

THE SERPENT'S TAIL

By DAVID LONSDALE

THE BRIGHTNESS of a bright idea is no indication of its divine origin. That was a comment of one of my former teachers in response to our less practical proposals for changing 'the system'. The same is true of the strength of feelings. Strong movements of feeling and bright ideas are what impel us interiorly to decisions and to action. Two of the fundamental convictions underlying both sets of Ignatius's Rules for the Discernment of Spirits are firstly, that God communicates himself to people through feelings and ideas, and particularly through feelings, and secondly that we are open to deception through our feelings and ideas.¹ The Second Week Rules for Discernment (Exx 328-336) explain how this comes about and how such deceptions can be recognized and appropriate action taken. In this article I shall outline some of the dispositions that Ignatius expects to find in a person to whom the Second Week Rules would be helpful and then discuss some typical instances of the practical application of these Rules.

Before that, however, some brief comments about Ignatius's main presuppositions. The Second Week Rules need the First Week Rules as a building needs a foundation. Reading the Second set of Rules in isolation from the First can give the impression that Ignatius was a pessimist about grace and over-preoccupied with deception. In fact he has full confidence in the willingness and ability of God to lead a Christian to full maturity (Exx 15). He wrote in a letter:

There are very few persons who realize what God would make of them if they abandoned themselves entirely into his hands and let themselves be formed by his grace. A thick and shapeless tree trunk would never believe that it could become a statue, admired as a miracle of sculpture, and would never submit itself to the chisel of the sculptor who . . . sees by his genius what he can make of it.²

Nonetheless, it is a fact that people are led astray through apparent good, and a spiritual director needs to be able to recognize 'the

serpent's tail' (Exx 334). The main elements from the First Week Rules which are needed for appropriate application of the Second Week Rules are: the necessity for the director to know whether he or she is dealing with a fundamentally 'maturing' or 'regressing' Christian³ (cf Exx 314, 315, 335); the ability to recognize and know how to deal with 'spiritual consolation' and 'desolation' (Exx 316-324); the knowledge that it is in the very nature of our resistance to the Spirit of God to be tricky and deceptive (Exx 139, 142, 325-327). The Second Week Rules have to do with the more subtle deceptions, and the focus of these Rules, as the previous ones, is on the individual's experience of thoughts and especially feelings which are signs of the presence and action of the Spirit of God and of one's harmony with or resistance to that Spirit (Exx 315-317, 322, 229, 335).

Dispositions for application of Second Week Rules

When Hamlet says that 'the devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape' (act 2, scene 2), he is quoting a fundamental principle of both sets of Ignatius's Rules for Discernment (Exx 332). There are, however, important differences between the two sets of Rules, and one of these lies in what constitutes a 'pleasing shape' for people at different stages on the christian journey. If my basic orientation is towards a comfortable, peaceful existence, I will be discouraged by thoughts or images of a way of living or acting that involve strenuous activity and considerable cost. If I am the sort of person who feels genuine enthusiasm for higher christian ideals, I will be fallaciously attracted to the lower or the less good, if it is disguised in the 'pleasing shape' of a higher. It is largely to this second category of people, maturing Christians, whom Ignatius calls 'souls that are progressing to greater perfection' (Exx 335), and to their spiritual guides that the Rules for the Second Week are addressed.

Ignatius did not think that any and every person was suited to making the whole Exercises (Exx 18). Similarly, not everyone who makes the First Week is necessarily ready to go further.⁴ Among those who do go on to make the Second and subsequent Weeks' exercises, some though not necessarily all would be helped by the Second Week Rules for Discernment, since some would be 'assailed and tempted under the appearance of good' (Exx 10).

We have some idea of the dispositions that Ignatius sees as compatible with the exercises of the Second and subsequent Weeks

and the forms that a person's resistance to the action of God might be likely to take. In the context of the Exercises, the necessary basic disposition seems to be that a person is inwardly so free from being bound to a significant course of action that he or she is effectively able to follow God's leading in practice. An early directory instructs that the First Week should be prolonged for 'all those who are not as yet resigned into the hands of God our Lord, etc., so that he can act on them and incline them toward that which is better for them, but they enter with certain plans and intentions . . .'.¹⁵ The exercises of the Second Week, especially the election, seem to ask for more: both that a person be open and able to follow God's leading in life, and that he or she desires to live at all times in a way that is *better* suited to giving praise and glory to God. That is to say 'not only to will and not will as God inspires' (Exx 155), but also to be at a point on their journey where 'the desire to be better able to serve God our Lord will be the cause of their accepting anything or relinquishing it' (Exx 155, cf Exx 151, 179, 180, 338, 339). This orientation towards and effective desire for what is *better* able to serve God is one of the distinguishing marks of a person who can profitably continue with the Exercises after the First Week.

This desire will include, in Ignatius's view, some kind of apostolic orientation, a movement of life towards others in charity and imitation of Jesus (Exx 95). It will also involve a close following of the path that Jesus took. Provision is made for people who want to be 'prompt and diligent' (Exx 91) to follow Christ and even to 'distinguish themselves' and 'give greater proof of love' (Exx 97, 104). This means not only a willingness to accept the cross for the sake of Christ but even an 'earnest desire and deliberate choice' of 'poverty with Jesus poor rather than riches; insults with Christ loaded with them, rather than honours; . . . to be accounted as worthless and a fool for Christ rather than to be esteemed as wise and prudent in this world. So Christ was treated before me'. (Exx 167; cf Exx 146, 147, 157). If the way of weakness and poverty was the true way for Jesus, it will be so too for his disciples. Even those who are already engaged in a particular christian way of life and not faced with a life choice in the course of the Exercises should show one of two dispositions:

First, if it be to the equal glory of God and without offence to him . . . to *wish* to suffer injuries and opprobrium and to be

humiliated with Christ . . . or second to be *ready* to suffer patiently, out of love for Christ our Lord, whatever of like nature may happen to him.⁷

This desire to be associated with Christ, and even to suffer with him, forms a crucial part of the setting in which the Second Week Rules may be applied even outside the Exercises. The insidiousness of the deceptions described in these Rules lies in their apparently being wholly in conformity with this uncommon and abundantly graced orientation of a person's life (cf Exx 139).

It is also important to note, however, that the two sets of Rules for Discernment overlap in their application. Few people outgrow the First Week Rules completely. Sometimes the Second Week Rules are helpful to a person in the Exercises of the First Week.⁸

Practical discernment according to Second Week Rules

I would now like to reflect upon some concrete instances in which the Second Week Rules for Discernment seem helpful. The examples are taken from recent experience of spiritual direction.

Ignatius's writing on discernment implies that in practice it is a matter of some subtlety requiring careful observation, perception, reflection and judgment. Even towards the end of his life, when his union with God was profoundly mystical, he was careful to observe, sift and reflect on his experience, aware of the possibilities of deception.⁹ Not all great spiritual directors, however, would agree that discernment of spirits requires such painstaking care and method. The russian *staretz* Seraphim of Sarov said:

I Seraphim am a sinful servant of God, and what the Lord orders me to say, inasmuch as I am his servant, that I say to the one who seeks profitable counsel. The first thought arising in my mind I consider to be a sign from God, and I express it without knowing what there is in my visitor's soul; all I do is believe that God will inspire me thus for that man's benefit.¹⁰

The differences in approach indicated here have present-day relevance. One meets people, and especially perhaps some who have come under the influence of the charismatic movement, who claim to know quickly and without very much reflection what 'the Lord' or the Holy Spirit 'is saying to us' in a given set of circumstances. The value of Ignatius's Second Week Rules, so it seems to me, is

that they are at least a reminder of the human heart's capacity for deception in good faith, of its ability to deify its own predilections and desires, to justify this by rationalization and to interpret the disguised urgings of egoism as the call of the Spirit of God.

Recent interest in apophatic forms of christian prayer, in 'centring prayer' and in eastern non-christian forms of meditation and contemplation, have rightly reasserted the values of stillness, interior peace and quiet in prayer. Helpful techniques have been developed which enable a person who practises them to move into increasingly profound experiences of peace and stillness. One difficulty that can arise here is that a pleasant, more or less self-induced state of interior peace and stillness can be mistaken for what Ignatius and others mean by the 'peace' of spiritual consolation. People with little experience in a life of prayer or who have taken most of their information about prayer from books, as well as those facing very difficult circumstances in life, seem to be susceptible to this kind of misunderstanding. It is true, of course, that genuine spiritual consolation often includes an experience of real stillness and peace (Exx 316). Not all experiences of peace are to be seen as deceptive or misleading. In some instances however, prayer can become, though not deliberately or consciously, a kind of peaceful cocoon into which a person moves and which is being used as a cushion against harsh realities and a resistance against the pain of further growth.

The signs that this 'peace' is a form of deceptive consolation seem to vary from one person to another but might include some or all of the following. A person's prayer, in the first place, might show little connection with his or her life; might not touch or be touched by the circumstances, especially the harsher circumstances of life. In this case, if a director suggests a change in the style of prayer (to a more 'active' way, for instance) the suggestions could meet with obstinate resistance, perhaps largely dominated by fear. Another sign might be that the director discovers that he or she is dealing with a person who has a timid and markedly unadventurous approach to life, a shrinking from challenging circumstances, which are dictating the style of prayer. If one explores such a person's images of God, as a spiritual director naturally would at some stage, they might turn out to depict a God who is one-sidedly comforting and comfortable, and who is found in prayer but rarely in life. If the director sees that this kind of 'consolation' may well be deceptive and hindering growth, he or she can begin to help.

The person in question is staying with the lesser good and not moving towards the greater, although the lesser may be clothed in the form of the greater.¹¹ This highlights two facts about Ignatius's Rules and their application. The first is that it is not helpful to emphasize one element of a description of consolation (namely 'peace') in isolation from others (Exx 316). Secondly, Ignatius's Rules are a reminder that the full discernment of the leading of the Spirit of God in prayer and life calls for external, objective criteria, as well as the interior, subjective touchstones that Ignatius gives.

A similar possibility of misleading 'consolation' can also occur within other forms and styles of prayer, including those in which the imagination plays an active part. For some people, times of prayer (as well as other times) can become a pleasant, stimulating and even exhilarating exercise involving imaginative flights with which are associated feelings of 'love' towards God and other people and generous desires to suffer with Christ and to live as the saints lived. A person who shows a propensity to this might seem to have an outstanding capacity for prolonged imaginative contemplation of gospel scenes.

There is clearly no doubt that some people do have such a genuine gift and that this can lead to real growth in christian love. But this capacity can also indicate a penchant for fantasy as a defence against life. As always, a director will look at the effects over a period of time that prayer has upon life and growth. Genuine prayer leads to changes in attitudes and practice and towards an integration of prayer and life. These are some of the touchstones by which the genuineness of any kind of prayer can be known. If there is little sign of growth in the gifts of the Spirit, it could be that the 'consolation' of such prayer is deceptive. A director can also ask about the 'afterglow' of such prayer: if the 'residue' tends to be dissatisfaction or anxiety, this can be a sign of resistance to a greater good, as Ignatius discovered in his own experience.¹²

Apart from these and similar instances in the area of prayer, we can also consider examples of possible deceptive or misleading consolation from wider areas of experience. The alleged experience of feeling 'wholly at peace' about a decision or course of action past or future is one form of consolation often cited in ignatian discernment. Such peace, when it is genuine, confirms the decision of a course of action undertaken. One meets instances, however,

in which this experience of peace appears deceptive, at least to an external observer. Sometimes people, believing that they are guided by the Spirit of God, adopt courses of action which are divisive in a community, offensive or hurtful to members of that community, apparently self-willed and headstrong, and which show few of the features of christian love enumerated by Paul (1 Cor 13, 1-7). The perpetrators of these courses of action sometimes justify themselves by appealing to the experience of feeling 'wholly at peace' about what they have set in motion. Here again a director, if consulted, can explore more exactly what is meant by 'peace' in such a case, and can foster further growth by showing that to focus on a single aspect of consolation—'feeling at peace'—can be misleading. The criteria of affective movements, moreover, have to be supplemented in discernment by external signs of genuine christian love and of the presence of other gifts of the Spirit.

We can look at another example. It is often being said at the present time that an essential (or at least an important) ingredient of being a Christian is the call to be a 'prophet'. We are said to be called to form a 'prophetic' Church. While this is obviously a too long neglected dimension of christianity, the experience of a call to be a prophet is one in which people can in good faith be deceived in the ways described by Ignatius in the Rules for Discernment of the Second Week. The 'consolation' itself, that is the alleged experience of a call to be a prophet, can be deceptive (Exx 331) in the sense that natural enthusiasm for a cause in a person who naturally responds enthusiastically to challenges can be mistaken, perhaps in the atmosphere of a retreat or a prayer-meeting, for true, spiritual consolation. Alternatively, the deception, the leading to a lesser good, can arise as Ignatius describes (Exx 332-333) in thoughts and decisions consequent upon a true experience of consolation.¹³ So as always, the vital procedure in such a case, when this call seems to be leading to courses of action about which discernment is needed, is to trace, 'the whole course of our thoughts' (Exx 333).

Ignatius gives two signs by which the 'serpent's tail' can be detected here. One is cognitive, that is to say, if the thoughts or ideas that come to mind are 'less good' or 'distracting' or 'terminate in something evil or less good than the soul had formerly promised to do' (Exx 333). This is a sign of deceptive good. The other sign is in our affective experience. If the course of thoughts ends in 'what weakens the soul, or disquiets it; or by destroying the peace,

tranquillity and quiet which it had before, it may cause disturbance to the soul', this too, is a sign of subtle resistance to God. If one or more of these signs is present, it will be helpful, partly too as a guide to future occasions, to trace back the course of reasoning to discover the point at which the fallacy or distraction towards the lesser good began (Exx 334).

We can look at a more precise example. A married man, father of a family, may experience a true call to make his life more 'prophetic'. Afterwards, in the 'afterglow' of this consolation, reflecting on and reasoning from this experience, he may be led to take up a lifestyle or form of work which seems to be more 'prophetic' but which perhaps causes harm to his marriage and family and in fact diverts him from a fuller way of living out his christian vocation and from a more profound way of being 'prophetic'. Here then it would be helpful to go over the course of thoughts which led to decisions and choices, to see where the distraction to a lesser good occurred. Contemplation of the gospel accounts of Jesus's temptations to a lesser good can be useful (Mt 4, 1-11; Lk 4, 1-13).

The underlying assumption of Ignatius's Rules of Discernment is the conviction that God communicates through our feelings. Felt affective states can be a guide to the activity of God within us. These same affective states are influenced by psychological forces or factors which are largely unconscious or on the boundary between the conscious self and the unconscious. Discernment of spirits in Ignatius's terms is not a matter of looking into the person to try to discover natural or supernatural influences (in any case, an impossible task). Discernment is not introspection. It is rather a matter of noting significant affective 'movements' in a person's experience and the perceptions, decisions and courses of action associated with these, and through that observation to try to perceive the leading of the spirit of God and the resistances to that leading that might be operating.

So although discernment is neither introspection nor psychological analysis, it is helpful if a spiritual director is aware of at least *prima facie* possible similarities between genuine spiritual consolation or desolation on the one hand, and on the other hand affective states which are due to unconscious psychological factors. Let me illustrate this by another example. The spiritual director has to be guided by his or her client's report of what has occurred in the client's experience: thoughts and feelings which seem significant

in this context of discernment. In good christian people the effects of, for example, a mild psychological compulsion can be very similar to the alternations of spiritual consolation and desolation.¹⁴ This fact can be specially important when it is a question of trying to discover one's 'vocation'. The effect of a psychological compulsion is disquietude, anxiety or feelings of guilt when the compulsion is not acted out in a person's behaviour. When a person is able to act out this compulsion, this disquietude is removed at least for a time. 'Good' feelings (e.g. peace, tranquillity, a desire to be generous) can be associated with my being able to live out my 'vocation' as I conceive it. 'Bad' feelings (e.g. anxiety, guilt, disturbance) appear when I am not living that out or when I conceive of a future for myself, which does not include my being able to live out my (alleged) 'vocation'.

The signs which would indicate to a spiritual director the presence of mildly but not pathologically compulsive behaviour with regard to a 'vocation' or a particular course of action would vary slightly from one person to another, but might include one or more of the following features. In addition to anxiety and feelings of guilt attached to what goes contrary to the supposed 'vocation' or preferred course of action, discussion of the images of God with which a person operates might reveal a God who inspires chiefly fear and who is unwilling to allow people to be free or to act freely. This may mean that earlier images of God in a person's life, which suggest that God does allow freedom, have been suppressed, but it may also mean that they have never been present. A person suffering from a compulsion will often associate similar features with the figure of Jesus and stress the strictures in the gospel teachings of Jesus. From these and other signs the director can see that a man or woman whose behaviour in this area is largely compulsive may be more helped at this stage by psychological counselling than by spiritual direction. At first sight, this might appear to be an instance in which the Second Week Rules for Discernment would apply, in the sense that the 'vocation' to which a person feels called might seem a spurious or deceptive good. This may in fact turn out to be the case, but the more urgent need is to focus on the compulsions. Here spiritual direction and counselling, insofar as they are distinct, can work together, especially if the compulsion is powered by the images of God. In fact, in ignatian terms, the person in this case is not yet ready for the First Week of the Exercises since he or she lacks the necessary

freedom and sense of the love of God presupposed in the First Principle and Foundation. A spiritual director might be able to help by suggesting contemplations of some images of God from scripture which might help towards a more balanced image of God and Jesus. But this sometimes only serves to reinforce already powerful distorted images. If the main problem is a psychological one, it should be treated psychologically.

In this article I have moved from some of the presuppositions of Ignatius's Second Week Rules for Discernment, through a consideration of the dispositions that Ignatius associates with a person for whom these rules would be helpful, to a discussion of some practical applications of the Rules taken from recent experience. The examples, of course, could be multiplied. Enough has been said, I imagine, to illustrate both the Rules and their limitations. They were intended not as complete guidelines for discerning the will of God in particular cases but rather as a way of helping a person to perceive, reflect on and overcome interior resistances to the leading of the spirit of God, however subtly and deceptively 'in pleasing shape' these resistances might be clothed.

NOTES

¹ Cf. Buckley, Michael: 'The structure of the Rules for Discernment' *Way Supplement* 20, (1973), pp 19-37.

² I do not have an exact reference for this extract from a letter of Ignatius.

³ Toner, Jules J.: *A commentary on St Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits* (Institute of Jesuit Sources, St Louis, 1982), pp 48 ff. His commentary on the Second Week Rules is found on pp 213-256.

⁴ Cf. *Autograph directories of St Ignatius Loyola* (Program to adapt the Spiritual Exercises, New Jersey), pp 14, 17 and 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 26.

⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 10-11. My italics.

⁸ Cf. Longridge, W. H.: *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola with a commentary* (London, 1919), p 14. Longridge's notes (pp 13-14, 184-193, and 262-267) are still among the clearest concise guides in English to Ignatius's Second Week Rules.

⁹ This is clear from Ignatius's own decisions recorded in his spiritual journal.

¹⁰ Fedotov, G.P. (ed.): *A treasury of russian spirituality* (London, 1950), pp 261-262.

¹¹ This was the case with the 'consolations' that Ignatius himself experienced in Barcelona and Paris, which tended to distract him from studying. Cf Ignatius's Autobiography, sections 54-55 and 82.

¹² *Ibid.*, sections 6-8.

¹³ To go into a discussion of *consolación sin causa precedente* here would take us too far afield. There is a full exposition of the latest thinking on this topic in Toner, *op. cit.*, pp 291-303.

¹⁴ Useful working definitions of compulsion and compulsiveness can be found, for example, in Harriman, P.L.: *Dictionary of psychology* (London, 1972); English H.B., and English A.C.: *A comprehensive dictionary of psychological and psychoanalytical terms* (London, 1958).