DISCERNMENT FOR ALL

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CHRISTIAN ORGANIZATIONS AND GROUPS have increasingly begun to use the techniques of discernment to find how the Spirit is leading them in their day-to-day or long-term decision-making. These techniques are often based on one or other of two sections in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. But, more and more, such groups, though perhaps originally run by religious orders, are staffed and often led by laypeople, who may have had only little training or experience in discernment. It may easily be that few staff are Christians. Can such an organization still be a discerning one in the Ignatian sense?

It would not be ideal if a few—a sort of elite—were to be the anointed people who discern, and the rest merely followers. My purpose here is to show that Ignatian discernment can be used in non-Christian groups, not being left to an elite few but involving most of the staff and volunteers. In what follows I am referring to the experience of an organization which is non-religious—which welcomes and works with people who are religious in outlook (of any faith, Christian or not), or agnostic, or atheist.

There are two points to make at the start. It is surely the case that the Spirit will be there to guide any organization which serves the people of God and seeks to help them to have a more fully human existence. In the recent encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis bases his teaching on a detailed analysis of the parable of the Good Samaritan and the law of love that it clarifies. But, having established this as a basis, he devotes much of the document—on what it means for the people who live in the common home (as described in *Laudato si'*) to share universal fraternity and social friendship with all who need friendship and help—without referring directly to any religious foundations.

The second point is that if you are running a hedge fund and seeking for the best way to make your next billion, then this article

may not be for you. The Spirit, after all, discerns where guidance and inspiration should be applied.

Two Ways of Understanding Discernment

The concept of discernment seems to be used in two contexts, both ultimately deriving from the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius.

The first context of discernment arises in the making of the Spiritual Exercises themselves—specifically the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits and the three moments of Election. Here the intention is to approach an important decision in the light of God's action in the world, and specifically in ourselves, and to make this decision as far as possible in a state of indifference (that is, balance or lack of personal bias), against the background of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, which surrounds this time in the Spiritual Exercises. Such a decision is made in one of what St Ignatius describes as 'times' or 'moments', and it is useful to recall these.

- The first moment is 'when God our Lord moves and attracts the will in such a way that a devout person, without doubting or being able to doubt, carries out what was proposed' (Exx 175).
- The second moment is 'when sufficient clarity and knowledge are received from the experience of consolation and desolation, and from the experience in the discernment of various spirits' (Exx 176).
- The third is based on a consideration of the pros and cons of a particular course of action, as seen from a perspective without bias (Exx 178–183).

Any or all of these moments can occur in any discernment. But it is the context within which the decision is taken that makes discernment different from ordinary decision-making.

The second approach to discernment, much more common, is based on St Ignatius' writing on the Examen (Exx 24 and 26 following). As presented in the Exercises it is a process designed to rid oneself of a particular sin or fault (it appears from Exx 31 that this would have been occurring many times each day). Holiness, of course, is not achieved by simply removing lots of little faults (or

even big ones), but by trying to follow God's call. So the Examen nowadays is seen as a review of the past day or so with a view to seeing if there is anything that strikes us (that is, anything accompanied by consolation or desolation) as leading towards a closer following of God's will. It is guidance as much drawing us towards an action as avoiding one.

The Background to Discernment

When engaged in any discernment, it is crucial to examine two things: first, the value system within which the discernment is being made, and secondly the commitment that participants have to this value system. It is the harmony or disharmony of the decision with the value systems that we hold, and our commitment to those values, which are the basis of discernment. If, for example, I am committed to a life of self-indulgence, then the thought of going and buying a nice expensive meal for myself will bring consolation—a point brought out by St Ignatius in the first week Rules for the Discernment of Spirits (especially Exx 314 and Exx 315).

First, to clarify the value system or vision: in making the Exercises we devote the Second Week to contemplating Jesus Christ as he goes about his work. We get to know him, and so we learn the values that underpin what he does and the decisions he makes—values which we hope to understand and hold. Secondly, as we move towards the Election in the Second Week of the Exercises, St Ignatius asks us to consider the Call of the King—how a loyal follower would respond to a committed and inspiring leader—and the Two Standards—considering where our commitment should lie.

The Call of the King presents some problems nowadays, because the king's call is 'to conquer the whole land of the infidels', to put up with all the hardships of the enterprise, 'so that they may have a part with me in the victory' (Exx 93). To avoid the implication of disrespectful and sectarian warfare this is often now presented rather as the call of an inspirational leader, perhaps someone devoted to working to relieve poverty or provide medical care where it is needed, who asks us to join him or her in the rigours of such work.

So, in any work where we are making a decision, the Call of the King can simply be presented as a restatement of the charism and

insight of the leader who is inviting us or of the work in which we are called to participate. One thinks, for example, of the people who work with Médecins Sans Frontières—who travel to war-torn and disease-ridden parts of the world, facing suffering and danger. Many who work with charities stress the importance of accompanying those whom we serve—standing with them in facing injustice, abuse, even if that is only being with them in their pain. This is the kind of inspiration and dedication that we admire in the King in Exx 93.

It is the position of the Election—the making of a decision—in the Exercises that is crucial. It is preceded by a contemplation of God's intention to send Jesus Christ to save the human race (Exx 102); an invitation to follow Jesus Christ as a charismatic leader (the Call of the King, Exx 91–100); a consideration of the characteristics of this leadership (the Two Standards, Exx 136–148); and an extended examination of Jesus Christ's work for the people of his time, always accompanied by a prayer that we may follow him more closely (Exx 104). It is within this context that decisions are made—a vision of Jesus' enterprise in the world and a commitment to put it into practice.

Consolation and Desolation

We need to think carefully about the terms *consolation* and *desolation*.[1] Part of the problem is that each guide will have a different take on what the terms mean or, more precisely, what they feel like or how to recognise them. Being definite about what consolation and desolation are is not simple—a glance through the 300-odd pages of Jules Toner's book *A Commentary on Saint Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits* will show a wide range of viewpoints, from St Ignatius' insistence that consolation is the work of the good spirit, to 'stir up courage and strength, consolation, tears, inspirations and tranquillity' (Exx 115), to definitions that reject all elements of feeling.

People often define consolation as a sense of peace and, by contrast, desolation as either darkness in prayer or depression

[1] St Ignatius refers to spiritual consolation and spiritual desolation, but in common parlance these are usually abbreviated to consolation and desolation, and we shall follow that practice here.

(none of these is correct). Many of us will have been to retreats and talks where we are invited to ask the Holy Spirit to guide us and then to see if we have a feeling of peace about something. Such a process is not likely to be a valid discernment.

What is key to understanding consolation and desolation, both in the Christian context and in non-religious ones, is the background or situation in which we find ourselves: the values that we are coming to hold and our commitment to them. The nice or positive feeling that we tend to call consolation is only valid in people who are both familiar with and committed to a particular view of the world and the values that they hold, according to the depth of response with which they adhere to the ideals of the organization they represent or the faith they profess. Thus, in the Exercises, consolation and desolation are defined only for the person who has been following the Exercises so far, and has committed him- or herself to service under the standard of Christ (Exx 145). It is only against the background of the values and vision that we hold and, within that, our commitment, that discernment of spirits is possible.

Making discernment possible in a non-religious situation is therefore mainly a question of defining and fostering commitment to the values, vision and ideals relevant in that situation. Without this background and commitment any kind of discernment is impossible. For example, the Jesuit Refugee Service is a non-religious group, a mixed bunch of committed people, though their core values are derived from a following of Jesus Christ. One ideal of their work is *accompaniment*. There is quite a lot of training in the meaning of this ideal and what it represents in our relations with the refugee-friends whom Jesuit Refugee Service welcomes and supports. This plays out throughout the organization, in practical decisions such as how to organize the giving out of winter coats, for example: choices will be made against the background of a shared understanding of accompaniment and commitment to it. When a decision is reached, people will say 'that feels right', which is the sign of consolation—the way to organize the coat distribution 'feels right' against the background of a shared commitment to a right understanding of accompaniment.

So the process of discernment involves making a decision following a vision and a set of values that we hold, within a

commitment to put them into practice as far as we possibly can. The process of facilitating a discernment in a person or a group is first to work through the value system that we shall accept, and then establish whether there is a commitment to putting it into practice. Only then, in the interplay of consolation and desolation, will we see the right way ahead. And, whether we ask or not, the Spirit will be there to guide us into all that is good. It is the task of the leadership of the organization to spell out the values that the organization holds and foster commitment to them in its the members.

Karl Rahner makes much the same point:

> It may be said too that nearly everyone in grave decisions makes a choice more or less exactly in the way Ignatius conceives it, just as the man in the street uses logic without ever having studied it, and yet it remains useful to draw inferences by means of logic that one has studied. In such decisions a man thinks things over for a long time. Consequently in every case he will probably make his decisions through a fundamental global awareness of himself actually present and making itself felt in him during this space of time, and through a feeling of the harmony or disharmony of the object of choice with this fundamental feeling he has about himself. He will not only nor ultimately make his decision by a rational analysis but by whether he feels that something 'suits him' or not. And this feeling will be judged by whether the matter pleases, delights, brings peace and satisfaction. There is much significance in this use of the word peace to describe what is found in a right decision.
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> The difference between Ignatius' logic of concrete particulars and that of daily life does not, then, lie in the formal structure of each, bur in their application to a particular range of objects. With Ignatius it is a question of recognizing the harmony between the object of choice and a person's precise individual mode of religious life … if, nevertheless, someone wanted to and had to indicate more precisely what this certainty was like and how it arises, could they say anything very different from what St Ignatius says? Is his teaching, worked out into its essentials, of what the faithful do by and large every day … ?[2]

[2] Karl Rahner, 'The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola', in *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (Freiburg: Herder and Herder, 1964), 166–167.

The Background in Contemporary Catholic Christianity

To illustrate why this is so important, I would like to recall two scenes from my own life.

The first is when I was about seventeen, in a good Roman Catholic school; I was (I think) seen as a good Catholic boy. As a devout member of the sodality, I said the rosary regularly and, on Friday afternoons, wore my broad blue sash and stood with the other members before the Blessed Sacrament, in front of the rest of the school at Friday benediction. As a good sodalist, I read the scriptures each week at our meeting and we did our 'see, judge, act' routine. I cannot remember ever having actually done anything, and I cannot now conceive how I could have kept reading the Gospels without seeing the strong call to social action which now seems to me to be so obvious. I was growing up in a context of praying and avoiding sin; I was committed to that; and against that background and with that commitment I was blind to the very real needs of the world, and to how I might help.

Just over fifty years later I was working as a chaplain in a Catholic school where, on Wednesday afternoons, a large group of pupils from the sixth form went to local schools and charities to help and support those in need. On their return, they would fill in their logs and discuss what they were learning from this experience of Christian charity and of the world in which they found themselves. They were growing up in what seemed to be a different Catholic Church from the one I had known. Their background was a call to be involved in the world, to make it a better place, and their commitment was to that ideal.

Since Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church is different. We know now that God comes to save everyone, and that we are all called to work together in the common endeavour to care for everyone in our common home—and that call is regardless of our faith and beliefs. Perhaps we who follow St Ignatius' teaching can bring to the table a way of finding the good—the very best—in the light of the revelation that God is offering to everyone in the world. Humans can, and perhaps are coming to, share a common set of values; increasingly there is a commitment that, 'in the face of present-day attempts to eliminate or ignore others, we may prove

capable of responding with a new vision of fraternity and social friendship that will not remain at the level of words'.[3] 'The level of words' is the background of values, and we rise above it to commitment.

Fratelli tutti

It is interesting to see how Pope Francis deals with discernment and decision-making in the light of the Spirit in *Fratelli tutti*: 'an invitation to dialogue among all people of good will' (Exx 6). The inspiration and the vision are derived from the scriptures, but the bulk of the document is addressed to everyone, of any or no religion.

Chapter 1 of *Fratelli tutti* has a close affiliation with the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises—a gloomy chapter surveying all the problems we have created for ourselves as we live in our common home. Chapter 2 is based on scripture, especially on the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is discussed at length. From this Pope Francis derives several key principles which will form the background or vision for the subsequent reflection (or discernment). Chapter 3 and the subsequent chapters guide the reader in the working out of this vision in the daily life of the world—outlining the vision of fraternity (the relationship that should exist between members of our common home), social friendship (practical action for those who need our help), the common good (the basis for good decision-making) and solidarity (standing with others in their need and their difficulties). All of these constitute a vision to guide and inspire governments, politicians, bankers, multinationals, international relationships—a vision of universal fraternity, social friendship and solidarity towards everyone. It is a remarkable working out of a vision among the great and small structures of the non-religious world.

The Good of God's People and God's World

Discernment is a process which can be followed by any group or organization which works for the betterment of God's world. The leaders of the group will consider its values and vision (which may

[3] Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, n. 6.

well be strongly Christian), express those values and vision to others, and encourage everyone to commit themselves to putting them into practice. In their decision-making at every level all members will be able to experience the presence of (or absence of) the peace that says 'that feels right'. We could label that 'consolation' (or maybe 'desolation') but there is no need to. And the Holy Spirit, who guides every process that seeks the good of God's people and God's world, will be active to guide the process.

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