

TOWARD COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT: SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

By WILLIAM A. BARRY

SOMETHING INTERESTING happened in the Society of Jesus between the 31st General Congregation (1965-66) and the 32nd (1974-75). Every reference to spiritual discernment or the discernment of spirits in the documents of GC 31 refers to individual discernment whereas the preponderance of such references in GC 32 are to discernment in common. GC 31 is obviously concerned that the Society recover the dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises and especially the individual discernment of spirits. While not neglecting the need for such a continuing recovery, GC 32 makes an effort to encourage communities to become communities of discernment:

Clearly, the requisite dispositions for true communitarian discernment are such that they will not be verified as often as those for ordinary community dialogue. Nevertheless, every community should seek to acquire them, so that when need arises it can enter into this special way of seeking the will of God.¹

What happened between 1966 and 1975?

In North America, to take an example, the directed retreat movement spread like a brushfire through the Society. At GC 31 it was almost timidly suggested: 'The scholastics should be permitted on occasion during their formation to make the Spiritual Exercises alone under the direction of an experienced spiritual father . . .'² By the time of GC 32 hardly a scholastic in North America made the Exercises in any other way. Spiritual direction with an emphasis on the discussion of the actual religious experience of the directee also took on great importance. But along with this increased interest in individual spiritual direction and this recovery

of the original intention of St Ignatius in giving the Exercises also went a renewed interest in other aspects of Ignatian spirituality. The Institute of Jesuit Sources under George Ganss began publishing English translations of original Jesuit documents, the most important being the appearance in 1970 of Ganss's own translation of the *Constitutions*.³ The Institute also made available in translation such scholarly works as de Guibert's *The Jesuits: their spiritual doctrine and practice*⁴ and began publishing original studies that made it possible for English-speaking Jesuits to recover their spiritual heritage. Finally in 1969 the American Assistancy Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality under the direction of George Ganss began publishing the very influential monograph series, *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*. Thus, the Society in North America responded to the call of Vatican II and GC 31 that religious try to recover the charism of their founders.

Very early in the *Studies* series, in April 1970, 'Ignatian discernment' by John Futrell appeared.⁵ This monograph, based on Futrell's doctoral dissertation, focussed not only on individual discernment but also on communal discernment modelled on the deliberation that led to the founding of the Society of Jesus. A year and a half later Jules Toner's 'A method for communal discernment'⁶ was published by *Studies* to be followed in November, 1972 by Futrell's 'Communal discernment: reflections on experience'.⁷ Finally, in June 1974, Toner's 'The deliberation that started the Jesuits: a commentary on the *Deliberatio primorum patrum*, newly translated with a historical introduction'⁸ made its appearance. Since that time nothing more on communal discernment has appeared in the *Studies* series.

Even a cursory reading of these four publications makes it clear that Futrell, Toner and other Jesuits were giving numerous workshops on communal discernment to groups of religious. During these same years William J. Connolly of the Centre for Religious Development in Cambridge, Massachusetts was in demand to conduct similar workshops and introduced me to the process when together we facilitated such a workshop for all the Jesuit superiors of the New England Province in 1972. In short order I was asked to facilitate a number of such workshops in New England and abroad. A stint as vice-provincial for formation took me out of circulation for such work until 1984 when, with Joseph McCormick, I was asked to work with the Jesuits of a large urban area to help them move toward communal discernment. What

intrigues me is the silence about communal discernment since the surge of interest in the early nineteen-seventies which culminated in the call of GC 32. Was it just a flash in the pan? Or is communal discernment still going strong, but silently?

For some time I have had close to hand my folder with detailed process notes on the workshops in which I was involved. I wanted to describe the process as I saw it with the hopes that such a description would be helpful to others. The invitation in 1984 and work with those Jesuits over the year 1984-85 have given me the impetus to write this article. If the process of communal discernment has in fact fallen into disuse, perhaps we need a stimulus to bring it back into use. In 1970 Futrell argued strongly that the times required a recovery of the Ignatian practice of communal discernment:

If true communal discernment of experiments to enable the Society of Jesus to renew itself and to adapt to the signs of the times today is a condition for the survival of the Society in the modern Church, then it is vital that all Jesuits learn to engage in authentic Ignatian communal discernment.⁹

Some sixteen years later, I believe, the need is still there, and not just for Jesuits.

I have entitled the article 'Toward Communal Discernment' quite deliberately. Many of the workshops in which I have participated have not reached the point of engaging in true communal discernment either because no question for discernment arose or because of lack of time or because other things needed to happen first. I suspect that many attempts at communal discernment falter for lack of the prerequisites outlined by both Futrell (1970 and 1972) and Toner (1971). Since both of these men have provided relatively detailed outlines of the actual process of discernment they use once these prerequisites are attained, I want to concentrate on the process of moving toward that attainment.

Communal discernment presupposes before all else that those who will engage in it have experienced the discernment of spirits in themselves. That is, each individual must have engaged in a process of contemplative prayer such as that proposed in the Spiritual Exercises and have experienced the movements of the different 'spirits' and have discerned which movements were of God, which not. Secondly, communal discernment presupposes

that the individuals can and will communicate to others their experiences in prayer and in prayerful reflection. The ability to do so cannot be presupposed since many of us older religious were brought up in a tradition where such communication was not only not encouraged but often enough actively discouraged. The recovery of the individually directed retreat and the development of a type of spiritual direction which requires the communication of religious experience are giving us the tools for the kind of communication communal discernment requires. But the willingness to communicate experience must also be present, and this is often the rock upon which attempts at communal discernment shatter. Let me elaborate on this point.

When will any of us—unless we are inveterate narcissists—reveal our intimate selves to others? Is it not when we trust the other, trust the other not to laugh or scorn or downplay our experience? Suppose you start to tell me about an experience of prayer that meant something to you and swiftly I change the subject or say: 'That sounds odd to me'. It will be a long time before you will take the chance again. When people approach a counsellor for help because they are deeply troubled, they will test the waters with him or her before they reveal their intimate selves. And directees only gradually reveal the most intimate aspects of their relationship with God as they come to trust their spiritual directors. So it is not easy to entrust our inner experience to others.

If this is the case in one-to-one relationships, how much more difficult to reveal ourselves in a group. In an earlier article I attributed a great deal of this difficulty to fear and offered a couple of approaches to overcome the fear.¹⁰ I do not want to repeat myself here. Rather I will develop more at length some of the processes we have used to help people in groups to entrust themselves more to one another.

First we explain the role of the facilitators by an analogy to the role of the spiritual director. The spiritual director helps individuals to recognize their desires with regard to the Lord, to make these known to the Lord, and to put themselves into a receptive position so that the Lord's response may be heard. The spiritual director does not manufacture desires or prayer experiences for the directee but helps the person to notice what is happening in the relationship with the Lord, to discern what leads toward the Lord and to decide what to do about the discernment. So too the facilitators of the

group try to help the group to articulate its desire as a group with regard to the Lord and to help them to approach the Lord in prayer with that desire. Here it is important to remind the individuals that they are asking the Lord to relate to them precisely as members of this group with the group's desire. Just as individuals ask the Lord for what they desire, trusting that the Lord has their good at heart, so too the individuals in this group context approach the Lord with the group's desire trusting that the Lord has the good of this group at heart.

The facilitators suggest a way for the individuals to approach the Lord in prayer. After the prayer period is over, they return to the group. The facilitators then help them to report to one another as much or as little as they wish of what happened during the prayer. Just as the spiritual director of an individual helps the person to notice and articulate what happened as much as possible without judging it, so too the facilitators of a group ask the group to try to listen without judgment to the experiences shared. Indeed, since the assumption of such group sharing is that we are hoping to hear what God is saying to us as a group, these periods of sharing are approached, as far as possible, with the same contemplative attitude one hopes to have in private prayer.

Secondly, we point out that the process is a slow one of growing in trust in the Lord and in one another. They already trust the Lord, but they probably have not thought much about the Lord's desires and hopes for the group as such. And most groups need to develop a trust in one another as deeply prayerful and honestly searching for God's will for the group. Communal discernment means that each member of the group trusts that God will reveal his will for the group through their individual prayer and through their sharing of the fruits of that prayer. To engage in this process I must trust that all the others are sincerely praying and trying to remain open to discern God's will. After all, my future is on the line since I am willing to abide by the group's decision.

We have usually structured the day into three sessions, morning, afternoon and evening. The whole group gathers at the beginning of each session, and we give them some orientation for private prayer. Each one prays for forty-five minutes to an hour and then takes a few minutes for reflection. If the group is less than ten, all the sharing sessions are in one group. If it is larger, we break it up into groups of ten or less for the sharing and ask that someone summarize for the whole group in a report. Each session, therefore,

lasts at least two-and-a-half hours. As the process goes on, we may have to vary the structure according to what is needed. For example, at the beginning of a session we may need to canvass the group to find out what their desires are.

Some groups begin the discernment process with much good will toward one another. Even so the individuals will still need time to develop the deeper trust in one another and the Lord that this process entails. Suppose that such a group's purpose is to discover how they might best use their talent apostolically. Their numbers have declined and they feel strained and overworked and realize that they can no longer continue to do all the work that they have been doing. We would suggest for the first period of prayer that they use a text like Isaiah 43,1-7:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
 I have called you by name, you are mine.
 When you pass through the waters I will be with you;
 and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
 when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
 and the flame shall not consume you.
 For I am the Lord your God,
 the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.

Because you are precious in my eyes,
 and honoured, and I love you,
 I give men in return for you,
 peoples in exchange for your life.
 Fear not, for I am with you.

We indicate that the Israelites heard this consoling word when they were in exile, their temple destroyed and their hopes at their lowest. We suggest that they ask the Lord to give them a sense of hearing these words as applying to them as members of this group. They then pray privately for forty-five minutes or so and afterwards return to the group where each one is asked to share whatever he or she wishes of what happened during the prayer. For most groups such an 'ice breaker' is reassuring and the variety of experiences enlightening. In a felt way they realize how sincere and faith-filled each one is. They are often surprised at how easy and enjoyable it is to talk about prayer with one another. Depending on how this first session goes, we might either suggest a repetition for the next session or suggest that they ask the Lord to

help them to know his dreams for them as a group. During the group meetings we remind them to listen to one another contemplatively and to note inner reactions as they listen. If they feel antipathy to what one member is saying, for example, they might want to ask the Lord's help to see things from that person's perspective. After the group has articulated its vision and dream as best it can, they might be ready to ask the Lord's help to discover what blocks them from realizing the dream. Now the hard part begins because they will be addressing neuralgic issues that may bring to light resentments, mistrust, and other 'negative' emotions. The facilitators now begin to earn their keep.

Any group that has a history together has got some bodies buried somewhere. We have been talking about groups who begin the process with much good will toward one another. Often enough, however, groups do not begin with much good will and trust. Then the negative feelings may have to be addressed even earlier. One group displayed so much anger, resentment, suspicion and misunderstanding at the very first session that even the facilitators wondered whether they had opened Pandora's box. But we pointed out that their reality had surfaced rather quickly and suggested that they might feel as the apostles did after the crucifixion when they boarded themselves up in the upper room. Imagine their feelings of guilt and anger and suspicion and fear. And into their midst came Jesus saying 'Peace be with you'. We suggested that they might want to spend an hour in prayer with this text (Jn 20,19-23) and then return. When they returned to the group, the atmosphere had noticeably shifted. Where before accusations and angry denunciations of others prevailed, now each one spoke of his own fears and failings and at the same time voiced a trust that the Lord would be with them. We had not yet reached the promised land, but we were on the way toward becoming a group that eventually might be able to engage in communal discernment.

In his 1972 monograph Futrell makes a perceptive comment: 'A community must have achieved the fruit of the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises *as a community* in order to begin true communal spiritual discernment'.¹¹ He does not spell out what that might mean, but I believe that this prerequisite is crucial, and in at least one case, I believe, I saw a group achieve that fruit. It was a group of male religious who were chapter delegates. They asked Joseph McCormick and me to facilitate a four-and-a-half day process that would help them toward being more discerning and open during

the chapter which would follow. The congregation was reeling from a heavy financial blow and from departures that had left them demoralized, angry and suspicious. Among the members of the group were some whom the others held responsible for their problems. Early in our sessions feelings of anger, suspicion, guilt and helplessness emerged. The first two days were stormy, but we could sense a gradual growth in trust. As one man said: 'We have thought the unthinkable and said the unsayable'. Toward the end of the second day we summarized the situation in this fashion:

You sense yourselves as broken, needy, helpless, and sinful precisely as members of this congregation and as chapter delegates. A number of you have identified with Simon the Pharisee who scorned Jesus for letting the sinful woman wash his feet. Some of you have voiced resentment at being put into the position of picking up the pieces of a mess caused by others. Some have voiced fears that as a group you will not have the courage to make the necessary decisions. Some fear that even God cannot change you. And yet you have also desired healing, have desired that Jesus make you brothers again. We suggest that you present yourselves to Jesus as you are and ask him for what you want. Perhaps you might want to do a repetition of Luke 7,36-50 or you might want to use the washing of the feet in John 13.

We also suggested speaking to Jesus on the cross and using the triple colloquy of the First Week of the Exercises.

The sharing after this period of prayer was very emotional and very honest. One man asked with tears for the forgiveness of the group. Another reported emptiness in prayer and asked the group to pray for him. A couple of men said that the desire for healing was growing in them. Most of the others reported consolation and a sense of being healed. Tears were shed. At the end of the sharing they broke up into dyads for reconciliation. The next day men continued to ask one another for reconciliation. We spent the last two days focussing on Jesus' relationship with his apostles in the gospel of Mark. At the end of the process they felt hopeful and much more trusting as they prepared to enter their chapter. As a result of the 'First Week experience' they seemed able to dream and to hope again as a group.

If spiritual directors need to have great trust in the Lord as their directees face some of the very painful and harrowing experiences sometimes associated with the process of conversion, it is even

more imperative for those who facilitate groups toward communal discernment. It is all too easy to gloss over serious divisions in a group, to let sleeping dogs lie, as it were. It is all too easy to present techniques that only can work if prerequisites of trust and contemplative prayer are present. It is also all too easy to give up hope that the Lord can work his wonders even on a group that seems at first hopelessly divided. Perhaps they do want to be healed as a group. I have never been a facilitator alone precisely because I feel the need for another so that together we can remind one another to pray ourselves and to entrust the group to the Lord and to trust the good will of the group in spite of everything. After all, we try to say to one another, they have invited us to help them to become a discerning group; so they must have some hope in the Lord who was called them together. A group is close to becoming discerning when the members can say, as one man did, 'During the Spiritual Exercises I came to trust deeply that Jesus had a dream for me. Now I believe that he has a dream for us'.

NOTES

¹ Decree 11, 'The union of minds and hearts', of the 32nd General Congregation of the Society, paragraph 23. In *Documents of the 31st and 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus* (St Louis, Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977), p 475.

² Decree 8, 'The spiritual formation of Jesuits', of the 31st General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, paragraph 124, in *Documents of the 31st and 32nd General Congregations of the Society of Jesus* (St Louis, Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977), p 108.

³ Ignatius of Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, trans George E. Ganss (St Louis, Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970).

⁴ de Guibert, Joseph: *The Jesuits: their spiritual doctrine and practice. A historical study*. Trans W. J. Young (St Louis, Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1964).

⁵ Futrell, John Carroll: 'Ignatian discernment', *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, II, 2 (April, 1970).

⁶ Toner, Jules J.: 'A method of communal discernment of God's will', *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, III, 4 (Sept, 1971).

⁷ Futrell, John Carroll: 'Communal discernment: reflections on experience', *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, IV, 5 (Nov, 1972).

⁸ Toner, Jules J.: 'The deliberation that started the Jesuits: a commentary on the *Deliberatio primorum patrum*. Newly translated with a historical introduction', *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, VI, 4 (June, 1974).

⁹ Futrell, *op.cit.*, (1970), p 70.

¹⁰ Barry, William A.: 'Religious community: a diagnosis and a prescription', *Review for Religious*, 1985, 44, pp 405-409.

¹¹ Futrell, *op.cit.*, (1972), p 169.

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SIGLA

OLD TESTAMENT

Gen	Jg	Neh	Cant	Hos	Nah	Bar
Exod	Ruth	Est	Isai	Joel	Hab	Tob
Lev	2, 2 Sam	Job	Jer	Amos	Zeph (Soph)	Jud
Num	1, 2 Kg	Ps	Lam	Obad	Hag	Wis
Deut	1, 2 Chr	Prov	Ezek	Jon	Zech	Sir (Ecclus)
Jos	Ezr	Qoh (Eccl)	Dan	Mic	Mal	1, 2 Macc

NEW TESTAMENT

Mt	Jn	1, 2 Cor	Phil	1, 2 Tim	Heb	1, 2, 3 Jn
Mk	Acts	Gal	Col	Tit	Jas	Jude
Lk	Rom	Eph	1, 2 Thess	Phm	1, 2 Pet	Apoc

Exx *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola.*

MHSJ *Monumenta Historica Societatis Jesu.*