

THE MINISTRY OF FACILITATION

By FRANZ MEURES

DISCERNMENT CAN ALL TOO EASILY end in deception. The early desert monks, who had moved out of the city in order to seek God and struggle with the demons, were well aware of this. In order not to become prey to illusions, they used to go to a spiritual guide who would help them to discriminate between, or discern, the spirits, and this remains today one of the central tasks in the spiritual direction of individuals.

Something similar applies to groups and communities wanting to let themselves be led by the Spirit and to discern the spirits in common. They are able to clarify and decide many things for themselves, but quite often the process stagnates or gets blocked. The members of the group fail to notice what is disabling it; the psychological drives at work within it induce a kind of collective blindness. Alternatively, if the members do become aware of the blockage, they cannot see how to overcome it. Thus they need an outsider to help them: a spiritual director for the group.

In Scripture we find two sorts of figures who take on this role of spiritual direction for individuals and groups: *angels* and *prophets*. Angels help people understand God's message, show them God's paths, and accompany and protect people, both individually and corporately, as they continue along their way. Thus the function of the angel is to help, accompany and support. By contrast the prophet's role is to criticize and to warn. A prophet accuses, uncovers, looks behind façades, takes masks away and calls to conversion. When prophets appear, the spirits start conflicting.

In the last thirty years many groups and communities have come to find collective spiritual direction, or facilitation, helpful. Lay groups such as the Christian Life Communities¹ draw regularly on a group facilitator; communities of religious, especially when they are changing their structures or reorientating themselves, look for a facilitator or supervisor; official church bodies and chapters of religious orders have experienced how important such an outside facilitator can be.

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The Ignatian heritage

There is nothing in Ignatius himself corresponding to group facilitation in today's sense. The modern approach depends on the findings of modern social psychology, on the development of groups with high levels of autonomy and self-organization, and on a newly deepened understanding of group spiritual processes.

Nevertheless, Ignatius' writings contain many valuable hints for the ministry of group and community facilitation. Obviously the most important source is the book of the *Spiritual Exercises*, which reflects in exact detail an approach to the direction of individuals. Many of the attitudes and procedures described in that book can be applied in group facilitation. Obviously the one who gives the Exercises is meant to present and explain the material, but that is not our concern here. Our concern lies rather with the role of accompanying the retreatant's spiritual process in such a way that the retreatant learns to discriminate between spiritual movements and to find the way towards a good decision.

Ignatius gives some rules for the relationship and for the communication between the one giving and the one making the Exercises. His basic principle runs to the effect that each should try to salvage a positive interpretation of whatever the other says, and that this attitude should be the starting-point for any mutual questioning (Exx 22). This principle of open, benevolent communication is the basis for the trust which the process's further development requires. At the same time, the giver of the Exercises should be told the truth about what the retreatant is thinking or being moved towards, so as really to be able to help them move further (Exx 17). All this applies also to the facilitation of groups, although among groups it is normally a much more difficult and complex matter to perceive spiritual movements.

Both with individuals and groups, it can happen that no spiritual movements occur at all (Exx 6); in this case the director should try to find out why in order to remove the blockage. When spiritual movements do occur, then the director of an individual should have a good knowledge of the rules Ignatius drew from his own experience and offer them in a way that responds to the individual's particular situation (Exx 8-10). In the same way, a group facilitator also requires a stock of experiential knowledge as a basis for understanding properly the currents at work in the group and for appropriate intervention. Facilitators should be able to tune in to the mood of each group and to its distinctive qualities (Exx 18), and let it take its own time (Exx 4). When over-hasty decisions are being taken, facilitators should look

carefully at how these are coming about so as to be able to warn the group.

However, the most important quality of all is a great inner freedom with regard to the retreatant. The one giving the Exercises is not to overload the retreatant with knowledge, but rather allow the retreatant to find a taste for it for themselves (Exx 2). Above all, for any decision the retreatant is to be left in full freedom. The director should be 'in the middle, like a balance' and 'allow the Creator immediately to work with the creature, and the creature with its Creator and Lord' (Exx 15).² With this we have already arrived at some basic principles of group facilitation. In no way should the facilitator seek to influence the group in any particular direction, but rather help it so that it itself can take its own decision. Underlying such an attitude is faith in God's gift of self to the creation. Only if the group lives out of this kind of faith and if the facilitator can trust that God's own self is at work in this group can group facilitation be offered in a proper spirit.

Another very helpful point is the note on how the one giving the Exercises should behave during desolation (Exx 7), since many groups decide to make demands on their facilitator just when crises, blockages or precisely 'desolation' become dominant in shaping the group's life. Ignatius begins with a general point: the one giving the Exercises should not be 'hard or grumpy' but rather 'kind and gentle'. More specifically he then describes the director's role in terms of three functions. Firstly, 'they should give the other courage and strength for the future'; here Ignatius is speaking of the supportive, strengthening function mentioned above under the heading of 'angels'. Secondly, 'they should lay bare to the other the wiles of the enemy of human nature': i.e. a facilitator should help the group see and understand what is actually going on in the group, especially what is disturbing it. Thirdly, 'they should get the other to prepare and dispose themselves for the consolation coming'. Crises, conflicts and difficulties can lead people to abandon all hope of things improving. The facilitator should help the group keep alive the hope of a change for the better.

In Ignatius' Directories we find some further hints on how a director can foster discernment and decision processes. If a person is not yet fully resolved to make the Exercises as the basis for a life-choice, the director should, through conversations and a few explanations, help them prepare themselves.³ Similarly, groups often need to do a great deal of work on their motivations before they can embark on a common spiritual decision process. Again, if in the Exercises there is no real readiness to take a proper decision about one's further way in life, the

director should prevent such a decision being taken too quickly, and therefore badly, and instead urge delay.⁴ In other words, the director is meant to make sure that the time is ripe for decision, and indeed Ignatius gives the director the role of assessing and checking whether a really good decision has occurred or not.⁵

In the Society of Jesus' *Constitutions* we find three provisions that in some sense approach what happens in group facilitation. The most important of these is the office of the *collateral*, which, however, did not become established in the Society's later history. A collateral is set alongside a superior but is not under obedience to the superior. His chief role is to advise and help the superior and provide critical support, but he is also meant to facilitate communication with the community. In an instruction about the collateral, Ignatius wrote:

... he should inform him [i.e. the superior] faithfully about what he should know, and tell him his opinion with Christian freedom and modesty in matters where he sees that this opinion should be told the superior regarding his person and matters to do with his government. But, having put it on record and presented his reasons and the motives, the collateral should, if the superior is of the contrary opinion, submit his own judgment, and conform himself to the superior.

He should take steps, in so far as it is possible, to bring the subjects into agreement with each other and with their superior, should this on some occasion be necessary, by behaving among them like an angel of peace ...⁶

A similar constructive and facilitative function can also sometimes be fulfilled by the *visitor*. Obviously such a figure is normally given sweeping jurisdictional powers and thereby reinforces authority. Nevertheless, Ignatius' writings contain repeated hints that the visitor also has a role in facilitating, for example when he acts in such a way as to 'further the spiritual or temporal welfare'⁷ of a college, or when, as a result of his interventions, the Society of Jesus in the place concerned grows 'in spirit and in all virtues'.⁸

Moreover, the regulations about *regular correspondence*⁹ within the Society contain a whole range of points that are significant for group facilitation. This correspondence requires the local superior and his community to reflect regularly on their situation and on their ways of proceeding. It also opens them up to ideas from outsiders. Thus it is that Ignatius can write an instruction listing twenty advantages of the practice of writing letters, among which the tenth runs:

Many, because they are alone and very much taken up with different activities and have much occasion to become confused, need advice

regarding themselves and their way of proceeding. These people will benefit from the opinion of their superior, if they constantly report to him about their affairs and open their hearts to him, etc. And this same benefit will be greatly extended if advice is given from everyone else in the Society.¹⁰

Facilitating group spiritual processes: particular challenges

Anyone undertaking the ministry of group facilitation today soon realizes that they are confronted with some quite distinctive demands: demands arising from the phenomenon of a group as such; demands connected with the question of what it is for there to be a spiritual process in groups; demands arising from the particular role of the facilitator.

There is an important difference between individual and group spiritual direction. The multiplicity of people in a group gives rise to an enormously complex range of relationships, roles and structures. It follows that the group's process will be influenced by an almost incalculable number of factors arising either from the group's environment, or from situations and dynamics peculiar to the individual members, or from particular dynamic features that have become established within the group. Such factors have been extensively researched by social psychologists and theorists of group dynamics, and here is not the place to expand on them. Nevertheless, anyone who seeks to facilitate spiritual groups should have some basic knowledge and skills in this field. To facilitate a group of any kind – whether or not spiritual issues come into play – one needs the insights and techniques of a supervisor, whether on a one-to-one basis or in some kind of shared setting.

However, there is also the further question of the difference between a normal group-dynamic process and a process of group spiritual discernment. Is discernment in such a setting even possible? Should we use the term 'spiritual' to describe just any religious or church group? What do we in fact mean by a group's 'spiritual process'? In answer to these questions, I would like to suggest the following as a definition of what it is for a group to go through a spiritual process:

If several people have come together as a group and are dealing and communicating with each other directly, processes develop that can be described in terms of social psychology and group dynamics. What makes such processes spiritual is that the members of the group sense and accept in faith that God is acting in ever new ways through their experiences with each

other and with their life-settings, and that they respond to the call of God which becomes clear to them in this way. As a result the relationships of the group with each other, with their life-settings and with God change, with effects on the group's style of communication, norms and structures.

An important point in this definition is that spiritual processes are not something completely different from normal processes of group dynamics, but rather that these normal movements in a group are experienced and understood in a different way, namely as how God is working with this group. This element of faith changes the group's dynamic and enables spiritual discernment to take place within the group.

We can then understand spiritual discernment as follows:

Group spiritual discernment is a process of clarification during which a group formed by faith in Christ tests the movements it experiences, whether they arise from internal or external causes, to see if they lead towards or away from God, in order to be able to decide how it should proceed before God.

On this basis we can see that the challenges facing facilitators are threefold. Firstly, they themselves must be spiritual people, capable of discriminating between both internal and external movements on the basis of a personal relationship with Christ. Secondly, they must really believe that God is at work in the group they are facilitating (see Exx 15). Thirdly, they must be capable of helping the group understand their experiences as experiences of God.

In order to be able to identify this work of God or of God's Spirit and to distinguish it, Ignatius developed some fundamental descriptive concepts on the basis of his experience. The two most important of these are 'spiritual consolation' and 'spiritual desolation', which in some way form the raw material for spiritual discernment. The *Spiritual Exercises* describe what these look like in an individual with some precision, in the rules for the discernment of spirits (Exx 316–317). If one is to do spiritual discernment through a group process, these descriptions have to be adapted. I would like to suggest the following alternative versions of the two rules in question:

Of spiritual consolation within a group. I call it spiritual consolation when within a group some movements arise which

help the group together to seek God and to orient itself towards him; and further, when the plans, intentions and goals of the group are such that in them they are seeking the ever greater love of God; likewise, when strong emotional reactions arise in the group through which they are moved towards love of their Lord, whether these be out of pain at the conflicts, failures and sins in the group, or over the passion of Christ or over other things. In general I call 'consolation' every increase of hope, faith and charity, and all joy within the group through which it orientates itself towards God and becomes corporately whole as a result of how, through the Lord's doing, calm, peace, acceptance and consensus become possible in the group.

Of spiritual desolation within a group. I call 'desolation' events in the group that are completely the opposite of what has been said above, namely the collapse of perspective, confusion in the group, crude or vulgar interactions, disturbance, conflict and disorder arising from various challenges and questions, i.e. events that lead to a decrease of faith, hope and love, with the group experiencing itself as paralysed, without enthusiasm, wanting to give up, and without any trust in God's help and spiritual progress.

It is towards experiences such as these that facilitators should chiefly direct their attention. They should also help the group discern between them. For this they should know well all the other rules for dealing with consolation and desolation (Exx 318–336), and be able to apply them.¹¹

There are some further demands connected with the facilitator's special role, a role which is not self-evident nor easy to define.¹² The facilitator is not a member of the group, but rather someone whom the group asks to undertake this service. Quite often this request itself is a source of difficulty; perhaps the group was not fully of one mind in making it. In the initial phase of the relationship, the group and the facilitator must make clear agreements with each other, establishing a kind of contract as the basis for any further work together. Only if there is this kind of clear, trustful relationship between the facilitator and the group can the facilitator exercise the role of the critical prophet – a role that is vital when it comes to uncovering covert processes and questioning premature decisions.

The tasks of the facilitator

This is not the place for a comprehensive presentation of the role and tasks of a group facilitator; that task requires a whole course.¹³ Here I

shall just set out the most central of the facilitator's functions. I see the facilitator as a kind of advocate for various key concerns during the group's discernment processes.¹⁴ However, I also work on the basis that the group itself is aware of these concerns and is itself trying to find ways of meeting them adequately. The facilitator is there to support and encourage the group's own steering mechanisms. Intervention will only really be necessary when it becomes clear that the group is neglecting such central concerns, or cannot meet them properly out of its own resources. I see five concerns that the facilitator should try to advocate.

The facilitator as advocate of open communication and interaction within the group. This is the first major concern, and unless it is met nothing else will work. The facilitator's first duty is to make sure that the style of communication in the group can be equitable, benevolent and positive. Sometimes this means that the facilitator will have to remind the group of some basic rules about face-to-face communication, and even set up exercises to rehearse them. Here are some examples: no one should ever begin a sentence with 'people say' when they mean 'I think'; members should speak about their own experiences and feelings rather than bombard everyone else with their theories and questions; everyone should be allowed to speak, including those who find it difficult to talk in groups. However, the chief point at stake is that all the members of the group should try hard to interpret positively what others say and how others behave (Exx 22), and to avoid as far as possible negative or dismissive judgements. Only on such a basis can the group grow in the trust and openness that is a sign of the 'good spirit' in the group.

Work at good communication and the growth in trust within the group that comes from such work are fundamental to any discernment process. This is because only in an atmosphere of trust will the members of the group be ready to speak openly about their true feelings and motives, to submit these to shared critical scrutiny and to risk decisions that might go well beyond their own preferences.

The facilitator as advocate of clear and effective structures in the group. Every group needs structures if it is not to fall into chaos. The facilitator should support the group's efforts to set up structures for itself that help it better to attain its objectives. One important set of such structures concerns boundaries of membership. Who belongs to the group? Who can and should participate in a common discernment process? What level of confidentiality is required for the group's decision process to be a good one? Other structures concern the roles

and responsibilities within the group. It is particularly important that the responsibilities of the group's leadership are clear and clearly acknowledged. This can mean that the facilitator operates like Ignatius' 'collateral', raising overtly or covertly conflictive issues with the leadership and thereby enhancing the leadership's credibility and effectiveness.¹⁵ The group's structures include also its norms and conventions, for example regarding attendance at sessions, regulations about absences, how long people are allowed to speak, minutes of sessions and so on. The facilitator should make sure that everyone is clear on these rules and finds them acceptable. Finally there are structures regarding time and place. Where do people meet? What is the timetable? What are the time limits for the process?

The facilitator as advocate for shared attention to the working of God's Spirit. This form of advocacy attends explicitly to the group's spiritual process. A facilitator can help the group to understand their shared process and their experiences as God's work. For this, the group as a whole needs to have the attitude of 'seeking God in all things', a kind of contemplative attitude.¹⁶ Facilitators should reinforce anything which makes the group attentive to the working of God's Spirit in its midst.

This can mean that they keep an eye on times of prayer and meditation, both for individuals and for the group. It can mean also that they make some effort to understand the group's previous history as God's work, rather as the first fathers of the Society of Jesus understood their community as something brought about by God and on that basis decided to stay together as a group.¹⁷ However, the main point is that attention to such issues should help the group to discern, discriminate between, the spirits working within it. A key question will always be what helps the group to greater communion with God and more authentic discipleship of Christ. With the help of the facilitator the group can learn to distinguish between the different impulses of consolation and desolation and cope better with the enemy's strategies (Exx 325–327). When the process falls victim to obvious illusion, the facilitator may be required to confront the group and encourage it to look again at its motivations.

The facilitator as advocate of a well-ordered discernment and decision process in the group. The facilitator has the task of supporting the group's clarification processes in such a way that it can become more and more able, through its distinguishing and deciding, to place itself at God's disposal. The Ignatian term 'well ordered' (e.g. Exx 174) indicates that something is orientated towards God's service

and praise: it refers to people's intentions. A process of discernment is 'well ordered' if it helps the group responses to God's call.

It follows that facilitators must be able to use a wide variety of methods in order to be able to help groups in different situations. There is no such thing as an ideal deliberation process; there are only ways of proceeding, of moving forward, that can be more or less helpful to the specific decision processes undergone by particular groups. Even in the Deliberation of the first Fathers there were at least three different methods used during the discussion, and a number of others were seriously considered.¹⁸ Facilitators should help their groups discover and take whatever next step is needed in their process. If the group is going through a formal process of spiritual discernment, the facilitator should make sure that the group goes through all four of the necessary stages: preparation, the initiating phase, discussion and decision.¹⁹ Less structured processes cannot be planned, and therefore for these the facilitator needs to be prepared to improvise according to the process's flow.

The facilitator as advocate of realistic decisions. Finally, the facilitator also has the task of assessing the group's decisions critically. This can mean making sure at the outset that the group is really able and ready to take a serious decision. If a decision has been taken prematurely the facilitator must say so to the group, frankly. Alternatively the assessment may take the form of reflecting on the spiritual movements and motivations in the group. Has the decision really brought about satisfaction and consolation in the group? Can one sense a real desire to translate the decision into reality? A third form of checking is needed when decisions taken largely on the basis of the group's moods and desires appear unrealistic from the outside, and fail to stand up to critical scrutiny. In such cases the facilitator's role may be to enable the group to check out its decision with a discriminating outsider.

This article was translated from the German by Philip Endean SJ.

NOTES

¹ See the *CLC manual for group-coordination and group-guidance*, available from CLC-Philippines, 170 A-B Gonzales Street, Loyola Heights, Quezon City, Manila, Philippines.

² Translator's note: Translations of Ignatian source material are normally original, but draw eclectically on the German versions used by Fr Meures and on published English versions. One should also note some nuances in two key German terms. *Unterscheidung*, the standard word for 'discernment', also means 'distinguishing' or 'discrimination', and I have occasionally used one or other of these latter where the context suggests. German writers can also avoid many awkward

associations of the term 'spiritual direction', given that the standard term, *geistliche Begleitung*, translates literally as 'spiritual accompaniment'.

³ MHSJ MI Dir, p 91, n 2.

⁴ MHSJ MI Dir, p 72, n 13.

⁵ MHSJ MI Dir, p 76, n 19.

⁶ Instruction of Ignatius to Fr Louis Coudret about the collateral, 17 January 1552, MHSJ EI IV, p 97.

⁷ *Constitutions* IV.2.F [330]. See also IV.10.A [422] and VI.2.C [558].

⁸ Letter from Juan de Polanco under commission to Andrés de Oviedo, 27 March 1548, MHSJ EI II, p 55.

⁹ *Constitutions* VIII.1.9, L-N [673–676].

¹⁰ Instruction from Juan de Polanco under commission to the whole Society of Jesus, 27 July 1547, MHSJ EI I, pp 566–541, here pp 538–539. See also the following letter, which is similar in form and treatment.

¹¹ For further discussion of the issues raised in these paragraphs, see Franz Meures, 'Was heißt Unterscheidung der Geister', *Ordenskorrespondenz* 31 (1990), pp 272–91 and 'Geistliche Unterscheidung im Gruppenprozeß: Gruppenbegleitung als eine Hilfe, den Willen Gottes zu suchen und zu finden', *Korrespondenzblatt zur Spiritualität der Exerzitien* no 52 (1987), pp 29–44.

¹² See the corresponding section of the CLC Manual cited above (note 1).

¹³ The first course for training group spiritual directors to be held in Germany took place between 1993 and 1995, under the title 'Leading and accompanying communities in faith'. The sponsors were the German-speaking Ignatian Spirituality Group (GIS) and the Christian Life Communities. The procedure, central themes and working materials of the course will be published during 1996 in *Korrespondenz zur Spiritualität der Exerzitien* nos 68 and 69.

¹⁴ I have taken this idea of the facilitator's advocacy (*Anwaltschaft*) of multiple concerns from Barbara Langmaack, 'Überlegungen zur Rolle und zum Selbstverständnis des Leiters', *Themenzentrierte Interaktion* 1/1 (1991), pp 48–55.

¹⁵ I am assuming here a model whereby the leadership structures of the group remain fully in place and the facilitator accompanies the group's self-directed process as an outsider. Sometimes, however, facilitators are asked to take over the group's leadership and moderation during processes of spiritual discernment, so that the normal leaders can participate with full freedom in the process. Such arrangements are certainly possible, but clear agreements about them need to be made when facilitation begins.

¹⁶ See William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The practice of spiritual direction* (New York, 1982), pp 46–65.

¹⁷ '... we decided affirmatively, namely, that since the most kind and loving Lord had deigned to unite us to one another and to bring us together – weak men and from such different places and cultures – we should not sever God's union and bringing together, but rather every day we should strengthen and more solidly ground it, forming ourselves into one body', MHSJ, MI Cons I, p 3; translation from John Carroll 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), pp 189–190.

¹⁸ The text indicates three methods that were actually put into practice. Firstly, and most straightforwardly, the companions came together and discussed the issues (n 1). Secondly, each person would consider the questions during the day, after which there would be an exchange of views in the evening (nn 2–3). Thirdly, the evening meeting would be used to discuss one possible alternative only (nn 4–7). Moreover there were other procedures considered that were not actually adopted: that of people leaving the city and retiring for thirty or forty days of recollection, fasting and penance in solitude; and that of sending just three or four people into this kind of retreat, i.e. of delegating the decision to a sub-group (n 5). See Franz Meures, 'Die Beratung der ersten Gefährten', *Korrespondenz zur Spiritualität der Exerzitien* no 56 (1993), pp 19–28.

¹⁹ Franz Meures, 'The process of communal discernment', *Progressio Supplement* 40 (July 1993), pp 4–23.