



On Discernment in Common

2017/11

TO THE WHOLE SOCIETY

Dear Brothers in the Lord,

This past 10 July, I addressed a letter (2017/08) to the whole Society, inviting all Jesuits to reflect on the intimate relationship between our lives and the mission to which we are called and sent. The letter was an invitation to discover, embrace, and live out in depth the message of the 36th General Congregation. In continuity with that reflection, I would now like to share with you some considerations about *discernment in common*, which is a prerequisite for implementing the decisions of the General Congregation, in keeping with the characteristics of the spirituality which animate our religious and apostolic body.

Called to discern

Two great challenges proposed to us by the 36th General Congregation are 1) discerning the consequences of formulating the Society's mission as a contribution to reconciliation and 2) choosing universal apostolic preferences at this particular moment in history for the world and the Society. These challenges demand that we, and our partners in mission, improve our ability to discern in common. There are other areas in which we are invited to grow in our capacity for communal discernment, among others, constituting ourselves as an intercultural body, deepening our dialogue with other cultures and religions, and promoting a culture of protection for children, young people, and vulnerable persons.

The 36th General Congregation confirmed that discernment in common is inherent to the way of proceeding of the Society of Jesus. The image of the first companions in Venice (1537) highlights the capacity they acquired of deliberating in common, led by the light of the Holy Spirit, even though they were such a culturally diverse group.¹ Nevertheless, they all had an active spiritual life, characterized by their having fallen in love with Christ in the Spiritual Exercises, by their service to the poor, and by their availability to be sent by the Church to any place where the need was greater.

Today, the Society of Jesus, in collaboration with others in the Church's mission of reconciling all in Christ, is also faced with the challenge of discerning in common, at all levels, its most

¹ We read in the *Deliberatio Primorum Patrum*: "The time was approaching for us to be scattered and parted from one another. We were eagerly anticipating this time so that we could the sooner achieve our appointed goal on which we had set our minds and hearts. We therefore resolved to get together for a good long time before our dispersal and to discuss our vocation and covenanted way of life. Some of us were French, others Spanish, Savoyards, or Portuguese. After meeting for many sessions, there was a cleavage of sentiments and opinions about our situation. While we all had one mind and heart in seeking God's gracious and perfect will according to the scope of our vocation."



important decisions. At the same time, the Society must encourage the participation of the whole apostolic body, which is called to *elect* the best possible ways to contribute to the proclamation of the Good News and the transformation of the world, in this epoch of swift and profound changes.

Pope Francis, for his part, has repeatedly insisted on the importance of spiritual discernment for the Church as a whole, and he has especially asked the Society of Jesus to contribute to the diffusion of discernment in all aspects of ecclesial life. From this perspective, we feel that having regular recourse to spiritual discernment as the means for seeking and finding the will of God in every dimension of our life-mission will bring about as a consequence a revitalization of our life-mission and also an increase in our capacity to serve the Church in these present times.

Discernment in common and apostolic planning

Discernment in common takes place both in our communities and in our apostolic works, with the active participation of our partners in mission. It makes sense that the particular group which discerns in common should vary with the decision that is to be made. In the life of the Society many decisions require that more than one group contribute to the discernment in common so that a final decision may be reached that is in consonance with the will of God that is earnestly sought. Discernment in common can be fruitfully practiced in the Consults of the Province, in Board Meetings of institutions with a Jesuit identity, and in all instances of apostolic governance.

Discernment in common is the prior condition for *apostolic planning* at all levels of the Society's organizational structure. Thus, discernment in common and apostolic planning work in tandem to ensure that decisions are made in the light of the experience of God, and that these decisions are put into practice in such a way that they realize the will of God with evangelical effectiveness.

The positive tension between discernment in common and apostolic planning requires, according to the Ignatian vision, a spiritual *examen* of what we have experienced, so that we continually grow in fidelity to the will of God. Therefore, a systematic evaluation of our apostolates is not sufficient. We must supplement that systematic evaluation with the spiritual perspective of the *examen*, a practice by which Ignatius invites us to recognize the action of God in history, to be grateful for his gifts, to beg pardon for our failure to measure up, and to ask for the grace to be ever better collaborators in God's work in the world. Thus, apostolic planning born of discernment in common becomes an instrument of our apostolic effectiveness, and we avoid the dangers of a trendy type of planning that makes use of only the techniques of corporate development.

The practice of discernment in common

The conviction that God is acting in history and is constantly communicating with human beings is the assumption on which our efforts to discern in common are based. For this reason, we should seek out those conditions which allow us to hear the Holy Spirit and be guided by Him in our life-mission. The personal and group disposition to receive and follow the Spirit who communicates with us prevents a false type of discernment in common, which only seeks to clothe in correct Ignatian language decisions that were already made on the basis of the criteria of one's own group.²

There have been many valuable experiences of discernment in common both in our tradition and in the present life of the Society. Gathering together the *best practices* of discernment in common, as well as providing a pertinent bibliography that is made available to all who participate in our mission, would be a most helpful means of strengthening the culture of discernment in

² Jeremiah 42 and 43 recount a clear example of false discernment in common.



common. I encourage apostolic works, Provinces, Regions, and Conferences of Major Superiors to undertake this task promptly and resolutely, and I urge them to design formation processes for discernment in common that are accessible to all those persons with whom we share our mission, as well as with all those members of the Church who feel called to grow in this dimension of Christian life.

Properties of discernment in common

Desiring to foster the growth of this dimension of our life, but without claiming to replace other good aids to and excellent studies on the topic, I wish to describe the principal properties of discernment in common. These properties are present in different degrees, depending on the circumstances in which the discernment is done. The following enumeration is not intended to propose stages or steps in a process, but rather, simply to describe the main features of discernment in common. Sometimes we will find that all these properties are present, while at other times they will not be present in the same form. Discernment in common follows traditional Ignatian criteria, taking into account *the persons, the times, and the places*.³ Thus, good discernment in common requires the following:

1. **Choosing the matter well.** Not every decision requires discernment in common. The aim of discernment in common is *seeking and finding the will of God* in important matters, in which it is not completely clear what is to be done or how it is to be done, what is best or how to do it in the best way possible. It is therefore crucial that we know how to choose the matter or the matters that require an *election* through discernment in common. At the same time, full information, of good quality and accessible to all, about the matter to be treated is needed. Good discernment depends on having a precise knowledge about the matter to be decided and about the result that is to be expected from such a complex and demanding process. In this way we avoid banalizing “discernment,” using the word as a way to justify either major or minor decisions.
2. **Knowing who should take part in the discernment and why.** It is necessary to establish clearly *which persons* will participate in the process of discernment, *why* they participate, and *under what conditions* they do so. The matter about which the *election* is to be made will determine who is invited to participate in the process. This means that each participant should know precisely and should freely accept both the reasons for which he/she forms part of the group that is discerning and the conditions under which he/she does so. Depending on the group, the matter being discerned, and other conditions in which the process takes place, it may be convenient and prudent to invite other persons to accompany the process or to provide expertise in the matters being treated.
3. **Interior freedom,** or Ignatian *indifference*, is a condition without which it is not possible to make a good election. Those who take part in the discernment should cultivate interior freedom; that is, they should be detached from their own interests and be free to assume whatever is the greater good in the light of the Gospel. Indifference is the fruit of an authentic spiritual life in which life and mission are inseparable, as the 36th General Congregation has made clear. It is possible and necessary also for those who share in our mission but not in our Christian faith to acquire that interior freedom which enables them *to divest themselves of self-love, self-will, and self-interests*.⁴ This interior freedom is the

³ See for example: *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* [64, 238, 343]

⁴ Sp. Ex. 189. There are many cases where persons who do not share our Christian faith collaborate in works of the Society or join with us in providing services to persons in need. Finding respectful and genuine ways to making them participants in the process of discernment in common is a challenge to our creativity and our freedom as sons and daughters of God.



human possibility to grow as persons in gratuitous relationship with others, seeking the greater good of all, even when such a pursuit involves as a consequence personal renunciation and sacrifice.

4. **Union of minds and hearts.** Discernment in common requires the existence of what Ignatius Loyola calls the *union of hearts and minds* in the group that is discerning, because the purpose of the process is to make an *election* freely according to the will of God. This union of hearts and minds is born of the shared sense of purpose possessed by all who form part of the group since what is at stake in the discernment directly affects all and each one. Thus, good mutual knowledge of each other is needed, a mutual knowledge that gives birth to trust in each other and motivates the active participation of each one.
5. **Knowledge about how to discern.** In the Exercises Ignatius presents three different *times* for making good, sound decisions.⁵ In the *first time*,⁶ there is no doubt about what the will of God is. In the *second time*, discernment in common may be done,⁷ by taking account of spiritual movements and their confirmation, or it may also be done by reasoning and deciding according to what is described in the *third time*⁸.

For a group of persons who have experience in the discernment of spirits, discernment in common can take the form of a process in which they perceive and weigh the *movements* which the spirits provoke in the group that is seeking the will of God. The capacity of the group to discern the spirits in this way is thus a condition for its being able to make use of the second time of election. The discernment of spirits makes it possible for the group to become aware of the direction that its life would take if it were to follow one or another movement of spirit, in order to follow the movements of the good spirit. In Ignatian language, the movements that are most relevant for discernment are called *consolation and desolation*.⁹ “*For just as in consolation it is more the good spirit who guides and counsels us, so in desolation it is the bad spirit, and by following his counsels we can never find the right way.*”¹⁰

The spiritual *movements* are not states of soul. They are palpable effects of the spirits that are trying to move a person’s will in one direction or another. Thus, *consolation* and *desolation* are not synonyms for being happy or sad, for feeling good or bad, for being contented or discontented, for agreeing or disagreeing with someone else’s idea or position. The scene of Jesus praying in the Garden of Olives before the Passion¹¹ can help us to distinguish the movements from our states of soul. The movements appeal to our freedom to choose. Although feeling sadness and anguish (vv. 37-38), Jesus *elected* to follow the will of the Father.¹² The movements of the good Spirit bring about a growth in faith, hope, and charity.¹³ Profound interior peace is the sign of being in consonance with

⁵ Sp. Ex. 175-188

⁶ Sp. Ex. 175

⁷ Sp. Ex. 176, 183, and 188

⁸ Sp. Ex. 177-178

⁹ See the *Rules to Aid Us toward Perceiving and Understanding the Various Motions ...* (Sp. Ex. 313-327) and *Rules for the Same Purpose, with a More Probing Discernment of Spirits ...* (Sp. Ex. 328-336).

¹⁰ Sp. Ex. 318

¹¹ Matt 26,36-46.

¹² Sacred Scripture offers many examples of the difference between following the Spirit and the state of soul of persons. The vocations and the lives of the prophets are clear examples. The decision of Joseph to accept Mary, already with child, as his spouse illustrates for us this difference between being led by the Spirit and the states of soul during the journey (Matt 1,18-24).

¹³ Sp. Ex. 316



the Holy Spirit as a fruit of discernment. That interior peace, which may be felt even in situations of great suffering, is the sign of having *found* the will of God. Such confirmation of being in consonance with the Spirit is perceived in the *joy* of the Gospel - experienced interiorly in each person and sensed by the group that discerns in common - or in the *consolation* that Pope Francis urged us to ask for insistently during his visit to the 36th General Congregation.

On occasion, depending on the conditions experienced by those who make up the group that is discerning, it may be advisable to make use of reasoning or deliberating the advantages (pros) and the disadvantages (cons) of making a certain election against the horizon of the greater and better service of the glory of God. In this case the condition for a good discernment is the group's ability to use its understanding lucidly to perceive what the greater good is according to the values of the Kingdom and to offer the decision made to the Lord for confirmation.¹⁴

6. **Prayer in common** is another requirement for good discernment. The group that proposes to discern in common should find ways and spaces for personal and communal prayer, in accord with its particular characteristics. Personal prayer and communal prayer maintain a healthy tension between heaven and earth¹⁵ as we seek the *magis* that derives from our relationship with God and his Word. Such prayer helps us to keep in mind that *as a body* we are servants of the *missio Dei*. The Eucharist is the privileged mode of prayer in common. Thus it may have special significance and a central role in the processes of discernment in common. A community or a group that is able to celebrate the Eucharist as a source of life in the Spirit increases its ability to perceive the action of the Spirit in history and to experience how the Lord fulfills his promise to be with us all days until the end of history.¹⁶
7. **Spiritual conversation** characterizes discernment in common. The 36th General Congregation strongly recommended that we improve our capacity to converse spiritually.¹⁷ Discernment in common should include periods of time dedicated to sharing the fruit of prayer or personal reflection. The sharing is an opportunity to present to others with simplicity and without making speeches, what one has perceived as movements of the Spirit or as the fruit of one's personal reflection on the point in question. On the other hand, our disposition to "listen to the other person" respectfully, without contradicting the spiritual movements that the other person has felt interiorly, can produce a spiritual echo or new spiritual movements in the person listening, giving rise to a fresh way of perceiving things. The custom of spiritual conversation, the habit of listening attentively to others and knowing how to communicate one's own experience and ideas simply and clearly contribute to good discernment in common when the matter under consideration requires it.

Sharing in a spiritual conversation is different from a business discussion in which the aim is to make the most reasonable decision according to administrative logic. It is also

¹⁴ Sp. Ex. 183

¹⁵ Sp. Ex. 101-105

¹⁶ Matt 28,20.

¹⁷ "An essential tool that can animate apostolic communal discernment is spiritual conversation. Spiritual conversation involves an exchange marked by active and receptive listening and a desire to speak of that which touches us most deeply. It tries to take account of spiritual movements, individual and communal, with the objective of choosing the path of consolation that fortifies our faith, hope and love. Spiritual conversation creates an atmosphere of trust and welcome for ourselves and others. We ought not to deprive ourselves of such conversation in the community and in all other occasions for decision-making in the Society." (GC 36, d. 1,12)



different from a parliamentary exercise in which consideration is given to the majority, minority, alliances, etc., in function of individual or group interests, making use of oratorical ability and other parliamentary “techniques.” Such forums have in common with discernment the need to offer good information about matters to be decided and the capacity to argue rationally. Discernment needs these elements but is not limited to them. Discernment ultimately has to do with spiritual movements, or if there is no clarity about these, with that which can reasonably generate greater love and service for the glory of God, seeking also the confirmation which comes from on high.

8. **The systematic practice of the *examen*** during the process of discernment in common allows us to pass from *seeking* to *finding* the will of God. The *examen* helps us to perceive the true nature of spiritual movements and to confirm that we are on the right path. The personal *examen* of each participant needs to be combined with the *examen* of what is happening in the group as a whole. Learning to examine the movements of the group allows us to take the pulse of the process or to confirm it, so that we can know whether we should continue onward, and how, guided by the Spirit. The constant monitoring of the movements of the group reflected in the *examen* is an instrument which helps us maintain a memory of the process. Just as we learn to perceive our interior movements, discernment in common requires that we develop the ability to perceive and interpret spiritual movements of the group which is listening to the Spirit in order to find the will of God.
9. **Establishing how the final decision is to be made** is something that should be clearly and precisely settled from the very beginning of the process of discernment. Those who take part in the discernment should know and accept from the start the manner by which a final decision is to be made. For example, we understand clearly that a General Congregation of the Society of Jesus makes its decisions by a majority of votes, except when the Formula prescribes otherwise. Similarly, it is known that, in the discernment of a religious community of Jesuits, the final decision rests with the Local Superior, and the decisions of a Province or a Region are the responsibility of the Major Superior. The apostolic works and institutions are governed by their own statutes and norms, which determine how decisions that affect the whole are made and who makes them.

Placing all our confidence in God

Discernment is a rich heritage of the Spiritual Exercises, one that is especially useful at moments of making the elections that our life and mission require. Discernment and good elections demand that we free ourselves from our disordered attachments and affections, so that we can place ourselves completely in the hands of the Lord. Promoting discernment in common was an intuition of the 36th General Congregation in its search for ways of improving our common life through deeper personal prayer and a richer sharing of our faith and our lives.

The allocution of Pope Francis to the members of General Congregation 36 ends with this prayer: “*We beg Our Mother to direct and accompany every Jesuit, along with that part of the faithful people faithful of God to whom he has been sent, **along these paths of consolation, of compassion, and discernment.***”¹⁸ Let us make this prayer our own, requesting this grace for each one who is called to share this mission of serving reconciliation and the justice of the Gospel, as well as for our communities and the works and institutions through which we carry out our apostolate.

¹⁸ Allocution of the Holy Father to the 36th General Congregation, 24 October 2016.



Let us therefore ask for the grace of personal and institutional conversion, and that the contemplation of Jesus in the gospels help us to learn from his loving and faithful relationship with the Father, how to perceive where the Spirit leads, and how to elect to live according to the will of God.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, located in the center-right of the page. The signature is fluid and cursive, appearing to read 'Arturo Sosa'.

Arturo Sosa, S.I.
Superior General

Rome, 27 September 2017
Anniversary of the Bull *Regimini militantis* of Pope Paul III (1540)

(Original: Spanish)