IGNATIUS AND THE QUAKERS

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IN STUDYING QUAKER AND IGNATIAN forms of communal discernment over the past twenty years, I have been surprised to discover that both groups tend to think their process was an invention of their founder. The typical Jesuit credits St Ignatius; the Quaker takes it for granted that George Fox made the discovery.

The two religious traditions are indeed distinct. Quakerism is non-credal, non-sacramental, non-hierarchical. Ignatian spirituality draws its points of reference from the credal, sacramental, hierarchical world of the Catholic Church. In spite of these major points of difference, however, the two traditions emerge from a single major theme of western Christianity, the belief that God guides individuals and groups through their religious experience.

A common history[1]

Although elements of individual discernment can be found in various places in scripture, the obvious mother lode of corporate discernment is in the Acts of the Apostles.

Acts 15 recounts the first Church Council. Paul and Barnabas had been preaching to the Gentiles that they could become Christians by being baptized. The Jerusalem Church had argued that a male must first become a Jew by being circumcised, that only then could he be baptized. Christianity was thus a branch of Judaism. To settle this angry doctrinal disparity, Peter presided over the new Church's first Council.

The Council's deliberations moved from heat to light. Finally, to everyone's amazement, James, the leader of the Jerusalem Church, stood up to endorse Paul's position and abandon his own. Recognizing something extraordinary in their agreement, the Council affirmed its surprising concord in a letter which claimed, 'It has seemed good to us and to the Holy Spirit' that Gentile converts be baptized but not circumcised.

Out of the surprising unity of this first council grew a Christian tradition that overwhelming agreement was a sign of divine endorsement. So widespread was this tradition that by 1170 the Third Lateran Council demanded that, for valid election of a new bishop, all the local clergy who were known for their virtue (the '*sanior pars*' or 'healthy heads' among the voters) had to agree on the candidate.

This laudable law foundered on the reality that no one could agree on which voters were truly virtuous. Frequently, the election would be contested, Rome would send out legates to investigate, there would be decisions and appeals. Often enough, before the issue was settled, all contestants would be dead! So, after seventy-five years, the law was dropped.[2]

Throughout the centuries, Church Councils sought unity as the mark of God's guidance. A new refinement came at the Council of Basle (1431 to 1438) when a participant, Nicholas of Cusa, noted that, although the Council was achieving easy unanimity time after time, the atmosphere was one of political animosity toward a faction not represented at the Council, not one of prayer and of seeking divine guidance. Cusa's observation led him to argue that consensus is not enough. There must also be the religious peace which is the mark of divine presence. This special concord or harmony or uniting is the guarantee that God guides the group.[3]

With the Reformation, one might expect that the doctrine of divine guidance of religious groups might become the province of just one branch of Christianity. The opposite was true. Romans, mainstream Protestants, and radical Reformers like the Mennonites and Anabaptists all agreed on the doctrine that a reliable indicator of God's will is the peaceful unity of a decision-making religious body. Hence the curiosity that the first century following Luther's ninety-five theses of 1519 can be understood as a quest for an ecumenical Church Council where the divergences in understanding could once and for all be put to rest.

The attempts tended to founder, of course, since the individuals who tried to gather such Councils also tried to 'assist' the Holy Spirit by inviting only people who saw things their way.

In the 1520s the Anabaptists of Muhlhauser sought a *Konzil der Endzeit*. Believing that the end of the world was imminent, they argued that this Council would declare what Christians needed to believe in order to reach heaven after the final conflagration.[4]

Other German groups developed the theory of the Church Council into their principle of the *Sitzerrecht* or *Lex sedentium*. For them, each congregation of Christians was eligible to assemble and pray and search scripture. When they reached unity, this was a divine confirmation of the conclusion they had reached.[5]

1545 saw the Roman Catholic expression of this same belief in the Council of Trent which reformed Catholic discipline and clarified Catholic doctrine.

It should be no surprise that, in 1539, Ignatius Loyola and his first Jesuit companions spent the season of Lent in daily deliberations over what sort of religious community they should become. Their process, recorded in the 'Deliberation of the First Fathers',[6] has come down to us today. In place of voting, the participants sought a unity achieved in an atmosphere of prayerful peace. Out of this communal experience and the individual training in spiritual discernment which is central to Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises emerges the communal discernment which has been a mark of Jesuit spirituality over the centuries.

What may be a surprise is that Henry VIII had his theologians establish his Parliament as a Church Council so that its determinations might be considered infallible.[7]

Decades later, in 1647, came the famous Putney debates about the nature of democracy. Here Cromwell's army discussed the political future of Britain. They began with the following instructions from Cromwell himself: 'I doubt not but, if in sincerity we are willing to submit to that light that God shall cast in among us, God will unite us, and make us of one heart and one mind'.[8]

When George Fox began building Quakerism from the Seeker communities of England in the 1650s, he introduced a religion of spiritual discernment. 'That of God' was to be found in everyone. The test of spiritual advice was whether it 'spoke to one's condition'. Worship was to be in communal silence. As each searched within for divine leadings, the meeting itself became 'gathered', 'covered with the wings of the Spirit'—a phenomenon surprisingly similar to the atmosphere which pervades a Catholic Eucharist at the time of consecration and of communion.

Out of such worship come ideas, leadings. Shared with the community, tested by the prayerful experience of others, these leadings can turn into invitations to the individual and even to the entire community. And the mark of their authority is that the overwhelming majority feel comfortable in uniting with them.

It might be helpful here to let some Quaker sources speak for themselves so the reader can catch a sense of the experience. Howard H. Brinton wrote in the early 1950s:

> At first sight, it might appear that the Quaker meeting can only be described by negatives—there is no altar, no liturgy, no pulpit, no sermon, no organ, no choir, no sacrament, and no person in authority. No external object of attention prevents the worshipper from turning inward and there finding the revelation of the Divine Will. Whatever is outward in worship must come as a direct result of what is inward—otherwise, it will be form without power. There must first be withdrawal to the source of power and then a return with power.[9]

Eighty years earlier, Caroline Stephen had her first taste of Quaker worship:

> On one never-to-be-forgotten Sunday morning, I found myself one of a small company of silent worshippers who were content to sit down together without words, that each one might feel after and draw near to the Divine Presence, unhindered at least, if not helped, by any human utterance. Utterance I knew was free, should the words be given; and before the meeting was over, a sentence or two were uttered in great simplicity by an old and apparently untaught man, rising in his place amongst the rest of us. I did not pay much attention to the words he spoke, and I have no recollection of their purport. My whole soul was filled with the unutterable peace of the undisturbed opportunity for communion with God.[10]

In explanation of Friends' experience, Gerald Hibbert comments, 'Suddenly or gradually we realize "the Presence in the midst", and the silence becomes fully sacramental'.[11]

In the years after George Fox founded the Religious Society of Friends, the tide of communal discernment waned sharply in the other branches of Christianity. For example, Jesuits put their own tradition into practice much less often than they had at the beginning, largely because their key men were assigned so far apart that they could not easily gather to deliberate. True, Roman Catholics still affirm the inspiration of Church Councils and make provision in the election of a new Pope for the special significance which obtains if the election occurs unanimously on the first secret

ballot. And American political conventions superstitiously attempt to simulate party unity and perhaps create the illusion of divine endorsement by ritually changing their votes and then making their choice unanimous after the *real* balloting is over.

But by and large, the individualism which is the mark of modern western society has taught us selfishly to see all issues from the vantage point of our own personal interests. However in doing so we become unable to take the vantage point of the needs of the community. And so we have trouble hearing God's calls to the community—we have trouble with communal discernment of God's will.

By contrast with the rest of Christianity, this tradition of discernment has continued, in relative good health, in the Quaker community for almost 350 years. When the Jesuits rediscovered the importance of communal decision-making soon after Vatican II, I had the opportunity to study how Friends make decisions, in hopes that I might take the lived tradition back to my Jesuit brothers. I am reminded here of how the French and Californian wine makers have recovered from disasters in their vineyards by grafting cuttings from each others' better vines onto their own vine stems. (I would rather describe my efforts in this language than accuse myself of pious theft!)

Complementary strengths and weaknesses

It is instructive to study how early Quakers, working in a spiritual milieu as rich as that of Ignatius a hundred years earlier, struggled in their attempts to develop their own 'rules for the discernment of spirits'. Early Quaker tests of leadings involve the presence of peace, the presence of the Cross in an option, conformity with scripture, confirmation in action which reveals the fruits of the Holy Spirit, etc. But Friends found these tests less than satisfactory in practice. As Ignatius would turn to conformity with the teachings of the Roman Church, Fox and his early followers relied upon presenting one's private leadings to the discernment of the local community, thus bringing individual discernment under community control. I have discussed elsewhere the limitations of the rules which early Friends developed.[12]

If Quaker practice for the past 350 years has kept the tradition of communal discernment alive in the West, Quakerism has paradoxically suffered from the loss of the spiritual wisdom in the

common heritage of western spirituality. Lacking a trained professional clergy, lacking credal affirmations, Friends have come to pass to the next generation less and less of the spiritual rules of thumb and practical insights which are included in 'spiritual' or 'ascetical' theology.

In a sense, Ignatian and Quaker traditions each hold a key to the other. If Jesuits lost the practical skills of communal discernment, they kept vigorously alive the tradition of spiritual direction and individual spiritual discernment. For this reason it is no surprise that Friends have begun in recent years to make Ignatian directed retreats and even to learn the art of spiritual direction.

But what of the key which Friends hold for Ignatian spirituality? How can we embellish the ancient Ignatian communal discernment from Quaker experience?

For the typical Catholic reader, it might be helpful to have a description of communal discernment as practised by Friends. Contemporary Quakers speak of 'The Friends' method of decision-making'. They often do not know the term 'discernment'. But their process, though far less structured than the approach taken by Ignatius and his comrades in the 'Deliberation of the First Fathers', builds on the insight that God's invitations are more likely found in the positive unity of a group than in majority votes.

Gatherings of Friends are called Meetings. The silent worship for which Quakers are famous occurs at Meetings for Worship. When decisions are to be taken, then a Meeting for Business is summoned.

The most obvious thing about a Quaker business meeting is that there is no voting. You simply discuss and explore all the options until you are virtually unanimous, i.e., until nobody any longer objects to a proposal.

The normal sequence of events is very simple. The chairperson (called 'clerk') introduces a topic. Then there is discussion. The striking thing about the discussion is that rhetoric is not appreciated. You are not supposed to be persuading people by anything hidden. You are not supposed to manipulate them.

As the discussion heads in a given direction, the clerk—very often a woman—will form a tentative 'minute' or statement of agreement. She will simply say, 'It sounds as if Friends are agreed on such and such'. Then she pauses and waits to see what the reaction is. And some people will say aloud, 'I should hope so' or 'I buy that' or 'I can agree'. But one or another may say, 'I am

not comfortable with that' or, in more formal Quaker language, 'I can not unite with that'.

As soon as someone indicates he is not in harmony, everybody wants to know why. So the person explains what is bothering him about the proposed minute. And then the group starts discussing all over again, trying to appreciate the objection and hoping that the objection will cast new light on how the group should conclude. People are thinking, 'Maybe we should change what we are saying just a bit to include this man's insight. Or maybe there is something this man is missing that we can at least clarify for him.'

And so you can go through three, four, five tentative minutes. Finally you come to the point where the clerk, often with the help of members of the group, can state a minute that no one objects to. When that happens, it does *not* necessarily mean that everyone in the room is delighted with the proposal or feels drawn to it. It is understood instead that there may be a few people who are only saying, 'Yes, I could live with that. I am not enthusiastic or drawn to it in my own prayer, but it can not do any harm and it might do some real good.' Someone may even sense that her own prayerful inclination is what the group will be drawn to in a year or two. But for now, her calling was only to lay the option before the community in order to prepare the way for its eventual adoption.

I like to explain Quaker experience in terms of a melody. Each of the people in the room is entrusted with a note to contribute to the group's melody. The important thing is for each person to feel comfortable with sharing her or his note. If you have very many people who stifle their note, who will not sing it, pretty soon you can not make out the melody.

Or better than a melody, think of each person's note as contributing to a harmonious chord. Early in the discussion, each sings the note he or she thinks is his or hers. Listening to the others, he or she learns how to correct the note slightly so that it becomes part of the group's chord.

Putting this in negative terms, any member of the group has the right to veto the group's proposed action. The person can simply say, 'I cannot unite'. And the community will return to discussion. But Quakers understand that they should exercise their individual veto only if they are strongly moved to believe that the group is seriously in error.

When the group has completed its decision-making process, the participants seem to come away with an especially serious sense of obligation to do their part in making the decision turn out well.

If the decision had to do with a significant matter—something one can see as a subject of interest to God—participants often see the conclusion as God's invitation to them. Their confidence matches that of the Church leaders at the Council of Jerusalem.

This is especially the case for Friends if the group made its decision in an atmosphere of deep prayer. Such a setting affects the attitudes of the participants, enters into their consciousness. In Quaker language, this situation is called a 'covered meeting'; for the community is aware of the wings of the Holy Spirit settled over the meeting. Or Quakers, who look for the 'Inner Light' of Christ in each person, sense that the members of the group have succeeded in letting the Inner Light shine out into their common awareness. The decision, therefore, is God's own; the job now is to make sure God's will is not thwarted. One makes an act of faith in the decision.

Such a context for the decision is not always reached, of course. Perhaps the issue is not significant enough to expect to find God in it. Or perhaps the quality of prayerfulness falls short. Or maybe many of the participants are not sensitive to the deeper religious experience. (This is often the case with new members of the community who have been drawn to join by the appeal of Quaker Testimonies such as non-violence and social justice but have not learned to experience God's presence—the centre of Quaker worship.)

If the sense of a divine mandate has not occurred, Quakers still leave the meeting with a strong desire to make the conclusion succeed. They reveal this obligation with their talk of pride in 'our Quakerly process'. They see the Quaker approach, with its great gentleness and its hunger to discover the opinion of even the least impressive participant, in total contrast to the rhetorical manipulation, vote-swapping, and tests of strength which typically mark the majority rule. (In this, Friends share with St Benedict who, in his Rule, urged the monks to be sure to listen to the youngest members of the community.)

There is also a psychological element of some significance. This is the personal obligation which one feels when one knows 'I could have exercised my veto, but I did not'. In a majority-rule situation, the person who did not feel drawn to the proposal would simply

have voted no. The day after the vote, those people who had voted yes might feel great obligation to make the decision work. But those who voted no might readily feel no obligation. After all, it is up to the 'winners' to prove they were right!

In a Quaker context, each individual who participated is responsible for the decision. No one was outside the majority. Because each person who was reluctant or hesitant knows he or she *could* have stopped the group, he or she now feels a real obligation to do his or her part in making the conclusion succeed. Various Friends have said something like this to me: 'When I decided my misgivings were not important enough to stop the decision, I forfeited my right to withdraw from the consequences; I owe it to the group to make it work'.

Catholics wishing to reestablish the Ignatian tradition of communal discernment can learn much from the Quaker approach. In teaching communal discernment to Catholic groups, I often ask them to start with the formal outline used by the first Jesuits in Lent of 1539. The group seeks the 'cons' first, then the 'pros', then seeks unity. But I suggest ways they might enrich the procedure with elements commonly used by Friends. Here is an example of such a process, offered with the disclaimer that the different elements are not steps to be mechanically applied but simply rules of thumb or hints which might prove helpful at one point or another in a decision process.

1. Prior to gathering together, provide all relevant information on each option to everyone.

2. Begin with prayer for light from the Holy Spirit, perhaps including an invitation to shared spontaneous prayer for a few moments. The goal is to focus the ongoing prayer of the community. Try situating the prayer with an appropriate passage from scripture, the writings of the founder of the community, other documents expressing the spirit of the community.

3. *CONS:* Each person reports the reasons (s)he has seen in prayer which oppose the option. Reasons are noted by the secretary (or chair, or clerk). Go in sequence; no one 'passes'. No speeches. One reason per person the first time around. Questions for clarification are fine; disagreements with judgments of the speaker should *not* be raised now. After the first circuit of the group, anyone who has further 'cons' to offer is welcome to do so briefly.

4. Break. This must be long enough for prayer over results of step 3, especially examination of conscience over one's reactions during it. Recall as well the reasons 'pro' from previous prayer.

5. *PROS:* Each reports the reasons (s)he has seen in prayer which favour the option. Proceed as in step 3.
(At the end of this step, 'tap for consensus'—find out whether it is immediately clear to everyone what the choice should be. Usually it is not clear and you need to continue with step 6.)

6. Break. Pray over 'pros' in light of 'cons'. Again be sure to examine conscience for reactions during step 5.

7. An effort is made now to *evaluate the weight* of the reasons pro and con. One procedure to try:

a. Each indicates how (s)he is leaning (pro, con, pro with amendment) and the principal reason which seems to be the moving force.

b. See whether amendments or deeper understanding will eliminate major 'cons'.

c. Deal separately with remaining points of disagreement. Those who do not see someone's point of view must make special effort to understand how (s)he sees it—'To see with the other person's eyes'.

d. At an impasse, either go to the next item (returning later to the point of contention) or break briefly for silent prayer. IF AT ANY TIME THE ATMOSPHERE OF PEACE IN THE GROUP SHOULD BE DISTURBED, STOP FOR SILENT PRAYER.

e. Face your real situation. Do not pretend agreement or water down the original proposal so that it loses its effective meaning, e.g., has it still got 'teeth' or does it just encourage anybody who agrees with it to carry it out?

f. To determine whether you have enough agreement to stop, ask the following:

If I am in the majority:
—Is the majority significant?
—Do I really understand how things look from minority viewpoints?
—Am I ready to 'own' this decision? (NOT: 'What they decided at the meeting', but 'What we decided at the meeting'.)

If I am in the minority:
—Is the majority significant?
—Has the majority made a strong effort to see how things look from minority viewpoints? Have I done the same about majority viewpoints?
—Do I find in the majority position a conclusion that is likely to be better for *us* here-and-now, granted that it may not be the best thing that could be done or the eventual thing to which God will call us?

IF ALL THE QUESTIONS CAN BE ANSWERED 'YES', IT IS TIME TO STOP. In that case, the decision should be clear, and confirmation should be experienced together through shared deep peace—finding God together. N.B.: This does *not* mean that all should lean in the same direction after sharing reflections. Sometimes this happens; but sometimes there is a significant majority and a minority which recognizes in the significant majority an indication of God's here-and-now invitation to the community. In practice, then, the people who are in the minority often end up being the ones who urge the group to go ahead.

8. End with prayer of thanks and of offering the choice to the Father, reaffirming the group's willingness to carry out the decision. Often this will include spontaneous shared prayer.[13]

There is, then, a complementarity between Ignatian and Quaker traditions. And each tradition has something significant it can offer the other. Quakers are more and more seeking out Ignatian directors for retreats and spiritual counsel. So, too, those in the Ignatian tradition should spend time with Friends in order to learn how to practise the communal discernment which is so central to the Ignatian heritage.

NOTES

[1] For an expanded version of these historical comments, cf Sheeran, Michael J.: *Beyond majority rule: voteless decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1983), pp 119–130.

[2] McCallin, Joseph A.: 'The development of a legal theory of majority rule in elections', *Saint Louis University law journal* 16 (Fall 1971), pp 1–10.

[3] *De concordantia Catholica*, 2.10.138, cited in Sigmund, Paul E.: *Nicholas of Cusa and medieval political thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963), p 227.

[4] Williams, George Huntston: *The radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), pp 48-49.
[5] *Ibid.*, pp 223, 829.
[6] Futrell, John C.: *Making an apostolic community of love* (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), pp 187-194.
[7] Williams, George Huntston: 'The religious background of the idea of a loyal opposition' in *Voluntary associations*, ed Robertson, D. B. (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1966), p 62.
[8] Woodhouse, A. S. P., ed: *Puritanism and liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p 105.
[9] Brinton, Howard H.: *Friends for 300 years* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), p 63.
[10] Stephen, Caroline E., writing of an 1872 Friends meeting in *Quaker strongholds* (n p, 1891), pp 11-13, cited in London Yearly Meeting, *Christian faith and practice in the experience of the Society of Friends* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1973), par 80.
[11] Hibbert, Gerald K., in *Quaker fundamentals*, p 6, quoted in Van Etten, Henry: *George Fox and the Quakers* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), p 164.
[12] Sheeran: *Beyond majority rule*, pp 22-29.
[13] For further practical suggestions, cf Futrell, John C.: *Communal discernment: reflections on experience*, vol IV, no 5 (Nov., 1972) in *Studies in Jesuit spirituality* Series (Saint Louis: Fusz Memorial, 1972), pp 172-178.