

# DISCERNMENT AS A WORK OF THE CHURCH

*Nicholas Austin*

## ***Becoming the Discerning Church***

A YEAR AGO, I gave a series of three talks on the discerning Church to a group of Catholic students and academics. On the first evening, I spoke about Pope Francis's exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (The Joy of Love), because of its theme of discernment. The document had followed two synods of bishops that addressed the contemporary crisis in the family. One especially difficult issue raised from the outset, which had received much media attention, concerned communion for those remarried after divorce. Rather than offering a universal or canonical norm, the bishops and Pope Francis found the way forward in the practice of discernment.

Given the diversity of situations, the application of a set of rules without discernment is not sufficient to find what God is asking of a person here and now: only 'careful discernment of particular cases' can do that.<sup>1</sup> Motivated by mercy, therefore, pastors need to learn how to accompany people and exercise a pastoral discernment that seeks to integrate people more deeply into the life of the Church.<sup>2</sup> Pastors, moreover, are called to 'form consciences, not to replace them' since the faithful 'are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations'.<sup>3</sup> What Pope Francis advocates in his exhortation on the family, then, is formation in discernment, for both pastors and laypeople.

I was somewhat taken aback by the reaction of the audience I was addressing. As a Jesuit moral theologian, I am not used to being accused of heterodoxy for defending what the Pope says. *The Church is just confusing people*, one person complained, *People will think that anything goes*. Another

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, nn. 79, 304.

<sup>2</sup> *Amoris laetitia*, chapter 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Amoris laetitia*, n. 37.



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said, *This is a disaster: it's overturning doctrine.* Yet another appealed to a well-known theologian who, he said, had shown that Pope Francis was leading people into heresy. Some were clearly quite angry with the Pope, and with me. For some, the appeal to discernment where there was a perceived need for clarity was disconcerting. They preferred what they saw as St Pope John Paul II's prophetic clarity on moral issues and his own insistence that communion was not be offered to the remarried. Some things are black or white, and it does not help to get caught in the grey.

I stayed behind after the talk and I heard from others who were more encouraged by Pope Francis's message. *In complex situations, is it not precisely discernment that we most need?* Another said, *Pope Francis is right: mercy is the only way.* Yet another commented, *For those who work with people pastorally, this is very inspiring.* I was also acutely conscious that there were those in the group who had said nothing, either in the plenary discussion or to me personally. I wondered what they were thinking.

Fortunately, I had most of the next day to make sense of the responses and prepare my second evening talk. I spent time in prayer. I tried to discern a way forward. Eventually, I tore up the talk I had prepared on the character of discernment and decided to do something different. I began the next session by saying,

*It is great that we have such different voices, because it means that our topic has just gone live. The discerning Church is no longer just an academic question. For we, in this lecture room, are a microcosm of the Church. Some voices are saying one thing, others another, and still others are yet to speak. There are different voices, and there are diverse spirits moving us. So, we have no*

*choice but to discern. Our task is no longer just to discuss a topic of shared curiosity; we have to become, here and now, the discerning Church ourselves.*

The challenge that faced that group of students and academics is, I believe, the challenge that faces the whole Church, as we attempt to understand better where the Lord is calling us in the manifold challenges of our day: not just to talk or write about the discerning Church, but to begin together to become the discerning Church.

### *The Early Church in Process*

The Church is called to discernment, but it is always in the process of learning how to do it better. For evidence of this ecclesial fact, we can turn to the Acts of the Apostles, which recounts, among other things, the story of the early Church as it learns to become a community guided by the Holy Spirit.

In the very first chapter of Acts, we find the disciples facing their first test after the risen Lord has left them: whom should they elect as an apostle to replace Judas? They begin well: they choose two people who had accompanied Jesus and the disciples from the baptism of John until the resurrection itself, of which they could be witnesses. They continue well: they turn to prayer to ask for guidance from the Lord. So far so good. Then what? They cast lots.

Should we accept the casting of lots as a good method of discernment? After all, it has precedent in the Bible, precisely as a method of decision-making that the first apostles used. While the Church has generally been against the casting of lots, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and others have not precluded the possibility that, in a case of last resort, and done with due reverence, the practice might be legitimate, as when it is necessary to choose one out of a group to stay behind in a time of persecution.<sup>4</sup> In the case of electing someone to an important office, there may not be any great harm in choosing between two good candidates by lot, and there may even be some advantages to the procedure. The Coptic Orthodox Church, in its process of choosing the Coptic Pope, uses the casting of lots in the final part of the process of election, to choose between three agreed-upon candidates.

Yet, generally speaking, casting lots does not amount to a reliable method of discerning God's will. It is good to recall that, at this point in the Church's early history, as recorded in the first chapter of Acts, the

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.2, q.95, a.9.

disciples are post-ascension but still pre-pentecost. The believers cast lots to choose the twelfth apostle because they neither have the Lord to guide them, nor have yet fully received the gift of the Holy Spirit. They have yet to learn how to be led by the Spirit. This early Church, like our own today, cannot yet claim to be the discerning Church.

The narrative continues. By the time we reach chapter 15 of Acts, the community is faced with a major test. It arises, not from the outside, but from the inside. Some Pharisee Christians have been telling the gentile converts that unless they are circumcised and adopt the Jewish dietary laws, they cannot be saved. Paul and Barnabas are furious, sensing that, if every Christian must observe the whole of the Law, the mission to the gentiles will be endangered. They appeal to James and the elders in Jerusalem to resolve the issue, and the Council of Jerusalem is convoked.<sup>5</sup>

Note that the dispute involves a clash between radically differing perspectives on the Christian life. The two groups involved are not merely in conflict over a matter of church discipline: there is a fundamental theological disagreement over how we are saved. For the Pharisees, we are saved by doing God's will as revealed in the Torah; for Paul and Barnabas, we are saved by grace.

What is fascinating about the first Council of the Church is that, despite the fundamental theological issue at stake, rational arguments do not offer a resolution. Both sides can argue cogently from scripture. The Pharisees can quote from the Law, just as their opponents can quote the prophets who see salvation reaching all nations. The elders, therefore, need to adopt a different method, an alternative to mere debate.

Their solution is to listen. First, according to Luke's account, they listen to Peter's testimony, based on his encounter with the gentile convert Cornelius. Then there is a beautiful description of an attentive silence that falls upon the Council: 'The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles' (Acts 15:12). Notice, then, that the elders of the Council are not just listening: they are listening *for* something, namely, signs of the action of the Holy Spirit.

This is what issues in the discernment and resolves the question. Through actively listening for the work of the Spirit, they recognise that Christ's Spirit is already active among the gentiles who have been

<sup>5</sup> My reading of this chapter has been influenced by J. Lyle Story, 'The Jerusalem Council: A Pivotal and Instructive Paradigm', *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership*, 3/1 (Winter 2010), 33-60.

baptized, even those who are not circumcised. James issues a letter that concedes something to the Pharisees, perhaps to keep them on board, but fundamentally allows the gentiles to continue in the Church without circumcision and the whole weight of the Jewish Law. The Council also confirms the ministry of Paul and Barnabas by sending leaders among the community to accompany them to Antioch. The consequences of this freeing, Spirit-led ecclesial discernment are still with us today.

In taking the Council of Jerusalem as an exemplar of the discerning Church for today, a word of caution is necessary. Luke's account, while it does not entirely hide some of the loose ends left by the discernment, nevertheless does have the feel of an idealized narrative. In contrast, the account of what is apparently the same event in Galatians 2:1-10 is followed by Paul's mention of his frank opposition to Cephas (normally assumed to be Peter), who, he claimed, had drawn back from the gentiles because he was afraid of the group advocating circumcision (Galatians 2:11-14). There was tension even between Peter and Paul on this issue, and Paul was not reticent about challenging Peter to his face. This may suggest to us today that discernment in the Church does not always happen in ideal conditions of mutual attentiveness and unanimity. At times what Brian Grogan has called a 'noisy discernment' may be needed.<sup>6</sup> Yet the core practice, whether peaceful or noisy, surely remains normative: to strive together, as Church, to discern where the Spirit is leading.

### *The Synodal Church Today*

What we see in the early Church we see also in the Church today, namely, the Church in the process of becoming the discerning Church, a Church able to identify the work of the Holy Spirit among us and to follow its lead. In my talk to the students and academics, what we collectively realised is that trying to force one's view on others does not resolve anything. We had to stop broadcasting and start listening to each other, especially to those who had not yet spoken. Bit by bit, our conversation changed from the shrill sound of argumentative debate to one of mutual attentiveness and respect. We began listening to each other because we were listening for the Spirit of Christ. We began speaking differently, also, with more humility and less concern to have our own viewpoint

<sup>6</sup> See Gerard F. O'Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis: A Synodal Catholic Church in Ireland?* (Dublin: Messenger, 2018), 105 note.

vindicated. I believe we learnt more about where God is leading the Church than if we had continued without a discerning way of proceeding.

The need for a discerning Church is a key emphasis of Pope Francis's reform. I first learnt of this, not from a Jesuit, but from a Dominican. In February 2014, I found myself sitting in a church in Belfast listening to Timothy Radcliffe, former Master of the Dominicans, talk about Pope Francis's agenda for the reform of the Church. He had just come from a meeting with the Pope. Fr Timothy was convinced, he said, that Francis believed that radical change was necessary, but that he did not have a blueprint or a checklist. What Francis wanted, he said, was a Church 'sensitive to the least breath of the Holy Spirit', a Church that was open to being led by 'the unpredictability of grace'.

We see this emphasis on the discerning Church in Pope Francis's reform of the synod, the regular meeting of the bishops from around the world that assists the Pontiff in his governance and teaching. The synod was founded by Pope Paul VI as a way of continuing the spirit of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>7</sup> On its fiftieth anniversary, Francis set out his own vision, telling the bishops that the synod is 'one of the most precious legacies of the Second Vatican Council' and explaining that it



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*A meeting of the synod of bishops*

<sup>7</sup> Paul VI, *Apostolica sollicitudo*, 15 September 1965.

is a key aspect of his ministry as Pope to ‘enhance’ it. The synod is meant to be an ‘image’ of the council and is ‘to reflect its spirit and method’.<sup>8</sup>

Francis’s vision for the synodal Church reflects the language of discernment.

A synodal Church is a Church of listening. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn: the faithful, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome; each listening to the others; and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (John 14:17), to know what he ‘says to the Churches’ (Revelation 2:7).<sup>9</sup>

A synodal Church, then, is a discerning Church, in which everyone listens to each other, in order to listen to the Holy Spirit.

One condition of the discerning, synodal Church, for Francis, is not merely listening, but speaking. He recounts how a cardinal had written to him saying that it was a shame that some bishops declined to say certain things, either out of respect for the Pope or fear he would disagree. Francis responds, ‘This is not good, this is not synodality, because it is necessary to say all that, in the Lord, one feels the need to say: without polite deference, without hesitation’.<sup>10</sup> Francis employs an important New Testament word to insist that the bishops should speak with frankness: *parrhesia*.

*Parrhesia* is bold, frank, free speech.<sup>11</sup> It is the kind of speech displayed by the apostles after pentecost. As Francis tells the synod bishops, ‘I ask of you, please, to employ these approaches as brothers in the Lord: speaking with *parrhesia* and listening with humility’.<sup>12</sup> The reason that *parrhesia* is necessary for community discerning together is that the Spirit may use the voice of any one of the participants to speak its own message. As Francis puts it elsewhere, ‘In the Synod, the Spirit speaks by means of the tongue of every person, who lets himself be guided by God, who always surprises’.<sup>13</sup> Not to be ready to speak with boldness and frankness would not be a sign of true humility, but a pusillanimous lack of willingness to be used by the Spirit for the good of all.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis, address on the fiftieth anniversary of the synod of bishops, 17 October 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, address on the fiftieth anniversary.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis, ‘Greeting to the Synod Fathers during the First General Congregation of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops’, 6 October 2014.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed definition, see *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, abridged edn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Pope Francis, ‘Greeting to the Synod Fathers’.

<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis, introductory remarks to the Synod for the Family, 5 October 2015.

The word *synod*, Francis explains, comes from the Greek *sun hodos*, and literally means ‘journeying together’. He insists that *synodality* is not just for the bishops, but for the whole Church: it should characterize the Church at every level. One sign of his commitment to the synodality of the whole Church is his decision that the two synods on the family be preceded by an attempt to consult all the lay faithful. While this consultation was not always done well, it is a remarkable thing that it was done at all. The theological rationale for the consultation is Francis’s pneumatological approach to ecclesiology: since every baptized person has received the Holy Spirit, potentially every Christian has the capacity to discern the voice of the Spirit. Francis explains:

As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith—*sensus fidei*—which helps them to discern what is truly of God. The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression.<sup>14</sup>

To fail to consult the faithful, to listen to their sense of the faith, to their discernment of what is of God and what is not, is to close the Church off from many tongues through which the Spirit may choose to speak. However, the obligation here falls not merely on the bishops, to listen with humility and with an open heart, but also on the laity, to be ready to speak with *parrhesia*. The theologian Gerry O’Hanlon confirms that discernment is the ‘key factor’ in Francis’s programme of reform and his advocacy of a synodal Church. He states:

At the heart of this reform lies a personal and communal discernment of what it is God wants of our Church now, a discernment that takes account in its formation of doctrine of the ‘sense of the faithful’ (not least popular piety and the voice of the poor), the voice of theologians, and the authoritative role of pope and bishops. It also allows for lay participation in the Church governance. The potential for change in this more inclusive ecclesial way of proceeding is enormous.<sup>15</sup>

Pope Francis recognises, then, that the whole Church is called to become discerning. ‘Today the Church needs to grow in discernment, in

<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 119.

<sup>15</sup> Gerry O’Hanlon, ‘Reforming the Catholic Church’, address to We Are Church Ireland, 27 May 2017, available at <http://wearechurchireland.ie/reforming-the-catholic-church/>, accessed 20 September 2019.



the ability to discern'.<sup>16</sup> His reforms are motivated by a desire for a more discerning Church, in the bishops' synods, the local church, the parish pastoral council, pastoral accompaniment and, ultimately, the consciences of individual Christians. As Francis puts it, 'Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out'.<sup>17</sup>

### *The Role of the Ignatian Family*

The Ignatian family has a special role in responding to Pope Francis's call for a more discerning Church. Ignatius Loyola's first experience of spiritual discernment, as he lay on his invalid's bed in the castle at Loyola, changed his life. 'His eyes were opened a little', and he became the Pilgrim, searching through discernment for the path of true consolation and enduring joy.<sup>18</sup> As well as clearly having the gift of discernment himself, he was especially good at teaching it to others, and his Spiritual Exercises form an intensive school of discernment. Within the Ignatian tradition today many thousands of people are helped in their relationships with God and their key life-decisions by this simple yet deep practice. This is why, according to the Thirty-Sixth Jesuit General Congregation, discernment is part of that 'special gift Jesuits and the Ignatian family have to offer to the Church'.<sup>19</sup> And yet, like the early Church, we are still learning about discernment, still trying to find out what the discerning Church might look like. Above all, like them, we are still in the process of becoming the discerning Church.

Another word of caution is necessary here, lest our Ignatian enthusiasm for discernment become self-defeating. For while the Ignatian family has a specific role in forming others in discernment, to overidentify discernment with the Ignatian would be to place a barrier to the development of discernment as a charism proper to all the baptized faithful. Consider the following papal quotation:

[Evangelical] discernment is accomplished through the sense of faith, which is a gift that the Spirit gives to all the faithful, and is therefore the work of the whole Church according to the diversity of the various gifts and charisms .... The Church, therefore, does not accomplish this discernment only through the Pastors ... but also through the laity:

<sup>16</sup> Pope Francis, address to Jesuits in Poland, 30 July 2016, quoted in Pope Francis and Antonio Spadaro, *Open to God, Open to the World*, translated by Shaun Whiteside (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 174.

<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Autobiography*, n. 8.

<sup>19</sup> GC 36, decree 1, n. 23.

Christ 'made them His witnesses and gave them understanding of the faith and the grace of speech (cf. Acts 2: 17-18; Revelation 19: 10)' ....

You may be surprised to hear that this is a quotation, not from Pope Francis, but from Pope John Paul II.<sup>20</sup> The latter is known for his emphasis, especially in morals, on the teaching authority of the Magisterium. Yet Pope Francis inherits from his predecessor a theology of discernment as flowing from the baptismal gift of the Holy Spirit and therefore the work of the whole Church. I do not want to gloss over the real differences between these two figures. Where John Paul II emphasizes the teaching Church, Francis accents the listening and learning Church; where John Paul underlines universally binding precepts of the natural law taught by the Magisterium, to which the consciences of the laity should remain faithful, Francis wants to give breathing space to individual consciences to discern where God is leading them here and now. Yet both agree in seeing discernment as a charism potentially universal to all Christians, and as a work of the Church as a whole.

There is need for a delicate balance here, therefore. While discernment is indeed a keynote of Ignatian spirituality, if we make of it something too exclusively Ignatian, we subvert our mission of fostering a culture of discernment in the Church as a whole. Not all are called to be Ignatian, yet all are called to discern.

It helps to recall that Ignatius is only one moment, albeit a significant moment, in the history of discernment.<sup>21</sup> Key figures in this history before Ignatius include Origen, Antony, Evagrius, Cassian, Benedict, Gregory, Bernard, Richard of St Victor, Jean Gerson, Bernadino, and Denys the Carthusian. After him come Mary Ward, Cardinal Bona, Scaramelli and, in the Reform tradition, Jonathan Edwards, who writes an entire treatise on discernment of spirits. This is not even to mention the Quakers, for whom a kind of discernment is the basis for their meetings and all their decision-making.

The Church's tradition of discernment, in all its breadth and depth from the desert monks to the Quakers, is both humbling and liberating. It is humbling because Jesuits and the Ignatian family realise they have sometimes been too quick to identify their own spirituality with discernment. It is liberating because discernment is not restricted to those

<sup>20</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, n. 5.

<sup>21</sup> For a survey of this history, see Mark A. McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* (New York and Edinburgh: Independent Publishers' Group, 2004).

specially versed in one school of spirituality but is the common patrimony of the Christian tradition, and this recognition underlines for the Ignatian family that they have a role in both fostering a culture of discernment in the Church and living it more fully in their own lives and ministries. Discernment is a work of the whole Church; discernment is for all.

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