

THE DRAUGHTHORSE'S BLOODLINES

Discerning Together in the Ignatian Constitutions

By PHILIP ENDEAN

WHEN COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT first appeared on the scene, people talked it up as a racehorse, a thoroughbred. Twenty years' experience suggests a more chastened image, that of a draughthorse, albeit one that is more serviceable and valuable than its dumpy appearance suggests. Andrew Hamilton's equine analogy wittily evokes the fanfare with which Communal Discernment appeared in Ignatian circles, the subsequent letdown, and yet also a sense of possibilities hidden in the idea – possibilities which we somehow missed. Perhaps it was not discernment in common as such that was problematic but rather the triumphalistic way in which it was first presented.

This article takes a fresh look at Communal Discernment's pedigree, at its antecedents in Ignatian sources. Writers on the process have normally concentrated on the procedures followed by Ignatius and his first companions as they formed themselves into a religious order.¹ My focus, by contrast, will be some passages in the Constitutions, which Ignatius, helped by Juan de Polanco, his secretary, wrote subsequently. If we read these texts with sympathy and imagination, we can, I believe, see in them a range of more modest, more durable versions of discernment in common – and perhaps the more circumspect expression, 'discerning together', is not an inappropriate title for them. Obviously, however, Ignatius' guidelines need adaptation, especially if they are to be of use outside Jesuit contexts.

The General Congregation

Let us begin by looking at the procedures which Ignatius lays down for what he calls a General Congregation. Once the Society expanded beyond the original sixty members envisaged, participation in this gathering became restricted to major superiors and elected delegates, but initially it was envisaged as comprising 'the majority of such of the

whole Society as can easily be summoned'.² For Ignatius, there is a sense in which important decisions, such as the election of a new superior general, require as many Jesuits as possible to discern together.

In one chapter of the Constitutions, Ignatius sets out how the Congregation should consider questions of policy. This juridical text is hardly attractive or inspiring, but it is worth pondering on the values Ignatius is seeking to foster and on the principles which seem to shape his legislation.

Firstly, Ignatius is concerned that decisions be taken in spiritual freedom. One aspect of this freedom is that people should be as open as possible to Christ, as liberated as possible from inordinate attachments. Thus Ignatius begins, as so often in the Constitutions, with an insistence on the need for prayer, and in particular for the eucharist. Ultimately the Society is rooted in a divine initiative independent of human virtue or devotion; its good progress depends on a sense of contact with that initiative; and only in God's light are things seen rightly: '... since it is from the first and supreme Wisdom that the light must descend with which to see what it is appropriate to decide, the first thing is that ... masses will be said and prayer made ...'.³ Through prayer the group can hope to resolve issues in such a way 'as might be for greater glory of God our Lord'.

Another aspect of this freedom is that the gathering allow each member's authentic participation. Thus Ignatius outlines a way of proceeding that minimizes group pressure:

Later they will meet in one or several sessions, and the superior general, and then the provincials, rectors and others called to the Congregation will put forward in the presence of all the things which they think need to be dealt with, giving reasons briefly for what they feel. And this each one, having considered it a great deal and commended it to God our Lord, should have put in writing. When he has spoken, he will be able to put what he has written in the middle, so that those who want to see it can say what they feel in the following session.

Additional provisions – 'declarations' – stipulate that each member should be invited to speak in order of age, and that adequate provision should be made for copying the written submissions.

Such a procedure may seem tedious, impractical and slow, but the intention behind it is surely a valid one. The prescription that proposals be made in writing, and that they remain in circulation at least until the

following session, encourages measured, objective consideration. Ignatius is attempting to counteract the pressures and haste that can build up in any large group. The cut-and-thrust of plenary debate may be entertaining, but it can lead to ill-considered decisions, especially if some of those present want above all else to get home quickly. Each member is being invited to take responsibility for what is occurring: though the reticent are entitled to say nothing, they must make that choice positively and own it in public. Ignatius is seeking to avoid undue dominance of the proceedings by the naturally vocal and by those with high profile; conversely he encourages those who might not so readily express themselves in plenary session.⁴

The second key value worth noting here is the group's unity. Ignatius and Polanco seem at least to envisage, if not indeed to hope for, consensual resolutions: it may be that 'when the questions have been discussed from one side and the other in one or more sessions', there will be a 'clear resolution to one side with a feeling common to all or nearly all'. Should these not be possible, the text allows for majority voting, but, significantly, within a small delegated sub-group rather than in plenary session. Ignatius and Polanco clearly want to avoid uncontrolled debate within the whole assembly.

The references to consensus are obviously idealistic, but not unreasonably so. God's Spirit is not arbitrary. To the extent that a group of people with some kind of shared vocation honestly open themselves to God, what happens in all of them will reflect the divine wisdom that holds all things in being. How the various reflections cohere may not be evident to us, and people's openness to God's promptings will always be less than complete. Nevertheless, visible consensus is something we can legitimately hope for, and a sign (though not in itself an infallible one) that the group is attuned to God's leading. Moreover, if the group has the spiritual freedoms Ignatius seeks to foster, then consensual decision-making becomes less vulnerable to the standard objection raised against such procedures: namely, that the changes necessary for organizational survival will be too little and come too late if one waits for all concerned to agree. If the facts of the situation genuinely point to the need for change, then, presuming good will on all sides and the freedoms Ignatius is building up, reasonable people will see that need. Conversely, a change of policy will normally not be fruitful unless those affected by the change can own it for themselves. Eloquent arguments in plenary session may encourage a premature, and hence counterproductive, decision.

Nevertheless, Ignatius acknowledges that sometimes consensus will not be obtainable, and makes provision accordingly:

... four definitors must be elected by majority vote from those who are present and have voice in the Congregation. And these (to whom the others will commit themselves) will meet with the Superior General the number of times necessary and will settle all the matters that are to be dealt with. And if they are not all agreed in their opinion, that to which the majority inclines shall be preferred; and the whole congregation shall accept this, as from the hand of God our Lord.

The wisdom of such a procedure is debatable: it might not be easy to find a group of definitors who would enjoy the whole group's trust and thus anxieties might well be heightened. But again it is worth noting Ignatius' underlying intention: that of not harming the group's collective sense of purpose by burdening the plenary assembly with tasks it is ill equipped to perform. Complex compromises, which inevitably involve careful listening and weighing, are better worked out in a subcommittee. Though conflict should not in general be repressed, contentious issues in a large group can easily take on an importance out of all proportion and overshadow the members' shared commitment to their more fundamental values.

More importantly, however, Ignatius is here counteracting any temptation to make the better the enemy of the good. Standard works on communal discernment stress the conditions which must be present in the group if the procedure is to be fruitful; by implication, nothing is possible if those conditions are absent.⁵ Here, by contrast, Ignatius is realistically acknowledging the limitations of the human condition, encouraging us to make the best of the situation as it stands, and seeking to leave us open to try for something better next time.

Discerning together with the superior

General Congregations are complex, difficult events; they demand a great deal of the time and energy that rightly belongs to ministry. We have just seen how Ignatius is concerned to reduce some of the difficulties that might arise during a Congregation. Similarly, the early Jesuits established a simpler institution to replace the Congregation itself, one that could work in normal everyday situations. I refer to the Jesuit superior.

For a variety of reasons, the mythology presents this institution in authoritarian terms, and therefore the idea can arise that Ignatius' vision of government consists in a confused mixture of democracy (in the General Congregation) and monarchy (in the normal exercise of government by a superior). In the Constitutions, however, the superior's government, informed as it is by others, appears not as

something in tension or conflict with the Congregation but rather as a simpler version of the same kind of process. Admittedly a Jesuit superior is in one sense plenipotentiary, but this is not the reason Ignatius gives for the Society not to hold Congregations regularly. Rather, the superior general has resources which can normally serve as permanent substitutes for the Congregation: 'the communication he has with the whole Society' and 'the help of those who are present with him'. 'Discerning together' is part of normal Jesuit government.⁶

With this in mind, we can turn to the passage where Ignatius describes the so-called account or manifestation of conscience. An important part of the communication a superior has with the Society consists in regular, confidential conversations during which the individual companion makes known all the personal information that may be relevant to decisions about his mission.

... it is not only highly but supremely important for the superior to have full information regarding the inclinations and motions of those who are in his charge, and to what defects or sins they have been or are more moved and inclined, that thus he may direct them better, without placing them beyond the measure of their capacity in dangers or labours greater than they could in our Lord endure lovingly; and also that the superior, while keeping to himself what he learns in secret, may be better able to organize and arrange what is expedient for the whole body of the Society.⁷

There is no obligation which Ignatius expresses more strongly.

The relationship here is clearly not a reciprocal one, but rather one between superior and subordinate. I shall touch on the issues which this fact raises towards the end of this article. But the crucial point for now is that Ignatius wants people to take decisions based on all the relevant information. Hence, in one sense, there is no sensible discerning except 'discerning together'. The process requires appropriate mechanisms for free interpersonal communication. In this connection, the privacy of the encounter is important; not all relevant information lends itself to public airing. Moreover, Ignatius is keenly aware of how individuals and situations differ; decisions should consequently be informed by as accurate an awareness as possible of these differences. The stress on defects and sins, both here and in similar passages, may seem bleak, but it can be of benefit to name and own the dark elements in our experience. If we repress or deny the negative in our psyches, the damage it does will only be greater, and skew our judgements in ways of which we are unconscious. If we bring the negative out into the open, it can be managed, allowed for and counteracted.⁸

Discernment is never purely individual: even when a person is not constrained juridically by another, the raw material to be discerned is always shaped by a history of relationships. For Ignatius, the effect of the account of conscience, even granted 'due submission', should be to bring about 'the union of one and the same sense and desire' (*la unión de un mismo sentir y querer*).⁹ However, this union, this shared human reality out of which decisions should emerge, will inevitably take on forms which no legislator can foresee. Ignatius acknowledges this point by insisting that superiors have the right and the duty to set the Constitutions aside when they judge that circumstances demand it. Though the rector of a house of Jesuit students should foster the observance of the Constitutions in their entirety, he has the competence of his own superiors delegated to him so that he can, if appropriate, dispense people from the Constitutions' requirements.¹⁰

Again Ignatius' vision is idealistic; again, equally, Ignatius makes provision for when things go wrong. Provincials and local superiors can be removed by higher authority if they abuse their powers; moreover, Ignatius provides for the eventuality of a corrupt or unsatisfactory superior general in ways that are blatantly frank, detailed and explicit.¹¹ Should an individual Jesuit have difficulties with his superiors, Ignatius suggests that others, both from within and from outside the Society, can mediate.¹²

Basic concerns

I have been suggesting so far, then, that Ignatian discernment in common is a more diverse and low-key reality than we have sometimes been led to suppose. There is no one correct procedure: the Deliberation of the First Fathers, the General Congregation and the account of conscience represent different styles, each of which will be realized in different ways depending on the persons who engage in them and the situations in which they find themselves. Rather than talk of an Ignatian method, we should think of concerns which any Ignatian approach to discerning together will try somehow to meet. Tentatively, I would name four such concerns:

- the concern that decisions be taken based on an accurate account of all relevant information. Hence the provision of structures for free and appropriate communication, structures counteracting understandable human tendencies towards keeping things hidden.
- the concern that decisions be taken in faith rather than fear, in consolation rather than desolation, out of a gospel understanding of the self rather than a more constricting self-image. Such a

concern presupposes the foundational conviction of the Exercises: that in our experience God's self-giving love can become manifest in ways that lie beyond our power to foresee.

- the concern that general rules not impede people's freedom to do what a situation requires. Each group is different, and each new situation it faces is different. The Ignatian tradition sits lightly to law, and tries to avoid rigid interpretations.
- the concern to allow realistically for human limitations. Negatively this means the provision of safeguards. More positively, all should be aware that the dispositions for a good decision are not attained overnight; one has to grow into them, and one does not have to have reached perfection before something important is possible. In the *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius sometimes sounds (e.g. Exx 169.1) as though total indifference is a prerequisite for a good discernment; in fact, our initial attempts at discernment, far from requiring perfect openness at the outset, gradually educate us towards a disinterested love of God. Similarly, some kind of 'discerning together' is certainly possible provided the group as a whole is open to God's presence within it and prepared to give the process an honest try.¹³

Authority

'Discerning together' contrasts with two other approaches to Ignatian decision-making: the formal procedures of Communal Discernment first elaborated in the early 1970s, and a militarist, hierarchical obedience to the superior's directives. The underlying issue is that of how God's providential authority relates to the fallibility and fickleness of human beings. 'Discerning together' presupposes a humbler, more subtle position on this issue than those approaches most commonly advocated.

Communal Discernment seemed to represent a participative – if not quite democratic – alternative to the authoritarianism prevalent among Roman Catholics, especially among religious, before Vatican II. It was grounded in the official Church's long overdue acknowledgment of how complex and diverse modern life had become, and of how this indefinite variety relativized the competence of any religious leadership.¹⁴ Communal Discernment was a reaction against a rigid conception of obedience, and thus, despite the surface differences, there were some underlying continuities between them. Something of the energy and heroism informing the best versions of pre-Conciliar obedience was redirected into the effort to follow complicated group procedures

and to attain the unrealistically high dispositions then seen as essential. Again, both old-style obedience and post-Conciliar Communal Discernment reflected a preoccupation with the question of who, in the end, has the power to make the decision. The rhetoric of obedience stressed that such power rested in the superior and that costly demands could be made on everyone else; the rhetoric of Communal Discernment relocated that power in the community or in some defensively formulated, unstable entity we might term the superior-in-community. The question 'who decides?' was a central concern on both understandings.

The Ignatian sources, if I am right, suggest that we need to consider the issues rather differently. Evidently there are good Ignatian precedents for various forms of 'discerning together', but the Ignatian legitimation for full-scale Communal Discernment came principally from a highly selective reading of just one text that emerged from a once-in-a-lifetime situation: the Deliberation of the First Fathers. Moreover, Communal Discernment was based on one of the various procedures by which the first Jesuit companions resolved merely one of the two questions facing them.¹⁵ Again, Ignatius is relatively unconcerned with the question of who has the power to *make* the decision: his aim is to help us *find* God's will together, God's will as manifest in the reality of our situations. To debate whether a group's authority lies in its official leaders or in its general assembly is to neglect the obvious limitations on any human decision-making. Our decisions are always responsive, decisions how to react to a situation that is not within our control, a situation that is *given* – given, so our faith tells us, by God.

Ignatius' reference to consensus reflects a conviction that, if only we can sensitively listen together to situations, God's message in them will normally be self-evident and the question 'who decides?' will not arise. Procedures and laws have their place, but ultimately,

... the supreme wisdom and goodness of God our creator and Lord is what must preserve and govern and carry forward in his holy service this very little Society of Jesus, just as he deigned to begin it, and, on our part, more than any exterior constitution, the law from within of charity and love which the Holy Spirit writes and impresses upon hearts ...¹⁶

In the most recent Jesuit legislation, the term 'discernment' seems to have disappeared from the tradition as suddenly as it was introduced in the immediate post-Conciliar period; 'discernment' seems to have broadened into 'dialogue'. God's will is not simply a matter of what a

superior decides, or of what emerges from a conversation between two or more individuals; rather, it can only be found in interaction with reality outside the discerning circle.¹⁷

Nevertheless, although the question 'who decides?' is not central to Ignatian discernment in common, it still has a place in the Jesuit Constitutions, and the answer to it there, for Jesuits, is clearly 'the superior'. Functionally, some provision has to be made for when consensus is not forthcoming; for Jesuits, this provision is a presumption in favour of the superior's view. More spiritually and fundamentally, the image of an apostle sent on mission defines specifically Jesuit identity, and hence there is a special place for the one who represents the sending Christ.¹⁸ In the Constitutions, Ignatius' insights on 'discerning together' are embedded in a vision particular to one Christian vocation. When Ignatius discusses the account of conscience in the life of the formed Jesuit, the most common form of 'discerning together', he begins with a strong, almost passionate evocation of the relationship between the sender and the one sent:

... it should be greatly recommended to all that they should practise great reverence, especially interiorly, to their superiors, considering Jesus Christ and reverencing him in them; and they should love them very much from their hearts as fathers in him, himself. Thus in everything they should move forward in a spirit of charity, holding nothing hidden from them, whether external or internal, wanting them to be *au fait* with everything so that they can better give them all kinds of direction in the way of salvation and perfection. And therefore all ... should be ready to reveal their consciences ...¹⁹

For Jesuits, the authentic spiritual point being made in a paragraph like this needs to be carefully distinguished from an integrist or infantile authoritarianism. If, however, others are to be helped by Ignatius' insights on 'discerning together', they may need to adapt them radically. Ignatius' teaching on the account of conscience is rooted in a warm sense of the specifically Jesuit charism, the specific way in which his group is graced by God. Other groups will need to replace that sense with something emerging from their own sense of how their group is a shared response to God's love. Only on such a basis can they sensibly ask how best to realize the goals informing Ignatius' teaching on 'discerning together': the appropriate communication of relevant facts, the taking of decisions in spiritual consolation, an openness to the new modes of God's presence in ever-changing reality, and, perhaps above all, realistic yet hopeful provision for

humanity's shortcomings. After all, it is a stable of draughthorses we are dealing with, not a unique thoroughbred.

NOTES

¹ The text in question is conventionally called the Deliberation of the First Fathers, and was written probably by either Pierre Favre or Jean Codure. The original can be found in MHSJ MI Const 1, pp 1–7, and a translation in John Carroll Futrell, *Making an apostolic community of love: the role of the superior according to St Ignatius of Loyola* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), pp 187–194.

² Formula 1539, n 1; MHSJ MI Const 1, p 17. There is a useful French parallel text version of the three versions of the Formula in Ignace de Loyola, *Écrits* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1990), pp 292–307. Translations of Ignatian texts in this article are generally my own.

³ In this section I am drawing on *Constitutions* VIII.7 [711–718]. Antonio de Aldama's commentary on part VIII of the *Constitutions*, an English translation of which has recently been published in India, is enormously informative both on the exegesis of the text and on how the legislation has been handled in the Society's subsequent history. On the latter, see also *For matters of greater moment: the first thirty Jesuit General Congregations – a brief history and a translation of the Decrees*, edited by John W. Padberg, Martin O'Keefe and John L. McCarthy (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1994).

⁴ This article draws on the privileged experience of helping facilitate an Ignatian General Congregation, that of the Roman branch of Mary Ward's Institute held in England in 1993. My co-facilitator, Hildegard Ehrtmann, comments interestingly on the Congregation's option for a version of Ignatius' procedure rather than a more conventional, 'democratic' approach: 'We knew that for many . . . it would have been easier to rely on other competent women who were present – women whose range of vision and experience perhaps made them better qualified objectively for the task. Each individual sister had to take a path that for many was still unfamiliar and provoked anxiety: that of seeing herself, inalienably, as a bearer of the charism for the whole Institute, and of confident expectation that she would find the right decision for herself (once the necessary preparation and study had been done and the information gathered) in prayer. Each day they were encouraged to be alert, to recognize the movements of the spirits, both positive and negative, not to rely on some other sister who might seem to be "superior", but instead to own the way they themselves were being guided in – to use a phrase long associated with Mary Ward – "free and open access to God".' See Hildegard Ehrtmann, 'Ein Wagnis, das sich gelohnt hat' (A risk that paid off), *Geist und Leben* 67 (1994), pp 304–308.

⁵ See, for example, Jules J. Toner, 'A method for communal discernment of God's will', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* vol 3, no 4 (September 1971), pp 121–152. Near the beginning of his essay, Toner lists certain attitudes that should be attained or deepened before each phase of a discernment process: an intense desire to do God's will, absolute trust in God's power, a prior commitment to the group's final judgement, a readiness to give as much time and effort as the process requires, 'an indifference to all but God's will' and 'freedom from hidden prejudgments about the issue at stake'. While acknowledging how difficult it is for a community to maintain these attitudes, and almost the inevitability of failure, Toner nevertheless writes: 'These attitudes are the key to success; the whole enterprise depends on them. They are essential; without them this method cannot help, nor can any other method' (pp 126–130).

⁶ *Constitutions* VIII.2.1 [677]. Compare the end of the first paragraph of the Formula, in all three versions (*Écrits*, pp 294–295). For the ideas in this section I am greatly indebted to Peter Knauer, 'The interior law, our way of proceeding in the Lord, and the Constitutions: towards a hermeneutics of the Constitutions – insights from constitutional theory', *CIS* 65 (Autumn 1990), pp 29–38. For a fascinating and adventurous rhetorical treatment of how the superior general relates to the General Congregation, see Dominique Bertrand, *Un corps pour l'Esprit: essai sur*

l'expérience communautaire selon les Constitutions de la Compagnie de Jésus (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1974), pp 180–197.

⁷ *Examen* IV.35 [92].

⁸ I am obviously here echoing Exx 326. In my very limited experience of group facilitation, I have been struck by how effective it can be simply to tell a group that one notices that it is being driven by unhealthy impulses – or, in Ignatian terms, that it is in desolation. The reactions may well be hostile; it is as though the facilitator serves as a scapegoat onto which the negativity is redirected. But it also seems to have the effect of freeing the group not to act out of those impulses when it comes to doing its business.

⁹ *Constitutions* IV.10.5 [424].

¹⁰ *Constitutions* IV.10.B [425]; compare what is said of the superior general in IX.3.8 [746].

¹¹ *Constitutions* IX.4.6–7 [733–744]; IX.V.4–6 [782–788].

¹² *Examen* 3.12 [49–50].

¹³ I allude here to *Examen* IV.45 [102], where Ignatius considers the possibility of a candidate for the Society lacking the dispositions of the Second Week, the desire to follow Christ along a path that includes suffering and ignominy. Ignatius is prepared to work with a candidate who, although lacking such a desire, has 'the desire for the desire': a basic recognition that such dispositions are worth striving for.

¹⁴ For a fuller account of how discernment became a central theme in Jesuit rhetoric, see my "'And it will be for the one being sent": mission, obedience and discernment from Ledóchowski to Arrupe', *CIS* 73 (Summer 1993), pp 57–73.

¹⁵ I owe this insight to Franz Meures' brief commentary on the Deliberation of the First Fathers in 'Die Beratung der ersten Gefährten', *Korrespondenz zur Spiritualität der Exerzitien* no 56 (1990), pp 19–28. See also note 18 to his 'The ministry of facilitation' in the present collection.

¹⁶ *Constitutions*, Preamble [134].

¹⁷ The index to *Documents of the Thirty-Fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995) has no heading either for 'obedience' or 'discernment', but a whole column of entries under the heading of 'dialogue'. Moreover, all these entries refer to interaction between the Society and the wider world. By contrast, in the index to *Documents of the 31st and 32nd Congregations of the Society of Jesus*, edited by John W. Padberg (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977), the headings for 'obedience' and 'discernment' are both significantly longer than that for 'dialogue', and roughly half of the entries under 'dialogue' refer to dialogue between Jesuits.

¹⁸ I owe this insight, which obviously requires far fuller development, to Antonio M. de Aldama's commentaries on the Constitutions, notably *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus part VII: missioning*, translated by Ignacio Echániz (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1990), pp 12–18. Aldama draws on an old tradition that Ignatius was led to found the Society through his experience of what we now call the consideration on the Kingdom and the meditation on Two Standards, and enriches this by drawing a connection with the image of the sent apostles as found in Matthew 10 and the verses just before it. This image is central to Jesuit identity, and in an open-ended way specifies how Jesuit vocations differ from others which might be rooted in some other gospel-based image.

¹⁹ *Constitutions*, VI.1.2 [551].