

## CHAPTER VI

### RULES FOR DISCERNING OF SPIRITS

In this world of ours, we are constantly being bombarded with thoughts and ideas; events and occasions. These can influence us to feel good or bad or bored. They can even influence us to act in response to them. Some ideas are good and come from God, perhaps through our Guardian Angels. Some ideas are obviously bad and come from Satan or one of his fallen Angels or from our own fallen nature. Some bad ideas however can seem to be very good and even holy. Satan is after all “The Master of Deceit” and often “poses and an Angel of Light”.

For example, look at all of the various Protestant religions, all claiming to “be inspired by The Holy Ghost” and all believing contradictory things! It is a blasphemy of the Holy Ghost to claim that He would inspire various people to have contradictory beliefs! Obviously untruths come from Satan, who is a liar and fools many. Many believe that what they do is good, when it is in fact very bad and leads many away from the Truth and the Catholic Church and the Sacramental System, which Satan hates.

Often Satan will inspire a soul yearning to do good, to actually do a small good in order to keep him from doing a greater good! For example, I will go to this Right to Life meeting but to do so will cause me to miss Mass this Sunday! Which is more important, going to Mass or attending a meeting for a good purpose? Or I will marry this fine Catholic person and raise a good Catholic family instead of responding to my Vocation to be a Priest or a Brother or a Nun (or visa versa if they do not have a Vocation).

Satan is truly the Master of Deceit and much more clever than we are. So how can we discern if the spirit is from God or not?

In his Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius gives us “Rules For Discerning The Spirits”. The Blessed Virgin Mary gave them to St. Ignatius. These can be found in the book on the Spiritual Exercises by Louis J. Puhl, S.J. published by Loyola University Press in Chicago.

A booklet on them is also available from The Angelus Press in Kansas City Missouri.

Below are excerpts, paraphrases and thoughts from these sources and from the comments of Retreat Masters leading various retreats over the years.

#### **We are all in the battle.**

We must expect to fight continually for the whole of our lives.

We are under the influence of both good (Our Lord, Saints, Angels) and evil (our own fallen nature, passions, demons, etc.). We must refuse the bad influences and accept the good influences.

The trouble is that we often can't see clearly. We are often up against a bad but powerful Angel. We are battling against a powerful and invisible enemy.

We must therefore learn how to discern spirits. We must learn how to distinguish between the good and the bad Spirits.

How do we know if an inspiration is from God or from the Devil or from our own intelligence and will?

The Devil does all in his power to make us believe that he does not exist or to think not of him. It is then that he is able to act with all freedom. This is the reason for all these attempts to deny the existence of the angels. If there are no angels, there would not be any devils. Yet the angels, both the good and the bad are found throughout Holy Scripture.

True, one third of the Angels fell and are against us. But two thirds of the Angels are faithful and want to help us.

A bad angel cannot move our will but God can! A temptation is not a sin. To resist temptation is an opportunity to merit. The saints were often tempted. When we give in to temptation (want it), then is when we sin.

We must acquire mastery of ourselves, master of our passions.



**A GENERAL RULE: Don't play with the Devil.**

As soon as one knows that it comes from the devil, it must be rejected without any discussion. Check to see if God would suggest the thought, if not, it's from the devil! Don't entertain it.

"Playing with the devil" is tarrying with a thought that one knows to be not good, and thus from the devil. Woe to him who consents to dialogue with the devil (who is much stronger than we). Eve succumbed because she "played" with the devil. Instead of cutting him short, she started to discuss the temptation with him. The devil finished by making her fall.

Saint Bernard wrote: "Nobody becomes suddenly bad." Know that it has not happened all of a sudden. For a long time, they have played with the devil.

If you play with the devil, you will lose. Don't entertain "what if" bad thoughts. Reject it as soon as you perceive it's a bad thought or you will fall little by little. He proposes little sins first.

The devil tries to put our minds at ease when we are in sin or are about to sin. The good angels do the opposite. We must not help the devil but must help disturb the conscience of those living in sin. Don't put them at ease. We must not help the devil give them a false peace.

People today are very external and active. They don't know how to be quiet, how to think about life. Beware of too much activity that keeps the mind from thinking, keeps us from internal thoughts. True peace of mind does not come from the devil.

The good angel will give reasons why an idea is bad.

The devil uses our situation against us. Are we tired, sick, have evil friends, etc. Beware of "if" or "maybe" proposals and thoughts.

God also uses good friends and sends us lights. Pay attention to influences. Distinguish between good influences and bad or evil influences. Keep the good and reject the evil.

The devil moves the passions since he cannot move the will. He however wants our will. So he moves our passions: sadness, anxiety, etc. Don't play with it. Say no to sadness. God always gives peace of mind when good is selected.

**FIRST RULE No. 314 (FOR THOSE IN MORTAL SIN).**

The devil proposes certain illusory delights, causing them to imagine sensual pleasures and enjoyments, the more effectively to keep them under the sway of their vicious and sinful course.

The good spirit deals with these same people in the opposite way, working on their consciences in order to induce compunction and remorse.

The evil spirit reassures the sinner and pushes him further and further into sin. He presents to him the objects of sin as the greatest happiness, just as if it were something normal and indispensable: "The whole world is doing it."

The good angel, on the contrary, sends a sting. He stirs one's conscience, this prevents the sinner from being complacent. He uses rational reproaches. He shows him the consequences of sin. The sinner is in the state of damnation, hanging over the pit of hell by the thin thread of life.

The devil: "Don't worry yourself, God is good."  
"Everybody does it."  
"You can confess this on your death bed."  
"You have enough time." "You are young."

The good angel: "With all the intelligence that God gave you, you are the most stupid man in town."  
"You are on the way of perdition."  
"You should make an Ignatian Retreat as soon as possible."  
"You call yourself a benefactor of humanity? You are a public scandal! Children lose their faith just by looking at you."  
"Prepare yourself to render terrific accounts to God, Who has laden you with gifts and to Whom you shall render an account."

Those who reassure the sinner in his sins also play the game of the devil.

This first rule can also be applied to those who, without being in Mortal Sin, are well entrenched in tepidity. The devil reassures one in tepidity, and it is very dangerous for their salvation. The good angel sends him grave warnings.

Woe to those who pay no attention!

## **SECOND RULE No. 315 (FOR THOSE WHO WORK COURAGEOUSLY AT CORRECTING THEIR SINS).**

The evil spirit tries to cause regret and sadness, using false arguments to disturb them and to impede their progress.

It is the role of the good angel to provide courage and strength, to console and inspire, to move to tears, all in a spirit of peace. Everything is made easy; all obstacles are removed, to enable the soul to continue in virtue.

Saint Ignatius gives us six signs by which to recognize the evil spirit who seeks to tempt those who progress in virtue.

### **SIGNS OF THE DEVIL:**

#### **1. Sadness.**

"A saint sad is a sad saint," said Saint Francis de Sales. The devil is eternally sad. He cannot get rid of his sadness.

\*\* When the devil attempts to tempt a fervent soul, under the appearance of good, one of the signs for recognizing that it is the devil, is this sadness that we feel overcoming us.

For example, you leave the Confessional content and then are suddenly struck by sadness. The devil is trying to take away your peace of mind. Ignore him.

Beware of these melancholic dreams! One may not realize, but the devil is not far off!

## **2. Regret.**

The devil tries to disturb one's soul by filling them with doubts about their good actions. He tries to destroy your peace of mind. He tries to confuse you. Don't listen to him.

The devil: "Oh I wonder if I made a sacrilegious confession?"

The good angel would tell you why and in what way you would have made a sacrilegious confession. There would be no doubt.

The devil would make the seminarian wonder if he really has a vocation.

The good angel would tell him clearly why he does not have a vocation.

If there is doubt then it is from the devil. If it is clear, it is from the good angel.

## **3. Impediments.**

The devil excels in making the practice of virtue seem too difficult. He blows out of proportion all the difficulties.

The devil: "Oh it is too hard to live a Christian marriage!"

"Oh the horror at the thought of not appearing like the rest of the world."

"Oh this panic pregnancy must end in infanticide."

"Oh it would be too difficult to drive 130 miles in order to go to Mass."

The devil inflates all the difficulties and at the same time hides that which renders the Christian life easy: flight from occasions of sin, prayer, the sacraments, the profound joys of a Christian family, the eternal bliss, etc.

## **4. Disturbance.**

"All trouble comes from the devil," said Saint John Berchmans, including moody temperaments and vivid emotions.

When there is tension in the family, know that the devil is near. Foolish things are said or done. One must warn the children of feelings of anger or pride, which the devil makes use of.

## **5. Fallacious Reasoning.**

Fallacious reasoning is an unmistakable sign of the devil. One must be very skeptical of certain false theories, of certain slogans, which engender many sins, and often grave sins against the faith, against justice or charity.

The devil: "They can choose their own religion when they grow up." Ha! They may not live so long! They have right to know the Truth and consequences now. Failure to teach (and show) children these things is a grave injustice.

"Father we will have only one child; that way, we will bring him up better." Do not be deceived! One does not bring up a single child better.

"I did not ask God (or my parents, or etc.) to come into the world..." At which moment, sir, should they have asked your permission?

## **6. Discouragement.**

Discouragement is the work of the devil. You have begun well, all of a sudden your courage dries up – the devil has passed by.

The good angel provides courage, peace, and joy and makes all things easy!

“You have prayed for the conversion of your children, or parents, or spouse for ten years and still they resist! What’s the use?” Pray for another ten years and ten more after that. Never give up and yield to the devil’s temptation to discourage your good efforts. The harder it is the more merit in perseverance.

You realize that you must straighten out your life, come back to the Traditional Mass and sacraments but know those close to you will object and may even get very mad. You are thereby discouraged and keep putting it off. Know that the devil is near. Ignore him. If you love them, give them your good example.

God sends us what we need. Sometimes he sends crosses and the graces to carry them. Sometimes he sends us reasons to fall on our knees and pray. Sometimes these “reasons” last a lifetime.

Trials do not break a man. They are used to measure what he is: strong or weak, brave or cowardly, fervent or tepid. Never become discouraged!

**THIRD RULE No. 316 (SPIRITUAL CONSOLATION) and FOURTH RULE No. 317 (SPIRITUAL DESOLATION).**

During spiritual consolation, the soul glows with love for its Creator and Lord. It may even shed sweet tears leading to love of God, either out of sorrow for sin or for the sufferings of Christ, or for other reasons connected with His service or praise. There is an inner joy, peace and tranquillity.

During spiritual desolation there may be a darkness of soul, disquiet of mind, an attraction to what is coarse and earthly, or dryness during prayers.

“In times of consolation, God gives us sugar. In times of desolation, He gives us steak as tough as leather.”

The devil has often been victorious over generous souls because of a false idea concerning spiritual consolation and desolation.

Many Christians wrongly confuse consolation with progress in the spiritual life and desolation with regression.

Do not imagine that you are more holy because you feel spiritual consolations (eg..after Communion, a heart filled with good feelings.) Do not become discouraged and believe that you are diminishing in holiness because you have temptations, no matter how evil they are.

It is easy to pray when we receive consolations. It is harder to pray when we receive desolations. There is more merit when it is hard but we persevere anyway, than when it is easy. Many saints continuously resisted great temptations and years of desolation and thereby received many graces.

Therefore do not believe that you waste your time trying to pray when all you have is desolation. Then is the time to merit.

It is during the years of desolation that many saints make the most progress in virtue. Levels that could never have been reached without these trials. God often brings good out of evil. Father Vallet points out that God permits the devil to tempt us, in order to help us advance rapidly in holiness.

Don’t correlate the way we “feel” with holiness. The way we “feel” is not necessarily the way it is.

**FIFTH RULE No. 318 (DON’T MAKE A CHANGE DURING DESOLATION).**

In a period of distress we are not to alter anything, but should remain firm and unyielding in our resolutions on the day preceding the distress or during the preceding consolation. For, in times of comfort, it is the good angel that guides us by his counsel, whereas, in distress, it is the evil spirit. The evil spirit's advice will never bring us to a right decision.

It is prohibited to change resolutions during the time of desolation because it is then that the devil is active. It is also possible to have false consolations, which come from the devil. During true consolations it is always God who is acting. It is sometimes easy to make a mistake.

#### **SIXTH RULE No. 319 (THE COUNTER ATTACK).**

In time of desolation, there is great value in increasing your prayers, meditations, and penances rather than decrease them. The devil uses false reasoning when he suggests that you drop boring prayers because "they are a waste of time". They are not a waste of time. They are an opportunity to grow in virtue.

St. Ignatius suggests that as soon as you are tempted, multiply the acts of the opposite virtue. Are you tempted to gluttony? Fast! Tempted to anger? Keep quiet! Tempted to hate? Pray for your enemy! Tempted to pride? Humble yourself! Tempted to sensuality? Do penance! This is how to become a saint.

St. Ignatius indicates four types of easy counter-attack:

1. Prayer
2. Meditation
3. Fervent Examination of Conscience
4. A little Penance such as three Hail Marys while kneeling on your fingers or a decade of the Rosary with your arms outstretched or a little sacrifice at the table. The devil fears that.

Believe in prayer which is all powerful. Saint Alphonsus said: "He who prays will be saved, he who does not pray will be damned!" Think about it.

#### **SEVENTH RULE No. 320 (DO NOT BELIEVE ALL IS LOST BECAUSE OUR LORD IS HIDING).**

When one is in desolation, he should remember that God has left him to his natural powers to resist the different agitations and temptations of the enemy in order to try him. He can resist with the help of God, which always remains, though he may not clearly perceive it.

Our Lord will never leave you without sufficient grace.

#### **EIGHTH RULE No. 321 (BE PATIENT)**

When in desolation strive to abide in patience. Patience means to suffer and wait and to have confidence and hope! Sweet consolations will soon return.

#### **NINTH RULE No. 322 (WHY DOES A GOOD GOD PERMIT TEMPTATION?)**

There are three principal reasons why we suffer from desolation:

1. Punishment: We have been tepid and slothful or negligent in our exercises of piety, and so through our own fault spiritual consolation has been taken away.
2. Heroic Virtue: God wishes to test us, to see how much we are worth and to show how far we are able to advance in God's service and praise without a great reward of comforts and extraordinary favors.

3. A Lesson: God wishes to give us a clear understanding and insight of ourselves. God does not wish us to rise up in spirit, in a certain pride and vainglory and attribute to ourselves the devotion and other effects of spiritual consolation.

**TENTH AND ELEVENTH RULE Nos. 323 and 324. (WHAT TO DO DURING CONSOLATION).**

When all is going well, take advantage of it to practice the virtues and gain merits.

Build up your strength for the next desolation.

Humble yourself as much as possible. Do not make known to others the great graces you have received (pride).

**TWELFTH RULE No. 325 (THE ENEMY IS WEAK IF FACE OF OPPOSITION).**

The enemy is a weakling before a show of strength, and a tyrant if he has his will.

When a man does the precise opposite to what the enemy suggests, his assailants turn tail and run.

On the other hand, if the man begins to feel panic and to lose heart, there is no animal on earth so savage as is the enemy of our human nature in ever-growing malice, with which he carries out his evil plan.

The devil becomes terrible if he sees us hesitate. Don't hesitate at all. At the first realization of the devil's attack immediately say: "Begone Satan!" and pray a Hail Mary or ejaculations.

Remember the principle: "One must not play with the devil!"

Saint Augustine's famous saying about the devil: "He is able to bark, but not to bite unless allowed to".

**THIRTEENTH RULE No. 326 (THE DEVIL IMITATES A SEDUCER).**

He is like a seducer in his desire to remain disguised and undetected.

"Do not tell you father, do not tell your husband. Otherwise, your game will be up from the very beginning."

The devil fears his traps will be revealed to our confessor or spiritual director or to a man of God who is familiar with his tricks. When he introduces into a faithful soul his lying suggestions, he is very anxious that these should be accepted and kept secret. He realizes that his wicked attempt will fail, once his obvious tricks are revealed.

**FOURTEENTH RULE No. 327 (THE ENEMY ATTACKS THE WEAKEST POINT).**

Like a military commander, the enemy launches his attack at our weakest point. What is your weakest point? Do you like to eat...to drink...be lazy....be imprudent....read anything indiscriminately...careless in selecting friends, too sensitive to criticism, etc? Then you know ahead of time where he will strike.

Often he will attack us through those close to us who may be weaker than we are. We will be tempted to condone their errors, for fear that they will get angry if we do not.