running. When you are walking you can stop when and where you want. That’s attractive. On the other hand, when you are running, you cannot stop or change course at will. Your forward momentum takes you past the point at which you wanted to stop. Isn’t that the way strong emotions are – things like love, fear, anger? Even when they are driving you, you can’t always stop at the place you’d like to stop. Again, imagine a runner crossing a finishing line. He can’t stop on a dime.

Love—you can’t stop on a dime—that’s a feature. One of the benefits of love in the Christian life is that it takes us farther than we may have intended. “Look where my love has taken me.” That can be scary—but when we encounter the Lord, running to him is the right response. John 20:4: “They both ran but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.” John 21:7: “When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his clothes, for he was stripped for work, and sprang into the sea.”

In the Christian life there is a powerful emotion or affection or passion which is a reliable guide to behavior—that is to say, love. There is a poem that I really like that expresses this. It’s by a Jesuit named Pedro Arrupe:

Nothing is more practical than finding God.
That is to say:
Than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way.
What you are in love with, what seizes your
imagination will affect everything.
It will decide what will get you out of bed in the
morning,
What you will do with our evenings,
How you spend your weekends,
What you read,
Who you know,
What breaks your heart,
and
What amazes you with joy and gratitude.
Fall in love, stay in love and it will decide everything.

I'm still setting the context now. We haven't turned the corner yet to discuss discernment of spirits. The corner is still a ways off. I want to say one more thing about the larger context, the discernment of God's will. I want to correct a common misunderstanding about discerning God's will. Remember, our topic is discernment of spirits, not discernment of God's will, but I think that it's worth our time to stop and address this common misunderstanding, because it will help us in the long run. This is going to be a little bit complicated, but just hang in there, because it will have a payoff.

Sometimes we can mistakenly think that discerning God's will means taking a universal principle such as "do good", "seek justice" or "love your neighbor", and then figuring out what to do in a particular circumstance. People who are experts at thinking about these things say that if you are really good at using universal principles to figure out what to do in a particular circumstance you have the virtue of prudence.

This is very interesting. People who think about these things point out that a person can be absolutely certain about universal principles: "do good" or "be just." However, choices and decisions about concrete, specific things—to fire this employee— can never be so certain. I can never be absolutely certain that what I am doing in this particular situation is just. At least, it's not as certain as "do justice." Folks who think about these things say that the certitude of prudence can never be so great as to remove all anxiety and complexity. You weigh things, you make a judgment, you do the best you can, but you can't be absolutely certain about your decision. On the other hand, when discerning God's will, it is possible to reach a point of absolute certainty about what you are to choose to intend to do in a particular circumstance. A discernment of God's will is not a prudential decision. I'm going to try to keep explaining what I mean.

The word "prudence" may not enter our cognitive schema very often, but prudence is often relied upon to make choices and decisions. Let me give you an example. I'm not recommending this. I'm just giving an example of one way to do things. So we look at Scripture, the Gospels especially, and we glean lessons from them. We read the text and we get the idea. We get the moral. We get the ethics that are involved. We get the point, as we read it. Jesus was born in a

stable. He humbled himself. Therefore, humility has to be a part of my life. That's the kind of reasoning that might go into a decision. Or, to take another example, Jesus reached out to social outcasts. Therefore, I have to reach out to social outcasts. Or, I have to avoid hypocrisy, etc.

But notice: these lessons that we distill from Scripture give us a certain independence from God. Think about it. We learn the lessons. We have the principles. We get the points. We don't need the manual. Or maybe we want to keep the manual around, but fundamentally we know how to do this thing. It is a temptation to create something like a really good philosophy of life from Scripture. I mean, to develop a set of principles for acting and then sit back and run your life according to those principles. But what you've done, then, is cut the thread which connects you to God. Instead of relating to God, you just follow the principles. You follow your script, the one you have devised based on your reading of Scripture.

So, I'm creating a contrast here. Am I following a set of principles, a rule, a law, or am I following a person? It's a lot easier to follow a rule and a lot less scary. In fact, the desire for rules is generally a desire not to be submitted to a person, not to be in a living relationship. It's a desire for independence, autonomy. We've experienced this sometimes when someone joins the Sisterhood, but I think it's probably true of the community, too. A new person wants the manual: "Just tell me what's expected of me." But to learn the Sisterhood way you need to be in living relationships with Sisterhood members.

Don't get me wrong. I'm all for clear thinking, but fundamentally am I submitting to the dictates of right reason or am I submitting to a person? As good as it is, reason isn't our king. We have no king but Jesus. We're back to love. So, I'm situating discernment of spirits in the context of discerning God's will, which is a context of love.

Now we are just about ready to turn the corner to discernment of spirits. First, let me recap. Last time, I presented a kind of personality profile of the Enemy—how he works and his strategies. We saw that he is a liar. He raises obstacles where there are none and gets us confused by false reasonings. He's an accuser, like a prosecuting attorney gone berserk. We encounter him as a roaring lion, but if we stand up to him we discover that he is really like the

cowardly lion in *The Wizard of Oz*. He's a weakling before a show of strength, but he grows strong on our cowardice, timidity and discouragement. He's like a shrewish woman. He's also like a smart military commander. He goes for the weak spots in our defenses, but he isn't above a direct frontal attack. He's like a man who is out to seduce a woman. His success depends on keeping his advances secret. He's the ultimate cockroach. He hates the light.

We also talked about the importance of knowing what is going on inside and the importance of bringing what is going on inside into the light, and how each fosters the other. We become more conscious of what is going on inside by talking about it and we become able to talk about it by becoming more self-aware.

Now I said this is complicated business and I'm going to add a new distinction that will make it even more complicated. Remember how I said the Enemy is an accuser and that those accusing thoughts, those condemning thoughts are from the Enemy. Well, for you they are, but not for every person. The Enemy is the accuser of the brethren. He is the accuser of those in the Lord's camp. But the Enemy treats people that are in his own camp differently. He doesn't accuse them, because if he did they might repent. He doesn't want that.

There's a principle here. In order to discern whether something a person is experiencing is from God or the Enemy, **the first question you have to ask is: What is the general trajectory of this person's life?** There are two kinds of people. There are people whose life is going in a direction Satan wants. They are going from bad to worse. What does Satan want to do in such a person's life? He wants to keep the regression going. He wants to encourage and to console such a person in his way of life. There's no clash between Satan and this person. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, works against the general direction of such a person's life and tries to cause a conversion. Therefore there is a clash. The Holy Spirit's action is noisy or even violent. It's unpleasant. The Holy Spirit appeals to reason and to the conscience, causing guilt and remorse. So such a person is consoled by the Devil and disturbed by God. Satan gives consolations and God gives desolations.

There is also the person whose life is going in the direction God wants. I'm talking about the general trajectory of a person's life. This person is growing in faith, hope and charity. Such a person could, for example, be a recent convert. The person may fall a lot, for example, but the general direction of this person's life is towards God. What does the Enemy want to do in this person's life? Derail it. The work of the Enemy clashes with the direction of this person's life. He causes feelings of pain, sadness, confusion, turmoil. His goal is to discourage. He tries to shake this person's commitment. The Lord, on the other hand, wants to encourage this person to persevere in his or her basic orientation. The Holy Spirit doesn't clash with such a person. He causes positive motions of the soul: sweetness, joy, delight, etc. Such a person is consoled by God and disturbed by the Devil. God gives consolations to such a person and the Enemy gives desolations.

In someone who is going from good to better, the action of the Holy Spirit is delicate, gentle, delightful. It may be compared to a drop of water penetrating a sponge. The action of the evil one upon such a person is violent, noisy and disturbing. It may be compared to a drop of water falling on a stone. In people who are going from bad to worse, the action of the spirits mentioned above is just the reverse. The reason for this is to be sought in the opposition or similarity of people to the different kinds of spirits. When the disposition is contrary to that of the spirits, they enter with noise and commotion and are easily perceived. When the disposition is similar to that of the spirits, they enter silently, as someone coming into his own house when the doors are open.

One time, a long time ago, when Paul DeCelles was involved in the *Cursillo*, a woman came to him for help. This woman was plagued with feelings of guilt. She felt so bad about herself. She was sure that these feelings of guilt and depression were from the Enemy. After all, she thought, God loved her and what she was experiencing was so contrary to what she thought she knew about God. She thought the Enemy was depressing her. On the face of it, it looked like this was a desolation that she was experiencing. Paul, who knew the details of her life, said, "Actually, those feelings of guilt and depression are from the Lord." The woman was enraged. No way, she thought, could God do something so harsh. She knew that he loved her.

What was going on there? What were the details that Paul knew? This woman was feeling miserable and she blamed everyone else for her misery. Sometimes she blamed God himself for her unhappiness. She was so miserable that she was drinking in secret. She needed money for the alcohol and she didn't want her husband to know about her drunkenness, so she was planning on pilfering some money, just a little bit, here and there. She was making plans to steal. She was a woman who was going from bad to worse. The Lord was opposing her and her plans. He was trying to derail her. Her feelings of guilt were from the Lord. God was giving her a desolation.

So, there are two kinds of people, and God and the Enemy work differently in each. There's a shorthand way of describing these two kinds of people: evil and good. Bad men and good men. That way of talking can get us confused, because we can get to know an evil person or hear their story and say to ourselves, they aren't so bad. We see something of the person, and there's a goodness there. But I'm talking about the general trajectory of a person's life. Which way is his or her life headed? This isn't always easy to tell. You could have a religious person, a Christian who is a "bad" person. His or her life is headed in the wrong direction, going from bad to worse. Their Christianity is only a veneer. Beneath the surface there is corruption. Likewise, you could have a person whose life seems pretty bad. Maybe the person is a new convert. Maybe she is still falling a lot, but the general direction of this person's life is toward more faith, more hope, more charity. So, it's complicated.

Let me go at it again. I want to say the same thing in a slightly more detailed fashion. With people who are going from bad to worse, Satan acts by filling their minds with sensual imaginations (what would it be like if...), desires, delights, gratifications. He caters to their baser vices/interests/personality. The Holy Spirit does the reverse. He will make use of such a person's reasoning capacity. In light of the person's reason, the Holy Spirit will cause the person's conscience at least to itch and sometimes to sting. The person will feel that what he's done is really off. He'll feel guilty. The Holy Spirit will move such a person to remorse—"I really regret having done that." "Making use of the light of reason, he will rouse the sting of conscience and fill them with remorse" (*Spiritual Exercises*, 314). The Holy Spirit is trying to

say, “What’s wrong with you?” He’ll make a racket, trying to wake the person up. He wants to shake the person up.

Now in people who are making progress in Christ, the Enemy causes anxieties and temptations to be concerned about everything, and overly so. He’ll whip them. People who experience this feel it like a scourge. A scourge of sadness comes over them. They are harassed with anxieties and whipped around by sadness. He also raises all kinds of obstacles to faith. This can be very surprising. You can have a person who has given her whole life to the Lord, maybe an older person who might seem to be well past these kinds of feelings. After feeling anxiety and sadness, she wakes up one morning and all of a sudden doubts that God exists. The doubt doesn’t make any sense. It comes from Satan.

Or you have a person who has lived a good life in the Lord and she begins to doubt that anything she’s ever done has amounted to anything. She thinks she was duped. She made a big mistake. She wasted her life. This can happen to a very holy person. She isn’t thinking straight about what’s really going on and what has been going on in her life. Her soul gets deeply disturbed. Satan does this in order to keep the person from advancing in the good that she has made such great progress in so far. “It is characteristic of the Enemy to harass with anxiety, to afflict with sadness, to raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul. Thus he seeks to prevent the soul from advancing” (*Spiritual Exercises*, 315). Satan gives desolations to such a person.

The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, gives courage, strength, consolations, tears, inspirations and peace. All these things tend to remove obstacles so that the soul goes forward, eager to do more good. The Holy Spirit consoles. We are going to talk more about this in the next talk. For now, just remember that God wants such a soul to run – free of all obstacles, just run full tilt ahead

Why spend all this time on what the Enemy does with regard to bad men getting worse? There are two immediate payoffs for us. **GOD DOES NOT GIVE DESOLATIONS TO GOOD PEOPLE TRYING TO GET BETTER. SATAN DOES.** You can go to the bank on that. If you are harassed with anxiety and afflicted with sadness and confused by fallacious reasonings that

seem to eat away at your faith, hope and love, they are from the Enemy. No doubt about it. Sometimes that may be very hard to believe, but it's true. In the area of discernment there aren't many things that I can say with certainty, but I can say that if you are experiencing desolation it's from the Enemy.

There's another payoff. Be suspicious of strangers talking about consolations. You may be talking to someone you don't know very well and the person starts talking about the peace she's experienced or how God is working in her life, etc. You don't want to judge the person, but you also don't want to accept what she is saying, either. The person may be a bad person getting worse, and her so-called "consolations" are from the Enemy. Take, for example, an active homosexual. Sometimes one of the gals in the campus division describes to me encounters with strangers who have talked about their experiences of God and I think, well, maybe. I mean, you don't want to be overly suspicious, but at least in the back of your mind you have to be aware that this consolation that's being described to me could be from the Enemy.

WLC Discernment Talk 3

This is a long talk, but it's not too complicated. My goal is primarily to describe consolations and desolations. From this point forward, I'm talking about the action of God and the action of Satan in the lives of "good" people. Remember, I'm talking about the general trajectory of a person's life. God's action is like water on a sponge. The Enemy's action is like water on a rock.

Consolations and desolations are movements of the soul. They are interior movements, things we experience in our souls. We experience them because we've had an encounter with God or with the Enemy. Often, though, we aren't very aware of the person we've encountered. We are more aware of what we're experiencing as a result of that encounter. We are more aware of "the movements of our soul," our feelings and emotions and thoughts.

I'm going to talk first about desolations. I used to think that I had never experienced a desolation. I had the impression that a desolation was a period of dryness in one's spiritual life that lasted for weeks, months or even years. Also, I thought that the defining characteristic of "being in a desolation" was feeling as if God wasn't present. I never felt like he had abandoned me. Sure, I struggled, etc., but I didn't think he had abandoned me. Of course, my awareness of his presence was pretty dim at that time, so I didn't feel his supposed absence very keenly. Anyway, I thought a desolation was a period of spiritual dryness. A desolation can result in a period of spiritual dryness, but technically it isn't simply a period of dryness. It's a movement of the soul. Let me tell you about how I learned otherwise.

I was in a meeting in the library at Greenlawn with Paul DeCelles and a few other people. I think we were talking about education. Before the meeting Paul and I had talked quite a bit about the subject at hand, and I knew what he thought. We were in the meeting, the conversation was cooking along. I was participating well, etc. Then Paul said something I didn't expect. At that moment the wind was taken out of my sails. The bottom dropped out. I was confused, full of self-doubt, suspicious of him. I dropped out of the conversation. I couldn't talk. I was all emotion. The next day, Paul asked me what happened. He said all of a sudden I just disappeared

in the conversation. I told him what had happened and he said that was a desolation. I was shocked. That experience was a desolation? I thought desolation was some kind of otherworldly dryness in prayer. A desolation is an interior movement. It's what happens in your affectivity—your feelings, your heart—and in your thoughts. It happens prior to reflection and the exercise of free choice.

So let's say we are just cooking along and we are moved. You could say we experience an inspiration. We feel a movement in our spirit or in our soul – whatever language you want to use – and it's a powerful emotional experience. It's a powerful trend or it may be an attitude we experience, or a sense. Something has just come across our minds and we suddenly perceive things differently because we experienced some kind of a movement of the soul. Sometimes we are moved, deep down in our hearts, very effectively by turmoil. We find we are experiencing some great anxiety, darkness and gloom, depression, confusion or a lack of insight, or a yearning for more and more selfish concerns. We find ourselves fearful, timid. We have a hardness of heart and we're bored. We feel moved to a weakening of hope, faith and love, a decrease of our faith in God, our hope of salvation, our affection for the Lord. When you experience that you are experiencing a desolation.

I'm going to describe desolations briefly. Then I'll give you some examples and then I'll unpack my description even more.

You can describe desolation as “darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness rising from many disturbances and temptations which lead to want of faith, want of hope, want of love. The soul is wholly slothful, tepid, sad, and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord.” (*Spiritual Exercises*, 317)

Here's an example of a mild desolation.

During the first part of the prayer, I could not settle down to pray. I was sitting in my room, but the thought kept going through my mind that maybe I should be in the chapel. I felt restless, while my mind was having a debate about where I would most find the Lord's presence. I finally decided to stay in my room, but I was still feeling restless. I next started wondering how I would pray, I did not resonate with Ignatius's meditation at this point in the Exercises. I would, I felt sure, do better with a different way of meditation, yet

I wanted to learn Ignatius's way. So my thought went on. The inner debate just aggravated my feelings of restlessness. Throughout, I was asking the Lord where and how he wanted me to pray, but my restlessness and inner debate were leading to confusion. Suddenly I recognized what was going on and prayed against it. Immediately the inner debated stopped and I felt strongly attracted to a particular Scripture passage...

Here's another story, of a woman who had been living very happily in the life of faith for some time, and had been so free from temptations as almost to begin to think she would never be tempted again. But suddenly a very peculiar form of temptation had assailed and horrified her. She found that the moment she began to pray, dreadful thoughts of all kinds would rush into her mind. She had lived a very sheltered, innocent life; and these thoughts seemed so awful to her that she felt she must be one of the most wicked of sinners to be capable of having them. She began by thinking that she could not possibly have entered into the rest of faith and ended by concluding that she had never been born again. Her soul was in any agony of distress.

I know of a Christian man. I'll call him John. John worked for another Christian man, a good friend and brother. John was expecting a promotion. There was a position open and John was sure that he had all the qualifications for the job. He thought he deserved it. When his boss announced that the position had been filled and it wasn't John, the light of faith and hope went out for John. He felt like God had abandoned him. He was confused. If he had been so wrong about this, what else was he wrong about? John experienced a desolation from the Enemy. In fact, the Enemy got such a toe hold that John was "in a desolation" (Note: I'll come back to this "in a desolation" stuff in the next talk.)

Now I want to unpack my description of a desolation. I'm going to throw a lot of descriptive words at you. There's a reason for this. Frequently, you can break the back of a desolation simply by recognizing it as such. So I'm going to use a lot of descriptive words in the hopes that they will help you learn to recognize a desolation. I'm going to come back to this in a moment, but right now I just want to register something. Not all desolations are from the Enemy. Grief is a kind of desolation but it's not from the Enemy. Desolations from the Enemy all tend toward a loss of faith, hope and love.

I'm talking now about desolations from the Enemy. You can feel a darkness of soul or a

gloominess of soul. On the inside you feel dark or heavy. Life in Christ is burdensome, oppressive and dark. Dark and gloomy feelings affect the way you see and interpret the world around you. You see everything as dark and oppressive. You might feel like you are lost, groping in the dark.

You can feel confused and experience a turmoil of spirit. Your own ideas, judgments, principles, values and emotional responses are so jumbled that you can't discern distinctly or clearly what is going on or why. In sensitive souls, the Enemy works to darken and confuse the good conscience by suggesting sin where there is none, and by calling good things/qualities/deeds defects. You experience fallacious reasoning that disturbs the soul. The more confused you get, the less able you are to fight the desolation.

Another thing that can happen, sometimes as a result of the gloom and confusion, sometimes parallel with the gloom and confusion and sometimes prior to the gloom and confusion, is an "inclination to what is low and earthly" (*Spiritual Exercises*, 317). Other translations say "a movement to contemptible and earthly things." We tend not to talk this way—we don't often contrast what is earthly with what is heavenly, for example. The language sounds two-story, but think of the second desolation I described above, the woman who is horrified by her awful thoughts. That is an example of a desolation and it's a work of the Enemy. Sometimes you might experience something that makes you think, where did that come from? That's a temptation or a thought from the past. I thought I was over that. Paul told me one time about a man who came to him. He was a very holy man, very good and very pure and chaste. He was plagued by base thoughts and images and was very desolate. Such temptations can make a pure soul desolate. As a result, the person can back off from God because he or she feels so unworthy.

Here's another way of describing what a person experiences: "disquiet from various commotions and temptations, [all this] tending toward distrust, without hope, without love." (*Spiritual Exercises*, 317) Ignatius is talking about inner commotions or disturbances, but he's not talking about the inner commotion that can be a result of a chaotic external environment or the demands of many responsibilities. Ignatius is talking about something else. This is related to what he

says about the action of the Enemy on good people. It's violent, noisy and disturbing. So when you encounter the Enemy and you experience a movement of your soul, that movement is bound to conflict with the central thrust of your life. Therefore you experience commotions or disturbances and temptations. The activity of the Enemy is like water falling on a rock. I've heard a desolation described as a tornado of thoughts and emotions. Swirling is the operative image. All the thoughts and emotions are contrary to faith, hope and love. The result is disquiet or restlessness. I think this disquiet and restlessness is the opposite of what happens in a consolation when the soul is filled with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord.

Remember, we're not talking about just any old darkness, gloom, confusion, or disquiet (more on this later). The experience we are talking about tends toward a want of faith, hope and love, but you could also say that the experience tends toward "distrust (*infidencia*), without hope, without love." (*Spiritual Exercises, 317*) What's at peril is a trust in God's personal love for me; what's at peril is the faith and trust in the other which makes a relationship possible. Desolations tend, not primarily toward a loss of intellectual assent to the dogmas of our faith, but to a loss of trust in the Person. We then find ourselves feeling without hope and without love.

You can also find yourself feeling indolent, tepid and sad. "Indolent and tepid." (*Spiritual Exercises, 317*) I think that's the opposite of being inflamed with love. It's a feeling of being becalmed, no wind in your sails. You are disinclined to exert yourself, you are disinclined to pursue this relationship or any relationship in Christ. You feel lukewarm. Faith, hope and especially love are powerful engines in our lives. They are what move us forward. Love propels us forward. When we don't feel them, we feel stalled. "Who cares." "What I do doesn't matter." "I just don't feel like praying." And you feel sad. The sorrow is depressing, discouraging. You have no sense of God's presence and you might even feel unloved by God.

Finally, one experiences oneself as separated from one's Creator and Lord. Note: you are not actually separated. God has not abandoned you. You just feel separated. You might feel as if you have sinned or as if you have become displeasing to God. You are very much tempted to doubt your own love for him. You feel unworthy, beyond the reach of God's love, beyond his forgiveness. You might feel as if he has forgotten you or is too busy for you.

Then there are the thoughts which spring from the desolation. Actually, they go hand and glove and it is often hard to distinguish between the thought and the emotion, but they are distinct. This will become important later when we are talking about consolation. Anyway, all sorts of thoughts spring from the powerful feelings that arise in you from an encounter with the Enemy.

For example, the inclination comes to question the beliefs and experiences that have grounded your faith and hope. The psychic energy to live out decisions and resolutions you've made wanes. The decisions you made in a better frame of mind, like making the covenant, seem unreal, and a change in decision seems just the thing that is needed to improve your situation. So there is a tendency to make rash, desolation-determined decisions and to abandon good undertakings already begun. If you don't abandon previous decisions you might find yourself constantly questioning them and therefore sidelined.

Other thoughts that might spring from desolation and are generated by the feelings of sadness and separation: "This is too hard. No one can live this life." "What am I doing?" "Who do you think you are? You don't fit." "You can't live this life." The thoughts are very frequently leading you to turn back. Don't go this way.

You've got to remember that a desolation is an interior movement that is aroused in your soul. It doesn't just happen to you from within. It isn't simply you generating thoughts or feelings of despair, doubt and sadness. It is caused. Something happens. It isn't something you did. It arises out of an encounter. You've been touched. There's another person involved. On the other hand, it is not a simply passive experience. You aren't passive, with the Enemy operating on you. A desolation is your response to an encounter with the Enemy.

I'm not saying this to make you afraid, but I want you to realize that desolations are highly personal. I've given you general descriptions, but a desolation arises from a highly personal encounter. They will seem hand-crafted, designed to really get under your skin. They are about you. They aren't about Everyman. Although we may first become aware of a movement in our souls—something in our mind or heart—discernment isn't just psychological analysis. It's not just

coming to know your own mind. It's not simply about sorting through your experiences. It's about recognizing the Enemy.

Remember, desolations are never from God. You can go to the bank on that. I've got a lot to say about fighting desolations, but that's in another talk. We'll be coming back to desolations, but now I'm going to turn to consolations.

So, what about spiritual consolation? There are, after all, two kinds of inspirations that we experience. We are deeply moved, you could say. We feel a movement in our spirit or in our soul, whatever language you want to use. It's a powerful emotional experience. It's a powerful trend or it may be an attitude we experience or sense. Something has just come across our minds and we just suddenly perceive things differently. We experience some kind of movement of the soul. Sometimes we feel our hearts and our minds moved particularly by clarity or by insight or delight, freedom, joy, light-heartedness. No job is too big for us. No job is too small for us. We are full of sympathy or compassion. We are full of zeal for the work of the Lord. All these things which we may be experiencing tend toward more hope, firmer faith and more truthful love. So, our general experience is one of delight, enlightenment, joy. It's like somebody just walked into the room and turned the lights on. Suddenly it's brighter. It's like the sun coming out on a gloomy day and all of a sudden everything looks a lot easier. Experiences of this sort are consolations.

Now I'm going to describe consolations and I'll make some comments. This isn't going to be an exhaustive treatment of what Ignatius says. Again, the goal is to help you become aware of what you experience.

First of all, I want to note that consolations vary in degrees of intensity. When I'm describing consolations I'll move from the most intense (being inflamed with love) to what is more common and often not quite as intense (every increase of faith, hope and love and all interior joy).

So, Ignatius says, "I call it consolation when an interior movement is aroused in the soul, by

which it is inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord.” (*Spiritual Exercises, 316*) “Aflame with love for God.” This means not just that you love God, but that you are aflame. That is to say, you experience your love for God as suffused with burning, passionate, tender feelings of love or you experience your love as being enriched with intense, deep feelings of warmth. In either case you are set afire. You have encountered God and your love is enkindled by the meeting. You awaken to his presence and union with you. You might experience a warmth, sweetness, delight, the assurance of loving and being loved, satisfaction, contentment, a sense of security, tranquility and joy. You experience an increased sense of fullness of being. This is a very incomplete description. It would be helpful to look at the “Love of God” talks from the viewpoint of consolations and desolations.

“It is likewise consolation when one sheds tears that move to the love of God, whether it be because of sorrow for sins, or because of the sufferings of Christ our Lord, or for any other reason that is immediately directed to the praise and service of God.” (*Spiritual Exercises, 316*) Tears in and of themselves are not consolations, but they are the effect of consolation and the sign of deep feeling. I remember one person responding to the “Love of God” talks with tears, choking out, “My love matters to him.” That was a consolation. Or you could have an experience of God and tears come to your eyes because you know you don’t deserve such a love and such a presence. It is so totally gratuitous, so free and undeserved. You are so grateful and so humbled by the love.

Not all sorrow and not all tears are consolation. For example there was no consolation in Mary’s sharing Jesus’ desolation on Calvary. I imagine there were tears and sorrow and anguish, but it wasn’t consolation. What she experienced at that moment is different from the sweet sadness of consolation experienced over the sufferings of Christ as a revelation of God’s love. That kind of sweet sadness was possible to Mary after Calvary, when she could shed tears in remembering the heroic and conquering love of her risen and glorious Son. You can’t speak of her anguish on Calvary or Jesus’ sorrow in Gethsemene or on the cross as consolation.

I don’t want to nitpick, but I wanted to make this distinction about tears, because I don’t want

you to make the mistake of thinking that bitter, hopeless, desolate, despairing tears are from God. God doesn't give desolations to you. I know the general trajectory of your life, and any desolation you experience isn't from God. The tears I'm talking about don't arise out of a felt separation from God and they don't create or accentuate distance from God. Sometimes people will find themselves just shedding copious tears and in the shedding of the tears they feel moved to the Lord, to the love of God. It's an experience of union, not disunion.

Back to consolations. "I call consolation every increase of faith, hope and love." I think it's safe to say that Ignatius is talking about any increase of faith, hope and love that we experience. It's a felt increase. Consolations are difficult to talk about because this whole conversation presupposes that you know and have experienced life in Christ. For example, "inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord" is like a hyperlink to the "Love of God" talks. "Every increase of faith, hope and love" is like a hyperlink to Smith Wigglesworth. He had a living faith. I'm not talking about just praying with people; I'm talking about his spirit. Here's another way to understand what I'm talking about. Think about a moment when you were absolutely full of the Holy Spirit. A consolation is more of that—deeper, firmer, more intense, purer, more effective, more widespread in your life. That's what Ignatius means by an increase of faith, hope and charity. It's a felt expansion of your life in Christ. It's an increased awareness of your divine sonship.

Finally, "all interior joy that invites and attracts to what is heavenly and to the salvation of one's soul by filling it with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord." (*Spiritual Exercises*, 316) Joy is a sure sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit. An encounter with God results in feelings of peace, joy, contentment and exultation. "Peace" is a tricky word. It doesn't mean here the absence of turmoil and disturbing feelings. It's not a feeling of calm; that is to say, the absence of either consoling or desolate feelings. It has to do with feelings of gladness, sweetness, delight and contentment—not just the absence of turmoil, but the opposite of turmoil. I always think of Psalm 131: "O Lord, my heart is not lifted up. My eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me, but I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a child quieted at its mother's breast; like a child quieted is my soul. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and for evermore."

Consolations—remember, these are primarily feelings—lead to thoughts and actions. They lead to inspiring thoughts of God’s grandeur, of his love and care, his creative artistry, etc. They also lead to thoughts like, “I can trust him. I want to give my life to him. Nothing is too good for him. No sacrifice is too great.” Consolations can make us eager for personal prayer. They make us willing and eager to step out in faith and pray with someone who is sick or talk to someone about our life in Christ in the People of Praise. It seems so easy to do that.

Consolations lead to a strong aversion to whatever draws us away from God. They lead to an inflamed love for your brothers and sisters. Consolations make obstacles seem small. You understand what Jesus meant about faith moving mountains.

Now, you’ve got to remember that a consolation is an interior movement that is aroused in your soul. It doesn’t just happen to you from within. It isn’t you generating thoughts or feelings of love or of faith or of hope. It is caused. Something happens. You are praying and all of a sudden something happens. It isn’t something you did. It arises out of an encounter. You’ve been touched. There’s another person involved. On the other hand, it is not simply passive. You aren’t passive, with God doing something to you. A consolation is your response, but it’s a response called forth in you by him. It has an active side. It’s your response.

Some people can mistakenly think either that a consolation is simply active—it’s what they do. Others can mistakenly think that it is something altogether passive—it’s done to them by God. It’s neither. It is both active and passive. (The same holds true for desolation, but in that case the other person is Satan.) Sometimes people can make the mistake of thinking that a consolation is an experience totally unlike any other. They can sit waiting and watching for some otherworldly experience. What you are experiencing is joy, like other joys, sweetness like other moments of sweetness, exaltation like other moments of exaltation. In this case they arise out of a meeting or an encounter with God, but they are recognizably human responses.

At this point I want to note that not all consolations and desolations are spiritual. I mean I can have consolations and desolations that aren’t from either the Enemy or from the Lord. You can experience gladness, peacefulness, sweetness, buoyancy, delight, joy, exultation, sweet sorrow,

warmth, tenderness, contentment, sense of security, cheerfulness, etc., as a response to lots of things, not just as a response to the Lord. You can be consoled by watching a really touching movie. You cry sweet tears. Listening to Handel's *Messiah* you can experience a purely aesthetic consolation of joy and exaltation. I experienced great consolation—talk about buoyancy and joy!—after finishing my dissertation. You can experience warmth, tenderness, contentment on account of loving someone or being loved by someone. You can experience euphoric feelings, delight and satisfaction, from the contemplation of beauty in nature or works of art or from the discovery of truth in nature or in Scripture. You can be consoled by philosophic, literary, scientific or scriptural study. You can experience joy and peace and contentment by attending a community meeting. They may come from the music and from the personal encounter with everyone else who is there. It may not be spiritual consolation. It could arise from your sensitivity to music and the charm of human persons. The experience at a community meeting might not be a consolation from God; it could very well be just a pleasurable experience. I'm not saying these experiences are bad—everything that is beautiful, true and good is from God – they just are not consolations from God.

I want to note that one person can listen to Handel's *Messiah*, study Scripture, look at the stars, attend a community meeting and experience non spiritual consolation, while another person might encounter the same things and experience a spiritual consolation, moving him to greater love of God and more faith. Imagine a non-Christian who experiences peace, delight and comfort from star-gazing. Maybe he's moved by the beauty or maybe all his troubles seem dwarfed by the vastness of the heavens. Whatever the cause, it's a nonspiritual consolation. Here's an example of a consolation in Ignatius' own life, "It was his greatest consolation to gaze upon the heavens and stars, which he often did and for long stretches at a time, because when doing so he felt within himself a powerful urge to be serving our Lord." He experienced more faith, more hope and more love from his star-gazing.

It's important to know that not all consolations are spiritual. They are not all from God. This is important to know so that you aren't propelled into action by a nonspiritual consolation, thinking you are inspired and this is what God wants you to do. You could make wrong decisions

because you thought you were being prompted by the Holy Spirit when in fact you were only experiencing a natural exhilaration at doing your own thing. For example, “I’m going to join this traveling chorus because of the consolation I get from listening to choral music. The consolation is a sign of God’s will.”

You can also experience nonspiritual desolations. You can experience anxiety, emptiness, heaviness, bitterness, sadness, discouragement, frustration, dejection, a sense of worthlessness, etc., as a response to lots of things, not just as a response to the Enemy. You can be desolate on account of an unjust situation, joblessness, death, divorce, physical exhaustion, sickness or hormones, for example. Grief is a kind of desolation but it’s not from the Enemy. Also, you could be “depressing” as a way of dealing with a problem, for example, a bad marriage or a purposeless existence.

One time I was listening to some Christian music. I was in a fine mood. It was a nice day, etc. As I listened I began to cry gently. I experienced a melancholy, but somewhat sweet, desire for God. It was not a consolation. It was essentially an experience of disunion. Underlying the desire was the presupposition, “He is not here.” In fact, my tears were not a response to God or to Satan. They were a response to the music. The music did that to me.

Again, it’s important to know the difference between a spiritual and a nonspiritual desolation. The strategies you use to fight a spiritual desolation won’t necessarily work on a nonspiritual one. For example, if you are depressing, you’d be better off exploring your choices trying to solve your problem rather than trying to counterpunch. Often though, some of the things that work for spiritual desolation work also for non-spiritual desolation, like doing the opposite of what you feel like doing.

All that being said, the Lord and the Enemy can use all these nonspiritual consolations and desolations. They will use them to work their strategies for good or for ill in your life. You may be experiencing grief or despair because you are out of work or because of hormonal mood fluctuations. The Enemy will add his work to these. Very often what starts out as a nonspiritual desolation will have a spiritual component in the end. And when you are experiencing non-

spiritual consolation—maybe you just attended a beautiful concert—take it to a higher level, so to speak. Thank the Lord for it. Remember that the Lord gave it.

WLC Discernment Talk 4

How do I deal with desolation? I've got several strategies to lay out here. Recognizing an experience as a desolation is a big help. Part of a desolation is not knowing it's a desolation. You are miserable and someone comes along and says, "That's a desolation," and you say "Ahh...you're right. That didn't occur to me." All of a sudden everything seem brighter. Often the recognition and naming of it break the back of a desolation.

Technically speaking, a desolation is a movement of the soul, not a period of dryness, tepidity, etc. Often the movement of the soul, if it goes unchecked, leads to a period of desolation. The thoughts, perceptions, feelings that are a result of the desolation take root in our minds and hearts and begin to flourish. I think that if we recognize the desolation right away, early on, it's a lot easier to fight. In other words, try to nip it in the bud. When the feelings settle in, they are much harder to fight.

Above all else, in a desolation or on account of a desolation, don't change a decision that you've already made. "In time of desolation we should never make any change, but remain firm and constant in the resolution and decision which guided us the day before the desolation, or in the decision to which we adhered in the preceding consolations."(*Spiritual Exercises*, 318)

Why? Well, think about what happens when you are desolate. You are sad, confused, in turmoil. You are inclined to question yourself. Your previous faith and hope and love seem unreal. What was so wonderful, now seems to be terrible. Filet mignon has turned to sawdust in your mouth. You feel like you don't have the energy to live out previously made decisions and commitments. Those decisions and choices made in a better frame of mind now seem unreal. It seems the most natural thing in the world to make a change, in order to ease the situation and lesson the turmoil you're in. You just want to spit the sawdust out. The whole thrust of the desolation is to get you to the point where you make a change in order to find some relief. Don't do it. Stay with what seemed wonderful, even though it seems terrible or empty now.

So, you're desolate. In good times, you've made some commitments. It could be a marriage commitment or your covenant commitment or a commitment to be at the men's group meeting or a commitment to good order in the family. Suddenly you feel so bad. You think, I'm such a bad person, I feel so bad and out of it, so gloomy, so dark and confused, I think I should just step back from all my commitments. I should go away for a bit from all these things that have been bringing me life in the Spirit. That would be 100% wrong!

Or let's say you've started a new job or moved to Allendale. Before you made the change, you were full of consolation: joy and light. But now that you are settled in to your new situation you feel empty, apathetic, dark and confused. You think that you've done something wrong. You think that God isn't pleased with you. He's trying to tell you something. In fact, all this began when you made this big change in your life. You should go back to where you were before. That's what God is trying to tell you or so you think. Desolation is never a sign of God's voice. Desolation is not God speaking to you. Good people make bad decisions because they misinterpret desolation, taking discouragement, dryness, restlessness as signs of God's will.

In a desolation, don't make any change in your commitments or in what you have decided to do for the Lord. It's really easy to do. Desolation demolishes your thinking capacity. You can't think straight. But remember that no desolation is from God. If you are good, you know your heart is set on God, and if you experience turmoil, anxiety, doubt, darkness and sadness, tepidity, you can be 100% sure it's from the Enemy. In fact, "just as in consolation the Holy Spirit guides and counsels us, so in desolation the Enemy guides and counsels. Following his counsels we can never find the way to a right decision." (*Spiritual Exercises*, 318).

Changing a previous decision in a time of desolation is following the Enemy's counsels. The desolation is the Enemy's attempt to guide you.

Now I want to make an aside. Push the pause button. This is an aside about how discerning spirits fits into discerning God's will. You should not, you ought not, don't ever change your direction on account of a desolation. Some people take this fact and then jump to the conclusion that the best time to make a decision is a time of spiritual calm. That's not true. In fact, if you are experiencing a lot of desolations AND consolations, that's a good time to make a new

decision. There are three times to make a decision. The first is a time something like what Matthew experienced when he left his tax station. The Lord invites and you have absolutely no doubt about it. In a certain sense, you could say, there's no decision to make. The second time to make a good decision is when you are experiencing not only desolation but desolations and consolations. In fact, this is the normal way for Christians to make decisions.

So let's say I'm Craig—this is imaginary. I think about buying the Raclin's house. I'm moved by a consolation. In fact, often, when I think about buying the Raclin's house and I think of what we might accomplish it in and with it, I'm elated. Having this house would enable us to do more for the Lord. I feel full of joy at the prospect. In fact, sometimes I'm not really praying and the thought of the house passes through my mind and I just get lit.

But then, sometimes, I think of the house and I break out into a cold sweat. There's a lump in the pit of my stomach. I feel terrified. There is no way this can work. What will people think? Another piece of property? How will we keep it up? The pipes will burst and we'll have a real mess on our hands. I experience a lot of confusion. My concerns become more and more irrational. It will never work. We'll never grow. Who do we think we are? And so on. It seems so hopeless. We can't do more for the Lord. We can't do anything for the Lord.

Elated. Sick to my stomach. Elated. Back and forth. I'm being pushed and pulled. This is a good time to make a choice. I'm experiencing both consolations and desolations. I step back and look at the whole picture and I conclude that God wants this and Satan doesn't. The hand of the Enemy is trying to keep me from what I want to do, which is to serve the Lord in this way.

I don't abandon my reason – the Community can't make an offer because we don't have the money – but I know that God wants it, so I start to do everything I can to enable us to purchase it. In this instance, God is communicating to me affectively in my consolation. I'm so moved to get the Raclin's house that I choose to start taking action towards that end. I know what to do and I'm doing it out of feelings of love. Whatever it takes, I'm going to do this. This is a great opportunity to do more for the Lord. This is not a case of my figuring it out that this would be a

good thing (a rational calculation using prudence). I'm not making a rational calculation about what is for the greater glory of God. I'm elated and I do it.

There is another time when you might be making a decision. That's when there is no wind in your sails. I'm not experiencing consolations or desolations. This is not the normal state of affairs and it's hard to figure out what to do. That's why Ignatius writes the most about it. Objectively speaking, I ask myself, what is more for the glory of God, not what's best for my family or what's best for me. I sit down, think hard and figure out what is more for the glory of God. You could say that when this happens—when there aren't a lot of consolations and desolations and you need to make a choice—God is saying to you, "Figure it out; you can do it." This isn't a moral choice. It's not a matter of right or wrong. I'm not engaging in a calculation that a pagan could make (a prudential calculation). And I can reach certainty about what to do in this case too. It's kind of interesting that some of the things Ignatius has you do in this third time—like thinking about what you would do on your deathbed—are exercises designed to stir up your affectivity.

That's the end of the aside. Now back to where we were. Don't change your direction in a time of desolation. You can't use desolation alone as an indication of what you ought to do. Don't let your feelings guide you. In desolation, good reason is your fortress and shield. You shouldn't do what your emotions are telling you. They are not reliable guides. Try to think straight, which is very hard to do. Desolations wreak havoc on your thinking. Confusion is a hallmark of desolation, confusion and fallacious reasoning, so ask for help.

In a time of desolation, right thinking and reason should be your guide, but don't take what is true in time of desolation—beware of your emotions – and use it as a rule to live by. When you're not in desolation, don't live as if you were. Rather, love and do what you will.

So, desolation affects a person in two ways: cognitively and affectively—in your reason and your emotions. When you are pastoring someone who is experiencing desolation, you can do two things. Help your sister think straight. Point out the fallacies in what she is saying. Imagine I'm the person who is coming to you for help. I'm not seeing reality clearly and you're pointing

that out. I might get mad because my desolation is propelling me to see things in a certain way. I might even feel like you don't understand me, that I'm not communicating the truth of what I see. For example, I may feel lukewarm and sad. "It feels like all that I am doing, all my service for the Lord, is tepid and not worth much and that I am of no use to him." You might say to me, "What? Look at all you are doing. Why, just this week you fixed the window in the house, you talked to the UPS man about the community, you ran an errand for me, you got out a huge Trinity mailing, etc." I'm telling you that I want to take on another big responsibility but this desire is rooted in desolation, because I think what I am doing now is worthless. I'm not thinking straight about my present circumstances. Thinking straight is very important because we don't want to end up making choices, doing things or saying things we'll regret. We can't take our words or deeds back, once they are said or done.

If someone you are pastoring is experiencing a lot of desolations, encourage her. Shore up her emotions, her affectivity. This can be helpful. It can ease the pain a bit, but it isn't as important as making sure she is thinking straight. Nonetheless, encourage her. Remind her that, although she doesn't feel like she has much faith, she is experiencing a desolation precisely because she does have faith. It's only people who have faith and who love God who feel saddened and confused and discouraged by his seeming absence. A desolation is actually a God-centered experience, only it's the God who seems absent. It's God, my beloved, from whom I feel separated. God, by whom I feel abandoned, is the center of the experience. Only a person who has a living faith can feel a desolation. The more intensely painful the sense of separation from God, the more intense must be the actual faith and love underneath all the darkness, confusion and disquiet. Her faith and love are strong, otherwise there would be no desolating sense of separation from God.

Also, remind her that God's grace is always sufficient in every situation no matter how difficult it might be. "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor. 10:13). Encourage her to persevere in patience. Love is patient. Tell her to remember that, even though you feel so far from God, so sad, so full of anxiety, so confused, so dark, so much in turmoil, so lethargic, so apathetic,

consolation is not far away. The Lord is present, and soon, any moment, you will awaken to him. What you are doing when you are encouraging your sister is giving her a chance to rely on your strength—your faith, your hope and your love.

So, you should help the person you are pastoring think straight and you should encourage her and you should also tell her to counterpunch. Let me explain. Let's say you are experiencing turmoil, anxiety, doubt and other such movements in your spirit. You then recognize it as desolation. It's not a time to quit or give up. In fact, it's a moment to turn the heat up. Satan makes a move and gives you a desolation. You say, "Ahh, this is the Enemy. I see where this is coming from." You should then, so to speak, as if you were in a boxing match, step aside and then strike back. Summon up all your courage and energy and counterattack. Attack him by opposing his works in you—the sadness, the distrust, the tepidity, etc. You should do the exact opposite of what he is encouraging you to do. When you recognize a desolation tempting you to back off your covenant commitment, for example, reinforce the commitment by coming to the community meeting 10 minutes early and staying 10 minutes late. That's a counterpunch. It's intensifying your activity against the desolation. If you feel joyless, sing. If you feel flat and apathetic, fast more (but submit it to your head first). If you feel pinched and niggardly, take a sister out to lunch or volunteer to serve somewhere. Spend extra time reading or studying Scripture even though that's the last thing you want to do. If you feel faithless, step, out in faith and pray with someone for healing or talk to someone about our life and the Lord. Remember the good advice that Smith Wigglesworth gave: "How is faith received? It is received by your acting with what you now have [no matter how small it seems]. If you act with what you have, your faith will be increased—you can never increase faith but by acting. Act in faith and you will have greater faith."

One time I was at a public meeting and I encountered the Enemy and was desolate. I felt like I had lost all my faith. I thought the whole meeting was a joke, that the healings were all in my head, etc. The wind was really taken out of my sails. I was fine one minute and desolate the next. I quickly recognized this as the work of the Enemy and I thought, I've got to do something. I've got to do something. I couldn't see what to do so I stood up. At least that was doing something. And then I saw a sister who had experienced the death of one of her relatives. I

thought, Well, I can go offer her my condolences. I went up to talk to her and it turned out that not only was she experiencing grief, but she was experiencing an irrational, consuming fear that someone close to her would die. I prayed with her against the Enemy and it was a big turning point in her life.

I am telling that story for a specific purpose. Because desolations are, so to speak, all in our head, we mistakenly think that the way to fight them is in our heads—with thoughts. We think that we should counterpunch in our thinking. That's ineffective. To counterpunch you have to do something, not just think something. That's why I kept thinking, I've got to do something, and standing up was better than nothing. Isn't that amazing? For some of you who may have read Toner on consolations and desolations he makes too much out of courage and energy as antidotes to desolation. Courage and energy are things in your head. If you just work on summoning up courage and energy, you won't break the back of the desolation. You've got to have courage and energy for a reason, in order to counterpunch, in order to do something. It's the doing something that's most effective.

Kristin, who lives with me, told me this story recently. She told one of her patients, a Christian, about city-building and he was openly skeptical. In fact, he communicated to Kristin something along the lines of "You're crazy." The Enemy got in there and Kristin experienced a desolation, a tornado of thoughts and emotions. She identified what was going on and counterpunched. She didn't fight by trying to think the right thoughts. Rather, she counterpunched by going back and talking to the man again. Doing so broke the back of the desolation.

Here's a caveat. One way to talk about counterpunching is to say or do the exact opposite of what he is encouraging you to do. That's true but only up to a point. Pray 10 extra minutes, but don't spend the day praying, for example. You don't want to make a decision which would turn out to be a change in direction made under the guise of counterpunching. So the Enemy could say, "Her service is really moving things forward for God. I'll make her desolate so she stops serving in order to pray all day."

With that caveat in place, I want to point out that in counterpunching you are opposing the Enemy, not just his works in you, not just the feelings of desolation. I don't know if I can explain it very well, but you are fighting him even though it feels like you are simply fighting a feeling. Your feeling is his handiwork. Sometimes, when you sense the Enemy at work, all it takes is a prayer of deliverance and the whole experience is back to normal. You pray and things are different. But have you ever noticed that often when you're desolate, you can pray against the Enemy until you are blue in the face and it doesn't seem to make any difference? You are right. Sometimes it doesn't work. The Enemy is long gone—he hasn't made any promise to be with your always. He's gone and you are desolate. When you are fighting the desolation you are fighting yourself, your feelings. That's why it's so hard. When Kristin experienced her city-building desolation, she asked me on two separate occasions to pray with her, but the second time I knew that prayer wasn't what was needed. What she needed to do was counterpunch.

I think it is especially hard for beginners in the spiritual life. You're desolate. You've felt this way before. You know this sick feeling in the pit of your stomach or you know this condemnation or this darkness. They seem like a part of you. It's really hard to believe that what you are experiencing is from the Enemy, but fighting the Enemy and his desolations gets easier after you've won a few battles. At least you know it's possible to win. But it's hard doing something for the first time. You don't know if you can do it. I remember my first semester in grad school. It was incredibly difficult because I didn't know if I could do it. So, if your head tells you that you are experiencing a desolation, believe her and follow her instructions. That's especially important for beginners, because it might be the only way you gain real experience in spiritual warfare.

Here's another point. When you are desolate, remember that this is an opportunity to express your love. God causes all things to work together for good, and so do his sons and daughters. The desolation isn't from God, but you can cause it to work together for good. You can say and do things that are expressive of your love. You can show your Father how you will remain faithful through times when you feel no sweetness, no warmth, no tenderness or joy in loving. You can remain faithful even when you are tempted to doubt your own love. You can show him

that not only will you remain faithful but you are going to continue doing the stuff that you know pleases him. You can pray with people even when you are full of doubt, you can sing his praises, etc. The desolation is an opportunity for love. It's an opportunity to believe in and trust his commitment to you. It's an opportunity to learn to love unselfishly. In it the real strength of your love emerges. It strengthens and reveals your love.

When Nano's mother was dying of cancer, her father cared for her. Dave loved Dot unselfishly. After she died, he said he was glad he had the opportunity to care for her. Was the cancer from God? No. Was it a good thing? No. But love conquers all. Likewise, take advantage of desolation. Your love will come out stronger, but don't think the desolation is sent from God. Desolations are from the Enemy. Your desolation is not from God, but you can turn it into an effective means for love to grow and be expressed.

For you, desolations are not from God, but they are part of the Christian's life. You've got to understand that the Enemy hates God and he hates his Christ—I mean you. He understands the role affections play in human life and he wants to use them against you and against God. There are, however, some things that you can do to guard yourself from them. There are also some things that you can do which make you a target for the Enemy. There are things that you can do that expose your flank and give the Enemy increased opportunity to attack. Just like in any relationship, you can neglect the other person, take him for granted, etc. Think of a marriage. The husband and wife are busy about many things. They don't spend much time talking to one another. They may be physically present to one another but they aren't really present. They are in the same room but unaware of one another. They assume they know what the other is thinking, etc. You get the picture. Slowly, gradually their love grows lukewarm.

The same thing can happen to you and in your relationship with your Father. You neglect the relationship. Consolation is a response in you that arises in a meeting. You don't take the time to talk to your Father and tell him what's going on. You assume you know him so you don't listen. You neglect the fellowship of his Son, by not gathering with your brothers and sisters at every opportunity. You begin to experience fewer and fewer consolations. It's your own fault.

Your negligence makes you a target for the Enemy (more so than normal). It's a great opportunity for him to derail you and strike a blow at God.

Sometimes we can experience a consolation and on the heels of the consolation comes temptation. You are moved with love for the Lord, and then the next minute you think to yourself, "See how much I love God." You begin to look down on others who aren't as on fire as you are. "They are so weak and so prone to discouragement and doubt. If they could just be like me." You get the idea that you will never be desolate, that you are immune from the attacks of the Enemy, that you are unshakably loyal, like Peter. "Everyone else may fall away, but I will not...Even if I must die with you, I will never disown you." But Satan sifted Peter. If you get on a high horse like that, where you're head and shoulders above everyone else, you'll be a target. And I guarantee, because you are riding so high, it's going to really hurt when you hit the dust. You will hit the dust because you've laid down your defenses. It's a great chance for the Enemy. So when you experience consolation, "consider how you will conduct yourself during the time of desolation which is sure to come, and store up a supply of strength as defense against that day"(*Spiritual Exercises*, 323).

This next example of exposing yourself to the attacks of the Enemy is harder for me to explain, but I'll give it a shot. You experience encounter the Lord. You experience a sense of exultation. You experience an increased fullness of being that is made possible by HIM. A whole world has opened up—the world, the being of HIM. In your experience of him, you are experiencing to varying degrees a whole new world! You are therefore larger, fuller, brighter. It's a personal encounter. You and he meet in the experience of love. Depending on your personality, the nature of your relationship, etc., you may feel wonderful zeal, intense loyalty, tears, an enveloping peace, sweetness, etc. There is an encounter, and your heart is moved. It leaps within you in a variety of ways. And there is an inevitable accompanying sense of gratitude. YOU, Father, are the occasion of this. Your gratitude is huge, profound.

Sometimes, you can lose the gratitude. You get dazzled by what you personally are experiencing—the sweetness, the ardor, the peace – and you begin to concentrate on yourself. In

a way, you forget God and fall in love with the experience. So you try to pray again and you try to recapture the experience. Let's see, I was reading such and such a Scripture passage when I was so consoled, so I'll go back over it again and again. That didn't work, so I'll try the latest prayer technique. I'm constantly on the look-out to find the magic key to his heart. I want to experience what I've experienced before. Oddly enough, you become full of yourself and you try to manipulate your encounters with him. You get selfish and puffed up and you make yourself an easy target for the Enemy. Again, this is a chance for him to make his move and strike a blow against you and your beloved Father.

If consolation could be had by your own techniques and devices, then God would not really be God. He would be the figment of your imagination and emotions. Consolation is not about the feelings occasioned in you. It's about the relationship, it's about you and your Father. It's not done to you, but it is a gift. It's not a gift in the sense of a Christmas present: "Now I possess this." It's a gift of a personal encounter.

So, what does it mean to cooperate with a consolation? After all, don't we want to discern between consolations and desolations so that we can cooperate with the one and oppose the other? Yes, but it is better to say that we want to discern consolations and desolations so that we can cooperate with the Lord and oppose the Enemy. When you are cooperating with a consolation you aren't just cooperating with the experience, as if you are consoled and are joyful so you try to have more joy. You aren't just trying to have more peace or more sweetness. A consolation is a response to God; you want to relate to him. "What do you want Lord? What do you have to say? O my friend, have I told you about...? What can I give you? How can I help you?"

Use a consolation like a pole-vaulter uses his pole. Think about it. A high-jumper can run and leap seven feet or so over a bar. If he runs with a pole and then converts his forward momentum to upward momentum he can get over a bar that is 11 or so feet high. So you can use a consolation to move your forward or you can just enjoy it. If you just enjoy it you miss the grace of the consolation. Remember, love is like a runner. It takes you even farther than the finishing line. You encounter the Lord, your heart leaps within you, you become conscious of him. You

know he is with you, that he loves you deeply. You are aware of how much a Father he is, how he provides everything you need. You are so full of faith and trust. You know that, even in the worse circumstances you can imagine, you'll be okay because he is your Father. In fact, you know you could be wonderfully happy without everything you have because God is with you. Nothing else is attractive. Only him. It's at a point like this that you should look to see if there is something else that you might do for the Lord out of the love that you have for him. Or you should think about how you can keep the commitments you've already made and how to make them work even better for you both. Because of what you've been experiencing, because you are willing to endure all hardship, however serious or grave it might be, see what more you can do.

So, just as in desolation you shouldn't abandon the commitments you've made, so in consolation you should be making commitments that will move you and your Father forward—your relationship, your work. When Moses encountered God in the burning bush or Saul encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus, it wasn't so that they could have a good prayer time. Take the ball and run with it.

WLC Discernment Talk 5

Where are we? We've seen that there are two kinds of people: first, people whose fundamental option in life is against God and for self. Remember, I'm talking about their basic trajectory. We saw that, for people like these, Satan makes the way forward easy and smooth, but God tries to shake them up. He stings their conscience; he gives desolations. But, for the second group of people, who have chosen God and his service as the basic orientation of their life, God and the Enemy act differently. We are talking about people whose fundamental option in life is for God. They may fail in many ways, but if you stand back and look at their lives as a whole the basic trajectory is toward God. For such people, desolations are never from God. Desolations are from the Enemy, they are the fruit of an encounter with the Enemy. Maybe he just passed by and whispered in their ear and is long gone, but the result is that they are desolate.

We've spent a lot of time talking about desolations and how to fight them. It's very difficult to talk about and to capture on paper, but my goal has been to help you recognize a desolation and consolation, so that you can be more responsive to the Lord and more on guard against the Enemy. I want to make you more aware of what is happening inside, so that you can become more discerning. The way to learn to become more discerning is to talk about experiences on a case by case basis. That's the ultimate goal—for you to learn to be more discerning—both in your own lives and with people you do head or will be heading in the future.

You yourselves, right now, can be 100% sure that the desolations you are experiencing, if they are genuine spiritual desolations (and not what you ate for dinner) are from the Enemy. They are not from God. “It is characteristic of God and His Angels, when they act upon the soul, to give true happiness and spiritual joy, and to banish all the sadness and disturbances caused by the Enemy.” (Such a wonderful God!) “It is characteristic of the evil one to fight against such happiness and consolation by proposing fallacious reasonings, subtleties, and continual deceptions.” (*Spiritual Exercises*, 329) This talk and the next one are about the deceptions.

Now, you might be thinking, Okay, desolations aren't from God, and then assume that all consolations are from God. You might think that every movement toward more faith, more hope

and more love in your soul is a consolation from God. No. For sure, desolations are from the Enemy. Consolations, on the other hand, can be from God or from the Enemy. The Enemy is the father of lies. He has no scruples about giving you consolations when it suits his purpose. When he can't turn you back or sidetrack you by means of desolation, he will seek to imitate the Lord's way of speaking and acting, in order to get you to listen to him and follow him.

Both God and Satan are willing to give consolations, so discernment gets more difficult. The things that I experience as delightful, life-giving, encouraging, are they really from the Lord? Is this movement of my heart from God or is it something from Satan? I want to describe to you under what circumstances can you say, for sure, this is from God or, for sure, this is from Satan.

I want to make something very clear. There are certain instances when we can say, for sure, this is from God. There are some instances where we can say, this is, for sure, from Satan—desolations, for example. There are other circumstances where we can at least say for sure that this isn't from God. It may be from Satan or it may not. All we can say is that, for sure, it isn't from God. And then there is a whole area in between. There are all sorts of experiences where we may conclude that we don't know if this is from God or not. Then we make sure we don't do anything on account of it. There is a very big gray area.

Sometimes when people discover that the Enemy can give consolations, they get afraid. They might think, I can't trust any experience I have of God, and so they reject all experiences. Don't do that. Even if you don't go that far, don't be afraid. However wily and deceitful the Enemy may be, he can never perfectly mimic the consolations of God; the tail of the snake will always appear when he is in the picture. There's always a clue that it's the Enemy.

So, how can I tell if a consolation is, for sure, from God? Some consolations come with preceding cause, some without preceding cause. If a consolation is without preceding cause, you can be sure it is from God. Let me explain what this means.

Most of the time when we experience consolations we are doing something. We are looking at a beautiful sunrise and praising God for it, we are talking to him, revealing ourselves, we are

meditating on a Scripture passage, we are remembering his gifts to us, we are singing or listening to music, we are at a prayer meeting and then we are moved. We are moved and joy is aroused in us, our hearts burn within us, we feel more faith or more love. We are moved to love God more, to serve him more, to praise him more, etc. That's a consolation with preceding cause. There is something in what I am doing that is preceding cause: my intellect is thinking about this Scripture passage, I'm immersed in this song, I'm reflecting on how God has acted, I'm perceiving the beautiful sunset, etc. And then I have a consoling experience of God. The consolation isn't from myself alone, since I'm not consoled every time I see a sunset or read a Scripture passage or sing "*Love So Strong*". Still, when I am consoled, there is a previous cause.

If a consolation has preceding cause that consolation could be either from the devil or from God—I'll explain more in a minute, but there are also consolations without preceding cause, and only God can give these. If the consolation comes literally from out of no where it's a consolation without preceding cause. That means it is basically a creative act on God's part. It's not a consequence of anything else, it's not a result of your reflection, your thought, your perceptions. Suddenly it just appears—bang—on your screen. We don't have very many of these.

So, if you experience a consolation without preceding cause, you can be sure it's from God. Satan can't possibly effect such a consolation in us. This is a pretty philosophical point. Only God can make something out of nothing, so if something happens without a previous cause, God did it. Satan can give consolations, but he needs some material to work with: some act on our part, a perception, a thought, a reflection, a remembering, etc.

I don't know if this example will work for everyone, but I like to think of it in this way. This is the way I think of consolation with a previous cause. I'm relating to God already in some way. I'm relating to him in my prayer time, in another person, through nature, in a community meeting, etc. Then he does something—a gesture, an action—it's so HIM. Or he reveals something about himself. In either case, I'm moved to greater love or more faith and I want to give a return. I want to do something for him. I'm consoled. I'm responding to him. That's a consolation with a previous cause. Other times he does something totally out of the blue. I'm not, so to speak, at all conscious or aware of him. I'm not relating to him. I'm totally absorbed

in cooking dinner or whatever. Out of the blue, he initiates something. It's got nothing to do with what was happening. That's a consolation without a previous cause.

So if it is a consolation without a previous cause, you can be sure it is from God, but even then you have to be careful. Let's say you are consoled without a previous cause. Then you have to be careful to distinguish between the actual time of the consolation and the period which follows it. In the afterglow of the consolation, you could come to certain conclusions or make certain resolutions to do things which aren't from God. They could come from your own reasoning or they could come from the Enemy. So for example, I could be consoled, without a previous cause, and be very moved to proclaim his glory for all the world to see. Then, as I am remembering and reflecting on the experience, I decide to write a book. The consolation is for sure from God, the resolution to write a book is not for sure from God. It needs to be examined.

“But we can frequently be deceived, however, because after such consolation or inspiration, when the soul is still abiding in its joy, the Enemy tries under the impetus of this joy to make us innocently add to what we have received from God our Lord. His only purpose is to disturb and confuse us in everything. At other times he makes us lessen the import of the message we have received and confronts us with obstacles and difficulties, so as to prevent us from carrying out completely what had been made known to us.” God can speak a word to us and, as we mull it over in our minds and hearts, the Enemy can get a foothold and we add to the word.

I know it was a slightly different situation, but I always think of Eve in the garden. God said, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” But Eve, in the presence of Satan, adds to what God has said, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” Other times, after a consolation, we can subtract from what has transpired. I'm consoled—filled with gratitude to God for saving me and moved to go out and spread his word, anywhere, anytime. After the experience, I'm tempted to subtract from it and say, I wasn't moved to leave town, I wasn't moved to go anywhere. That's not possible. I couldn't give up my job.

By the way, this kind of deception in the afterglow can happen either after a consolation with preceding cause or after a consolation without preceding cause.

I don't want to belabor this distinction between consolation with or without preceding cause too much, but I want to make one more point. Some people mistakenly think that because a consolation is without preceding cause it is somehow better, or purer. They might think that if they receive such a consolation it is a sign of holiness, etc. They hear someone say that in a consolation without preceding cause the Lord draws a person totally into his love and conclude on the basis of the word "totally" that this is a very high-order experience. They think a consolation without a previous cause is an experience where your whole being is totally consumed with love for God, you are completely surrendered, there is no love of self, etc. That's not what Ignatius is talking about. He's talking about a moment where nothing else matters but God. It's a manner of speaking. For example, I might say "I'm totally captivated" but I don't mean my legs are in irons. My point is just that we can be swept up into the love of God through a consolation with preceding cause too. When it's God it's God, whether it's with or without preceding cause.

So why does it matter whether the consolation is with or without preceding cause? If it had preceding cause I at least have to consider that it might be from the Enemy and I ought not to act on it until I've made that discernment.

What about consolations with previous causes? It's important to realize that Satan can give them. Why would Satan inspire anybody to have greater faith, greater hope, greater love? That sounds like it would be counterproductive, doesn't it? Well, he's in it for the long haul. If he can get you to pay attention to him and take his advice occasionally with regard to something, he's got a toehold. You start listening to his counsel. He becomes your friend and he can lead you on from that good advice to the place he really wants to go. You become accustomed to listening to that voice. That voice brings you delight and consolation, and so, when he inspires you to do something less than you should do, you might not even notice. Then he might even

successfully inspire you to do something evil. Satan is willing to make a good relationship with you in order that you begin to be friends with him. He wants to be your spiritual director.

In one of his letters Ignatius describes this strategy of the Enemy: “He enters through the other’s door and comes out his own. He enters with the other by not opposing his ways but by praising them. He acts familiarly with the soul, suggesting good and holy thoughts which bring peace to the good soul. Later he tries, little by little, to come out his own door, always suggesting some error or illusion under the appearance of good, but which will always be evil.” (*Letters of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, pp. 51-52) In his rules he puts it this way: “The purpose of the evil angel is . . . to draw the person on to his damned intent and cunning trap. It is characteristic of the evil spirit to take on the appearance of an angel of light, so that he can begin by going the way of a devout person and end with that person going his own way. By that I mean that he first prompts thoughts which are good and holy, harmonious with such a faithful person, and then manages, little by little, to step out of his act and lead the person to his hidden falsehoods and perverse designs.” (*Spiritual Exercises*, 332)

Now it’s possible – and I’ve done it myself – to respond to this description and say yes, I know that Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light and that not all consolations are from God, but I can still lack any real understanding of the situation. I want to press this point: Satan can give consolations. Remember how we defined a consolation? It’s being inflamed with love for God, it’s being moved to love of God, to his service and praise. It’s every felt increase of faith, hope and charity. It’s being filled with zeal and being fired up to do great things. Think back to all the things I said about consolation. You can have these experiences as a response to Satan. They are really good experiences—you really are moved to more faith or more zeal— but they are from Satan.

This is very important to grasp. I’m going to give some analogies that will help make this point. Imagine that you walk home from work every day. Each time it rains a guy stops and gives you a ride home. A ride home in the rain is a good thing. No harm has ever come to you. In fact the guy is very kind, very polite. But who is this person and why is he doing this? Even if the ride is a good thing, you shouldn’t take it. Some rides you just ought to turn down. This guy does

you a service, he doesn't harm you, he is polite, but you can't conclude that he is a good person. Who is he and why is he doing this? Really evil people can be quite charming. If a person accepted the ride, I'd say she's not a very discerning person.

Here's another example. Imagine you go to hear a preacher. He's quite eloquent and inspiring. In fact, as you listen to him you are quite moved. You are filled with more faith and more zeal. You are fired up and inspired to go out and do more during the coming week: pray with people for healing, speak to people about the Lord, etc. And you want to go back to hear more. You really like the guy. You like what he had to say. Furthermore, there is no doubt about that. You experienced something really good—more faith—as you listened. But there was this one moment in the sermon when the preacher was railing on the pagans for their fornication. In the same breath he went on to say how all things are lawful for Christians and they can do whatever they want. The implication was that fornication is lawful for Christians. Oops. The preacher revealed himself in that one line. He had all sorts of good qualities and attributes—his eloquence, the stories of how he had healed people, etc.—but then HE was revealed. Your sister says, “That was no good. That stank.” You say, “I liked it. It was great. I had a great experience.” You are missing the point. You aren't a very discerning person. You did have a great experience. You were moved to more faith, but where did it come from? Who was the cause? It was a good experience, but there are some rides you just ought not to take. You shouldn't go back. You say you liked him and what he had to say. After all, he stirred you up to more faith and more zeal. But look what's happened. You've united yourself with that guy in spirit, at least to some degree, but he is an evil man. You've just corrupted your soul. There's really a temptation to accept the greater faith and zeal and to be indebted to the giver. In fact, that's just what the preacher wants. He wants women to come back again and again and again. You read a year later in the paper about how he has seduced a whole coterie of women.

Living life to have a consolation or to feel fired up is a bad idea. In a relationship of genuine love and friendship, we have true encounters with the other person and the emphasis isn't on the satisfaction of our pleasure level. “I like it when I feel really zealous.” That's puppy love. I know the other person hardly at all, but I just love to be in love. I love being really passionate about someone.

In the garden of Eden, the apple was a really good thing. “The woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise. She took of its fruit and ate.” It was good food; it was beautiful; wisdom is a good thing, really good. But Eve didn’t stop to ask, “who is giving me this?” She knew the difference between the serpent and God, but at that moment she didn’t just break the law. It was a question of affection. She preferred Satan to God at that moment on account of what he offered. The apple was a really good thing. Was it from the Lord? No.

We can misunderstand the phrase, Satan appears as “an angel of light.” We think it means he gives us bad things which look on the surface to be good. That can happen also, but my point is that he can give really good things and cause really good things. He can give consolations which are a movement toward something good. You can’t say the consolation is bad. It isn’t. It’s a movement toward something good. It’s not bad. What I’ve experienced isn’t bad. It’s the origin which is bad, not the consolation itself. I might rightly say, this is good, but I also might have no discernment about where it came from. I can be moved to genuinely heroic things – to give away all that I have or to deliver my body to be burned for the sake of the gospel – or I can be moved to speak with great eloquence about the Lord, but I can still say, this isn’t from God.

Here’s an example from Ignatius’s life:

Returning to Barcelona, he began his studies with great diligence. But there was one thing that stood very much in his way and that is that when he began to learn by heart, as has to be done in the beginning of grammar, he received new light on spiritual things and new delights. So strong were these delights that he could memorize nothing nor could he get rid of them however much he tried.

Thinking this over at various times, he said to himself: “Even when I go to prayer or attend Mass these lights do not come to me so vividly.” Thus, step by step, he came to recognize that it was a temptation. After making his meditation, he went to the church of Santa Maria del Mar, near the house of his teacher, having asked him to have the kindness to hear him for a moment in the church. Seated there, the pilgrim gave his teacher a faithful account of what had taken place in his soul, and how little progress he had made until then for the reason already mentioned. And he made a promise to his master, with these words: “I promise you never to fail to attend your class these two years, as long as I can find bread

and water for my support here in Barcelona.” He made this promise with such effect that he never again suffered from those temptations.

Ignatius' Autobiography, nos. 54-55; in St. Ignatius' Own Story, pp. 39-40

Ignatius was experiencing wonderful things, great insight into the things of God and great spiritual delight. I imagine he felt very close to God. But there are some rides you just ought not to take. He said no to these spiritual things.

One more example:

Besides his seven hours of prayer, he busied himself with certain souls who came looking for him to discuss their spiritual interests. All the rest of the day he spent thinking of divine things, those especially which he had either read or meditated that day. But when he went to bed he received great illuminations and spiritual consolations which made him lose much of the time he had set aside for sleep, and that was not much. He looked into this matter a number of times and gave it some thought. Having set aside so much time for dealing with God, and besides that even all the rest of the day, he began to doubt whether these illuminations came from the good spirit. He concluded that he had better not have anything to do with them, and give the time determined on to sleep. And this he did.

Ignatius' Autobiography, no. 26; in St. Ignatius' Own Story, pp. 21

Again, note that Ignatius turned aside from great illuminations and spiritual consolations. Just because they were good things didn't mean they were from God. When things are from the Enemy, he always gives a telltale sign, so we don't have to be afraid of being fooled.

WLC Discernment Talk 6: Discerning Consolations

We are coming up on the end of this series, but don't coast yet. We've still got some important material to cover. Earlier we talked about how the Enemy can give consolations. That's a hard concept to grasp. We know that he lies to us, accuses us, tempts us, but he can also give us consolations. He can move us to more faith, more hope and more love. The end result of an encounter with him can be something good in our soul. He's absolutely unscrupulous. He'll do anything to get us to begin listening to his voice. He wants to be our spiritual director.

I'm going to give you a way to discern a consolation. Some of you might find this frustrating. Let me remind you what I'm doing here. **I am not** giving you a manual that will enable you to tell for sure in every instance whether something is from God or from the Enemy. I'm giving you some helps, some tools that will shed light on some events.

So, of course, the next question is: How do I know a consolation is from God? I experience a consolation. Is it from God? How do I tell? Well, you should look at the beginning, the middle and the end of the consolation. Was the experience unalloyed—is it pure from beginning to end?

Check and see if it started right. Were you in the right place, doing the right thing, with the right incentive? Did it continue in the middle of it to be genuinely holy, righteous and true and free from obvious evil like envy? Did it end up in the right place? Did you wind up with the right sentiment? You can check the beginning, the middle and the end and see if in fact the thing had some integrity, whether it held together as a whole. If it does, you can trust it more than you would otherwise. That's not to say that you can for sure say it's from God; but it's a real possibility. Why didn't I say, if it has a good beginning, middle and end it is **for sure** from God? If it is a genuine spiritual consolation, it is from God, but sometimes we mistakenly think that a natural movement of our soul is a consolation from God. Remember, we talked about this before: maybe we're just filled with joy because we're doing our own thing.

Here's the payoff: If it had a bad beginning or a bad middle or a bad end, you can be sure it's not from God. However, you can't necessarily be sure it is from Satan. Why didn't I say that if it had a bad beginning or a bad middle or a bad end you can be **sure** it's from Satan? If it was a genuine spiritual event, a spiritual consolation, but it had a bad beginning, middle or end, then it was from Satan. But maybe it wasn't actually a spiritual event at all – it could have been a natural event.

We are back again to the definition of a spiritual consolation. It's a movement of the soul. Something real happens. It's an event. There's an effect due to a cause. The cause can be either Satan or God. Remember, we can experience all sorts of things. We can be moved with compassion, for example, or we could experience great insight into Scripture, but they aren't what I mean by spiritual consolation. In my own life, especially while I was studying Matthew's Gospel, I had all sorts of delightful experiences of coming to understand something new in the text, but those experiences weren't consolations in the sense I'm using the term. The understanding bore great fruit in my life – as I came to know the Lord better, my love grew – but those experiences of increased understanding weren't spiritual consolations.

So I'm going to start over here. The presupposition here is that you've experienced a genuine spiritual event – a consolation – and it's with a preceding cause. We talked about this in the last talk. You weren't moved by the beautiful sunset you saw, or getting your own way. Something

spiritual transpired: you were moved by either Satan or God. How do you tell? Look at the beginning, middle and end. If the beginning, middle and end seem to pass muster—they are all equally good—then the consolation is from God. If it was a real spiritual event and it had a bad beginning or a bad middle or a bad end, you can be sure it's not from God. In fact, it's from the Enemy. Let me give you some examples.

Let's say I am late for an appointment. There is someone waiting for me. I see a church and I am say to myself, "I'll just stop for a moment to pray." While I'm in the church, a homeless man walks in. He's very bedraggled and so sad-looking. I gaze upon him and experience my heart burning with God's love for him. This is no ordinary compassion. I've just experienced something of God. I go away from the event wondering whether I should volunteer at a homeless shelter.

Was the experience from God? It's a genuine spiritual event. That much is for sure. Well, look at the beginning, middle and end. First, the end. There's nothing wrong with volunteering at a homeless shelter. Now the middle. I'm praying and moved with compassion. Sounds okay. But look at the beginning. How did it happen that I was in the church praying? Well, I was late for an appointment and there was someone waiting for me. I caused that person to wait even longer and I choose to be even later by going into the church. It had a bad beginning. It wasn't from God. It was the Enemy. And I certainly cannot say God moved me to volunteer at the homeless shelter.

So, it is important for your decisions—anytime you experience a sudden inspiration to do something—to stop and ask yourself what is happening. I'm talking about important or semi-important decisions to act, not about deciding whether to go to a movie tonight or not. We have to ask ourselves, Where did that come from? Was it really from the Lord? Was the inspiration to do that really from the Lord? Did it begin in the Lord? Did it end in the Lord?

Let's say I'm praying and I'm meditating on a Scripture passage about healing and I'm genuinely moved to more faith in the Lord who heals and more love for him, but then I start daydreaming about healing someone. At first glance, the daydream is about the person healed,

but really I'm at the center of it. Good beginning, good middle and bad end. It wasn't from the Lord. It's not a consolation from God. The whole thing, not just the end, was not from God.

Here are a couple of other examples. One time a woman was praying through her state in life. She came to her head and said, "Can I talk to you? I just had the most amazing experience in my prayer time." She went on to tell her head how she had this wonderful experience of God's personal love. "It just banished all doubt and I was moved to more faith." Her head asked, "How did this begin? What were you doing?" The person responded, "I was making a list of my desires, just as you told me to do, and I just didn't feel like doing that—it was too hard to look at—so I started thinking about how much God loved me." Bad beginning—disobedience. The head said, "That wasn't from the Lord. In fact, it was a consolation from the Enemy." The head could see that this person was on the verge of coming to grips with her inordinate attachments and this so-called consolation was actually a huge distraction. Not only was it not from God, but it was given by the Enemy.

In this case, the woman had set upon a course, part of which entailed coming to grips with all her various desires. The enemy's work led not to something evil, but to something less good than what she had previously proposed to do. It led her to shielding herself from self-knowledge.

Here's another praying through your state in life example. Gertrude was eager to begin the process. Her head had given her some preliminary instructions, telling her that she was to move through the *Spiritual Exercises* slowly, in a measured way, and that she wasn't to jump ahead—thinking of the resurrection when it was time to pray about the nativity, and stuff like that. Gertrude had done a few meditations. Then she was meditating on the fall of Satan and the sin of Adam and Eve. She was to begin praying for the grace not to take sin lightly. She began by sitting down in front of a window. She was moved by the beauty outside: the green of the trees and leaves. It was raining outside—one of those beautiful spring rains that makes everything greener. She began to sing "Let It Rain." And then she began to pray in tongues for a long time. When she was telling her head about it, she said that she had a strong sense of God gathering the courts of heaven and announcing the Incarnation. Was that from the Lord? No. It had a bad beginning. She was supposed to be asking the Lord for the grace not to take sin lightly. That's

not how she began. The whole experience wasn't from the Lord. It was the Enemy. When Gertrude's head pointed this out, Gertrude was enraged, which was further evidence that the Enemy was really at work.

Let me give you another example. A woman was praying. She was on a retreat and had been directed to think about times in the past when she had encountered the Lord. The point of the exercise was to come to see HIM revealed in his acts and gestures. She went eagerly and joyfully to her prayer time. As she sat down to do her assignment, a smile came to her lips. Immediately several instances came to mind, and just as immediately she suddenly realized that all of them involved humor. You could say that all of them contained a revelation of God's humor. Then she thought, "That's all God has been able to reveal to me. He would like to reveal more of himself, but I'm not open." She spent the rest of her prayer time and the rest of her retreat examining herself and looking for ways she wasn't open to God.

It was a good beginning, but the middle was an accusation. By the end, she wasn't at all doing the assignment: coming to know her Father better. She ended up thinking about how she didn't measure up. The whole thing wasn't from God. The beginning looked like it might have been, but when you look at where it ended up, it wasn't from God. In fact, it was the Enemy. It is his way to suggest or propose a truth (or even several) in order to come off with a lie and entangle us in it. That's what happened in this last example. The Enemy suggested a truth (all those incidents have humor in them) in order to propose a lie (you aren't open). The woman had gone into her prayer time in a good spot, but the Enemy worked to weaken, disquiet and confuse her, doing away with the peace, tranquility and quiet joy she had been experiencing before the prayer time.

So we can look at the beginning, middle and end of a consolation and come to the conclusion that it is from God or it's from the Enemy. If it's from the Enemy, somewhere in the experience he gives himself away. Sometimes people make the mistake of thinking that they can slice and dice consolations from the Enemy. For example, someone might say, "I was wrong to stop in the church and pray, even though someone was waiting for me, but I'll always cherish the love I felt for that homeless man." Or "The daydreaming was regrettable, but I'll hold on to the inspiration

to more faith.” Or, “I regret not doing what my head told me to do, but that was a wonderful experience of God’s love for me.” Or, “I’ll cherish the revelation of God’s humor and just reject the accusation that came after it.” This is very important. If it’s from the Enemy you should reject the whole thing. The whole thing: beginning, middle and end. Don’t drink from a polluted stream.

Here’s another example. This is a bit tricky. Imagine a situation in which a devout and generous person is misunderstood and criticized. Despite her good intentions, her head and her sisters misread her motives or criticize her work. This is painful to any normal human being. She feels hurt and frustrated. Moreover, being sincere, she begins to wonder if maybe she is deceived and deceiving others. She goes before the Lord in prayer in a state of misery and distress. As she kneels helplessly and almost hopelessly, suddenly she seems to hear the Lord saying, You came to this life for me and not for these people. All that matters is what I think of you.

What can you say about this experience? Well, there isn’t enough information to make a discernment. We don’t know what the end was. Did she feel better toward anyone—her head or her sisters? Maybe, but as it stands the woman is just a hair’s breadth away from thoughts like, So, what do you care about those people? Those other people don’t matter. If the consolation had ended in anything like those thoughts, we could say for sure that it wasn’t from God. If, on the other hand, she is then moved to go back and love her sisters freely and openly because she has been freed from her vainglory, then it looks like it was from God. As it stands, there isn’t enough information to make a discernment.

There’s a pitfall in this, which I bet you can imagine. You could be having a personal prayer time in the morning or simply talking to the Lord in the car on the way to work and you are constantly examining what is happening as it happens. Don’t do that. That’s no way to relate to a person. At the end of a prayer time in which you’ve been moved to something, take a few moments and examine what has happened. Look at the beginning, middle and end, but while it is happening just let it happen. Don’t be afraid. The Enemy is discernable. He leaves a telltale trail. If, after you look at the beginning, middle and end of an experience, you determine that it

was the Enemy, not the Lord, learn how he worked on you so that you can guard against it in the future. “It is useful for the person who was tempted by him to look immediately at the course of good thoughts which were prompted in him, noting how they began and how, little by little, the Enemy contrived to make him fall away from the earlier sweetness and spiritual joy until he led him to what his [the Enemy’s] own corrupt mind intended. The purpose is that observing such an experience and taking mental note of it will be a safeguard for the future against these customary hoaxes of the Enemy.”

All this might seem really complicated, but you can, through practice, get pretty good at discerning. It’s kind of like learning to sail. At first you are very much aware of the rules and the principles, but eventually all the rules and principles become internalized and you just sail. It’s like that with discernment. Eventually you might just know right away that something just stinks. It doesn’t smell right. It doesn’t add up. Something fishy is here. In the meantime, be open and eager to share what the enemy is doing in your life. Desolations and temptations and consolations and joys are not a measure of your personal worth or value or holiness. Very holy people encounter some of the gravest temptations. Just think how much you’ve learned from the examples in this talk. Being open is one way to get good at discernment.

Above all else, don’t be afraid. Love is a risk, but it’s worth the risk. And remember, “What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?” (Lk. 11:11ff).

We’re going to have time for questions in a minute, and after that I have some concluding remarks, but first I’d like to summarize.

Someone has had a spiritual experience. She’s been moved—not by their environment, not by her physiology, not by her own personal wants and desires— she’s been moved by either God or Satan. How do you tell? First, look at the general trajectory of her life. If she is going from bad to worse, Satan gives consolations and God gives desolations. If she is going from good to

better, and is experiencing a desolation, it's from the Enemy. God does not give desolations to a good person getting better. If she experiences a consolation, ask, Does it have a preceding cause? If there is no preceding cause, it is for sure from God. If it does have a preceding cause, you have to look at the beginning, the middle and the end. If all three are pure, it's from God. If something's wrong with either the beginning or the middle or the end, the consolation is from the Enemy.

I want to close by looking at Luke 24:13-35. The disciples on the road to Emmaus experienced desolation. (So we are back at desolations again! That's because they are so common.) This passage from Luke's Gospel is in many ways a review of some of the things we've learned.

Cleopas and his friend's hopes in Jesus were trashed. They "had hoped," Scripture says, that Jesus was the Messiah, and it didn't work the way they thought it should work, so they left the company of the disciples. They were desolate. Scripture says they were "sad" but put yourself in their shoes. "I left everything—my family, my career, everything—to be his disciple. How could we have been so wrong?" Their high hopes that Jesus would save Israel were shattered. Their whole lives had revolved around Jesus for close to three years. They had been living for him and his mission. And now the central meaning of their lives was gone, forever, beyond recovery. They knew the person whom they had loved and followed was a great prophet but he was killed on a cross by their own people. Not since Jeremiah had there been such a prophet, but now he was gone. The one who made God seem so real and so close was gone. Evil had triumphed. How could they not feel sad and confused and discouraged and aimless and so far from God? They thought they had seen God in Jesus. They thought they had discerned him. They thought they knew what he was doing and what he wanted.

They've lost heart and yielded to their desolation. The two disciples are changing course. They aren't holding on to the choices they made while they were full of faith. They are leaving Jerusalem and the small band of disciples. They are going back to pick up the threads of their lives, as best they can, where they left off to follow Jesus. It is exactly the decision the Enemy wants to bring about. While Jesus was with them visibly, speaking his powerful words, doing

his mighty works, letting them experience the splendor and power of his personality, there was no problem about believing in him as the messiah and hoping for the kingdom. But, now that they have no experience of him, and have to rely on the testimony of their sisters that he is not dead but alive, they don't believe. They are sure that the light of the world is gone; the flame of their hearts is dead forever.

In reality, the Lord is just around the corner. He is with them. He walks with them on the road, but they don't recognize him. Jesus opens the Scriptures to them and gently leads them to more faith so that they believe the meaning of the prophecies and their fulfillment in the passion and death of Jesus. As their faith is reawakened, their hearts burn within. They still don't recognize Jesus, but their hearts are aflame with intense feelings. The risen Jesus consoles them and only afterwards reveals who he is. They recognize him in the breaking of the bread. The consolation impels them back to Jerusalem, back to the little flock, back to the way of life they had chosen.