

THE DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS

By JAMES WALSH

IT MAY BE taken as one of the 'signs of the times' (and we are told that we need discernment to read the signs¹) that the spiritual vocabulary associated with the phrase 'discernment of spirits', until comparatively recently confined to serious students of mystical theology, to spiritual directors of contemplatives, and other rare mystical birds, is now becoming common currency in the Church. The pentecostal movement is now firmly established amongst us, and it is not restricted to contemplative religious, let alone to spiritual theologians and their disciples. We even talk of communal discernment, of its practice as the basis of dialogue in religious community and as the means of ensuring authentic 'consensus'. Over against this, the practice of discerning the spirits² traditionally demands a 'mind remade and our whole nature transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable and perfect'.³ In fact, as far as Paul is concerned, only those Christians who are 'mature', 'perfect' or 'spiritual' are capable of discernment – 'who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil'.⁴ More immediate to our own considerations, Ignatius Loyola, whose *Rules for the discernment of spirits*⁵ are culled from a body of doctrine first developed by Origen and Cassian out of sacred scripture, states that his rules in their fulness apply to those who are exercising themselves in the illuminative way:⁶ that is, those accounted as proficient in the

¹ 'We take to heart the warnings of Christ the Lord, that we should know how to discern the signs of the times (Mt 16, 3)'. From the Apostolic Constitution of John XXIII, *Humanae Salutis*, 25 December, 1961, convoking the second Vatican Council. [Translation from the official Latin text (*Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis*, 1966), p 841.]

² We may loosely describe it as the process by which we 'separate out' the inner 'spiritual' movements which we experience in ourselves: those which, in the light of faith and a whole-hearted love, lead to the Lord and to a more perfect service of him and his brethren, and those which lead us away from this goal.

³ Rom 12, 2.

⁴ Heb 5, 12–14; cf Phil 1, 9–11; 1 Cor 2, 11–13. For a fuller treatment of this point, see Barnabas Ahern, 'Maturity: Christian Perfection', in *Supplement to the Way*, 15 (Spring, 1972) pp 3–15.

⁵ Exx 313–336.

⁶ Fourth Annotation: Exx 10.

spiritual life, in as much as, purified from inordinate attachment to creatures, they are consciously enlightened by the holy Spirit. There is thus a special context for discernment, an atmosphere which one must be breathing in order to practise it; outside of such an atmosphere one will remain merely a hearer of the word, not a doer.

The atmosphere of discernment

Throughout the spiritual tradition, though much of what is written seems to concern itself, at first sight, almost entirely with the interior state of the individual christian (usually the monk or the bishop – the man who is ‘obliged’ to strive after perfection or who, by virtue of his office, is supposed to be in the ‘way of perfection’), discernment always has had what we would now call an ecclesial dimension. It is listed by Paul amongst the gifts given for the building up of the body which is the Church:⁷ for St Bernard, it is the charism which enables us to distinguish between the gifts we receive for our own good, and those given to us for the good of our neighbour;⁸ and we may infer from the juxtaposition in the Exercises of the rules for ‘thinking with the Church’ and the other rules where discernment is needed, that here, as elsewhere, the purification and illumination of the exercitant depends on his union with the Spirit of Christ, the Spouse of the Church.⁹ The man of discernment is he who receives and lives Tradition in its total sense:

What has been handed down by the apostles comprises everything which contributes to the holiness of life and the increase of faith¹⁰ amongst God’s people. It is the Church who perpetuates and communicates to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes, in terms of her life, her teaching and her worship. This tradition which comes from the apostles develops in the Church with the co-operation of the holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which are handed on. *This happens by means of the contemplation and reflective investigation of the believers, who meditate on these things in their hearts (cf Lk 2, 19. 51) through the intimate understanding of the spiritual things they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received the sure gift of truth along with the episcopal succession.*¹¹

⁷ 1 Cor 12, 10.

⁸ Cf *Sermo 88, De diversis*: PL 183, 706–7.

⁹ The title of these rules may be translated thus: ‘Rules to follow in order to have the true mind we ought to have in union with the Church militant’. Exx 352; and cf 353.

¹⁰ We may note here that consolation, which for Ignatius is the controlling factor of discernment, is ultimately defined by him as ‘every increase in hope, faith and charity . . .’ Exx 316.

¹¹ The dogmatic constitution of Vatican II on divine revelation – *Dei Verbum*, 8.

Here we find clearly stated the essential pre-requisite of this process of ecclesial discernment: the intimate understanding which flows from the contemplative experience of the word of God and of the saving mysteries of Christ, ascribed pre-eminently to Mary by the evangelist. As Fr Futrell has recently emphasized, it is through the growing experience of constantly integrating all the actions and relationships of life into his basic identity in Christ, that a man finally comes to *feel* the various impulses or movements of the Spirit (or against the Spirit) within himself. This is what St Paul, speaking of the knowledge of spiritual things, calls 'having the mind of Christ' – a phrase rendered traditionally in the latin of the west as *sensus Christi*.¹² It is not surprising that the same word in the sixteenth century spanish, *sentir* – to feel, to know intimately, is central to the ignatian vocabulary of discernment.¹³ Futrell also notes that 'the many nuances of *sentir* in the vocabulary of Ignatius are grounded in its root meaning of sense-experience . . . In the process of discernment, *sentir* comes to mean above all a kind of 'felt-knowledge', an affective intuitive knowledge'. It has to do with the contemplative approach to Christ in scripture and the Church as it developed in the spiritual tradition in the west, especially in the writings of St Bernard and his monastic contemporaries:¹⁴ the doctrine known as the spiritual senses, in which the key-words for the knowledge of God-in-Christ are 'touch', 'taste' and 'feel'.¹⁵ Knowledge of God in this developed affective sense, which demands a progressive spiritualization of self-awareness, is essential for the recognition of, and therefore for co-operation with, the action of the Spirit 'whose power is at work in us to fulfil his purpose in us'.

Discernment, then, is the right assessment of the various spiritual reactions and tendencies in a man which are experienced in the context of life in the Church: of faith, hope and love – reactions that help to foster that life or which militate against it.¹⁶ Discern-

¹² 1 Cor 2, 16 '... We have the mind of Christ' (Vulgate – *nos autem sensum Christi habemus*). This is one of the classical pauline passages on discernment. The vulgate also uses the verb *sentire* to translate the famous phrase of Phil 2, 5: 'Let that mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus' – *Hoc enim sentite in vobis quod et in Christo Jesu*.

¹³ Cf Futrell, John C., S.J.: 'Ignatian Discernment', published in *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits* Vol II, no 2 (April, 1970), pp 53 ff. The essay is based on the same writer's *Making an Apostolic Community of Love: The Role of the Superior according to St Ignatius of Loyola* (Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis, 1970).

¹⁴ *Art. cit.*, p 56.

¹⁵ Cf e.g. Dumontier, P.: *Saint Bernard et la Bible* (Paris, 1953).

¹⁶ On this point, see Kyne, Michael, S.J.: 'Discernment of Spirits and Christian Growth', in *Supplement to the Way* 6 (May 1968), pp 20 ff.

ment thus belongs to the man who not only wishes to be, but *is*, aware of being 'moved by the Spirit of God':¹⁷ who is docile, purified, illumined, liberated. The ecclesial character of discernment is illustrated by Ignatius when he lists the qualities which he believes the Superior General of the Order ought to have:

Although learning is highly necessary for one who will have so many learned men in his charge, still more necessary is prudence along with experience in spiritual and interior matters, that he may be able to discern the various spirits and to give counsel and remedies to so many who will have spiritual necessities.¹⁸

An even more forceful illustration is to be found in the Council's decree on the priesthood, where the nature of the response to the Spirit of Christ is set out in total apostolic terms:

Christ, whom the Father sanctified (or consecrated) and sent into the world,¹⁹ 'gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds' (Tit 2, 14); and so he entered by way of his passion into glory.²⁰ Priests, likewise, are consecrated by the anointing of the holy Spirit and sent by Christ, put to death in themselves the works of the flesh and devote themselves wholly to the service of men. So it is that they are enabled to grow in the holiness with which they are endowed by Christ to his mature manhood²¹. In this way they exercise the ministry of the Spirit and of righteousness and are strengthened in the life of the Spirit, as long as they are docile to this Spirit of Christ who unifies and leads them.²²

Such is the climate of the discernment which is total response to the action of Christ's Spirit.

The characteristics of the Spirit's action

Phrases such as 'openness to the Spirit', 'response to the Spirit', are already clichés in the Church of post-Vatican II. They do, however, serve to remind us that renewal, creativity and innovation must be constants in the life of the Church: so that openness to change, to expansion, exposure and conversion belongs to the

¹⁷ Cf Rom 8, 14. Paul is speaking of the distinction between living according to the flesh and living according to the Spirit.

¹⁸ *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (english translation and edition by G. Ganss S.J., Institute of Jesuit Sources, St Louis, 1970), p 310.

¹⁹ Cf Jn 10, 36.

²⁰ Cf Lk 24, 26.

²¹ Cf Eph 4, 13.

²² *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 12.

climate of discernment; that no matter how devoted and 'regular' christians and religious may be, they cannot respond to the Spirit unless they accept the fact that constant and even radical change is implied in the gift and process of discernment. The disciples on the road to Emmaus were rooted in a past of should-have-beens or might-have-beens, prisoners of their own reactions and judgments. Equally there is often a situation of non-discernment among those who are deceived – the 'elect' amongst them – by false Christs and false prophets. Not all signs of newness are authentic signs of the times.²³

Discernment is not only response to the Spirit; it is the reflection of his action. It will manifest his integrity, his unity, in a variety of gifts and movements. The man of the Church, who takes his name from Christ and bears his name, is, according to Origen, one who looks for truth equally in the old and the new law.²⁴

Most importantly, the power of discernment depends on that co-operation with the Spirit which is free and responsible. It is when a man is free to respond, that is, when he shares Christ's freedom which is self-determination, that he sees how he must respond. The freedom implied in discernment is the freedom of christian maturity: when we are no longer children,²⁵ having to look to our parents (or our spiritual fathers or our moral theologians) to decide in every instance how we are to distinguish between good and evil, or to decide where the will of God for us lies. 'If you are led by the Spirit, you are no longer under the law'. But we have to be clear-eyed about the implications of this maturity. It means that we can live by the fruits of the Spirit, 'because those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires'.²⁶

Freedom for discernment involves illumination as well as purification; in the last analysis, discernment, like every other gift of the Spirit, is unitive – having as its immediate purpose living union with Christ. So Paul insists that 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom'. It is this freedom, in action and response, of turning to the Lord (who is the Spirit) which removes the veil, enabling us to *see* what is good, acceptable and perfect; for, in a measure, we see him and are changed into his likeness.²⁷ Here again we are in a contemplative context: the law for the christian man, the man of the Church of Christ, whom he progressively knows to

²³ Cf Mk 13, 21–23.

²⁵ Cf Eph 4, 14–15; Heb 3, 13–14.

²⁷ 2 Cor 3, 15–18.

²⁴ *Homily on St Luke*, XVI, 6.

²⁶ Gal 5, 16–25.

be living in him.²⁸ The process of discernment demands a constant, progressive, contemplative penetration, through the power of the Spirit, of the inexhaustible mystery of God which is revealed in Christ.²⁹ This is simply expressed in the preparatory prayer of petition which is a constant in every contemplation in the Spiritual Exercises: that intimate knowledge of Christ out of which flow love and discipleship.³⁰ It is in terms of mission that he is made known to us.

The crowning exercise in Ignatius's book, the *Contemplation for obtaining (or attaining) love*, has, as its title suggests, a specific unitive purpose. The author reveals the contemplative depths of the exercise by noting that love consists in the fulness of mutual communion: 'that is to say, the lover gives and communicates to the beloved what he has or can give; and, in the same way, the beloved shares with the lover'.³¹ One of the most eminent of Jesuit theologians, Francisco Suarez, considers this exercise as the culmination of the exercises on the mysteries of the risen Christ,³² which is 'contemplation properly so-called'. The contemplation for obtaining love, he says, demands a soul docile to the call of grace, purified, illumined and transformed by the action of the Spirit.³³ Its refrain sums up what I have called the atmosphere of discernment, and incidentally explains why recent theologians prefer to disassociate discernment from the infused virtue of prudence, unlike St Thomas and other early scholastics:³⁴

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, understanding and all my will – all I have and possess. You gave it all to me; to you, Lord, I return it. It is all yours; dispose of it entirely as you will. Give me your love and your grace; that is enough for me.³⁵

Here again we have the apostolic dimension of the ignatian response to the Spirit; the process and end of discernment is the seeking and finding of the will of God: how I am to respond here and now to the Spirit's action in this free disposition of myself.³⁶

²⁸ Cf Gal 2, 20.

²⁹ Cf Eph 3, 8–20.

³⁰ Cf Exx 104–105.

³¹ Exx 231.

³² Exx 218–229: the 'Fourth Week' of the *Exercises*.

³³ *De Religione Societatis Jesu, Opera Omnia, X*, ch VI, 9.

³⁴ On this point, see *Discernment of Spirits* (ed. E. Malatesta, Collegeville, 1970), pp 108 ff. This work is a translation of the lengthy article, by various hands, in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Vol III, cols 1222–1291. It is the most complete, though summary, treatment of traditional doctrine, and includes a bibliography of other works in English on discernment.

³⁵ Exx 234.

³⁶ Fr Futrell (*art. cit.* p 48) argues cogently that 'to hear and respond to the word of God here and now' is an intelligible and acceptable modern equivalent of the ignatian 'seek and find the will of God'. From this he distinguishes the *existential* word of God,

The levels of discernment

In order to choose to respond, to co-operate with the Spirit in the context of christian life and commitment, there must be real freedom – one which corresponds to the freedom which the Spirit wishes to confer in his action on us. Wherever there is coercion (which is the case where conscience dictates to a man the right to be chosen or the wrong to be rejected), there is no question of discernment.³⁷ The issue concerns the *magis*: that which conduces *more* to the glory of God and the good of the neighbour. This will often reduce itself to matters of opinion,³⁸ as Paul VI points out in his recent exhortation, in speaking of the difficulties involved in religious obedience: 'Except where a command is clearly contrary to the laws of God . . . the superior's decisions are made in circumstances in which the evaluation of the greater good can vary according to the point of view'.³⁹ Here there are three levels of awareness which indicate a progressively more mature discernment, in an ascending order of authenticity.

The first level demands sweet-reasonableness⁴⁰ and a moderation in the affective area, which means purification from the obvious prejudices arising from self-will and self-interest.⁴¹ It is, if you like, the settled attitude of commitment towards God of the first mode of humility.⁴² It also demands in the practical area not only an emotive freedom from any stubbornness or rigidity born of ignorance, but a developing ability in assessing information. (In the context of faith we expect that light from the holy Spirit which informs our critical faculties, in so far as we effectively desire to be freed from affective obstacles, or inordinate attachments, as they are traditionally called.⁴³)

The second level demands, affectively and effectively, the dis-

which is the concrete situation mediating God's active love to the individual, and the *prophetic* word of God, which is the revealed word in Christ, in scripture, in the living tradition and in my own personal spiritual history. The 'word of God here and now' is 'discerned through the dialectic of the *existential* and the *prophetic* word'. *Ibid.*, p 86.

³⁷ The presumption is, of course, that we are dealing with a purified and informed christian conscience; and discernment has a vital part to play in the progressive purification and illumination.

³⁸ Fr Futrell notes that by far the commonest word referring to 'the psychological states involved in the discernment process' in the writings of Ignatius is *parerere* 'to have an opinion'. *Making an Apostolic Community of Love*, ch 5.

³⁹ *Evangelica Testificatio*, 28. Cf *Supplement to the Way* 14 (Autumn, 1971), pp 15-16.

⁴⁰ On *epikeia*, cf Mahoney J.: 'Consent or Conformity', in *Supplement to the Way* 6 (May 1968), pp 5-19.

⁴¹ Cf Exx 189.

⁴² Cf Exx 165.

⁴³ Cf Exx 1, 150, 152-6.

position of indifference: that is, detachment from one's own will to the point of not being drawn by the lesser good when this is perceived as such.⁴⁴ Indifference here corresponds to the settled attitude of the second mode of humility:⁴⁵ a kind of congenital refusal to transgress the *known* will of God even in what may be, or appear to be, comparatively unimportant matters; for the reason that to choose, knowingly, the lesser good militates in some way against the life of faith, hope and charity. Put more positively, it is to respond affectively and effectively⁴⁶ to the word of God here and now, as it comes to me across events in terms of my actual union with Christ in his Church.

Here again it is necessary to stress that discernment, since it is concerned with choice, always has reference to a concrete human situation. Affectively, we will believe and hope in the good will of others involved in the choice, unless there is strong and positive evidence to the contrary. But this acceptance will not interfere with the grace-enlightened ability to assess the expertise and quality of judgment. There should always be a proportion between affective and spiritual growth for self-giving and in prudence and human powers of judgment.

It is at the third level that we arrive at discernment properly so called, which is the possession of the *sensus Christi*: the ability to discover what the Father's will is in Christ, and joyfully to choose it according to the terms of the self-determination of the incarnate Word,⁴⁷ of his *kenosis*.⁴⁸ This is the disposition of the third mode of humility:⁴⁹ so to be one with Christ in heart and mind for the continuing fulfilment of his mission by way of death and resurrection that it becomes, in practice, impossible for us to choose anything other than what is seen to be conducive to God's greater glory and the good of the neighbour, in Christ, in the Church, in the christian community.

We have said that this level of discernment of contemplative awareness (for that is what it is) is the attitude, the *disposition* of the third mode of humility. The point is that Christ did not choose poverty and contempt as such, but because these were involved in his own response to the Father; the 'ought' of the mystery of his suffering and death⁵⁰ in his Father's imperative, not his own. 'I do

⁴⁴ Cf Exx 23.

⁴⁵ Cf Exx 166.

⁴⁶ It is taken for granted here that the choice of the greater good is not only possible but feasible.

⁴⁷ Cf Heb 10, 5-9.

⁴⁸ Cf Phil 2, 6-11.

⁴⁹ Cf Exx 167, 1.

⁵⁰ Cf Lk 24, 26.

as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father'.⁵¹ Christian maturity, the ability to discern with the redeeming and saving Christ, is based on our sharing with him in those terms: to the same degree of loving humility as he manifests to the Father in responding to the word, in accepting the mission.⁵² Discernment, having the *sensus Christi*, means this positive and active share in his Spirit: that is, the experience of coming to the Father and responding to his word in and through the Son.

The experience itself is characterized by the peace and joy of Christ – the fruits of his Spirit. One can safely choose within this peace and joy, particularly where the decision is a difficult one, involving real self-abnegation. For Ignatius, consolation is the key-note of discernment – that joy characteristic of the christian in the face of the difficulties and afflictions of the apostolate.⁵³ Experiencing the Spirit is also experience of the consolation which comes to us in contemplating the Son.

*Consolation: the key-note of discernment*⁵⁴

It is obvious from the text of the *Exercises* that consolation and its counterpart, desolation, are at the centre of the instruction on and explanation of discernment. These terms are used to describe the predominant moods and interior states in which the various spiritual impulses are to be observed and discerned. In his definition of consolation, Ignatius distinguishes three types:

Consolation is the name given to any interior movement produced in the soul whose effect is to set the soul on fire with the love of its Creator and Lord, so that it can no longer love any created thing on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of all things.

The name also applies to the state in which the soul sheds tears of grief for its sins or for the passion of Christ our Lord, or for other things expressly directed towards his praise and service, all of which leads to the love of the Lord.

Lastly I give the name consolation to every increase of hope, faith

⁵¹ Jn 14, 31.

⁵² For these reflections on the third mode of humility see W. Peters S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises: Exposition and Interpretation* (Program to adapt the Spiritual Exercises, Jersey City, 1968), pp 124–5.

⁵³ Cf Acts 5, 41; 2 Cor 6, 10.

⁵⁴ For what follows I am largely indebted to the recent study of Fr Penning de Vries S.J., *Ignatius of de Spiritualiteit der Jezuïeten* [spanish translation, *Discernimiento, Dinamica existencial de la doctrina y del Espiritu de San Ignacio de Loyola* (Bilbao, 1967)].

and charity; to all interior gladness, which calls and attracts a man to heavenly things, and to what is genuinely good for him, leaving him restful and at peace in his creator and Lord.⁵⁵

The first and third type De Vries calls respectively 'intense' and 'ordinary' consolation. For the middle type he retains the word 'tears', because they are so important as the sign and manifestation of consolation in the spiritual experience of Ignatius himself.⁵⁶ Often the most crucial task of the director is to help the exercitant to distinguish between true and false consolation – the overall purpose of the 'Rules containing a fuller discernment of spirits'.⁵⁷ For Ignatius, consolation is a sure guide to the will of God, as long as it is *true*, and interpreted aright: generosity can be a hidden form of selfishness; and even the moderns would accept the truth of the shakespearean phrase 'the proud consciousness of duty done'. Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light. But the consolation which flows from persevering contemplation is marked by gentleness, sweetness and serenity.⁵⁸

Consolation and the three 'moments' for choice

The classic case of discernment for choice is the ignatian Election.⁵⁹ It comes at a point in the Exercises when the exercitant, after being exposed to an intense programme of spiritual purification, has begun 'to exercise himself in the illuminative life', that is, in the contemplation of the mysteries of the incarnate Christ.⁶⁰ The choice with which Ignatius concerns himself is whether or no the exercitant is being called to follow Christ by way of the evangelical counsels. This is the focal point of the contemplation of the boy Christ in the temple, 'when he left his adopted father and his natural mother, to devote himself to the exclusive service of his heavenly Father. As we contemplate his life, we shall begin to enquire and to ask in which life or state the divine Majesty wants us to serve him'.⁶¹ The consideration for this choice is begun, significantly, whilst the exercitant contemplates Christ's leaving Nazareth, his baptism and his consecration by the Spirit.⁶² Central

⁵⁵ Exx 316.

⁵⁶ Cf Fr Munitiz' 'Introduction to the Spiritual Diary of Ignatius Loyola', *infra*, pp 111–116.

⁵⁷ 'Rules . . . more suitable to the Second Week'. Exx 328–336. Ignatius takes it for granted that if the exercitant is 'not experiencing any interior movements such as consolations or desolations', he is really in a state of 'quiet' desolation. Cf annotation 5, Exx 5.

⁵⁸ Exx 335.

⁵⁹ Exx 169–189.

⁶⁰ Annotation 10; Exx 10.

⁶¹ Exx 135.

⁶² Exx 163, 158, 273.

to the consideration is the instruction on the three occasions or moments, each of which can be opportune for making a good and sound election.

The first kind of occasion is when the Spirit's action on the soul is so evident that the choice in the situation is equally evident: 'when God our Lord so moves and attracts the will that the devoted soul follows what is shown to him without doubting or being able to doubt, just as St Paul and St Matthew did when they followed Christ our Lord'.⁶³ Such a time corresponds to a time of 'intense' consolation, a rare moment of high contemplation or 'felt' union. It will be particularly necessary to distinguish true and false consolation in this instance, not only because of the momentous nature of the choice but because the commotion and disturbance occasioned by the bad spirit⁶⁴ can be mistaken for 'intensity'.

The second moment is when one is aware of being moved to a calm hope and tranquillity in the face of choice. This is clearly the normal moment for choice, the settled climate for discernment, in which we experience the unitive presence of God gently pervading our doubts and apprehensions – the Spirit 'guiding our steps into the way of peace'.⁶⁵

There is a third moment, one which is repeatedly stressed, and sometimes to the practical exclusion of the other two. It frequently happens (and in fact this is usually taken as the norm in any community situation) that the finger of God is not perceived clearly enough, either because the person is not aware of any movement at all, or is unable in the situation to discern the movement with surety. This is the time for *reasoned reflection*, which obviously is always to be invoked when others are involved in any decision either as leaders, partners or dependents. It is clear, however, from the frequent practice of Ignatius himself, that this third moment is not really a moment of choice at all; it only becomes so when we experience the consolations proper to the second moment. A typical example is found in his letter to St Francis Borgia, when the pope and the king of Spain were pressing Borgia, against the apostolic detachment professed by the Society of Jesus, to accept a cardinal's hat:

From the moment I heard what the emperor had proposed . . . I immediately felt in myself a tendency, a movement, to oppose the proposal with all my strength. At the same time I was not certain

⁶³ Exx 175.

⁶⁴ Exx 335.

⁶⁵ Lk 1, 79.

of the divine will, because of the many reasons for and against. So I directed the priests in the house to celebrate mass, and all the brethren to pray for three days that I might be guided in all things according to the greater glory of God. During this period of three days, from time to time, as I reflected and turned the matter over in my mind and heart, I felt within myself certain fears; I lacked the freedom of Spirit to take up a positive position and oppose the matter. I said to myself: 'Do I know what God our Lord wants done?' And I failed to find in myself any real assurance that I could oppose the matter. But at other times, when I went to my normal prayer, I felt these fears melted away. I continued to make the same petition over and over again, sometimes experiencing the fears, at other times the contrary. At last, on the third day, at my normal prayer and always after that, I experienced so decisive a judgment and a will so serene and free for opposing the matter, to the point that I could do it in the face of the pope and the cardinals; and that, if I did not act thus, I would not be able to justify myself before God our Lord.⁶⁶

A similar process, in what might be called a community situation, was at work in the 'Deliberation of the First Fathers' of the Society of Jesus on the interior structure of their Order, before it was decided that the members should take a vow of obedience to a Superior General.⁶⁷ It is, of course, easy to press this particular process of reasoned reflection as a model of community discernment too far: the Society of Jesus was not at that time the apostolic Institute it was so soon to become; and the election of the General who was 'to have complete authority over it',⁶⁸ and communicate this authority to all other superiors,⁶⁹ obviously made a crucial difference. At any rate, there are no clear examples of this mutual discernment after the election of the first General (except, of course, general chapters – or congregations, as they are called in the Society of Jesus). In fact, at least on one occasion, Ignatius as General revoked a decision taken by the 'First Fathers'.⁷⁰

This is merely said as a *caveat*: it is easy to become over-fascinated by the democratic possibilities of discernment. What remains true

⁶⁶ MHSI IV 283–5. There is a french translation in a collection edited by G. Dumeige, *Sainte Ignace: Lettres*, (Paris, 1959), pp 264–6.

⁶⁷ Fr Futrell cites it in full in an appendix to *Making an Apostolic Community of Love*, pp 187–94. It is really the lynch-pin of the book's argument, that jesuit obedience, or rather the apostolic relationships in community, especially those involving the subject/superior relationship, are entirely dependent on mutual discernment.

⁶⁸ *Constitutions* (ed Ganss), Part IX ch VI [742], p 313.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, [745], p 314.

⁷⁰ Cf Fr Munitiz' article, *infra*, p 103 and note.

is that we need the same climate and the same contemplative preparation for communal discernment as for individual decision. Furthermore, though we can help each other in the interpretation and even the application of the 'Rules for Discernment', even as we can share each other's spiritual joy and gladness as we move towards a decision by reasoned reflection in community, we still need a conviction for decision in terms of participation in Christ's mission; and this can only be when and where the Spirit guides the steps of each one of us, individually, in the way of peace.

To demand such perfection, in terms of detachment from oneself and connaturality with the Spirit, may seem unreal. It may even be seen as 'tying the hands' of the Spirit, limiting his action, so to speak, until we have all become mature enough to co-operate with him. It must be stressed here that for the Church, for a christian community, and for the individual member of Christ's body, discernment is bound up with tradition, with the on-going process. It is clear enough to many of us, from our own experience as well as from our reading of community experience, that we are not all habitually in this disposition of detachment and of contemplative and apostolic attachment to Christ. Yet it still remains possible – and, we would presume to say, highly feasible in faith, hope and charity – for the Spirit to respond with his magnanimity to the poorest offering of ourselves, so that we can (and hope that we do frequently) listen and respond to the word of God here and now. This belief would appear to be a *sine qua non* for community discernment, especially. In this atmosphere of faith, we can follow the pattern of praying before community decision-meetings, of tabling opinions as objectively as possible, accepting the acknowledged expertise of some, and a certain intelligence on the part of all, and thus of achieving a reasoned reflection; then, when a measure of consensus begins to show, of taking it and praying over it individually, collectively, or both, until the signs of authenticity and peace appear. It was no less an expert in discernment than the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* who said: 'It is not what you are, nor what you have been, that God looks at with his merciful eyes; but what you would wish to be'.⁷¹ And in that there is consolation for us all.

⁷¹ Ch 75.