

The Rhythms of Consolation and Desolation

On Rules 7 8 and 9 of the First Set

(Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, #320-322):

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(This is based on a teaching I gave in the diaconal training programme of the Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth in January 2012. I have been following the excellent text of Timothy Gallagher, The Discernment of Spirits, but in this unit also made use of materials from a course I have given on theology of grace for many years.)

Rules 5 and 6 gave us some instructions on how to act when we are under desolation (i.e. let us not change what we resolved to do under previous consolation, but change ourselves in seeking to overcome the desolation). These three rules (7, 8 and 9) go deeper by giving us instruction on how to think differently about ourselves when in the state of desolation. A different perspective can make a world of difference. We're very unlikely to act differently (rules 5 and 6) if we don't think differently (rules 7, 8 and 9).

A salutary reminder as we begin. The word "desolation" has a number of related meanings, and we need to be aware of the meaning that applies here. Ignatius begins this set of rules by making a distinction between persons who are on the whole moving away from God and those moving towards God. The desolation of the damned, or of those on earth caught in a life of sin, is quite different from the desolation of those who are moving towards God. The first kind of desolation does not coexist with the gift of God's grace; the second does. The rules of the first set are directed towards those who are moving towards God and in this section Ignatius is showing us how to deal with desolation, which can discourage us and impede our journey.

A second distinction we must reiterate is that between spiritual desolation and desolation which is based on physical or psychological causes. A person could be in clinical depression and still experience spiritual consolation. A psychological setback or major disappointment or weakening of health may cause desolation which is not spiritual. That desolation will become spiritual if the person who suffers it goes the next step of moving into self-pity, experiencing distance from God, and discouragement in his/her journey to God.

In this presentation I will start with an image to help us understand these three rules. This image is presented by a fable of Aesop which comes to us via Martin Luther:

A dog holding a bone in his jaw sees himself in a pool of water. He goes for the reflected bone, and in the process of losing the real bone, loses the reflection too.

This fable is an image of our life of grace. The dog represents me (or you); the bone he holds in his mouth is sanctifying grace (not a term Luther would use), which is the genuine presence of God in my heart; the bone reflected in the pool of water is the effect within me of this genuine

presence, an effect I perceive and feel as consolation. Going for the reflection is akin to focusing on my experience of consolation, on my enjoyment of God's presence. But as soon as I do that I lose both the presence and the consolation. There is nothing for the pool to reflect back, and in any event the pool's surface is disturbed.

In this context, the fable suggests that I must keep my focus not on the consolations of God but on the God of consolations. The fable presents the extreme situation in which I totally turn away from God, fall from grace, and make of my own spiritual experience an idol, a source of boasting and security. Instead of finding justification through God's free gift of grace, I seek justification through my self-validating spiritual experience. But there are lesser instances of this in the lives of each one of us. We do not lose our connection with God, but we weaken it because we unduly focus on the experience we have of God and not on the God we experience.

For instance, I am at prayer, and things are going well. I notice what is going on and I start saying to myself. "Wow, I am experiencing consolation. This is great." Instead of simply giving thanks and going back to my prayer and my focus on God, I focus on the experience of consolation. All of a sudden my state of prayer evaporates and I find myself with focus neither on God nor on the consolation, which has disappeared.

In guiding me in my life's journey God has to find the right rhythm for his gift of consolation. If he gives me too much consolation or consolation for too long, I easily end up taking consolation for granted, and eventually the experience of consolation becomes a screen between myself and God. It becomes my anchor, the source of my security towards God. If God gives me too little consolation, God becomes distant and remote for me, and I get discouraged. So the normal course of events for human beings is a rhythm between consolation (the presence of God's grace which I perceive because it affects my consciousness) and desolation (the presence of God's grace which I do not experience because it withdraws from my consciousness). When I am in desolation, I need to remember that I was in consolation before, and to remind myself that I will be in consolation again. I alternate between the two, and that is normal.

This alternation of light (consolation) and darkness (desolation) is part of the Divine Pedagogy. God wants to lead us to himself through felt experiences of his presence without having us cling to those experiences as though they were God. The final word is consolation and light. But the presence of darkness and absence enables us to appreciate the gift of light more profoundly when it does come to us.

Thus at times we will be left with the basic awareness of an emptiness within ourselves. It is as if we hang on to God, hovering over the abyss by an invisible but strong piano wire, which is our faith. God is present but does not feel present. Our act of faith will be dark, but nonetheless in our experience of God's absence we experience his presence in a deeper way. This type of non-experience can easily be monotonous, boring (thus the flood of distractions when prayer is not going well), and it can be positively frightening and dismaying (the dark night of the soul).

At other times we are granted an expanded awareness of God's grace. Faith is then

experienced as a fullness, a light given by God. We feel the psychic fruits of the Spirit: joy, peace, well-being, light, unction, and so on (Galatians 5:22).

The two introductory quotes for Gallagher's chapter on rule 9 say all of this very nicely:

◆ George Herbert:
Yet take Thy way, for sure Thy way is best:
Stretch or contract me, Thy poor debtor:
This is but the tuning of my breast
To make the music better.

◆ John of the Cross:
God's purpose is to make the soul great.

I am like a musical instrument, a guitar or a violin, that needs to be tuned by either tightening up or loosening. And God knows how to do this in me to make my music better. And, as John of the Cross suggests, God does this in order to make the soul great.¹

This experience of alternation between consolation and desolation is unique to each person. Julian of Norwich describes a rapid movement back and forth between the two (p. 110 of Gallagher's book), and others sometimes report a life-long desolation which deepens and purifies their faith, in the hope that in the end all will be well. This appears to have been something of the experience of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. God knows how best to deal with each one of us.

Just experiencing the alternation of consolation and desolation will not help us move forward. One must reflect on that experience as it recurs in our lives, try to discover its patterns, its causes, and ways that help us move out of desolation. We must remember our past and learn its lessons. That is how spiritual progress comes about. This is what these three rules ask us to do. We will now briefly comment on each rule:

Rule 7:

This rule presents the contrast between the state of great fervour which characterizes consolation and being left to one's natural powers in the state of desolation. At the same time if one reads the rule carefully, what Ignatius means is that desolation feels like being left to our own natural powers, with God being totally absent. But still, as he tells us, the divine help is there for us, and we continue to have sufficient grace (as opposed to intense grace) for eternal

¹Allusion to music suggests another artistic image. Consolation has been described as light and desolation as darkness. The deft mixture of lights and shadows are generally needed for a successful painting. It will differ markedly according to the style of the painter and the subject of the painting.

salvation. Sufficient grace was a term often used in theological debates, but its scriptural roots are clear: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor 12:9). We feel we are threatened by the abyss (of alienation from God, of damnation) but we are safe, because we are in the hands of God. Ignatius is inviting the person in desolation to realize that the experience of God’s absence does not mean that God is absent. Thus desolation is not the end of our road towards God; it is a phase of our human journey. Indeed during a period of desolation we can resist the various agitations and temptations of the enemy. Knowing all this gives us strength to face the ordeal.

When in desolation, the Lord leaves us “in trial” in our natural powers. This teaches us that the grace of God is not identical to the consolation that comes from God. By unmasking and resisting the temptations and agitations of the evil one, we learn about ourselves, first our power through the grace of God to successfully wage spiritual combat without the help of a warm feeling of consolation, secondly the areas of weakness through which desolation can insert itself and take over our psyche, and as a result we develop the familiarity and the habitual dispositions which will help us the next time desolation beckons or envelops us.

Rule 8

This rule asks us to “work for patience”. When we are striving for a goal and finding obstacles on the way, we can react with anger: we release pent up energy, often with negative results, at other times summoning us to the extra effort that will get us over the top. We can also react with patience, and often have no choice in the matter: we continue our struggle in a consistent, even-handed way, overcoming the succession of obstacles put before us, learning valuable lessons about ourselves and others in the process. Our available energy is spread out over a period of time, and we learn how to endure through suffering.

The word patience has a scriptural base. God is patient; Christ is patient; patience is a virtue which we are to develop: “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” (Col 3:12) Perhaps the most telling passages that link up with patience in rule 8 are found in Romans:

³ ..we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. (Rom 5:3-5)

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

When we are in desolation, and struggling simply to keep our head above water, these two texts tell us about the patience Ignatius wants us to work for. The first text does not use the word “patience”, but the message is clear. Suffering produces perseverance – akin to patience – in the face of obstacles, patience tempers our character, and that leads us to hope, and we know that hope will not disappoint us because of the love the Spirit pours within our hearts, whether we feel that love or not. The second text points out that what we hope for we do not yet see. In desolation we hope for union with God, but we fail to see, to to experience the warmth of God’s presence. If we fully saw it, experienced it, there would be no reason to hope. All would be given to us. In the meanwhile we wait patiently.

Rule 9:

This rule goes deeper. Rules 7 and 8 give us points for us to consider when we are in desolation, in the hope that this will help us get out of our unpleasant state. Rule 9 tells us more about why God allows this alternation of consolation and desolation in our lives. It further enhances and deepens our understanding. Ignatius gives us three points:

A) Desolation helps us to recognize the areas of our life – especially around our spiritual practices – where we are tepid, slothful, negligent. We learn about our own weaknesses and blind-spots, especially those that are so close to us that we miss them. Often they are at the source of our movement towards desolation or our staying in desolation. For example, a person might be at prayer, and let in some negative emotion, self-pity, anger, envy, whatever. Once that emotion has found a place, it chases out the peace and joy of consolation, and I am left with a feeling of emptiness and futility.

B) Desolation also can have the exact opposite effect. It gives us the opportunity to learn how much we remain committed to God’s service even when we suffer the absence of felt consolations. The values we hold on to when we are in the dark are genuine values, values deeply imbedded within our spirit. The grace of God present within us when we are in desolation is even deeper because we believe and hope in God in spite of appearances to the contrary. Tribulation and desolation test us, temper us, and we find out what we are made of, like Jesus in his temptations.

C) Desolation also helps us learn that we can earn nothing having to do with God’s grace and consolation. They are gifts of God, pure and simple. God does not arbitrarily withdraw his grace, because he wants all of us to be saved, but he often withdraws his felt presence from us and leaves us in desolation to help us learn that we are not God. In this way we avoid vainglory and pride, and attribute all our gifts to God. This is true humility, which is the basis of spiritual progress.