CORRECT WEIGHT FOR COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT

By ANDREW HAMILTON

IF COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT were a racehorse, disappointed Jesuit punters would surely have called for a swab. The subsequent stewards' enquiry might show that its Jesuit bloodlines were impeccable and that it had raced fairly. It was boosted unduly by media hype, however, was entered at some shonky meetings, and set for races where it could not win. If the enquiry went outside its terms of reference, it might suggest that Communal Discernment was ideally bred for a more substantial, if less glamorous, new career as a draughthorse.

The course

Communal Discernment came into prominence as trainers looked for horses that could handle the new kind of course developed after Vatican II. *Perfectae caritatis*, the decree of Vatican II on religious life, noted that appropriate renewal of religious life required all members of religious congregations to co-operate actively in rediscovering the charisms of their founders.

This apparently anodyne remark led to the encouragement of consultative processes and the revision of capitular processes in many congregations. In the Society of Jesus, its importance became abundantly clear after General Congregation 31 had reviewed the life of the Society. The changes which this Congregation introduced and the continuous change which it presaged could not be carried through simply by legislation. It required that all those affected reflect prayerfully both on the tradition of the Society and on the needs of the day.

By 1970, when he began to prepare the Society for another General Congregation, Pedro Arrupe, the Jesuit Superior General, had recognized both the need for renewal and the strong resistance to it. He saw communal discernment as one of the ways in which renewal could be owned by the Society. On Christmas Day, 1971, he commended it formally to the Society. In this address, he requested Jesuit communities to reflect together on the challenges which faced the Society and its

ministries, and asked to be sent reports on the results of the reflection. He also recommended that processes of communal deliberation and discernment be included in this reflection.

Thus, communal discernment was encouraged as a response to the appropriation of changes initiated by Vatican II. In retrospect, it can be seen to form part of a romantic reaction against a classical settlement. That is to say, it was part of a renewal movement that emphasized freedom over order, the communal over the individual, the affective over the rational, and the charismatic over the institutional.

The need for those affected by change to own it challenged an emphasis on obedience, in which subjects obeyed without being actively involved in the making of decisions. This approach worked well within a relatively stable religious world. But it was fatally limited after Vatican II because the great changes called for there could be implemented only if all Jesuits owned them fully and took an active role in implementing them. It was necessary, therefore, to emphasize the freedom and responsibility of each Jesuit rather than the claims which obedience made on them.

The advocacy of communal discernment also commended the affective bonds of community to a self-reliant individual who had found his place within the structure of the community and guarded that place against the encroachments of others. Effectual change demanded that each individual participate affectively in the life of the community and be willing to yield to others where helpful.

Renewal also emphasized the importance of affective response. Because the need for change was so far-reaching, the values which it promoted had to be as deeply felt as it was powerfully argued for. The subjective and the affective were as important as the objective and rational. Furthermore, if institutions were to be renewed, those working within them had to find forms of shared prayer and life in which to communicate their deeper responses to God and their world.

Finally, the processes of renewal emphasized the importance of the charismatic as against the institutional. The radical demands of the gospel furnished more persuasive arguments than a pragmatic or conservative wisdom that placed a high value on institutional continuity and order.

All these emphases had their counterpart in the secular movements of the 1960s which emphasized community, exploration of feelings and sharing of life through small groups, and which believed that radical change was desirable and possible. They, too, were a romantic reaction against a classical construction of society. The reaction was particularly

strong in religious congregations, because the claims of classicism had also been so strong there.

Breeding

Such was the course for which Communal Discernment was being prepared. The colt was ready; its breeding was impeccable, and its bloodlines can be traced through the Ignatian tradition. Three lines are of particular importance.

The first was the practice of personal discernment, codified in the rules for the discernment of spirits within the Spiritual Exercises.[1] The discernment of spirits had been given a larger place in daily Jesuit life by a renewed practice of the examination of conscience. When we begin to understand the examination of conscience, not as an introspective record and analysis of sins, but as reflection on the significant movements of the heart, we are led to attend to the origin of the spirits by which hearts are moved.

Communal Discernment also derived from the Election in the Spiritual Exercises. Although retreat directors had often treated the Election as peripheral because the Exercises were generally made by people who had already chosen their path of life, it nevertheless provided a model for choice and practical renewal within a context of prayer. Within the Exercises, the process of decision-making which culminates in the Election places more emphasis on the movements of the heart than on the reasons of the mind. It therefore demands attention to these movements.

In the Spiritual Exercises, both the discernment of spirits and the Election were resources used by the individual who stood in solitude before God. But they could serve also as resources for people who wished to reflect and pray together about what they should do. The legitimacy of this extension of the Exercises to groups was underpinned by a third and previously neglected Ignatian resource.

This resource was the short account, left by Ignatius and his companions, of the crucial deliberation which led to their decision to form a religious congregation. As analysed by Jesuit commentators, this deliberation entailed a long and painstaking process of prayer and reflection.[2] While the commentators drew attention to the differences between the way in which the early Jesuits made this decision and the way in which they made later decisions, the incident nevertheless furnished an illuminating example which might be followed in communal decision-making, and grounded it firmly within the Ignatian tradition.

Together, these resources of the Ignatian tradition suggested that the methods of the Spiritual Exercises which were designed for the individual could be extended to communal reflection and choice.[3] The deliberation of the first Fathers suggested that attention to the movements of the heart was of the first importance within such a process.

The programme

The Jesuit races in which Communal Discernment was entered were varied. Some were maiden sprints. In many communities, meetings and discussions of issues were lightly coloured by the commendation of communal discernment. The phrase suggested that discussion should be preceded by prayer, and that articulation should not prevail too easily over personal reflection.

Communal Discernment was also entered in exhibition races. Many communities submitted to programmes in which they were encouraged to name and decide on a course of action which they believed to be important in their life. In their meetings, they used techniques suggested by the Exercises and the deliberations of the first fathers: they were urged to avoid mere debating, and considered reflectively and prayerfully the reasons for and against particular courses of action. Since these seminars formed part of the programme of religious renewal for many congregations, they introduced the language and practice of communal discernment to a broader public than the Society of Jesus. The method was then incorporated into other traditions to meet a variety of needs.

Communal Discernment also competed in feature races. Superiors of provinces and communities invoked it to involve their members in difficult decisions that needed to be taken. On occasion, members of different communities came together to deliberate about which institutions should be closed, merged or developed. To facilitate this process, handbooks set out the assumptions behind communal discernment, the traps to be avoided, and some procedures which had proved helpful.

The record

Despite the good bloodlines of Communal Discernment, it has to be said that many Jesuit punters soon dismissed it as an inconsistent performer. They complained that it never reproduced its form on the track consistently enough to justify the low odds at which it went out to race or the expense of keeping it in training. Many reasons were given for this dissatisfaction.

Some saw Communal Discernment as a show pony, useful only for exhibition races where there was no prize money. They argued that the community exercises devoted to learning processes of communal discernment often produced meagre, almost banal results, after a great expenditure of energy. The outlay appeared incommensurate with the return.

Others complained that in important races where Communal Discernment was heavily backed it often weakened and finished out of the money. The stewards' enquiry suggested, however, that in most of these races the horse was not at fault, but that many of the races were fixed, and the rules manipulated to favour other runners.

From the beginning, the trainers of Communal Discernment were concerned about the race rules. Early writers focused nervously on the relationship between superior and community.[4] They clearly saw that communal discernment cut across traditional patterns of obedience. To forestall any such conflict, they defended the unique responsibility of the superior within the community.

That the relationship between discernment and obedience should have been neuralgic is not surprising, for members of the community were now asked to take responsibility for decisions which superiors had previously reserved to themselves and still had the right to reserve to themselves.

The relationship between communal discernment and the Spiritual Exercises could make this tension palpable. In the Spiritual Exercises the process of discernment demands that the director trust the presence and work of the Spirit within the retreatant's heart, and indeed withdraw in order to allow God to act freely. The process assumes that if the discernment is deep and open, the resultant decision can be trusted. It seemed to follow, then, that if this process of the Exercises formed an appropriate image of communal discernment, the superior should trust the Spirit of God working in the community. But the commentators drew the opposite conclusion, claiming that precisely at this point the analogy broke down. They claimed that discernment must take place within the structures of obedience that are found in the Jesuit institute.

Confusion about the race rules had practical consequences. In some cases, superiors invited their community to engage in processes of communal discernment about important issues. But when they found that the community had reached decisions contrary to those which they wanted, they told their communities to repeat the process. In such cases, those involved in the discernment readily believed that they were not trusted, and that the process had really been designed to persuade

them to endorse interiorly a decision that had been made independently. They concluded that the race was fixed.

Their disillusionment was potentially more intense if they noticed that the proponents of communal discernment had placed a heavy weight on the honesty and inner freedom that the process demands. Most writers rightly insisted that the Exercises assume that decisions will come out of a radical freedom based on self-knowledge. This requirement distinguishes communal discernment from other ways of reflecting and taking decisions, and also promises to enhance the inner life and the apostolic effectiveness of the community. But since such freedom is so difficult to attain, and the process is laborious and protracted, the disillusionment after a process which failed to produce the desired results could be the more massive. If the results of the discernment were subsequently set aside, the community could conclude that it had not prayed hard enough to achieve the necessary freedom. It was thereby convicted of sin and failure. If participants felt this imputation to be unfair, they turned against the process in which they had been involved. They said that the judges had rigged the race.

Other disappointed racegoers, however, blamed, not the judges, but other jockeys. In some cases those involved in major decisions concerning their ministry used processes of communal discernment to come to a decision. They reached their conclusion after much deliberation and prayer. They found subsequently, however, that those whose interests had suffered in the decision went secretly to their superiors, and successfully pressured them to have the decision overturned. They later boasted of their resourcefulness. Those who had participated generously in the process were disillusioned at having spent time and goodwill in a process which had been proved fraudulent. They had also sacrificed the opportunity to use the normal political processes to push the merits of their case. They understandably swore never to back Communal Discernment again, and to have it banned from serious racing.

The final objection to Communal Discernment came from those who observed that the courses for which it was prepared had often proved unraceable. For at the time when it was commended to the Society, there was an unusually high degree of polarization within Provinces and communities. This was a natural result of the rapid change that followed Vatican II, but it was intensified after General Congregation 32 declared that the pursuit of justice was inseparable from the proclamation of the gospel.

Such polarization made it difficult to discern together. For sharp and deep divisions are usually accompanied by anger, fear and other strong

emotions, whose presence would normally caution retreatants to delay making important decisions until they had come to terms with their feelings. When people who had passionately opposed views were committed to discern together, the difficulty was multiplied. Their exchanges of opinion fuelled their emotions, while they were unable to find the space and time needed to deal with them.

In the polarization that followed the Congregation a more serious difficulty emerged. For Jesuits were often divided not simply about the wisdom of different courses of action, but about their moral propriety. In communities that included military chaplains and jailed pacifists at the time of the Vietnamese war, for example, it proved impossible to take decisions by a process of discernment. For the members of each group believed that what their fellows were doing was in objective terms mortally sinful, even though they might allow that they were subjectively innocent because of their blindness.

Were individuals to internalize such a choice, Ignatian discernment would be impossible, for Ignatius allows retreatants to deliberate only between choices of life that are lawful. Where one of the choices is recognized to be sinful, it cannot be God's will that we should choose it. Communal discernment is equally impossible. The best that could be hoped for would be a majority decision, from which the minority would be bound to dissent. If the process were presented as discernment, it would normally alienate the minority because they would feel under moral pressure to compromise their consciences. The majority, in turn, would naturally believe that the minority group was disloyal to the process by refusing to accept the outcome.

In conclusion, the punters were uncertain about the conditions under which Communal Discernment was being raced. If it were to run unfettered, the prize being recognition of the will of God, then protests from the losing horses about the running of the race should have been dismissed. But they were not dismissed – the stewards, it seemed, could disregard the running of the race and award the prizes as they pleased.

If Communal Discernment were expected to deliver harmony and unity, however, the scene in the betting yard after the race often belied the impression. There was more strife after the race had been run than before. In short, its critics were unsure what they could expect from Communal Discernment on the track, and were displeased with its performance. They suspected that too much had been claimed for the horse.

I would like now to turn to what we might expect from communal discernment, and suggest the more robust and everyday tasks that it is ideally suited for.[5]

Horses for courses

The process of discernment allows us to recognize what we want most deeply. The complexity and subtlety of discernment reveal that our hearts are divided, and that we want different, and perhaps even incompatible, things. As we attend to the possible directions our lives may take, we experience various movements of the heart as our conflicting desires come into play. By sifting and weighing these movements, we may recognize what we want more deeply.

Neither in the Spiritual Exercises, however, nor in any reputable Christian practice, is God's will simply identified with what I want. When I discover what I want most deeply, I simply recognize a fact about myself. I have then simultaneously to set this fact alongside the consideration of what God wants. In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius introduces reflection on God's will by letting the retreatant's desires and interests intersect the large narrative of the Gospel. The rules for the discernment of spirits govern this meeting of gospel and personal desires. They deal particularly with the conflict of desire, and therefore with the possibility that our interests will lead us to identify the gospel with a counterfeit more consistent with our interests.

The juxtaposition of the large narratives of God's will with my responses creates the possibility that I shall respond to new choices of life, and discover that what I had identified concretely with my deepest desires was not really so. At this point, when my own personal narrative coincides with the movement of the gospel in coming to a choice for life, we can speak of finding God's will. For a while the narrative of the Gospel is consistent with many personal narratives, as Ignatius shows in encouraging choice between the religious and the lay state, the coincidence between our deepest desires and the movement of the gospel will naturally take the form of a choice of one defined path of life.

Thus, in the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius assumes that we can know clearly both ourselves and the gospel with relative objectivity. Neither the self nor the gospel is created by the act of interpretation. For Ignatius, too, our access to an objective gospel is grounded in our acceptance of the community in which the gospel receives its authoritative interpretation. Serious disputes about what the gospel entails can be resolved authoritatively within the Church, because pastoral and teaching offices can in general be trusted.

Within the Ignatian framework, then, communal discernment is conceivable because we acknowledge and have access to the one gospel. But for it to lead to communal decision-making, the play of our personal desires must also be related to the constraints of the community. We must be able to recognize the gospel within the community, and also weigh our deepest desires in the light of the common response to the gospel. This reference to the community can be structured in many ways – through religious obedience, through a capitular process, through informal consultation, through communal discernment, or through any combination of these.

These conditions of effectual discernment show why it is so difficult to practise it in times of polarization. At such times it becomes more difficult for us to know ourselves and to accept that we share a common gospel. We also become more sensitive to the political processes that underlie the interpretation of the gospel, even by authoritative groups within the Church. As a result it is difficult to trust the processes by which we seek to weigh our desires against a shared, common response to the gospel. In such circumstances, it is easy to abandon hope that we shall find the gospel in the life of the community and, instead, to limit our response to the authentic living out of an essentially private understanding of the gospel. Communal Discernment will always carry too great a handicap to compete successfully in races conducted under these rules.

Race horse or draughthorse?

Communal Discernment needs a favourable course governed by a coherent set of rules. It did not find it. But it would be a pity if it were sent prematurely to the knacker's yard. For today there are less spectacular, more everyday, but no less important tasks for which it is ideally bred.

The task today is in many respects easier than it was previously. Polarization among those who are committed to work together for the kingdom is less common. The wagons have been drawn up in different parts of the field. In our work now we are challenged to handle constant change creatively and to leave the security of authoritatively established and long-standing ways of acting. The voice of the critic who suggests that perhaps we should try what has been done for hundreds of years, and see if it works, is heard as more plaintive than threatening.

But within the Church, groups who respond together to the demands of the gospel are rarely formed from within a single spiritual tradition.

Certainly, for Jesuits to engage appropriately in communal discernment only with other Jesuits would now be almost inconceivable. Most Jesuit enterprises, like others in the Church, bring together engaged people from many different spiritual traditions and with a range of motivations. They share the conviction that their common goal is worth achieving, but they have different symbols and many preferred ways of realizing it. A hierarchical structure, in which decisions are taken at the top and communicated downwards, is therefore less effective. It assumes a respect for authoritative ways of proceeding which is normally not given, and also a commitment to non-participative ways of finding God's will.

This environment, where people are at ease with the claims of the gospel and would like to believe that they can find its demands together, is ideally suited for communal discernment and for other ways of working together to find God's will. For any process which encourages partners in an enterprise to articulate their desires and to understand those of others, and to reflect together on the gospel by which they are called, will release creativity and energy. This process assumes that when people gather to reflect on what they are doing in the light of the gospel, the Spirit of God will lead them to ways of working that are both good and true.

This is heavy and unspectacular work. It brings benefits only in the long term, and does not reward speculative betting plunges. It is ideally suited for horses bred in the Ignatian stable. Riders from the traditionally highly individual Jesuit school, however, may need retraining. For as Communal Discernment is used as a draughthorse, there will be less scope for an élite to go mounted. Those who work with it will need to walk together alongside one another.

NOTES

[1] See J. Futrell, 'Ignatian discernment', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* vol 2, no 2 (1970).

[2] J. Toner, 'The deliberation that started the Jesuits: a commentario on the *Deliberatio primorum patrum*, newly translated with a historical introduction', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* vol 6, no 4 (1974).

[3] See J. Toner, 'A method for communal discernment of God's will', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* vol 2, no 2 (1970); 'Community discernment and deliberation', *Supplementum, Centrum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis* (1972), 1.

[4] Cf G. Dumeige, 'Jesuit "deliberation" and discernment', *The Way Supplement* 20 (1973), pp 56–71.

[5] The scope of communal discernment is discussed by J. Futrell, *Making an apostolic community of love: the role of the superior according to St Ignatius of Loyola* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970); J. Futrell, 'Communal discernment: reflections on experience', *Studies in the*

Spirituality of Jesuits vol 4, no 5 (1972); W. Barry, 'Toward a theology of discernment', *The Way Supplement* 64 (1989), pp 129–140. The most helpful and realistic account is that by L. Orsy, 'Towards a theological evaluation of communal discernment', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* vol 5, no 5 (1973).