

# Ignatian Discernment of Spirits

*Learning to Recognize God's Voice in Everyday Life*

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*"It is not enough to have knowledge; we must also apply it. It is not enough to will; we must also act — and in all things, seek the greater glory of God."*

— St. Ignatius of Loyola

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## Welcome to This Guide

Dear friend, welcome — and congratulations on taking this step in your spiritual journey. Whether you have been Catholic your whole life or are still finding your footing in faith, this guide was written with *you* in mind. You do not need a theology degree, a long history of prayer, or any special background to begin practicing Ignatian discernment. All you need is an open heart and a genuine desire to grow closer to God.

Through this guide, you will be gently introduced to one of the most beloved and time-tested traditions in Catholic spirituality — the **Discernment of Spirits** as taught by St. Ignatius of Loyola. Over the course of five sections, you will learn who Ignatius was, what discernment means, how to recognize the movements of God in your own soul, and how to use practical tools —

like the Daily Examen — in your everyday life. Reflection prompts, callout boxes, scripture verses, and step-by-step guides are included throughout to make this as approachable and nourishing as possible.

Take your time with this material. Read it slowly. Pray with it. Return to sections that move you. This is not a test — it is an *invitation* to deeper friendship with God.

### **How to Use This Guide**

This guide is designed to be read over several sessions, ideally alongside your mentorship meetings. Each section builds on the one before it. You may wish to keep a journal nearby as you read — many beginners find that writing down their reflections deepens the experience considerably.

## **SECTION 1**

# **Who Was St. Ignatius — and What Is Discernment?**

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## **A Soldier Transformed by Grace**

St. Ignatius of Loyola was born around 1491 in the Basque region of northern Spain, the youngest of thirteen children in a noble family. As a young man, he was everything we might expect of a 16th-century aristocrat: proud, ambitious, and hungry for military glory. He dreamed of honor on the battlefield, of impressing great lords, and of winning the admiration of a noble lady he admired from afar. Faith was not absent from his life, but it was certainly not at the center of it.

All of that changed on May 20, 1521, when a French cannonball struck Ignatius during the Battle of Pamplona, shattering his right leg and wounding his left. Carried back to his family's castle to recover — a painful, months-long process that included multiple surgeries without anesthesia — Ignatius asked for his favorite reading: books of chivalry and knightly romance. None were available. Instead, his sister-in-law brought him the only books in the castle: a life of Jesus Christ and a collection of saints' biographies. What happened next changed the course of Catholic history. As he read, Ignatius noticed something remarkable within himself. When he daydreamed about winning battles and impressing noble ladies, he felt a rush of excitement — but afterward, a hollow emptiness. When he imagined following Christ, living as a pilgrim, doing what the saints had done, he felt something different: a deep, lasting peace and joy that did not fade. This interior observation — that different thoughts leave different lasting impressions — became the seed of his entire teaching on discernment.

After his recovery, Ignatius laid down his sword, made a pilgrimage to a Marian shrine at Montserrat, and spent a year in a cave at Manresa praying for up to seven hours a day. During this intense period of prayer, fasting, and mystical experience, the foundational insights of what would become the **Spiritual Exercises** were born. He studied in Paris, gathered a small band of companions, and in 1540 founded the Society of Jesus — the Jesuits — an order that would go on to become one of the greatest missionary, educational, and intellectual forces in Church history. He died in Rome on July 31, 1556, and was canonized in 1622. His feast day is celebrated every year on July 31.

## **What Are the Spiritual Exercises?**

The *Spiritual Exercises* is a structured guide to prayer, meditation, and self-examination that Ignatius developed over many years and formally published in 1548. Traditionally made as a 30-day silent retreat (though

shorter versions are widely available), the Exercises lead a retreatant through a deep encounter with Christ — from creation and sin, to the life and ministry of Jesus, to His Passion, death, and Resurrection. Woven throughout the Exercises are the Rules for Discernment of Spirits: practical guidelines for reading the interior movements of the soul and learning to distinguish God's voice from the voice of the enemy or our own disordered desires.

### **What Is Discernment of Spirits — in Plain Language?**

The phrase "discernment of spirits" sounds mysterious, but the concept is surprisingly practical. Put simply, **discernment of spirits is the practice of paying attention to your inner life — your thoughts, feelings, impulses, and desires — and learning to distinguish which ones come from God and which ones do not.**

Every day, a constant flow of interior movements passes through us: ideas, moods, fears, hopes, memories, longings, and nudges. Not all of these are neutral. Some draw us toward God, toward love, toward service, toward peace. Others draw us away — toward selfishness, toward despair, toward avoidance of God. The art of discernment is learning, over time, to recognize the difference. It is a skill anyone can develop with prayer, practice, and guidance.

### **Why Does Discernment Matter for Everyday Catholic Life?**

You may be thinking: *Isn't discernment something for mystics or priests on retreat?* Not at all. Ignatius designed his Rules for ordinary people navigating ordinary life — people trying to make good decisions, grow in prayer, resist temptation, and follow God's will in the midst of work, family, friendships, and uncertainty. Discernment matters when you are choosing a career path, navigating a difficult relationship, feeling spiritually dry, wondering if a desire is from God or just from yourself, or simply trying to

live more faithfully each day. In short: if you are seeking to live a life oriented toward God, discernment is an essential tool.

## The Two Spirits

Ignatius frames discernment around two primary sources of interior movement:

| The Good Spirit (The Holy Spirit)                                                   | The Evil Spirit (The Enemy)                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Works to draw us toward God, virtue, love, peace, and authentic growth in holiness. | Works to draw us away from God — through discouragement, deception, temptation, false consolation, or spiritual laziness. |
| Leads to lasting peace, increased faith, and a desire to serve God and others.      | Leads ultimately to agitation, emptiness, pride, isolation, or despair.                                                   |
| May sometimes challenge or convict us, but always with gentleness and hope.         | May sometimes appear attractive or even "angelic" — making bad choices seem reasonable.                                   |

### Important Note

Ignatius's use of the word "spirits" does not mean we are always dealing with supernatural beings in a dramatic sense. Often, the "spirits" refer to interior impulses, movements, or influences — some of which may be divine, some diabolical, and some simply the product of our own personality, wounds, or habits. Discernment helps us sort through all of these with wisdom and humility.

## SECTION 2

# Two Key Movements of the Soul: Consolation & Desolation

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At the heart of Ignatian discernment are two foundational concepts: **consolation** and **desolation**. These are the two basic interior "directions" a soul can move in at any given moment, and learning to identify them is the first and most essential skill of discernment. Understanding what these words mean — and, importantly, what they *do not* mean — will transform the way you listen to your inner life.

## Spiritual Consolation

**Consolation**, in the Ignatian sense, refers to any interior movement that draws the soul toward God — that inflames us with love for our Creator, increases our faith and hope, and orients us toward what is truly good and holy.

Ignatius describes consolation as the experience of the soul being "inflamed with love of its Creator," of shedding tears that move us toward love of God, and of "every increase of hope, faith, and charity, and all interior joy which calls and attracts to heavenly things." In consolation, the soul feels drawn upward — toward God, toward others, toward virtue, toward meaning.

### Consolation may feel like:

- A deep, quiet peace that is not dependent on circumstances
- A surge of love for God, for others, or for life
- Tears of joy, gratitude, or tenderness in prayer
- An increased desire to pray, serve, give, or sacrifice
- A sense of clarity, rightness, or "yes" about a decision
- Renewed faith or hope in the midst of difficulty

- A gentle compunction or sorrow for sin that leads to hope, not despair

## **Spiritual Desolation**

**Desolation** is the opposite movement — any interior state that draws the soul away from God, diminishes faith and love, and inclines us toward what is lesser, selfish, or spiritually deadening.

Ignatius describes desolation as "darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness rising from many disturbances and temptations, which leads to want of faith, want of hope, want of love." In desolation, the soul feels pulled downward — away from God, away from prayer, away from love.

### **Desolation may feel like:**

- A spiritual dryness or numbness — prayer feels empty or pointless
- Sadness, agitation, restlessness, or inner turbulence without a clear cause
- A feeling of distance from God — as though God is absent or silent
- Temptation toward laziness, self-pity, despair, or giving up on faith
- Doubt, confusion, or a sense that your past commitments were mistakes
- A pull toward isolating yourself, skipping prayer, or numbing out

### **Critical Distinction: Consolation ≠ Happiness & Desolation ≠ Sadness**

This is one of the most common misconceptions beginners encounter, and it is worth pausing on carefully:

- **Consolation is not the same as feeling happy or comfortable.**

Ignatius explicitly notes that mourning one's sins, experiencing the

suffering of Christ, or feeling compunction (a holy sorrow) can all be forms of consolation — because they draw the soul toward God.

- **Desolation is not the same as feeling sad or suffering.**

Physical illness, grief after a loss, or fatigue from good work are not necessarily desolation. The key question is always: does this interior movement draw me toward or away from God?

- **Desolation is not a sign that God has abandoned you.** As we will see in the Rules, God permits desolation for our growth. The feeling of God's absence in desolation is never the reality of God's absence.

## Quick Comparison: Consolation vs. Desolation

| Dimension                    | Consolation                                        | Desolation                                                    |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Interior feeling</b>      | Peace, warmth, love, clarity, joy, tenderness      | Agitation, dryness, confusion, sadness, restlessness          |
| <b>Direction of movement</b> | Toward God, others, virtue, prayer, service        | Away from God, toward isolation, self-pity, or sin            |
| <b>Effect on faith</b>       | Increases faith, hope, and charity                 | Diminishes faith, hope, and desire to love                    |
| <b>Source</b>                | The Good Spirit (Holy Spirit)                      | The Evil Spirit, or our own tepidity/neglect                  |
| <b>What to do</b>            | Receive gratefully; store up the memory; be humble | Do not make major decisions; pray more; hold firm             |
| <b>Common mistake</b>        | Becoming proud or taking credit for God's gift     | Abandoning prayer; believing the desolation will last forever |

# The Foundational Rules — Simplified for Beginners

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In the first week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius provides fourteen practical rules for discernment of spirits. These are not abstract philosophical principles — they are hands-on, tested observations about how the soul behaves under the influence of the Good Spirit and the Evil Spirit. Below, each rule is presented in plain modern language, grouped into three natural clusters, with a key takeaway for each.

## Rules 1-4: Understanding the Two Directions & Two Movements

These first four rules establish the basic landscape of the interior life — who the Good Spirit and the Evil Spirit are targeting, how they go about it, and what consolation and desolation feel like from the inside.

### Rule 1

#### The Enemy Encourages Those Already Going the Wrong Way

For people who are moving away from God — living in habitual sin, ignoring their conscience — the Evil Spirit typically does *not* cause turmoil. Instead, he offers apparent pleasures, flattery, and comfort, making sin feel easy and normal. The Good Spirit, conversely, stings the conscience and stirs up a holy restlessness in such a person — nudging them toward repentance and conversion.

*Key Takeaway: If you feel no spiritual friction at all — if sin seems painless and God seems irrelevant — it is worth asking: who is making me feel so comfortable?*

### Rule 2

### **The Enemy Troubles Those Who Are Already Seeking God**

For people who are sincerely trying to grow in holiness, the dynamic reverses. The Evil Spirit now brings anxiety, discouragement, false obstacles, and temptations designed to make them give up. The Good Spirit, however, gives encouragement, strength, peace, and interior joy to those moving in the right direction — making goodness feel attractive and sustainable.

*Key Takeaway: If you are genuinely seeking God and encounter sudden discouragement or doubt, this may not be a sign you are on the wrong path — it may be a sign you are on the right one.*

### **Rule 3**

#### **What Spiritual Consolation Is**

Ignatius defines consolation as any interior movement that inflames the soul with love of God, increases faith, hope, and charity, sheds tears that move one toward love, or draws one toward heavenly things. It is any interior experience that brings the soul into deeper union with God and draws it outward toward goodness and service.

*Key Takeaway: Consolation is not just about feeling good — it is about being drawn toward God. The test is direction, not emotion.*

### **Rule 4**

#### **What Spiritual Desolation Is**

Ignatius defines desolation as darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, restlessness,

a drawing toward earthly and self-centered things, a diminishment of faith and hope, and a felt sense of separation from God. Everything seems heavy, dry, or pointless. Prayer feels hollow. The soul is not being drawn upward but pulled downward or inward.

*Key Takeaway: Desolation is not just about feeling bad — it is about being pulled away from God. Name it, do not obey it.*

## **Rules 5-8: What To Do During Desolation**

These four rules are among the most practically urgent in all of Ignatian spirituality. Desolation is uncomfortable, and our natural instinct is often to either panic or give in. Ignatius gives clear, compassionate guidance for navigating it faithfully.

### **Rule 5**

#### **Never Make Major Decisions in Desolation**

This is perhaps the most famous of all the rules — and the most practically useful. When you are in desolation, you should *not* change any important decision or commitment that was made during a time of consolation or peace. The Evil Spirit uses desolation as an opportunity to make us abandon good resolutions. Hold firm. The desolation will pass.

*Key Takeaway: Do not quit your prayer routine, abandon a vocation, or make a major life change when you are in spiritual desolation. Wait for the clouds to lift.*

### **Rule 6**

#### **Fight Back — Do the Opposite of What Desolation Suggests**

Desolation tells you to pull back: stop praying, isolate yourself, give in, do less. The correct response is the exact opposite. During desolation, *increase* your efforts: pray more, not less; reach out rather than isolate; practice penance or fasting if appropriate; insist on your commitments. Ignatius calls this a "counterattack."

*Key Takeaway: When desolation tells you to give up on prayer, double down on it. Desolation lies — respond with action, not passivity.*

## Rule 7

### Remember That It Will Pass

One of the cruelest lies desolation tells us is that it will last forever — that this is just how things are now, that the joy we once felt in faith was an illusion. Ignatius counters this firmly: remember the consolation that has come before, and trust that it will come again. God has not changed. Sufficient grace is always present to endure the trial.

*Key Takeaway: In desolation, actively recall times of consolation. Remind yourself: "This is a season. God is still here. This will pass."*

## Rule 8

### Three Reasons God May Allow Desolation

Why does God permit desolation at all? Ignatius offers three reasons: (1) We may have grown lazy or negligent in prayer — the desolation is a wake-up call; (2) God may be testing and strengthening us, showing us what we are capable of through His grace; (3) God may be teaching us humility — reminding us that consolation is a pure gift, not something we earn or control

by our own effort.

*Key Takeaway: Desolation has a purpose. Ask: Is God correcting me, strengthening me, or teaching me humility? The answer will shape how you respond.*

## **Rules 9-14: Advanced Guidance — Consolation, Humility & the Tactics of the Enemy**

These final six rules are slightly more advanced, but still very accessible. They offer wisdom for those making progress in the spiritual life and need to be alert to subtler tactics of the Evil Spirit — including the deceptive disguise as an "angel of light."

### **Rule 9**

#### **In Consolation, Prepare for Future Desolation**

When things are going well spiritually — when you feel close to God, prayer is alive, and faith feels vibrant — do not simply enjoy it passively. Use the time of consolation to store up strength, make good resolutions, and prepare your heart for the inevitable return of desolation. Think of it as laying in spiritual reserves while the sun shines.

*Key Takeaway: In consolation, write down what you feel and resolve. In desolation, return to those notes. The light you captured in consolation can guide you through the dark.*

### **Rule 10**

#### **In Consolation, Be Humble; In Desolation, Trust God**

In times of consolation, practice humility — the gift you are experiencing is not the result of your own virtue, but of God's grace. Do not become proud or think you have "arrived." In desolation, do the opposite of pride: trust that God is near even when He cannot be felt, and that nothing is beyond His power to restore.

*Key Takeaway: Consolation calls for gratitude and humility. Desolation calls for trust and perseverance. Neither calls for self-reliance.*

## **Rule 11**

### **In Desolation, Do Not Underestimate Yourself**

Desolation has a way of making us feel utterly incapable — as though we cannot pray, cannot love, cannot persevere. Ignatius pushes back: even in desolation, we have sufficient grace to resist and endure. We are not abandoned. God's ordinary grace is always present, even when the felt sense of His presence is absent. Do not capitulate to the lie that you are hopeless.

*Key Takeaway: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13). This is especially true in desolation, not despite it.*

## **Rule 12**

### **The Enemy Is Bold with the Timid, Cowardly with the Brave**

Ignatius uses a vivid image: the Evil Spirit behaves like a bully who is bold when faced with weakness and turns and flees when met with strength. When we give in to temptation easily, he presses harder. When we resist boldly — meeting temptation head-on, with prayer and courage — he withdraws. Spiritual cowardice invites more attack; holy courage drives him away.

*Key Takeaway: Face temptation boldly and directly. The act of firm, courageous resistance is itself a form of spiritual power.*

### **Rule 13**

#### **The Enemy Hates Transparency — Tell Your Spiritual Director**

The Evil Spirit works best in secrecy and shame. He wants his temptations and deceptions to stay hidden in the dark of your interior life, where they can fester and grow. The moment you bring them into the light — by confiding in a confessor, a spiritual director, or a trusted spiritual companion — their power is greatly diminished. Secrets feed temptation; transparency dissolves it.

*Key Takeaway: Bring your interior struggles into the light. Speaking with a spiritual director about temptations and struggles is one of the most powerful weapons in discernment.*

### **Rule 14**

#### **The Enemy Attacks at Your Weakest Point**

Ignatius compares the Evil Spirit to a shrewd military commander who scouts out a fortress, identifies its weakest defenses, and concentrates his attack there. In the same way, our adversary looks at all our virtues — and wherever we are weakest, wherever our defenses are lowest, there he attacks. This is why self-knowledge and humility are so essential to discernment: we must know our vulnerabilities in order to defend them.

*Key Takeaway: Know your weak points — your characteristic temptations, your emotional vulnerabilities, your habitual sins — and reinforce them with prayer,*

*accountability, and sacramental grace.*

*"In desolation we must never make a change, but remain firm and constant in our resolutions... For as in consolation the good spirit guides and counsels us, so in desolation the evil spirit guides and counsels us."*

— St. Ignatius of Loyola, Rules for Discernment, Rule 5

#### SECTION 4

## The Daily Examen — Your Discernment Tool

If there is one practice that most distills Ignatian spirituality into something usable every single day, it is the **Daily Examen**. This short prayer — typically 10 to 15 minutes — is not a performance review or a guilt trip. It is a gentle, daily habit of looking back over your day with God, noticing where you experienced consolation and desolation, giving thanks, asking forgiveness, and setting an intention for tomorrow. St. Ignatius considered it so important that he asked his Jesuit companions to do it even on days when other prayer was impossible.

### Recommended Approach

**Time:** 10–15 minutes | **When:** Evening or end of day (before bed is ideal) | **Where:** A quiet place — your room, a church, outdoors | **What**

**you need:** A journal (optional but highly recommended for beginners)

## The 5 Steps of the Daily Examen

### Step 1 — Give Thanks (Gratitude)

Begin by becoming still and placing yourself in God's presence. Look back over the day and name at least two or three specific gifts: a moment of beauty, a kind word received, a task completed, a meal enjoyed, sunlight through a window. Let gratitude open your heart. Gratitude is the doorway into honest prayer.

### Step 2 — Ask for Light (Petition)

Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see your day clearly and honestly — not through the distorting lens of pride or despair, but through the gentle, truthful light of God's love. A simple prayer: *"Holy Spirit, show me my day as You see it."* This step is often skipped by beginners and is often the most important.

### Step 3 — Review the Day (Walk Through)

Walk through your day like a gentle replay: morning through evening. Pay special attention to two things: (1) Moments of **consolation** — where did you feel drawn toward God, love, peace, or goodness? What were you doing? Who were you with? (2) Moments of **desolation** —

where did you feel distant from God, agitated, sad, or tempted away from what is good? Notice patterns without judgment. You are not grading yourself — you are learning to see.

#### **Step 4 — Seek Forgiveness (Repentance)**

With honesty and without harshness, acknowledge where you fell short today — a failure in charity, a moment of selfishness, a small dishonesty, an avoided conversation. Bring these to God not with shame, but with trust. Receive His mercy. This is not about cataloguing failures — it is about the humility of recognizing that we are human and God's forgiveness is always available and always waiting.

#### **Step 5 — Look Forward (Intention)**

Close by looking toward tomorrow. Is there a situation, relationship, or challenge coming that will call for virtue or discernment? Set one concrete intention: *"Tomorrow, I will pause before reacting to my coworker."* *"Tomorrow, I will spend five minutes in silent prayer."* Then entrust tomorrow entirely to God. End with a brief, simple prayer of surrender — such as the Our Father.

### **Journaling Alongside the Examen**

Many practitioners find that keeping a dedicated journal dramatically deepens the Examen experience. After completing each step, take a moment to jot down: what you noticed, where consolation or desolation appeared, and what your intention is for tomorrow. Over weeks and months,

patterns will emerge — recurring moments of consolation, characteristic forms of desolation, temptations that follow predictable triggers — and these patterns become the raw material of deeper discernment. Your journal is your personal log of how God moves in your life.

### Tips for Beginners

- **Do not aim for perfection.** Five minutes of honest Examen beats a flawless 15-minute performance. God is pleased by sincerity, not eloquence.
- **If you miss a day, simply begin again.** The Examen is a practice, not a contract. Missing one night does not disqualify you.
- **Start with just the first three steps** if the full five feel overwhelming. Add the others gradually over time.
- **Use a printed prompt card** with the five steps written out until they feel natural and internalized.
- **Do the Examen with your mentor** occasionally — sharing your observations aloud can surface insights you might miss alone.

## SECTION 5

### Practical Discernment in Decision-Making

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Sooner or later, every practitioner of Ignatian discernment faces a real decision — a crossroads in life, a vocational question, a choice between two goods, a moment where the interior map of consolation and desolation must translate into an actual, concrete choice. Ignatius foresaw this and offered a

framework for exactly this situation: the **Three Times for Making a Decision**.

## The Three Times for Making a Decision

| Time                                                     | What It Looks Like                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | How to Respond                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>First Time:</b> A Time of Clarity                     | God moves the soul so clearly and unmistakably — through a powerful interior experience, a clear call, or an undeniable sense of divine direction — that there is no real room for doubt. This is rare, like St. Paul on the road to Damascus.             | Receive it humbly. Verify it with a spiritual director. Act with grateful obedience.                                                                               |
| <b>Second Time:</b> A Time of Consolations & Desolations | The soul experiences alternating movements of consolation and desolation in relation to the decision at hand. One option consistently brings peace; another brings agitation. Discernment involves weighing these movements over time to detect a pattern. | Track your interior reactions over days or weeks. Journal. Pray over each option. Look for the consistent, lasting peace — not the fleeting excitement.            |
| <b>Third Time:</b> A Time of Quiet                       | The soul is neither in clear consolation nor desolation — it is calm and undisturbed. This calls for rational deliberation, weighing pros and cons, using the gifts of reason and imagination that God has given us.                                       | List the advantages and disadvantages of each option. Imagine yourself at death looking back — which choice would you wish you had made? Pray over your reasoning. |

## Tips for Using Discernment in Big Life Decisions

- **Give yourself time.** Authentic discernment rarely happens in a single prayer session. The bigger the decision, the more time it deserves.

Weeks, even months, of prayer may be appropriate for major vocational questions.

- **Pray over options, not outcomes.** Rather than praying for the decision to turn out a certain way, pray to understand which option is more aligned with God's will — even if it is harder.
- **Look for lasting peace, not just initial excitement.** The Evil Spirit can mimic the excitement of a good decision. The Good Spirit's consolation is characterized by depth, stability, and a peace that holds up even under scrutiny.
- **Test the decision against the fruit it produces.** Ignatian tradition: "By their fruits you shall know them." Does this option, when seriously considered, produce generosity, courage, and openness to God? Or does it produce self-centeredness, fear, or spiritual contraction?
- **Involve others.** Discernment is not meant to be done in isolation. A spiritual director, a trusted confessor, or an experienced mentor is invaluable in helping you see past your own blind spots.

### **Common Mistakes Beginners Make**

- **Confusing desire with discernment.** "I really want this, therefore God must want it for me." Not necessarily. Our disordered desires can feel very strong and still not be God's will. Discernment requires honesty about our own self-interest.
- **Making decisions in desolation.** Reviewing Rule 5 is always the right response here. If you are in spiritual desolation, simply do not make the decision yet.
- **Expecting absolute certainty.** Discernment rarely produces a 100% guarantee. It produces a well-founded, prayerful judgment — a "moral certainty" sufficient for action — not a signed letter from heaven.

- **Treating consolation as automatic approval.** The Enemy can produce false consolation, especially in more spiritually advanced persons. A good feeling about a choice is one data point, not the whole story.
- **Discerning alone.** Solo discernment without any external check — a director, a confessor, a community — is an invitation for self-deception.

## **The Role of a Spiritual Director or Mentor**

Ignatius himself was clear: the Rules for Discernment are most powerfully used in the context of a relationship with a wise, experienced guide. A **spiritual director** is not a therapist, a life coach, or someone who tells you what to do. They are a trained, prayerful companion who helps you notice what God is doing in your soul, asks good questions, and helps you distinguish authentic movements of the Spirit from the counterfeits of the enemy or the projections of your own ego. For anyone in a mentorship program, your mentor can serve an important part of this function — especially as you are beginning.

## **SECTION 6**

## **The Beginner's Toolkit**

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### **Five Scripture Verses for Discernment**

These passages have been prayed with and treasured throughout the history of Ignatian spirituality. Consider using one each day of your first week of practice.

**Romans 12:2**

*"Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect."*

#### **1 John 4:1**

*"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."*

#### **Philippians 4:6–7**

*"Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*

#### **Jeremiah 29:13**

*"When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD."*

#### **Psalms 139:23–24**

*"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if*

*there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."*

## Recommended Beginner Reading

| Title                                                                             | Author                     | Why It's Great for Beginners                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living</i>          | Fr. Timothy Gallagher, OMV | The gold standard introductory text. Explains all 14 rules through real-life stories. Warm, clear, and deeply pastoral. Begin here.                          |
| <i>Discerning the Will of God: An Ignatian Guide to Christian Decision Making</i> | Fr. Timothy Gallagher, OMV | A practical companion to the above, focused specifically on applying discernment to real decisions. Excellent for the decision-making chapter of this guide. |
| <i>The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today</i>                     | Fr. Timothy Gallagher, OMV | A short, accessible, and beautiful guide to the Daily Examen — perfect for deepening Section 4 of this guide.                                                |
| <i>God's Voice Within: The Ignatian Way to Discover God's Will</i>                | Mark E. Thibodeaux, SJ     | Accessible and conversational in tone — very approachable for those who find Gallagher a little more formal. Excellent contemporary treatment.               |
| <i>Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality</i>                      | Margaret Silf              | Beautifully written introduction to the whole of Ignatian spirituality for laypeople — a wonderful broader companion to this guide.                          |

## A Sample First Week of Discernment Practice

| Day          | Practice                                                                                             | Reflection Prompt                                                                              |
|--------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Day 1</b> | Read Section 1 of this guide. Do one 10-min Examen.                                                  | When today did I feel closest to God? When did I feel farthest?                                |
| <b>Day 2</b> | Read Section 2. Journal on one consolation and one desolation from the past week.                    | What did the consolation feel like in my body? My heart? My thoughts?                          |
| <b>Day 3</b> | Pray with Romans 12:2. Do the Examen. Read Rules 1-4.                                                | Am I currently in consolation or desolation? How do I know?                                    |
| <b>Day 4</b> | Read Rules 5-8. Identify one area of life where desolation is currently at work.                     | What has desolation been telling me to do? What should I do instead?                           |
| <b>Day 5</b> | Read Rules 9-14. Pray with Psalm 139:23-24.                                                          | Where am I spiritually vulnerable right now? Who or what could reinforce that weakness?        |
| <b>Day 6</b> | Do a longer Examen (20 min). Begin journaling on a current decision using the Three Times framework. | When I imagine choosing Option A, what happens in my heart? Option B?                          |
| <b>Day 7</b> | Rest, pray freely, and meet with your mentor. Share your week's observations.                        | What surprised me most about my interior life this week? What do I want to bring to my mentor? |

## How to Find a Spiritual Director

Finding the right spiritual director is itself an act of discernment, and it may take some time. Here are practical steps to begin:

- **Ask your pastor or parish priest** — many dioceses maintain a list of trained spiritual directors and can offer a referral.

- **Contact your diocesan office** — many dioceses have offices of formation or spirituality that maintain directories of certified directors in your area.
- **Reach out to a local Jesuit community or retreat center** — many offer spiritual direction and often have waiting lists, so begin the inquiry early.
- **Visit Spiritual Directors International ([sdiworld.org](http://sdiworld.org))** — an ecumenical organization with a searchable global directory of trained directors.
- **Be patient and prayerful.** It may take several conversations with different directors before you find the right fit. This is normal and part of the process.

#### **What to Look for in a Spiritual Director**

A good spiritual director is: a person of evident faith and prayer; trained in the tradition of spiritual direction (ideally including Ignatian spirituality); capable of listening more than speaking; someone who helps you hear God's voice — not their own; orthodox in Catholic faith; and someone with whom you feel safe being fully honest. Direction is not therapy — it is companionship on the journey toward God.

## A Closing Prayer for the Discernment Journey

*Lord of all consolation and peace,  
You know the restlessness of my heart  
better than I know it myself.*

*Teach me to listen —  
not to the loudest voice, nor the most urgent,  
but to the still, small voice of Your Spirit  
that whispers beneath all the noise.*

*In consolation, make me humble and grateful.  
In desolation, make me faithful and brave.  
When decisions loom large before me,  
steady my heart and clear my sight.*

*Send me companions for the journey —  
mentors, directors, and friends in faith —  
who will help me see what I cannot see alone.  
And when I am uncertain, remind me  
that You are always more faithful to me  
than I could ever be to You.*

*I place my life, my choices, and my heart  
into Your hands, today and always.  
For Your greater glory, and for the good of souls.*

*Amen.*

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