

Community and community discernment (2/2)

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Since discernment is a judgment, originating in an act of personal intelligence in the light of faith and guided by the Spirit, it can be the result of only each person's conscience. Moreover, no one can be sure that the judgment each member of the group has arrived at is subservient to God's plan in Christ and in keeping with Gospel values. If a person is spiritual and has made a spiritual discernment, it is likely that his judgment is spiritual. If another person did not make his discernment spiritual, his judgment will be carnal (in the Pauline sense). Could one call spiritual the overall results of such common discernment? Which judgment would have been preponderant, that of the spiritual persons, or that of those members of the group who are cleverer at imposing their opinions by various forms of manipulation? This is true also of Chapters, one may add in passing. Should we not rather speak, therefore, of spiritual discernment made in common, rather than of community discernment, in which the community is seen as the body responsible for the result? True community discernment is possible only if there is *koinonia*, that is, in a community in which everything is put in common.

If it is true that spiritual discernment in community is possible, this does not mean to say it is easy. For this discernment to be religious, it must respect both authority and obedience. This presupposes an underlying attitude of radical obedience to the Gospel and, as a consequence, a lively faith stimulated by the action of the Spirit in each of its members, fidelity to the Founder's interpretation of the Gospel inspired by the Holy Spirit, obedience to the Gospel seen in the light of the charism of the Institute inspired by the Spirit and endorsed by the Church. Secondly, this requires from each of the members of the community radical obedience as an affirmation or re-affirmation of fidelity to a professed way of life in a fraternity which has accepted them. To persevere in fidelity or to ratify one's fidelity in a dynamic fashion is what constitutes obedience. There is a constant need for conversion, often a painful process, if we are to adopt new ways of acting in which we have not been trained. Often the excuse put forward for not making the effort to return to the spirit of the 1987 Rule is that "We were not trained to do that!". There is the risk that we end up in a sort of no man's land, governed neither by the old Rule in which superiors had overall authority, nor by the new one in which the community periodically seeks in communion to discern the will of God regarding it. There is no more obedience. Are we still religious?

There exist books which deal with this topic in a more detailed way:

A. Ducharme, *Discernement spirituel et délibération communautaire*, Via Evangelica 7, Ottawa 1974.

A. Martinez, *El discernimiento. Teoria y practica*, Madrid 1984

J. M. Guerrero, *El discernimiento comunitario. Desafio y respuesta a nuestra busqueda esperanzada*

L. Gutierrez Vega, *Funcion de la autorodad en el discernimiento comunitario*, Madrid 1976

M. Ruiz Jurado, *El discernimiento espiritual. Teologia, Historia, Practica*, BAC 544, Madrid 1994

We shall limit ourselves here to pointing out a few personal and community dispositions which are necessary for discernment in common. It is important to be sure that everyone is prepared to communicate on the level of faith, that is, to have in view the plan of God embodied in Jesus Christ and present in the community through his Spirit. This should engender an attitude of openness, willingness, the desire to seek God's will for oneself and for the community, on the model of the obedient Christ. It is this profound attitude of obedience which is the basis, as we have seen, of discernment.

If the community is to bring this fundamentally important attitude to discernment, each stage of the process must be permeated with prayer, the invocation of the Holy Spirit, openness to his action which gives spiritual freedom, brotherly friendship, sharpness of vision, humility and simplicity in both listening carefully to others and in expressing one's own thoughts.

Another attitude to adopt is one of poverty and interior freedom, in the sense that one has detachment from one's own ideas and feelings. This is necessary in order to be able to be open and to allow the Spirit to speak within oneself and through others. If one remains attached to one's own ideas, even if they are good, or if one lets one's feelings (antipathy, fear, resentment, prejudice) cloud one's judgment, discernment becomes impossible. On the other hand, if one considers ideas expressed as a gift to the community, the community can make whatever use it wishes of it without provoking frustration. Otherwise, one remains attached to one's own views and there is no room for other people's ideas and feelings: there is no more dialogue, only a succession of monologues. The last two conditions imposed by St Ignatius are a good way to avoid undue pressure and to prevent feelings interfering with judgment.

A necessary complement to the attitude of detachment is the positive attitude of being welcoming towards others and their ideas and feelings. This attitude and openness are shown by listening carefully and with empathy to others, hardly possible without the preceding condition. Without it, instead of listening really to what the other is saying, one argues with the other person inside one's head, rejecting his arguments or looking of ways to contradict them.

Another important condition is the atmosphere of agape, created by mutual love, and consisting of its two essential elements of perichoresis and kenosis, that is, being intimately present to the other and effacing oneself. This condition consists also of a common search for the will of God and fidelity to the Founder's understanding of the Gospel, in order to reach conclusions and implement them in the here and now. This is why earlier we said that discernment is possible only in the presence of *koinonia*.

The factors of time and place have to be taken into account also. The factor of time is most important if real spiritual discernment is to be made by a community. This question can be considered in two different ways. The community can withdraw to a suitable place, a retreat centre, a monastery, etc., for a few days with the sole aim in view to undertake spiritual discernment together. This is ideal. Otherwise, one can follow the example of St Ignatius and his first followers, that is, continue one's apostolic work, permeating it with meditation, attention to the presence of God, reflection, recollection, and meet periodically to share the fruits of one's personal discernment. St Ignatius took three months over his discernment. If the second approach is adopted, there is danger of dispersion, and this must be borne in mind when choosing which approach to adopt.

When the time comes to make a choice in community, two extremes need to be avoided: unanimity at all cost or the majority vote of half plus one. On the one hand, it is better to leave time for ideas to mature and enable each one to benefit from other people's ideas instead of wanting at all cost to end the process by voting, especially if one feels there is a divergence of views. In such a situation, there is a danger that a vote will divide the community rather than unite it. It is better to put off making a decision than to make one with a divided vote. In any case, there is no guarantee that unanimity is always possible, nor that it is always genuine. That is why it has to be borne in mind always that, what is involved, is looking for what corresponds most closely to the will of God and the good of the community. This recalls the expression in the formula of vows which says "as far as I am able and as you will require of me". What is involved here is a prudential judgment made in faith, which does not mean, however, that it is automatically

the best decision, and that other options are worthless. This is what corresponds to the idea of “magis” in the Ignatian Principle and Foundation.

Spiritual discernment made in community must take place against the backcloth of the Gospel words: “I tell you solemnly once again, if two of you on earth agree to ask anything at all, it will be granted to you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them” (Mt 18,19-20). We have seen that discernment must take place in an atmosphere of intense prayer which can ensure, as it were, the presence of Jesus in the midst of the Brothers who wish to discern together the will of God. If prayer is to have the efficacy guaranteed by Jesus, it must satisfy two conditions. First of all, it is not sufficient to meet together: the meeting must be held “in my name”, that is, with the intention of conforming in everything with the will of God, as Jesus did, and not of pursuing one’s own ideas and one’s own plans and making sure they are accepted at all cost. Meeting in the name of Jesus is to meet in an atmosphere of mutual love, in which each one is prepared to practise kenosis as Jesus did: “There is no greater love than to give up one’s life for one’s friends”. If true love must make a person prepared to give up his life, how much more so his ideas or his plans. One must be prepared therefore to empty oneself to leave space for the Holy Spirit who speaks and acts in each of the Brothers (cf. Rule 37). When these conditions are present, we can pray together and the Father will not be able to refuse to send his Spirit to unite all hearts.

The Brothers’ Rule speaks of discernment in a number of places. In article 5, we find: “It is by faith that the Brothers judge all earthly realities in the light of the Gospel” and that they “learn to see in every happening and in every person, especially in the poor, a call of the Spirit” (Rule 5; cf. Also MD 44,1,2). What is mentioned here is personal spiritual discernment made in the light of faith. This is the first condition necessary for all spiritual discernment, whether personal or community. It recalls clearly the first effect of the spirit of faith “not to look upon anything but with the eyes of faith”. If all Brothers tried to live their daily lives with this profound attitude of faith, communities would be in a position to undertake community spiritual discernment.

The Rule returns to discernment when it speaks of obedience: “The ordinary way in which the Spirit is revealed is through a community working together to discover the needs of the world and of the Church. Each member of the community ought to be heard, since the Spirit speaks and acts in every Brother” (Rule 37). The same article goes on to point out that “differences of age, of view-point and formation provide a rich source from which to form policies and come to decisions. It is the responsibility of the Brother Director to make the final decision concerning them” (ibid). It is a pity that the Rule does not mention the conditions necessary for an exchange of ideas to be, first of all, a real dialogue, and then to become genuine spiritual discernment, because there is no guarantee that everything a Brother says is inspired by the Holy Spirit. By using the word “discernment” without any specification, we run the risk of removing from spiritual discernment its formal dimension of faith and prayer. All the same, the Rule speaks of the value of discernment in community as the principal human means of obedience. Presumably what we said earlier is taken for granted. However, would it not have actually been better to put it in writing?

Discernment is mentioned also in connection with mission. When the Rule speaks of mental prayer, it seems to use the expression “discernment of spirits” in the same way as Meditation 33, namely, with reference to knowing the young people entrusted to us: “They hope to receive from the Lord the internal freedom and the spiritual discernment which their ministry requires, and the graces they need to work effectively for building up the kingdom of God” (Rule 69). Elsewhere, the Rule says: “The Brothers submit their plans for new forms of apostolate to the discernment of the community in communion with the superiors and the Brothers of the District, in order to be sure that these initiatives are in conformity with the purpose of the Institute” (Rule 16a; cf. 16c). Here we seem to be nearer to

spiritual discernment in community, but once again it is taken for granted that all community discernment takes place under the conditions we spoke of earlier, which does not necessarily follow.

Regarding the Community Programme, we read: “At the beginning of each year and in a spirit of discernment, the Brothers establish or revise their annual community programme” (Rule 58a). No doubt, discernment here should be understood as being what we called earlier community spiritual discernment. We will come back to this point in the next paragraph.

Finally, the Rule uses the term “discernment” in the vocational sense, or simply to mean judgment: “They exercise discretion (discernement in the French text) in their use of the means of social communication” (Rule 54c).

Meetings to undertake spiritual discernment are not the only way to discover the will of God. For centuries now, monks have had their “collationes” (from con-ferre: to put together), during which they could share with one another the fruits of their meditation, reading and reflection. This was also something the Brothers did at the beginning of the Institute by means of the “conference”: “When there are several feasts in the course of the same week, the Brother Director will give a talk on Sunday and on the principal feast. When he is unable to give a talk, he will have extracts read out from a good book and ask a number of Brothers to give their opinions as at a conference” (RC 28,17). The difference between a talk and a conference is quite clear: the latter is a form of community discussion. We read in the Preface to the Conduct of Schools: “This guide has been prepared and put in order only after a great number of conferences between him (De La Salle) and the oldest Brothers of the Institute and those most capable of running a school well” CE 0,0,2). From this we see also that there existed both spiritual and pedagogical conferences.

When the Rule says “Community meetings constitute a significant occasion for the Brothers to reflect together, in the light of the Gospel, on the way they actually live. The Brothers realise that community meetings are necessary for the life of the community and they take part in them willingly. They make use of these opportunities to express their opinions, to put forward suggestions, and to share their experience and their knowledge” (Rule 59a), it is referring to these kinds of conferences, which it considers to be a very important part of community life. These community meetings can serve also as means of learning koinonia which will make true spiritual discernment both easier and more effective. There are different kinds of meetings: they can be adapted to the reality of the community, or they can serve as a means of initiation to koinonia. At times, they can take the form of an exchange of ideas about a chosen topic: an article, an event, some aspect of community or apostolic life. Another meeting can have as its starting point a Gospel text, an passage from a contemporary writer, a Papal document, or the Superior’s Pastoral Letter, and Brothers can be asked to give their reactions to it. The text should be short to avoid dispersion during the sharing of views. Another meeting can give Brothers an opportunity to speak of their personal experiences. This can serve to make the Brothers know one another better, or to develop communion among them by encouraging them to speak more personally. There are many ways of encouraging koinonia, and as many ways to form the Brothers gradually in personal and community spiritual discernment.

Apart from the enrichment that Brothers can obtain from the contribution of others at community meetings in which each one expresses his thoughts, feelings and experiences, there is also great personal enrichment for the person who shares. The fact of having to express his thoughts, his feelings and his experiences, obliges him to clarify his own ideas and feelings, and makes him more aware of who he is himself. If community meetings are seen as a form of punishment, an imposition, it raises questions about the quality of the interior life of community life. This does not imply that the quality of the interior life of each one individually leaves much to be desired, but it does indicate that true community spirituality, koinonia, is still a long way away. •