

IN TIME OF CONSOLATION ONE SHOULD MAKE CHANGE

The Underlying Message of the Fifth Rule for the Discernment of Spirits

Ignacio Iglesias

[318] During a time of desolation one should never make a change. Instead, one should remain firm and constant in the resolutions and in the decision which one had on the day before the desolation, or in a decision in which one was during a previous time of consolation. For just as the good spirit is chiefly the one who guides and counsels us in time of consolation, so it is the evil spirit who does this in time of desolation. By following his counsels we can never find the way to a right decision.

IS THERE NOT, as counterpart to this text, one that might be formulated more or less as follows? *In time of consolation one should always make changes, following on the resolutions and decision produced during a previous verified consolation. For, just as in desolation it is more the evil spirit who moves us, so in consolation it is the good spirit who guides and counsels us, and by following his counsels we can find the right way.*

Obviously Ignatius never explicitly formulated such a rule, but he did suggest it in coded language by the tenor of this rule itself and by two of the rules that follow, the sixth and the ninth (Exx 319 and 322). I think it is our task to try to uncover it, not for purely academic reasons, but because of its great practical importance.

To 'Make Changes', to 'Adapt', to 'Alter' ...

Words of this nature are often used by Ignatius to suggest the dynamic process of revision and election required when making a decision. They involve an objective aspect: actions to be taken (with regard to the preambles to prayer, to the additions, to time and place, to the topics of prayer, even to the previous resolution or decision).¹ But they also refer

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¹ See Exx 49, 89, 105, 119, 130, 133, 206, 229, 244, 247, 318, 319.

to a subjective dynamic: a conscious willed process through which the exercitant, while receiving the transforming action of God, brings about a change or resists desolation:

... to have no desire ... unless the Divine Majesty has put proper order into those desires and ... so changed one's earlier attachment ... (Exx 16).

... it is often useful to make some change ... (Exx 89).

... it is very profitable to make vigorous changes in ourselves against the desolation ... (Exx 319).

... in desolation ... we may prove ourselves by resisting the various agitations and temptations of the enemy ... (Exx 320).

... consolation will return again, through the diligent efforts against the desolation which were suggested ... (Exx 321).

In any case, both aspects require and signify, in addition and above all, an action, a 'gift' from God, which is absolutely necessary if the exercitant is consciously to set any change in motion: 'I should beg God our Lord to be pleased to move my will and to put into my mind what I ought to do ...' (Exx 180). Ignatius himself describes an occasion when God 'set in motion' one of the foundational changes of his life and his own reaction:

And being one day in a church some miles before arrival in Rome and making prayer, he sensed such a change in his soul and he saw so clearly ... that he would not have the wilfulness to have any doubt about this.²

He also records the transformation that was brought about in some of his companions at the Sorbonne: 'These made major changes in their lives'.³ And as he dictated the account of how he tore himself away from Loyola, the scribe added the note, 'His brother, and some of those in the house, suspected that he wanted to make some kind of major change'.⁴

Neither of the two aspects, the objective and the subjective, should be isolated from the other. They need to be linked, as Ignatius indicates, in the deepest part of the personality, that point where desire and affection join, which is where God 'moves' and 'changes', without encroaching

² *Autobiography*, n. 96.

³ *Autobiography*, n. 77.

⁴ *Autobiography*, n. 12.

upon the freedom of the individual—rather the contrary: ‘unless the Divine Majesty has put proper order into those desires, and has by this means so changed one’s earlier attachment’ (Exx 16). This ‘giving of a right direction’, which is how God ‘changes’ (transforms), requires in the one who is freely to ‘change’ the light by which to ‘find the right way’ (Exx 318).

Who ‘Guides and Counsels’? The Key to Finding the Right Way in All ‘Change’

For St Paul what is involved in allowing ourselves to be guided in this way is nothing less than our kinship with God: ‘For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God’ (Romans 8:14). The consolation (defined by Ignatius as the interior movement of love that increases ‘hope, faith and charity’ [Exx 316]) is the guiding *wind* of the Spirit. The signs of it are clarity, light, strength, peace. These are the ideal conditions for someone about to make an election and to take a decision on the right lines; the exercitant can make a move and accept a change in what has to be done because he or she is aware of being moved by God.

What this involves are not only the particular decisions that may lead to particular ‘changes’, but also the general, permanent election or the chain of choices that make up a life. In this ‘choice of a way’, which is to live one’s life as way of choices, it is essential not to stop. To cease to choose is to come to a halt. It would not be living life in its fullness—a life that springs from a freedom set free that can constantly be ‘right’ because it has the full light of consolation, thanks to which we can become (and remain) lucid.

The Subtle Temptation That Besets the Person in Consolation

To ‘remain firm and constant in the resolutions and in the decision’ (Exx 318) is not the same as halting and settling down in what has been gained. The crude temptation of desolation is to take off and run away, to avoid the trial, sometimes desperately! The urge is to escape from it by any means possible, with a ‘change of place’ that is more like a self-willed flight than the truly humble search for enlightenment that Ignatius suggests (Exx 321–322). However, the subtle temptation of consolation, or rather of the person in consolation, is to settle down, to rest comfortably in what has been enjoyed, not to ‘move out’, and not to allow anyone to move you on. This is Peter’s ‘Lord, it is good for us to be here’, when consoled on the Mount of the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:4).



Pilgrims in Sight of the Celestial City, by Henry Dawson

This is the temptation that inverts the good desire (not to ‘make any change’ in the good ‘resolutions and decision’ made with the light of consolation) so that it turns in upon itself and confines us; we end up simply not wanting any change at all. As exercitants we have lost the path that was leading onwards. The security gained from the consolation has been converted into a personal hoard. Now we fear the risk of allowing ourselves to be shifted away from an initial attachment (Exx 16–17); we forget that life is a search and permanent ‘election’ for the future city. The need is felt to defend the city that has been won at all costs: to defend it even from the aggression of consolation itself—the Spirit!—the driving force that urges us to continue moving out of ourselves and to risk a love that is new. Instead the way forward—the constant moving that is essential, the progress, the growth, the risk-taking ‘in his name’, the ‘more’—that way is blocked. And yet it should be clear that the looked-for security comes not from a possessive clinging to consolation, but from a God constantly searched for, the God *semper maior* who always ‘makes me his own’, even as ‘straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal’ (Philippians 3:12–14).

It is surely this that Ignatius had in mind when describing the ‘three chief causes for the desolation in which we find ourselves’ (Exx 322). The relationship with the Consoler is obliterated and we appropriate the consolation received as due to personal merit. We forget the elementary

fact that 'everything you have given me is from you' (John 17:7). Instead of moving in the world of the children of God, which is one of pure gift, we are left with 'our own powers' (Exx 320). A self-induced blindness has taken over, and to make any change while under that influence would be suicidal. The sole remedy is to return once more to the utter indebtedness of the tax-collector at prayer (Luke 18:13), who claims no merit for himself but seeks and asks for a grace he does not claim to deserve, 'in patience' (Exx 321), 'resisting the various agitations and temptations of the enemy ... with God's help ... sufficient grace'. We continue to trust that it will be possible to regain our 'abundant fervour, augmented love, and intensive grace' (Exx 320), in other words the consolation that will allow us to 'find the way' (Exx 318) again and not halt along the path.

Availability—Consolation

The major aim for us, our goal, is neither consolation nor desolation, which are states of mind, but rather the *availability*, the readiness, that is our basic attitude as children of God. Consolation strengthens this, just as desolation weakens it. Both help it to mature and grow, just as, inversely, they themselves are assisted or prevented by this availability. Consolation is the wind in its sails, but if the person in consolation pulls in those sails, the boat stands still. The temptation, then, is to try 'change' in a self-willed way, rowing furiously and vainly, especially if desolation brings a contrary wind and the sailor lacks the skill to raise the sails or seek advice.

It is consolation that has brought about the great 'shifts' in the history of Christianity: the experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, of St Paul, of St Francis of Assisi, of St Ignatius. It is the gentle breeze of God found in little daily 'changes'. Not to feel it, not to go along with it, not to seek it, because of some self-satisfaction, would not be just to have stopped, but rather to have started along a route of diminishment and regression.

The prayer proper to consolation is not linked to the joy felt, but rather to a *question*. It goes with the sense of availability, that of the person who lives life as an election. Throughout the Exercises the typical prayer of Ignatius is that of the question. This begins with the first meditations (Exx 56); then the petitionary prayer for internal knowledge questions the Lord about why he lived, acted and spoke as he did; the whole process of the *election* is basically a question, 'What do you want from me, Lord?' ... 'Where is the greater service and praise of God our Lord to be found?' And the 'right way' ends in the Contemplation to Attain Love with the

quest for total availability. What the Exercises aim to produce are men and women who are ready and willing, who are available. This is the permanent state of ‘questioning-change’, which is neither caprice, nor the desperate condition of a person fighting to escape from the cage of desolation. Rather, it is the state of those born anew, those open to the unceasing wind of the Spirit: ‘The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ (John 3:8)

A beautiful example of the prayer of consolation that takes the form of a question is to be found in the *Spiritual Diary* of St Ignatius:

Later, in the chapel, praying gently and quietly it seemed to me that at first my devotion had for its object the Trinity, then it took me elsewhere, for example to the Father: in this way I felt within me a wanting to communicate with me from different directions—so that eventually while arranging the altar, my feelings found voice in the prayer, ‘Where do you wish to take me, Lord?’ I repeated this many times: my devotion increased greatly, drawing me to weep. Later, while I prayed on vesting, I offered myself, very moved and with tears, to be guided and taken etc. through all these stages wheresoever He might take me, being over me. After I had vested, I did not know where to begin. Then I took Jesus for my guide; I also appropriated to each Person His own prayer; in this way I reached the third part of the mass receiving considerable grace to assist me, a warm devotion and a great satisfaction of soul. There were no tears nor (so I believe) any disordered desire to have them: I contented myself with the Lord’s will. However I did say, turning to Jesus, ‘Lord, where am I going, or where ... etc.? Following you, my Lord, I cannot be lost.’⁵

This text can also serve as an authentic hermeneutic guide to explain many of the phenomena mentioned in the Rules that form the subject of the present commentary.

The Temptation of Collective Consolation

The points that have been raised about ‘making a change’ by an individual (which is the area dealt with by Ignatius)—both the negative warning against change that is motivated by desolation and the positive recommendation of change that springs from consolation, each as usually expressed—are also valid in the social and spiritual spheres of collective

⁵ Diary, 5 March 1544.

groups and institutions. In fact I would dare to say that these points are even more relevant. When there is a collective desolation, the mad urge to 'change things' at all costs and in all directions ends up becoming a desperate struggle just to survive or a series of self-willed authoritarian gestures. The result is often mutual aggressiveness and blame, leading to the disintegration of the group or its descent into depression, a loss of identity and a herd mentality.

Equally harmful, though for the opposite reason, can be the collective consolation that has brought a group to a certain level of ideal success and self-satisfaction; results seem assured and publicly recognised. Then the subtle temptation described above can threaten the group. The consolation, instead of being a strength and a stimulus to change becomes a right, a treasure to be preserved and defended against any alterations. When this happens, the group is on the slippery slope downwards. Self-satisfaction becomes bourgeois complacency. The 'future desolation' (Exx 323) may not be far off.

One may even envisage the process as one of cycles of expansion and decadence that succeed one another inexorably. Basically these occur in response to the openness and availability of individuals (or of the collective) to the renovating impetus of consolation, or, on the other hand, to the self-interested appropriation of that consolation, which is just the contrary of availability and saves us the risk of making those changes that are constantly set in motion by the one 'who makes all things new'.

Several different paralyzing reactions may then begin to threaten us, though we can ward them off with the help of the gift of discernment of spirits. One such reaction goes from self-esteem (the joyful acknowledgement of the energies and gifts of the Spirit) to self-satisfaction (self-complacency in the gifts, as if they were ours); or from the feeling of a true achievement (obtained thanks to grace) to a sanctification of achievement (as something that is untouchable); or even from the concept of the starting point (such as all authentic consolation should be) to the illusion of a definitive arrival at the finishing line. The whole idea of finishing lines is a human invention and encourages self-will, competitiveness and envy. Not infrequently it ends as the opposite of 'consolation without cause', namely 'desolation with cause'.

God does not set up finishing lines or final goals; God is the only goal: 'Come to me' God provides us with *ways*. However, we may turn back along such ways and fail to follow them step by step, with constant *change*, as the way broadens into ever greater love. Then we begin to slip

and fall back along an inward slope of ever greater egoism and dissipation (the divine tension of consolation is weakened). It soon becomes clear that reform is needed, but not simply an outward improvement of the façade or a strengthening of antiquated structures. The roots need to be tended, and that is the role of consolation—both in the case of the individual and in that of the collective.

All the reforms in the Church have needed men and women blessed with the gentle rain of consolation, even if they also have to endure the occasional storm. At some point that consolation will move them ‘to make vigorous changes in ourselves’. Then the sails have to be fully hoisted and advantage taken of all the winds available, even those that seem contrary, full of the energy of God, the Holy Spirit. Just as Ignatius did, they have to realise in themselves ‘some great change’, which will give them once more the freedom of the children of God, so that, like St Paul, they are no longer ‘conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of [their] minds, so that [they] may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect’ (Romans 12:2).

Consolation is by its very essence (as Ignatius well knew from experience) the deepest transforming power that exists, one that brings about permanent ‘changes’, the effect in the human being of the creative and re-creative love of God.

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