DISCERNMENT IS A HUMAN CAPACITY as old as humanity itself. From the beginning, men and women have had to take decisions, to make choices: what have I got to do? Or, what should I do? What is good; what is bad? To take good decisions or to make good choices men and women rely on their experience: what went well; what did not? They rely also on their conscience, that most intimate centre of a human being. Discernment is a fundamental human capacity—then and now. And to discern, human beings use that capacity to reflect on their experience.

From the very beginning of the Church, Christian teachers and theologians have spoken about ‘spiritual discernment’, emphasizing that discernment has something to do with the Spirit: the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. In using our capacity to discern, they believe that God’s Spirit is our best guide in taking decisions about life. Spiritual discernment is our human capacity to discern illuminated by God’s Spirit. The light that illuminates our discernment comes from the Spirit. It is a gift given by God. It is God’s work in us; it is not ‘our’ work. But how can we know that it is really God’s Spirit who is guiding us? An answer can be found in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola.

A Spiritual Journey

Ignatius’ specific contribution to the tradition of spiritual discernment is the ‘discernment of the spirits’ and the ‘Rules’ that he proposes to help with this. The Spiritual Exercises are a spiritual and prayerful journey, a process that leads to a decision, an election about the future of our life.¹ The aim of this spiritual journey is to find out—gradually—what God’s desire for our life is, so that God’s desire can become our own desire.

The journey starts as a path to inner freedom. A first step will be to discover, in prayerful meditation, how God’s mercy is always greater than our sins, than our infidelity. Retreatants, touched by God’s mercy, then feel a desire to be an answer to God’s love themselves. But how should they proceed? Ignatius proposes that they should contemplate the life of Jesus. This contemplation, day by day, will help the retreatants to discover how their lives can be more and more in tune with Jesus Christ, the image of God’s love. The contemplation of Jesus’ life in the Gospels—to see the persons involved, to hear what they say, to see what they are doing—is at the heart of this prayerful journey.

It is important during this day-by-day contemplation to become aware of the inner movements that the contemplation is provoking in our hearts. Normally, retreatants will not remain unaffected by contemplating Jesus’ life. So, what touched them in contemplating a particular event? And how did it touch them? Did they experience peace, joy, trust, harmony? Or did they experience disturbance, darkness, disquiet? Ignatius calls the positive inner movements consolation (Exx 316) and the negative ones desolation (Exx 317).

We arrive here at the centre of Ignatius’ vision of spiritual discernment. He proposes that retreatants make a review (Exx 77, 62, 118) of each contemplation, noting what happened during the contemplation, especially what the inner movements were. This review of the inner movements is essential in Ignatius’ pedagogy. It will help retreatants to discern how God was speaking to them during their prayer. Without inner movements there is no discernment in the Spiritual Exercises: are the inner movements coming from the good spirit or the bad spirit?

Before exploring the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, it makes sense to ask ourselves what Ignatius means by the good and the bad spirit. When, at the beginning of the book of the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius presents the General Examen of Conscience, he writes:

> I presuppose that there are three kinds of thought processes in me, one sort which are properly mine and arise simply from liberty and will, and two other sorts which come from outside, one from the good spirit and the other from the bad (Exx 32).

In the anthropology of Ignatius’ time, thoughts coming from outside were considered as coming from ‘spirits’, having intelligence and will but no body. These spirits look to communicate with human persons, suggesting ideas or images that touch them in their inner selves. Such beings may be called ‘spirits’ or ‘angels’, and they may be good or bad.
Modern psychology has a different approach. It accepts that there are some thoughts that are really my thoughts, and there are other thoughts about which I wonder where they are coming from. They are not from outside (as in the anthropology of Ignatius’ time) but from my unconscious. There are, thus, thoughts and images which affect me and which come from my intellect and will, and there are thoughts and ideas that I undergo and which could become mine if I assent. These can be good or bad. ‘Inner movements’ means, in Ignatius’ terminology, being affected in our inner self.

Are ‘inner movements’ movements of our human affectivity? When we look at the sea we will see waves; they can be very high and strong, they can be more moderate, and sometimes the sea can be quite flat with very small waves. These waves nevertheless say nothing about the current in the depths of the ocean. The ‘inner movements’ Ignatius speaks about are not what we experience immediately when we have strong emotions; they are in the depths of our personality. Certainly, they are a part of our human affectivity, but they are more than that. If Ignatius speaks about ‘spiritual’ consolation and ‘spiritual’ desolation, he wants to underline that these ‘inner movements’ are a part of our spiritual life, of our life in the Spirit.

### Rules for Spiritual Discernment

There are two sets of Rules for Discernment in the book of the *Spiritual Exercises*, written for the one who gives the Exercises. After the title (Exx 313) and the general framework—is the retreatant a person who is going from one deadly sin to another (Exx 314), or is he or she going from good to better (Exx 315)?—there follows the description of consolation (Exx 316) and desolation (Exx 317). These paragraphs (Exx 314, 315, 316, 317) form an introduction both to the Rules for the First Week and those for the Second Week.

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Then follow ten rules (Exx 318–327) that are most suitable for the First Week, or for whoever is at the beginning of the spiritual journey. Nearly all these ten rules concern desolation. Why? Because at the beginning of the spiritual journey of the Exercises—meditating on their sins and infidelity—desolation could lead retreatants more easily away from the way they want to go in following Jesus. The purpose of these ten rules is to help the retreatants manage the movements of desolation well, so that they can resist them in the future. The aim of this first set of rules is not so much to discern where the desolation is coming from, but to learn how to manage it well.

The second set (Exx 328–336) is composed of eight rules, all concerning consolation, and is more appropriate for the next stage of the spiritual journey. Continuing this journey, contemplating the life of Jesus, the danger is no longer being tempted by desolation—retreatants know how to manage that—but being deceived by false consolation. The aim of this second set of rules is thus to discern if a consolation is a true consolation—a movement caused by God or God’s good angel—or a pseudo-consolation caused by a bad angel, ‘an angel who takes the form of an angel of light’ (Exx 332).

Let us go deeper into these rules for spiritual discernment. The title at the beginning of the first set says:

Rules by which to perceive [sentir] and understand [conocer] to some extent the various movements produced in the soul. The good that they may be accepted, and the bad, that they may be rejected. Rules more suitable for the First Week. (Exx 313)

Sentir and conocer: it looks as if sentir concerns affectivity and conocer the intellect. But things are not as easy as that in Ignatian vocabulary. Sentir means here to become aware of what touched me interiorly, of what affected my heart or, in the expression Ignatius uses in this context, to become aware of the ‘inner movements’ I experience.

Michael Ivens translates the famous last sentence of the second Annotation as follows: ‘It is not much knowledge but the inner feeling and relish of things that fills and satisfies the soul’ (Exx 2). The

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Spanish text says: ‘No el mucho saber harta y satisface al ánima, mas el sentir y gustar de las cosas internamente’. George Ganss translates it: ‘For what fills and satisfies the soul consists, not in knowing much, but in our understanding the realities profoundly and in savouring them interiorly’.4

The interiority or inner self of the retreatant is a central concept in the Spiritual Exercises. It appears regularly in the grace for which retreatants should ask at the beginning of a contemplation, for example, during the Second Week: ‘To ask for inner knowledge of the Lord’ (Exx 104), or in the Contemplation to Attain Love: ‘To ask for interior knowledge of all the good I have received’ (Exx 233). Interior knowledge is a knowledge that affects the retreatant in his or her innermost self. Affectivity and intellect are thus related to one another.

Let us go back to the title of the first set of Rules for Discernment (Exx 313). Ivens translates the text as: ‘Rules by which to perceive and understand to some extent the various movements produced in the soul ….’ Inner movements are experienced at the level of our deeper affectivity, and to perceive those inner movements is already an exercise of the intellect.5 It is to become aware of the inner movements, to become conscious of the movements I experience and to give them a name, to understand them, so that I am able to accept the good inner movements and reject the bad ones.

The Rules will help in this process, which takes place in different stages: the starting point is just the experience of being affected (by this or that aspect of a contemplation of the life of Jesus); a second step is the perception I have of being affected by my contemplation. A third step will be to understand these inner movements by identification: is it consolation or desolation?

Reading the description that Ignatius gives of consolation and desolation, it is important to note where the inner movement is leading us. Reading Exx 316, it appears clearly that consolation leads the retreatant ‘to a greater love of God’. Desolation leads to ‘a lack of confidence in which one feels oneself to be without hope and without love …. One finds oneself … as though cut off from one’s Creator and Lord.’ (Exx 317)

4 Autobiography, nn. 6–10.
5 Robert, Autre Connaissance de Dieu, 131–139.
Can desolation come from God? In a letter of 18 June 1536 to Teresa Rejadell, Ignatius writes: ‘I shall speak, though briefly, about two lessons that the Lord is accustomed to give, or at least permit (he gives the one and permits the other)’. But even if God permits desolation itself, persons in desolation should keep in mind how much they can do if they draw strength from their Creator and Lord, having the grace sufficient to resist every enemy, as Ignatius says in the eleventh rule of the first set (Exx 324). How, then, can we manage desolation well?

- In a time of desolation we should not make changes to former decisions, because in desolation we mostly hear from the bad spirit, which will give us bad counsel. Nevertheless, we can orientate ourselves in the opposite direction from the way the desolation is leading us. For example, if the desolation is isolating us within ourselves, we can make little steps towards doing something for others. In doing so we make it possible for a positive dynamic to emerge and prepare the way for consolation. During a time of desolation we should not remain passive; we have to act, even if it is only by these small steps. We can transform a time of desolation into a time of spiritual growth. (Exx 318–319)

- We can live this time of desolation as a time of testing. Even if we are left to our natural powers, without the strength of the gift

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of consolation—nevertheless there will be always be sufficient grace for eternal salvation. (Exx 320)

- It can be a time to exercise our patience. (Exx 321)
- It can become a test for our generosity. How generous am I in God’s service when I have no consolation? (Exx 322)
- It can help us to become modest. We are not the ones who give consolation. (Exx 322)
- The cause of the desolation can be found in ourselves, when we are lukewarm, lazy or careless in the practices of the spiritual life. (Exx 322)
- When we are in consolation we should gather renewed strength for the time of desolation which will come. In a time of consolation we can grow in humility by thinking how little we value ourselves in time of desolation. (Exx 323–324)

Three attitudes can help us to manage temptations.

- When we are tempted, we have to stop the temptation immediately. Principiis obsta (resist the beginnings) as the monks in the Middle Ages said. We have to resist strongly. Ignatius uses the image of a quarrel between a man and a woman to describe the way of proceeding of the bad spirit who is trying to bring a person into temptation. It is the only place in the Spiritual Exercises where the bad spirit is compared to a woman! (Exx 325)

- The second attitude is to be open with a person we trust: to speak about the temptation. The image here is that of a woman with a false lover. When the woman reveals the bad intentions of the lover to someone else, the lover’s plan will not succeed. (Exx 326)

- The third attitude is to be vigilant. It is important to know our weak points, our limits. But it is not enough to know them; we have to learn to accept them and to respect them. The image here is that of a military leader who inspects the weak points of the enemy’s fortifications, so that he knows where to attack them. (Exx 327)

7 Compare Ovid, Remedia amoris, l. 91.
Consolation Comes First

It is not just by chance that the description of consolation (Exx 316) precedes the description of desolation (Exx 317). Consolation comes first; it is much more important than desolation. Consolation remains always at the horizon. Consolation is a safe guide on our spiritual journey; desolation is not. The description of desolation is not much more than the contrary of the consolation. Only consolation is a guiding star on our spiritual journey. Consolation is a gift from God. It is the way God is speaking to us, the way God communicates God’s infinite goodness to us.

We find this same fundamental conviction in the way Ignatius begins and finishes his letters. He begins the letter to Teresa Rejadell already quoted as follows: ‘May the grace and love of Christ Our Lord be always in our favour and assist us’. The letter finishes with: ‘I end by praying the most Holy Trinity to give us, through their infinite and supreme goodness, the fullness of grace, so that we may feel their most holy will and fulfil it completely’ (this is the same for 992 of his 6,815 letters!).

Rules for a More Advanced Discernment of Spirits

The Rules for the First Week helped us to manage desolation. Used well, they made us more resistant, more humble, more patient, more vigilant in the spiritual combat that is ours. During the First Week we have to fight against desolation. By contrast, consolation has to be accepted; we never need to resist consolation. In the Second Week, we do not have to fight against the false consolation, but against the thoughts coming from the bad angel.

Having experienced God’s mercy at the end of the First Week, retreatants then feel a deep desire to make their lives more in tune with Jesus Christ, the image of God’s mercy. They will now contemplate the life of Jesus, to find out how to do this. The meditation on the Two Standards teaches them that the bad spirit is still there, now ready to deceive them rather than bring desolation. They have to know that the bad spirit can ‘assume the form of an angel of light’. The eight Rules Ignatius proposes now will help the retreatants to fix their vision on God.

8 Robert, Autre Connaissance de Dieu, 149.
9 Robert, Autre Connaissance de Dieu, 151.
10 Robert, Autre Connaissance de Dieu, 149.
• If the description of consolation (Exx 316) emphasizes the aim of consolation—to grow in love of God, our Creator and Lord—in the second set of Rules the emphasis is much more on its origin: where is the consolation coming from? The answer is clear: consolation is given by God, or by God’s angel, the good angel. So, it is a circular movement: consolation is coming from God and it leads us to God. This means that each consolation is deepening our relationship with God. Consolation is never given just for itself; the aim of each consolation is to deepen our relationship with God, our Creator and Lord, so that our life can be directed to God’s glory and to the common good. (Exx 329)

• God is sovereign. God can give us consolation without any cause, just in order to communicate God’s love. Ignatius explains ‘without cause’: ‘I mean without any previous perception [sentimiento] or understanding [conociemiento] of some object due to which such consolation could come about’. Here again ‘perception’ and ‘understanding’ derive from the verbs sentir and conocer. That a consolation without cause is a real possibility is a fundamental conviction of Ignatius. It is, for example, what happens during ‘the first time of making a sound and good election. When God our Lord so moves and attracts the will that without doubting or being able to doubt, the faithful soul follows what is shown.’ (Exx 175) If experience teaches us that this first time is not the normal way for making an election, it is nevertheless not exceptional. (Exx 330)

• Analysing consolation without cause more precisely, Ignatius warns retreatants in the Eighth Rule:

>When consolation is without cause, even though there is no deception in it (since as has been said, it comes solely from God our Lord), nevertheless the spiritual person to whom God gives this consolation must scrutinize the experience carefully and attentively, so as to distinguish the precise time of the actual consolation from the period following it, during which the soul is still aglow and favoured with the benefits and after-effects of the consolation now passed.

Even if the consolation was pure grace, it could be possible for the retreatant to make a decision in the period immediately after this grace, thinking that the decision is given directly by God. So, we have to examine well, says Ignatius, what is the grace given by God, and what is the result of my own thoughts and decisions. (Exx 336)
According to the Third Rule: ‘When there is a cause, consolation can be given by the good or the bad angel, but these give consolation for opposite purposes’. Therefore it will be necessary to discern if the consolation is a true consolation, coming from the good angel, or if it is a false consolation, coming from the bad angel. (Exx 331)

The next three rules (Exx 332, 333, 334) propose a way of proceeding to find out if a consolation is coming from the bad spirit and so to discover whether it is a false consolation.

First of all, it is important to know that the bad angel, when he chooses to deceive, ‘assumes the form of an angel of light’. He enters through the door of the devout soul, to bring it ‘little by little’ to his ‘perverted purposes’. (Exx 332)

Secondly, it is important to ‘pay close attention to the whole course of our thoughts. If beginning, middle and end are entirely good, this is a sign of the good angel.’ But if the ‘course of our thoughts leads us finally to something bad and makes us weakened, upset or distressed’ it is ‘a clear sign of the bad spirit’. (Exx 333)

Thirdly, ‘If the bad angel has been recognised by his serpent’s tail’, it is important to ‘retrace the whole sequence of good thoughts he has suggested’, so to discover how ‘little by little he brought us to his depraved intention’. (Exx 334)

Only by experience do we become more sensitive to the way of proceeding of the bad angel. The experience of all our true consolations in the past—the memory of the heart—will help us to discover ever more rapidly when the bad angel is at work.

The Seventh Rule describes the situation of a person who has learnt much from his or her experience of discerning the bad from the good angel:

With those who go from good to better, the good angel touches the soul gently, lightly, and sweetly, like a drop of water into a sponge … the good angel comes in quietly, as one would enter one’s own house by an open door.

The one who goes from good to better recognises the good angel with a deep familiarity. Every true consolation deepens that person’s intimacy with God, the Giver of all good. A person who
Spiritual Discernment

is familiar—connatural—with God and all that is good recognises the bad angel in false consolation immediately and faultlessly.\textsuperscript{11} (Exx 335)

There is a text in the Constitutions which reminds us of this last quoted passage from the Spiritual Exercises. It is the text which describes the qualities the Superior General should have:

The first quality is that he should be closely united with God our Lord and have familiarity with him in prayer and in all his operations, so that from him, the fountain of all good, he may so much the better obtain for the whole Society a large share of his gifts and graces, as well as great power and effectiveness for all the means to be employed for the help of souls (Constitutions, IX.2.1 [723]).

We never receive consolation just for ourselves.

\textbf{The Horizon That Is God}

We have to fight against the bad spirit, but it is the consolation given by God or God’s good angel that will show the way we can live more in tune with Christ and so better serve his Kingdom. Because the bad spirit tries to divert us from the way in which we can accomplish our most profound vocation as men and women, Ignatius calls the bad spirit the ‘enemy of our human nature’.

The context makes it clear that retreatants are involved in a combat between good and bad, and that the bad spirit wants to tear them away from themselves, away from their deeper vocation. Patience and perseverance, as we saw, are important attitudes during desolation. Resistance to the temptations of the bad spirit is necessary. Vigilance, to avoid being attacked

\footnote{\textsuperscript{11} See Jules Toner, \textit{A Commentary on Saint Ignatius’ Rules for the Discernment of Spirits: A Guide to the Principles and Practice} (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1982), 238–239.}
at our weak points, is another attitude necessary in a time of desolation. We need inner strength. Therefore, during a time of consolation or in a tranquil time we have to exercise ourselves in patience, modesty, humility, generosity and in all the other virtues.

We must never lose the horizon that is God, who invites us to a relationship, a relationship of love which fulfils our deepest aspirations. Only consolation will maintain us on the track. Consolation is a gift from God, who communicates Godself—God’s love—in this way; consolation deepens our relationship with God. If the bad spirit tries to weaken us, the good spirit, the angel of God, helps us on our way to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord (Exx 23).

Mark Rotsaert SJ is a Flemish Jesuit. He has been novice master for the North Belgium and Dutch Provinces, twice provincial of the North Belgium Province, President of the Conference of European Jesuit Provincials, superior of the Jesuit community at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, and is currently senior research fellow at Campion Hall, Oxford. He has translated the Spiritual Exercises, the Spiritual Diary, and about forty letters of Ignatius into Dutch, and collaborated in a Dutch edition of the Autobiography.