

COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS AND THE IGNATIAN METHOD OF DELIBERATION IN A GENERAL CONGREGATION

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The rediscovery of communal discernment

IT WOULD BE INTERESTING to know what person or group of persons first thought of using in our own day the process of communal discernment. It is possible that the idea derives, at least in part, from the invitation issued by the second Vatican Council to all religious communities to promote a renewal in which all the members would take part, and to search for solutions to the problems posed by this renewal, from the theology of the holy Spirit so frequently implied in the Council documents, and the desire for interpersonal communion and exchange which characterizes contemporary society. In any case, the phrase 'communal discernment' and the reality of it have become immensely popular in the last few years. It is to be hoped that such interest will be a lasting and not just a passing phenomenon; for, in the context of the rediscovery of the community dimension of the people of God, communal discernment contains rich possibilities for the renewal of the christian life in general, and of religious life in particular.

In his letter of 25 December, 1971, Fr General Pedro Arrupe officially invited all the members of the Society of Jesus to engage in an effort of communal discernment as a means of preparing for the order's next General Congregation. He expressed his desire for 'a climate of true and sincere spiritual community interchange, based on a profound union, and capable of being converted on occasion into a *true discernment* and *communal spiritual deliberation*'. The preparatory commission of the congregation referred to this invitation a year later in a letter to the provincials, indicating that the most important element in the present phase of preparation is the personal reflection and exchange among jesuits in a spirit of fraternal union and collaboration.¹ These requests have occasioned various

¹ Letter to Major Superiors, December 11, 1972.

experiences, some of them successful, others imperfect, and have inspired reflection upon the conditions necessary for good results. New questions have been raised which have led to the clarification of the goals, criteria and results of authentic spiritual discernment. Especially since 1970, there have been many publications on this topic.² Experiences of community discernment are not the exclusive property of the Society of Jesus. They have been tried by other groups of religious men, and especially of religious women. In some cases, the experience of the laity has inspired others to use this means.

It is difficult to calculate the results which have emerged. It would be necessary to multiply community examinations of conscience in order adequately to assess the spiritual profit that has accrued to communities, the quality of the decisions reached, and the real action of the Spirit upon the groups which have striven to be open to him. Successful results cannot be achieved in those cases where community discernment has been confused with a form of democratization which does not take account of existing spiritual structures, or where the exclusion of superiors is considered to be a means of acting as a community.

From individual discernment to communal discernment

The question to be raised here, even if it cannot be answered fully, is that of 'communal discernment of spirits and the ignatian method of deliberation in a general congregation'. It seems absolutely necessary to speak explicitly of *spiritual* community discernment, in order to highlight what Spirit should animate this discernment, to define the modalities of its exercise, and to evaluate its possibilities for the preparation and subsequent activities of the General Congregation.

Through our reading and from personal experience, we know what makes up individual discernment of spirits in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. Commentaries and studies on the rules for discernment are not lacking, and the procedure has been tried and

² See *Dossier Sulla Deliberazione Comunitaria*, A and B (2 fascicules) (Rome, *Centrum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis*, 1972), especially B, pp 128-130, where the bibliography includes 24 titles, to which should be added: John C. Futrell, 'Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience', in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, vol iv, no 5 (1972), pp 159-194; M. Giuliani, 'La délibération communautaire', in *Vie Consacrée* 44 (1972), pp 149-158; M. Rondet, 'La formation au discernement personnel et communautaire', in *Cahiers Forma Gregis* 24 (1972), 87 pp; William J. Byron, 'Group Decision Making', in *Catholic Mind* 71 (Feb 1973), pp 27-34. On the General Congregation, see L. Ōrsy, 'Some Questions about the Purpose and Scope of the General Congregation', in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, vol iv, no 3 (1972), pp 85-114.

proven. Actually, this form of discernment is not strictly individual: the Lord himself is present. It is he who occasions it by the experience of the interior movements of consolation and desolation. The 'one who gives the Exercises', the companion and guide for the person who cannot easily discern alone, represents the Church in offering fraternal assistance. There are more persons present in the apparent solitude of a retreat than one might at first think. The criteria and conditions of discernment are explained in the 'rules for discernment of spirits', which vary according to the spiritual state of the retreatant.³ There are also counsels for those 'making an election'.⁴ To these can be added the 'rules for thinking with the Church', especially rule thirteen, which says: '... linking Christ our Lord the bridegroom and his bride the Church, there is one and the same Spirit, ruling and guiding us for our souls' good'.⁵

These rules and counsels are those which we find applied in the document called 'The deliberation of the first fathers', a report of a community discernment realized by the first members of the Society of Jesus, from March to June 1539, regarding two questions which were crucial for them: Should they constitute a religious order? Should they obey one of the group?⁶ All those who have read and meditated on this document of eight pages will recognize it as a model which can serve as a guide to every authentic process of community discernment or deliberation: that is, one which is to be made 'in the holy Spirit'.

Why should this deliberation of the first fathers be singled out? It could hardly be said that the Church and its members did not practise communal discernment until 1539. Exegetical studies have begun to show that Yahweh invited his people to discuss his will.⁷ Exhortations are not lacking in the letters which Paul and John wrote to various communities.⁸ The 'Council of Jerusalem', as recorded in Acts 15, is sometimes presented as an experience of dis-

³ Exx 314-336.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 169-189.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 352-370, especially 353 and 365 (quoted here).

⁶ *Monumenta Historica Societatis Jesu (MHSJ), Constitutiones*, I, 1-7; english translation by Dominic Maruca, 'The Deliberation of our First Fathers', in *Woodstock Letters* 95 (1966), pp 325-333; John C. Futrell, *Making an Apostolic Community of Love* (Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis, 1970), pp 188-194; french translation, *Notes ignatiennes* 1 (Enghien, 1956); italian translation, *Discernimento spirituale comunitario: un metodo e un esempio (pro manuscripto)* (Milano, Piazza San Fedele, 1972), 9 pp.

⁷ See J. Guillet, *et al.*, 'Discernement des Esprits', in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol III, cols 1222-1247; english translation, *Discernment of Spirits* (ed E. Malatesta, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1970), pp 17-53.

⁸ Cf I Thess 5, 19-22; 1 Jn 4, 1-6.

cernment. We might ask whether the monastic chapter, as it is envisaged in the rules of certain communities, might not have some relationship to collective discernment. We can suppose that medieval popes, when they presented their decisions with the formula *de consilio fratrum nostrorum* (in consultation, that is, with the cardinals), intended more than fidelity to a mere literary convention. Historical research has barely begun to explore the field of communal discernment. At any rate, the author of the report of the Deliberation of 1539 formulated with technical precision the method and spirit of a practice of which there are other examples, unfortunately not so well documented, in the life of the first jesuits before and after the composition of the Constitutions. Between August 1534 and March 1539, the companions held no less than thirteen 'deliberative reunions' which they attended according to their possibilities and about which our information is only fragmentary.⁹

What were the steps and modalities of this process of community inquiry and decision? A community of 'friends in the Lord', who have known each other for several years, who are already profoundly united by the experience of the Exercises and several deliberations, as well as by individual decisions which have been discussed in common and which join them together in what is still an informal group, are faced with a new decision. The discernment they will exercise will decide their individual existences and their existence as a group. To answer the questions before them, they adopt together methods for seeking the will of God which they will vary according to circumstances, just as the retreatant of the Exercises changes his way of acting when he does not find what he is seeking.¹⁰ They did not know from the beginning that this enterprise would last four months, but they were agreed that it would not distract them from their apostolic ministries. In agreement also on the questions to be solved, the companions prayed and reflected individually in the Lord. Each question was debated only before God and with God. The Spirit of God acted in various ways on these men, who were conscious of their individual differences. The unity of the goal to be

⁹ See A. Baruffo, 'Appunti per il discernimento e la deliberazione in comune', in Dossier B, pp 138-139; Fr X. Osuna, *Recherches I, Amigos en el Señor* (Roma, *Centrum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis*, 1971), pp 70-106, where it is shown that 'deliberation' describes the meetings of Venice, Rome, and Vicenza because the companions observed part of the method they used in 1539. Simon Rodriguez uses the word *deliberari*; see MHSJ, *Epist. Broetii, Jaii, Coduri et Roderici*, p 474. The words *deliberación* and *deliberar* occur only once in the *General Examen* (ch 3, 14 [51]), and once in the *Constitutions* (Pt IV, ch 6, 2 [361]), in both cases with reference to a personal decision already made.

¹⁰ Exx 89.

attained, and the uniformity of the method adopted, did not prevent differences from manifesting themselves. The members of the group wished to be 'indifferent': that is, as objective and as unconditioned as possible, impervious for the moment to the opinions of others in order to preserve their personal freedom and so to guarantee the authentic expression of their spiritual state. After having experienced the movements of the Spirit which inclined them in one direction, and leaving themselves open to what the others would say, they came together to listen to the 'reasons against' – the motives which might justify a negative reply to the question under consideration.

It is possible that these men, formed at the University of Paris, used the method of the *videtur quod non*, practised in scholastic disputations, for a spiritual purpose. That which is said by each one was listened to by the others without any discussion. After mutually informing each other, they returned to their private prayer and reflection, in order to examine 'the reasons for' – the favourable motives which each one in turn expressed to the others. The various aspects of the problem were thus examined during several days, from both sides, by analysing and evaluating the most important reasons; by praying, meditating and reflecting until the final moment when they reached a conclusion: one which was expressed with absolute unanimity, with the help of the Lord. 'It was much preferable and very necessary for us to render obedience to one of our group'.¹¹ The deliberations continued until the day when all was concluded in joy and in total agreement, after much prayer joined to much spiritual and physical exertion.

This experience of the 'first fathers' invites some observations. The participants were men taken up with an apostolate; in order not to waste precious time, they adopted a method designed to help them discern more rapidly. But even then the deliberations lasted four months. The process resembled one which is recommended in the nineteenth annotation of the *Spiritual Exercises*: what we call today 'exercises in the stream of life'.

The object of their discernment and deliberation was of such fundamental importance that their decision was to *constitute* the Society of Jesus. Throughout her history, this same Society has used the same method of discernment, and others as well, in solving the problems posed to her.

This process of discernment, carried out by means of a delibera-

¹¹ *Deliberatio primorum Patrum*, MHSJ, Const, 1, p 7.

tion, is a work which is both human and divine, one in which the Spirit of God, the spirit of each one, and the spirit of the group intervene. It is a process which is slowly modified as the discernment progresses. An analysis of it reveals that it contains a very ignatian mixture of the means employed in the 'second and third times of making an election' of the Spiritual Exercises.¹²

The necessary initial attitude is impartiality to everything except the will of God. There must be indifference concerning the question to be treated, concerning one's own opinion, concerning what will be said by others. This indifference is fostered by the desire to avoid all psychological contagion, and to neutralize the influence of other persons (even those of good will) – factors which risk unduly influencing one's personal judgment. The sharing in common of reasons against and for is scarcely a dialogue. It is an exposition of what each one has felt in the Lord.¹³

The exchange which first takes place between God and each of the participants individually becomes one in which the members of the group enter into a more active communication; in such a way that the group itself becomes the subject of spiritual movements and sentiments which are more than the sum-total of what each one has experienced individually. The participants are enlightened by this group-experience. They discover, even at the price of interior tensions, the direction in which the Spirit leads the group. Aspects which were not perceived at first oblige them to a personal re-education before God of their own interior movements and reflection.

In the case of the 'first fathers', it does not seem that there was a leader or facilitator in the group, which was without a formal superior. At that time, each one was superior in turn. They acted as a group of equals, though they were conscious of their diverse gifts and temperaments; yet even among these equals there was a certain primacy given to Ignatius. Throughout the entire description of the deliberations we see signs of the spirit and methods of Ignatius, who had already given his Exercises to the rest.

Everything was done 'to the degree that we, poor men, are capable', as they put it, in order to ensure that the experience was truly a spiritual one, lived in God, whose will was all that they sought. They prayed, they celebrated Mass (during which Ignatius

¹² Exx 176–177; 178–188.

¹³ On the importance of *sentir* in ignatian experience, see Fr Marxer, *Die inneren geistliche Sinne* (Freiburg-Basel-Wien, 1963), and the 'Index' to the *Spiritual Exercises*, MHSJ, 100 (Roma, 1969), p 781, and to the *Constitutions*, Coll. Christus (Paris, 1962), p 54.

received much light), they reflected with the conviction that the holy Spirit would inspire them.

The confirmation and certitude that the companions experienced of having discerned well were given to them in the joy and peace in the holy Spirit, whom they had sought from the beginning.¹⁴ This joy proceeded from union of hearts; 'the true gladness and spiritual joy', of which the Exercises speak,¹⁵ was here the uplifting sentiment which came from seeing that they were 'unanimous', that their differences became incorporated into and enriched by a decision where they recognized both themselves and the action of the Spirit. But to complete the entire process, it was necessary also that the apostolic See should confirm and approve. It was the holy Father who was to say that their decision was a good one and that the Spirit of God was present.

Forms of discernment in the practice of the Society

Historically, it is correct to say that the Deliberation of 1539 was something unique. After that date, Ignatius does not seem to have used formally that method of discernment. There is a reason for this. The Society had given itself a superior general in 1541, after an electoral process which included three days of private prayer, a vote the results of which were not tabulated for another three days, and a second vote four days later. At this point, Ignatius made his confession, declaring that he would accept his confessor's counsel. This was followed by three more days of waiting, at the end of which the confessor sent his judgment under seal. The confirmation of the election of Ignatius therefore took ten days!¹⁶

From the moment the Society had a general superior, to whom others would succeed and who would in turn name other superiors, there would still be community discernment, but in other forms. The superior would make the decisions, but with the intervention of the entire community, or part of it, to help him in his discernment. A text of the *Determinaciones antiguas* states that if a superior has doubts about a matter that is within his competency, he should have recourse to those who are his brothers and sons in the Lord. The more important the matter is, the more persons he should consult. He should invite the community to offer Masses, especially those whom he is going to consult. Those so consulted should, in all sim-

¹⁴ *Deliberatio Primorum Patrum*, MHSJ, Const, I, p 7: 'suaviter et concordī animorum consensus'.

¹⁵ Exx 316 and 329.

¹⁶ MHSJ, *Fontes Narrativi* I, pp 15-22.

plicity, purity and charity according as the holy Spirit gives them his grace, either write their opinions which they will give sealed to the superior, or communicate their point of view orally. After reading these opinions, 'putting aside any movements of passion, he should have recourse to his Creator and Lord and present to him these views, setting aside any feeling of his own (if he has any) . . . then he will determine according to his conscience what he feels in our Lord, or what seems best'.¹⁷

In this text, which has become part of the *Constitutions* and which in several places evokes the habitual procedure of consultation, there is no deliberation in common. There is the discernment exercised by each member of the community, to be expressed in an opinion which the superior will consider in the Lord, while he himself strives to remain in a state of impartiality. He is the one who will then decide. The *Constitutions* repeat these indications, applying them to particular instances.¹⁸ Before they were written, there were in the Society a certain number of examples of the active participation of a community in a deliberation which could affect its structure and its life; for example, in the matter of the students sent to Paris in 1541, and those of Louvain in 1547. Sometimes the community was asked to choose its superior: for example, at Gandia in 1547, and at Valencia, Louvain and Messina in 1548. We know from the *Journal* of Gonçalves da Camara that Ignatius organized at the professed house in Rome diverse consultations at which he was not always present. These were held by different categories of persons in the community who could better discern because they were more familiar with the question being treated.¹⁹ A more 'communitarian' type of participation is not excluded in the case of the most important decisions.²⁰

A certain number of the elements of the Deliberation of 1539 were also incorporated into those texts of the *Constitutions* which treat of a general congregation. Ignatius thought that the apostolate in his day did not permit of general congregations being held regularly or often:²¹ that would be a 'distraction for the Society'. Communication by letter seemed to him to suffice as a means of self-expression in matters pertaining to ordinary government. The

¹⁷ MHSJ, *Const*, I, pp 218-219. See also p 292, n 122; pp 336-337.

¹⁸ *Const*, Pt II, ch 2, A (211); ch 3, 3 A (219, 221); Pt IV, ch 10, 7 (431); ch 17, 1 (490); Pt VIII, ch 2, 1 (618); Pt IX, ch 6, 10 and 12 (803, 810).

¹⁹ See description and analysis in Fr X. Osuna, *Amigos en el Señor* (unpublished part of the dissertation) II, pp 565-586.

²⁰ MHSJ, *Polanci Complementa*, I, p 83.

²¹ *Const*, Pt VII, ch 2, 1 (677).

congregation should be called to elect a general, or when it was necessary to treat important questions concerning the future, or which were 'very difficult and affect the whole body of the Society or its way of acting'. In the second case the general was to convoke the congregation, and the delegates would be elected or chosen by the provincial.

For the election of the general, the pattern followed is that used in 1541. The procedure begins with three days of prayer, reflection and gathering of information which will help the electors to come to a mature decision which they will make only when assembled. The Mass of the holy Spirit is celebrated, and an exhortation of a general nature is given. A common inspiration may bring it about that all are immediately in agreement, visibly inspired by the holy Spirit, in a spontaneous vote. But perhaps it will be necessary to follow the procedure of the second and third times of election proposed in the Exercises. Each one prays and reflects privately for an hour, then comes the vote. No-one speaks in the election-room and the casting of each one's vote is preceded by an oath. In the case of an insufficient majority, three or five electors will be chosen by a majority vote. The congregation, recognizing that it is incapable of discerning the person to be elected, now discerns only that it should abide by the choice of a smaller group, to which it delegates its responsibility.²²

For matters other than the election of a general, the congregation and the Society give themselves to prayer, to obtain the grace of making the right decision. During several assemblies, the participants present the matters to be treated, air their suggestions orally first, and then in writing. These questions are examined from various points of view, and then the decision-making begins. If a clear decision cannot be reached 'with a consent that is unanimous or almost such', the congregation confides the matter to four definitors, whose majority decision 'the entire congregation will accept as from the hand of God our Lord'.²³ This text gives the impression that it was necessary to foresee several ways to accomplish the work assigned to the congregation. The concern to act rapidly, so as not to take too much time from the apostolate, is in keeping with the structure of the text. The general congregation is, during this process, 'the Society', deliberating about its future and its activities.²⁴

²² *Const*, Pt VIII, ch 6, 7 (707); ch 7, 3 (715).

²³ *Const*, Pt VIII, ch 7, 3 (715).

²⁴ The identification of the general congregation with the Society occurs in *Const* Pt VIII, ch 5, I (690); Pt VIII, ch 4, 2 (689); see J. de Roeck, 'Du sens de la Congrégation générale dans la Compagnie d'après les Constitutions', in *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu*, Vol 35 (1966), pp 223-224, n 37.

Reflections on our practice

From these various texts what can we conclude about community discernment, deliberation and consultation?

First of all, there are differences between these various experiences of discernment. Community discernment is concerned with a particular situation, a question which concerns the life or the activities of the community in the light of certain spiritual principles. It is an effort in the Spirit to discover among so many signs those which have God as their source: an effort to live and act in fidelity to the Word of God. This should come about when the community recognizes itself and feels itself as truly called by the Lord.

Consultation is also a form of community discernment. Whether it takes the form of individual replies which have matured in private prayer and reflection, or of small groups which have pooled their reflections and their prayer, the consultation requested by the superior or proposed to him can help him in the discernment which he himself has to exercise.

Deliberation, which is another manifestation of discernment, has more definite traits: the search is realized in common, the object more clearly defined, the technique more sustained, the decision more clearly formulated.

In any case, the practice of communal discernment is very demanding indeed. It is of the utmost importance to insist upon its exigencies with those who might be tempted to embark upon it without discrimination – and with those who finally do initiate the process. All its forms require the belief that the holy Spirit is always at work in the world; and that he helps Christians who are docile to him, individually and in community, to discern what is better for their lives, to discover the will of God. The holy Spirit is the Spirit who witnesses to us that Jesus is Saviour, who recalls to us and helps us to understand and feel what is proclaimed in the gospel, who builds up the Church in all of its cells, communities and congregations, by inspiring them with that humility and charity which are the 'sentiments of Christ'.

The person or the group which seeks inspiration for life in the gospel, whose constant newness is revealed by the Spirit, should join to prayer a serious and reflective attention to the concrete details of daily living. Solutions to our problems do not come only directly from God. The circumstances 'of time, place, and persons', as St Ignatius would say, require the discernment of tangible signs. But mere awareness is insufficient. We must not only see the signs, we

must analyse and search out their profound meaning, in order to discover in them the Lord's call. What are the greatest needs of my country today? What kind of response to them should I give in a spirit of absolute fidelity to the gospel? Without a deep sensitivity to the meaning of the reality that surrounds me, how can I hope to act upon that reality?

The community which desires to discern and deliberate should already be united by the bonds of a common vocation, and possess the conviction that the line of thought or action in which it is engaged is that to which all its members adhere. This basic agreement is not a pre-established harmony which would presuppose at the beginning of the experience whatever will be found at its end. It is the certitude that the diverse tensions which are operative in the community, while very real, are susceptible of a solution in which religious dynamism and apostolic creativity will converge. This basic agreement – which we should not be too quick to believe has already been achieved – presupposes that the object of discernment has been chosen, that the community is determined to open itself to whatever may come from God directly or through others, that it is willing to accept whatever will manifest itself in the community and by the community as coming from the Lord.

It has been said that authentic discernment should be 'spiritual': that it should be carried out in the Lord. Its indispensable elements are: to pray, to offer oneself to the light which comes from the Lord – how many expressions of openness and generosity we find in the Exercises! – and to listen to the Spirit individually and as a group, in private prayer and in common prayer. It is a question of being 'indifferent', of fostering in oneself a permeability to God, a transparency to others which allows true exchange.

Surely it can be helpful to read or hear read verses of the scriptures where God always speaks, or some basic texts on our vocation which help us to see the direction in which the discernment should be made.

A prerequisite for being penetrated by the mystery of the gospel is keeping at a certain distance for a time from the object being discerned, so that whatever is too natural, too exclusively human or subjective in us, may not be an obstacle hindering the inspirations or motions of the Spirit. To be led by the Spirit of God means to prepare oneself to act in God and for God.

Once each one is grounded in this attitude, then it is appropriate to listen to the others and to what they have judged to be good, while being receptive of the motions and motivations which each

expresses. This variety of points of view – first negative, and then positive – on the same question will influence each one, furnish new matter for reflection, confirm the views of some, weaken the views of others; and it will permit all the members of the community, enriched by this sharing, to return to prayer, where there will be manifested motions of the Spirit which each one will have felt in the Lord. To expose first the negative reasons seems to have the advantage of liberating a certain pent-up aggressivity, clearing the ground, preparing by means of negation for an affirmation. The ‘no’ makes room for the ‘yes’ to be said.

It is then that a common evaluation can be attempted. The community-consciousness of a submissiveness to the Spirit which has been slowly acquired (by each one in his own way and in his own time) brings a conviction that everything humanly possible has been done. This consciousness facilitates the discernment of movements which are no longer felt as individual only, but which are really those which energize and inspire the community. The community thus slowly evolves towards a unique solution, a unanimous conclusion, in which the manifest agreement makes us recognize that ‘the Spirit of God is here’. Such a quest for the divine will does not overlook natural means, which, however, should always remain subordinate to the supernatural. There is a sincere attempt to act with the greatest spiritual liberty, to avoid being imprisoned in one’s own views, to be truly open to others. The community has not forgotten that it has deliberated as a part of the body which is the entire congregation, one which is in the Church and for the Church. It can believe that Christ is in the midst of those who are joined together in his name.

The word ‘unanimity’ can pose a problem. Unanimity can be reached spontaneously; but this is not the ordinary manner. One might ask, where an immediate result is obtained, whether it was worthwhile to discern or deliberate. More often, unanimity is the result of a long process which includes the patient relaxation of tensions, the gradual approach to a mutual agreement without restrictions, and finally the arrival of all concerned at a state of peace and joy which are the fruits of the Spirit. Ignatius would say, in such a case, that the community is ‘consoled in our Lord’:²⁵ that is to

²⁵ See *Deliberatio Primorum Patrum*, MHSJ, *Const*, I, p 5, where the phrase *in inveniēdo gaudium et pacem in Spiritu Sancto* is used to describe the goal for which the companions are seeking. For ‘consolation in the Lord’ as desired for the member who leaves the Society, see *Const*, Pt II, ch 3, 6 (225).

say, happy to have reached its goal, decided to continue on, more confident in the word of God whose efficacy it has experienced, and more attached to the will of God which has been more clearly perceived.²⁶

But unanimity can also result from an acceptance of the decision by certain members of the group, in no way to be considered a 'minority', who had and still have a different preference, but who, for the common good and in the desire to be united to the community, sacrifice their own views and adhere to that decision which their adherence makes even more communitarian. They discern that it is preferable to avoid all desolation in the group: sadness at the failure of an important project, disturbance caused by a deep and evident disagreement, hard feelings regarding those with whom one differs. By acting in this way, they lead the others to accept and respect their different view which remains an important value, while disposing the others to listen with openness to what they may propose on another occasion.

The conclusions reached can manifest themselves in the recognition of a common agreement, in a resolution which has common approval. They can also be synthesized by a procedure of voting which has been agreed upon beforehand. A vote has the advantage of giving a firmer expression to the group's discernment. At times, however, this method can be disadvantageous; for the reason that it risks transforming differences into opposition. It can be a useful procedure if carried out in such a way that there are neither triumphant and oppressive victors nor offended losers inclined to revenge. In any case, such a vote is beyond the laws of mere parliamentary procedure. There is a difference between things which are done on a purely human level and those realized by those who wish to live according to the Spirit.

The results are confirmed by the mutual satisfaction of all, in peace and joy, in the spiritual gladness that can result from an experience costly in effort but carried out with patience. But confirmation is also given by higher authority. The companions of 1539 wished to say or do nothing except what the Spirit had suggested to them and what the holy See would approve. This raises the question

²⁶ The *Spiritual Exercises* speak of *todo aumento de esperanza, fe y caridad y toda leticia interna que llama y atrae a las cosas celestiales y a la propia salud de su anima, quietandola y pacificandola en su Criador y Señor* ('... every increase of hope, faith and charity, and all interior gladness which calls and attracts a person to heavenly things, and to what is truly salutary for him, leaving him restful and at peace in his Creator and Lord'). 316.

of the role of the superior in community discernment.

The role of the superior

We have already noticed the absence of a superior in the Deliberation of 1539, and the reasons for this absence. We also recalled that religious communities have a general, and many other superiors, provincial and local. It is impossible to prescind from this institutional situation (which itself results from a community deliberation). What is the place of the superior in communal discernment? Is it necessary to hold that when the community recognizes the spiritual truth of the decision it has made, the superior is obliged to follow it and thus obey the community; that is, practise a form of caputular government which places authority and execution in the community alone?

This question needs to be situated on a more general level. The superior is, with the others, a member of the community. He is different by reason of his function of carrying responsibility and fostering union which assures and expresses the bond of charity uniting all the members. As superior, he can accept the project of a community discernment or deliberation. He can even initiate such procedures. As a member of the community he is called, as the others are, to discern and to deliberate, while allowing his brothers to express themselves with the greatest freedom. He can also contribute according to his position by giving reasons which the other members of the community could not otherwise know. It is certainly preferable that he be neither the director nor the animator of the discernment process. He will thus avoid, to some extent, any conflict between his position as a member of the community and his function as its superior. In the community exchanges, he too will say how he sees the matter in the Lord, with detachment and penetrated with indifference for anything which is not the manifest will of God. If the community finds its joy and peace in the positive results reached in a spiritual way, there should be no reason why, ordinarily speaking, the superior would have any difficulty in accepting the conclusions of the group. To confirm the decision of a group is not to be determined by it; it is to be docile to the Spirit. If, on the contrary, there are considerations which he could not express and which he cannot reveal (this is more frequent where the matter involves individual persons rather than the religious and apostolic orientations of a community), he remains free, after prayer, to exercise a supplementary discernment and to decide otherwise.

St Ignatius, who had consulted his companions regarding the difficult question of poverty, ended by deciding in a way different from that which they had suggested. One might reply that he was St Ignatius. It would be better to say that he was Ignatius obedient to the Spirit, the same man who put his own counsels and instructions in a subordinate position to whatever 'wise love (*la discreta caridad*), when the actual situation has been duly weighed, and the anointing of the holy Spirit, who must be principal guide in all things, will dictate' to the one whom he had sent on a mission.²⁷

The General Congregation

Two phases should be distinguished in regard to the general congregation which is to treat very important matters: the period of preparation and its actual meeting. The catalogue of questions and the order of their importance, determined by the replies sent in by the provinces, puts in first place the vocation and purpose of the Society, the actual form of our apostolic service, the concrete aspects of our religious and community life, the mission of the Society in the Church, the fourth vow, poverty and obedience. The structures of the general congregation itself and of the provincial congregations figure eighteenth and nineteenth in the catalogue. The first six points, the choice of which is already the result of a community discernment, have occasioned exchanges of views throughout the Society. It can be said that never has there been so much consultation within the order, never have superiors so encouraged communal discernment. Has everything been achieved and achieved well? Has discernment been carried out according to the demanding methods for which the Deliberation of 1539 furnishes the model?

An affirmative reply cannot be given. Some communities were not ready for this discernment because they were hardly communities. In some cases, the invitations to community discernment were met with scepticism and indifference (not of the ignatian type!). Criticisms were raised against the methods proposed – which appeared so new! Even when communities were prepared to respond, even if they had recognized this new flexibility as indispensable for

²⁷ Ignatius's letter to Fr Nuñez Barreto, 7 April, 1555, in MHSJ, *Epistolae Ignatianae*, I, viii, p 690. The *Constitutions* speak of the anointing of the holy Spirit, or of the eternal Wisdom: *Const*, Pt I, ch 2, 13 (161); Pt III, ch I, A (219); Pt IV, ch 8, 8 (414); Pt VII, ch 2, F (624); Pt VIII, ch 6, 5 (700); Pt IX, ch 3, 8 (746).

the authenticity of the discernment experience, they then had to break the barriers of the individualism in which they had been formed (and deformed) for so long. Those who were able to advance beyond the barrier, and take an interest in the basic questions regarding their religious life in these difficult times: it was these who initiated the experience of community-exchange, and began to perceive that different persons truly shared a common vocation. A developing mutual esteem, based on something more than productivity or exterior qualities and defects, led to a better knowledge of one another and a renewed hope. What was impossible to men was realized by God to whom they had entrusted themselves. Other communities, already more unified, and in a way that goes beyond that of good friends who get along together, realized the real community experience of union within differences.

We should not imagine that all the individuals and communities of the Society advance at the same pace and in the same way. The experiences of the order's members are so diverse, the forms of ministry so different, the tensions between persons and groups sometimes so strong, that it is reasonable to see in this return to life according to the Spirit a long road on which the communities as such are invited to travel: in some cases to take their very first steps, and in every case to discover their own pace of advancing.

The invitation to community discernment is proposed as 'the personal reflection and exchange among jesuits close to each other'. The president of the Preparatory Commission has said that, for Fr General, 'this preparation can be more important than the congregation itself'. It is necessary that there be communication of 'every contribution judged useful', that the documents proposed for our discernment 'help and not suffocate'.²⁸ The objective honesty of these documents may have led some to think that the commission is presenting them as its own value-judgments.

We are reminded, however, that 'the exchange in prayer and mutual listening will permit the congregation to be a means for the union of all'. The replies elaborated during the fourth phase of preparation were to be sent in during February 1973. But this date does not mark the end of the experience of community discernment. That which counts is that the communities discern, and that they continue to discern. The will of God must always be sought and found. The word of God has never finished its work of transforming

²⁸ Letter to Major Superiors, December 11, 1972, 1, 3, 6.

man. The discernment which helps a community to develop is a path, not the end of the journey.

Should we speak about the Congregation itself? It is difficult to set norms for it, since it is the highest authority within the Society. We might hope that it will use the spiritual methods foreseen by St Ignatius and indicated in the Constitutions, that it will realise the climate of prayer docile to the Spirit, that its delegates will be conscious of being the Society and not merely the representatives of an assistancy or a province; a fact which confers on them the responsibility of thinking of the universal good of the Society and of the Church, which is also 'the more divine'. In the light of their vocation and that of their brothers, of the charism of their founder approved by the Church, they will evaluate the reasons against and for the options proposed to them, gather together all the data and exercise discernment in the name of and for the Society.

Obviously one might ask, without giving offence to anyone, whether such a large gathering of men, from all countries and uprooted from so many concrete preoccupations, constitutes a community technically apt for spiritual discernment. It takes time to form a community, and a congregation which according to St Ignatius should not last long, is a gathering of religious who will just begin to know each other. Should they entrust their work of discernment to commissions which would replace the definitors of the past? Surely if they have listened well to what their brothers have discerned they will be helped in their own discernment, while remaining free, as is every superior, to make their own communal decision.

The general congregation was instituted 'for the union of persons'.²⁹ The entire deliberating Society comes to focus in the congregation, which is the chief instrument possessed by the Society of discerning the more universal good. Discerning in fidelity to the spiritual inspirations which gave birth to the Society, aided by the Constitutions in which it can find principles of a renewal adapted to the pluralistic situation of today, and confirmed in communal joy, the general congregation ought to be a lived experience of ignatian discernment, a discernment of men who know how to make all things serve the final goal of the greater honour and glory of God.

²⁹ *Const*, Pt VIII, ch 2, 1 (677).