

Discernment Readings

Where the church exists as something more than institution or ethical society, it is marked by this kind of faith. The church is a paschal community, dying in order to live. In the lives of its individual members, faith seeks to discern the call of God in their particular circumstances. As a group, the community as well seeks to discern, the Word spoken to this people in the challenges of the present moment. The identity of the church is always being shaped by its response to God's call in the context of its worldly life.

The relevance of this for our present discussion should be clear: the *implicit* choices of the group, which the challenge to change ought to make explicit, are the choices of faith for God's Word. This means, in turn, that the process of making decisions in the church will involve the interpretation of God's Word. The church is called into existence in the first place, sustained and addressed by the activity of God both within it and outside it. The church believes, therefore, that -- however darkly -- it is being called as a group by the working of God in its members. This working of God requires scrutiny, discernment. Is this truly God's Word which is being spoken to us in these circumstances, or a counterfeit of that Word? Discernment, the process of sorting, evaluating, and distinguishing among competing voices, is already a kind of decision.

Decision Making in the Church: A Biblical Model, Luke Johnson

As we have seen, the emphasis given to discernment in the early tradition was on personal discernment as a means of personal spiritual growth. There seems little in the early writings after the Council of Jerusalem to indicate the use of discernment for community or group decision making. According to Ann Graff there is some hint of this possibility as early as Origen, however, to be found in the theological anthropology. Reflecting on his insights, she writes:

...discernment is seen as a gift and an ability acquired on the path toward God, and that aids one to recognize and follow that path. The Possessor of such a gift is gradually able to distinguish with more surety what is of God and what is not. This person learns to distinguish not only what pertains to the relation and direction of his/her own life toward God, but also what characterizes the Christian community. (1)

Saint Benedict, writing his *Rule* in the fifth century, also seems to move in this communal direction when he insists that the entire community be gathered for the sharing of wisdom when decisions need to be made. His reasoning is clear: The abbot is to consult all because the Spirit gives wisdom to all, "even the youngest." But we have no historical accounts of this communal use of the gift of discernment until Ignatius and his little community of followers were faced with a serious question about their future as a community. That was in 1539, and the process they developed, "The Deliberation," moves the tradition very clearly into the communal experience. It is this process, then, that I wish to pursue, both in terms of its theology and structure and in terms of its implications for the shared wisdom model.
The goal, then, is to arrive at a "shared decision"-shared both in the input that comes from all the members and in the final acceptance of the decision by all the members.

Since discernment is both a gift and an acquired ability, it calls not only for surrender to the gift of the Spirit but also for the development of a process or method in and through which that gift can be touched and nuanced. Summarizing how these basic concepts were understood and put into practice by Ignatius and his early followers as they worked their way through that first deliberation, Jules Toner notes:

There are two main parts. The first is taken up with penance, intense prayer, meditation, and Eucharistic liturgy, all in order to attain and maintain purity of

heart, freedom of spirit before God and to beg for enlightenment from God. Without purification in adequate measure (who can attain it fully?) and without prayer for God's enlightenment, no one should begin deliberation or long continue in it. The second part of the method is a set of procedures to protect freedom of spirit and mutual openness among the participants while carrying on deliberation, to move the deliberation as smoothly as possible and to bring it to a definite conclusion. (3)

The first thing to be considered, then, is the depth of prayer life to which these men committed themselves.

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It is important for us to note that even though Ignatius and his followers agreed to increase their prayer and penance, they did so without limiting their normal apostolic activities. They considered three ways of going about this process. One was to stop all regular ministry and to go away to a place of solitude where they could devote themselves to only this one effort. Another was to commission a few of their number to devote themselves full time to discerning the will of God, with the understanding that all would accept the final decision of the few. Both of these options were rejected. The entire group was to be involved; and that involvement, in terms of personal preparation as well as communal sharing and deliberation, was to be added to the regular and apparently quite demanding schedule of apostolic activity. This historical factor is most helpful to us in our efforts to translate the model for councils and boards, groups typically composed of very active and committed members of the parish and diocese!

Another critical concept is to be found in the shared commitment that held Ignatius and his followers together. In today's church we call an understanding of that commitment a charism or a mission statement. The mission statement expresses the purpose for which the parish or diocese or community exists and serves to focus the group on a unified commitment. It is therefore able to serve as a criterion for decision making while also limiting the possibilities of choices in a positive and healthy way.
But how that life of God touches and forms and challenges that community is related to why that community exists-what it feels itself to be called to, that is, its charism or mission.

Two concerns immediately become evident. The first has to do with the dialectic of community.The dialectic is built into the challenge! We very seldom are brave enough to ask the question, at least out loud or seriously, but that does not make it less important. That question, simply put, is:

What are we to be about ---
a church *being* community or
a church *doing* ministry?

The answer is not, of course, either! or as much as it must be both! and. Any diocese or parish or religious community must be able to see its ministry flowing from its mission.

Any group wishing to engage in a discerning process or model must have first dealt with this dialectic and come to terms with it in their charism or mission statement. Faith sharing and the sharing of religious values allow decision makers to arrive at mission statements that enable their ministry decisions to be congruent with what they claim to be called to as a community, a parish, or a diocese.

Shared Wisdom, Mary Benet McKinney

In classical spirituality, discernment means distinguishing God's Spirit from other spirits that are present in a given time and place-such as the spirit of a nation, the spirit of the times, the spirit of competition. To put it another way, discernment is distinguishing the voice of God from other voices that speak to us: the voice of our parents echoing from years past, the voices of friends, voices of urgency or fear. These voices are neither bad nor good in and of themselves. God often speaks to us through them. But, if followed indiscriminately, such voices can dominate us and lead us along a wrong path.

Discernment is a prayerful, informed, and intentional attempt to sort through these voices to get in touch with God's Spirit at work in a situation and to develop a sense of the direction in which the Spirit is leading. Discernment is more a journey than a destination. We may not find answers for all our concerns, but we can be receptive to God's presence as we ponder the questions.

Sound rational analysis based on the best available information is crucial to good discernment. Yet spiritual discernment goes beyond the analytical to engage our senses, feelings, imaginations, and intuition as we wrestle with issues. It often points toward a decision, but it is **not** problem-solving. The goal of our discernment efforts is to find the mind of Christ! As such, it is the central component of decision-making for those who would have their lives grounded in God.

Discernment is more than saying prayers that ask God to guide us in rational consideration of matters. It is a mode of prayer that involves opening Our entire selves to the working of the Holy Spirit. It bids us to let go of preconceived ideas so that we can be open to new possibilities with a readiness to view things from new perspectives. Discernment beckons us to be still and listen with the ear of our heart. It draws us into alignment with God.

Discernment is central to doing God's work. To serve God, we must constantly be alert to the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Without God, we can do nothing. "Those who abide in me and I in them:" said Jesus, "bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" an. 15:5).

In group deliberations, discernment involves coming together with open hearts and open minds to seek God's wisdom around issues important to the community. The first order of business is to become attuned to God's presence within and among those assembled.

“Grounded in God”, Farham, Hull, McLean