

COMMUNAL DELIBERATION

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ONE OF the most outstanding examples of communal deliberation (often mistakenly called 'communal discernment'), is the *deliberatio* of Ignatius Loyola and his first companions, who in 1539 in Rome, decided to form a community which came to be called the Society of Jesus. Our purpose here is to illustrate the various attitudes and dispositions which animated this deliberation; and, for clarity of treatment, we have divided it into six points.

1. A unity of aim, but with a difference of opinion regarding the means.
2. A unity of mental attitude.
3. A time for silence.
4. A time for speech.
5. The unanimous decision.
6. Its dedication and presentation to God for his confirmation.

In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius says that during the first week the retreatant should not be told what he has to do during the next week (Exx 11), nor should he be instructed in the rules for discernment proper to the second week. Further, if he cannot attain to the dispositions proper to the second week, but merely wishes 'to be put on the right path, and to find some peace of mind', he should not continue the Exercises (Exx 18). Ignatius also says that, unless the retreatant has achieved a real measure of indifference, he risks following his own subjective point of view, instead of choosing with God (Exx 23, 149-57, 165-66, 169): 'For instance, many first decide to get married, though this is only a means, and then to serve our Lord in that state; yet it is the service of God which is the end' (Exx 169).

Hence, in a situation of communal choice, it is necessary to advance step by step. Unless the right attitude has been reached, there is danger of ill-judgment which will result in a wrong decision (Exx 9). Given these limitations, we can elucidate the above six points one by one, and illustrate them with other examples from Ignatius's own experience. (Each section begins with a quotation from the relevant passage of the *deliberatio*.)

1. *Unity of aim, with a difference of opinion regarding the means*

During Lent, before our dispersal, we decided to come together regularly to deliberate on the question of our vocation and our rule. Thus the goal after which we aspired and upon which we had already reflected and determined, began to clarify itself. It emerged, after

several meetings, that our opinions and ideas about a state of life differed because some of us were French, others Spanish, Savoyard or Basque. We did, however, have one intention and one mutual longing: to look for the perfect will of God and for his holy pleasure, in accordance with the aim of our vocation. But there were some differences of opinion regarding the suitable and fruitful means, both for ourselves and for our neighbour. No one should think it strange that these differences of opinion existed among us, weak and frail human beings as we are. After all, the apostles, the heads and pillars of Holy Church, and other extremely holy men, with whom we cannot possibly be compared, suffered diversity of opinion, sometimes even conflicting views; and they recorded these different views in writing.

We need not delay on this first point. We can recognize our own communities in those hesitations and differences of opinion. Here, as a first phase, we can take stock of the conflicting views, use them to create alternative possibilities, and thus arrive at a suitable formulation for choice.

2. *Unity of mental attitude*

What common attitudes are required for making a collective choice? Let us allow the text to speak for itself:

In the meantime we kept in mind the possibility of discovering a completely different way of life: a path which would enable us, all of us without exception, to offer ourselves as holocausts to God, to whose praise, honour and glory our entire being must be devoted. Therefore, we unanimously decided and determined that we should pray, mortify ourselves and meditate with more zeal than usual; and, when we had done all in our power, we would cast all our cares upon the Lord. Since he never refuses to give the true Spirit to him who makes his request with humility and sincerity, but rather gives it liberally and speedily, we hoped that he, in his goodness and generosity, would not forsake us; his mercy is greater than we ask for or can comprehend.

Here then we find expressed a real wish for clarity, an earnestness and a vigour in prayer and mortification, and a deep faith in God. However, when the deliberations reached an impasse, the general attitude was submitted to three manageable rules of thumb:

The second point about which we began to deliberate so as to come to a solution was to indicate to all of us together and to each one separately the three following attitudes. The first: each one was to prepare himself and apply himself to prayer, mortification and meditation in such a way

that, on finding the joy and peace of the Holy Spirit concerning obedience, and granted that the praise and glory of God were equal, he would strive as best he could to incline his will more to obeying than to commanding. The second: the companions were not to come together to talk over the matter nor ask questions about it. Here the intention was that no one should be persuaded or moved by another's persuasive power to obey or to disobey. Each one should consider only that which he had found in prayer and meditation to be the most effective. The third: each one was to think of himself as though he were outside our Society and never expected to become a member. The purpose of this was that none of us would be led into judging in one way rather than in another by any kind of attachment. Each person should be as free as a stranger in expounding his views regarding the question raised: 'obedience, yes or no'; and finally each one, in his vote, would confirm and justify the point of view by means of which, in his opinion, God would be better served and the Society's future assured.

Thus communal choice is no less trinitarian than a personal one: its norm is God's honour, with a preference for the cross of obedience, arrived at in a joy and peace in the Spirit. The entire active purpose of prayer, mortification and meditation is directed toward this goal. The text also distinguishes three other elements: a preference for what is more radical; an impartiality about the opinion of others; detachment from the self.

It is obvious that this communal election acquires its shape in very much the same way as in a personal choice:

(a) *The preference for what is more radical*: 'The third way is the most perfect humility. Supposing that I have attained to the first two ways, and granted an equal measure of praise and glory to God, I choose to be poor with Christ in poverty rather than rich, to be insulted with Christ so grossly insulted, rather than to be thought well of; I would rather be thought a helpless fool for the sake of Christ who was first treated so, rather than to be thought wise and clever in the world's eyes' (Exx 167).

(b) *Impartiality about the opinions of others*: 'It is not for him who gives the Exercises to turn the retreatant's thoughts to poverty or to the promise of any such thing rather than to the opposite, nor to one state or way of life rather than to another; outside the time of the Exercises we may properly and meritoriously induce those who, in all probability, have the necessary disposition to choose continence, virginity, religious life or any kind of evangelical perfection; but in the course of these Spiritual Exercises, it is more appropriate that, in the search for the divine will, the Creator and Lord should be left himself to deal with the soul that belongs to him, receiving it into his love and to a life

of praise, fitting it for that form of service which will be best for it in the time to come. He who gives the Exercises, therefore, must not tend or incline to either side, but remain in perfect equilibrium, allowing the Creator to deal directly with his creature and the creature with his Creator and Lord' (Exx 15).

Therefore, the liberty we have to influence others outside the Exercises does not hold good for a situation of communal election, which is, in itself, an application of the Spiritual Exercises.

(c) *Detachment from the self*: 'Let me think of a man unknown to me, whom I have never seen. Now, if I want him to be perfect in every way, let me think what decision I should tell him to make, to promote God's greater glory and his own spiritual perfection. Let me then take my own advice and observe the rule I am laying down for someone else' (Exx 185).

We conclude with an example of Ignatius's detachment in his relationship with others:

His affability becomes apparent when, indoors, he meets a fellow-Jesuit. Then his smiling face radiates such joy that it seems as if he wants to enclose the other in his heart. All those who returned from a journey or were about to set out on a journey were asked by the father to sit beside him at table, the first or the last time (that they were in the house). And from each one he took leave with great affection. Yet he retained the necessary earnestness in his relationships; he only informed the direct superiors and the necessary consultants about matters which were indispensable for the proper government of the Society. We are justified in stating that he was affable to all but familiar with none (*Autobiography*, 89).

3. *A time for silence*

The *deliberatio* gives the following data concerning the division of time:

Usually we thought about it during the day, and also searched by means of prayer and meditation. In the evening each one brought forward what he found to be the best and the most effective for himself. The purpose was, that the best decision would be accepted unanimously, after having been weighed and reflected upon, examined and confirmed by the majority, through a greater number of effective

arguments. We were to remain in town, and devote one-half of the day to this matter that absorbed us, so that there would be ample opportunity for meditation, reflection and prayer; whilst the rest of the day would be devoted to our usual occupations of preaching and hearing confessions. The companions were not to assemble to discuss the matter or to draw one another out. The purpose was that no one would be persuaded or moved by another to obey or not to obey. Each one should consider only that which he had found to be the most effective in prayer and meditation. Before we deliberated and decided upon these matters, there had been many vigils and prayers, and physical as well as spiritual exertions.

The purpose of the time for silence was to enable them to communicate directly to each other God's influence upon each one. Already then, a glimpse of life is perceived in the time of prayer itself, and not merely in their later discussion; just as in a personal election, the contemplation on Christ's life goes hand-in-hand with the contemplation on one's own life:

The example set us by Christ our Lord concerning the first state of life — the observance of the commandments — has now been studied in the contemplation on his obedience to his parents. So, too, with regard to the second state — that of evangelical perfection — he has given us an example in staying behind in the temple, leaving his foster-father and his mother, to devote himself entirely to the business of his eternal Father. We now go on studying his life, at the same time examining and enquiring in what state of life his divine Majesty wishes to make use of us also. By way of introduction to this enquiry, the next exercise shows us the plan of Christ our Lord, and by contrast that of the enemy of mankind. We shall thus see how we ought to be preparing ourselves to achieve perfection in whatever state of life our Lord God shall grant us to choose (Exx 135).

This third phase is so decisive that it is mentioned once more at the end of the deliberations. Because this time of prayerful silence is so important, there are numerous examples of it in Ignatius's own practice:

One day our father said to me: 'I desire everyone to have a general detachment and, assuming that the subject is obedient and detached, I am most willing to follow that person's own inclinations'. Our father proves this in his actions. If he wants to allow someone to study or to go abroad, or to entrust him with a mission, he first of all examines what the person's inclinations are (granted that there is no doubt about his detachment). The examination proceeds as follows: Ignatius tells him to pray or to say mass, and then to answer three questions in

writing: first, whether he is prepared to go in accordance with obedience; secondly, whether he feels inclined to go; thirdly, what his choice would be if he were left free to choose as he liked. He sometimes uses a further method. In ordinary conversation he tries to find out what the person's inclinations are. He uses the first method in matters of more importance, as for example in the missions to Prester John and to Loreto. He nearly always uses the second method, when the subject's inclinations are unknown to him. He considers these inclinations so important that, when he deliberates with his council about who is to go where, or who is to be entrusted with a certain task (presupposing the person's suitability), the most decisive argument for him is whether the subject is or is not inclined in that direction. For our father all this is very normal. He gives his consent to those inclinations which yield to obedience, but he praises very much those who have only one inclination, namely to obey (*Autobiography*, 117).

Our father said: 'Let us first sleep on it'. This was a well-known statement of his, to indicate that he was first going to pray about the matter. In October 1555, we were supposed to leave Rome: Fr Nadal, with five others whose superior he was to be, for Castile, and I, accompanied by thirteen or fourteen companions, for Portugal. Fr Ignatius wanted us to travel to Spain together. In those days the king of France and the emperor were at war, which made our journey by land as well as by sea very perilous. For if we travelled by land, we were in danger of being prevented from travelling through France, as some of us were Spaniards and our destination was Spain. On the other hand, if we travelled by sea, we were sure to encounter ships of the french fleet based at Marseilles, and all Spaniards caught by them were robbed and taken prisoner. After dinner, a few days before our departure, our father laid all these facts before us. Fr Nadal and I preferred to travel by land, yet we listened to the views of the other fathers, without showing any preference. Opinions were divided, and our father concluded the council with his usual statement: 'It is necessary that we sleep on this'. On the following day he summoned brother Martin, who helped him in his room, at five in the morning — the hour he finished praying — and said to him: 'Go and tell Master Nadal and Luis González that they must travel from Genoa to Spain by sea, and that their journey will be blessed'. I cannot remember ever hearing him speak similar words (*Ibid.*, 162-63).

Our father often gives the impression that in his undertakings he is not at all concerned with human prudence, as in the case of the college that he started without having any definite income at his disposal. There are many other examples of this. But it is obvious that everything

he undertakes is based on his trust in God. As, at the beginning of such undertakings, he seems to exceed human prudence, so he uses divine and human prudence to look for the necessary means to maintain them. He first talks over with God everything he intends to undertake, and because we do not notice this, we are surprised to see how he sets about things (*Ibid.*, 234).

In everything that our father undertakes, he is so steadfast and unwavering that this surprises everyone. The first reason (for this steadfastness) seems to be that he reflects a long time before coming to a decision. The second: he prays for a long time and receives God's light. The third: he never drives a matter concerning separate persons through, without having first listened to the opinion of those people who know the ins and outs. He generally wants to hear the judgment and the opinion of others, unless he himself is in possession of all the facts.

... This was especially true with regard to some companion or other who had to be dismissed. Then our father proceeded as follows: he listened to the mistakes that were told to him concerning this person; after he had been well informed, was sure of all the facts and had prayed and reflected lengthily upon the matter, he at once dismissed the person concerned if, in God's presence, he realized that it was better that the other should leave the Society. I cannot remember the father summoning the council for a special matter like this, in which he might have said: 'This or that person has acted in such or such a way; the question is now: can he remain or must he be dismissed' (*Ibid.*, 282-83).

At Whitsuntide all the students of the German College had, of their own free will, chosen Cornelius as confessor, and they went to him for confession. Before this they neither could nor would keep the rule for speaking Italian, neither would they agree to the imposed penances. And Master Andrew thought that it was impossible to uphold this rule. Although he warned our father that all the students would leave, the latter was adamant. He said that now they had to be treated still more severely, because in their revolt they would appeal to the German cardinals who were in Rome; and that it was necessary to be still firmer, because these cardinals knew about the matter. And this is how things went. Now all have calmed down, except a few who remained restless and wanted to leave. These are striking examples of the good results with which our Lord blessed the steadfastness and the government of our father; I remember our father's steadfastness in everything he undertook. The reason is this: he ponders thoroughly and recommends it to God (*Ibid.*, 363-64).

4. *A time for speech*

After having thus determined upon these preparations, we decided to attend the meeting the next day in this attitude. Each one would enumerate all the disadvantages which could be brought against obedience. Namely, all the arguments which came into his mind and which each one of us separately had found after reflection, meditation and prayer. . . . On the following day we held the examination in the opposite direction; we brought forward all the fruits and advantages of obedience, which each one of us had found during prayer and reflection.

First silence, then speech. At this stage one does not simply say what his thoughts are, for then polarization might take place. No, each one occupies himself with the advantages and disadvantages of the two possibilities in turn, and tries to feel what others might wish, but with God as starting point: first one side, then the other side, but always together. It is the same as in a personal election. 'I should then carefully calculate the advantages or benefits that will accrue to me from holding the position or living in question, simply for our Lord God's praise and my soul's well-being; on the other hand I should calculate in the same way the dangers and disadvantages of holding it. I will do the same with the alternative, that is to say, looking at the advantages and benefits involved in not holding it and, on the other hand, the dangers and disadvantages' (Exx 181).

Ignatius's teaching is best explained by his life. For him the time for silence remains a time in which all feelings are purified, so that speech emanates from the silence of the emotions. Fr Luiz González da Cámara, who lived in the same house as Ignatius and was his private secretary for the writing of his personal memoirs, as well as his collaborator as father minister of the house, describes the mortified and serene way of speaking that is the result of this. We can read this in the annotations he made while still in Rome (23 May 1554 — 18 October 1555):

About the way in which our father manages things, I remember: first, that he never uses feelings but facts, to convince; second, that he does not embellish matters with words, but lets the facts speak for themselves, and he brings forward so many and such decisive arguments, that these in themselves are convincing; third, his speech is simple and clear (*Autobiography*, 99).

Silence orders speech:

He was never engaged on more than one thing at a time. He listened and answered until the hour was up; then he rose and ended the council (*Ibid.*, 169).

Our father's inner devotion radiated outward and was always noticeable in the great peace, quiet and calm of his face. No message, no occurrence (happy or sad, having to do with either spiritual or material things) was able to make him show that he felt any interior emotion. When he wanted to receive someone kindly, his joy was so apparent that it seemed as if he wanted to enclose the other in his heart. He had such bright eyes that, as Fr Lainez told me, someone from Padua who had been delivered from the devil and wanted to give a description of Ignatius, praised him warmly, using the following words: 'A Spaniard, short of stature and limping slightly, with very bright eyes'. Usually he keeps his eyes cast down, so that they look like the eyes of a dead person. One of the things he most disapproved of was our keeping our eyes raised. Only the superior was allowed to look the subject in the face, when he spoke to him. As far as we others were concerned, our father wished that when we were in conversation with each other or with the superior, we did not raise our eyes higher than the breast of the one with whom we were talking. One day, when I was walking with our father along the roofed-in walk leading from the garden to the church, we met a brother, Giovanni Domenico, born in Rome and novice of a few months standing. His lively eyes always looked around inquisitively. Our father wanted to draw his attention to this fact and make him improve himself. But realizing that he was not yet very strong, he spoke kindly to him as follows: 'Giovanni Domenico, how is it possible that in your eyes there is no sign of the humility that our Lord has put in your soul?' (*Ibid.*, 180-81).

5. *A unanimous decision*

After having thus deliberated for many days about the solution to our problem, weighing the more important and effective motives, and also busying ourselves with the usual exercises of prayer and meditation, we finally decided to vote with God's help, and not by a majority of votes but by consensus. We kept to this way of acting and deliberating in all other items, always looking at the matter from both sides. This and other things kept us occupied for about three months, from the middle of Lent up to and including the feast of Saint John the Baptist.

Living together appears to mean living slowly, going together, going slowly. This is perhaps the first impression one receives. Haste and impatience call forth a reaction; the other braces himself and slows down the progress. It is arbitrariness that creates divisions, that rouses distrust and causes separations. It is a fact that differences of opinion can bring people together, but not

different arbitrary decisions: arbitrary difference of opinion amounts to an arbitrary choice of the difference. And that is what divides.

That Ignatius, as soon as he had been chosen as superior, considered himself the 'superior' and above consensus, we have already seen in the case of Nadal's sea voyage. It is also illustrated by the following anecdotes:

Juan de Alba requested to be accepted again. Our father summoned a council with all the lay brothers. When the majority had voted for his return, our father was told. He answered that all the same it was not suitable, and that this was precisely the reason for summoning the council. Our father knew very well that all the brothers would vote for the return of Juan de Alba, especially as they were aware that our father felt a special affection for him. But, after having heard all the opinions, he solemnly voiced his decision, so that everyone would understand, that he only bore in mind what was suitable for the order and for the peace of the house.

Francesco from Ferrara and Tomaso had spoken about confession, and now they feared that they had given publicity to it. The fathers of the council, to which our father appealed, decided that they were not to be dismissed. Our father dismissed them all the same. Now he says . . . : 'It is your task to admit, mine to dismiss' (*Autobiography*, 402-03).

At the same time the working-method of the *deliberatio* can still be of use to an advisory council, or to a group which, in obedience, has already relinquished the power of making the final decision concerning its own fate.

7. *The dedication and presentation to God for his confirmation*

In the case of a personal election, Ignatius suggests:

When I have come to this decision or conclusion, I must turn to earnest prayer before our Lord God, offering this decision to be ratified by his divine Majesty's acceptance of it, supposing that his service and praise are thereby promoted (Exx 183).

Thus the first fathers had their decision confirmed by prayer and sacrament; a fortnight later they came together once again to offer their decision to God and to voice it for each other's benefit; each one in turn, and just before going to communion. This dedication is an experience of an active offer as well as a sacramental receptiveness and of a choice that is individual as well as communal.