

I want to begin with a passage that St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first American-born saint, wrote, remembering an incident from 1789 when she was fifteen. “When my father was in England, one morning in May, in the lightness of a cheerful heart, I jumped in the wagon that was driving to the woods for brush, about a mile from home: the boy who drove it began to cut (the brush), and I set off in the woods, [I] soon found . . . a chestnut tree . . . found rich moss under it and warm sun. Here, then, was a sweet bed – the air . . . a clear blue vault above – the numberless sounds of spring . . . and a heart as innocent as human heart could be, filled with enthusiastic love [of] God and admiration of His works . . . I prayed, sang hymns, cried, laughed, talking to myself of how far He could place me above all sorrow. Then I laid still to enjoy the heavenly peace that came over my soul; and I am sure, in the two hours so enjoyed, grew ten years in the spiritual life.”

This experience is a good example of what St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Founder of the Jesuits, called “spiritual consolation.” Ignatius was

the great teacher in the Catholic tradition concerning spiritual consolation and desolation – and what to do when we are in them. In his Spiritual Exercises Ignatius lists fourteen rules of discernment. Today, in light of this Gospel, I want to preach about Rule 10: “Let the one who is in consolation think how he will conduct himself in the desolation which will come after, taking new strength for that time.”

Consolation is a moment, hour, day in which we can feel ourselves to be especially blessed by God. God is near, seems so real, almost touchable. Like Elizabeth Ann Seton’s, our prayer and very lives then seemed graced with extra color, perfume, music – and interior peace. In our Gospel today we hear an account of an even greater spiritual consolation. At the Transfiguration, Jesus blesses Peter, James and John with these moments or hours, we don’t know how long – of glorious experience of His divine power and presence.

But, in this world at least, consolation never lasts forever, or even for very long. Desolation returns. Desolation is what Ignatius calls those

times when our spiritual life is dry. God seems far away or unreal.

Prayer is tedious. When will our prayer time over? Our souls are disturbed by fear and anxiety. The world seems boring or pointless.

Some of you are in consolation today, feeling spiritual comfort. Things with God are going well. But even more of you are in desolation, because the dryness is more frequent in life. Even in the Apostles' lives we see that proportion. Jesus rarely shows His full power to them. There were many dusty miles on the roads of Galilee before the Transfiguration. Why this back and forth?

When we are in consolation, it's God showing His love for us in concrete ways. When we are in desolation, we're given the chance to show our love for God in concrete ways – by remaining His friend, praying, believing in Him, even when He doesn't reward us. In our desolations God gives us the chance to show that we're not mercenaries, who serve Him only when paid with pleasant spiritual experiences.

So, desolation is not necessarily bad, or our fault. Now, it's true that if we sin or grow cold in our love for God, then there will be dryness and felt absence of God. But desolation is sometimes a tool God uses to sharpen our spiritual edge. The test of whether dryness is our fault is to look at our virtues. Are we still growing in patience, charity, humility, kindness in the middle of dryness? If so, then be at peace. The desolation is just God giving your faith a chance to mature.

What else are we to do in these alternating experiences of consolation and desolation? The first thing to do in consolation is to enjoy it. These are times of spiritual growth spurts. Think of the way Elizabeth Ann Seton said she grew ten years-worth in the spiritual life in two hours. That can happen. These moments are valuable spiritual gifts from God. Like Elizabeth Ann Seton under the chestnut tree, rest in the glory of what God gives – and thank Him.

But then also remember, Ignatius says, "Let the one who is in consolation think how he will conduct himself in the desolation that will

come after, taking new strength for that time.” We can’t stay in consolation. God will sooner or later end it. Think of Peter at the Transfiguration. He wants to stay on the mountain top. “It’s good that we are here.” But Jesus doesn’t let the Apostles remain long in His glory. They must continue their journey. Jesus has shown them His glory precisely so they can endure the coming Cross and its desolation.

Ignatius tells us to do the same thing. In times of consolation we should remember, “This won’t last, so I must remember this glory and comfort of God when the inevitable hard times come again.” We must be intentional. There’s need of a strong will in the spiritual life. The grace of consolation must be turned into the tough-minded resolutions of the will. We must be able to tell ourselves, “I will make it through these tough times. I will not give up on my spiritual journey to God just because prayer is dry, and events provoke me right now. I know from experience that God also consoles me. He has in the past. He will again!”

Don't waste your times of consolation. They're rare enough. In spiritual consolation take new strength for the coming desolation by meditating on the spiritual value of dryness and suffering. When we're in the middle of desolation this is too difficult to see. The suffering is too close. But when we are separated from the dryness by time and the present consolation, then God's wisdom in allowing us to grow in love by the sacrifice of our will to Him in our suffering is more easily understood – and accepted.

The exodus to Jerusalem and the Cross will come for you and me, just as it did for Jesus, as it came for Peter, James, and John. Jesus knows this and is preparing us for that right now through both our consolations and desolations on the journey. Let us stay faithful to Him, both on the mountain top and in the valleys, and we will someday rest in His glory forever.