Making wise decisions is one of the most important skills in life. We often don’t know how.

Saint Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits and the “the world’s first psychologist,” was a master decision maker. His “Rules for Discernment” have helped millions of people make good life decisions for more than 450 years.

God desires that we make good decisions, and God will help us do so. The “discernment of spirits” is a way by which we come to understand God’s will for us. It involves reflecting on interior movements and seeing whether the “good spirit” or the “false spirit” is acting on us. We follow the action of the good spirit and reject the action of the false spirit.

Discernment is a choice between goods. We don’t need to “discern” if we should steal from the grocery store. Whether to have a family or enter religious life, however, is a matter for discernment. Deciding between taking a job in a different city or staying rooted in one’s community requires discernment.

The thoroughness of our discernment will depend on the seriousness of the decision that we need to make. What to have for lunch and whether to marry this person do not require the same level of discernment.

Discernment is a two-way street. One might be convinced that he is being called to marry person X or enter religious order Y. If that is not reciprocated by person X or order Y, then the “discernment” isn’t valid.

Keep Moving

Expect twists and turns along the way of discernment. Sometimes God pulls us in one direction to introduce us to an idea or relationship that can serve as a stepping stone to something else. Start walking. Those twists and turns might be painful. It’s challenging to be “in suspense and incomplete,” but this is God’s work in you. Running from the pain is running in the wrong direction.

The false spirit will try to get young people to focus on questions like, “What will I be like when I’m 60? Can I really do this for 50 years?” Such questions are too big to tackle; they paralyze us. The false spirit likes that. More immediate questions deserve our attention: Will I pray today? Will I gather more information this week? Will I make a retreat this month?

The false spirit loves to keep us standing still if he can. Discernment needs measured motion. God rarely sends an unambiguous and all-revealing sign. Keep gathering data points from God — hundreds — that paint a picture.

God’s plan for us is less like a railroad track and more like a compass point. God does not give up on us if we step off the path. God continues to invite us to walk in a direction (toward love).
God Speaks to Us

Discernment is not alienating. God knitted us in our mothers’ wombs. We have particular gifts and passions. God’s desires for us may be surprising or challenging, but they will also integrate with our talents and loves. God wants us to thrive.

Central to good decision making is keeping our end in mind. God created human beings to praise, reverence, and serve God, and by doing this, to save their souls. In the words of Ignatius, we should be “indifferent” to how we might go about praising, reverencing, and serving God. This is not a lack of concern. Rather, we so passionately care about giving glory to God that we want to be open to any path if it might lead to God’s greater glory. This “indifference” is generous availability.

Overview of Consolation and Desolation

Ignatius recognized that the pull toward God and the pull away from God have distinctive characteristics. A person can determine God’s will by paying attention to the movements of “consolation” and “desolation.”

“Desolation” is the state of being under the influence of the false spirit. We are in desolation when we are moving away from faith, hope, and love. God is always close to us, but God does not feel close when we’re in desolation. Common experiences when in a state of desolation include restlessness, anxiety, apathy, and fear. When in desolation, we can have irrational worries and petty resentments. We’re tempted to close ourselves off from others.

“Consolation” is the state of being under the true spirit. We are in consolation when we are moving toward greater faith, hope, and love. We sense God’s presence. When in consolation, we often have a deep sense of peace, even though we may continue to face challenges. We are filled with desires to do good in the world. We find ourselves reaching out to others, rather than closing ourselves off.

Desolation is not the same as feeling bad. We may feel good while engaging in all sorts of superficial pleasures, but deep down, there’s an emptiness in what we’re pursuing. That’s desolation. Consolation is not the same as having pleasant feelings. We may feel anger or sadness, but if those experiences push us to trust in God, reach out to others, and work for good, that’s consolation.

God gives consolation but only permits desolation. God can allow us to experience desolation in order that we learn more about ourselves and God. Desolation can also result from our own inattentiveness to prayer and the spiritual life.

What to Do in Desolation

We often cannot eliminate desolation immediately, but there is much we can do to fight it — and we should fight it. This is not a time for passivity. Naming the desolation is often the first step. It’s important to know what we’re up against. In the words of Professor Dumbledore, “Fear of a name increases fear of a thing itself.” Calling out the desolation can go a long way to being liberated from it.

Desolation is not the time for making decisions. We often can’t see the forest for the trees while in desolation. Never change a decision that was made during a time of consolation while you are currently experiencing desolation.

Don’t go it alone. We are often tempted to keep things to ourselves during desolation, thinking, “It’s not a big deal,” or “I really shouldn’t bother her.” Resist that temptation. Lean on your support network. Talk to a mentor or spiritual director. Participate in a faith community. (The Catholic Church has 2,000 years of shared reflection on just about any issue you might be experiencing. Soak up that wisdom!)
Even though we often don’t feel like praying while in desolation, we need it now more than ever. We might moderately increase our prayer and church participation. Doing good for others doesn’t come as easily during desolation, but we can also make an extra effort to be kind to people as a way of fighting the desolation.

It’s helpful to remember that desolation rarely lasts long and that God can make good use of this time. While in desolation, we can become less dependent on spiritual “candy” and grow in greater trust, even when we’re not feeling God’s presence.

What to Do in Consolation

Consolation is a time to make decisions and, more than anything, do something beautiful with your life. The human person is created to praise, reverence, and serve God. Let ’er rip during the period of consolation!

Like a squirrel saving nuts for winter, consolation is also a period to prepare for desolation. The false spirit can act like an army commander and target our weak spots. Consolation is the perfect time for shoring up our weak points so that we are ready for the next period of desolation.

We should also watch out for false consolation. This is an experience of being drawn to things that look good and holy at first but that lead to actions to which God is not calling a person. We might feel attracted to a form of service that is objectively good, but if that service does not match our God-given passions and gifts or is not appropriate for our current circumstances, then that attraction is probably false consolation.

Dream

Rooted in indifference, allow yourself to dream. Tap into your deep desires. As sinners, we can desire all sorts of things that are not good for us, but Ignatius believed that God dwells within our deep desires. God has planted those desires in our hearts, and they are a significant way that God communicates with us. We are not being called to run away from our true nature in order to please God. Rather, God wants you to be your best you.

As we daydream — or “praydream” — about different options, we try to notice the stirrings of the heart. Which options leave me dry, deflated, and lacking in zeal? Those are signs of desolation. Which dreams leave me with an abiding sense of satisfaction? Is there something that fits me like a glove? Where do I have a sense of rightness? Those are signs of consolation. Pay attention to which options give you a sense of deep-down peace. Such options may be challenging or even frightening, but deep peace is a great sign of consolation.

Laying a Foundation

Our world is noisy. In order to hear God’s voice, we need to turn down the sound. A commitment to prayer and reflection is critical. It’s not possible to know which direction God is leading us if we don’t know what it’s like to be with God.

There is a logic to Ignatian discernment, but it’s primarily a logic of the heart. “The heart has reasons that reason knows nothing of,” said Pascal. Life is not an equation to be solved; it’s a journey in relationship with God.

We also need material for our reflection. Gather data. Get your hands dirty and engage in experiences related to that which you are discerning. Talk with people. Research different options. Google is your friend — so are your actual friends and mentors! Ask yourself big questions: What gives you joy? What are you good at? What are the needs of the world and your community that grab your heart? What feels like fun to you but work for others? How might you apply your gifts to a pursuit that interests you and helps others? What would you do if you weren’t afraid?
calling us by paying attention to the movements of consolation and desolation and then following that which leads to consolation.

### When You Just Don’t Know

Even when we prayerfully give ourselves to the process of paying attention to the stirrings of the heart, we may not know what to do. In that case, we will need to rely more on our reason. Ignatius gives several helpful mental exercises. The first is to prayerfully make a list of pros and cons for the different options that we are considering. Beware of the “confirmation bias” in which we might add extra items to the pro side of the equation for the option that we prefer. We should pray for indifference so that we can be truly open to whatever option might give greater glory to God.

You can also imagine yourself giving advice to someone who came to you in the exact same situation in which you find yourself. Sometimes the change in perspective can cut through the fog and enable you to know exactly what you need to do. For professional decisions, you might ask what your successors would do about your dilemma if you were replaced tomorrow. By thinking about what others should do in your situation, you might know exactly what you should do in your situation.

Ignatius also recommends imagining yourself looking back on this decision from your deathbed. At the end of your life, which option that you are considering would you be most proud of? What might you regret?

One might also ask, “What would the best version of myself do?” Trying to act like the best versions of ourselves helps us become our best selves.

### Decision Time

Now, it’s time to decide. Dive in, knowing that you have given yourself to this process and that God wants what is best for you. Even the best decisions have drawbacks. Choosing the opportunity of one’s dreams will inevitably involve saying goodbye to certain people or places. Even when we know that our decision is a good one, we need to accept that it may hurt a bit.

It is common to experience some “buyer’s remorse” after deciding. Don’t allow the false spirit to stifle the joy of making a well-discerned choice. In the words of Taylor Swift, “Shake it off!”

Give thanks to God for accompanying you in this process. Keep living *ad majorem Dei gloriam* — for the greater glory of God!

### Confirmation

Even when we think we know what we’re supposed to do, we’re not quite finished. Ignatius recommends that we offer our decision to God, who may — or may not — confirm it.

One way of seeking confirmation is to live as if we have made the decision, but without burning any bridges quite yet. Sometimes God will give us overwhelming clarity, but that’s not common. More often, confirmation comes in the form of a simple sense of peace and rightness. Confirmation does not mean certainty. God never promises us certainty. We may feel confident about a decision, but we still have to trust.

If you’re interested in learning more about being a Jesuit, visit beajesuit.org or contact us at decisions@jesuits.org.