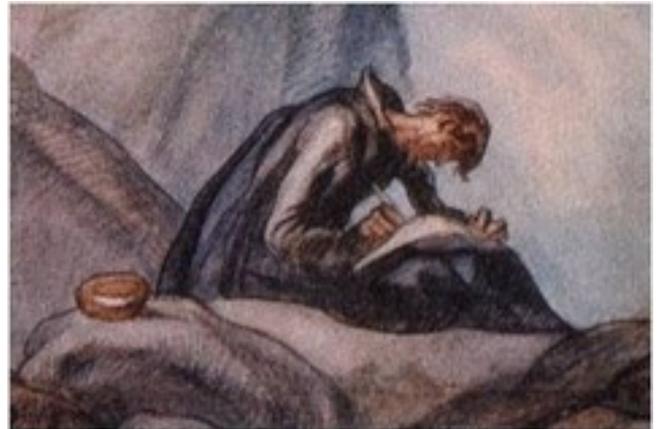


Consolation and Desolation

The Ignatian tradition helps us understand the inner life by providing a vocabulary with which to talk about it. Ignatius took the maelstrom of our feeling and emotions and classified them into two broad categories. One he called “consolation.” This describes feelings that move us toward God and others. Consolation is any felt increase in faith, hope, and love that leads to a holy peace. It is commonly experienced as feelings of peace, serenity, and joy. But consolation also includes feelings of sadness about circumstances and personal shortcomings as long as these lead to a resolve to draw closer to God.

The other category of feelings is “desolation.” This is the opposite of consolation. That is, desolation takes us away from love of God and others. It is commonly experienced as a troubled spirit: anxiety, restlessness, doubt, upset. It sometimes includes feelings of pride and smugness about a life centered on pleasure. One of the surest signs of desolation is spiritual lethargy. Typically, a person in desolation is not naturally inclined to pray. God seems nowhere to be found, and it’s not worth the trouble to establish contact.



Consolation and *desolation* are somewhat old-fashioned words coined in a previous era of spiritual writing, but they are quite familiar emotional states. Nearly five hundred years of Ignatian discernment and spiritual direction haven’t produced language that describes these states any better. Consolation and desolation are not rarefied spiritual states of bliss and despair. They are feelings—and the thoughts connected to feelings—that we experience all the time in the midst of daily life.

We can identify these states by looking at where they are pointing. True consolation points toward God and other people. We are happy, joyous, and at peace because we are joined with others. Our work is bearing fruit. Our family is happy. Desolation points us away from God. We’re unhappy because our desires are thwarted. People don’t respect us. We’re all alone in a cruel world.

Consolation feels like coming home. Desolation feels like having lost our way home. Home is where we belong. It’s where God is. It’s where we find our right place in the human community. It’s where we find the answer to the question, What do I really want?

Reflection on our emotions can thus become a trustworthy tool for making decisions. Generally speaking, consolation is the work of the Holy Spirit and desolation the work of the evil spirit. We want to make decisions associated with consolation. This is something of an oversimplification—discernment of spirits is tricky business. But the language of consolation and desolation is extraordinarily helpful. It makes our emotional life part of our decision making.

From *What’s Your Decision?: How to Make Choices with Confidence and Clarity, An Ignatian Approach*. By J. Michael Sparough, S.J., Jim Manney, and Tim Hipskind, S.J. Loyola Press, ©2010 pp. 61-63. Used with permission.