

COMMON APOSTOLIC DISCERNMENT

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During the first morning of the international course/workshop of “CAD (Common Apostolic Discernment) in the light of GC35” on January 19th 2009, the group of some 86 persons, Jesuits and lay men and women, had the privilege to meet Fr. General Adolfo Nicolás, S.J. In a conversational atmosphere this is what Fr. Adolfo shared in answer to questions put to him.

It is a pleasure to see so many people interested in the themes of Ignatian spirituality, in its accompaniment, discernment and so on. My talk is basically on the way I look at these themes. Indeed, I am glad that you yourselves have already had the opportunity to think about these subjects, for that means that there already exists a beginning of a dialogue between us.

The first question is: ***Why does the working of the apostolic body need a permanent common discernment? Why is it that the personal discernment of superiors, leaders, and so on, is not enough, and that the whole apostolic body of the community has to be involved?***

A few days ago as we were getting ready for our spiritual exercises, I was reading a booklet I got in Japan a few weeks before. This booklet deals with the teaching of a very famous, probably the most influential, Zen Master in the whole of Japanese history, Master Dogen. This booklet is very

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simple, it has one chapter for each page, and each chapter gives one aphorism of Buddhism as explained by Dogen. There is a chapter about change, precisely responding to our questions. Dogen asks: Why are people afraid of change? When they open their eyes they see that everything before them is changing all the time.

I lived for six years in the Philippines and could see every national group celebrate its own culture, its own spirituality, its own theology, naturally, in different ways. Japanese culture is based on change. The only thing that the Japanese find stable is that the seasons are four. The essence of the four seasons is that they keep on changing and changing.

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Look at the cherry blossom. The cherry is one of the symbols of Japanese culture and beauty. It flourishes all of a sudden. After a few days the weather starts getting cold, the rain falling, and the petals start falling and covering the ground as a carpet. Indeed, it's beautiful. But the essence of enjoying the cherry blossom is that it withers away in one week. If the fine

weather is too steady and the cherry lasts for more than a week, the Japanese get anxious, and uneasy, and ask themselves what is wrong with the universe.

Everything is changing. This is why we need to have an ongoing discernment. I was elected General Superior a year ago, and now I see things differently from the way I saw them last year. Our priorities did not change, but the way I look at them changes. As I visited different parts of the world I realized that my appreciation had been very limited. I needed to change, for reality is not the same everywhere.

My predecessor, Fr Kolvenbach, spoke of creative fidelity. Fidelity - for there is something basic in our relationship to Christ, the Church, the world and humanity. But at the same time, it is creative - for it has to keep on changing.

St Ignatius was never happy with the *status quo*. The famous *magis* he proposed suggests a certain dissatisfaction with the way things are. This means a spiritual refusal of the current state of things.

In our constitutions, and, I am sure, also in the New Testament, the verbs used are active verbs - to love, serve, advance, walk, proceed, aspire, grow - all verbs of action. ***Spiritual life is either growth or decline.*** There is

no staying fixed in one place. If we do not grow, the weight of our weaknesses takes over. We are all the time growing, that is changing. This requires us to be all the time alert to what is happening around us, what is good and what is not so good.

The people we serve change too. This is the reason why our language changes. The language of children, of adolescents, of young couples, of mature couples, of people working together, is not the same. We realise this even more as we grow older.

When I was in India I noticed in the programme set for me that I was to give a message of encouragement to the children. I was at a loss how I was going to speak to them. I wondered what their vocabulary was, what their language was! An experience I had one Easter Sunday in Tokyo illustrates my point. The caretakers with their families and children came to Mass. The homily was given by a Father, member of the community, who happened to ask the children what was the most important thing in their life. The children looked askance at one another in amazement and responded "That is difficult!" The Father realized that the language he was using was not the language of children. So he then asked "Okay, what programme do you watch on television?" They quipped immediately; but then the Father did not know what they were talking about.

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When I travel, the only thing that scares me is not the food or the climate — I am used to tropical and non-tropical countries; what scares me is how to talk to people about whom I know nothing, people whose experience I do not have, of whose questions I have no idea. I do not like to go round giving big lectures not knowing to whom I am talking. This same experience I had even before when I was serving in a parish.

Language, images, symbols are different. As you know from cultural anthropology, symbols are very important in the life of people. ***Symbols are born, grow and develop, become sick and die. Some resurrect. We have to rediscover our own world in practically every generation. This entails perception, feeling, response, the capacity to react, to challenge, and so on.***

The hearts of people also change. They come closer to or more distant away from God. This is why St Ignatius himself, every time he was

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to celebrate Mass, would look into his own heart - How I wish we Jesuits did that more often! – On that look, on that grasp of his own heart, St Ignatius would decide whether to pray to Mary, to Jesus or straight to the Father. If he felt much united to God he would go straight to the Father; if he felt there was a certain distance, he would go straight to Christ; and if he felt the distance was much longer, he knew he needed a mother. He would pray first to Mary, then to Jesus, then to the Father. There is a sensibility to our situation that makes us realize that we are not always in possession of the same things. We keep changing, and we have to be alert to that.

The circumstances of our apostolate change. The situation of a school changes; so also the situation of a parish. Our knowledge of reality changes. In a school the students are different, one class differs from another; one group may be impossible to manage, while the next group we find wonderful!

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The parents also change. They are different. So also different are the environment, the possibilities of learning, of entertainment, of study, the gadgets students use. I remember

when I went to Japan in 1961 we had to study Japanese the hard way with a teacher and with set books. A few years later new methods of learning began to appear, with cassettes and all kinds of technical aid. Now there are crash courses that in six months people speak the language as we spoke it after three years of study.

We are living in a world where our research is telling us that the change may go beyond what we can foresee. For instance, look at the research being done in our own time on the development of the brain, how the brain of a child develops. New vistas are being opened. I have a sister-in-law who when she began to teach remedial English at the University, got very interested in why the kids needed remedial English at all, for they seemed to be quite intelligent, bright and perceptive. She then realized that their brains worked in different ways from those of other kids. She got interested in neurobiology studies, and soon learned that we have different brains and that the way they combine and interact with one another determines very much the way we act, learn, and study, and so on. All these things are changing our way of relating, our way of working.

So also do our questions change. We ask ourselves, should we go to teach in schools, or should we rather work on research in education so as to help the schools? Should we work with traditional middle class students or rather with migrants or with the urban poor or else with the rural children? Should we aim at the prestigious school or rather at simple schools that can multiply so that education in the country may develop according to the needs of that country? Again, should we work in traditional schools or in technical schools? We have community colleges which take care of people who become dropouts. Instead of making them, as in the past, say, humanists, without losing the humanism of our education, we try to make them employable, which is a totally different approach. Instead of working in individual schools, one could work in networks, such as the Fe y Alegria in Latin America, and the Cristo Rey and Nativity schools in the United States. The answer to these questions will be totally different in Canada, in Italy, in Timor or anywhere else.

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All this means that we need to discern. However, our discernment is not made once and for all. We have to keep on discerning. The process never stops. Those who are or have been provincials are well aware of this ongoing task, this ongoing challenge. The world is trying to respond to new needs, in new ways. New situations bring new discernment, new creativity and new response.

On January 1, 2000, I was in Manila after having finished my work as provincial in Japan. I was invited to give a talk to the Jesuits, and I chose as a topic, what we could learn from 2000 years of Church history, what in the past really worked and did not. Such a reflection put one completely in the light of the need of change. ***The history of the Church is a history of change, so also is the history of religious life, and of the lay apostolate. New forms, new developments, new needs, new responses arise.***

Every generation has to rediscover itself, rediscover Christianity, and rediscover the responses to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Every generation has something to discover.

But what about tradition? Tradition gives us the core and the wisdom. We have to take it fully and make it our own. If we do not, we will not find it helpful. At times we tend to take only a patch of it. We tend to say, "Well, I belong to this tradition, but then I leave the main part out."

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So we need to discern. The questions will be about what, how, until when, and so on. This is why we have programmes of formation – a formation which prepares us and others to enter into this process of change. ***Discernment is the way to live in the midst of a changing world. It has to be communal, for no single person can control everything, and God does not allow himself to be captivated by anyone.***

In discernment we realize that we can never fully possess the will of God. We can come very close to knowing it, and we can say, “Well, I think that in the present circumstances, with prayer, with consensus, with the data we have, with our convictions, it’s the closest we can get to the will of God. That is our decision.” But St Ignatius kept stressing on and on that if we find new data that sheds new light on our problem, we should always be willing to reconsider. God is free and far bigger than our understanding.

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Obedience is never a one-act reality. Discernment is a process for which factor counts, such as every experience, every positive fact and every datum. For this we need a community. Remember the book of Hilary Clinton about education “*It Takes*

a Village”. So also, it takes a community to discern.

Then one asks, why do we have superiors? Since there is a community, there needs to be some one who coordinates. If we did not have communities, we would not need superiors. But the superior is always at the service of the community and at the service of the will of God. The superior and the community have to obey. I get very uncomfortable when a superior is so cock sure of knowing the will of God, that no matter what happens around him he is never willing to change. God gives us signals of his will in many ways, and we find his will by accepting the signals he gives us. If we do not accept them, we are disobeying, and alas there are superiors who in fact disobey.

Communal discernment is, I think, a slow process; it is slow and down to earth. There is no such thing as instant discernment. True, as St Ignatius says, in some special cases one can get all of a sudden some extraordinary light, as St Paul got on his way to Damascus. But discernment is different; its nature is that of searching, and searching is a slow process.

If you do not form part of the process you can easily be a cause of its ruin. If you are not really involved in the process you will never be attuned to it. If a superior decides things because he is very clear about them but the community has not been part of the process, I can tell you that sooner or later I will receive letters from that community complaining that the superior never consults and that he decides things on his own. The participation of all, therefore, guarantees the slow tempo needed for real change.

A final word about this first question is that, I think, God hides in the process of discernment. If we follow a process that is real, we find God. If we overlook it because we are in a hurry, we will miss God who is hiding there. The process is a great help, and that is why St Ignatius was so keen on it. The process takes us from where we are to where God wants us to be, but we must not take it for granted that we are going to find him easily.

The second question:

What elements and dimensions have we to take into consideration in today's world for a common apostolic discernment?

St Ignatius works with us through exercises. The elements I can think of are related to the kind of exercises we do. It helps us to free our minds and our hearts so as to do those exercises which touch the reality of people, the human needs and human suffering. Since the time I was teaching theology, I have been thinking about how Jesus in the Gospel confronted the needs of the people. Jesus responded to these needs in three ways. First, he gave the people what they were asking for, say, the healing of leprosy, of blindness, of paralysis or of whatever ailment they were suffering from. Second, he responded to a hidden need, something deeper: the paralytic needed forgiveness, the leper needed to be integrated in the community, and so on. Third, he also opened a new horizon for the people at large, new dimensions for all those who were present and watching. This is why at the end of a miracle Jesus performed, the people were happy, wondering and praising God, and saying "This has never happened before!"

A very good exercise for us is to discover what people need, and then with them penetrate into what they really need far more deeply. Such exercises are important for justice and peace, for the Church, for religious life. They make us look into the depth of the humanity of people, and show us the root causes of their condition. Of these trends we are not always conscious.

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It is important to look not merely at the problems of an individual person, but at the trend of people. We ask ourselves, for instance, why do young people no longer have that support they used to have, support from their family, their training, their environment? This gives rise to a different problem. Whatever puts us in contact with a wider reality is very helpful for our discernment.

Surface trends are easy, but superficial. Take, for instance, the matter of fast food. One eats fast food without really having time to savour it, and consequently life for that person becomes very superficial. A booklet on Zen Buddhism says that the experience of having something really tasty - you eat it and say "Oh, my goodness, this is really good!", — this experience is a good preparation for enlightenment, because it's a moment of no thought (this is Buddhism), no thinking, just pure feeling, a moment of bliss. Fast food makes us lose the experience of enjoyment, we have no time to stop and enjoy something. There is no free joy; we do what's to be done fast and that's all. How is all this affecting people, the young and the old?

These are points which if we come in contact with will help us in our discernment. ***When we discern, we are aware of the experience, the anxieties, insecurities, helplessness that other people have, the criticism, and the ability to take criticism.*** I remember one Jesuit professor at Sophia University once told me, "You know, I recently find it very difficult to flunk people in their exam, for they might commit suicide or fall into depression. So what shall I do? Students are on one hand so much under heavy pressure, and on the other they have such a psychological weakness that they cannot take a failure!" How do we challenge that? How can we help them grow? This is a very concrete problem for discernment for a community, for a pastoral or an educational programme.

Other exercises affect the change of our hearts and minds, that is, our interior life. This exercise gives us a new awareness. ***I would say we need psychological literacy*** – not all of us are psychologists, but we have to be literate in psychology so that when we talk to people we are able to figure out whether there is lack of contact with the Spirit or simply a psychological inability to face reality or to make a choice and keep wandering on aimlessly.

The Spiritual Exercises help us to find our attachments to places, to groups, or to results. This is a very strong point in Christian spirituality, as also in Buddhism and Hinduism. You work and do your best, but then you are detached from the fruit of your work. Attachment to the fruit of our

work is so much a source of unhappiness in many of us. We work hard and we want to see the results, but the results depend on so many other things besides. This is why all spiritual traditions insist on detachment from the fruits. Not detachment from the work – no laziness! Work hard, but then remain detached, free. The Gospel says that if people do not welcome your message, shake the dust off your sandals and go away free and happy. So the Exercises touch trends, fears, the spiritual state of a person, and so forth.

Other exercises affect the human and religious communities, both interior and exterior. For instance, questions about *the form or ways of prayer of a community*. Some may have very good will, but then they may not know how to handle the problems of community prayer. The exercises can help us to detect where the problems lie — perhaps, in the lack of unity, or in the poor esteem of values, in a blurred vision, in the lack of readiness to go along with others, or in some ideological factors. When ideologies come into play in our communities, there is no way of making sense of the community.

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Then there is also the risk factor. Risk, whether we believe it or not, prevents us from discerning. Such are the risk of failure, of becoming materially poor, of financial problems, of being counter-cultural, of anything that is new. ***Challenges make us uneasy. In the area of risk, I think we have to pay particular attention to how we value success.*** I think the feeling of success has been one of the toughest enemies we have to fight against. True, success can be something we thank God for. But it can also be a great temptation, as when we feel we should remain where we are not needed only because we have been successful, or when we do not undertake any risky task because we fear we might end in failure. Well, Jesus' life ended in failure. We celebrate success all the time. I do not know yet of a single religious community which has celebrated failure for the kingdom of God.

The third Question:

The Ignatian Apostolic Community (lay, religious, Jesuit) what may be our specific contribution to the Church today regarding common apostolic discernment?

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Here we have to speak with great humility, for we are only servants of the Church. We do not possess anything as our own. I think that this Ignatian discernment has much to contribute to the Church.

We can help the Church in a few of her needs by integrating them into our process of discernment. So, I have divided this section into three stages: at the starting point of the discernment, along its process, and at its end.

At the starting point, we get those needs of the Church 'incarnated' into the real problem. Discernment is never abstract; it is always about something concrete. It is important to grasp the human reality, human suffering, and human confusion. We need to make sure that our concerns and challenges are those of humanity, not some other concern that we ourselves create. Bringing this to the discernment of the Church is, I think, a great contribution that communities, groups or processes can make.

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Learn how to approach and how to be touched by reality, how to be moved within this reality by the Holy Spirit. The Inquisition did not find anything unorthodox or inconsistent in

St Ignatius, but it was worried because this man was pointing to something dangerous, something revolutionary. Indeed, he was a revolutionary because he took human reality very seriously as a starting point, and there he found the will of God. Like Jesus he lived in the midst of reality; he did not start from the law but from the life of people in a concrete way, and only then he pursued the law from there.

For the contribution along the process of discernment, I list three key-words, viz: awareness, listening and integration. The first one is to learn how to be aware of self and of the inner movements. Fr Tony De Mello in his *Sadhanas* made much of this awareness as the core of spirituality. It is to become aware that God is at work, is moving and acting, and that we are surrounded by signs and are capable of picking up those signs; so that we can recognise the meaning of the movements inside us, the meaning of our feelings and of our inspirations, and so we can discern and handle them well. Thus we learn to purify ourselves, learn to be directed, to struggle with things that seem contradictory, and so deepen them. Ignatius was

thorough on this — he insisted on repetition, on the application of the senses, then he let in the community, and finally he came to a confirmation.

The second key-word is listening. We learn to listen to the Holy Spirit. This is not something spontaneous; there is no romanticism about it, and no self-deception. It is very easy to confuse self with the Holy Spirit. When one feels great about something, one may hurriedly think it's the Holy Spirit. One had better wait! Even in our conversations we at times use consolation and desolation much too glibly. These are terms that refer to the communication of the Holy Spirit, and not just the way one feels. Don't say, "today I feel consoled" just because the weather is fine, had a good breakfast and your back pain is disappearing. That is not consolation. To learn to become sensitive to the action of Holy Spirit is a great grace for the Church. I think this is an area where we can make our contribution without manipulation, for manipulation entails the lack of real freedom.

The third key-word in the process is integration. I think we can help the Church and one another by learning how to integrate our insights with the insights of the community. Here again comes communal discernment. This integration is something we have to learn. We have to listen again and again to each other and to the community. We are put in a position of great humility, and begin to hear, as it were, not only the individual musical notes but also the symphony of the whole orchestra.

Communal discernment requires much more humility than personal detachment. So also does the acceptance of the common good in preference to the private idea.

Here comes also ***the obedience to God through others.*** Obedience is difficult even for superiors. But we must all be obedient to the will of God. Authority is a part of the whole process of discernment, not an outside agent. ***Real communal discernment will find at the end that the authority will confirm the process.***

At the end of the process, I think it would help the Church on many levels if we open ourselves and look for signs confirming what has been discerned. It is certainly not helpful if we remain closed and fixed in our personal idea and refuse to accept a decision which may be contrary to our own, protesting that "I have already made my idea public and now

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cannot change, for if I did I would lose face and my authority". ***Interior signs of confirmation are joy, hope, charity in the community, sometimes even health.*** Fr Charles de Foucaud who wanted to do something harder, felt in his prayer Jesus telling him, "Charles, your health will help you find my will".

If the process becomes stressful, people get bored and consequently start falling off. This is a sign that the discernment was not good. About the stress, we have to consider that nowadays with fewer men we may be carrying the same load of work, and it may happen that we may go on like that until people collapse. This is not good discernment. Discernment requires a freedom from such situations.

In such a case we have to be courageous and determined enough to come to a tough decision, say, to discontinue a work, institution or ministry which may have been very successful in the past but which we now feel cannot be run any more. We must not kill people for a successful work. We thank God for the past, and hope somebody else would be able to continue that work in future.

External positive signs are the community itself, its consensus and sometimes the superior. But our personal gains are never good signs.

At the end we are always willing to revise everything if new signs or new data appear. Ignatius was always ready to reconsider. If he himself had this will and disposition, why don't we too have them? We are looking for the will of God and not for asserting our own authority. If we change our mind people may perhaps realize that after all we are trying to obey. I think that at this point all of us at some time or other have had or we will have to go through the test of our sincerity, honesty and the ability to change our mind.