



St Canice's Parish Elizabeth Bay, 9 November 2014

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Communal Apostolic Discernment

In 1534, Ignatius and his small group of companions discerned together what God might be asking of them as a fledgling religious community – that is they sifted through the options in a prayerful and systematic way. This process, known as “communal apostolic discernment” Ignatius has bequeathed as a great gift to the Church, perhaps needed now more than ever.

Background

- My experience of Ignatian spirituality
- Jesuit Renewal Course, Rome, 2009: Communal Apostolic Discernment
- Pope Francis' leadership of the Vatican Synod, October 2014

Introduction

- Throughout our Judeo-Christian history, God has raised up inspirational, prophetic figures to provide us with fresh hope and to point a way forward in responding to the needs of the Church and the world at that point in time.
- Such was St Ignatius of Loyola in 16th century Europe.
- Ignatian Spirituality was born out of the profound spiritual and human experience of St Ignatius- his own first of all, then his growing realisation that the pattern of this experience was valid for all those who begin to take seriously their relationship with God.
- For the past four and a half centuries, this Ignatian heritage has fuelled the spiritual fire of the Jesuit order and the many individuals and communities who have been inspired by its grace-filled spiritual and psychological insights.
- Such experience remains the starting-point for all our attempts to come to know the will of God by discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit within our hearts and, through spiritual conversation, in the hearts of our companions.
- Ultimately, the Ignatian person is drawn by the love of Christ to find God in all things and to seek the greater glory of God (*ad maiorem Dei Gloriam*).

Hence, we'll take as a broad outline for today's conversation:

- what discernment meant in the life of Ignatius,
- in the communal experience of the first companions and
- what it can mean, individually and communally, in the life of our Church.

Experience of Ignatius and the first companions (see accompanying fuller notes)

- Iñigo of Loyola: Family background and youth (1491-1521)
- Conversion at Pamplona (1521)
- Montserrat and Manresa (1522) – by the river Cardener
- Jerusalem, Paris and La Storta *en route* to Rome (1523-1556)
- Ignatius and companions take vows in Montmartre and discern where God is calling them as a group (1534)
- Ignatius and the companions in Rome (1540-1556) – the mission expands



Individual discernment / consolation and desolation (fuller notes, page 5)

Discernment: sifting movements felt within one's own heart, to determine

Which are from God, or lead to God → 'spiritual consolation'?

Which are not from God, or do not lead to God → 'spiritual desolation'?

- Spiritual consolation: feelings of peace, rightness and other positive emotions which draw one towards God.
- Spiritual desolation: feelings of disquiet, turmoil, confusion and other negative emotions which draw one away from God.

Communal discernment

Father General on discernment (from his talk at CIS program, Rome, 17 January 2009)

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?



Father Nicolás:

- Everything is changing. This is why we need to have an ongoing discernment. We are living in a world where our research is telling us that change may go beyond what we can foresee.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

Pope Francis on discernment (from interview in *America*, 30 September 2013)

Fr Anthony Spadaro SJ:

How do you understand the role of service to the universal church that you have been called to play in the light of Ignatian spirituality? What does it mean for a Jesuit to be elected pope? What element of Ignatian spirituality helps you live your ministry?

Pope Francis:

- Discernment. Discernment is one of the things that worked inside St. Ignatius. For him it is an instrument of struggle in order to know the Lord and follow him more closely.
- Discernment in the Lord guides me in my way of governing.
- Discernment is always done in the presence of the Lord, looking at the signs, listening to the things that happen, the feeling of the people, especially the poor. My choices, including those related to the day-to-day aspects of life, like the use of a modest car, are related to a spiritual discernment that responds to a need that arises from looking at things, at people and from reading the signs of the times.
- This discernment takes time. For example, many think that changes and reforms can take place in a short time. I believe that we always need time to lay the foundations for real, effective change. And this is the time of discernment.
- But I am always wary of decisions made hastily. I am always wary of the first decision, that is, the first thing that comes to my mind if I have to make a decision. This is usually the wrong thing. I have to wait and assess, looking deep into myself, taking the necessary time.
- The wisdom of discernment redeems the necessary ambiguity of life and helps us find the most appropriate means, which do not always coincide with what looks great and strong.
- I was always struck by a saying that describes the vision of Ignatius: *non coerceri a maximo, sed contineri a minimo divinum est* (“not to be limited by the greatest and yet to be contained in the tiniest - this is the divine”).
- This virtue of the large and small is magnanimity. Thanks to magnanimity, we can always look at the horizon from the position where we are. That means being able to do the little things of every day with a big heart open to God and to others. That means being able to appreciate the small things inside large horizons, those of the kingdom of God.
- This motto offers parameters to assume a correct position for discernment, in order to hear the things of God from God’s ‘point of view.’ According to St. Ignatius, great principles must be embodied in the circumstances of place, time and people.

Discernment of spirits – consolation and desolation

While convalescing in Loyola, Iñigo was given a copy of the life of Christ and a popular collection of lives of the saints. He began to take notes as he read; their influence made such a lasting impression on him that their influence can be seen in his later writings, especially the *Spiritual Exercises*.

It was also during this period of convalescence, that Iñigo began to notice that something deep within him was stirred while he was daydreaming. When dwelling on thoughts about God, he felt a deep peace and ‘rightness’, but when he frittered away his time on romantic and frivolous notions, he felt restless and dissatisfied. The terms Ignatius began to use for these movements were ‘consolation’ and ‘desolation’.

What Ignatius meant might be described as follows.

When a person is seriously trying to grow in the ways of God, those thoughts or behaviours which are consistent with this intention will bring the person ‘consolation’. Even if these actions might be regarded as ‘difficult’, such as going against one’s natural inclinations (*agere contra*), they bring a certain peace or feeling of ‘rightness’ because they are consistent with the interior movement of the Spirit.

At times the same person, although still oriented towards God, may act contrary to his/her deeper intentions or better self. This may lead to a certain tension or discomfort which St Paul captures when he says: “the will to do good within me I do not do, but find myself acting against my own good intentions...” (Rom 7:18-19). While the person remains in this state, they will feel ‘desolation’ because they are giving in to behaviour which draws them away from God either because of its very nature or because it creates in them a resistance to persevere in their first resolve.

On the other hand, a person who has deliberately chosen to move away from God and live a life of self-indulgence will find cheap ‘consolation’ in all that supports these selfish interests and ambitions. However, at some point they may begin to sense a growing dissatisfaction with their self-centred life and lifestyle. This experience of ‘desolation’ (because it is ‘contrary’ to their general direction) is a sign that the Spirit is nudging them to take stock, raising questions which disturb their comfort zone. For a person in this state, this experience of discomfort or ‘desolation’ has the potential to move them in a positive direction - towards God.

Over time, Ignatius came to understand these feelings as gifts of the Spirit, indicators which could be trusted whenever he had to make important decisions. By identifying them and reflecting on their meaning, a person is able to ‘discern’ which of these feelings or ‘spirits’ leaves them with a sense of ‘rightness’, a deep interior peace, “that peace which the world cannot give” (John 14:27).

Communal Discernment – a suggested process

Preliminary step Gather all relevant information re the matter for discernment.

Inner dispositions

1. The Holy Spirit speaks especially within our hearts

- Thinking clearly is important,
- but the real locus of the movement of the spirit is in our deepest self, our heart
- Notice the words Ignatius uses: feelings of peace, contentment, discomfort, anxiety - all 'feeling' words.

2. One of the best scriptural examples of this inner listening, and reflecting on the experience, is the encounter with the risen Jesus by two disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). - "Were not our hearts burning within us?" (v.32)

This inner movement of my heart is the CORE experience of the process of discernment. Viewed with the eyes of faith, it becomes:

I believe that my felt experience is the movement of the Holy Spirit drawing me towards God and to what God is asking of me.... of us.

3. Individual prayer. Each person takes time out to pray for the two key graces essential for genuine discernment:

- Openness to hear what God may be asking of me / us.
- Generosity of heart to assent when the way becomes clear.

1. The question for discernment and decision-making is stated clearly.
2. Members take time out for individual prayer, asking for the graces of openness, honesty, freedom from bias, and for help in seeking the best course of action.
3. In the large group, each one shares his/her reasons AGAINST the suggestion; there are no comments, but each listens with respect.
4. In the large group, each one shares his/her reasons FOR the suggestion; there are no comments, but each listens with respect.
5. A second short period of silence while each person weighs up both points of view, discerning which seems to sit rightly and brings most inner peace.
6. In the large group these are shared; the group endeavours to come to a consensus in a spirit of genuine detachment from one's own position and openness to what God seems to be saying through the group responses.
7. The leader takes a straw vote.
 - If the group is divided, it may help to repeat the process, if possible not immediately.
 - If there is a consensus, the decision is taken at whatever level is appropriate.

