

Hearing the Voice of God Within

What is God Saying

St. Ignatius was a womanising, party boy soldier before he was hit with a cannonball. He had to take several weeks of bed rest to recover. He quickly became bored and asked for some reading material, however, all that was available in the house was an account of the life of Jesus and several accounts of the lives of various saints – including St. Francis, who had turned down his position in his wealthy father's business to dedicate his life to serving the church and serving the poor.

As Ignatius read these accounts, he encountered God in a powerful way and was transformed. He recalls that in the weeks that followed, he found himself daydreaming about two ways he could live his life once he had recovered. Some days he would dream of military glory – climbing up the ranks and winning praise from his neighbours, friends and family for his skill and accomplishments. Other days he would dream of becoming a saint like Francis – dedicating his life to helping those in need, proclaiming the gospel and equipping the church. Both dreams appealed to him. They both excited him and made him happy. However, he found his dream to become a saint left him with a long-lasting, deep and profound happiness. Whereas, when it came to his dream to continue as a soldier, as he dwelt on it a little longer, and as he tried to imagine what his life would be like in ten, twenty, thirty years' time, the happiness began to fade.

He ended up choosing to be a saint and lived a life filled with joy and peace. God did amazing work in and through him – work that has affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in the five hundred years since.

Ignatius' experience making a choice about what to do with his life left its mark on him. For the rest of his life, he was interested in how we discern the voice of God – how is it we know what God is calling us to.

Ignatius came to believe – and I think he is right! – that most of the time when we desire something in our spirits (rather than the simple desires we have in our bodies for food, shelter etc.), it is because a spirit is acting upon us and enticing us. Ignatius identified two spirits that act on us: the **false spirit** and the **true spirit**. The false spirit is the devil and all that comes from him – childhood trauma, insecurity, being overworked and underappreciated, fear, depression, anxiety, hunger and tiredness. There are times in our lives when the false spirit causes us to desire things. (An extreme example would be spirits, hunger and childhood trauma all working together to cause us to desire intoxication as a coping mechanism). The true spirit is God and all that comes from him – a positive childhood, confidence, safety, a balanced workload, a good night's sleep and a full stomach. We also know of times in our lives when the true spirit causes us to desire things – when a good night's sleep, a balanced workload and the Holy Spirit all work together to cause us to want to pray, go for a nice walk, serve the poor or read a good book.

The aim of the false spirit is to lead us into a spiritual state called **desolation**. And the aim of the true spirit is to lead us into **consolation**.

When we hear the word “desolation” we think of being stressed and anxious because of trauma, busyness or grief in our life. And when we hear “consolation” we think of being happy because our life is simple, filled with enough rest, food and fun.

That’s not quite what Ignatius means. You can have many stressful and painful things happen in your life and still be in the spiritual state of consolation. Conversely, you can have an easy life with all your needs provided for and be in the state of desolation.

Whether you have lots of stressful and painful things in your life or not, this is what desolation and consolation look like:

In desolation: (You’ll find some or all of these)	In consolation: (You’ll find some or all of these)
You find yourself lacking or decreasing in faith, hope and love.	You are filled with trust in God, experience hope that he will set things right and are growing in love for God and others.
You find it hard to feel or be aware of God’s presence with you.	You are aware of God’s caring and loving presence with you – either through your circumstances or in spite of them.
Your circumstances (good and bad) cause you to feel restless and agitated – you are overly eager to change things. You are confused about what will happen next and what to do and that upsets you.	In the midst of your circumstances (good and bad) you have a deep sense of peace beneath any pain or stress. You may be unsure about what comes next, but you are confident God will be with you in it.
You are easily bored and apathetic. You don’t care about how well you are doing or whether you are growing.	You find yourself growing in passion – you desire more and more (to create, to love, to worship, to honour God etc.)
Your actions are driven by fear and worry.	
You become more secretive – you don’t let anyone else know that you are in a state of desolation. You start hiding things you are doing from your friend, spouse or mentor.	You find yourself opening up to those close to you. If you need confession or accountability, you seek it out.

For Ignatius, discerning what God is saying is simple (even if it takes a lifetime to master): learn to tell the difference between what the false spirit causes you to desire and what the true spirit causes you desire, and then go with the true. That is the desire that has come from God. That is what God wants you to do.

Here’s a step-by-step process that may help you to do that:

Step 1: Lay the Foundation

It's very hard to hear from God when you are in desolation, so in as much as it is in your control, wait until you are in consolation to make big decisions. Sometimes, you can't do much to help that, but praying, resting, eating well and exercising can help.

Remember why you are put on earth – what your purpose is. Each of us have unique particulars to our purpose (our individual callings), but the core of our purpose we have in common. We are all here to grow in union and happiness with God, grow into the character of Jesus and to bring glory to God. Find some space away from distractions to be quiet for a decent amount of time. Become aware of God's presence with you. (This is tougher, although not impossible, if you aren't praying every day.) If you've got two or three different options you desire, ask God to help you to be happy with any option. If you can't help but want one of the options more than the other, tell God that you choose for his will to be done either way – even if your emotions aren't quite there at the moment.

Step 2: Observe

Research the different options available to you. Write them out in a list and find out what would be involved if you followed them through.

Take note of what it is you desire. These will often be competing desires. (For example, part of you may want to change jobs and part of you may want to stay put.)

Prayerfully daydream about the two or three options available to you. Ask God to help you see what life would be like if you picked each option.

Step 3: Interpret

As you daydreamed, desire would have swelled within you. The prospect of going down one path or another would have made you happy or excited. Now ask, which of these dreams left me in consolation, and which of these dreams left me in desolation?

- In which of these dreams was I filled with peace, hope, love and a sense of the closeness of God, and in which did God feel more distant?
- Which left me with good desires, and which left me desiring things I know aren't really good for me.
- Which dreams am I excited to share with friends, families, mentors and ministers, and which do I feel tempted to hide?
- Which lead to a deep-down peace, a sense of 'fits just right' and energy, and which made me feel fearful, worried, agitated, bored or apathetic?

Ask God to show you which of the desires of your spirit come from the true spirit and which ones from the false. Seek help from a trusted friend to direct you. Draw on the Bible and the teachings of the church to help you understand. (The true spirit will never contradict the Bible.)

Step 4: Respond

If you discern that one of the desires comes from the false spirit, let it go. If one comes from the true, go for it. If they all feel 'neutral', trust God is with you and will bless you whichever way you go. Hand the decision over to God. Imagine yourself literally handing it to Him, asking him to affirm it or do away with it if it isn't what he desires. Start to act as if you've made that decision – taking steps that

aren't permanent (yet). If you're feeling a sense of consolation and have others affirming you as you move forward, it's probably the right decision.

Most of this material is drawn from Mark E. Thibodeaux's 'God's Voice Within: The Ignatian Way to Discover God's Will.' Check it out for more information.