

‘SEE, JUDGE, ACT’ AND IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY

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THE ‘SEE, JUDGE, ACT’ method of discernment is as old as the Bible itself. Whenever anyone noticed a problem and then asked the Lord for help, he or she was following this method, one way or another. We are hardly ever told that there was a process of discernment going on, yet something along these lines must have been happening, no matter how crude and primitive it might have been. I believe it is safe to assume that whenever we encounter the expression ‘The Lord said to ... [whoever it was]’ there must have been discernment—about which we are told nothing—but in this process of discernment the individual concerned came to understand that it really was the Lord speaking, and that the message could be trusted.

The story of Gideon is perhaps one of the more colourful episodes of this sort of discernment (Judges 6: 11–24). The Midianites have overrun the territory of Israel, and Gideon is threshing his wheat secretly when an angel accosts him. It takes him a while to realise who the angel really is, but then, slowly and reluctantly, Gideon sees that he is the one who is called to do something about the situation. He then reinforces his original discernment by laying a sheep’s fleece on the ground and leaving it out overnight, saying to God ‘if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said’ (Judges 6: 37). All this is what today we would call discernment. And, specifically, it is a public response to a public problem.

The ‘See, Judge, Act’ Method

It was Mgr (later Cardinal) Cardijn who gave the ‘see, judge, act’ method its current name. This is always, without exception, an objective response to a public situation, such as Gideon’s. It is never ‘dreamed up’ by anyone’s private consciousness. There always has to be something objective for

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someone to observe. And usually what is observed is problematic, and what we search for is a practical and workable response. We see a problem in the world, discern what to do about it, and go into action.

This was what Cardijn used for his workers' Catholic Action groups (especially Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne), using Catholic social teaching as the fundamental hermeneutic for decision-making. But he was also extremely apodictic. He *told* his people what they should observe, he *told* them how to evaluate the situation, and he *told* them what to do about it. His discernment was from the top downwards. Today we are much more cautious about this sort of authoritarianism.

The method and its name have survived the collapse of Catholic Action, principally through Basic Ecclesial Communities, who still use this method today,¹ as much of the rest of the Church in Latin America does. 'See, judge, act' also underlies several of Pope Francis's encyclicals. So it is still a popular and widely used method of discernment. I intend to compare it to the principles of Ignatian discernment and also to show how the two methods can complement each other.

In Basic Communities the discernment using this method is always communal: the whole community has to be involved. Indeed most situations where this method is used involve a communal process, whether in a bishops' conference, a pastoral team or, in the case of a papal encyclical, the entire Church. Always, however, we must have the facts of the situation before us, and those facts have to be correct.



Joseph Cardijn in 1934

¹ See my book *The Word for Us: Spirituality and Community* (North Charleston: CreateSpace, 2013) for a history of this development.

What we *see* (or choose to observe) is not quite as obvious as we might think. Ideology plays a major role in what we allow ourselves to notice and what we choose to ignore. Take the case of climate change: in spite of overwhelming evidence to the effect that we are confronted with a major crisis of epic proportions, there are still ‘climate-change deniers’ in our midst, most of them heavily invested, one way or another, in the fossil-fuel business.² Other current examples could include how concepts such as terrorism or political legitimacy are defined. Self-interest often has a blinding effect on our ability to engage with facts objectively, as do culture and tradition.

The hermeneutic involved, by which we *judge* (discern) what we have observed, again presents us with some interesting questions. Basic Communities take their time over this. Their hermeneutic is based on the Bible, as presented in the Sunday readings. And over a process of many sessions, in which the objective reality of their everyday lives is continually confronted by the ideals of the gospel, they gradually formulate a common response to the world around them. The way a method of interpretation develops in this sort of context is very similar to Newman’s theory of ‘illative sense’ (what he calls the mind’s ‘power of judging about truth and error in concrete matters’), which also has a heavy emphasis on practical wisdom.³ But I have said more about this in my book on Basic Communities,⁴ so there is no need to repeat it all here. It must be mentioned, however, that for this method to succeed in Basic Communities, there has to be consensus in the group.

It is interesting that in ecclesial documents such as the Latin American bishops’ Aparecida document, the hermeneutic used depends very much on what has been observed. After a survey of Latin American social problems, the rights and wrongs of the situation are pretty well obvious, and so is the subsequent action. In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis’s outline of contemporary environmental difficulties again dictates how his *judgment* of the situation will be developed. His principal interest, in the section where he *sees* what is going on, is in the difficulties that poor people will experience through climate change: that concern influences everything else that follows.

² See Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), chapter 1.

³ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010 [1870]), 346.

⁴ Sheppard, *Word for Us*, chapter 14.

The *action* that we need to undertake is conditioned by several factors. One of these is the concerns of the group. In Basic Communities, where a communal response is called for, the action has to be something of which everyone approves, and usually this is something close to home and right around the corner: setting up a food bank or a soup kitchen or something similar. Episcopal documents can call for response in more general terms. But action there has to be, otherwise the whole process is a waste of time. Interestingly, as we react with our environment, we also change it. This leads to a continuing cycle of reflection and response that has profound and far-reaching effects in many Basic Communities.⁵

Feeding the Five Thousand

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while'. For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat'. But he answered them, 'You give them something to eat'. They said to him, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?' And he said to them, 'How many loaves have you? Go and see.' When they had found out, they said, 'Five, and two fish'. Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men. (Mark 6:30–44)

⁵ See Sheppard, *Word For Us*, chapter 8, on the 'Prayer Spiral'.

The Feeding of the Five Thousand is a discernment story. The disciples go to Jesus to ask him what to do, and he tells them news they are very unwilling to accept. First of all, they see the problem: a huge crowd with nothing to eat, and no easy solution in sight. So the disciples ask Jesus to make the problem go away: 'Send them away to ... buy something for themselves to eat'. Today, we are just the same. We would rather the poor were moved somewhere out of sight rather than be confronted with their suffering. We call our projects 'Neighbourhood Improvement' or 'Urban Renewal', but it always involves the same thing.

Jesus is blunt. 'You give them something to eat'! And the panic begins. The disciples begin by worrying about money: just as we do today, they think money is the solution to everything. But Jesus then asks them to take stock of what they do have. 'How many loaves have you? Go and see.' In other words, he challenges them to look at what resources they do have at their disposal. Then he tells them to organize the crowd into groups of fifty and a hundred. Then the miracle takes place. And we have to ask ourselves how many wonderful apostolates have started up in the history of the Church in exactly the same manner. We begin with fear and panic over the sheer size of the problem, but as we pray (discern) over this we discover a few little loaves and fishes that we do actually have, and so we begin a little organizing. Everything else follows from there.

This passage also reminds me powerfully of the discernment sessions I have lived through with so many Basic Communities. Almost always, we begin with panic and denial. The problem is just too big for us—it is global—or it is altogether beyond our capacity to solve, and so on. But of course the problem does not go away. So we begin with some humble measures, and are amazed at how they grow into something we never imagined we were capable of producing.

Anawim House in Victoria, British Columbia, is a good example of this. The original Basic Community flourished some forty years ago, and was involved right from the beginning with helping street people. Overwhelmed by the problems of alcoholism, drug abuse and mental illness, the people they wanted to help also had to struggle with unemployment and homelessness. It was hard to know where to begin, and their sense of helplessness, the community told me, was a major problem. So they did a survey of those who needed help, and were told that what would be most valuable was some sort of facility for homeless



Breakfast at Anawim House

people to wash their clothes, have a shower and get a cup of coffee when it was wet and cold outside.

This was a very significant step in the community's discernment. Rather than treating the poor as merely the objects of the discernment, they involved them in the process. The homeless people were also discerners along with the Basic Community. In the words of the final document of the Puebla conference, the people need 'legitimate self-determination. This will permit them to organize their lives according to their own genius and history'.⁶ So the community rented a small apartment where they could do what was required, and it was so popular they quickly discovered that they needed to expand. Next they did some very successful fund-raising with the local business community, and today Anawim House is a splendid facility catering to large numbers of homeless people, with an important healing programme for alcohol and drug abusers. It is, of course, no longer run by the original Basic Community, but is now an independent organization with its own board of directors. But it

⁶ Document of Puebla n. 505, available at <http://www.cpalsj.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Puebla-III-CELAM-ESP.pdf>, accessed 13 November 2016. And see also the letter from Pope Francis to Cardinal Marc Ouellet, president of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, 19 March 2016: 'We must do this by discerning with our people and never for our people or without our people. As St Ignatius would say, "in line with the necessities of place, time and person".' (Available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160319_pont-comm-america-latina.html.)

was the original group who *saw* the problem, *judged* or discerned correctly, and *acted* according to the Holy Spirit.

Ignatian Spirituality

True Ignatian discernment is always based on the cycles of consolation and desolation that individuals experience: even if the object of our discernment is a public question, we still need to make time for a shift to interiority in which we listen to the intensely private and intimate inner movements of the heart, to try and find the call of the Holy Spirit.⁷ This is at one and the same time the strength and the weakness of Ignatian spirituality: strength, because of the depth and intimacy that becomes possible when we discern the Divine Will, and weakness because of the subtlety involved. Too many people either do not take the time required, or have simply given up on—or never really accepted—the practice of the discernment of spirits.

Teaching the Rules for Discernment in the Spiritual Exercises is always challenging. In my experience, retreatants must first clearly understand the difference between consolation and desolation (and not everyone succeeds here), and must then come to see that this is actually useful, that in fact it really is possible to discern the movements of different spirits in their own life, and that this helps their decision-making. Again, not everyone makes the grade here. There is yet a third step to be made, when they come to trust their own reading of the movements of the different spirits in their own experience, so that they can actually make a decision based on that reading. And, once again, many people never really do trust their own discernment. So is Ignatian discernment only for a few? Certainly, to the extent that only a minority are really interested.

Ignatius himself, of course, was well aware of the problem here, and suggested what many refer to as the ‘four column’ method of making a decision ‘when the soul is not being moved one way and the other by various spirits’ (Exx 177):

I should consider and reason out how many advantages or benefits accrue to myself from having the office or benefice proposed, all of them solely for the praise of God our Lord and the salvation of my

⁷ See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: U. of Toronto P, 1971), 265–266.

soul; and on the contrary I should similarly consider the disadvantages and dangers in having it. Then, acting in the same manner in the second part, I should consider the advantages and benefits in not having it, and contrarily the disadvantages and dangers in not having it. (Exx 181)

Three other approaches are also proposed: one of imagining how we would counsel another person in the same situation; a second of imagining ourselves on our deathbed, looking back on the decision we are about to make; and the third of considering how we will be judged on the Last Day. Much prayer of different kinds is suggested in the text here, but these methods do not require the discernment of spirits. However it is not impossible (and may sometimes be advantageous) to combine them with the usual cycle of consolation and desolation. It is noteworthy that Ignatius clearly intended the last three methods for individual, rather than communal, discernment.

Suggested Synthesis

To work with both Ignatian discernment and 'see, judge, act' together we must have a public question that needs an active response. Preferably, this should involve the whole community, of whatever kind. So, suppose the question is: should we install solar panels on a house that we have to renovate? The first steps will involve careful research into the availability, price, performance and installation costs of these panels, along with whatever related questions need to be explored (for example the possibility of selling surplus electricity into the local grid, and what the related legislation might be). The information gathered has to be correct: there is no room for subjective opinion at this stage of things.

Then we would bring the community together and share the information acquired. In communal discernment I believe it is helpful to have some sort of 'filter' in place. Not everyone (even today) really believes in communal discernment, and those who reject it do not help the process along. So it is important that everyone concerned has accepted the process and is willing to cooperate. Each person who has received the information would then be asked to pray over it. This is where the whole cycle of consolation and desolation comes into play, and where each individual has to be very sensitive to the movements of the different spirits in his or her soul. This is also the time at which personal attitudes, prejudices and ideologies need to be prayed over to discern, yet again,

which are inspired by the Lord and which by some other influence. We should take whatever time is necessary for this, and not be rushed into a hasty decision.

The final step consists in sharing the content of our prayer with the rest of the discernment group. It is good to repeat this at least a couple of times, so that each member has an opportunity to reflect on what the others have said, and to get an idea of how the cycle of consolation and desolation is working within the discerning group. After this, usually, the group is ready to make a decision.

So the whole process begins with a dispassionate, objective examination of a public reality or question. The relevant data are researched and shared with the discerning group. The group, however, examines the data from another perspective entirely, that of the intimate working of the Holy Spirit in the depths of our souls. Ignatius spells out how all this works so well in the Spiritual Exercises that it would be redundant to do so here, except to remember that he lays such emphasis on our desire and the importance of conforming this to the Divine Will.

In practice, this is how a great many decisions with public import get made in communities anyway. So do we need formally to combine 'see, judge, act' with Ignatian spirituality? I believe it is always helpful



to spell our procedures out clearly, so we have a better idea of exactly what we are doing. Discernment has to be informed, and all the data have to be available to whoever is doing the discerning. And the 'see, judge, act' spirituality has so much to offer us today. We live in a secular world, where faith and religion are endlessly crowded out of the public sphere and reduced to mere private phenomena. Even in the Church there is a glut of private, individualistic spiritualities that have no social dimension whatever. So it is vital to have an explicit method, such as we have in 'see, judge, act', that confronts our faith with the world out there and gets Christians involved, as Christians, in the issues of the day. How can we be more Ignatian than that?

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