

Understanding and Applying the Ignatian Rules for Discernment of Spirits

A Practical Guide for Formators and Spiritual Accompaniers

Missionary Situation for Reflection

When Interior Movements Become a Crossroads

Br. Mark entered the novitiate with enthusiasm. He was regular in prayer, generous in community life, and eager to grow in his vocation. During the first few months, he experienced a deep sense of peace and gratitude. He enjoyed prayer, found joy in serving the community, and felt increasingly convinced that God had called him to missionary life.

After several months, however, things began to change. Prayer became dry and difficult. He found himself easily distracted and less motivated to participate in community activities. Small corrections from the novice master irritated him. He began comparing himself with other novices and wondered whether he had made the wrong vocational choice. Thoughts of returning home became more frequent. At times, he even questioned whether God was still close to him.

Concerned about these changes, the novice master invited him for a conversation. As they spoke, he discovered that Br. Mark had also been sleeping poorly because of the summer heat, was anxious about his aging parents, and had recently received news that a close friend had died unexpectedly. The novice master realized that some of Mark's struggles were spiritual, while others were emotional and human. Rather than giving quick answers, he accompanied him patiently, helping him to pray, reflect on his interior experiences, care for his physical well-being, and distinguish what was drawing him closer to God from what was discouraging him.

Over the following weeks, Mark gradually regained interior peace. Although prayer was still not easy, he understood that temporary spiritual desolation did not mean that God had abandoned him. He learned to persevere with greater trust and maturity.

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. What interior movements can you identify in Br. Mark's experience?
2. Which experiences appear to be spiritual, and which may have psychological, emotional, or physical causes?
3. How might a formator distinguish between ordinary discouragement and spiritual desolation?
4. What mistakes might a formator make by interpreting every struggle as purely spiritual?
5. How did the novice master's approach help Mark grow in discernment rather than simply solving his problems?
6. Have you accompanied someone with a similar experience? What did you learn from it?

Formation Note

Every person in formation experiences changing thoughts, emotions, desires, fears, and inspirations. Some of these movements come from ordinary human experiences such as fatigue, illness, grief, stress, or personality differences. Others touch the person's relationship with God and influence faith, hope, charity, and vocational commitment.

One of the formator's important responsibilities is to help formandi recognize these interior movements, understand their meaning, and respond to them wisely. This requires patient listening, careful observation, prayerful reflection, and respect for the whole person. Not every sadness is spiritual desolation, and not every pleasant feeling is spiritual consolation. Authentic discernment seeks to recognize how God is at work amid the ordinary experiences of daily life.

The Ignatian Rules for the Discernment of Spirits provide a practical and time-tested guide for this task. They do not offer quick answers to every situation. Rather, they teach us to become

attentive to the movements of the heart, to understand their origin and direction, and to cooperate more freely with the grace of God. For formators, these rules become a valuable instrument for accompanying formandi with wisdom, patience, and hope.

“The goal of discernment is not simply to understand our inner experiences but to grow in freedom so that we may respond more faithfully to God’s invitation each day.”

I. Formation Insight

Why Discernment Matters in Formation

Formation is more than acquiring knowledge, developing skills, or observing religious practices. At its heart, formation is a journey of growing into a deeper relationship with Christ and learning to respond faithfully to God’s call. Along this journey, every formandus experiences a variety of interior movements: peace and restlessness, enthusiasm and discouragement, clarity and confusion, confidence and fear. These experiences are a normal part of spiritual growth.

The challenge is that these interior movements do not all have the same meaning. Some lead a person closer to God and greater freedom for mission. Others gradually weaken faith, diminish hope, reduce charity, or discourage vocational commitment. Still others arise from ordinary human experiences such as fatigue, illness, grief, stress, personality traits, or unresolved emotional conflicts. A formator therefore needs the wisdom to distinguish among these different experiences before offering guidance.

St. Ignatius of Loyola developed the **Rules for the Discernment of Spirits** to help believers understand these interior movements. They are not complicated theories but practical guidelines drawn from his own experience of prayer, conversion, and accompanying others. Their purpose is to help people recognize God’s action, identify the subtle tactics of the evil spirit, and grow in the freedom to choose what leads to life and mission.

For formators, these rules are especially valuable because they provide a practical framework for accompanying formandi during times of enthusiasm, uncertainty, temptation, spiritual dryness, vocational questioning, and important decisions. Rather than giving immediate answers or solving every problem, the formator learns to help the formandus read what is happening within and discover how God may be inviting him to respond.

Discernment Serves Formation

Authentic discernment helps formandi to:

- become attentive to their interior life rather than acting impulsively;
- distinguish movements that lead towards God from those that lead away from Him;
- persevere during periods of spiritual struggle without losing hope;
- grow in spiritual freedom rather than being controlled by emotions or fears;
- make vocational and missionary decisions with greater wisdom and maturity;
- become more open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in daily life.

For formators, discernment develops the ability to accompany rather than control, to listen before advising, and to guide with patience rather than haste.

An Integral Vision of the Human Person

Ignatian discernment always respects the unity of the human person. Our thoughts, emotions, body, relationships, personality, and spiritual life are closely interconnected. A lack of sleep, prolonged stress, unresolved grief, or emotional exhaustion can influence one’s prayer and feelings. Likewise, genuine spiritual movements often affect emotions, attitudes, relationships, and behaviour.

For this reason, good discernment never reduces every struggle to a spiritual problem, nor does it explain everything only in psychological terms. It considers the whole person and seeks to understand how grace is working within ordinary human experience. When necessary, spiritual accompaniment may be complemented by medical or psychological assistance. These are not opposing approaches but can work together in promoting integral human formation.

Formation Note: The goal of discernment is not simply to identify consolation or desolation. Its deeper purpose is to help the formandus grow in freedom, maturity, and faithful response to God's call. As formators become more attentive to the movements of the heart, they are better able to accompany others with wisdom, compassion, and confidence.

Key Insight: Discernment is the art of recognizing how God is working in the ordinary experiences of life, so that we may freely choose whatever leads us to love God more fully and serve His people more generously.

II. What Is Discernment of Spirits?

Learning to Recognize God's Action in Daily Life

Every day we experience many thoughts, feelings, desires, fears, attractions, and resistances. Some encourage us to pray, forgive, serve others, and remain faithful to our vocation. Others gradually draw us toward discouragement, selfishness, isolation, or loss of hope. Still others simply arise from ordinary human experiences such as tiredness, illness, or emotional stress.

Discernment of spirits is the process of prayerfully recognizing these interior movements, understanding where they are leading us, and responding in a way that helps us grow closer to God. For St. Ignatius, discernment is not primarily about extraordinary mystical experiences. It is about learning to recognize God's presence in the ordinary events of daily life. Through this attentive listening, we become more aware of how the Holy Spirit gently guides us and how other influences can divert us from God's path.

The purpose of discernment is not merely to understand ourselves better, but to grow in freedom so that we can love God more faithfully and serve others more generously.

What Are Interior Movements?

Ignatius speaks about the "movements" of the heart. These include the thoughts, desires, emotions, attractions, and resistances that arise within us and influence our relationship with God.

Examples include:

- a growing desire to pray or to avoid prayer;
- peace after forgiving someone or resentment after refusing to forgive;
- courage to persevere in one's vocation or discouragement leading to thoughts of giving up;
- gratitude for God's gifts or constant comparison with others;
- generosity in service or increasing self-centredness.

These interior movements are often subtle. They become clearer when we regularly reflect on our experiences before God.

Three Steps in Discernment

Ignatian discernment follows a simple process.

1. Become Aware: Notice what is happening within you.

Ask:

- What am I thinking?
- What am I feeling?
- What desires are becoming stronger?
- What gives me peace?
- What disturbs my heart?

Without awareness, discernment cannot begin.

2. Understand: Reflect prayerfully on these movements.

Ask:

- Where is this leading me?
- Does it increase faith, hope, and love?
- Does it bring me closer to Christ and my vocation?
- Is it encouraging generosity or selfishness?
- Is it helping me become more available for mission?

Understanding usually grows gradually through prayer, reflection, and accompaniment.

3. Respond: Having recognized God's invitation, choose the response that leads to greater love and freedom.

Discernment is complete only when it leads to action.

Discernment Is Not the Same as Decision-Making

Many people think discernment simply means deciding between different options.

Ignatian discernment begins earlier.

Before making a decision, we first learn to understand the interior movements influencing that decision. Once these movements are recognized and purified, we are better able to make wise choices.

For example:

A theology student receives two ministry assignments. He immediately prefers one because it is more visible and prestigious. Through prayer and accompaniment, he realizes that his attraction is rooted more in the desire for recognition than in service. As he continues discerning, he gradually experiences peace in accepting the less visible assignment, recognizing it as God's invitation to grow in humility and availability.

Discernment helps him understand **why** he is attracted to one option before deciding **which** option to choose.

Discernment Is Not Simply Following Feelings

Feelings are important because they often reveal what is happening within us. However, feelings alone do not determine God's will.

- Not every pleasant feeling comes from God.
- Not every painful experience comes from the evil spirit.
- Spiritual maturity grows through listening to both the movements of the heart and the light of faith, reason, prayer, and wise accompaniment.

Ignatius invites us to pay attention to our feelings, but always to examine where they are leading us.

Formation Example

During his first year of theology, Br. Peter receives a correction from his formator regarding his attitude during community meetings. He feels hurt and embarrassed. Over the following days, he notices increasing resentment and begins avoiding the formator. During prayer, however, he gradually recognizes that the correction was fair and that his resistance comes from wounded pride rather than injustice. With the help of his spiritual director, he accepts the correction, reconciles with the formator, and experiences greater interior peace.

Discernment helped him move beyond his initial emotional reaction to recognize God's invitation to humility and growth.

Formation Note: Discernment is a habit that develops through regular prayer, honest self-reflection, and faithful accompaniment. It is learned gradually through experience rather than mastered quickly through theory. As formandi become more attentive to the movements of their hearts, they grow in spiritual freedom and become better able to recognize God's voice amid the many influences that shape daily life.

Key Insight: Discernment begins by noticing what is happening within us, deepens by understanding where these movements are leading, and bears fruit when we freely choose what brings us closer to God and His mission.

III. Preparing to Apply the Ignatian Rules

Seeing the Whole Person

Before applying the Ignatian Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, a formator must first understand an important principle: **every interior experience should be viewed in the context of the whole person.**

Human beings are not only spiritual. We are also physical, emotional, psychological, relational, intellectual, and spiritual. These dimensions constantly influence one another. A person who is physically exhausted may find prayer difficult. Someone who is grieving may experience sadness that affects concentration and motivation. Likewise, a deep spiritual experience can influence emotions, relationships, and daily behaviour.

For this reason, good discernment begins not with quick conclusions but with careful observation and attentive listening.

St. Ignatius himself encourages us to become aware of our interior movements before trying to understand or judge them. The Ignatian Rules help us discern the spiritual significance of these experiences, but they should always be applied with wisdom, patience, and realism.

Looking at the Whole Person

When accompanying a formandus, a formator should consider several dimensions of his life.

Physical

Ask questions such as:

- Is he getting enough sleep?
- Is he physically exhausted?
- Has there been illness or chronic pain?
- Are there changes in appetite or energy?

Physical well-being often affects prayer, attention, and emotional balance.

Emotional

Consider:

- Is he experiencing grief?
- Is he homesick?
- Has he recently experienced rejection or disappointment?
- Is he carrying unresolved anger or fear?

Strong emotions are part of normal human life and should not automatically be interpreted as spiritual movements.

Psychological

Reflect on questions such as:

- Is there persistent anxiety?
- Is there prolonged sadness?
- Are there patterns of perfectionism or excessive self-criticism?
- Has there been a significant change in personality or behaviour?

Some struggles may require psychological support in addition to spiritual accompaniment.

Relational

Ask:

- How are his relationships within the community?
- Has there been conflict with companions or formators?
- Does he feel isolated?
- Is he able to seek help when needed?

Healthy relationships often support spiritual growth, while unresolved conflicts can affect one's interior life.

Spiritual

Finally, consider:

- Is he faithful to prayer?
- Does he desire to seek God?
- Is he growing in faith, hope, and charity?
- Is he becoming more generous in responding to God's call?

These questions help identify movements that are specifically spiritual.

Distinguishing Spiritual and Human Experiences

One of the most common mistakes in accompaniment is to interpret every interior struggle as a spiritual problem.

For example:

A novice has difficulty concentrating during meditation after several nights of poor sleep.

This may be primarily a physical issue rather than spiritual desolation.

A theology student becomes discouraged after failing an important examination.

His sadness may be a normal emotional response before it becomes a spiritual struggle.

A missionary feels deep sorrow after the death of a parent.

Grief is a natural human experience. While it can affect prayer, it should not immediately be interpreted as a sign that God has withdrawn His consolation.

At the same time, spiritual movements often emerge within these ordinary experiences. A person who is grieving may still experience a deep trust in God. Another who is physically healthy may gradually lose hope, avoid prayer, and become indifferent to his vocation. Discernment helps us recognize these deeper spiritual movements.

Formation Example

Br. Anthony had become unusually quiet during the novitiate. He no longer participated actively in community recreation and often appeared distracted during prayer. Some companions assumed he was experiencing spiritual desolation.

The novice master spent time listening to him. During their conversation, Anthony shared that he had been suffering from frequent headaches and had been worried about his mother's recent surgery. He was sleeping poorly and felt constantly tired.

The novice master encouraged him to consult a doctor, maintain regular rest, and continue his simple daily prayer without anxiety. Over the following weeks, his health improved, his anxiety decreased, and his joy gradually returned.

The novice master did not ignore the spiritual dimension of Anthony's life, but neither did he reduce every difficulty to a spiritual problem. By considering the whole person, he was able to accompany him wisely.

The Formator's Attitude

Before applying any of the Ignatian Rules, a formator should cultivate four attitudes:

- **Attentive listening:** Seek first to understand the person's experience rather than immediately offering advice.
- **Patient observation:** Look for patterns over time rather than judging a single event or emotion.
- **Prayerful discernment:** Invite the Holy Spirit to guide both the formator and the formandus.
- **Respect for the whole person:** Recognize that God ordinarily works through the realities of human life rather than apart from them.

Formation Note: The Ignatian Rules are not a shortcut for explaining every human experience. They are a guide for recognizing how God and the enemy influence our relationship with Him. Good discernment therefore respects both **grace and nature**. It appreciates the contributions of spirituality, psychology, medicine, and sound human wisdom, knowing that these work together in fostering integral human formation.

Key Insight: Before asking, "*Is this consolation or desolation?*" first ask, "*What is happening in this person's life?*" Discernment begins with understanding the whole person and only then interpreting the spiritual meaning of the interior movements.

PART ONE

The First Week Rules (Rules 1–14)

Introduction to the First Week Rules

Why Did St. Ignatius Write These Rules?

Every person who sincerely follows Christ experiences an interior struggle. At times, we feel drawn towards God with faith, hope, generosity, and peace. At other times, we experience discouragement, confusion, temptation, fear, or loss of enthusiasm. These changing interior movements are a normal part of the Christian journey.

Through his own conversion and years of accompanying others, St. Ignatius discovered that these interior movements are not random. Some help us grow closer to God, while others gradually draw us away from Him. To help believers recognize these movements and respond wisely, he formulated the **First Week Rules for the Discernment of Spirits**.

These rules were originally written for those making the **First Week of the Spiritual Exercises**, a period focused on conversion, self-knowledge, and turning away from sin. However, their value extends far beyond the retreat. They are practical guidelines for anyone seeking to grow in faith and remain faithful to God's call.

For formators, these rules provide a valuable framework for accompanying formandi through the ordinary challenges of formation, helping them understand what is happening within them and respond with greater freedom and trust.

The Purpose of the First Week Rules

The First Week Rules help us to:

- become aware of the interior movements we experience;
- understand where these movements are leading us;
- distinguish the action of the Holy Spirit from the subtle temptations of the evil spirit;
- cooperate more generously with God's grace;
- persevere during periods of temptation, discouragement, and spiritual dryness.

Ignatius does not ask us to suppress our thoughts or emotions. Rather, he teaches us to observe them carefully, understand their direction, and respond wisely.

Who Are These Rules For?

The First Week Rules are especially helpful for people who are:

- beginning or deepening their spiritual life;
- seeking greater conversion;
- struggling with temptation or discouragement;
- learning to persevere in prayer;
- growing in vocational commitment;
- seeking greater freedom to follow Christ.

They are equally valuable for formators who accompany others in these situations.

A Roadmap of the First Week Rules

Although there are fourteen individual rules, they naturally form five stages.

Stage 1: Understanding Spiritual Movements

Rules 1–4: These rules answer the question: **What is happening within me?**

They explain:

- the different ways the good and evil spirits act;
- the meaning of spiritual consolation;
- the meaning of spiritual desolation.

Stage 2: Responding to Spiritual Desolation

Rules 5–9: These rules answer: **What should I do when I experience spiritual desolation?**

Ignatius teaches us:

- what to avoid,
- what to do,
- why God sometimes permits desolation.

Stage 3: Preparing for Future Spiritual Struggles

Rules 10–11: These rules teach us to remain balanced.

During consolation:

- prepare for future trials.

During desolation:

- remember God's grace.

Stage 4: Recognizing the Enemy's Tactics

Rules 12–14

These rules reveal three common strategies used by the evil spirit:

- discouraging us,
- leading us into secrecy,
- attacking our weakest areas.

Understanding these strategies helps us resist temptation more effectively.

Applying the Rules in Formation

The First Week Rules describe experiences commonly found in formation communities.

For example:

- An aspirant becomes enthusiastic after a retreat and wants to change his entire lifestyle overnight.
- A novice begins doubting his vocation after several weeks of dry prayer.
- A theology student becomes discouraged after repeated academic failures.
- A young missionary loses motivation because ministry is more difficult than expected.

A formator who understands these rules is less likely to react impulsively. Instead of giving quick advice or interpreting every struggle in the same way, he learns to accompany the person patiently, helping him recognize God's presence even during difficult moments.

Formation Note: The First Week Rules are not a checklist for judging people. They are a guide for understanding how God gradually forms the human heart. Their purpose is not to produce fear of making mistakes but to foster greater freedom, trust, and fidelity to Christ.

As we study each rule, we should remember that Ignatius is teaching us **how to read the movements of the heart**, not simply how to solve problems. When these rules are understood and practiced, they become a valuable aid for personal growth and for accompanying others with wisdom and compassion.

Key Insight: The First Week Rules help us recognize the ordinary spiritual movements that shape our daily lives, so that we may freely choose whatever leads us closer to Christ and His mission.

Section A: Rules 1–2

Recognizing the Two Spiritual Directions

Introduction

The first two rules are the foundation of all the Ignatian Rules for Discernment. Before we can understand consolation and desolation, we must first understand an important truth: **the good spirit and the evil spirit do not act in the same way with every person**. Their approach depends on the person's spiritual direction.

St. Ignatius observed that people generally move in one of two directions:

- Some are gradually moving **away from God** through habitual sin or resistance to His grace.
- Others are sincerely trying to **grow closer to God** by seeking His will and living faithfully.

The enemy and the Holy Spirit act differently in each situation. Knowing this helps a formator understand why two people may experience very different interior movements even though they are facing similar circumstances.

Rule 1 - Those Moving Away from God

The Rule: For those who are moving from one serious sin to another and becoming more distant from God, the evil spirit usually makes life appear attractive, easy, and pleasurable in order to keep them where they are. The good spirit, on the other hand, awakens their conscience, making them aware of the emptiness of their way of life and inviting them to conversion.

What Does This Mean?

When a person habitually chooses what is contrary to God's will, the evil spirit does not usually disturb him. Instead, he encourages him to remain comfortable, convincing him that everything is fine.

The Holy Spirit works differently. He gently unsettles the person's conscience, helping him recognize that something needs to change. This interior discomfort is not meant to condemn but to invite conversion.

The temporary loss of comfort can therefore be a sign of God's grace at work.

Example

A postulant repeatedly neglects community responsibilities. He frequently arrives late for prayer, ignores the community timetable, and offers excuses for his behaviour. Initially, he feels little concern because he believes these are only minor matters.

During a retreat, however, he begins to feel uneasy. He realizes that his lack of discipline is affecting his relationship with God and with the community. He experiences a sincere desire to change and seeks the help of his formator.

The uneasiness he experiences is not a sign that God has abandoned him. Rather, it is the Holy Spirit inviting him to conversion.

Guidance for Formators

When accompanying someone who is drifting away from God's call:

- avoid merely correcting external behaviour;
- help the person reflect on what is happening within;
- encourage honest self-examination rather than guilt;
- present God's mercy and the possibility of a new beginning.

The aim is not to make the person feel condemned but to help him rediscover God's invitation.

Rule 2 Those Growing Closer to God

The Rule: For those who sincerely seek God and strive to grow in holiness, the situation is reversed. The evil spirit tries to discourage them through fear, confusion, sadness, or false reasoning. The good spirit strengthens them with courage, peace, hope, joy, and the grace to continue faithfully.

What Does This Mean?

As a person grows closer to God, the enemy recognizes that obvious temptations are often ineffective. Instead, he tries to weaken commitment through discouragement, unnecessary fears, self-doubt, or subtle distractions.

The Holy Spirit, however, encourages perseverance. He gives interior strength, hope, and confidence, even when difficulties remain.

This does not mean that faithful Christians never experience struggles. Rather, within their struggles they receive the grace needed to remain faithful.

Example

A novice has been faithful to prayer and community life. As his final profession approaches, unexpected doubts begin to arise:

- *"Perhaps I am not good enough."*
- *"Maybe I should leave before it is too late."*
- *"Others seem much happier than I am."*

He becomes anxious and loses confidence.

Through regular spiritual accompaniment, he gradually recognizes that these thoughts are leading him away from trust in God rather than towards greater freedom. At the same time, he notices a quiet but persistent desire to remain faithful to his vocation. As he continues praying, speaking openly with his novice master, and participating faithfully in community life, his peace slowly returns.

The discouraging thoughts sought to weaken his commitment, while the Holy Spirit gently strengthened him to persevere.

Guidance for Formators

When accompanying someone who is sincerely striving to follow Christ:

- encourage perseverance in prayer and ordinary duties;

- help distinguish temporary discouragement from genuine vocational concerns;
- remind the formandus of God's faithful presence;
- strengthen hope rather than allowing discouragement to dominate.

Often, the greatest help is not giving immediate answers but accompanying the person patiently until clarity emerges.

Comparing the Two Rules

Person's Direction	Action of the Evil Spirit	Action of the Good Spirit
Moving away from God	Keeps the person comfortable in unhealthy patterns	Awakens the conscience and invites conversion
Growing closer to God	Discourages, confuses, and weakens commitment	Gives courage, peace, hope, and strength to persevere

Formation Note: These first two rules remind us that **the same interior feeling can have a different meaning depending on the person's spiritual direction**. A disturbance of conscience may be God's invitation to conversion for one person, while a similar feeling of discouragement may be a temptation for another who is sincerely trying to follow Christ.

For this reason, formators should not ask only, "*What is the person feeling?*" They should also ask, "*In which direction is this person's life moving?*" Understanding this wider context is the key to applying the Ignatian Rules wisely.

Key Insight: The first step in discernment is not to identify the feeling itself, but to recognize the person's direction of life. Only then can we understand whether an interior movement is drawing the person closer to God or away from Him.

Section B: Rules 3–4

Understanding Spiritual Consolation and Spiritual Desolation

Introduction

The first two rules explain that the good spirit and the evil spirit work differently depending on the person's spiritual direction. The next two rules help us recognize **the principal interior movements through which these spirits influence us: spiritual consolation and spiritual desolation**.

These are among the most important concepts in Ignatian discernment. A correct understanding of them enables formators to accompany formandi with greater wisdom and confidence.

At the same time, these rules require careful application. Not every pleasant feeling is spiritual consolation, and not every painful experience is spiritual desolation. Human emotions arise from many causes. Ignatius is concerned specifically with those interior movements that affect a person's relationship with God.

Rule 3 - Understanding Spiritual Consolation

The Rule: St. Ignatius describes spiritual consolation as an interior movement that inflames a person with love for God, deepens faith, strengthens hope, increases charity, and fills the soul with peace and joy in the service of God.

What Does This Mean?

Spiritual consolation is much more than feeling happy. It is an experience that **draws us closer to God** and strengthens our desire to follow Christ more faithfully.

During consolation, we may experience:

- greater love for God;
- deeper trust in His providence;
- renewed enthusiasm for prayer;
- generosity in serving others;
- greater patience and forgiveness;
- peace in accepting God's will;
- joy in living our vocation.

Sometimes consolation is accompanied by strong emotions. At other times, it is experienced as a quiet but deep inner peace without any intense feelings.

The essential question is not “**How do I feel?**” but “**Where is this experience leading me?**”

If it leads to greater faith, hope, love, and missionary generosity, it is likely to be spiritual consolation.

Example

A novice has been struggling with community life because of misunderstandings with another novice. During his personal prayer, he gradually becomes aware of God's invitation to forgive. He experiences a deep interior peace and freely decides to reconcile with his companion.

The conversation that follows is not easy, but afterwards he experiences greater freedom, renewed joy in prayer, and a stronger desire to live community life.

His peace is not simply the relief of solving a problem. It is a spiritual consolation because it has drawn him closer to God and strengthened his love for others.

Guidance for Formators

When accompanying someone experiencing spiritual consolation:

- encourage gratitude to God rather than self-satisfaction;
- help the formandus recognize the grace he has received;
- invite him to remain humble and faithful in ordinary duties;
- encourage him to remember this experience during future periods of struggle.

Consolation is a gift to be received with gratitude, not a reward to be possessed.

Rule 4 - Understanding Spiritual Desolation

The Rule: St. Ignatius describes spiritual desolation as an interior movement characterized by darkness of soul, disturbance, attraction to what is low and earthly, loss of confidence, lack of hope and love, spiritual dryness, and a feeling of being distant from God.

What Does This Mean?

Spiritual desolation is **not simply feeling sad or discouraged**. It is an interior movement that weakens our relationship with God and makes us less willing to pray, trust, love, or persevere in our vocation.

A person experiencing spiritual desolation may notice:

- reluctance to pray;
- loss of hope;
- discouragement in following Christ;
- diminished generosity;
- increased self-centredness;
- confusion about one's vocation;
- temptation to abandon commitments;
- feeling spiritually distant from God.

These experiences may be painful, but they do not mean that God has abandoned the person. Rather, they are part of the spiritual journey and call for perseverance and deeper trust.

Distinguishing Spiritual Desolation from Human Distress

One of the most important responsibilities of a formator is to distinguish **spiritual desolation** from distress that is primarily physical, emotional, or psychological.

For example:

- A novice who feels tired after several sleepless nights may find prayer difficult because of physical exhaustion.
- A theology student grieving the death of a parent may experience deep sadness and reduced concentration.
- A missionary experiencing burnout after years of demanding ministry may feel emotionally drained.

These experiences are real and deserve compassionate accompaniment, but they are **not necessarily spiritual desolation** in the Ignatian sense.

Spiritual desolation is identified not primarily by emotional pain but by **its effect on one's relationship with God**. It weakens faith, hope, charity, and the desire to follow Christ.

Human distress, on the other hand, may or may not affect one's spiritual life. A grieving novice may continue to trust God deeply even while experiencing profound sadness.

Sometimes both are present at the same time. A person may be physically exhausted and also experience spiritual desolation. Good discernment patiently considers the whole person before drawing conclusions.

Example

Br. Joseph had always been faithful to prayer and community life. After several months of caring for his seriously ill father during vacation, he returned to the theologate exhausted and emotionally burdened.

He found it difficult to concentrate during meditation and often felt sad.

The formator listened carefully and encouraged him to rest, share his grief openly, and continue his simple daily prayer without anxiety.

Over time, Joseph realized that although he was emotionally exhausted, he had not lost his trust in God. His sadness came mainly from grief, not from spiritual desolation.

Several months later, however, after neglecting prayer and isolating himself from the community, he began losing hope, questioning God's love, and feeling tempted to abandon his vocation. This time, he recognized genuine spiritual desolation. With patient accompaniment, he gradually regained confidence in God's faithful presence.

Comparing Spiritual Consolation and Spiritual Desolation

Spiritual Consolation	Spiritual Desolation
Deepens faith	Weakens faith
Strengthens hope	Leads to discouragement
Increases love for God and others	Reduces generosity and charity
Brings interior peace	Creates spiritual unrest and confusion
Encourages perseverance	Tempts one to give up
Leads towards God	Draws one away from God

Guidance for Formators

When accompanying formandi:

- do not identify consolation simply with pleasant feelings;
- do not identify desolation simply with sadness;
- explore the person's whole experience before drawing conclusions;
- observe whether the experience strengthens or weakens the person's relationship with God;
- when significant emotional or psychological difficulties persist, encourage appropriate professional assessment while continuing spiritual accompaniment.

Formation Note: Consolation and desolation are not rewards or punishments from God. They are spiritual experiences that help us become more aware of our relationship with Him. Consolation encourages us to continue faithfully. Desolation invites us to persevere, deepen our trust, and become less dependent on changing feelings.

A wise formator therefore asks not simply, “**How does the person feel?**” but “**How is this experience affecting his faith, hope, love, prayer, and vocational commitment?**”

Key Insight: Spiritual consolation and spiritual desolation are identified not by the presence of pleasant or painful emotions, but by the direction in which they lead the person, either towards deeper communion with God or away from Him.

Section C: Rules 5–9

Living Wisely During Spiritual Desolation

Introduction

Once we recognize spiritual desolation, the next question naturally arises: **How should I respond?**

Many people react to desolation by changing their decisions, abandoning prayer, withdrawing from others, or believing that God has abandoned them. St. Ignatius warns that these reactions often make the situation worse.

Rules 5–9 provide practical wisdom for living through spiritual desolation. They teach us that desolation is usually temporary and that, if faced with faith and perseverance, it can become a time of deeper spiritual growth.

For formators, these rules offer valuable guidance in accompanying formandi through periods of doubt, dryness, discouragement, or vocational questioning.

Rule 5 - Never Make Important Changes During Spiritual Desolation

The Rule: St. Ignatius advises that during spiritual desolation we should not change the good decisions we made when we were in spiritual consolation. Instead, we should remain firm and wait until the desolation passes.

What Does This Mean?

Spiritual desolation often clouds our judgment. We may begin to question commitments that previously brought us peace and clarity.

A novice may wonder whether he has a vocation.

A seminarian may think of abandoning his studies.

A missionary may feel that years of ministry have been meaningless.

These thoughts may feel convincing during desolation, but Ignatius reminds us that this is **not the right time to make major decisions**. The same person who felt called by God during consolation now sees everything through the darkness of desolation.

This does not mean that genuine vocational questions should be ignored. Rather, important decisions should be made when the mind and heart have regained clarity and freedom.

Example

After several weeks of dry prayer, Br. Daniel tells his formator that he wants to leave the novitiate immediately because he no longer feels called.

Instead of encouraging an immediate decision, the novice master invites him to continue his normal routine, remain faithful to prayer, and postpone any major decision until he has regained greater interior peace.

Several weeks later, Daniel realizes that his desire to leave arose during a period of spiritual desolation rather than from a genuine loss of vocation.

Guidance for Formators

When a formandus wants to make a major decision during desolation:

- listen carefully without dismissing his concerns;
- avoid pressuring him into immediate decisions;
- encourage patience and perseverance;
- review the reasons that led to his earlier commitment;
- revisit the question once greater interior freedom has returned.

Rule 6 - Respond with Greater Fidelity

The Rule: Although we should not change our good decisions during desolation, Ignatius encourages us to respond actively by praying more earnestly, examining ourselves honestly, and practicing suitable forms of self-discipline.

What Does This Mean?

Desolation is not a time to become passive.

Instead of withdrawing from prayer or community life, Ignatius invites us to remain faithful to the ordinary means through which God strengthens us.

These may include:

- faithful participation in community prayer;
- personal meditation, even when prayer feels dry;
- regular spiritual accompaniment;
- examination of conscience;
- acts of charity and service;
- simple acts of self-discipline that help restore spiritual focus.

The emphasis is not on doing more out of anxiety, but on remaining faithful with confidence.

Example

A theology student feels no enthusiasm for prayer and begins skipping meditation.

His spiritual director encourages him to continue praying faithfully, even if he experiences no consolation. Over time, he discovers that perseverance during dryness strengthens his trust in God more than prayer motivated only by pleasant feelings.

Guidance for Formators

Encourage formandi to:

- remain faithful to their daily rhythm;
- avoid isolating themselves;
- continue ordinary responsibilities;
- seek accompaniment rather than struggling alone.

Rule 7 - Remember That God Has Not Abandoned You (God Allows the Struggle)

The Rule: Ignatius reminds us that during desolation God permits us to experience our own weakness, yet He continues to give us sufficient grace to remain faithful.

What Does This Mean?

One of the strongest temptations during desolation is the belief: *“God has left me.”*

Ignatius assures us that this is not true.

Although the person may not experience God’s closeness emotionally, God continues to sustain him with His grace.

This rule teaches humility.

It reminds us that spiritual strength is always God’s gift, not our own achievement.

Example

A novice says: *“I no longer feel God’s presence during prayer.”*

His novice master replies: *“Your feelings have changed, but God’s faithfulness has not. Continue walking with Him even when you cannot feel Him.”*

This simple reassurance helps the novice persevere with renewed trust.

Guidance for Formators

Help formandi to distinguish between:

- **God’s presence**, which remains constant;
- **our experience of His presence**, which changes.

Faith rests on God’s fidelity, not on changing emotions.

Rule 8 - Persevere with Patience

The Rule: Ignatius teaches that spiritual desolation will pass. We should therefore remain patient and persevere until consolation returns.

What Does This Mean?

Desolation often makes us believe that nothing will ever change.

Ignatius encourages us to remember that spiritual experiences are not permanent. Just as consolation does not last forever, neither does desolation.

Patience prevents discouragement from becoming despair.

Example

During his first pastoral assignment, a young missionary feels ineffective and discouraged.

Instead of abandoning his ministry, he continues serving faithfully while remaining in regular spiritual direction.

Gradually, his confidence and peace return.

His perseverance during desolation becomes an important step in his human and spiritual maturity.

Guidance for Formators

Encourage formandi to:

- avoid expecting immediate solutions;
- trust the gradual work of God;
- recognize that growth often occurs quietly during difficult periods.

Rule 9 - Why Does God Permit Spiritual Desolation?

The Rule: Ignatius offers three possible reasons why God may permit spiritual desolation:

1. because we have become negligent in our spiritual life;
2. to test and strengthen our fidelity;
3. to teach us humility by reminding us that spiritual consolation is God's gift.

What Does This Mean?

Ignatius does **not** say that every desolation has the same cause.

Sometimes we contribute to it by neglecting prayer or becoming spiritually complacent.

Sometimes God allows it so that our love may become deeper and less dependent on pleasant feelings.

Sometimes it teaches us that every spiritual gift comes from God's grace rather than our own efforts.

Rather than asking, "*Why is this happening to me?*", Ignatius encourages us to ask: "*What is God teaching me through this experience?*"

Example

A novice notices that his prayer has become dry.

After reflecting with his novice master, he realizes that he has gradually become careless about personal prayer and the daily examen. He renews these practices and slowly regains spiritual vitality.

Another novice remains faithful in every way yet still experiences desolation for several weeks. Through this experience, he learns to love God even without emotional consolation and grows in spiritual maturity.

Both experience desolation, but for different reasons.

Summary of Rules 5–9

Rule	Ignatius' Guidance
Rule 5	Do not change good decisions during desolation.
Rule 6	Remain faithful to prayer, self-examination, and ordinary responsibilities.
Rule 7	Remember that God continues to give sufficient grace.
Rule 8	Persevere patiently because desolation will pass.
Rule 9	Reflect prayerfully on what God may be teaching through the experience.

Formation Note: These five rules teach an important lesson: **the goal is not to escape desolation as quickly as possible but to grow through it.** Periods of spiritual darkness can become moments of purification, deeper trust, and greater freedom when they are lived with faith and perseverance.

For formators, these rules encourage a ministry of patient accompaniment rather than quick solutions. Instead of immediately removing every difficulty, they help formandi discover how God continues to form them even in times of spiritual struggle.

Key Insight: Spiritual desolation is not the end of the journey. When lived with patience, prayer, and faithful accompaniment, it can become a privileged opportunity for deeper trust in God and lasting spiritual growth.

Section D: Rules 10–11

Preparing for Future Spiritual Struggles

Introduction

The previous rules teach us how to respond during spiritual desolation. Rules 10 and 11 help us prepare **before** spiritual circumstances change.

St. Ignatius understood that our spiritual life is not static. Consolation and desolation often alternate. Therefore, a wise person learns not only how to endure difficult times but also how to use periods of peace and joy to prepare for future struggles.

These two rules teach two complementary attitudes:

- During **consolation**, prepare yourself for future desolation.
- During **desolation**, remember that consolation will return.

Together, they cultivate **spiritual balance**. They prevent overconfidence during times of spiritual strength and hopelessness during times of spiritual weakness.

Rule 10 - Use Times of Consolation to Prepare for Desolation

The Rule: St. Ignatius advises that a person who is experiencing spiritual consolation should prepare for the time when spiritual desolation will come.

What Does This Mean?

Spiritual consolation is a gift from God, but it does not last forever. If we assume that our present enthusiasm or peace will never change, we may become spiritually complacent.

Ignatius encourages us to use periods of consolation wisely by strengthening the habits that will sustain us later.

During consolation we can:

- deepen our relationship with God;
- establish a faithful rhythm of prayer;
- strengthen healthy community relationships;
- renew our vocational commitment;
- remember the graces God has given us.

These become important sources of strength when difficulties arise. Consolation is therefore not only a time to rejoice but also a time to grow deeper roots.

Example

A novice returns from an eight-day retreat with renewed joy and enthusiasm. He feels close to God and full of energy for his vocation.

The novice master encourages him to reflect on the graces he has received and to write them in his spiritual journal. Together they discuss practical ways of remaining faithful to daily prayer, community life, and spiritual direction after the retreat.

Several months later, when prayer becomes dry and discouragement appears, the novice rereads his retreat notes. Remembering God's earlier faithfulness helps him persevere without losing hope.

Guidance for Formators

When formandi experience consolation:

- encourage gratitude rather than excitement alone;
- help them identify the practices that support their spiritual growth;
- invite them to record significant spiritual insights;
- remind them that future struggles are a normal part of spiritual life.

The goal is to transform temporary consolation into lasting spiritual maturity.

Rule 11 - Remain Hopeful During Desolation

The Rule: St. Ignatius encourages those experiencing spiritual desolation to remember that God will again grant consolation. Likewise, those enjoying consolation should remain humble, recognizing that this grace comes from God.

What Does This Mean?

This rule invites us to live with both **hope** and **humility**.

During desolation, we may believe that our present darkness will never end. Ignatius reminds us that God remains faithful and that consolation will return in His time.

During consolation, we may be tempted to think that our spiritual strength comes from our own efforts. Ignatius reminds us that every genuine consolation is God's gift.

Thus:

- **Desolation calls for hope.**
- **Consolation calls for humility.**

Both attitudes help us remain spiritually balanced.

Example

A theology student who had previously enjoyed great peace in prayer enters a period of spiritual dryness. He begins comparing himself with others and worries that he is failing in his vocation.

His formator reminds him of the many ways God has guided him in the past. Instead of focusing only on his present struggles, he recalls God's fidelity throughout his formation journey. This memory renews his confidence and helps him continue faithfully.

Another student, after receiving excellent evaluations and experiencing great success in ministry, begins to believe that his effectiveness is entirely the result of his own abilities.

During spiritual direction, he is invited to reflect with gratitude on how God's grace has worked through him. This reflection helps him recover humility and openness to God.

Living with Spiritual Balance

Rules 10 and 11 teach an important principle: Neither consolation nor desolation should become the measure of our spiritual life.

When we experience consolation:

- remain grateful;
- remain humble;
- prepare for future trials.

When we experience desolation:

- remain patient;
- remain faithful;
- trust that God's grace continues to sustain you.

A mature Christian is not controlled by changing spiritual feelings but remains faithful in every season.

Guidance for Formators

Help formandi to:

- value consolation without becoming dependent upon it;
- accept desolation without becoming discouraged;
- remember God's faithfulness throughout their formation journey;
- develop stable habits of prayer, community life, and service that continue regardless of changing feelings.

One of the marks of spiritual maturity is not the absence of desolation but the ability to remain faithful through both consolation and desolation.

Summary of Rules 10–11

Rule	Ignatius' Guidance
Rule 10	Use times of consolation to prepare for future desolation by deepening prayer, gratitude, and fidelity.
Rule 11	During desolation, trust that consolation will return; during consolation, remain humble because every grace comes from God.

Formation Note: Formation is a journey of gradual growth rather than constant spiritual success. Periods of consolation and desolation are both part of God's work in shaping mature disciples. Formators help formandi not by protecting them from every difficulty but by teaching them to remain faithful through every season of their spiritual life.

The deepest sign of spiritual maturity is not continual consolation but **stable fidelity**, a willingness to continue loving, praying, serving, and trusting God whether one experiences spiritual joy or spiritual dryness.

Key Insight: Spiritual maturity grows when we receive consolation with gratitude and humility, and endure desolation with hope and perseverance. Both become occasions for deeper trust in God's faithful love.

Section E: Rules 12–14

Recognizing the Enemy's Strategies

Introduction

The previous rules explain how to recognize and respond to spiritual consolation and desolation. The final three rules of the First Week reveal **how the evil spirit ordinarily works**. St. Ignatius does not present these rules to make us fearful or suspicious. Rather, he wants us to become **spiritually alert**.

One of the greatest insights of Ignatius is that temptation often follows recognizable patterns. By understanding these patterns, formators and formandi are better able to recognize temptation early and respond wisely.

In these three rules, Ignatius uses **three vivid images**:

- **a weak woman** (Rule 12),
- **a false lover** (Rule 13),
- **a military commander** (Rule 14).

These images reflect the language and culture of the sixteenth century. Today, they are best understood as illustrations of **three strategies** of temptation rather than descriptions of particular persons. Their message remains timeless.

Rule 12 - Temptation Grows Strong When We Lose Courage

The Rule: St. Ignatius observes that the enemy becomes bold when we lose courage and confidence, but weakens when we firmly resist temptation.

What Does This Mean?

Temptation often begins with small suggestions:

- "You are not capable."
- "There is no point trying."
- "You will never change."
- "Give up."

If we become discouraged and surrender immediately, these temptations usually become stronger. However, when we face them with trust in God and quiet determination, they gradually lose their power.

The enemy thrives on fear and discouragement but retreats before patient perseverance.

Example

A postulant struggles with public speaking. After making several mistakes during a community presentation, he begins telling himself:

- *“I am not suited for religious life.”*
- *“Others are much better than I am.”*

He thinks of withdrawing from all leadership opportunities.

His formator encourages him to continue accepting small responsibilities instead of avoiding them. With practice and encouragement, his confidence gradually grows, and the temptation to give up loses its strength.

Guidance for Formators

When formandi become discouraged:

- encourage small, realistic steps rather than perfection;
- strengthen hope rather than focusing on failures;
- remind them that setbacks are part of growth;
- help them distinguish temporary weakness from lack of vocation.

Rule 13 - Temptation Grows in Secrecy

The Rule: St. Ignatius compares the enemy to a false lover who prefers secrecy and loses influence when his plans are brought into the light.

What Does This Mean?

One of the enemy’s most effective strategies is convincing us to keep our struggles hidden.

A person may think:

- “No one will understand.”
- “I should solve this by myself.”
- “If I tell my formator, he will think badly of me.”

The longer temptations remain hidden, the stronger they often become.

When they are honestly shared with a trusted spiritual guide or formator, they usually begin to lose their power.

Honest openness allows God’s grace to enter situations that secrecy keeps in darkness.

Example

A novice experiences persistent doubts about his vocation but feels ashamed to speak about them. For several months he pretends that everything is fine while becoming increasingly anxious and withdrawn.

Eventually, he shares his struggles with the novice master during spiritual accompaniment. Through patient conversation and prayer, he realizes that many of his fears are based on unrealistic expectations rather than on a genuine lack of vocation.

His openness becomes the beginning of healing and renewed confidence.

Guidance for Formators

Create an atmosphere where formandi feel safe to speak honestly.

Encourage them to:

- share temptations without fear;
- ask for help when needed;
- distinguish confidentiality from secrecy;
- recognize that openness is a sign of maturity rather than weakness.

Rule 14 - Temptation Often Attacks Our Weakest Areas

The Rule: St. Ignatius compares the enemy to a military commander who studies a fortress carefully and attacks where it is weakest.

What Does This Mean?

- Every person has strengths and vulnerabilities.
- One formandus may struggle with pride.
- Another with discouragement.
- Another with loneliness.
- Another with the desire for approval.
- Another with impatience.

The enemy often exploits these particular weaknesses rather than attacking everyone in the same way.

Recognizing our personal vulnerabilities helps us become more vigilant and allows God's grace to strengthen those areas.

Example

Br. Thomas is generous and hardworking but constantly seeks the approval of others.

Whenever he receives praise, he becomes highly motivated. Whenever he receives correction, he quickly becomes discouraged and questions his vocation.

During accompaniment, his formator helps him recognize this pattern. Over time, Thomas learns to root his identity more deeply in God's love rather than in the opinions of others. As he grows in freedom, the same corrections no longer disturb him as deeply.

Guidance for Formators

Help formandi to identify:

- recurring temptations;
- emotional triggers;
- unhealthy patterns of thinking;
- situations that repeatedly lead to discouragement or poor choices.

The purpose is not to make them fearful of their weaknesses but to help them cooperate more consciously with God's grace.

Bringing the Three Rules Together: These final rules reveal three common strategies of temptation.

Rule	The Enemy's Strategy	Wise Response
Rule 12	Discourages us so that we lose courage.	Persevere with confidence in God's grace.
Rule 13	Encourages secrecy and isolation.	Bring struggles into the light through honest accompaniment.

Rule 14	Attacks our particular weaknesses.	Know your vulnerabilities and remain spiritually vigilant.
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Applying These Rules in Formation

These rules have particular importance in formation because many vocational struggles develop gradually rather than suddenly.

A formator should therefore be attentive to signs such as:

- increasing isolation from the community;
- reluctance to speak honestly during accompaniment;
- repeated discouragement after ordinary failures;
- recurring patterns of the same temptation;
- excessive dependence on praise or fear of criticism;
- avoiding prayer or community life after personal setbacks.

Early recognition allows timely accompaniment before these struggles become deeply rooted.

Formation Note: The purpose of these rules is **not to make formandi suspicious of every thought or temptation**. Temptation is part of every Christian life. What matters is not whether we experience temptation, but **how we respond to it**.

A mature disciple learns to recognize discouragement without surrendering to it, to speak openly rather than hiding struggles, and to acknowledge personal weaknesses while trusting in God's grace. Formators who accompany with patience, discretion, and compassion help formandi develop this same spiritual wisdom.

Key Insight: The enemy's greatest strength lies in discouragement, secrecy, and exploiting our weaknesses. These lose their power when we remain courageous, seek honest accompaniment, and place our trust in God's faithful grace.

IV. Applying the First Week Rules in Formation

From Understanding the Rules to Accompanying People

The First Week Rules are not meant simply to be studied or remembered. Their real value lies in helping formators accompany formandi through the ordinary experiences of formation. Every day, formators encounter candidates who struggle with prayer, community life, apostolic work, vocational doubts, discouragement, or personal weaknesses. The Ignatian Rules provide a practical framework for understanding these experiences and responding with wisdom.

A good formator does not immediately label an experience as consolation or desolation, nor does he rush to solve every problem. He first listens carefully, observes patiently, and helps the formandus become aware of what is happening within. Discernment is a process of accompaniment rather than quick diagnosis.

1. Listen Before Offering Advice

The first responsibility of a formator is to listen attentively.

When a formandus shares an experience, it is tempting to give immediate advice or offer solutions. Ignatian discernment invites the formator first to understand the person's interior experience.

Helpful questions include:

- What happened?
- What are you experiencing interiorly?
- How has this affected your prayer?
- What thoughts have become stronger?
- What desires are growing within you?
- Where do you experience peace?
- What is disturbing your heart?

Listening patiently often reveals much more than immediate explanations.

Example

A novice says, “I don’t feel like praying anymore.”

Instead of immediately saying, “You are in spiritual desolation,” the novice master gently asks, “When did this begin?” “Has anything happened recently?” “How has this affected your relationship with God and the community?”

Gradually, the novice realizes that unresolved conflict with another novice is influencing his prayer.

2. Help Formandi Recognize Their Interior Movements

Many formandi notice only their actions but not the interior movements behind them.

The formator helps them learn to identify:

- recurring thoughts;
- emotions;
- desires;
- fears;
- attractions;
- resistances;
- changes in prayer;
- movements towards or away from God.

This develops the habit of spiritual awareness.

Example

A theology student notices that after spending time comparing himself with classmates, he becomes discouraged and avoids study and prayer.

By recognizing this pattern, he begins to understand how comparison gradually leads him away from peace and confidence.

3. Distinguish the Different Sources of Experience

Not every difficulty has the same origin.

A wise formator asks:

- Is this primarily physical?
- Is it emotional?
- Is it psychological?
- Is it relational?
- Is it spiritual?
- Are several factors present together?

Good accompaniment avoids both extremes:

- reducing everything to spirituality;
- reducing everything to psychology.

Instead, it seeks an integral understanding of the person.

Example

A postulant who becomes irritable during prayer is found to have been sleeping only four hours each night while preparing for examinations.

The immediate issue is physical exhaustion rather than spiritual desolation.

4. Observe Patterns Rather Than Isolated Events

Ignatius teaches us to pay attention to movements over time.

One difficult day does not necessarily indicate spiritual desolation.

One joyful experience does not necessarily indicate spiritual consolation.

Discernment becomes clearer by observing recurring patterns.

Questions include:

- Has this experience continued over several weeks?
- Is it becoming stronger or weaker?
- Where is it leading the person?
- What fruits is it producing?

Patterns reveal much more than isolated events.

5. Encourage Faithful Perseverance

When formandi experience spiritual desolation, the formator's role is not to remove every difficulty but to help them remain faithful.

Encourage them to:

- continue daily prayer;
- remain involved in community life;
- fulfil ordinary responsibilities;
- continue spiritual accompaniment;
- avoid impulsive decisions.

Faithful perseverance often becomes the place where God forms deeper trust.

6. Help Formandi Learn from Spiritual Experience

Every experience becomes an opportunity for growth.

Rather than asking only, "How can this difficulty end?" encourage questions such as:

- What is God teaching me?
- What have I discovered about myself?
- How have I grown?
- What helped me remain faithful?
- What will I do differently next time?

Reflection transforms experience into wisdom.

7. Know the Limits of Spiritual Accompaniment

The Ignatian Rules are guides for spiritual discernment.

They do not replace:

- medical treatment;
- psychological assessment;
- professional counselling;
- appropriate safeguarding procedures.

When emotional distress is severe, persistent, or significantly affects daily functioning, referral to qualified professionals may be necessary while spiritual accompaniment continues.

Recognizing these limits is itself a sign of good discernment.

Attitudes for Accompanying Discernment

A formator who applies the First Week Rules well gradually develops certain qualities. He is:

- prayerful rather than impulsive;
- attentive rather than hurried;
- patient rather than controlling;
- compassionate rather than judgmental;
- hopeful rather than discouraging;
- realistic rather than simplistic;
- respectful of both grace and human nature.

Such accompaniment helps formandi develop confidence in God's guidance rather than dependence on the formator.

Example

A novice approaches his formator saying, "I think I have lost my vocation."

Instead of immediately agreeing or disagreeing, the formator spends several weeks accompanying him. Through regular conversations, prayer, and observation, they discover that the novice's doubts began shortly after receiving news of serious financial problems at home and after becoming physically exhausted from apostolic work.

As his emotional burden is addressed and his physical health improves, his vocational clarity gradually returns. The formator realizes that what initially appeared to be a vocational crisis was largely influenced by grief, anxiety, and fatigue.

Patient accompaniment enabled genuine discernment.

Formation Note: The First Week Rules are not techniques for analysing people. They are a way of accompanying persons with reverence and wisdom. The formator's role is not to tell the formandus what God is saying, but to help him recognize God's action for himself. This requires prayer, attentive listening, patience, and trust in the Holy Spirit, who is the true guide of every vocation.

Key Insight: Good accompaniment does not provide quick answers. It helps the formandus become attentive to the movements of the heart, distinguish their source, and respond freely and faithfully to God's grace.

PART TWO

The Second Week Rules (Rules 1–8)

Introduction to the Second Week Rules

Growing in Deeper Discernment

The First Week Rules help us recognize the ordinary movements of consolation and desolation and teach us how to respond to them. They are especially valuable during times of conversion, temptation, discouragement, and the early stages of spiritual growth.

As a person grows in faith and sincerely seeks to follow Christ, the challenges of discernment often become more subtle. The question is no longer simply, “**Am I choosing between good and evil?**” Rather, it becomes, “**Among several good possibilities, which one is truly God’s will?**” At this stage, temptation may no longer appear as something obviously wrong. Instead, it may come disguised as something attractive, generous, or even holy.

To accompany people in these situations, St. Ignatius offers the **Second Week Rules for the Discernment of Spirits**.

These rules are intended for those who are striving to live faithfully and generously according to God’s will. They help us discern the more subtle movements of the spirit and recognize when the enemy disguises himself as an “angel of light” (cf. 2 Cor 11:14), leading a person away from God through what initially appears to be good.

The Purpose of the Second Week Rules

The Second Week Rules help us to:

- recognize the more subtle action of the good and evil spirits;
- distinguish genuine inspirations from deceptive ones;
- examine the origin, direction, and outcome of interior movements;
- avoid being misled by appearances;
- grow in greater spiritual freedom and maturity.

These rules are particularly valuable for those entrusted with leadership, formation, spiritual accompaniment, and important missionary responsibilities, where many decisions involve choosing between good alternatives rather than between obvious good and evil.

Who Are These Rules For?

The Second Week Rules are especially helpful for:

- formandi who have developed a stable prayer life;
- formators and spiritual directors;
- missionaries entrusted with significant responsibilities;
- community leaders making pastoral decisions;
- anyone seeking to discern God’s will among several good possibilities.

They presume a sincere desire to follow Christ and a willingness to seek God’s will above personal preferences.

A Roadmap of the Second Week Rules

The eight rules naturally fall into three groups.

Section A: Recognizing Genuine Spiritual Consolation (Rules 1–3)

These rules explain:

- the different ways God gives consolation;
- the importance of consolation without a preceding cause;
- how genuine consolation always leads us closer to God.

Section B: Recognizing False Appearances (Rules 4–6)

These rules warn that the enemy may disguise himself as an “angel of light,” leading us gradually away from God’s will through apparently good thoughts or generous desires.

They teach us to examine:

- where an inspiration begins;
- how it develops;
- where it finally leads.

Section C: Confirming Authentic Guidance (Rules 7–8)

These rules help us review our spiritual experience carefully and distinguish genuine inspirations from subtle deception.

They invite us to examine the fruits of our decisions before acting upon them.

Applying the Second Week Rules in Formation

The Second Week Rules are especially relevant in formation because many important decisions involve choosing between several good options rather than between right and wrong.

For example:

- A young missionary is invited to pursue higher studies or begin parish ministry. Both are good. Which better serves God’s call at this time?
- A novice desires to undertake additional penances. Are these inspired by love of God or by hidden perfectionism?
- A formandus volunteers for many apostolic activities. Is this generous availability or an unconscious way of avoiding silence, prayer, or community life?
- A formator feels strongly convinced about a decision affecting a formandus. Is this truly the guidance of the Holy Spirit or influenced by personal preferences or assumptions?

The Second Week Rules help us look beneath appearances and discern the deeper movements that shape our choices.

Formation Note: As we mature in the spiritual life, discernment usually becomes more refined rather than easier. The enemy often abandons obvious temptations and instead seeks to influence us through subtle distortions of what is genuinely good. For this reason, spiritual maturity requires increasing humility, self-awareness, prayer, and openness to accompaniment.

The Second Week Rules remind us that **every inspiration should be tested**, not because we distrust God, but because we sincerely desire to follow His will rather than our own preferences.

Key Insight: The Second Week Rules help us discern not simply between good and evil, but between what appears good (the apparent good) and what truly leads us more deeply into God’s will and the service of His Kingdom (the real good).

Section A: Rules 1–3

Recognizing Genuine Spiritual Consolation

Introduction

The First Week Rules help us recognize the ordinary movements of consolation and desolation. The Second Week begins from a different situation. Here, the person is sincerely seeking God and desires to live faithfully according to His will. The challenge is no longer obvious temptation but **discerning whether an apparently good inspiration truly comes from God**.

These first three rules explain how God gives spiritual consolation and why not every experience of peace or enthusiasm should immediately be considered a sign of God's will.

Rule 1 - God Alone Gives Consolation Without a Preceding Cause

The Rule: St. Ignatius teaches that **only God can give spiritual consolation without a preceding cause**. Such consolation arises directly from God's action and is not produced by our thoughts, reflections, or external circumstances.

What Does This Mean?

Sometimes, while praying or going about our ordinary duties, we unexpectedly experience a deep awareness of God's presence, profound peace, renewed trust, or an overwhelming desire to love and serve Him. We cannot explain why it happened. There is no particular event, reflection, or emotion that caused it.

Ignatius calls this **consolation without a preceding cause** because it comes directly from God.

It is a pure gift of grace. It cannot be produced by our efforts or repeated whenever we wish.

Example

During an ordinary morning meditation, a novice suddenly experiences a deep certainty that God loves him and has called him to missionary life. Nothing unusual has happened. He has not been reflecting on his vocation or seeking a special experience. Yet he is filled with profound peace and gratitude.

The experience strengthens his love for Christ and renews his commitment to his vocation. This is an example of consolation without a preceding cause.

Guidance for Formators

When formandi describe such experiences:

- receive them with gratitude and reverence;
- avoid exaggerating or sensationalizing them;
- encourage humble gratitude rather than spiritual pride;
- remind them that God's gifts are meant to strengthen faithful daily living, not to seek extraordinary experiences.

Rule 2 - Consolation with a Preceding Cause Requires Discernment

The Rule: When consolation arises through our thoughts, reflections, prayer, reading, or external events, **both the good spirit and the evil spirit may influence the experience**. Therefore, it requires careful discernment.

What Does This Mean?

Most of our spiritual experiences have a preceding cause.

For example:

- reflecting on Scripture;
- making a retreat;
- listening to an inspiring homily;
- reading the life of a saint;
- participating in a meaningful community celebration.

These experiences often bring peace, joy, or enthusiasm. They may indeed come from God, but Ignatius reminds us that they must still be discerned because our own desires, imagination, or subtle temptations can become mixed with genuine grace.

The important question is: **Where is this inspiration leading me?**

Example

After attending a missionary conference, a theology student feels inspired to volunteer immediately for the most difficult mission territory.

His enthusiasm is sincere and generous. During spiritual accompaniment, however, he gradually realizes that part of his motivation is a desire to prove himself and gain admiration.

With further prayer and discernment, his motivation becomes more purified. He continues to desire missionary service, but now from a deeper love for Christ rather than from the need for recognition.

The initial consolation was good, but its motives required discernment.

Guidance for Formators

Help formandi to examine:

- What gave rise to this experience?
- What desires are influencing it?
- Is it producing humility and freedom?
- Does it encourage faithful daily living?
- Is it leading towards greater love of God and service of others?

Rule 3 - Judge the Experience by Its Fruits

The Rule: St. Ignatius teaches that when consolation has a preceding cause, we should carefully examine **its beginning, its development, and its outcome**. If the whole movement leads towards God, it may be accepted with confidence. If it gradually leads away from God, it should be rejected.

What Does This Mean?

An inspiration should not be judged only by how it begins.

Some thoughts begin beautifully but gradually lead to:

- pride;
- impatience;
- discouragement;
- division;
- self-importance;
- neglect of ordinary responsibilities.

Others begin quietly and gradually produce:

- humility;
- peace;
- generosity;
- charity;
- greater fidelity;
- deeper trust in God.

The fruits reveal the true source of the inspiration.

Example

A novice decides to spend much longer hours in personal prayer. Initially, this seems admirable.

After several weeks, however, he begins neglecting community responsibilities, becomes impatient with fellow novices who pray less, and quietly believes himself to be spiritually superior.

His formator helps him recognize that although the desire to pray was good, it gradually became mixed with pride and imbalance.

Together they develop a healthier rhythm that integrates prayer, community life, study, and apostolic service.

The good beginning needed purification because its later fruits revealed that the inspiration was no longer leading wholly towards God.

Applying These Rules in Formation

These three rules are especially valuable when accompanying formandi who are:

- making important vocational decisions;
- beginning new ministries;
- considering additional spiritual practices;
- experiencing strong religious enthusiasm;
- assuming leadership responsibilities.

Rather than asking only, “**Is this a good idea?**” the formator also asks:

- Where did this inspiration come from?
- How is it developing?
- What fruits is it producing?
- Is it increasing humility, freedom, charity, and missionary availability?

These questions often reveal much more than first impressions.

Formation Note: Not every inspiring thought is necessarily God’s invitation. Likewise, not every deep spiritual experience requires immediate action. The Second Week Rules invite us to examine every inspiration prayerfully and patiently before acting upon it.

As formators accompany others, they should encourage gratitude for God’s gifts while also cultivating humility, prudence, and careful discernment. Authentic inspirations become clearer over time because they consistently bear the fruits of faith, hope, charity, humility, and generous service.

Key Insight: Genuine inspirations are recognized not only by how they begin but by where they lead. When an interior movement consistently produces greater love for God, humble service, and faithful perseverance, it bears the marks of the Holy Spirit.

Section B: Rules 4–6

Recognizing False Appearances

Introduction

One of St. Ignatius' greatest insights is that temptation becomes more subtle as a person grows spiritually. For someone sincerely seeking God, the enemy rarely suggests something that is obviously sinful. Instead, he often proposes **something that appears good**, gradually leading the person away from God's will.

For this reason, Ignatius reminds us that **the enemy can disguise himself as “an angel of light.”** He may inspire thoughts that seem holy, generous, or admirable at first, but which eventually produce pride, confusion, discouragement, or division.

These rules teach us not to judge an inspiration by its first appearance alone, but by **its origin, its direction, and its fruits.**

Rule 4 - The Enemy Can Appear as an Angel of Light

The Rule: St. Ignatius teaches that the evil spirit may present himself as an “angel of light.” He may begin by suggesting thoughts that appear good and attractive, but gradually lead the person away from God's will.

What Does This Mean?

Not every generous desire comes from God.

Not every spiritual idea is inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The enemy often begins with something genuinely good but subtly changes its direction.

For example:

- generosity becomes the search for recognition;
- zeal becomes impatience;
- discipline becomes rigidity;
- prayer becomes an escape from responsibility;
- commitment becomes self-reliance.

The beginning appears good, but the final outcome moves the person away from humility, charity, and obedience.

Example

A novice decides to spend extra hours in prayer each day. His desire is sincere. Gradually, however, he begins arriving late for community activities and neglecting assigned responsibilities because he wants to remain in the chapel. When corrected, he believes that others do not understand his “deep spiritual life.”

His increased prayer is no longer leading to greater charity and obedience. What began as something good has become unbalanced.

Guidance for Formators

Help formandi ask:

- Is this inspiration making me more humble?
- Does it strengthen my commitment to community life?
- Does it increase charity and obedience?

- Am I becoming more available for mission or more centred on myself?

Authentic inspirations always deepen communion with God and with others.

Rule 5 - Examine the Whole Course of the Inspiration

The Rule: Ignatius advises us to examine carefully the entire course of an interior movement, its beginning, its development, and its conclusion. If every stage leads towards God, it may be accepted. If it eventually leads away from God, it should be rejected.

What Does This Mean?

Some inspirations begin well but slowly change direction.
Others begin quietly and gradually produce lasting peace and fidelity.
Instead of asking only, **“How did this begin?”**

Ignatius encourages us to ask:

- How is this developing?
- Where is it leading?
- What kind of person am I becoming?

The final fruits often reveal what the beginning concealed.

Example

A theology student volunteers enthusiastically for every pastoral activity.

Initially, everyone appreciates his generosity.

Over time, however, he begins neglecting his studies, skips community recreation because he is “too busy,” becomes impatient with fellow students, and feels indispensable.

His activity is still good in itself, but it is no longer helping him live a balanced formation life.

Through accompaniment, he learns that authentic missionary generosity includes prayer, study, community life, and apostolic service in proper balance.

Guidance for Formators

Invite formandi to review significant experiences by asking:

- How did this begin?
- What happened as I continued?
- What attitudes developed within me?
- What fruits did it produce?

Reviewing experiences in this way often reveals God’s guidance more clearly than judging them at the beginning.

Rule 6 - Learn from Past Experiences

The Rule: Ignatius encourages us to remember how the enemy has acted in the past so that we may recognize similar patterns in the future.

What Does This Mean?

- The enemy often repeats the same strategies.

- A person who regularly becomes discouraged after correction may notice this recurring pattern.
- Another may repeatedly seek excessive responsibilities to gain approval.
- Another may consistently avoid difficult conversations by becoming “too busy.”
- Recognizing these recurring patterns helps us respond more wisely the next time they appear.
- Discernment therefore grows through reflection on experience.

Example

A young missionary notices that whenever he receives constructive criticism, he immediately begins questioning his vocation and considers asking for a transfer.

After reflecting with his spiritual director, he recognizes that this pattern has repeated itself several times over the years.

The next time correction comes, he is able to recognize the familiar temptation and respond more calmly, without making impulsive decisions.

His awareness has become an important step in spiritual growth.

Guidance for Formators

Help formandi review their experiences regularly by asking:

- Have I experienced something similar before?
- How did I respond then?
- What helped me remain faithful?
- What mistakes should I avoid repeating?
- What has God been teaching me through these experiences?

Such reflection gradually develops mature discernment.

Bringing the Three Rules Together

Rule	Main Insight	Question to Ask
Rule 4	The enemy may disguise himself as an angel of light.	Does this apparent good truly lead me closer to God?
Rule 5	Examine the whole course of an inspiration.	How did it begin, how is it developing, and where is it leading?
Rule 6	Learn from recurring patterns.	Have I experienced this before, and what did I learn from it?

Applying These Rules in Formation

These rules are especially valuable when accompanying formandi who:

- show exceptional enthusiasm after retreats or spiritual experiences;
- take on many responsibilities without maintaining balance;
- become rigid in spiritual practices;
- repeatedly fall into the same patterns of discouragement or pride;
- make decisions based mainly on strong initial enthusiasm.

The formator’s role is not to discourage generosity but to help ensure that it remains rooted in humility, charity, obedience, and missionary availability.

Formation Note: As we grow spiritually, discernment requires increasing patience and humility. Good intentions alone are not enough. We must also examine where those intentions are leading us.

Authentic inspirations consistently produce the fruits of the Holy Spirit: humility, peace, charity, fidelity, and generous service.

For formators, these rules are a reminder that accompaniment is not about evaluating isolated actions but about helping formandi recognize the deeper patterns that shape their relationship with God.

Key Insight: The enemy rarely leads committed disciples away from God through obvious evil. More often, he subtly distorts what is good. Wise discernment therefore examines not only the attractiveness of an inspiration but also its direction and lasting fruits.

Section C: Rules 7–8

Confirming Authentic Guidance

Introduction

The final two rules of the Second Week bring together everything that St. Ignatius has taught about discernment. After recognizing that God alone gives consolation without a preceding cause and that the enemy can disguise himself as an angel of light, Ignatius now explains **how we can confirm whether an inspiration truly comes from God.**

The emphasis shifts from the beginning of an inspiration to **its lasting fruits.** Genuine inspirations consistently lead to deeper faith, humility, charity, and faithful service. False inspirations, even if attractive at first, eventually produce confusion, pride, discouragement, or self-centredness.

For formators, these rules encourage patient accompaniment. Rather than judging an inspiration too quickly, they help formandi reflect on their experiences over time and recognize God's guidance with greater confidence.

Rule 7 - Learn to Recognize the Characteristic Ways God Guides You

The Rule: St. Ignatius teaches that, through experience, we gradually learn how God ordinarily guides us and how the enemy usually tries to deceive us. This growing self-knowledge helps us discern more wisely in the future.

What Does This Mean?

God often works with each person in a consistent way.

Some people experience God's guidance through a quiet and lasting peace.

Others receive clarity gradually through prayer and reflection.

Others recognize God's will through faithful service and patient perseverance.

Likewise, the enemy often repeats familiar patterns of temptation. He may repeatedly attack a person's particular weaknesses, such as fear, pride, discouragement, perfectionism, or the desire for approval.

As we become more aware of these patterns, discernment becomes easier and more reliable.

Example

A young Claretian notices that whenever he is asked to accept a new community assignment, his first reaction is anxiety and self-doubt. During prayer, however, this anxiety gradually gives way to peace and generosity.

After reflecting on several similar experiences with his formator, he realizes that this has become a recurring pattern in the way God leads him. Instead of reacting immediately to his initial fear, he learns to wait, pray, and allow God's peace to emerge.

This self-knowledge enables him to respond with greater freedom and confidence.

Guidance for Formators

Help formandi to reflect on questions such as:

- How has God guided me in the past?
- Are there recurring patterns in my spiritual life?
- What situations usually bring me closer to God?
- What situations repeatedly lead me to discouragement or confusion?
- What have I learned about the way God works in my life?

Such reflection gradually develops mature spiritual wisdom.

Rule 8 - Confirm an Inspiration by Its Lasting Fruits

The Rule: Ignatius teaches that authentic inspirations continue to bear good fruits over time. They lead to lasting peace, humility, charity, fidelity, and greater openness to God's will.

What Does This Mean?

Some inspirations produce immediate enthusiasm but soon disappear.

Others quietly deepen over time, bringing greater freedom, peace, and commitment.

Ignatius invites us not to judge an inspiration only by its intensity but by its **lasting effects**.

Questions to ask include:

- Does this inspiration deepen my relationship with God?
- Does it make me humbler?
- Does it strengthen my love for the community?
- Does it increase my availability for mission?
- Does it help me become more faithful in ordinary responsibilities?

Authentic guidance from God always produces fruits that endure.

Example

A theology student begins to feel drawn towards missionary work among migrants. Rather than acting immediately, he brings this desire to prayer, spiritual direction, and conversations with his formation team.

Over the following months, the desire remains steady. It deepens his prayer, increases his generosity, strengthens his commitment to study, and makes him more available to serve wherever he is needed.

The lasting fruits confirm that this attraction is not a passing enthusiasm but a genuine movement of God's grace.

Guidance for Formators

When accompanying important discernments:

- do not rely only on first impressions;
- allow sufficient time for the inspiration to mature;
- observe whether it consistently produces good fruits;
- encourage consultation, prayer, and community dialogue;
- confirm decisions through lasting peace rather than temporary excitement.

Patience is often one of the best safeguards in discernment.

Bringing the Two Rules Together

Rule	Main Insight	Question to Ask
Rule 7	Learn how God and the enemy typically work in your life.	What patterns do I recognize from my past experience?
Rule 8	Confirm inspirations by their lasting fruits.	Does this continue to lead me towards greater faith, humility, charity, and mission?

Applying These Rules in Formation

These final rules are particularly helpful when accompanying formandi who are:

- discerning ministry or community assignments;
- considering further studies or specialized ministries;
- preparing for first or perpetual profession;
- discerning ordination;
- assuming leadership responsibilities.

Rather than asking only, “**What do you want to do?**”, the formator also asks:

- How has this desire developed over time?
- What fruits is it producing in your life?
- Has it increased your love for God, the community, and the mission?
- Have you remained open to the guidance of your formators and the community?

Such questions help ensure that important decisions arise from genuine discernment rather than passing emotions.

Formation Note: The Second Week Rules remind us that discernment is not about finding extraordinary signs but about faithfully recognizing God’s quiet and consistent guidance in everyday life. Authentic discernment grows through prayer, self-knowledge, humble openness to accompaniment, and patient attention to the fruits that gradually emerge.

For formators, these rules are an invitation to accompany with patience and confidence. The Holy Spirit ordinarily leads people gradually, not hurriedly. Wise accompaniment respects this rhythm and allows God’s work to unfold in its own time.

Key Insight: Authentic discernment is confirmed over time. When an inspiration consistently bears the fruits of faith, humility, charity, peace, and missionary availability, it gives reliable signs that the Holy Spirit is leading the person toward God’s will.

V. Applying the Second Week Rules in Formation

Accompanying Mature Discernment

The First Week Rules help formandi recognize the ordinary movements of consolation and desolation. The Second Week Rules prepare them for a more mature stage of the spiritual life, where the challenge is often not choosing between good and evil, but discerning **God’s greater good** among several good possibilities.

In formation, this situation becomes increasingly common. A formandus may sincerely desire to serve God, yet still need help discerning the deeper motivations behind his choices. Likewise,

formators are often required to accompany decisions that have no obvious right or wrong answer but require prayerful discernment.

The Second Week Rules help formators accompany these situations with patience, wisdom, and humility.

1. Help Formandi Discern Their Motivations

A good decision can arise from different motivations.

For example, a formandus may volunteer for a demanding apostolate because:

- he genuinely desires to serve Christ;
- he wants to avoid academic responsibilities;
- he seeks recognition;
- he finds it difficult to say “no”;
- he believes that being busy makes him a better missionary.

The external action may be the same, but the interior motivation differs.

The formator therefore helps the formandus ask:

- Why am I attracted to this?
- What desire is influencing this decision?
- Is this leading me towards greater freedom or towards self-interest?
- Am I seeking God’s will or my own preferences?

Discernment begins by purifying motives.

2. Encourage Decisions Rooted in Prayer

Important vocational and missionary decisions should never be made only on the basis of enthusiasm, fear, or personal preference.

Encourage formandi to:

- pray consistently about the decision;
- reflect on Scripture;
- seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit;
- allow sufficient time for clarity to emerge;
- avoid unnecessary haste.

Prayer gradually purifies desires and allows God’s invitation to become clearer.

Example

A theology student receives an invitation to specialize abroad. The opportunity is attractive and appears beneficial. Instead of accepting immediately, he brings the matter to prayer, discusses it with his formator, and reflects on the needs of the Congregation.

Over time, he realizes that his initial enthusiasm was influenced partly by the desire for prestige. As his discernment deepens, he becomes more open to accepting whatever best serves the mission.

3. Confirm Decisions Through Their Fruits

Not every good idea should be acted upon immediately.

Allow important inspirations to mature.

Observe whether they produce:

- lasting peace;
- greater humility;
- deeper commitment to prayer;
- stronger community relationships;
- increased missionary availability;
- freedom from excessive attachment.

Good fruits over time provide greater confidence that the inspiration comes from God.

4. Discern Together with the Church and the Community

Ignatian discernment is never purely individual.

Within religious formation, personal discernment is enriched through dialogue with:

- the formator;
- the spiritual director;
- the formation team;
- the community;
- the wisdom of the Church;
- the charism and mission of the Congregation.

Listening to others does not diminish personal freedom. Rather, it helps the formandus recognize aspects that he may not see by himself.

Example

A novice feels strongly called to a particular ministry. During community conversations and meetings with his formator, he gradually recognizes that although his desire is genuine, his gifts may be better suited to another apostolate. Through this dialogue, his discernment becomes broader and more realistic.

5. Be Patient with the Discernment Process

God usually leads people gradually.

Some decisions become clear quickly.

Others require months or even years of prayer, experience, and reflection.

A formator should therefore avoid:

- forcing quick decisions;
- interpreting temporary enthusiasm as certainty;
- becoming impatient when clarity does not come immediately.

Patient accompaniment allows God's guidance to unfold naturally.

6. Respect the Freedom of the Formandus

The role of the formator is to accompany discernment, not to replace it.

A formator should:

- ask questions rather than provide all the answers;
- help the formandus reflect honestly;
- present different perspectives when needed;
- respect the person's freedom and responsibility.

The goal is not dependence on the formator but growing freedom before God.

7. Remain Open to God's Surprises

God's plans sometimes differ from our expectations.

A formandus may discover that:

- the ministry he desired is not where God is calling him;
- unexpected difficulties become opportunities for growth;
- an assignment he initially resisted becomes the place where he experiences deep joy and fruitfulness.

Discernment therefore requires openness, flexibility, and trust.

Example

A young Claretian hoped to become a Scripture professor and had prepared himself for higher studies. Instead, he was assigned to youth ministry in a remote mission.

Initially, he accepted the assignment reluctantly. As the years passed, however, he discovered unexpected joy in accompanying young people, developed gifts he had never recognized before, and experienced deep fulfilment in missionary service.

Looking back, he realized that God's plan had been wiser than his own expectations.

Practical Guidelines for Formators

When accompanying mature discernment, encourage formandi to ask:

- Is this leading me closer to Christ?
- Am I seeking God's will or my own preference?
- What motivates this desire?
- What fruits has this produced over time?
- Have I prayed sufficiently about this?
- Have I listened to those accompanying me?
- Does this strengthen my availability for the mission of the Congregation?

These questions foster freedom and responsible decision-making.

Formation Note: The Second Week Rules remind us that mature discernment is not about finding extraordinary signs or waiting for absolute certainty. It is about growing in a trusting relationship with God, becoming aware of our motivations, patiently examining the fruits of our choices, and remaining open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit through prayer, the Church, the community, and those entrusted with our formation.

For Claretian formators, these rules are especially valuable because they help formandi discern not only *what they want to do*, but *how they can respond more generously to God's call in the service of the Church and the mission of the Congregation*.

Key Insight: Mature discernment seeks not simply the good, but *the greater good that best serves God's will and the missionary vocation entrusted to us*.

VI. Discernment Across the Stages of Formation

Growing in Discernment Throughout the Formation Journey

Discernment is not a skill that is learned once and mastered forever. It develops gradually as a person's relationship with Christ deepens and as he gains greater self-knowledge, spiritual maturity, and missionary experience.

The Ignatian Rules should therefore be introduced progressively according to the stage of formation and the needs of the formandi. In the early stages, the emphasis is on becoming aware of interior movements and establishing healthy spiritual habits. In the later stages, greater attention is given to discerning motivations, confirming vocational decisions, and responding faithfully to God's call in increasingly complex situations.

The role of the formator also changes. Initially, the formator provides more guidance and helps the formandus recognize basic spiritual movements. As formation progresses, the formator gradually encourages greater personal responsibility and spiritual freedom.

1. Aspirancy and Pre-Novitiate

Formation Focus

At this stage, candidates are learning to develop a relationship with Christ and to understand themselves more honestly. Many are encountering regular personal prayer, community life, and spiritual accompaniment for the first time.

The emphasis is not on mastering all the Ignatian Rules but on developing the habit of paying attention to one's interior life.

The Formator Helps the Formandus

- become aware of thoughts, feelings, and desires;
- distinguish between temporary emotions and deeper convictions;
- develop regular habits of prayer and reflection;
- practise a daily examination of conscience;
- speak honestly during accompaniment.

Rules to Emphasize

First Week

- Rules 1–4: Recognizing the different interior movements.
- Rules 5–9: Learning to persevere during discouragement.

The Second Week Rules are normally introduced only in a simple way.

2. Novitiate

Formation Focus

The novitiate is a privileged time for learning discernment. Through the Spiritual Exercises, regular prayer, silence, community life, and accompaniment, novices become more attentive to God's action in their daily lives.

They begin to recognize recurring patterns of consolation, desolation, temptation, and grace.

The Formator Helps the Novice

- apply the First Week Rules to daily experience;
- recognize spiritual consolation and desolation;
- avoid making important decisions during desolation;
- understand personal strengths and vulnerabilities;
- grow in openness during spiritual accompaniment.

Towards the latter part of the novitiate, the Second Week Rules may be introduced gradually, especially when accompanying vocational commitment.

Rules to Emphasize

- First Week Rules 1–14.
- Introduction to the Second Week Rules.

3. Post-Novitiate

Formation Focus

As formandi begin philosophical/ theological studies and become more involved in pastoral ministry, discernment becomes increasingly practical. They must learn to integrate prayer, study, community life, apostolic service, and personal growth.

They also begin making decisions involving ministry, leadership, relationships, and the use of personal gifts.

The Formator Helps the Formandus

- discern motivations behind choices;
- integrate prayer with daily responsibilities;
- recognize subtle forms of temptation;
- review experiences regularly;
- make decisions through prayerful reflection rather than impulse.

Rules to Emphasize

- Continued application of the First Week Rules.
- Regular use of the Second Week Rules, especially for discerning motivations and important decisions.

4. Immediate Preparation for Perpetual Profession and Ordination

Formation Focus

As formandi prepare for lifelong commitment, discernment becomes more focused on vocational fidelity, missionary availability, and generous self-giving.

The challenge is often no longer vocational uncertainty but remaining free from personal ambitions, fear, or attachment.

The Formator Helps the Formandus

- confirm vocational motivations;
- review the journey of God's grace;
- discern readiness for lifelong commitment;
- strengthen trust in God's providence;
- cultivate freedom for mission.

Special attention should be given to the Second Week Rules, which help purify motivations and confirm authentic spiritual guidance.

5. Ongoing Formation

Formation Focus

Discernment remains essential throughout missionary life.

New responsibilities, changing ministries, intercultural communities, leadership roles, illness, ageing, and personal transitions all require continued openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The mature missionary continues to ask:

- What is God inviting me to at this stage of life?
- How can I remain faithful to my missionary vocation?
- What new attachments or resistances are emerging?
- How is the Holy Spirit inviting me to grow?

The Missionary Is Encouraged To

- maintain regular personal prayer;
- continue spiritual accompaniment whenever possible;
- practise regular personal reflection;
- review significant life experiences prayerfully;
- remain open to ongoing conversion.

The Role of the Formator Across All Stages

Although the emphasis changes at each stage, the formator's fundamental task remains the same: *to help formandi become attentive to God's action and respond with increasing freedom and responsibility.*

This involves helping them to:

- notice interior movements;
- interpret them wisely;
- integrate human and spiritual growth;
- persevere during difficulties;
- confirm important decisions through prayer, reflection, and accompaniment;
- grow in missionary availability.

As formation progresses, the formator gradually moves from providing more guidance to fostering greater personal discernment, enabling the formandus to become increasingly responsible for his own spiritual journey.

Formation Note: Discernment is a lifelong discipline rather than a temporary formation exercise. The Ignatian Rules are not intended only for retreats or periods of vocational uncertainty. They become a practical guide for living each day with greater attentiveness to God's presence and greater freedom in responding to His call.

For Claretian missionaries, discernment serves the mission. It helps them remain open to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, respond generously to the needs of the Church, and faithfully embody the missionary spirit of St. Anthony Mary Claret in every stage of life.

Key Insight: Discernment grows with the person. As formandi mature in faith and missionary commitment, the Ignatian Rules become not merely principles to study, but a habitual way of listening to God and responding generously to His call.

VII. Common Pitfalls in Discernment

Avoiding Common Pitfalls

The Ignatian Rules are a reliable guide for discerning God's action in our lives. However, they can be misunderstood or applied incorrectly. Being aware of these common mistakes helps formators accompany formandi with greater wisdom and balance.

1. Equating Feelings with God's Will: Pleasant feelings are not always signs of God's guidance, nor are painful feelings necessarily signs of spiritual desolation. The important question is not, "*How do I feel?*" but, "*Where is this experience leading me?*"

2. Making Important Decisions During Desolation: Spiritual desolation can cloud judgment and lead to impulsive decisions. Whenever possible, important vocational or missionary decisions should be made when one has regained interior peace and freedom.

3. Spiritualizing Every Human Difficulty: Not every struggle has a spiritual cause. Fatigue, illness, grief, stress, or psychological difficulties can influence one's interior life. Good discernment considers the whole person before drawing conclusions.

4. Reducing Everything to Psychology: While psychological insights are valuable, they do not explain every spiritual experience. Genuine movements of God's grace also require prayerful discernment.

5. Seeking Extraordinary Signs: God ordinarily guides us through daily prayer, ordinary responsibilities, community life, and the quiet movements of the heart. Discernment does not depend on extraordinary experiences.

6. Expecting Immediate Clarity: God's will often becomes clear gradually. Discernment requires patience, prayer, and faithful reflection rather than immediate certainty.

7. Discernment in Isolation: Discernment is a personal journey but should not be lived alone. Honest dialogue with a formator, spiritual director, or formation team helps confirm authentic inspirations and prevents self-deception.

8. Becoming Overly Self-Analytical: Constantly analysing every thought or emotion can create anxiety and self-preoccupation. Healthy discernment combines self-awareness with trust in God and faithful attention to one's ordinary duties.

Practical Reminders for Formators

When accompanying formandi:

- Listen before drawing conclusions.
- Consider the whole person.
- Distinguish between emotions and spiritual movements.
- Observe patterns over time rather than isolated experiences.
- Encourage prayer, patience, and honest accompaniment.
- Respect the person's freedom and pace of growth.
- Recognize when professional assistance may be needed.

Formation Note: Discernment is learned through prayer, experience, and accompaniment. Mistakes need not discourage us; they are often opportunities for deeper learning. A wise formator accompanies with patience, humility, and trust in the Holy Spirit, helping formandi grow in spiritual freedom and faithful response to God's call.

Key Insight: Authentic discernment avoids quick judgments, respects the whole person, and patiently seeks God's will through prayer, reflection, and accompaniment.

VIII. Key Takeaways for Formators

Essential Principles of Ignatian Discernment

The Ignatian Rules for the Discernment of Spirits are not merely a set of spiritual principles to be studied. They are a practical guide for helping formandi recognize God's action in their lives and respond to it with increasing freedom and generosity. The following points summarize the essential insights of this module.

1. **Discernment is a Lifelong Journey:** Discernment is not limited to retreats or major decisions. It is a daily practice of becoming attentive to God's presence and responding faithfully to His invitations.
2. **Pay Attention to Interior Movements:** Thoughts, desires, emotions, attractions, and resistances all influence our relationship with God. Learning to recognize these interior movements is the first step in discernment.
3. **Look at the Whole Person:** Good discernment considers the physical, emotional, psychological, relational, and spiritual dimensions of life. Not every difficulty is a spiritual problem, and not every spiritual experience can be explained psychologically.
4. **Judge Experiences by Their Direction and Fruits:** The question is not simply, "*How do I feel?*" but, "*Where is this experience leading me?*" Genuine movements of the Holy Spirit lead to greater faith, hope, charity, humility, freedom, and missionary generosity.
5. **Do Not Make Important Decisions During Spiritual Desolation:** When experiencing spiritual desolation, remain faithful to previous good decisions and continue ordinary practices of prayer and community life until greater clarity returns.
6. **Persevere Through Spiritual Desolation:** Periods of spiritual dryness and discouragement are a normal part of the spiritual journey. Lived with faith and patience, they become opportunities for deeper trust in God.
7. **Discern Motivations Carefully:** As we grow spiritually, temptations often become more subtle. Even good desires need to be examined to ensure that they arise from love of God rather than pride, fear, or self-interest.
8. **Discernment Requires Prayer and Accompaniment:** God ordinarily guides us through prayer, reflection, Scripture, the Church, the community, and wise accompaniment. Discernment should not be carried out in isolation.
9. **Growth in Discernment Requires Humility:** No one is free from self-deception. Humility, openness to correction, and willingness to learn from experience are essential for authentic discernment.
10. **The Goal of Discernment is Faithful Mission:** The purpose of discernment is not simply to understand our interior experiences but to become more available for God's will and more generous in serving the Church and the mission of the Congregation.

Formation Note: For Claretian formators, the Ignatian Rules are a valuable resource for accompanying formandi towards spiritual maturity and missionary availability. They help formators listen more attentively, guide more wisely, and foster greater freedom in those entrusted to their care. Ultimately, discernment is not an end in itself but a means of helping every missionary become more attentive to the Holy Spirit and more faithful to the mission received from Christ.

Key Insight: The fruit of authentic discernment is a person who grows in freedom, faithfully follows Christ, and becomes increasingly available for the mission of the Church.

IX. Reflection Questions for Formators

Personal Reflection

These questions are intended to help formators deepen their own practice of discernment before accompanying others. Effective accompaniment begins with a formator who is attentive to God's action in his own life.

1. How do I normally recognize God's action in my daily life?
2. Which Ignatian Rule has been most helpful in my own spiritual journey? Why?
3. How do I usually respond during periods of spiritual desolation?
4. What recurring patterns of temptation or discouragement have I noticed in my own life?
5. How do I ensure that my personal preferences do not influence the guidance I offer to formandi?

Reflection on Accompaniment

6. Do I listen carefully before offering advice?
7. How do I help formandi recognize and interpret their interior movements?
8. Am I attentive to the physical, emotional, psychological, relational, and spiritual dimensions of the person's experience?
9. Do I distinguish between genuine spiritual desolation and human or psychological distress?
10. How do I encourage formandi to grow in freedom rather than dependence on me?

Reflection on Formation Practice

11. How do I help formandi become more attentive to God's presence in ordinary daily life?
12. Do I encourage them to persevere during spiritual desolation without making impulsive decisions?
13. How do I help them examine the motivations behind important vocational or missionary decisions?
14. Do I provide a safe and trusting environment where formandi can speak honestly about their struggles?
15. How do I integrate prayer, discernment, community life, and mission in the accompaniment process?

Reflection on Missionary Discernment

16. How do I help formandi recognize that discernment is ultimately ordered towards mission?
17. In what ways do I encourage availability for the needs of the Church and the Congregation rather than personal preferences?
18. How do I accompany formandi in discerning ministry assignments, leadership responsibilities, and other important missionary decisions?
19. How do I foster openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit within the formation community?
20. What one aspect of my accompaniment would I like to strengthen in light of this module?

Formation Note: These questions are not intended as an evaluation checklist but as an invitation to ongoing formation. Discernment grows through regular reflection, prayer, and accompaniment. Formators who continue to examine their own way of listening, discerning, and accompanying are better prepared to help formandi become mature disciples and generous missionaries.

Final Reflection: *Before helping others discern God's will, how is God inviting me to grow as a discerning and accompanying formator today?*

(Optional Personal Resolution): Conclude your reflection by completing the following statement:
In the coming months, I will strengthen my ministry of accompaniment by...

This simple resolution encourages the module to end not merely with reflection but with a concrete commitment to growth, which is consistent with the formative approach adopted throughout the manual.

Further Reading

- **Ignatius of Loyola.** *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius.* Translated by Louis J. Puhl, S.J. Chicago: Loyola Press, 1951.
- **Gallagher, Timothy M.** *The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living.* New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005.
- **Gallagher, Timothy M.** *Spiritual Consolation: An Ignatian Guide for Greater Discernment of Spirits.* New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007.
- **Gallagher, Timothy M.** *Spiritual Desolation: Dryness, Darkness, and the Discernment of Spirits.* New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2019.
- **Toner, Jules J., S.J.** *A Commentary on Saint Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits.* St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1982.
- **Barry, William A., S.J., and William J. Connolly, S.J.** *The Practice of Spiritual Direction.* New York: HarperCollins, 1982.
- **Barry, William A., S.J., and Robert G. Doherty, S.J.** *Contemplatives in Action: The Jesuit Way.* New York: Paulist Press, 2002.
- **Nouwen, Henri J. M.** *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life.* New York: HarperOne, 2013.