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FOSTERING THE PROCESS OF DISCERNING TOGETHER

Virginia Varley

FOSTERING THE PROCESS of discerning in community impels us to remember that we are on a faith journey where we are neither the masters nor mistresses of what will occur in the process or in the outcome. Rather, we are entering into a mystery in which, simultaneously, we wait on God to show us how we ought to proceed, while using our minds and hearts and the best strategies at our disposal to help us grow spiritually as a group, in order to make decisions together in a faith context.

For the purpose of this article I will expound and explain some strategies that facilitate the dynamic of intentional group life in its spiritual growth and in its approach to concrete decisions. I will use a case study throughout to illustrate the dynamic and phases a group goes through in a communal discernment. The case study involves Loyola House and the Institute of Communal Life, two apostolates in Guelph, Ontario, which work with the Spiritual Exercises. Loyola House has as its focus the giving of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius and the training of others for this ministry. The Institute of Communal Life, for its part, works with groups enabling decision-making based on the Exercises. The situation is that of a group faced with a significant issue about which they must make decisions if they are going to survive in the future.

Communal Discernment: Some Clarifications

It may be helpful here to define spiritual discernment, since this is the overarching process that the group is entering into, and then to make some distinctions for the sake of clarity.

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Spiritual discernment is concerned with the movements in the affections and their influence on the interior state of the person and on the subsequent actions. As a process, spiritual discernment is a matter of recognising the initiative of the Holy Spirit so as to follow the Spirit's lead. In this process of spiritual discernment there is a certain purification of the individual issuing in a freedom that is open to following the Spirit's lead. This discernment may be experienced by an individual or a group of individuals who come together to discern as community. This latter tends to be called communal discernment.¹

The first distinction that I wish to make has to do with informal and formal discernment. Everyone makes choices daily. Many are made almost automatically, while others require significant reflection along with the seeking of advice. People make these decisions all the time in the best way they know how. They draw upon their common sense and their knowledge of how to acquire the information they need to come to a decision. Many will seek God's help in knowing how to proceed. I call this informal discernment, and it serves people well.

Formal discernment takes place within a structure, be that in the context of spiritual direction, a retreat or a facilitated communal discernment process. While either an individual or a group may enter into an informal or formal discernment, I will be dealing in this article with formal discernment as it relates to a group or community and will outline a process for doing this kind of discernment.

The second distinction I wish to address is the distinction between individual and communal discernment. For this distinction I draw upon the work of John English in *Spiritual Intimacy and Community*.² My first comment has to do with disclosure—who tells whom what? In individual discernment, although there is some disclosure about one's interior movement of spirits to a spiritual director or retreat director, the actual discernment is a private affair. This does not mean that there is no communal dimension in the individual's discernment, but it is private rather than public. The individual seeks to recognise the kind of movements taking place within him or her and to grasp the meaning of the consolation and desolation so that he or she can follow the lead of the Spirit. However, when an individual comes to a decision, this decision

¹ John English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1992), 26.

² English, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community*, 37–39.

is considered tentative or provisional until confirmed objectively by one's community, be that husband or wife, religious superior or employer. In the matter of communal discernment there is often a higher authority with whom the group has to be in dialogue for objective confirmation. And so this same principle for objective confirmation applies.

My second comment has to do with story. The importance of story is rather different in the two kinds of discernment. In-depth awareness of one's story is helpful in assisting a person to interpret present prayer experiences (is what is happening to me consistent with my history, etc.?); but story is especially significant for community. The communal graced history needs to be recalled and expressed often for the sake of establishing community itself and for a discernment of communal call. History is the interpretation we give to events and to their connection with one another. As Christians, we interpret events in terms of the paschal mystery, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The experience of life, death and resurrection in our lives is grace. Consequently, each of us individually, and the group as a whole, has a blessed history of sin and hope which, when looked at in totality, forms our graced history. It is the sharing of the memories and prayer over this material that becomes the public activity of the group.

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My third comment has to do with the nature of the activity itself. In individual discernment the main activity is the private prayer of the person, while in communal discernment the main activity is the public interrelationship. In individual discernment the public activity occurs during the steps of articulation and interpretation with another.

In communal discernment, on the other hand, there is time for private prayer and reflection but the bulk of time and activity is in the public sphere. The public time of the group is the basis for private reflection and communal discernment. Public time is also necessary for understanding the significance of the community's experiences in terms of consolation and desolation and for subsequent decision-making. For the purpose of this article, I will deal with communal discernment rather than individual discernment.

It might be well to insert here something about the role of the spiritual director of individuals and of groups. A note that Ignatius makes in the Exercises states:

To assure better cooperation between the one who is giving the Exercises and the exercitant, and more beneficial results for both, it is necessary to suppose that every good Christian is more ready to put a good interpretation on another's statement than to condemn it as false. (Exx 22)

The interpretation that members of a group put on each other's statements may lead to group consolation or group desolation. The spiritual director, then, needs to be present to the individual or group as one who listens attentively. The director is noticing where God is at work through the movements of consolation and desolation and will draw attention to those movements as appropriate.

In order to place the strategies for spiritual growth and decision-making in a concrete reality, I will use the pattern for discernment of John English as the skeletal structure upon which to develop strategies which support this process and I will do that against the backdrop of the case study mentioned earlier. With regard to the latter, the Jesuit Provincial of the Upper Canada Province encouraged Loyola House and the Institute of Communal Life to become one entity since the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius are the focus for ministry by both groups, one emphasizing the individual experience of the Exercises, the other the communal experience of coming to decision. To become one



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entity had significant implications for each group. I will refer to these entities simply as LH and ICL.

Readiness

Before beginning a group discernment process there is always a period of 'reading'. The group may feel it knows the issue it has to deal with, but there is more to it than that. There is the matter of dispositional readiness, which is a matter of the heart. Among the signs of readiness are the following:

The ability of the members to enter into serious conversation with one another. This implies the ability to absorb and be humble before views and ideologies different from one's own with a willingness to enter into dialogue.

The members are open to prayer, both personal and group prayer, as an essential element of the discernment process. This may be intimidating to some groups where their experience of working together has been based upon successful business models and where the state of one's interior has not been part of the agenda.

The group has a relatively clear grasp of the issue it is bringing for discernment and of the reason it is bringing the issue to this kind of process in the first place.

The members have an interior readiness for this kind of experience. This implies that while there may be disagreements among them, there is no open hostility, and the members have experienced satisfaction and well-being in working with one another.

The capacity to trust the process and the facilitator, knowing at the same time that, at any moment, if the process is perceived to be out of tune with the group's spirit or agenda, it can be halted or changed. Trusting the process often surfaces as an issue because the discernment process does not usually move in linear fashion. Anxiety often surfaces in feeling that 'we're not going to get finished'. Circular reasoning is essential to this kind of discernment is not appreciated as a form of repetition in the Ignatian sense during which the group goes deeper and deeper. Linear thinking is a controlled process while circular is an open process.

The capacity to endure to the end. In terms of the Spiritual Exercises this often is experienced as the grace of the Third Kind of Humility in the group (Exx 167). The members are able to leave their own agendas to stay with the group in what may be a painful juncture at the time or in the future.

With regard to the readiness of LH and ICL, we already had the foundational experience of making the Exercises personally and communally (although not together). In other words we had the same language to talk about our experience. As a first step to responding to the Provincial's desire, we felt we needed to structure conversation among us, that is to give some directional formality to what we often did in informal ways. So we designated a series of meetings when we would gather for serious conversation around topics that were pertinent to the ministry of both groups. Different members shepherded the meetings. Among the topics were issues dealing with communal spirituality, ecology, the land, feminine issues, etc.

In our evaluation at the end of each meeting some of us would say that we had not been looking forward to the meeting (we are all busy people with our own agendas) but by the end we were energized. In addition we were not always there willingly. Like most groups, there were times when some of us could not feel a connection between what we were doing in these conversations and where we were going in the long run. At other times some of us could only see the headaches of implementation should the two bodies become one entity. But we were committed to each other and to the work each group was doing. By the end of the first year we decided to enter into a more formal process and to start by using the 'history line'³ as the tool to help us begin.

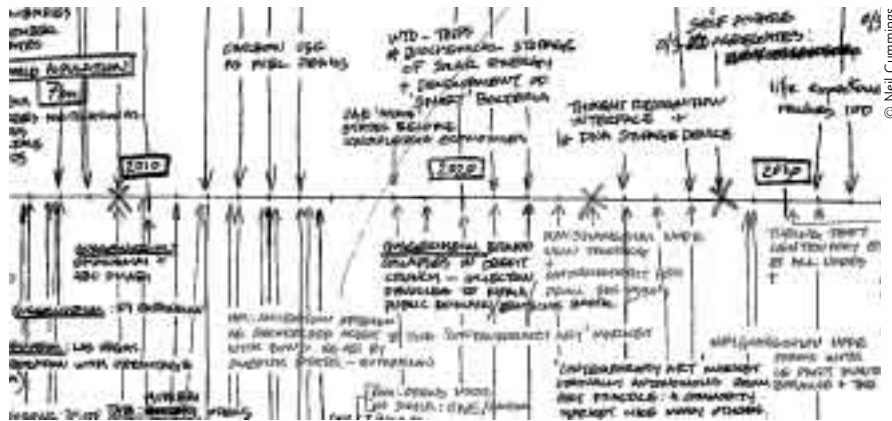
The dynamic as outlined in the following pages is described in terms of what a group does during the process. Within this doing there is the deeper dynamic that happens which affects the members and the group as group.

The Dynamic of Discernment: A Five-phase Process

Phase One: Experience

Most groups that come together for a discernment process already have a history together. And so the history line can be a helpful way for the group to begin. A history line can effect many things in a group. It can be the instrument of inclusion of new members; it can be an instrument of reconciliation and healing among members; it can be the vehicle for

³ See George Schemel and others, *Ignatian Spiritual Exercises for the Corporate Person* (Scranton: U. of Scranton P, 1990) volume 1, 41–44.



A history line

discerning the presence of God to a group over time, and so help the group to articulate identity, vocation and mission.

Groups establish new directions and goals as a result of reflecting on the story of their past. Commitment to and enthusiasm for the future are developed. A good history line can put the needs of a group into high relief, so that they can be recognised by all and dealt with clearly and decisively.

A history line is a way of recording and interpreting historically decisive events. The history line is composed by drawing a line across several sheets of flipchart paper taped together and marking this line off in natural periods of the group's history together, beginning with the present, writing 1996 at the far right of the line and working back along the line e.g. 1990, 1985 ... to the moment when the group came together. For a religious community, the line may go back to the time of being elected to council, or it may even go back to the founding of the congregation, depending on the nature of the issue the group has brought for discernment.

The historically decisive events are then recorded on the history line. Those events around which much feeling, positive or negative, was engendered are particularly important.

While tracing the historical events from the present back in time the group eventually comes back to its beginning where the initiating vision took form. At this point a group may move directly into the reflection phase to discover the meaning of the history they have just recorded. On the other hand, what may be significant for the group is to

enter into storytelling about their beginning, which is sometimes called the 'founding myth'. In touching back into the vision, often considerable energy is released in the group, an energy that refuels the present dream of creating something new.

Embedded in the dynamic of the history line and hidden in the very act of storytelling is the articulation of the vision of the group. A shared vision is not an idea.⁴ It is, rather, a force in people's hearts which, if shared, may be compelling enough to engage the support of the group. Just as personal visions are pictures or images people carry in their heads and hearts, so too shared visions are pictures that people throughout an organization carry. They create a sense of commonality that permeates the community and gives coherence to diverse activities.

A vision is truly shared when individuals in the group have discovered a shared picture and are committed to one another having it. Shared visions derive their power from a common caring. The significance of this for a group embarking on decision-making together is contained in the operative word, 'shared', i.e., the group will not move effectively if the vision is only one person's vision. If one person's vision is imposed on a group, the best one can hope for is compliance from the other members, not commitment.

While there are no formulas for 'how to find your vision', there are principles and guidelines for building shared vision. The first is to encourage the members of the group or community to develop their own visions. These visions will be rooted in the individuals' own set of values, aspirations and concerns. Why begin with personal visions, you might ask. Genuine caring about a shared vision is rooted in the coalescing of personal visions and commitment to the shared vision that comes out of that process.

For a group of individuals to move towards a shared vision it is important that each person sees his or her own picture of the organization at its best. And so each shares responsibility for the whole, not just their piece.

LH and ICL did not share a common beginning as a single entity. But that was to be part of our discovery, although at this stage we did not know that. We composed the history line, but at the end of that meeting

⁴ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1990), part 3, chapter 10, 'Shared Vision'.

we were not very satisfied with what we had done. We had one of those 'Well, it was OK' responses to our day together. We were somewhat confused by our response, because each group had had many experiences of touching back into the shared vision of some programme, of feeling the energy in the vision, and of being helped by that experience to adapt or develop something new. This was different. We agreed to pray over our history before we met again in order to interpret it in the light of what we were facing in the present. Despite this we came to a significant awareness during this meeting. We faced the fact that the Provincial did not have anyone to send to complement either group. With this awareness, we freed ourselves from 'the Provincial and his decisions regarding manpower', and took responsibility for our future.

Phase Two: Reflection

Once the history line has been composed, what is recorded then becomes matter for personal prayer. Reflection on one's experience is the first attempt at understanding the movement of spirits in one's interior. Here it is that each person examines and questions that experience. This becomes shared in the group.

This exercise helps the group to revisit the important events in order to discover their meanings and their emotional impact. And so the group may be instructed to sit before the history line in silence and, first, to ponder the questions: *what is the significance of this event? What is it saying?* Secondly, to make a personal assessment of meanings: *'Our history says to me that ...'*. Each person lists his or her personal interpretation of the meanings found in their group's history; thirdly, to make a list of needs emerging from these meaning statements of the group's history: *'Because our history is what it is, there is a need to ...'* A good criterion to apply in developing need statements is: *'Does this describe something which we can do something about?'*

This praying over the group's history not only assists the group to interpret its history in the Christian context of the life, death and resurrection of Christ, but it also provides the opportunity for the group to hear, perhaps for the first time, its own history. Storytelling is an important part of composing the history line.

After reflecting on the history line for LH and ICL that we had composed we discovered that it was exclusively the history of LH that we were recording. The members of ICL had worked on various programmes over the years but it was LH work they were doing, not the



work of ICL. We then understood why we had not been able to touch into the energy of the vision in our previous meeting. We did not as yet have a common history. We had only begun and so we had to go to a level of shared hopes and desires for the future. We made the decision then to work our way up the Life Cycle⁵ from myth (what energizes us in the ministry) through developing a common vision, clarifying our assumptions, formulating goals, etc. In doing this we realised that we were now creating our history together as well as gathering data for the decision we were facing. Much of this clarification was reached in the next phase, that of articulation.

Phase Three: Articulation

In the sharing of each one's reflection, it is important that each person be encouraged to speak. Indeed, this is essential for communal discernment even though much, of necessity, will remain private. When everyone has spoken, the group returns to silence to reflect on what they have heard from each other. The members then speak again, saying what they have understood from what they have heard. Then the group takes a few more minutes of silence to consider what all this is saying about them as a group. At this point the facilitator might comment on the second and third level of sharing, pointing out, perhaps, the

⁵ MDI Monograph Series (Cincinnati: Growthways, 1990).

movements of consolation or desolation being experienced by the group.

The articulation of each one's experience in prayer places the individual in a communal context and helps the group to become more objective in its understanding of the experience. It is in the articulation phase that community is formed and that the group comes to understand itself as group.⁶

When members of the group share with one another what has happened in their prayer, trust grows in the group. People become willing to share something of the depth of themselves in the group. Indeed, it is in this phase that the personal visions of the members of the group and the care each has for their vision begin to be transformed into the group's or community's vision. In this process, they experience what it is to be open and to say what they think about any item up for discussion. In listening to one another, they learn to make no negative judgment on what they hear, but to wait in trust for God's work in them to become clear (Exx 22).

It was during this phase of articulation that LH and ICL were taken by surprise. We were no longer working with the history line but were working at the level of vision, expressing hopes and desires. The conversation was moving quite smoothly when one member noticed a change in the language we were using. We were no longer using 'you' and 'us' but we were now talking in terms of 'we'. This person drew the group's attention to the fact and said, 'I think we've made our decision to become one entity'. Conversation came to a halt as each one turned inward to reflect on what had been happening interiorly. Then one after the other said, 'Yes, I think we've made our decision'. We went around the group one more time with the question, 'Is it your decision that we should become one entity?'

We were unanimous in our 'Yes'. Our experience that day was characterized by quiet, gentleness and peace. We were surprised by what had happened to us. God had simply given us our decision without our working at it in any arduous way. Joy began to seep through us. We finished our meeting agreeing that we would revisit our decision the next time we met.

⁶ For an additional resource, see Laura J. Spencer, *Winning through Participation* (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1989), part 2, chapter 4, 'The Top Focused Conversation Method'.

Phase Four: Interpretation

I was involved in a group recently where one member, the father of a family, was feeling quite embarrassed. The night before, the children (aged 2, 4 and 9) would not settle down and he yelled at them. He had come home longing for some quiet and peace for the evening. He did not get the peace he was longing for because now he felt bad about himself in losing patience with the children. He did not say whether he had talked with his wife about how he was feeling, although he did say that he apologised the next morning to his children. This was his community. We can all identify with that sort of experience in which we recognise that some desire or compulsion has moved us in a direction that did not turn out happily and we end up feeling discouraged. This is where the feelings resulting from his impatience led this man.

There are times when the moods or judgments of members of a group can cause the group to move into discouragement also and to experience communal desolation which may be manifested in various ways. One expression of this desolation may take the form of the group being moved off track, being diverted from what it is about. It is at these times that it is important for the group to pause and ask, 'What is happening to us?', and to trace where these feelings of discouragement originated.

And it is here that the insight of St Ignatius of Loyola can be very helpful. His insight showed him the importance of considering not just interior moods, feelings or affections, but their tendency of direction—whether their end is such that the person feels drawn Godwards or away from God. Ignatius speaks of this as the movement of spirits. This experience requires discernment (Exx 313–336).

Interpretation is the activity by which persons realise the significance of the interior movements of spirits. This action of interpretation is often begun by the simple question, 'What does this experience of ours mean?' As a group grows together, greater facilitation in this kind of interpretation grows also. When a group is able to monitor itself in this way, it has grown a great deal in spiritual maturity. This is a skill that can be learnt but it is also a gift of the Spirit, one which needs to be nourished and respected as gift, through prayer and a dependence on God.

When LH and ICL met again, we shared with one another how we had stayed with the decision the group had made in the previous meeting. We talked about the surprise of it. We talked about the difficulties some

of us had seen previously, should the groups decide to become one entity, and how, once we had been captivated by the vision, the difficulties no longer had the same power over us. We trusted now that the group would be able to work through whatever surfaced.

It was with enthusiasm that we set about formulating our vision statement along with goals and objectives. Ordinarily, a group would move into the decision-making phase after the phase of articulation. For us as a new entity, the formal process of decision-making would come about when we began to choose the programmes which would carry out our goals.

Phase Five: Decision-and-action

This phase of the discernment process is better known than the four phases discussed above. All too often the decision-making process begins here for groups. Thus the group has not integrated its blessed history nor does it necessarily know its affective life as group. When a group begins its decision-making process at Phase Five, often the rational dynamic overshadows the affective one.

Simply put, the four steps in the decision-making process that the group will move through are:

- walking around the issue, gathering all relevant data and posting it on flipchart paper for all to see;
- checking assumptions and determining criteria for choice;
- brainstorming, prioritising, examining the advantages and disadvantages, making a composite of the group's list of advantages and disadvantages and taking the matter to prayer, seeking God's help in coming to a provisional decision;
- seeking confirmation for the decision reached.

Among these steps there are some aspects that are not as well known. Thus a facilitator often needs to make a formal presentation around assumptions, criteria and confirmation. I would like to address these briefly now.

Behind the determining of the key question (or issue) the group often discovers that there are a number of unacknowledged assumptions. Assumptions are implicit criteria, rather than the real data, which determine one's looking at an issue.

For example, a group may be considering setting up a foundation to assist women in their pursuit of degrees that will enable them to assume leadership roles in society. Through discussion the group may discover that it has an assumption that women make better leaders than men; or they may have an assumption that most men can pay for their own education, etc. If these assumptions are not brought to the surface and examined they may remain unconscious criteria which will influence the group's choice.

Throughout all the steps criteria need to be made explicit. Criteria help determine what to accept or not to accept during the brainstorming step as well as determining the priority of the possible solutions to follow. Criteria help determine both the reasons one puts down and their relative weight. Criteria are found in desires, hopes and values, and become the basis of judging inasmuch as they flow from the vision or past experiences of consolation and desolation.

Following personal prayer over a composite list of advantages and disadvantages, the members share the tentative decision each has reached. The members listen to this sharing to determine whether there is consensus in the group. It may be helpful here to describe what I understand by consensus.

Consensus

Consensus in a group is a special form of confirmation. As a group moves to final decision it looks for full agreement or union, a sense of consensus. A group may say that a majority vote gives a consensus. This means that every member in the group is committed to the decision reached by this majority vote. Such agreement may be enough for a united commitment to action. Others may say that unanimity is the only experience of consensus that expresses full agreement and union. I believe that consensus is necessary but also means something more than either of these: only after a group dynamic in which everyone has fully participated can such agreement and union be termed consensus. While majority rule works in parliamentary procedure, discerning faith communities usually hope for unanimity in their decisions.⁷

The fourth and final step in the decision-making process is praying for and seeking confirmation. A significant experience both at the time of

⁷ English, *Spiritual Intimacy*, 164–166.

decision and when seeking confirmation is consensus. Confirmation may be recognised in the group in some of the following ways.

The group is given the consolation of recognising its participation in the paschal mystery and its own willingness to suffer with the body of Christ in the future. The group knows that suffering will be involved in the implementation. Yet the group is united and may even experience a special sense of its wholeness. It realises that the experience of the consolation of consensus is more than a sense of union in the group. Everyone is committed to the decision and its implementation. The group recognises love working in the group and sees how this love frees everyone so that creative gifts get expressed; the creative action of the group as a whole takes place before its eyes. The group enters the effort of implementing the decision with a realistic hope and a certain joy in the power of the risen Christ. The group may experience a creativity it did not know it had, hope in the face of obstacles, or a sense of universal compassion.

Finally, when a group experiences the consolation of consensus, it recognises that it has been involved in a mystery which has touched the life of each member. They are the first to say that, while they have worked hard throughout the process, it is God who has worked this change in them.

With regard to LH and ICL, I simply want to say that I believe we received the consolation of consensus as described above. We did not follow every step that I have outlined in this article but that is the way it



is with groups. We simply do not control the grace of God. The gift of discernment helps us to recognise what is happening to us and to move to the next appropriate step, even if it does not follow the anticipated order.

As LH and ICL began to narrow down the list of programmes that we felt would carry forth our vision, we once again entered a period of some struggle. We needed to remember constantly that we are now a 'we' and to speak out of that 'we'. We had to bring our assumptions underlying programmes to the fore again. We had to talk a lot together to ensure that we were speaking with a common voice. Now, between each meeting, we commit ourselves to reflect on what was generated out of the previous meeting. We know that each of our meetings will involve the same process that we have already moved through: experience, reflection, articulation and decision. That is what happens in a process. We proceed through the stages in a somewhat orderly fashion while at the same time moving through the same stages in each segment of the overall process. Hence the importance of the group trusting the process. If I had to say what is most important for the activity of discerning together, I would say without hesitation, prayer, intentional conversation and good process.

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