

Community and community discernment (1/2)

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Parish, family, school staff...for a variety of reasons, Brothers and lay colleagues belong to a number of groups which can take, more or less, the form of a community. What is said here about Brothers' religious communities can help us in our groups to seek the will of God for the group, and to listen to the Spirit who speaks through each of their members.

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In a Church structured as a pyramid, religious life had a similar vertical structure, with God at the top, the Brother at the bottom, and in between, the Rule and the Director. Nowadays, the Church sees itself as a communion, and religious life mirrors this, and the visible intermediaries are more on the horizontal plane. The community sees itself as a turntable, where these various intermediaries meet: the community is the primary and the most important of these intermediaries.

It would be useful at the outset to say a few words about the concept of community. Community is first of all Ekklesia, because it is a "con-vocation". For a religious community, this "con-vocation" is twofold: the call to live the Gospel, and live it in the light of the charism, or of the particular interpretation the Spirit has inspired the Founder to adopt. To the first call, the Brother responded by baptism, thanks to which, dead to sin, he lives for God in Jesus Christ (cf. Rm 6,11). To the second, he responded by his religious consecration, which commits him to follow in the footsteps of St John Baptist de La Salle so that he can be a sacrament for young people of the love of the Father in the Son through the Spirit.

Each community is Ekklesia, because it is a Church "cell", and because it brings people together around the Risen Christ who have been called to follow in his footsteps like the disciples in Galilee. Because of the personal link he establishes with each Brother, the Risen Christ becomes the formal reason for the "us" that forms community, which is the Body of Christ. Vita Consecrata says the following: "The religious life constitutes in fact a living memory of the way Jesus lived and acted as the Incarnate Word in relation to his Father and his brothers. It is a living tradition of the life and message of the Saviour" (VC, 22,3,37).

The 1987 Rule sees the community as a visible sign for the Church and for the world: "The Brothers live out their consecration in a community of the Church. Their community is for all Christians a special sign of the covenant between God and human beings. Such a community affirms the duty and the possibility of renewing the world in the spirit of the Gospel" (Rule 23).

Each community is called to be koinonia (union, communion): this is its formal aspect. In fact, what makes a community is the presence of the Risen Christ in the midst of the Brothers gathered in his name (cf. Mt 18,20), that is to say, in his love, in his spirit: "If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love" (Jn 15,10). In specific

terms, the commandment of Jesus is mutual love on the model of the Trinity (cf. Jn 13,35). Wherever two or three Brothers are united in mutual love, they are koinonia and Ekklesia. "Ubi tres, Ecclesia est, licet laici" (Tertullian). In the same way that the Risen Christ is also as much present in a small host as in a full ciborium, so he is present in the Ekklesia, whether it is formed of two or three or thousands of persons. We have here the two main ways in which the Risen Christ is present: in his eucharistic form and in his mystical body. Each way is as real as the other. There is, however, an important difference between these two ways of being present. In the Eucharist, the presence of Christ depends on himself through the intermediary of the ordained minister. It is a stable presence: whether the church is empty or full, the eucharistic presence does not vary. In community, the presence of Christ depends on the mutual love, on the koinonia. If there is no koinonia, Christ is not present, and it can be said that there is no formal community: there is only a physical community.

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(Br Richard goes on to speak of religious obedience in this community context. He then says a few words about religious authority).

For some people nowadays the whole idea of authority is questionable, no doubt because of some bad experiences in the past which have not yet been laid to rest. In the light of this, it might be better to try live out relationships within the community in terms of unity, and to stress creating or maintaining communion as explained earlier, as a motive for authority. In the first place, all the members of the community are Brothers and are subject to the same freely accepted obligations. All also are responsible for the vitality of the community: "Each Brother considers himself responsible in union with all the others, for the life of the community, the power of its witness, and for its pastoral commitment" (Rule 49a). The Founder gave communities a number of supports to enable them to maintain their vitality, but the efficacy of these depended on each member of the community. The director has a role as a human intermediary whose task it is to enable each Brother to enter into communion with the Father in Christ through the Spirit. If he really sees his role as being simply the interpreter of God's will, he must "remain listening to God with love, trembling and docility to his will (PC 14), totally open to the demands of the Spirit. To do this, he must be a man of prayer, have a profound spirit of faith, and be prepared to engage in dialogue with the Brothers" (S.M. Alonso, *La vida consagrada*). His relations with his Brothers must be characterised by a profound desire, on his part and on that of the Brothers, to seek together the will of God and to find the most appropriate means to discern this will in the light of the Word of God and of his Spirit.

Discernment in community

Following Vatican II, religious life changed from being governed by a Rule in which everything was stipulated in the smallest detail, and according to which discernment was reserved to the superior alone, to being inspired by a new outlook, in which communities were called upon to make value judgments about their life and the concrete situations which would enable them to be faithful to the Gospel and to the particular interpretation given it by the Founder and the Institute. Communities need to learn to discern spiritually and as a community.

The question of community discernment was raised only after the *Perfectae caritatis* document of Vatican II had asked superiors "to consult and listen to their subjects in an appropriate way" and to lead them "to cooperate in active obedience that is responsible" (PC 4,2; 14,3). However, dialogue is not necessarily the same thing as spiritual dis-

cernment. There are three stages in this discernment: 1° dialogue as a presentation of opinions and points of view, which is what normally happens in community meetings; 2° evaluation of the reasons given; 3° the final decision or choice. For a long time, the process stopped after the first stage, and the other two were often considered to lie within the competence of the superior. And then, communities began to completing the three stages, and the role of authority was to indicate the concrete action to be taken by taking a decision in community and for the community.

However, in this transition from a situation in which discernment was reserved exclusively to the superior to another, in which communities began to discern “democratically”, deciding quite often simply on the basis of a majority vote of half plus one, there was a real danger that discernment would be seen as the task of solely the community. This would create a dilemma, as it would place the superior and the community in an antinomic position. What is acquired by one seems to be taken away from the other: if the superior discerns, it makes community discernment impossible; if the community discerns, the superior needs only to sign a blank cheque or rubber stamp the decision. This is like Sartre’s dilemma: either God exists and man is not free, or man is free and God does not exist.

The religious community will not be able to avoid this dilemma unless it seeks *koinonia*, knowing full well that it is something that is never completely achieved, but that it must be nourished constantly and protected. It is only in a community where this is done that there can be true spiritual discernment. As it is, not all communities are communities of communion, *koinonia*, and some are simply groups of religious living together. Spiritual discernment in community is possible and very necessary, since it constitutes the theological basis for *koinonia*. It is not easy, however, and it has to be learnt. Without it, groups of religious living together will not form true communities.

If we are to speak adequately about community discernment, we need, perhaps, to explain first of all in what it consists, because all community discussions or meetings do not necessarily constitute spiritual discernment, however prudent, brilliant and well-intentioned the participants may be. It is not a question here of simply human prudence, that is, of judgments based on the data of human reason, but rather of judgments based on views of faith. Not all parliamentary or deliberative assemblies are necessarily held with the Holy Spirit in mind and under his influence. A discussion including a variety of more or less opposing views, or a debate which highlights the main arguments for and against, and is normally won by the more brilliant and shrewd debater, are one thing. Seeking a way forward in prayer, and seeing in such or such situation in the life of the community a call from God, is quite another. Decisions based on scheming, lobbying or pressure groups can never be the result of spiritual discernment. Such decisions are divisive and exacerbate conflicts. Spiritual discernment, on the other hand, strengthens unity and creates joy and peace. Meetings which take place at full speed, watch in hand, governed by the concern not to run overtime, can hardly result in spiritual discernment, which calls for willingness to spend time, and a great interior freedom so that God’s Word can be understood.

At times, we speak of community discernment, at other times of discernment in common, which is not necessarily the same thing. Community discernment means that the discernment is directed at the community, and that the community is responsible for the decisions taken. Discernment in common describes simply the conditions in which it takes place: it makes no judgment about the nature of the process nor about those who take part, whether individuals or the community as a whole. Nowadays what is generally understood by community spiritual discernment or spiritual discernment in community, is the search for the will of God, by a group which meets, and in which all take part

in the reflection which leads to the identification of the signs which indicate the direction in which the Spirit is leading them.

This is something new, because nowhere in all the historical and theological sources is the expression “spiritual discernment” applied to community groups. It is something that was born of Vatican II. The rediscovery of the collegiality of the Church perhaps had some influence, but it is more likely that it was the spread of the concept of democracy in society which really determined the position adopted by the renewal General Chapters, rather than the pneumatological dimension. However, it is enough to examine the concept of democracy to see that it does not include the element of communion used in Council documents. The history of salvation does not originate with mankind, rather it is the gratuitous initiative of the Trinity, whose wish it is that mankind live in communion in its own image. It is possible, therefore, to equate political groups or others, which, at best, wish to establish and defend the common good, and ecclesial communities which, united in Christ, seek to discover the will of God as a group or a community, in order to live in a Christian manner, according to God’s plan, and to submit everything to obedience and to the inspirations and actions of the Spirit.

The model of community discernment which is often given is that practised by St Ignatius and his first followers when they wished to know whether or not it was opportune to found a new religious order and, more especially, whether it was proper to make a vow of obedience to one of their group. They did not call this process “community discernment”, but rather a “celebration of the first Fathers”. (cf. A. Ravier, Ignace de Loyola fonde la Compagnie de Jésus, Christus 36). It is useful to recall the conditions established by St Ignatius and his companions in order to make a discernment regarding this question, discussion about which, at that particular moment, had reached an impasse.

1. Each one should devote himself to prayer, penance and meditation, in order to try to find peace and joy in the Holy Spirit with regard to obedience, striving as best he can to wish to obey rather than to command, for the equal glory of God and praise of his majesty.
2. Let no one speak of this with anybody else, let no one question anybody else, so that no one is put under pressure or induced to obey rather than not to obey, or vice versa. Let each one search only in prayer and meditation what is of more value.
3. Let each one imagine that he does not belong to the group, in fact, that he will never belong to it, so that, by this subterfuge, he will not be led to judge on the basis of his feelings, but that he can free himself of them in order to present his views to the group on obedience or non-obedience, and so that by his personal reflection he can strengthen his reasons for thinking how the service of God will be greater and the future preservation of the Company will be better assured.

After this personal discernment, the views and reasons of all were pooled. On the first evening, each one presented his reasons against the vow of obedience which had occurred to him in reflection and prayer. On the following day, they did the same thing, but gave their reasons in favour. Finally they arrived at the following, not majority, but unanimous conclusion: “It is better for us, it is more necessary, to promise obedience to one of ourselves” and this for a threefold reason: “So that we can fulfil better and in a more exact manner our first desire to accomplish by all our actions the will of God; then, so that the Company be preserved more surely; and finally so that each one can be provided for properly both spiritually and materially” (ibid). After taking three months over this discernment, all that was left was to submit the result of their deliberation to the Holy See.

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