

DIFFICULTIES IN DISCERNMENT

By MICHAEL KYNE

IT MAY BE true that there was a time when superiors in the Church tended to behave as if they had a private line to God, enabling them to relay his will on any given action or problem with speed and imperturbable certitude. The spectacle of a pope agonizing for years before issuing a pronouncement on birth regulation, of superiors so fearful of taking harsh or wrong decisions that their authority is eroded by inaction, of parents floundering to discover fair rules to impose upon their teen-age children, points to a widespread and largely healthy change in this regard.

But has the old illusion really disappeared, or merely shifted its centre of influence from superiors to the rest of us? Today, it might seem as if a private or party line were part of the equipment of every individual or community. Granted minimal atmospheric conditions, we can achieve by ourselves a steady flow of right solutions and effective decisions, all stamped with the divine guarantee. A directed retreat or two, followed up by a 'discernment workshop', provide all the training we need in this improved method of communication; and once we have learnt to use the system, we may apply it at need to the situations of everyday life. This, or something like it, would seem to be the unreflective model at the basis of a fairly widespread way in which the word discernment is currently employed.

Not everyone, of course, has the same feelings in the matter. The cool and clinical overtones of the word belie the strength and variety of the emotion which swirl around it. For some, it holds the promise of a new kind of security, of being in possession of an irresistible weapon. (After all, to resist the confident assertion 'I have discerned this', to say nothing of the stronger form, which runs 'I have discerned this with my spiritual director', calls for considerable nerve.) But not surprisingly, others remain sceptical. The assurances of well-known practitioners of renewal that no other method works like this one, or the testimony of countless sisters to the improvements effected in their lives and communities by the new key to knowledge, do not carry conviction in every quarter.

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There are people whose hearts sink at the very sight of yet another article on discernment. Are the everyday, pedestrian choices of ordinary people really amenable to such complicated techniques?

Perhaps a crying need at the moment is to set discernment in a context and cut it down to size. Then the emotion may abate a little, and progress in thought and action may become a little easier.

The first contextual reality is God – the one who, in himself and in his ways, will for ever remain beyond the grasp of man's mind and plans;¹ the free agent and initiator to whom a man must turn in adoring obedience but whom he can never truly anticipate; the only one who comprehends all causes and freedoms within his saving aim. This God has indeed drawn close to us. He has let our hearts be transformed in faith and love by his presence; he has disclosed to us the essential truths about himself and about men in the world and their way to him. Yet our transformation is radical, not total. Our lives, minds and hearts are indeed set in a direction; but they are given no detailed knowledge of the route we must follow to him, our goal, in whom we will be totally transfigured. The one thing we know clearly is that our way will be marked by death and resurrection in Christ.

Secondly, man is never withdrawn from his contingent, provisional reality. He never possesses himself wholly, nor can he express himself fully in a single act. He gradually becomes what he is potentially by the gift of God. He works step by painful step to express his full reality, individual and social, to create himself and his world in subordination to the creating and redeeming God. His work is always precarious, in that what is built by human freedom can be dissolved by that same freedom.

This provisional nature of man's being and works extends to much of his practical knowledge and the action flowing from it, even when these are the result of discernment. This knowledge often remains hypothetical in two senses. It first requires, according to its importance, extended reality-checks or experiments in the course of life for its validation. Further, the discernment may cease to be valid, once the data involved in its attainment change by the addition or subtraction of various elements.

It is vital to remember that none of us works in a vacuum. We are always surrounded by other real causes than ourselves and the

¹ Cf Isai 55, 8.

active freedoms of other persons or of God. This means that no decisions about our private lives and, still more, about our actions in society, can be cut and dried in every detail. The basic decision may be confirmed as right by our implementation of it, but its working out must be gradual: it must take into account the changing circumstances which require us to modify its expressions, if we want it to continue in its true reality.

Thus discernment of God's will is largely a tentative matter, which is both difficult to achieve in anything but broad outline, and which needs continual reality-checks to prove its genuineness.

It seems that there are three levels at which this discernment works, both as regards the individual and the community.

The first level concerns the decision of faith in Christ. In this completely certain choice, made by the gift of God, is entailed a cleaving to the incarnate Word and, consequently, an irreversible acceptance of union with God and with his Church, known as the centre of the human race in so far as this is called to be one under Christ its head. Clearly, this decision is reversible in the sense that man's freedom can go back on it; but such a change is not justifiable in a moral sense, if the decision was really one of faith.

The decision of faith itself involves certainty about patterns of thought and life and particular actions which christian experience has come to see either as compatible or incompatible with God's gift of a share in Christ's life. However, this does not mean that such compatibility or clash is always immediately apparent. Ultimately the Church's discernment is infallible by the gift of the Spirit; but it must often include a period of struggle, argument and lived experience before such certainty about points of teaching or action is reached. This provisional period is all the more required because the members of the Church are not – and never will be – fully christian in all their judgments and reactions. Again, the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* is a case in point: until the Church pronounces by a deliberate call on its infallibility about birth control, we must necessarily remain in an uncomfortably provisional position. The Pope has pointed a direction, and some time is required for the whole Church to try to live along this line before certainty is reached. Meanwhile, despite the agony of many (which *may* be the agony inevitably involved in union with the Christ who died and rose again, and certainly is involved in full union with his body of limited members), the instinctive reaction of faith will surely be to align ourselves with the universal pastor rather than

with our own ideas or those of voluble members of the western middle classes. All further decisions, then, specify the irreversible decision of faith, and are founded on their continuing *consonance* with that primary decision under God.

The second level of decision is that of definitive choice of a way of christian life which has been validated as such by the Church. Such a way of life involves a permanent, though broad and developing, pattern of cleaving to God, the Church and the human race through an irrevocable commitment to some person or group within the Church.

There is no basic difficulty here about the way of life as such, nor about the definitive character of the choice it demands, since these are covered by the discernment of the Church. The possibility of this definitive choice is implied in the Church's validation of the way of life, and there are processes which allow such a choice to be made: the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola provides such a process. The difficulty, then, lies in the personal order. By what criteria do I come to recognize a given way of life as the will of God for *me*? The possibility of doing this does not imply that in practice the matter will be either swift or easy. Indeed the presuppositions implied in the capacity to make such a choice will always be daunting except to the really great-hearted; and these, alas, always seem to be a minority. Further, a number of considerations would seem to indicate that the situation of our own time gives rise to special difficulties of its own.

Since this is the classic context of the *Spiritual Exercises*, it may be well to consider briefly the main requisites for making an election according to the Exercises, and the attitudes which Ignatius himself seems to have held regarding the matter of such an election. First of all, Ignatius envisages a person who is really free to make a permanent and irrevocable choice; and in the current context of religious uncertainty and cultural change, fewer and fewer people seem able to aspire to, let alone possess, such freedom. I have written elsewhere of the quality of indifference that this internal freedom requires;² and the considerations invoked by Ignatius to discover whether this is really feasible in the individual case. These include the oblation at the end of the exercise on the Kingdom, the colloquy of the meditation on Two Standards, the consideration of

² Cf 'Discernment of Spirits and Christian Growth', in *Supplement to The Way*, 6 (May, 1968), pp 20-26.

the Three Classes of Men and of the Third Mode of Humility.³ All these demand a level of union in faith and action with Christ crucified which hardly anyone would claim to possess. Even so, it is possible to conclude with Ignatius that a man who wants to give himself totally to God, and is really concerned about the mode in which to do so, can, by exhaustive spiritual effort, arrive at a state in which such a choice, under God, is possible. Possible, but not to be taken for granted, or regarded as the guaranteed outcome of a 'method' or 'process', however rigorous. Furthermore, Ignatius's 'Rules for making a sound election'⁴ were drawn up with a specific case in mind: the irrevocable apostolic commitment to a life according to the evangelical counsels; and they belong to an age in which the permanent nature of such a commitment was never challenged. Ignatius did not seem to envisage the necessity of a protracted discernment process for choosing a state of life 'according to the commandments'; nor does he apply his 'election machinery' to a radical renewal of the state of life to which one is already committed.⁵ (In our own day we are all beginning to experience most acutely the need for constant purification in order to maintain our subjective certainty.) It is true that Ignatius and his companions, in coming to crucial decisions about the nature and structure of the society which they were to found, applied to these matters his rules for making a sound election. But it is worth stressing that in all these decisions, both as individuals and as a group, they enjoyed an external freedom that no already constituted religious congregation or other form of christian community can lay claim to.

This much, however, has to do only with subjective certainty. Even where subjective certainty on any vital decision of a personal or community kind is reached, and God wills the choice to be made, it does not necessarily follow that he wills the choice to work out effectively. The choice involves not only my definitively committed freedom but also the freedom of others. Time is needed, not only to see if my subjective certainty continues for a reasonable time and is marked by gentle freedom and peace, despite changing moods and an incipient bond with the person(s) of my choice. It is also needed to see whether those who are closely involved in the decision freely and definitively decide to accept me according to my choice.

In general, it can be said that once these human freedoms definitively concur, then all further choices of an individual or

³ Exx 98, 147, 149-56, 167-8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 169-88.

⁵ Cf *Ibid.*, 189.

group are made by the perception of a consonance in them with the unity created by the life-choice, which itself will always need re-affirming and deepening.

The third level is that of particular expressions of either or both of the first two levels which set definitive patterns or directions of life. Within these, the family or order, as well as the individual, must decide on particular actions inside or outside the group which fit in with the deeper directional choices. Here, it seems, the possibilities of error are almost limitless, whatever the discernment process used. Admittedly, it is possible to check the consonance of these choices with the deep thrust of the two basic choices; peace and contentment may be experienced for a reasonable period afterwards. But still the choice may be wrong in any practical sense, and will therefore need revision. To take a small example, a person may have rightly chosen to pray more regularly and for longer periods; and then, without fault on anyone's part, he may find himself in a situation which renders this prayer impossible. A community may rightly decide to expend money and extra staff to improve one of their schools; and then a government may legitimately abolish schools of that particular type. No right choice concerning the majority of concrete expressions can remove us from the realm of history into a realm untouched by other causes. What God wants of us at this level is the right *provisional* expression, our real seeking for the best, in the knowledge that such a 'best' may simply cease to exist. In that case, we have to choose again.

As private individuals, in all our discernment we are testing 'consonance'. It is the harmony of our present spiritual impulse (based on sound knowledge) with the life of Christ in the Church and with the particular relational bond with God and man which forms our life-vocation. Discernment, then, seems to lie essentially in the fields of holiness, marked by the pattern of Christ's death and resurrection, rather than in that of practical efficiency. The deepening consonance of our lives with our faith and our vocation will lead to a natural 'feel' for consonance in all but the most complex situations, so that specialized techniques may be needed only comparatively rarely.

In our communities, even where we have verified the deep permanent bond which unites us with the Church and with each other in our vocation, the seeking for this consonance continues. Continually, we are called to check our life and actions against the direction of our original choices. Of course, we must reach out to

new activities and new expressions of our life. But we need to do this realistically, and realism imposes certain limits. It is not realistic to spend time discussing what might be done if we were not the limited group which in fact we are, or if we had not chosen *this* vocation under God. Again realism prevents us from leaping to the conclusion that one particular consonant action will necessarily be the most effective action possible.

In the light of all this, it may be no bad thing to exercise a little restraint in the use of the word discernment. If it appears to invest our choices with a pseudo-infallibility, or to surround them with a spiritual atmosphere which quite possibly does not exist, a less pretentious language might sometimes be more appropriate. In many cases, it might be preferable not to talk about 'discernment', but simply about sensible decisions which christians make in accord with their faith and vocation.