



The Prayer of Examen

Testing Spirits. Biblical basis 1 John 4

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. 2By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 3and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. 4Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. 5They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. 6We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

St. Ignatius of Loyola teaches on the Discernment of Spirits

Ignatius began to learn about the discernment of spirits while convalescing in his family home from a battle injury. He did not have access to the romance novellas he preferred and was left with biographies on the lives of saints and of Jesus. While reading, he noticed different interior movements as he imagined his future. When he spent too much time dreaming of going to court, of chivalry, and of winning fame and the attention of ladies, he discovered a heaviness and even a sadness. When he dreamed of becoming a saint like St. Francis, he experienced lightness of heart, hope, and joy.

Good and Evil Spirits - Consolation and Desolation

Ignatius taught that these interior movements were caused by “good spirits” and “evil spirits.” Our hearts are divided between good and evil impulses. To call these “spirits” simply recognizes the spiritual dimension of this inner struggle. Ignatius defined these feelings stirred up by good and evil spirit, “consolation” and “desolation.”

Spiritual consolation is an experience of God’s love that inspires us to praise, love, and serve God and help others as best as we can. Spiritual consolation encourages and facilitates a deep sense of gratitude for God’s faithfulness, mercy, and companionship in our life. In consolation we feel more alive and connected to others. For people who are trying to live a life pleasing to God, the good spirit strengthens, encourages, consoles, removes obstacles, and gives peace.

Spiritual desolation, in contrast, is a heavy experience of the soul in darkness or turmoil. We experience doubt, temptations, and are mired in self-preoccupations. We are restless and anxious and feel cut off from others. Such feelings, in Ignatius’s words, “move one toward lack of faith and leave one without hope and without love.” The evil spirit tries to derail them by stirring up anxiety, false sadness, needless confusion, frustration, and other obstacles.

The key question in interpreting consolation and desolation is: *where is the movement coming from and where is it leading me?* Surprisingly happiness does not always mean you are experiencing spiritual consolation, and sadness does not always mean spiritual desolation.

For people who have closed themselves off from God's grace, the good spirit disturbs and shakes up. It stirs feelings of remorse and discontent. The purpose is to make the person unhappy with a sinful way of life. On the other hand, the evil spirit wants such people to continue in their confusion and darkness. So the evil spirit tries to make them complacent, content, and satisfied with their distractions and pleasures.

Sometimes an experience of sadness is a moment of conversion and intimacy with God. Times of human suffering can be moments of great grace. Similarly, peace or happiness can be illusory if these feelings are helping us avoid changes we need to make.

Discernment of spirits is a challenging task. It requires maturity, inner silence, and an ability to reflect on one's interior life. Discernment takes practice. It is something of an art. Ignatius Loyola's rules for discernment provide a framework, not a program. We must be ready to improvise and adjust because God works in each of us uniquely. That is why it is recommended to discern spirits with the assistance of a spiritual director, a trusted pastor, or spiritual friend.

A Very Personal, Yet Cosmic & Practical Discipline

Practicing the Examen will require us to pay close attention to everything and anything. Ignatius had a rich, cosmic understanding of the Holy Spirit's ability to speak to us in and through all created things. The Examen is a working out of the First Rule and Principle at the beginning of the Spiritual Exercises:

*All the things in this world are gifts from God,
Presented to us so that we can know God more easily
and make a return of love more readily.
As a result, we appreciate and use all these gifts of God
Insofar as they help us to develop as loving persons.
But if any of these gifts become the center of our lives,
They displace God
And so hinder our growth toward our goal.*

We must develop a facility of inner attention in order to practice this kind of discernment. This inner facility is something like a muscle, a capacity, an inner reflex. The Orthodox tradition refers to this as 'nepesis,' what they call the inner eye or a 'third eye.' Consider the language of

Psalm 130:

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

In the examen we 'watch for the Lord' through all of the happenings of our days. It is also helpful to think of the Examen as a practice of listening as well as seeing. Ignatius encouraged his Jesuits to practice the Examen at least twice a day so as to not miss out on the opportunity to hear the voice of God yes, but also to make sure the Jesuits were practicing and learning to hear God's

voice. Jesus proclaims in Matthew 11:15, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” And indeed this is the crux of the problem: God is always speaking by the Holy Spirit through our created existence but most of us have not practiced and tuned our ears to hear. We do not know how to pay attention. Regular practice of the Examen is a way for us to spiritually exercise and develop this inner facility.

Steps of the Prayer of Examen

1. **Wait. Rest. Center. Draw near.** Place yourself in God's presence. Give thanks for God's great love for you.

2. **Illumination. Pray** for the grace to understand how God is acting in your life.

3. **Notice. See. Be attentive. Review your day** — recall specific moments and your feelings at the time. Use this space to write down specifics of your day where you sensed either consolation or desolation. Identify at least three specific instances.

4. **Meditate. Converse with God. Reflect** on what you did, said, or thought in those instances. Were you drawing closer to God, or further away?

5. **Commit. Look toward tomorrow** — think of how you might collaborate more effectively with God's plan. Write out how you want to respond to God tomorrow. Be specific, and conclude with a prayer of thanks.
