

From the Ignatian Tradition

ON CONSOLATION

Jerónimo Nadal

*Jerónimo Nadal (1507-1580) did much to consolidate the foundation of the Society of Jesus, above all through his visitations of significant communities in Spain and Portugal. This issue's **From the Ignatian Tradition** is an anthology of passages from Nadal's writings on consolation. We begin with an extended passage from a talk he gave at Alcalá in 1561, and continue with some passages from the spiritual diary which Nadal kept from the time of his joining the Jesuits in 1545 until shortly before his death.¹ The diary particularly enables us to sense how the Ignatian teaching arises from quite particular personal experience. More generally, we can see Nadal negotiating tensions inherent in the tradition. How is freedom under God to be reconciled with the need for some kind of control? How can we preserve a dynamic sense of prayer informing ministry and not degenerate into mere functionalism?*

To the Jesuits at Alcalá, November 1561

So, what are you going to do with consolations?

It's important that you understand why God our Lord is giving them to you, what it is that God is wanting with them. It is so that you do what you have to do with greater perfection; so that you understand with greater light and clarity what you were dealing with earlier; so that you desire more eagerly and truly and with more lively desires to employ yourselves in what belongs to the divine service, and have more strength for this. You do badly to lose yourself totally in consolations, and to vanish into them; you are not taking what is most important into account. A person like that is here opening the door to

¹ The originals are to be found in MHSJ MN 5, 481-484, and *Orationis observationes*.

the devil for very dangerous deceits and errors. *Utendum est consolatione, non fruendum*—consolation is for use, not enjoyment. Consolation has to be taken as a means and as a gift that our Lord makes, and not as an end—it is not for resting in, but for taking as a down payment enabling you to move forward.

And so that you understand what concerns this material: there are two kinds of consolation; some are of the understanding and others of the will. Those of the understanding go like this. You begin to meditate on the things of God our Lord with Catholic trains of thought, drawing on faith and on the natural light of the understanding. God our Lord in His infinite mercy and goodness is wanting to give you a personal mercy and gift, and thus to strengthen your understanding, to give you more clarity and light with which the intellectual sight of interior things can be sharpened; and this can grow, with the Lord's help, so much that there is such facility and such abstraction that the senses are no longer necessary. And these are called *ecstasies* when the senses are set aside and the whole understanding is captivated by the consideration of divine things. God our Lord at this point is giving another, new way of understanding, well known among those who have the use of the 'senses' and who derive awareness of things with their service and help.²

There are also *raptures*, and these are substantially the same as ecstasy. There is a difference in that ecstasy grows little by little until it finds itself in that state, as I said to you, while rapture is immediate, without helps from the senses coming first, neither from meditation nor contemplation, of the kind you see in ecstasy. So it was with St Paul's rapture.³

These things are not to be sought in prayer, nor are you to go to prayer for this purpose. And when God our Lord in his mercy gives them, they are to be taken with humility and simplicity, with the person recognising that they merit nothing of any of that, and making greater acts of humility the more mercies they recognise that they are

² Nadal is a believer in the 'spiritual senses', special or transformed faculties that come into play in exalted prayer states, and refers to them here allusively.

³ 2 Corinthians 12:2-4: 'I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.'

receiving from God's hand, and spurring themselves, encouraging themselves to serve their Lord more.

The consolation of the will is a *concursus*⁴ that God our Lord gives it in accord with its nature. It is that the will's feelings and activities should be gentle, intimate, united to God; and from here tears arise—from the abundance of consolation the heart melts, and from that the tears flow. These tears are good, and a sign of the great gifts that God our Lord is giving the person—and the person should make great efforts to move forward in the divine service. There are also tears of sadness in these consolations, at seeing one's soul separated from what it loves so much and not able to go and enjoy at once what it so much desires. And all these consolations are difficult to explain. And there are also tears of sadness at one's own sins and those of others.

It remains for us to say how we are to handle these things. I say you should deal with them by the ordinary way, through common terms—that it should be for the building up of the Church; and if you do not hold on to that, it is better that you keep quiet. These interior matters have to be explained in the way that they are spoken of in the Church. And you can make very great use of the afterglow of prayer to discuss these things firmly and with assurance, as one who has much knowledge, as one who is master of the subject. But those who say everything do badly and err, and do not please God our Lord, who wants to have his secret friends, and does not give these things to be revealed. Those who go about saying, 'I saw this and that in my prayer', do not please me, because the things in question are things that they just feel like; and when they might be true, God does not give them for this purpose. They are not to be made public without the advice of spiritual persons. And, finally, all these interior things are to be subjected to the legitimate judgment of one's superiors, in order to avoid the errors which customarily occur.



⁴ A technical term within accounts of divine and human action that see no contradiction between divine omnipotence and human freedom.

From Nadal's Prayer Notes

SAYING OF FR IGNATIUS. In good decisions, if there is some consolation, and then desolation comes, this is a confirmation of the earlier intention.⁵ (n.3, 1545)

There are two modes of spiritual life; one through desolations; the other through consolations. The former is generally of greater merit, if only your spirit stands in purity of faith, hope and charity without sensible consolation. However, I do not think this has ever happened to anyone—which seems to be indicated in the first chapter of 2 Corinthians.⁶ (n.25, 1546?)

PERCEPTIBLE CONSOLATION IS NOT TO BE SOUGHT. I⁷ was a person whose prayers seemed to aim at my being consoled and serving God in gladness. But it was shown to me that I should feel the inappropriateness of my sins, and pray on account of them. Thus I was not to pray for perceptible consolation, but rather to understand that I was worthy of all desolation and punishment. And if consolations were to be sought, I should understand that this should be on condition that they help promote the greater glory of God, and that, quite simply, the will of God be done. (n.150, 1546-1547)

Perceptible workings of the spirit and interior relishes and consolations, even as they fill the soul with gentleness and simplicity, are nevertheless to be observed diligently and attentively in case they are extended to things other than that for the sake of which they have taken on their effectiveness and helpfulness. For ... it might happen that the one who is superior interprets everything in a favourable way, naively, and never reproves or corrects someone under him. And so it is worth establishing a taste for a second virtue, while at the same time

⁵ This saying dates from the time of Nadal's entry into the Jesuits.

⁶ The connection here is not quite clear. 2 Corinthians opens with an evocation of God's consolation and of how human beings can mediate it, and later Paul evokes a particularly painful experience: '... we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again' (2 Corinthians 1:8-10).

⁷ In the original, Nadal describes his own experience in the third person.

preserving that for the one which you already have;⁸ and by nature and grace the person should use the particular virtue, the particular relish, needed in order to act according to both commandments and precepts.⁹ (n.239, after 1552)

There is one rationale for joy when it comes from penitence, and another for the joy which comes from other spiritual exercises—different, in other words, arising from the different roots from which the joy comes. The former is a matter of tears, containing sadness and cherishing it, but also joyful; the latter is a joy of exultation which does not go easily with sadness. Thus, arising from the difference in object, there is a difference in the rationale for joy. (n.294, ca.1555)

Spiritual consolations follow spiritual virtues (charity, faith, hope, contemplation, prayer, gifts of the spirit)—just as other virtues are followed by their consolations. For to act virtuously is to act with relish. (n.380, 1556-1557)

Take great care not to use inappropriately the light of consolation or the grace of your vocation. For you can use these well and badly; however, they are not given except to be used, whether publicly or privately. (n.437, 1557)

After two days of desolation, which seemed to be to do with lack of courage, a spirit of large-heartedness was given me, greater than I had ever felt, centred on these things about the Society and about bringing heretics back into faith and union with the Apostolic See. This large-heartedness was linked with a facility in being humble towards any human being whatever.

The Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son; thus through that missioning it comes about that the Spirit's being led forth eternally and infinitely is felt in the spirit, by some means that cannot be recounted.

⁸ In the immediate context, Nadal has been discussing conflict between the duties of obedience and a person's own common sense. Perhaps because this is a difficult topic, his language here becomes obscure. Throughout these notes, Nadal's writing draws on Aristotelian virtue theory, and in particular on the claim that the virtues dispose us emotionally to behave in good ways. His point is that these dispositions can take us too far—perhaps a sub-Aristotelian version of Ignatius' teaching about the angel of darkness appearing as an angel of light. 'The virtue you already have' is presumably obedience. The text is worth including because of its rare and frank admission that Jesuits need to discern critically their trained disposition to do what they are told.

⁹ Both divine commandments applying to everyone, and the 'evangelical counsels' of poverty, chastity and obedience, applying to those called in a special way.

When I was meditating on how the Apostles, having received the Holy Spirit, spoke of the marvels of God, nothing occurred to me that I should speak of before the sins from which the Lord had freed me.

Some thoughts were disturbing me, and as I was praying against them in Mass, a certain spirit of repugnance was given me through which those thoughts were dissipated. For the repugnance was of such a kind, as though a perceptible grace in the gentleness of the heart coming from outside had expelled them with an invisible strength. Glory be to Christ Jesus. (nn.483-486, 1558)

When ugly thoughts press and disturb us, we must take effective and deliberate control in Christ and his cross, and turn our attention to acts of the will, even though we can maintain only the weakest hold on some good object. And the whole force of our will should thrust out towards this object (of course in due proportion).

Those whom a perceptible grace touches, either of their vocation or a private one, tend to be negligent in uprooting vices and in planting virtues in their spirits. Therefore careful and diligent attention needs to be given that such grace be not neglected—and so much so that those consolations should make us more vigilant, becoming weapons and resources by which we will be helped against our vices, and incited to impress virtues on our spirits. This will happen if we always join humility and fear to those spiritual apprehensions and relishes. Is this what Paul means—‘do not become proud, but stand in awe’—and when he tells them to taste with sobriety?¹⁰

A kind of door was opened up to me, beyond all visible things, in darkness. (nn.503-504, 1558)

This too is to be observed: consolations are not to be sought just for their own sake, but as resources for helping one’s neighbour—whether one is studying, or a coadjutor, or a spiritual coadjutor or a professed father.¹¹ It is here that there is a source of consolation and perfect patience in tribulation. (n.534, 1559?)

It is generally more to be feared, and more carefully to be watched for, that we shall err when we are dealing with consolation of spirit than in

¹⁰ Allusions to Romans 11: 20 and 12: 3, Vulgate.

¹¹ Nadal is here referring to different grades of membership in the Society.

desolation. For desolation tends to make us cautious and intimidated; consolation makes us more confident and inattentive—in other words this is about our vice and negligence, not about any incapacity in true consolation. (n.672, date uncertain).

‘When Jesus was twelve years old’ (Luke 2). Christ Jesus is teaching us how to handle our ministries. We move away from the presence of Christ, in other words from contemplation and prayer, to action, thinking that he is in our companionship and that his strength is in our action. But our negligence brings it about that we lose this sense, this spiritual meaning, in our action. We return to Jerusalem, to prayer; we seek Christ in our sorrow, and we find him. In other words, consolation of spirit. Gently, devoutly, we make our complaint and reveal our sorrow to Christ. But he does not reproach us for our mean-spiritedness, because in our action, even though we do not have an actual sense and consolation of the spirit, nevertheless we must trust that Christ is with us in those things which are his Father’s business: that is, in our ministries which he gave us in order to work with us. Indeed, now it is not we who are working, but Christ who is working in us and we are working with Christ. Impress, Lord God, on our heart that spiritual sense that all the actions of Jesus Christ, his sufferings, his death, his mysteries, his merits are indeed of God, as well as of this human person. Hence the divine strength; hence the exultation of spirit; hence the heavenly strength from God; hence the doors open into the gifts of God. (nn.942, 1574-1575?)

When consolation is given, do not fail to co-operate with it, but rather gently receive it, so to speak, and—as it requires this—co-operate spiritually in joyfulness of heart.

God’s light and the sense or intimation of divine strength exists through divine gift. We co-operate with it not of ourselves, but through the strength that is in it, very strongly indeed, but also very peacefully and very gently in Christ. (n.951, 1574-1575)