

DISCERNING THE SPIRITS WORKS

A Recent Example in Early Morning

John Smith

I LIVE ON A ISLAND in the Pacific Ocean, one hundred miles off the north-west coast of Canada. My main source of heating is wood, and my water flows from heaven. Recently I set up a system with a thousand-gallon tank to collect the rain from the roof of my mobile home. And only three days ago I finished replacing the kitchen and bathroom sinks as well as the toilet. I felt so proud. Everything had been rusty because the well water I used before is full of iron and manganese; it is not fit even for cooking.

In his Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, St Ignatius explains some of the tactics the enemy will use to plunge us into desolation. He says: ‘... it is characteristic of the evil spirit to cause gnawing anxiety, to sadden and to set up false obstacles. In this way he unsettles these persons by false reasons aimed at preventing their progress.’ (Exx 315) Because I am a controller, I panic and become very anxious when I am not in control, even in little things. As sure as day follows night, I end up in desolation. The positive side of this is that I am now more aware of my destructive pattern and I am managing (not controlling!) these events a lot better. I have come to realise that desolation for me is to be robbed of my peace and inner harmony—it’s that simple. It doesn’t have to be a major catastrophe. Anxiety is enough—it is my weak point for the enemy to attack.

My alarm goes off at five o’clock, and what an effort it is to get out of my warm nest into an icy room! The wood stove dies about an hour after I go to bed. Last night was our first heavy frost. As I fumbled my way towards the bathroom, I heard the water pump starting and stopping, and my heart just about stopped too. Talk about being out of

control, false reasoning and anxiety! My imagination went crazy, even though I was half asleep. The worst had happened. Despite the insulation, one of the pipes had burst. Or worse still, the thousand-gallon plastic tank had split. No water. It's Saturday, on an island. And it's winter. I can't walk down to the beach and bathe.

The adrenaline kicked in. It's amazing how it warms you up. I slid my cold pants over my pyjamas, grabbed a flashlight, and ran in the pitch dark to the sound of gushing water. The hollow sound of the tank said it was empty, and my heart sank to my boots. All I could do was unplug the motor and hope it was not burned out. I would have to wait till daylight to see whether my nightmare had come true.

On my way back inside I began talking to myself. Here's the gist of my conversation:

John, keep cool. Don't panic. Remember the other times when you feared the worst and it didn't happen. You are into distorted thinking. Remember how you usually handle desolation and return to consolation.

Ignatius tells us to store up a good bank account of consolations so that we can draw on it in desolation. Up until this I had been blessed with much consolation and had been banking it away for a rainy day. At five-thirty I headed to my prayer room for my hour of contemplation. I picked up my Bible and went to my favourite passage, John 17:9-15, which never fails to restore consolation. Here Jesus is praying for *me*. He prays that I may be one as he is one with the Father; that I may have his joy; and that I may be delivered from the evil one. When I am in desolation I feel abandoned, alone, vulnerable, sad, lonely, helpless, scared and very anxious. I have lost my peace. This for me is evil and frightening. I piggy-back on Jesus' prayer and tell him how I feel. My desire is for him to deliver me from this evil and restore my peace. I sit for the hour.

My hour followed this pattern. By the end I felt relaxed, hopeful and at peace. The problem still loomed before me; I felt anxious too, but the difference was that I felt grounded and rooted in peace. The storm still raged on the surface, while below I was at peace—just how I experience the ocean across the road from me when it storms. I call this kind of consolation 'hard consolation'; it seems to be the natural route from desolation to full consolation. My thought pattern became

more positive and realistic as I remembered the millions who have no water at all.

After breakfast I sat down to Office of Readings and Morning Prayer with a mug of coffee. Being so relaxed, I fell asleep for forty minutes. At first light I went to inspect the damage. Peeling off the insulation on the hose was like being a surgeon opening up a patient, not knowing what he would find. I couldn't believe my eyes! The tank had obviously sunk under the weight of the water, and the hose had become detached. There was no damage at all. Just nine hundred gallons down the drain. And the miracle continued. I noticed that the clamp was loose, which meant the plumber had not tightened it when we installed it two months ago; the hose had just slid off. Had it been securely tightened, something would have had to break with the weight of the tank sinking. A break where the hose joined the surface of the tank would have resulted in the tank bursting. Gratitude welled up in me. While I thanked Jesus I also thanked myself. I tried to imagine how I would have felt had I spent five hours worrying—for nothing!

This was a powerful growing experience for me. My confidence in handling desolation shot up. I am now reading *Ignatius of Loyola* by Karl Rahner, in which Rahner writes a letter to the Jesuits as though he were Ignatius. Two points are important for me here. One is that Rahner, speaking through Ignatius, confidently proclaims that he experienced God. The other is Ignatius' inner freedom, as Rahner reports it, to deal with the possibility of his Society collapsing: 'I would not need more than ten minutes to be near to God and at peace again'.

I felt something of that freedom. From experience, I know that Discernment of Spirits works in everyday life, in little and in big events. I know too that John 17:9-15 works, every time. What a grace! Don't get me wrong; it's no magic wand. The guru who was asked to explain his sense of peace and tranquillity said: 'Well, before I was enlightened I was depressed. And after I became enlightened I am still depressed!' It's all about the storm on the surface of the ocean and the calm below.

As I reflect on my experience, Ignatius' 'Finding God in All Things' is making sense. I experienced God at five in the morning in a sinking water-tank and gushing water! How? I was catapulted into desolation, but through getting my focus off myself and on to Jesus I experienced salvation in the raw, with the peace that results. I

experienced death and resurrection in the mundane. I see more clearly the similarity in the movements between desolation and consolation on the one hand, and between death and resurrection on the other. Because of this connection, the daily Eucharist is taking on a whole new meaning. Desolation and consolation are the bread and butter of spiritual growth. The more I become aware of the movements of the spirits, the clearer the pattern of death and resurrection is in my daily life. In the Eucharist I celebrate desolation and consolation. These are the concrete, tangible and messy ways in which I experience death and resurrection daily.

Tomorrow morning, if I am alive, I will pick up John 17:9-15 again. But this time I will be expressing my profound gratitude for my consolation. I will read the passage, and my prayer will be something like this:

Thank you, Jesus, for rescuing me from the evil one. Thank you that I feel at one with you again. Thank you for the deep joy I am experiencing.

And I will let that joy wash over me for the hour.

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