

STUDIES

in the Spirituality of Jesuits



**Toward a Theological Evaluation
of Communal Discernment**

Ladislav Orsy, S.J.

**Published by the American Assistancy Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality,
especially for American Jesuits working out their aggiornamento
in the spirit of Vatican Council II**

THE AMERICAN ASSISTANCY SEMINAR ON JESUIT SPIRITUALITY

consists of a group of Jesuits from various provinces who are listed below. The members were appointed by the Fathers Provincial of the United States. The purpose of the Seminar is to study topics pertaining to the spiritual doctrine and practice of Jesuits, especially American Jesuits, and to communicate the results to the members of the Assistancy. The hope is that this will lead to further discussion among all American Jesuits -- in private, or in small groups, or in community meetings. All this is done in the spirit of Vatican Council II's recommendation to religious institutes to recapture the original charismatic inspiration of their founders and to adapt it to the changed circumstances of modern times. The members of the Seminar welcome reactions or comments in regard to the topics they publish.

To achieve these purposes, especially amid today's pluralistic cultures, the Seminar must focus its direct attention sharply, frankly, and specifically on the problems, interests, and opportunities of the Jesuits of the United States. However, many of these interests are common also to Jesuits of other regions, or to other priests, religious men or women, or lay men or women. Hence the studies of the Seminar, while meant especially for American Jesuits, are not exclusively for them. Others who may find them helpful are cordially welcome to read them.

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Ladislav Orsy, S.J.

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Editor's Foreword

Widespread opinions, expressed with appropriate qualifications and nuances impossible in this brief space, exist today in the following tenor. The Church--and consequently every diocese and religious institute within her--is now passing through a transition as momentous as that of the Reformation and Council of Trent. She is moving from an era of authoritarianism, when most of the impulses came from the top downward in her no less than in the civil commonwealths under absolute monarchs, to an epoch far more democratic, when most of the ideas and initiatives are coming from the members upward. Those in authority, moreover, are now regarded as servants of the members and under obligation to listen to them. The outlooks of these two eras are clearly mirrored in the concepts of the Church found respectively in Satis cognitum of Pope Leo XIII and Lumen gentium of Vatican Council II, as Father John Courtney Murray pointed out in an address which the present writer was privileged to hear.

One manifestation of this trend toward increasingly democratic procedures in the Church is the growing use of "communal discernment"--which in turn further stimulates the democratization. Beyond doubt this "discernment" is something with roots and precedents in sound tradition which are wisely made the object of serious study. But it is not and should not be merely an effort to reproduce some past model which is allegedly being re-discovered. Rather, in many of its features it is an original and creative development, geared to modern times and still undergoing modification through experimentation. In the law of life, creation usually precedes criticism.

Nevertheless, once the creative activities have been well launched, reflective evaluation ought to accompany and guide their further development.

In this climate of opinions, the American Assistancy Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality has naturally shown much interest in communal discernment. Three of our published Studies have dealt with it: Father John C. Futrell's "Ignatian Discernment" (April, 1970), Father Jules Toner's "A Method for Communal Discernment of God's Will" (September, 1971), and Father Futrell's "Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience" (November, 1972). It is only natural, too, that many reactions have come back to us. Often they were poles apart, and many were shadings somewhere in between: praise and blame, enthusiastic discovery and glum scepticism, hopes sometimes excessive and then results of disappointment, doctrinal defenses and theological criticisms.

All this led our members to think that the time has come when serious attempts should be made to bring theological reflection to bear on this important problem of our day. When Father Ladislav Orsy showed a genial willingness to accept this task, we quickly prevailed on him to take it up. We are now happy to present his reflective study. Neither he nor we think it can yet be definitive. But we hope that it will add perspective, balance, and insight to discussions on communal discernment and thus further its development.

George E. Ganss, S.J., Chairman
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TOWARD A THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT

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Introduction

A. A Multitude of Theoretical Problems Relevant Here

The attempt to evaluate community discernment is a search for a theological description or definition of it. Once we know its nature with some precision we shall be in good position to determine what we can or cannot expect from it, and also what our practical attitudes toward it should be.

But in the field of theological reflection no question stands alone; each is linked to many others as closely as the arches of a Gothic cathedral are linked together. No one of them can be pulled out and examined separately. Not only would it have no meaning outside of its place; its removal would endanger the whole building.

The innocent question, "what is community discernment?" is linked up with momentous theological problems over which theologians have battled for centuries, often with no better result than the proclamation that they were in the presence of a mystery which their minds could not penetrate.

Indeed, the search for the understanding of community discernment does lead to mysteries. Some examples follow.

1. Community discernment is commonly described today as a search for the revelation of God's will which is to be recognized or discovered through the movements of grace in the inner being of the participants.¹ But such a

¹ This description gives the meaning of "community discernment" which has come into widespread usage today. It at least identifies the "thing itself," the creative process which is being much employed in many religious communities today. This process requires theological appraisal; and hence for our present purposes we make this meaning our own as the

search cannot be explained in theological terms unless the much broader question of the relationship between divine gifts and human capacities is faced. On the one hand, we Christians are children of light with a capacity to perceive the presence of divine mysteries and to receive divine life itself. On the other hand, we are earthly creatures with a mortal body and limited intelligence. To know how much the community can accomplish in the process of discernment, we must have some conception about the relationship between God's gifts and man's capacity to receive them.

2. This leads to the kindred theoretical issue of the relationship between God's grace and man's freedom. After the Dominicans and Jesuits had been entrapped in a futile battle for centuries by a wrongly formulated

basis of this study.

An altogether different though intimately related question, to which we can give little more than mention in present space, is: To what extent does this and related terminology accurately represent the thought and usage of St. Ignatius in his Exercises, Letters, and Constitutions? A comprehensive technical study of his terminology would be a great help here, but does not yet exist.

In the recent symposium on "Ignatian Spirituality and Reform" at the University of San Francisco, July 15-31, 1973, several speakers made clear that currently much diversity and even confusion has arisen in the use of Ignatius' terminology when it is applied to community discernment. For example, sometimes discernment and deliberation are used as if they were for him interchangeable synonyms; statements of his about discernment of spirits in individual persons are too indiscriminately applied to groups; modern terms which he did not use are accepted as if they were his; and modern meanings are read back into his terms. On all this, see, e.g., Gervais Dumeige, S.J., "Communal Discernment of Spirits and the Ignatian Method of Deliberation in a General Congregation," The Way, Supplement no. 20 (Autumn, 1973), pp. 55-71, esp. pp. 55, 56, fn. 9 on 57, 69. Also, the remarks of Fr. James Walsh, S.J., editor of The Way and the reactor to Fr. Dumeige's paper, are pertinent and important, but not yet published. See also Wm. Peters, S.J., "Discernment: Doubts," Review for Religious, XXXII (July, 1973), 814-817.

Those who desire to reach an accurate understanding of Ignatius' terminology in this entire field will do well to keep in mind the root meanings of the words "discernment" and "deliberation." In Latin, Spanish, and English, "to discern" means, or at least implies, to cognize closely with a view toward separating or distinguishing; and "to deliberate" means to weigh or discuss pros and cons.

question, all came to the realization that the relationship is a mystery and it cannot be clarified in the way the two sides tried to do it. Analogous problems arise because grace and freedom certainly play their respective parts in community discernment.

3. If we knew God's providence in all its intricacies, it would be much easier to handle the meaning of community discernment. But we have no such knowledge. All that we can do is to sound some warnings. The will of God is one of the most complex terms in systematic theology. It can mean God's positive and efficacious will: He does what he wants. "For who can resist his will?" (Rom. 9:19). It can mean his permissive will which allows evil to operate in this universe: He does not want any evil, yet he allows his creatures to revolt against his design. "For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all" (Rom. 11:32). Between these two classifications or meanings of the term "God's will" there are many others. In an individual situation positive and permissive wills may be present in different combinations.

4. There is the problem of interpreting the will of God in relation to the future. On the one side, there is the naive conception that God has a special blueprint for our lives in all details, and that we have the duty to discover it and make it into the norm of our actions. On the other side, there is the simplistic belief that God leaves us fully autonomous, and that we create our way of living as we wish to do it. In truth, our God is neither the meticulous and oppressive planner, nor the distant and cool observer. He is a friend with great love who has his dreams about our future but who respects our freedom as well. Again, systematic theologians have never succeeded in bringing these two aspects together in harmonious concepts and thus in dispelling the mystery. Fortunately, however, good Christians have been able to discover the guiding hand of a friend.

5. At a somewhat different level, there is the question of how infused contemplation works in man's heart. The best spiritual writers are in agreement in saying that the gift of wisdom--and discernment is a species of wisdom--is a gift akin to that of infused contemplation. Even if gifts such as these are given radically with the baptismal grace, they are not very

often found in their fullness in adult Christians. How far, then, can the contemplative gift of discernment be presumed to exist in all the members of an ordinary community? The right understanding of community discernment may well depend on the answer to this question.

6. In the Church of Corinth, however, Paul found gifts and charisms among ordinary folk, who were not very different from Christians today--especially if we judge these Corinthians by their faults as well as their graces, both of which are well described by the apostle. Precious gifts existed in an ordinary community; how do we explain it all? Did the community consist of persons of very different calibre? Or can those gifts exist side by side with serious deficiencies in one person? Theologians of the spiritual life find it difficult to give well reasoned answers here.

Problems in the field of theory, indeed, abound. Solutions are hard to come by. But every right question is a real step toward progress, even if the answer is not evident or complete.

Fortunately the gifts of the Spirit do not depend very much on our reflections. They are given before we can analyze them; the gifts precede the reflections. Neither should prayerful deliberations wholly depend on or await fully satisfying theoretical explanations. While theologians are working their way toward a conceptual understanding, communities that are one in mind and heart should go on praying to find out how they should take the next step in the service of the Lord. The praise of God and the work for his Kingdom should never be delayed because we are not ready with our precise and scientific articulation of it.

The Lord said: "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Matt. 7:8). Community discernment is a way of asking, seeking, and knocking. Its method may be different from community to community; the Lord leaves all free to follow what is the best for them. The overriding truth is that when the community gathers in prayer, the Risen Lord is with his disciples again. The best fruit of any discernment will be always the recognition of his presence, as it was given to the disciples at Emmaus, and the discovery that "there are three things that last: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13)

B. Four Basic Questions

We religious have made much progress in recent years in understanding the nature and working of our communities. Each community is an organic unit; it is alive when there is a dynamic interplay among the members. It must have a center where one (or several) persons clothed with authority stand, and to whom informational data flow steadily from all directions. Then the task of the center is to create one mind and one heart in the community, out of the multiplicity of ideas and desires, in harmony with the aspirations of the universal Church. Such organic unity among intelligent persons can hardly arise if those in authority alone decide all issues and call for unconditional and blind surrender in others. The ones who preside must respond to the good and rightly articulated desires of all in a spirit of service. The Church holds them accountable for this.

From such an understanding of religious community, new decision-making processes have sprung up. Communal discernment is the most important among them. Some communities are practicing it; some are puzzled by it; all want to know more about it. To satisfy the need several studies have been published on the topic, a few of which are listed in the bibliography below on page 187. They have brought help to many. Indeed, groups once locked into insoluble conflicts are now praying and searching together to find the will of God; groups once gripped by despair are freed by newly found hope. The fruit produced speaks of the quality of the seed.

Since the studies published were responding to an urgent need, their orientation was mainly practical. They raised and answered the question: How can a community seek and find the will of God? They focused especially on method.

The time has now come to continue the good work and also to raise the question, especially from the viewpoint of theological investigation: What is communal discernment? This is the aim and purpose of our study. For the sake of clarity and orderliness, our fundamental question will be broken up into four more specific queries.

First, what are the theological foundations of communal discernment?

Second, what can a community expect to accomplish through the use of the discernment process?

Third, what is beyond the possibility of attainment by community discernment?

Fourth, what practical guidelines can follow from our theological considerations?

In exploring these questions, we shall proceed somewhat in the manner of scholasticism, by positing a series of twenty-two theses or assertions and then discussing them.

PART I. WHAT ARE THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT?

A. Discernment Requires Contemplative Insight

Thesis 1. Communal discernment in its best and purest form is the articulation of a contemplative insight into the working of God's grace in a community.

We say "in its best and purest form" because we have to begin there. Wholeness is the clue to the understanding of the fragments. Contemplative insight means knowledge obtained not so much by human effort and creativity as through God's gracious gift; a knowledge akin to the "intimate understanding and relish of the truth" (el sentir y gustar de las cosas internamente) of which St. Ignatius speaks in his Exercises ([2]) and which plays such an important role in them. Such knowledge is discovered or appropriated or authenticated through consolations from God, such as are peace, joy, and encouragement; it is certainly not the mere logical outcome of a reasoning process. We may even say that community discernment is the discovery of a gift by another gift; the discovery of God's plan for the community through the light of faith infused into the minds of the members. In other and more biblical terms: it is the recognition of God's sometimes scandalous or foolish ways, "a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23), through the presence of the fruits of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5: 22-23).

Such discernment requires contemplative persons, well-versed in finding God's presence by instinct. A sensitivity to the gentle movements of grace is necessary to the point of being an indispensable condition. Without it there is no wholeness in discernment.

Further, discernment in its fullest religious sense is about truly great spiritual issues, where neither the simplicity of the dove nor the cleverness of the serpent is enough. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is. 55:8-9).

Precisely because his ways and thoughts are so high, the ordinary human process of acquiring knowledge is not sufficient.

B. An Early Example: The Apostolic Council of Jerusalem

Thesis 2. Communal discernment itself (as distinguished from the terminology) is not new in the Church; a careful reading of the acts of the apostolic council of Jerusalem reveals all of its essential elements (Acts 15:1-35).

At the apostolic council of Jerusalem there was a great religious issue involving the future of the whole Church: Were the Gentiles asking for baptism obliged to be circumcised? In other words, does salvation come through the Law and its practices, as the party of the Pharisees contended, or does it come through the grace of the Lord Jesus alone (Acts 15:3-11)?

If we consider the strength of the Jewish tradition and how the Church of Jesus grew out of that tradition, we see that the issue was by no means small. Mere reasoning and logic could hardly do justice to it. After all, did not the Master come to uphold and perfect the Law (Matt. 5:17)? Admittedly, he insisted also that the sabbath was for man and that all nations are invited into the Kingdom. But among those apparently conflicting testimonies, how could the apostles decide without the light of the Spirit? There had to be discernment in the full sense.

The apostles gathered together with the elders and disciples. The core

of the assembly was the small group which prayed together in that upper room when the Spirit of the Lord was poured out on them, the persons who continued to go to the temple to pray even after that great event. No doubt as they came together again, they were united in prayer as only they could be. Today in more prosaic language we would say that they put themselves into the right disposition before God, or they made themselves "indifferent" or impartial, although more correctly we should say that they allowed God to dispose their hearts for the truth.

Luke describes how arguments were brought up from both sides. But interestingly enough, the disciples did not much debate the merits of the question. They spoke about the witness of the Holy Spirit who cleansed the hearts of many and worked signs and wonders among them. It appears that all who wanted to speak could do so. The party of the Pharisees, then Peter, then Barnabas and Paul had their say. Finally James summed it all up and proposed a solution that was based on the words of the prophets, on the signs of the times, and on some shrewd wisdom that made him opt for new ways and yet not without making some concessions to the conservative party. "My judgment therefore is that we should impose no irksome restrictions on those of the Gentiles who are turning to God, but instruct them by letter to abstain from things polluted by contact with idols, from fornication, from anything that has been strangled, and from blood" (Acts 15:19-20).

The text refers also to the silence of the assembly during the speeches. At that the whole company fell silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and miracles that God had worked among the Gentiles through them (Acts 15:12). They listened. Isn't this what we call openness to all sides and willingness to opt for wisdom instead of narrow prejudice?

At any rate a consensus emerged at the council to the point that the participants were able to formulate a message approved by all. It carried the words that became familiar to those who were to read the documents of ecumenical councils throughout the history of the Church: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28): a proclamation that the decision is not so much the logical conclusion of a debate carefully conducted as rather the discovery of a new light given by the Spirit.

The Acts report (15:31) that when the letter was communicated to the Church of Antioch, "they rejoiced at the exhortation." There was peace in the congregation. The fruits of the Spirit sealed the decision.

Admittedly we do not claim that the acts of the apostolic council of Jerusalem displayed the same neat and organized procedure that is found in the communal discernment process as it is practiced in many places today. But the gist of it all is there.

The biblical precedent gives us a broader horizon. We know that we are not joining a movement of dubious origins. We follow a route traced by the apostles. Such historical awareness helps us to realize that ever since the council of Jerusalem communal discernment has been practiced in the Church whenever men and women graced by God gathered together and set out to search for those high thoughts and ways of the Lord that no man can know through his own efforts alone. Various councils, particular and ecumenical, had to discern the word of God in common. Otherwise how could they have said with any authenticity that their decision "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us"?

Moreover, it is legitimate to assume that discernment was a way of life for early monastic communities, be it in the East or in the West. Originally the monastery harbored a small fervent community seeking to find the will of God through prayer and penance under the leadership of the abbot. There can be little doubt that the monastic chapter with its prayerful atmosphere and subdued discussion grew out of common effort to seek and find the will of God in all things, that is, of a regular exercise of communal discernment.

Into this enduring tradition must be inserted the practice of communal discernment used by St. Ignatius and his first companions. As Ignatius did not invent the discernment of spirits but set some good practical rules for doing it, the first Jesuits did not invent communal discernment but left the records of an orderly way of carrying it out.

C. The First Fathers of the Society of Jesus

Thesis 3. The process through which St. Ignatius and his first companions arrived at the decision to form a religious community is a good model of communal discernment.

The early history of the Jesuits provides an outstanding example of communal discernment. The process has been carefully recorded by one of the group, in the document known as the Deliberatio primorum Patrum, somewhat freely translated by "Deliberation of the Founding Fathers."

The conditions required for genuine discernment were verified in this group of ten. There was a Spirit-filled community. For years the members of the group had lived the Exercises with all its divine consolations and human harshness. They were guided by Ignatius, who was blessed with extraordinary mystical graces well beyond our comprehension.

The issue was monumental, not only for them but for the universal Church: Should they form a permanent organic body, a religious order in fact; and if so, should they accept mission from one of their own, who by some unexplained mystery would represent Jesus Christ for them as much as the Vicar of Christ, the Pope, does? Or, should they remain as they are, dear friends in the Lord, but with no permanent bond among them? If ever an issue had to be discerned by the criteria of the Exercises, through consolations and desolations, this was the one. Fortunately, the persons were equal to the task.

After months of prayer and discussion, these "pilgrim priests" decided to form a permanent union and the Society of Jesus was born. History has proved their spiritual insight. They discovered the intrinsic trust of grace in their midst.

D. Historical Questions about the First Ten Jesuits

Thesis 4. The message for our time coming from the early historical records of the Society of Jesus on discernment cannot be grasped accurately until the usual hermeneutical process of interpretation is completed and the past events are contemplated in their historical context.

To understand what happened, we must search for the sixteenth century meaning of the records; we should not project our own modern ideas into them. To draw practical conclusions for our times, we must go through a rigorous process of historical criticism. Any deviation from this basic rule leads

to distortion of both the understanding of past history and the soundness of present practice

Obviously this historical reconstruction cannot take place here. It would require a full-fledged study. Nonetheless, pertinent questions can be and must be raised here to make us aware of the historical dimensions of the problems, and in particular of the need for a well grounded hermeneutical process that enables us to transpose, from old times into new times, the values contained in the records.

1. How Far Did Ignatius Inspire the Group?

To understand the nature of this deliberation of the ten companions, we must ask to what extent the decision of the small group to accept mission from one of them--that is, to form a religious order in the classical sense--emerged from the group, and to what extent it came from Ignatius. Did they all, Ignatius included, begin their deliberation from the same state of ignorance, doubt, and detachment, or was one of them, Ignatius, in possession of an extraordinary vision that helped him to enlighten his companions throughout the deliberation and to raise their minds and hearts to the internal knowledge and aspiration that he possessed? This is a fundamental question. If the final decision emerged fully from the group, their deliberation must be truly described as a creative process in which each played a role and played it equally, even if each made a different contribution. If, however, Ignatius entered the process with a vision and with a gentle and quiet assurance that God wanted him to be an instrument to enlighten his companions, then the decision originated more in one person than in many. In the first hypothesis, all would have contributed equally throughout the process. In the second, the group would have gradually appropriated the vision of its leader.

We do not propose here any definite answer, but we assert that there are good reasons to investigate the matter. A whole series of events in the life of Ignatius indicates an increasing desire to gather companions around himself and to form a group permanently united in the service of the Church. His painful search to find companions, marked by failures first and eminent successes later, had all the dynamics toward organizing

a group that would stay together. To assume that Ignatius entered this process of deliberation without a vision of permanent unity in the group, in a state of blank indifference about its outcome, is to ignore the history and the dynamics of his life after his conversion in 1521. To assume that he had a vision which he wanted to communicate to his companions who had not received the same graces and in the same abundance--this makes good historical sense. It is so much in harmony with the tenor of Ignatius' life from his conversion to the deliberation of 1539.

Our aim here is not to decide this issue; it is much less. We submit simply that the nature of this first discernment cannot be stated correctly as long as this historical question is not answered. To answer it, detailed research is necessary in all the documents in order to reconstruct, as far as possible, the mind of Ignatius in the beginning of this deliberation. In one way or another, the answer will shed light on what the deliberation was, a groping from darkness to light in all the companions or the communication to all, by means of prayerful considerations, of the light which had been previously given to one.

Obviously, we are aware that the word "indifference" can be used with various meanings. One of them, unconcern about either alternative, is impossible here. But in the context of the Deliberatio, another sense would be an indifference which does not as yet include any vision of or attraction to a determined goal, but is ready to accept whatever is revealed throughout the process as God's will. Still another sense would be an indifference which means that a person does have such a vision or attraction, but is ready to sacrifice it if God should indicate that to be his will. Our question is: Precisely in what sense was Ignatius indifferent to the outcome of the deliberation?²

2 In the spring of 1973 a student of mine, Mr. William G. Foote, S.J., carried out some historical studies on the movement toward a steadily increasing unity among Ignatius and his first companions, that movement which led up to the Deliberatio primorum Patrum. Mr. Foote's conclusions seemingly support the view that the group was gently led by Ignatius to a vision which he had had for a long time. In his unpublished manuscript, "Some Historical Conclusions Prior to the Deliberatio

2. Why Did Ignatius Later Prescribe Other Methods?

Furthermore, before a model is widely copied, it is necessary to assess what in the model is the expression of unique and particular circumstances and what is destined to be the standard pattern for general use. Ignatius himself displayed discretion in drawing up plans for any future discernment process. In the Constitutions, [694-718], we have fairly detailed rules for the election of the General and for transacting business at General Congregations. In neither case is the pattern of the Deliberation of the First Fathers reproduced. Sudden inspirations from the Holy Spirit are certainly allowed, for elections and decisions can be made by acclamation, that is, by one common acceptance of a powerful movement of the Spirit. But ordinarily elections and decisions are made through the humble means of votes given and counted; and the history of the Society of Jesus does not report the use

primorum Patrum," he writes:

"In summary, we have basically observed three movements [towards a growing unity], namely, that:

(1) Ignatius and the "nine friends in our Lord" were a close-knit group who had one common goal in life;

(2) Ignatius truly founded the "nine friends" in the evangelical life by way of the Spiritual Exercises and Ignatius himself;

(3) the continuum of the mystical life of Ignatius ostensibly sprang, at least in intensity, from the illumination beside the Cardoner, and was confirmed by the vision at La Storta pertaining to an apostolic service of the companions who were placed "at the side of Christ."

This is what history has shown us regarding the previous dynamics which went into the Deliberatio. These men knew, worked, suffered, prayed, and thought with one another. Their mission was basically from the Gospel, especially as understood by Ignatius through mystical prayer.

Although Ignatius is not as detailed as we might wish about all the specific details in the illumination beside the Cardoner, it is safe to say, by judging from his subsequent actions, that he did have in mind a gathering together of men of like "mind." This mind is perhaps that "mind of Christ" of which St. Paul speaks, and into which Ignatius hopes to lead the retreatant during the second week of the Exercises. This gathering of companions and fellow pilgrims was given divine sanction through Ignatius at La Storta, where, one might say, God the Father 'officially' placed the companions at the side of His Son."

of any other method than this ordinary one. Why did Ignatius--one of the greatest masters of discernment in the history of the Christian Church--prescribe such ordinary means? Did he look at the method of communal discernment used by the First Fathers as somewhat unique, to be used for exceptional issues, by persons equal in grace and wisdom to that small group? Or, and this is another possibility, did Ignatius perceive the core of discernment in the discovery of a grace that can be reached in many ways and by many means? In other terms, did he distinguish between the theological event of discerning or recognizing a grace and a certain external process that prepares for it? The core element would be unchangeable and applicable to all historical situations. But the practical approach to it could be changed as occasion demands.

3. How Should the Rules for Discernment of Spirits Be Applied for Communities?

A thorough study is needed about transferring the "Rules for the Discernment of Spirits," originally conceived for individual spiritual direction, to community situations. The person remains unique even in community, but the community is one through a bond that transcends all differences, through the presence of the Lord. Each person must be given the full respect which is due to an intelligent and free child of God, yet each must contribute toward a unity in the Lord. Delicate balances are necessary to satisfy the demands of both sides, or, more correctly, to bring about the desired harmony. Those balances cannot be permanent and static measures; they must shift and change, bringing into the fore the uniqueness of the person at one time, the importance of having a common mind and common heart at another time.

Moreover, communal discernment as it is practiced today is hardly ever concerned only with "understanding to some extent the different movements produced in the soul and for recognizing those that are good to admit them, and those that are bad, to reject them" (Spiritual Exercises, [313]). It is mostly concerned with deciding precise issues either in the theoretical order (for example, what is the right concept of poverty?) or in the practical order (for example, should we give our money to the poor?). It follows therefore that the thorough study mentioned above should be extended so that it brings in the various instructions which Ignatius gives about how to make a good and

correct choice (SpEx, [169-188]). Those rules focus specifically on the problem of deciding an issue, or at least, on the method of choosing the best among several courses of action.

The question must be asked: What is the relationship between those two sets of directives, those for discernment of spirits and those for making a choice or election? Assuredly, the two sets are closely related; yet they do not deal with identical situations. To identify a movement in the heart as divine and follow it is not the same as to give an assent to a proposition, be it theoretical or practical.

Then again, what Ignatius conceived for personal direction must be transposed into a community situation. How should this adaptation be accomplished? The answer may be easier in practice than in theory. But unless we are able to formulate guidelines based on sound theology, sooner or later some communities will be misled by a combination of good will and theological ignorance.

All these are legitimate questions which demand critical inquiries in depth. But it does not follow that while the work of historical and theological investigation goes on, communal discernment should stop. Enough valid insights have already emerged to guide wise men and women in search of progress in God's service, provided they are conscious that there is still much to be learned.

E. Discernment in Our Days

Thesis 5. Communal discernment is a good instrument of progress for lesser giants than Ignatius and his companions, and for lesser issues than the founding of a new religious community, provided that from beginning to end the members of the discerning group are aware of their limitations.

Two principles are implied in this statement, both fairly obvious. One states that the more remote a person is from contemplative insight, the less he should presume that he is able to discover infallibly the movement of grace in a community. In fact, no one should ever presume that he

received the charism of infallibility in determining the subtle movement of grace in a human being. The other affirms that no extraordinary illumination should be expected from the Spirit when the ordinary use of human intelligence assisted by grace is enough to decide an issue. That is, communal discernment will be an instrument of progress for humble folk who know their own limits. For others, it becomes rapid transport to a dream world filled with illusions. Let us see more closely, therefore, what discernment is in an ordinary community.

Communal discernment for most of us means to form a judgment or to make a decision through a pattern of prayerful reflections to which all the members of the community contribute. Its process is complex, its result is more than the summary of individual judgments or decisions; it is the fruit of a communal enterprise. It includes the sharing of all available data, the articulation of many insights into the known facts, the formulation of definite judgments, and the making of decisions. It includes even more an alertness to the movements of grace in each throughout the whole process. There is an interplay among the members; the community thinks, speaks, acts as one organic body.

To understand rightly this "communion in action," two extremes must be avoided. One exalts the community to the point that respect due to individual persons is destroyed. The other stresses the individual differences so far that the community vanishes in the process.

All human beings are persons who find their fulfillment in a community.

To be a person is to have the highest dignity in this creation. A person has intelligence and freedom. If he is a human person, he has a right to develop according to his own pace, to his own internal light. Ultimately all data, all insights into information, all judgments about true and false and all decisions about right and wrong are in the individual person. This basic fact remains true even in the process of communal discernment.

Yet a person must not exist alone; he must be integrated into a community. This process of integration is more than a loose association of many. It leads to a new, mysterious unity in which the personhood of each remains but it is enriched by all the others. In a true sense, then, information gathered by each becomes common possession, insights into facts

and ideas support all the members, judgments are construed through mutual help, and finally, options are chosen as inspired by a common ideal.

We are far from understanding the precise situation of an intelligent and free person in community. We know that somehow the primacy of the person must be affirmed in all community situations. Otherwise, the highest dignity in creation would be diminished and its gifts diffused in some kind of collectivity. There is no situation in which a person should renounce the use of his intelligence and freedom. Yet those persons who form a community can do much to enhance the operation of intelligence and freedom in each, even to the point that they all may come to similar judgment and decision and in this sense become of one mind and of one heart. This is all the more true when they take their common inspiration from the same source: from the Gospels and the teaching of the Christian Church, and when they are assisted by the same mysterious strength that comes from a divine person, the Spirit of God.

Communal discernment can be fruitful only if the integrity of the Christian person who is existing and operating in a community is preserved. The community can never take over the intelligence and the freedom of the individual; but it can do much to guide the individuals within the limits of prudence to help them to avoid false judgments originating in a biased mind and to avoid wrong decisions stemming from misguided attachments. The community can create a climate of prayer to assure that grace and wisdom prevail over the pull of selfish interests. Besides, there is the mysterious action of the Spirit who can give the same vision to many and can strengthen the group for the same action.

It follows that communal discernment is for strong persons. Each must go through a thorough preparation, reflection, and prayerful consideration, as if he had to decide the issue for himself. If the majority is weak or not well prepared, one or two may carry the others with them, and there will be no communal discernment, but discernment by some, after whom the others drift.

Should we say that communal discernment should be a process through which the community attempts to appropriate the best insight existing somewhere in the members, and make it into the community's own judgment? At

times, an affirmative answer to this question may be a correct description of what should happen; at other times, it would be incorrect, because a best insight may not exist in any one member. It is precisely the process of deliberation that makes them all aware of what is the best. Be that as it may, it is certainly correct to say that a communal discernment is likely to defeat its own purpose if the better judgments of the individuals are leveled down to a common denominator acceptable to all. In all cases, communal discernment requires the conversion of the community to the highest vision and to the most creative decision that emerges in the group. No mean task!

F. God's Light and Man's Weakness

Thesis 6. Ordinarily, communal discernment is a dynamic process in which the light and strength of God and the blurred vision and weakness of man all play their role. In it, a sinful community forms a judgment or makes a decision in God's luminous presence. The final result usually manifests something of all these ingredients.

In this mixture of contrasting elements is the clue to the understanding of the value of communal discernment. Through it the community meets with God, in a grace-filled atmosphere, and makes a step forward in the service of the Lord. The contrasts must be there; they are the manifestation of our human condition. The members of the group are at various stages of their human and Christian development. Rightly so, since no one enters a religious order to put his holiness on display; rather, each comes to learn how to progress in accepting God's grace and in producing fruit in the exacting measure of the Gospels. Full wisdom and intelligence are not given overnight; difference in outlook, in understanding, and in maturity remain.

Such differences play their role throughout the discernment process. While information regarding data can be shared easily, the communication of an insight and an understanding is more difficult, at times, impossible. Clues can be given, but the light that brings understanding must come from inside. Frequently, to progress in the process of discernment, some must be helped to advance from the level of simple pragmatic reaction to the

level of broad critical understanding. But helped or not, if someone is hampered by intellectual prejudice, ultimately he can be saved only by himself, although the community that surrounds him can be an instrument of grace. Similarly, if someone is hampered by disordered attachment before a moral decision, he must liberate himself although he can receive powerful help from the group. A judgment or a moral decision not rooted in the individual person is worthless even if it is made in the context of community deliberations.

The techniques of discernment are mostly concerned with the right balance among various contributions in the process. Yet let us remember that no technique can ever do justice to all the differences that follow in a community from the distinction of persons. Happen what may, all through the process, the individual must remain his whole self. To fall under the spell of some trend or pressure in order to avoid a discordant note is to fall into a situation all the more dangerous because it has all the appearance of harmony, but only outwardly.

Obviously these statements should be understood and interpreted in the general context of the delicate relationship between person and community which was explained above. It does not imply even remotely that a person should not be integrated into a community, or that a whole community could not be under the powerful action of the Spirit which eventually brings fruit beyond the expectation and the capacity of each.

G. Substance and Procedure

Thesis 7. The correct theological meaning of discernment is in the perception or discovery of a movement of grace, although the term is often used to include the procedural technique that best disposes a person for such discovery.

The use of the same term in these two different senses is justified, provided the respective meanings are clarified. Discernment in its proper sense means to perceive or to recognize an inspiration of grace. This

correct, full meaning should be retained.

But no one is so pure that without any preparation he could focus on a divine gift. We come to God's presence from a long distance with a distracted mind, with a disturbed heart. Hence, we need to go through a process that cleanses our vision to judge what is true and frees our will to choose what is right. The scope of procedural techniques is to assure this purification. Their role can be so important that without them genuine discernment cannot even take place. To be open to all arguments for a cause, and to be open to all reasons against it, is to possess a natural equilibrium and to have a capacity to give due attention to everything. To make ourselves indifferent (in the Ignatian sense of impartial) to advantages or disadvantages on the right and on the left is to make ourselves sensitive to a variety of inspirations.

There can be several good techniques, but the ultimate act of discovering grace is one and undivided. Discernment is there. The preparatory process can be changed according to the needs of a community. The act of discovery is beyond any method.

The procedure used by those priests who decided to become the small Society of Jesus was a good way of organizing their search and their prayer toward the discovery of grace. It was an existential "heuristic structure," good but by no means unique.

To sum it up: we must be aware that discernment has different meanings. It may refer to the theological act of accepting a call from God. It may refer to a procedure that disposes us for hearing the voice of God.

H. The Discovery of a Gift--The Creation of a Decision

Thesis 8. In a more subtle way, another distinction can be drawn between two possible objects of discernment. It is a troublesome distinction, deceptively clear in theory, but always difficult to apply in practice.

There is a difference between a knowledge which only God can give (since it transcends our capacity even in our graced condition), and a

knowledge which we can find through the effort of our own intelligence healed and strengthened by God's grace. Some examples make this distinction clear.

No amount of prayerful reflection on Jesus' general teaching could have revealed to Peter that he was the rock on which the Church was to be built. He had to be told. So the Gospel reports this act of special election and its revelation to Peter. But obviously enough, Peter was capable of reaching many decisions with the ordinary help of grace as to how he could fulfill his own ministry. The Gospels do not suggest anywhere that an uninterrupted revelation from heaven was to be necessary to carry out the mandate of Jesus.

Admittedly, this is Peter's individual case. We chose it because it clearly exhibits the sharp contrast between a new knowledge conveyed by God and a knowledge arising from the grace-filled potentials of a Christian.

If the evangelical counsels are a gift from God to the Church, no one but the Holy Spirit can call a man to that way of life, or can inspire a group of men to form a new religious order. The light that leads into such a new state of life must be discovered. The discernment process ought to be, in that case, a path to discovery.

But the members of a community already constituted may well wonder if they should open a new school. There are many considerations: the good of the children, the good of the parents, the good of a particular parish. Yet all counted, the members of the community have the resources to bring together intelligence and grace and to make a decision for themselves. To expect the Spirit to intervene by a special act of revelation could be to tempt God. We should speak of the creation of a decision rather than of the communication of a revelation. Most community decisions, of course, move at this level.

Another image may help us to understand the distinction. When the object of discernment is a new light from God which man hopes to discover, he must, as it were, prostrate himself before God in fasting and prayer, ready to learn from above what he cannot know from his own resources. But when the object of discernment is a new decision which is to be made about created things, man must pray and move, by means of the human resources common to all God's children, toward a sensible, grace-filled decision. In the former case

the final outcome is given to man; in the latter it is created by man.

The two attitudes are as different as the humble acceptance of a gift is different from the daring creation of a new adventure.

The difference is in the knowledge that results from discernment. In one case it is discovery; in the other case it is an act of creation. In the process leading up to this knowledge there need not be much difference. All the techniques of purification of mind and heart employed for the one are perfectly suitable for the other. But in one case we are dealing with revelation; in the other case we are contemplating creative action in a grace-filled universe.

In the practical order the distinction is hardly ever so clear. The same issue presents both aspects. In most cases, we are dealing with a union of the sacred and the secular, the divine and the human, grace and nature.

There is a practical difficulty in distinguishing a specific call which comes from God, and about which no man can know with any certainty until he is told, from a decision which comes from men or women out of their ordinary resources of nature and grace. In practice this difficulty can lead to a questioning of the correctness of our fundamental distinction, or even to an outright denial of it. But once the line is blurred between an unexpected intervention of God in human life and the ordinary creativity of a good person, there is no way of understanding the call of Abram, of Moses, and of so many other prophets in the Old Testament. Nor is it possible to explain, without diluting them, the words of Jesus to the apostles, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). Moreover, a strong conviction has always existed in the Church that persons such as Sts. Francis of Assisi, Dominic Guzman, Ignatius of Loyola, and Teresa of Avila received a specific mission from God which no amount of ordinary meditation and reflection could have revealed to them. In some mysterious way--and God's ways are many--their mandate was revealed to them. At times, what is given to individual persons is given also to communities. A group of persons is given also to communities. A group of persons can have a mission given to them specifically by God for the good of the Church.

We must insist on the fundamental importance of this distinction because

the nature of an issue to be decided must determine the attitude of discerners at a deeper level than the method they follow. In one case the accent must be on humble petition and waiting for God's own time to reveal his thoughts, as Ignatius so wisely directs in the matter of election in the Exercises (SpEx, [15]): ". . . while one is engaged in the Spiritual Exercises, it is more suitable and much better that the Creator and Lord in person communicate himself to the devout soul in quest of the divine will, that he inflame it with his love and praise, and dispose it for the way in which it could better serve God in the future."

In another case we have to create a decision with the ordinary gifts of nature and grace, knowing that whatever the decision is, God will not fail to stand by his children even to the point of bringing good out of their mistakes.

PART II. WHAT ARE THE LEGITIMATE EXPECTATIONS FROM COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT?

To find what are the reasonable and legitimate expectations from communal discernment, two questions must be asked: (1) What can a community intent on discernment expect from the Lord? and (2) what can the community achieve in searching for his will?

These two questions should not be separated too sharply. The first simply points out that there are gifts that no man can conquer by force. They can come only through the gracious goodness of the Lord. The second question implies that there are decisions that man, enlightened by faith, strengthened by hope and love, can make.

A. The Presence of the Risen Lord

Thesis 9. For a community intent on praying, the most legitimate expectation is the presence of the Risen Lord.

It is legitimate to expect the presence and the strength of the Lord among those who come together in his name; he himself promised it: "Again

I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done by my Father in Heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:19-20). The success of this prayer, of course, presupposes a community that lives by faith and love, and is not disturbed too much by earthly desires and dissensions.

When the community comes together, the Lord is with them. His presence is dynamic and purifying, eventually leading them, if they persevere, to a disposition that makes all their petitions acceptable provided that their prayer is inspired by the Spirit of Christ.

The presence of the Lord is quiet and strong. It does not work wonders and miracles overnight, but it gives wisdom and strength to the members.

In fact, community discernment can be a powerful instrument to lead the community to a new awareness of the presence of the Lord among them. Prayerful concentration on seeking his will may not bring a specific answer to a question set by them, but it may well give them the experience of a redeeming presence, a far greater gift than any particular answer would be.

When we consider that the future of a religious community may well depend on its contemplative depths, the newly found collective awareness in the Lord may be the beginning of new life for the group.

B. The Grace of Healing

Thesis 10. The dialectics of prayer and reflection may lead to the discovery of new graces, even unexpectedly; and in any case, it has a healing effect on the community.

Communal discernment may bring surprises. God may have graces in store for the community that its members never anticipated, still less asked for. But such an event is somewhat exceptional; our expectations should be more ordinary.

Prayer has a healing effect on our nature. There is no better preparation for creating a wise decision than to stand before God; to deliberate then and there. In the process the object of decision may become secondary; the best result obtained will be reconciliation in the community.

Indeed, when each in the community turns away from his own preoccupation and focuses on seeking and finding God's will, a convergence of intentions is created and a movement in a common direction is initiated. It is the beginning of a liberation from factions, selfish projects, and of a conversion to a common work in the cause of the Gospel.

C. Increased Prudence and Wisdom in a Community

Thesis 11. The sharing of information and insights benefits all toward a better judgment and wiser decision.

Intense development toward a community of one mind and one heart can be expected from a well managed communal discernment process provided each person partakes in it ready to give what he has, and ready to be enriched by others. Then each is raised to a higher capacity in understanding, judging, and deciding; and parallel with it, each undergoes a purification of his insights and motives through the help of the others.

Discernment in community becomes a process of building and of liberation for each and for all. It is a building process. The available information needs critical examination to become worthy evidence. Unsubstantiated facts must be discarded; incomplete data must be completed. Insights must come from many directions and must be adjusted to the facts with utmost precision, otherwise they lead to fantasies and not to the understanding of facts. Some insights must be trimmed; they go beyond the evidence. Some must be extended; they do not cover the facts sufficiently. Eventually the community of those who deliberate has to come to grips with reality by making a firm judgment on the desirability of an option in this complex world. Indeed, this is building a common mind and heart in the community. Each must make his own contribution; each must have his share in making sure that the contribution of others fits in. It is building with precision, progressing continually by every move between two extremes, those of achieving less than is needed and of construing more than what is warranted. Achieving less means not to perceive complications, different dimensions, different consequences. It is an escape from whole truth, therefore disastrous.

Construing more than what is warranted is being unfaithful to facts, working with theories that go beyond them, being in the clouds without firm support from the ground. It leads into a world of fantasy; it will take only a little time for the real world to destroy the dream castle.

All this is a process of liberation. The reciprocal exchanges in community bring about a greater freedom for each member. Each is helped by the others to progress from blindness to the perception of facts, from prejudices to good judgments, from reluctance to make hard decisions to the acceptance of the right option. The ascent to God in our mind and heart is an ascent to freedom at the different levels of our consciousness. The community can give powerful help to achieve this ascent in a climate of prayer and charity.

Such building and liberating activity, even when focused on one issue, ordinarily requires far more than the honest and prayerful consideration of the arguments in favor of or against a course of action. Dialectical consideration of the opposites can certainly be of help, especially of initial help, in building a house, but ultimately the strength and beauty of the construction will have to come from the precise contribution and complex cooperation of all concerned: the architects, engineers, decorator, and others. There will be more about this later in this study.

D. The Quality of the Fruit

Thesis 12. The judgments and decisions will correspond to the potentials of the group and the situation.

There is an analogy between the potentials of a person and of a community.

The potentials of a person are limited. No one can reach beyond himself, beyond his gifts of grace and nature, as no tree can bear fruit beyond its capacity. The potentials of a group, too, remain limited, even though it is enhanced by the presence of the Risen Lord. The most one could hope for is that the members will be lifted up to the best judgment, to the wisest decision given to any of them. Such fruit requires the

conversion of the whole community to the very best insight and desire found in the group--an unlikely event. We even doubt that such conversion is desirable. Each member must develop at his own pace; he must grow slowly as a person toward deeper insights and more dedicated options.

Dramatic group-conversions happen rarely; and only rarely, too, should they be promoted. Hence it is too much to expect that in the course of discernment, the best judgment will always prevail. Our salvation history shows abundantly that those who were given a message from God often remained alone. The community was not only slow to grasp their message but at times was even downright opposed to it, not necessarily because the community was not God-fearing and was not intending the best, but simply because its members needed time to assimilate the words of the prophet and to overcome their own ignorance and prejudices. True prophets are more often than not lonely persons, appreciated more by posterity than by their contemporaries.

It follows that the legitimate expectation is rarely the emergence of what is best in the group, but the standard that the majority of the members can somehow reach and grasp then and there. A modest accomplishment, maybe, but a real one. We should not be disappointed. If we watch a group of runners, it is not a legitimate expectation to hope that all will keep up with the best one and reach the goal at the same time; the group achievement will be much less than the best. If the group wants to keep together, the fastest runners must slow down. The achievement will not be in speed but in unity. Admittedly this material analogy does not do justice to a spiritual situation. Nonetheless, it helps us to understand one precise point: it is unreasonable to expect that the objectively right but complex judgment and objectively right but hard decision will always gather consensus. Quite simply, many in the community may not understand the complexity or may not have the strength to face the harsh options. Neither may God want them to do so here and now. He is the God of patience and forbearance. His pedagogy throughout the time of the Old and New Covenants has been to introduce his people step by step into the fullness of truth and love.

To sum it up, judgments and decisions at the end of communal discernment will display human limitations.

This is not to deny the value of Christ's presence. In spite of the

inherent limitations, it is effective. It brings more light, more strength to the community, but in the Lord's own wise and slow way. It helps the pilgrims to progress on the road, but it does not imply a promise that at times they will not make a false step or will not slow down unduly. We do not know with precision how the Lord's presence operates, but we do know by faith that it brings a mysterious and mighty help to those who are gathered in his name.

E. One Step Forward in the Service of the Lord

Thesis 13. The best and most legitimate expectation is that through discernment the community takes a step forward in the service of the Lord.

The community is God's pilgrim people. He leads them step by step towards the Promised Land. Such a pilgrimage may include events that are analogous to those recounted in the Bible: the flight from Egypt, the hurried wading through the Sea of Reeds, the confused and seemingly aimless wandering in the desert, the perilous conquest of the Promised Land against fierce resistance, and finally, the day by day work of sowing the seed, planting vineyards, threshing the wheat and treading the grapes. The modern pilgrimage no less than the old is a journey into the unknown among many uncertainties. It requires much patience in the people: God has his own ways and his hand cannot be forced. Communal discernment does not lay the future bare, nor does it take the community to the promised land overnight. It has a different purpose: it helps the community to become aware of the next step they have to take and gives the strength to take it, be it through the sea, be it in the desert, be it in the battle. Such a step, limited as it is bound to be, can be correctly described as finding and doing the will of God, but not without some further qualifications.

The expression "will of God" carries many meanings, numerous enough to trap the unwary. An attempt to analyze it immediately recalls subtle distinctions between God's positive will and his permissive will. It recalls also bitter disputes between Dominicans and Jesuits who locked

themselves for so long into the wrong question about divine initiative and human freedom. Our purpose here cannot be to undertake a full analysis of past subtleties. But past animosities should make us careful in using the expression. We should remember, too, that many saints did not have or need a scientifically elaborate concept to seek and to find God's will. Their pilgrimage to him did not depend on sophisticated theology.

Nonetheless, some pitfalls should be known; after all we do not have the sure instinct of saints. Therefore, some clarification of the idea of "God's will" is necessary, so that the pitfalls could be avoided. One mistake would be to assume that we have to discover a precise plan, a blueprint drawn up by God for every move in our life. No, his providence does not work in that way. The details of a plan somehow emerge out of our own resources of nature and grace. God seals them by making all events work to the good of those who love him (Rom. 8:28).

Another mistake would be to assume that God has no plan for us at all. He would be like a father who, once the child reaches adulthood, tells him, "Go your own way; I have nothing to say. You will have to make your own life." The analogy is wrong. God is a good friend who throughout our lives has a plan for us. He reveals it step by step, calls us to fulfill it through gentle inspirations, hard awakenings, through all that ever happens to us internally and externally.

Between those two extremes we have to feel our way. At one time we have to create a decision after grace-filled and intelligent deliberations. At another time we have to ask for light and strength that we cannot muster in ourselves. Granted, there is something new in all decisions, whether they are created from our ordinary resources or are the extraordinary gifts of God. But in one case the fruit is produced out of the ordinary potentials of the tree; in the other case God's intervention produced the fruit that the tree by itself could not bear.

To conclude, it is legitimate to expect that through discernment the community finds God's will, provided it is understood that in the pragmatic order this will means simply the next step by the pilgrims' group in the service of the Lord.

PART III. CAUTIONS ABOUT SOME EXCESSIVE EXPECTATIONS

A. Respect for God's Freedom

Thesis 14. No community has a right to put a question to God merely at its own good pleasure.

If the dynamics of the discernment are towards the discovery of a grace that God offers to the community, there must be some previous inspiration from God to put them on this search. The instruction we receive from the Lord for prayer applies to discernment too: "Truly, truly I say to you, if you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name. Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full" (Jn. 16:23-24). Such prayer is powerful even beyond the one that can move a mountain, since it brings an infallible response from the Father of all in all cases. But the interpreters of the Scripture agree that it must be inspired throughout by the Spirit of the Lord; otherwise the promise does not hold. Discernment, after all, is a form of prayer: a question transfigured through grace into a petition. The response of the Father can be expected if the question comes from the Spirit. Then the inspiration of the Spirit and the response of the Father are only two distinct moments of God's revelation of himself to his people.

It follows that the members of a community intent on discernment must be deeply united to Christ, not only to find the answer to their problem, but to ask the right question in the first place. This applies especially when the community is moved to discover a new gift that is virtually equivalent to an extraordinary revelation, as it was in the case of the first Jesuits who deliberated about founding a new religious order. God guided them toward the formulation of the question from the time when they first experienced the call of the eternal King, the joy of their union which culminated in their vows at Montmartre, and the common inspiration to offer themselves to the pope, so that he might send them wherever the need was the greatest.

Even when the process of discernment is not intended to lead up to a

revelation that can come only from God, but rather to the creation of an intelligent decision out of ordinary Christian resources, the question must be formulated with as much wisdom as it is expected to be in the decision. The wrong question, especially when it is put in the clear-cut dialectics that allows only for an answer of yes or no, can enclose the community into a fruitless if not endless search. Worse still, ordinary consolations and desolations may be associated with the wrong question, then taken as signs from God to confirm the community in a wrong decision. It follows that every community discernment should begin by asking if the question is the right one.

B. God Comes Only at His Own Time

Thesis 15. To fix a date for God's extraordinary intervention is to tempt him; to set a day by which ordinary deliberations should be concluded can be wise planning.

Life processes do not tolerate a rigid framework. If they are strong and aggressive, they destroy artificial limits; if they are weak and tender, the limits destroy them. Whether we intend to discover the delicate movements of grace through the interplay of all the members of a community, or whether we want to come to a creative decision, it is no more realistic to set a precise date for results than to fix the day in advance for the perfect fruit of the tree. This is not to suggest that the process should be stretched out with no limits; it is to say that due respect should be given to the slow work of nature and grace. A good gardener knows how to wait for the sun and the rain and how to determine the best time to pick the fruit.

A further qualification is necessary. When the community is moved by the Spirit toward asking God to reveal to its members what they cannot know ordinarily, they are not in a position to impose a limit or deadline on God's mysterious ways by setting a date by which he must speak. Indeed, if the example of the first Jesuits is invoked, their patient waiting for light, their flexibility in the method of their search, should be pointed out.

But when it is clear that the answer to the question must arise from the ordinary resources of the community, it may be wise to set a tentative date by which the deliberation should be concluded--provided, however, that such a limit does not interfere with the life process. This is not an idle remark; we have seen many times how the temptation to reach a decision can interfere with the quiet play of living forces. The temptation is all the more alluring if, for example, the idea is present that with some effort a decision can always be reached by a given date. All that is necessary is to put pressure on the committees at work by telling them that they must produce proposals by a given time. To avoid embarrassment and ill-feeling they will do so. The resulting decision will attract praise for efficiency, but there will not be much internal goodness in it. The relief and euphoria after such a process will be followed duly by the bitter taste of the immature fruit. It may be wise to set a date tentatively; it may be even wiser to cancel it.

C. Lasting Success from a Forced Conversion

Thesis 16. The conversion of an individual person, as well as that of a community, cannot be produced at pleasure.

Every community discernment is a conversion process as well, since it is a movement to the better understanding of the Good News and to a more radical following of Christ. Such change requires renewed vision and determination. But persons as well as a community need time to broaden their horizon and even more time to adjust themselves practically to the new landscape. After all, human development is subject to complex laws. It is fed by the free acceptance of new ideas and by free choices of new courses of action. Such newness cannot be forced on anyone, certainly not in an instant, or in a few days. More often than not, we have to wait patiently while the process of conversion progresses.

Since in a discernment process each member of the community is helping the others, they should all be aware that to promote or to assist the conversion of another is a difficult art.

First, all who take part should become aware of their own need for conversion. A feeling of self-righteousness excludes all progress.

Then each and all should recall that strong differences of opinion on a given issue frequently are due to different points of departure. If this is the case, to discuss arguments for or against a solution is a waste of time, since the differences on that level are merely manifestations of differences in foundational principles, be they theological, philosophical, or psychological. The community should rather reflect on the origins of various approaches and see if any mutual understanding and respect can be achieved at some deeper level. At times, persons or groups have to retrace their intellectual views and moral decisions to the original starting points. This may mean that each of them must dismantle a great deal before they can build something together.

Finally, when a unity or mutual understanding about the foundations is achieved, the community should face the real issue to be discerned.

Many conflicts in the Church after Vatican Council II are due not so much to different opinions on a given issue as to differences in theological, philosophical, or psychological foundations. The conflicts, of course, arise around a topical issue, but they remain unresolved. A climate of bitterness and sharp argument easily appears. When this happens there is a need for conversion and for the meeting of minds at a deeper level.

At times the proper fruit of discernment in religious communities should be in simply discarding the issue under consideration, coupled with a decision to dig much deeper and to discover the different foundations on which the mental and moral outlook of each person is built. When the participants know each other at such depths, they may be able to construe new questions in a spirit of mutual understanding.

D. Intelligence Plays a Role

Thesis 17. Communal discernment is no substitute for critical intelligence.

In all cases, critically trained intelligence is a good instrument to buttress spiritual discernment. In some cases, too, the issue under

deliberation has some aspects which must be examined and judged by an intelligence trained in critical procedures. Although spiritual simplicity can lead far in the city of God, whenever the issue concerns the city of man as well, ordinary human prudence must be brought to bear on the problem and must serve as an indispensable framework in which spiritual intuition operates. No less a contemplative than St. John of the Cross warns repeatedly that we should glorify God by the full use of natural faculties before we ask for his supernatural intervention. Indeed God gave us intelligence to be used, and to be used fully. Rarely will he give spiritual illumination when the light of intelligence is enough. Let us stress this point because there is an anti-intellectual trend in the Church, particularly in the field of spirituality. Christian wholeness does not consist in bypassing the intelligence in pursuit of holiness, but rather in a healthy integration of our humanity with God's grace. Especially when the subject matter of discernment is partly sacred and partly secular, our intelligence has to play a role and work as far as it can go. So called "spirituals" can cause harm to the community by playing down the role of intelligent inquiries. Nothing pleases God so much as the proper use of his creation.

Let us add this also. The more highly trained the human intelligence is, the more it glorifies God and serves the cause of spirituality as well. To train the mind means principally two things: first, to enlarge its horizons, that is, to broaden the field of its operation; second, to discipline it to the point that its understanding and judgment flow from the facts available and never go beyond them.

The broadening of the horizon is an important step from childhood into adulthood, from naive simplicity into wise sagacity. A child is not able to place an issue in a broader context, for the simple reason that as yet he does not have an ordered knowledge of himself, of others, of his world, and of his Creator. Since he cannot discover points of reference in his memory, and cannot construe them out of his own resources, he focuses on only one or two aspects of the issue. Then out of them he brings forth a judgment that is lucid but one-sided. He is easily misled by apparent truth, and he opts easily for what has the semblance of right. But the expansion of horizon is not completed on the threshold of adulthood; it must go on

throughout our life. Our judgment should improve with age as good wine does. Often, the success of discernment depends on the vastness of the field on which a mind is able to operate. Only God knows how much harm has been done to the Church throughout its history by persons who prayed deeply but thought narrowly and acted accordingly. God did not work miracles to correct their mistakes. Rather, he used their deeds to keep the mystery of the cross present in his Church. But only God may do that; we are not called to contribute to the cross of others by well meaning mistakes. To avoid them spiritual intuition should go hand in hand with trained intelligence.

Discipline of mind means fidelity to facts and to the rules of sound logic on the way to judgments and decisions. Therefore the solid foundation for communal discernment is in knowing how to use the mind and how to examine an argument critically. Also, each participant must do his homework on the issue at hand. Each must assimilate the problem personally and struggle with it. No one must consent to a decision unless he knows the data and has a thorough grasp of the problem. The communal presupposes the personal in the process of reflection. Each must retain his integrity, his faithfulness to the vision he can achieve, his commitment to the decision that is warranted in the circumstances.

E. Criteria for Truth

Thesis 18. Consolations and desolations are not necessarily criteria of truth.

Consolations or desolations are signs of the disposition of a person before God. Since they are signs, and not reality itself, it is never easy to interpret them. St. Ignatius in his Rules for the Discernment of Spirits (SpEx, [313-336]) gives elaborate norms to help us to construe the meaning of these dispositions, yet he himself cautions us many times how deception or mistake is possible in the course of interpretation.

The basic principle of these Rules of St. Ignatius is akin to the teaching of St. Thomas on the knowledge of God and of things divine by affinity. Aquinas remarks that someone may come to a good knowledge of some precepts

of Christian morality through sensing with the help of the gifts of the Spirit what is right and what is wrong, without ever having studied the matter conceptually. Ignatius affirms that a person who has grown in grace and wisdom responds positively to a movement of the good spirit through experiencing his joy, courage, and so forth, and that he responds negatively to a movement that comes from the evil spirit by feeling restless, sad, depressed, and so on (see the Rules for the Second Week, [328-336]). Quite logically if someone is given to evil, his reactions will be the opposite. He will respond to evil suggestions with elation and to the inspirations of grace with a flight from his conscience that troubles him (see the Rules for the First Week, [313-327]). It is all no more than an application of the Lord's saying that the sheep follow the good shepherd, for they know his voice (John 10:4). There is a beautiful continuity from the doctrine of John on the voice of the shepherd to that of St. Thomas on affinity and finally to St. Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits.

In this doctrine of discretion or discernment, there are usually two aspects. One is in recognizing the quality of an inspiration and following it; the other is in coming to the affirmation of some truth, either by accepting an idea or by opting for the right course of action. Communal discernment, too, may exhibit these two aspects. But at this point complications enter.

Consolations or desolations may be of help in discovering the divine truth. Indeed, St. Paul affirms that the experience of the Spirit leads to the knowledge of truth: "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:12-13).

But the proper criterion of truth in human affairs is in the satisfaction of the mind that all steps have been taken to find the right answer to a question and that the answer covers all possible queries arising from the same problem. If we lose sight of this human aspect, it becomes impossible to reexamine the outcome of a communal discernment that involves judgments about human affairs. The criterion of truth would be in various spiritual

impressions and not in solid reasoning. Such spirituality disregards God's ordinary creation and the reality of the incarnation, hence it should be suspect.

It follows that for a happy outcome of discernments, at least when any human affair is touched on, it is important to examine both the human judgments and the movements of the Spirit. Also, the discerners should be aware that the judgments of the participants are not of equal value. Each moves within the limits of his own horizon, one narrow, the other broad. One remains within a tangible and material universe, the other explores the depths of the human spirit. Yet let us stress that, given his stage of development, each may report joy, peace, and courage.

A similar consideration applies to every practical decision and option. None of us is totally free from attachments and biases. The degree of our freedom enlarges or restricts our field of choice. There, too, each judgment must be critically examined. Intellectual sanity is a good disposition for the Spirit.

Even if the whole community reports, peace, joy, and courage at the end of the discerning process, the common judgment or the decision reached may still be vitiated by the narrowness of the human mind and the attachments of the heart. Uniform peace does not necessarily indicate truth.

If there is a conclusion, it is that the signs of consolation and desolation must be handled with care and interpreted with caution.

F. Infallibility and Fallibility

Thesis 19. The discerners are not infallible. Hence the outcome of every discernment process is fallible.

After Vatican Council II, a curious shift has taken place in the Catholic Church, if not in theory, certainly in practice. As the understanding of the infallibility of the Church, especially as it is manifested through the acts of the pope and of the bishops, underwent a purification and became more restricted, a myth began to grow up that attributed infallibility to persons and communities to a degree that was not conceded to the college

of bishops and its head. This phenomenon was certainly noticeable in some American religious communities. But we cannot have it both ways. We should certainly welcome a restraint on the part of the hierarchical Church in the exercising of its gift of infallibility, but then we should be even more restrained in presuming the existence of this gift in our particular community, even if the universal Church possesses it.

The simple truth is that any process of discernment by individual persons or by communities of Christians takes place in the context of fallibility, unless it is backed by the whole weight of the teaching authority given to the Church, as may happen in an ecumenical council or in some exceptional pronouncements of the pope.

An analysis of the process of discernment bears out well the truth of this statement. When God stirs a human being or when a human person experiences a movement of grace, it all takes place at a depth that is beyond images and concepts. But it does not stay there. The presence of the Lord, or the mysterious stirring of the heart, must be proclaimed, but proclaimed it can be only in a human tongue. At times such proclamation can be confused and unintelligible, as in the case of the "glossolalia" mentioned by St. Paul (1 Cor. 14:1-19). Ordinarily, however it should be articulate and intelligible through words and concepts that carry a meaning for the community; it should be in the form of "prophecy," as Paul called it. Through such "prophecy" the mysterious movement initiated by the Spirit enters our own limited world, our culture, and our history; the ineffable takes on a human form. But this human form is given the inspiration by the person who received it; he gives it out of his own mental resources. As he expresses the meaning of the movement of grace, he also interprets it. In the final result, side by side with divine wisdom, there will be a markedly human contribution. The ineffable at the depth of the person and its articulation in human words are welded into a unity. God's clarity and human fallibility will both be there.

It follows that no person and no community can claim that they articulated the movement of the Spirit in its purity. Ultimately all that they can do is to proclaim their conviction that they believe they have been prompted by the Spirit and that they reached the best interpretation they

could give to what is ineffable in itself. The biblical story of Jonah, who received a genuine mandate from God but interpreted it in his own way, should be a salutary warning to all discerners. Jonah obeyed the call and announced, as he was instructed, that in forty days Nineveh would be overthrown. But the horizons of his mind were too narrow to understand that God could repent of the evil which he had said he would do to the people of Nineveh. When God did not do that evil, it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. The story ends beautifully by describing how true parables and signs broadened the mind of Jonah to understand that the pity of God can extend even to the hundred and twenty thousand heathens of Nineveh.

The Spirit of God present in the Church guarantees that the message given to men through Jesus Christ will never be lost, and that God's people will not lose their way to the Kingdom. Surrounded and protected by this exceptional gift, the community of the elect must live and operate with fallibility. To understand this situation is liberation for us all. No one must pretend that his statements come straight from God. Rather he should submit everything he articulates to the good sense of the community, and ultimately to those who have the final authority to judge, namely, the college of the bishops and the pope, so that what is missing in his vision could be completed by the ministry of the Church. Dialogue is possible and necessary precisely because we are fallible; otherwise the Church would be a resounding cacophony of final statements.

The Good News never promised that each of us or every freely associated group will have the power to articulate the final truth, but it promised that "in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). A biblical blank check--God takes care of our well-meaning mistakes.

G. The Habit of Prayer is Necessary

Thesis 20. Prayerful reflection during communal discernment will not supplement for the lack of long years of devotion and purification.

A habitually prayerful person will discern better in a short time than a dissipated one praying at length over the issue. An analogy illuminates this principle rather well. A learned and experienced surgeon will operate better and faster on the patient than a medical student who is consulting the best authorities during the operation. Improvised acts cannot take the place of a skill built up over a long period. Discernment at its deepest level supposes the habit of contemplation that cannot be acquired over a few weekends, intense as they may be. This principle applies as much to persons as to communities. It is of some importance that discernment should be made in a prayerful framework; it is of greater importance that those who discern should be prayerful persons. It follows that for some communities the right question is not how to discern an issue but how to create a habit of prayer, even if it takes years to do it.

H. Consensus Can Be a Mixed Blessing

Thesis 21. If consensus can be reached, praised be to God; if not, let us recall that to disagree is Catholic.

Consensus is a fascinating idea. What is more beautiful than the whole community being of one mind and of one heart in the Spirit and agreeing to the same judgment that eventually leads to a common course of action? There are times when God gives such unity. The First Fathers of the Society of Jesus certainly reached it at the end of their deliberations about religious obedience. In a different field, the laws for papal election admit the possibility of choosing a new pope by common acclamation under the inspiration of the Spirit. Consensus is certainly possible in some cases. When it is there we have to acknowledge it and respect it.

But ordinarily consensus manifested in an identical judgment will not and should not arise. Although God created all men equal, he did not give equal gifts of nature and grace to each one; neither did he create them exactly at the same spot in time and space; nor did he impose on them a uniform rhythm in their progress toward the Kingdom. Hence in the practical order, rare will be the issue when all come to agreement. The overriding

rule is that no violence should be done to the intelligence or to the freedom of anyone. Rather, we should anticipate that the vision of each will be different, and so will be his contemplated course of action.

It follows that at the end of a community discernment process it is reasonable to expect some small or great diversity of opinions, and varying strengths in each one's determination for action.

Consensus in judgment can be either God's gift or man's fallacy. When it comes from above, it builds the community; when it is forced on the group, it destroys the community.

But there is another type of consensus. It is not in a common assent to the truth of the matter but a common experience of peace in relation to the proposed solution of a problem. Intellectually some may not approve of the answer, they may feel compelled to oppose it. They are ready, nonetheless, to accept it as the only possible one in their community, as the only one that can unify the community. A complex situation indeed! Some minds do not find rest in the truth because they did not find the truth. But all find peace in a solution because it appears as the next feasible step in the service of the Lord. Such consensus is legitimate but by its very nature is fragile. Truth is not negotiable. Therefore those who are convinced that the judgment and the decision is not the true one have a duty to prompt the community to search further. Their peace should last only as long as they do not have a reasonably good opportunity to move the question again.

As a general approach it may be wiser not to extoll the importance of consensus in one way or another but rather to insist that those who live in a community must carry one another's burden. This burden includes less than perfect judgments, less than the best courses of action. The bond of a community was never in identical judgments but in charity that covers a multitude of limitations and shortcomings. To find perfection in charity means to accept the wisdom of a legitimate majority, or at times to accept their lack of wisdom. We have to find peace not so much in perfection as in accepting an imperfect world. Some communities hurt themselves through an endless search for consensus in judgments. They never found peace because they were unable to consent to their own imperfections and limitations.

I. Summing Up through a Paradox

Thesis 22. To assess the value of the outcome of a community discernment process, we must keep in mind that the experience of peace and joy in the Lord is compatible with erroneous judgments and objectively wrong decisions.

This statement does not come as a surprise any more. It simply sums up much of what has been said before. It affirms again that the community is not infallible in any kind of process. Consequently sincere efforts of its members to reach the objective truth or to make the right option may fail. But such failure does not necessarily make them less acceptable to God.

God never wants more from a human person than the step that flows from his capacity here and now. Once the person exerted himself and took that step, God is pleased and the conscience of his servant is in peace.

The capacity of a person is limited. Intellectually he may not be able to think further than simple common sense judgments which are sufficient to settle daily issues but are sadly inadequate, even harmful in complex situations. Similarly, in his decisions and options he may be confined to what is right for his small world, but disastrously inadequate for the greater good of a large community or of the universal Church. How many examples of such options we have today!

There is an objective world outside of us with its own ruthless demands for truth and purposefulness. If our judgments and options fall short of it, a price will have to be paid sooner or later, in spite of the peace and joy we may have experienced.

The gist of this paradox is that God takes us as we are and provided we honestly search for him, he is contented and shares his contentedness with our conscience. But the same God made this universe with its own laws, and for us to operate in it well, nothing less than truth and correctness will do; error and imprudence will have sad consequences even if the one who caused them meant well. The good intentions of one become the real cross

of another.

Ideally, the discernment process should bring about a fruit that is good under all aspects: it contains the objective truth, it prepares for prudent action, and it springs from subjective righteousness. In reality, it is not always so. An historical example will give more light on this point.

It would be difficult to find a more spiritual man in history than St. Francis of Assisi. He left behind for his brethren a rule of life that was intended to keep their communities together. There is no doubt that the rule was the fruit of discernment in the fullest sense. Yet, soon after Francis died, dissensions arose, and the rule he left proved itself inadequate to keep the communities in good balance. Francis was not an organizational genius.

St. Dominic was a spiritual man too, but he was blessed with a sharp sense for balanced organization. Consequently, he initiated the composition of a rule of life that was both strong and flexible to guide his communities through the vicissitudes of centuries.

No one can doubt that both men discerned, both found peace in the result. But the fruit of one's discernment was less suitable for the purpose intended than the fruit of the other's. Hence the telling difference between the history of the two orders. The Franciscans went through many crises and were split into separate autonomous branches because of the different interpretations of Francis' heritage. The Dominicans kept their unity throughout centuries.

The application from personal discernment to communal discernment is obvious. The same general principles are valid and the same difficulties may emerge.

Where do we go from here?

Keeping in mind the paradox, we can arrive at a better understanding of the meaning of the signs such as peace, joy, and the like in the discernment process. They are indicators of the relationship of a person or of a community to God. They are not necessarily indicators that a given judgment or decision conforms to the objective order of things or is the wisest choice. No wonder; those signals are ultimately the signs of a good conscience and conscience concerns our relationship to God.

Once this paradoxical situation is understood it becomes clear that there are no short cuts through the laws of nature. The criterion for truth is in objective evidence, followed by the assent of the mind to a judgment. This process by the intelligence cannot be left out or watered down without penalty, not even in a discernment process. God made this objective world to which we must conform if we want to give full glory to him. A similar consideration applies to options among many courses of action. They must be examined critically to find out whether or not they are leading to the goal intended, whether or not they are the right means to the end desired.

These reflections suggest caution in using discernment in those cases in which a critical judgment must be formed or the decision must be ordered to a specific end.

Let us give an example again. A community can rightly use the discernment process to arrive at a decision about poverty in the life style of its members. At the end peace and joy could be good criteria of the right decision. But the community should be far more alert to the exigencies of critical intelligence and reasonable planning when they want to set up new structures. If they are not well-versed in the history of religious orders, in the dynamics of human community, in the technique of planning, they will not even realize what is needed and will feel great spiritual satisfaction with bad structures. Morally they are unblemished; practically they are heading for disintegration.

It follows also that the expression "finding the will of God" should be used with caution. As we indicated earlier, it would take volumes to explicate the complexities of the will of God as we can comprehend it. Yet for practical purposes a useful distinction can be drawn. For the person, the will of God is that he should make the next step toward his Creator, even if that step can be objectively misdirected. For God the interior disposition matters. But God also created the objective world outside us with its laws independent from us. If the action of a person does not conform to that objective pattern, some disorder will ensue and human beings may suffer and institutions may collapse. Very frequently such sincere and misguided actions are at the origin of crucifying situations within the Church itself.

It does not follow that discernment should not be used. It follows only that we should know that its greatest value is to reaffirm our relationship to God. It is not meant to give extraordinary revelations. Once the group is aware of this limitation, they have a precious instrument in hand.

PART IV. SOME PRACTICAL GUIDELINES FROM THESE THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

The following practical guidelines flow from our theoretical reflections. They do not contain new insights. They suggest practical conclusions, attitudes, and actions for communities intent on discernment.

1. A community intent on discernment should recall the words of the Lord: "For which of you desiring to build a tower does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?" (Luke 14:28). Their first resolve should be to keep the height and width of the tower proportionate to their gifts of nature and grace.

2. A community should not imitate any historical model of discernment literally unless its members' own circumstances are identical or very similar to that model, and their own resources are as abundant as those whom they follow. Since the first Fathers of the Society of Jesus were a small and deeply contemplative community, formed and trained by Ignatius for many years, and since they deliberated over an exceptional religious issue to which God only could give a reliable answer, their method and resources may have been unique, at least in parts, and may need serious adjustment before other communities begin using it for different kinds of issues.

3. While an ordinary community concerned with lesser issues may not be able to operate with such deep insight and such firm design as the first Jesuits did, its members should be perfectly able to find the next step in the service of the Lord. Therefore community discernment should never be presented as so difficult as to make it impossible to do it well here and now by an ordinary group that wants to do it according the measure of its own gifts.

4. Communities are blessed by the Lord in different ways. The

issues they face are different too. Hence adjustments in the method of finding the next step in the service of the Lord are always necessary. No pattern is universal.

5. In all communities peace is a fundamental condition for successful discernment. If there is no peace, a sincere search for reconciliation is recommended. It should be the only object of discernment.

6. To expect an answer from the Father is right when the question is put in the name of the Lord Jesus and is inspired by his Spirit. But no one should tempt God by raising a question out of his own resources and then postulating an answer by a fixed date. Such presumption has been abundantly condemned in the Scriptures. The community should know how to wait patiently when He alone can give the answer. Remember that no human effort can hasten his coming and that our impatience can easily lock us into a false solution.

7. When the community has the capacity to resolve a problem by creating a solution from its members' own resources of grace and nature, they should do all they can with that foolish courage that should be typical of Christians. The fundamental rule for any method is that all the exchanges and deliberations should be soaked in prayer.

8. The community can make good progress by focusing in prayer and reflection on the opposite sides of the arguments, especially when the answer to a question must be a yes or a no. This was the method of the first Jesuits; it suited their purpose perfectly. And it may suit the purpose of some latter-day communities as well. But the method is not exclusive of other procedures.

9. When the question does not allow a simple yes or no as answer, other methods must be worked out that allow for steady, on-going contributions from many sources. You must use different working methods for deciding the questions, "Should we build a tower?" and "How should we build it?" This distinction is particularly relevant for communities who are intent on writing constitutional documents.

10. While all should make an effort to understand and judge every point of view, all should accept also the one-sidedness of a prophet and the penetrating but circumscribed insights of a genius. Many times in history a unique inspiration from God or an unusual insight into nature

made a prophet or a genius unreceptive to arguments which seem good to everybody else. The community should treasure such persons. They make up in depth what they lack in breadth.

11. Throughout the process of communal discernment each participant should participate wholeheartedly, both in giving and in receiving. If a member fails in either way, the whole body will suffer.

12. Peace, consolation, and encouragement are signs of God's grace and of his presence. They confirm the conscience of the community that is intent on taking the next step in the Lord's service. The objective value of such a step can be considered in two ways. First, in relation to the community: It may be the best for them because it is the most they can do. Second, in relation to other communities, including the universal Church and our human society: It may be good or bad, it may bring progress or disaster. An incompetent child can do his very best in driving a train and still cause it to derail and involve many others in the disaster. A competent man drives it properly and assures peace for all. This rule is not cancelled out by the true belief that the presence of the Risen Lord enhances the capacity of the community to serve the Lord.

13. For practical purposes the expression "seeking and finding the will of God" should be taken as meaning "to seek and find the next step in the service of the Lord."

14. Community discernment should be an ongoing process. The actual time of discernment is no more than an intense period in the continuously evolving life of the community. Discernment must blend into a broader movement of life.

15. Community discernment must be a self-correcting process. When the community articulates what the next step is, there is a fallible human element in its judgment. It is subject to correction. Since our sinful condition makes our vision blurred, our insights limited, our decisions less than the best, we must continually examine and reexamine what we are doing.

16. In community discernment there should be room for dissent. Indeed dissent should be welcome and manifest for all to see. The dissenting voices of today are often the beginning of a new dawn for tomorrow. No one

should be pressured into a common opinion. God loves persons in a community.

17. Community discernment can be a powerful instrument of progress in the life of a religious community provided we do not expect wonders and miracles from it. It can assure quiet growth in grace and wisdom.

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