

Discerning God's Will Together. The first group of Jesuits

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Rome, Lent of 1539. The first group of Jesuits came to live together. The group was made up of Ignatius of Loyola, Francisco Jassu de Xavier, Peter Favre, James Laynez, Alphonse Salmeròn, Simon Rodriguez, Nicholas Bobabilla, Pascal Broet, Claude Jay, and John Codure. Previously, while studying in Paris, each one of them had vowed to either go to Jerusalem, or, if that proved impossible, to offer their services to the Pope. Some extraordinary and providential circumstances channelled the whole group towards the second option.

Having survived a strong persecution in Rome, they had the opportunity to meet the Pope. He accepted their offer of service and expressed his desire that they go to various Italian cities. At that point in time they had to decide whether to remain united and on their type of community life. It was a fundamental decision: what was God's will for each one of them and for the group?

The ten companions discern

Who were these ten men? They were priests with degrees in theology, and their age was between 30 and 40. They came from different European regions, of which some were at war with each other. They belonged to different social classes, ranging from nobility to peasantry. Their characters too were in stark contrast to one another.

How on earth could these ten men, so different one from the other, come together and remain united? How was it possible for them to found a new Order and give birth to a new type of consecrated life? Someone might answer that the charism of St. Ignatius and his presence were enough to achieve their unity of ideas and to keep them united. That's true. Others might say, however, that since the Jesuits are known for their obedience, the factor that kept them united was that they obeyed whatever Ignatius ordered them to do. This is false.

Going through their writings, we can see that all the decisions that eventually gave rise to the Company were taken after a process of communitarian discernment. These writings do picture St. Ignatius as the leader and soul of the group, but surely not the head. For the Companions of Jesus, their 'head' is Jesus; the same Jesus who, present among his companions, makes his voice heard during a process of communitarian discernment.

One of the most significant documents that can help us understand how the first Jesuits journeyed together is the *'Deliberations of Our First Fathers'*. This document reports the communitarian discernment processes that helped the group to make some important decisions, e.g. to found the Company of Jesus, to be obedient to one of them, and to outline the physiognomy of their vocation. The year was 1539. *"The time was approaching for us to be scattered and to part from one another. We were eagerly anticipating this time so that we could soon achieve our appointed goal on which we had set our minds and hearts. We therefore resolved to assemble together for an extended period of time before our dispersal and to discuss our vocation and covenanted way of life"*.

After having celebrated Easter, Broet and Rodriguez left for Siena. This separation, however, did not prevent them from making as their own the decisions which were later taken by the group. We can say, in fact, that all ten of them were involved in the decision-making process.

The group saw separation and dispersion as a positive event, something to be longed for. They saw this in the light of the Trinitarian dynamic, i.e. in the dynamic of reciprocal love, in which these were necessary so that the love and unity of the Company of Jesus could spread throughout the whole world. It was the new way of living Christianity and consecration in a modern era.

One goal, diverse views

In the light of the Gospel, the group had no qualms admitting that there were diverse opinions as to how to go about doing things. At the same time, however, the group had clearly in mind one and the same goal. *“While we all were of one mind and heart in seeking God’s gracious and perfect will according to the scope of our vocation; nevertheless, regarding the more readily effective and more fruitful ways of achieving God’s will for ourselves and others, we held diverse views. No one ought to wonder that this diversity of views could be found among us spiritually infirm and feeble men; even the apostles themselves, princes and pillars of the most holy Church, sometimes thought in opposing ways and handed down in writing their conflicting judgments. So also did many other very perfect men with whom we cannot be remotely compared. Since we did hold different judgments, we were eagerly on watch to discover some unobstructed way along which we would be able to advance together and by which all of us could offer ourselves as a holocaust to our God, in whose praise, honour, and glory we would yield our all”*. Had there been different goals, had each one sought only ‘his’ own goal, and had the group accepted different goals, it would have been impossible to discern together God’s will.

With a simple and humble heart

First of all, they together decided to base their discernment upon some spiritual means and a pure intention. *“At last we made a decision. In full agreement we settled on this that we would give ourselves to prayer, Mass, and meditation more fervently than usual and, after doing our very best, we would for the rest cast all our concerns upon the Lord, hoping in him. He is so kind and generous that he never denies his good Spirit to anyone who petitions him with humility and simplicity of heart; rather, he gives to all extravagantly, not holding back from anyone. In no way, then, would he who is kindness itself desert us; rather, he would be with us even more generously than we asked or imagined”*.

Besides these spiritual means, the companions made use of “every human effort”. They decided to tackle *“some questions worthy of careful consideration and forethought at this opportune time. Throughout the day, we were accustomed to ponder and meditate on these considerations and to prayerfully search into them. At night each one shared with the group what he judged to be most appropriate and helpful, with the intention that everyone would be of one mind in embracing the truer way of thinking, which had been tested and commended by the more powerful reasons and by majority vote”*.

From these initial descriptions, we can pick up some elements of the methodology used. First of all the communitarian spiritual discernment entailed that each one renewed his choice of God-Love. Then a suitable spiritual environment needed to be created through communion with Jesus in the Word (prayer and meditation) and with Jesus in the Eucharist (the Holy Sacrifice). Then came the use of human means. Lastly, there were the alternate modes of discernment, both personal and communitarian. The first was carried out through three types of activity, namely reflection, meditation, and prayer. The second of these was made up of four successive moments: the sharing of each one’s opinion, the evaluation of the different opinions, the acknowledgment of the one that was ‘most true’, and finally, the unanimous decision.

As one body

The ten tackled the first issue in this manner: *“At the meeting on the first night, the following question was opened up: given that we had offered and dedicated ourselves and our lives to Christ our Lord and to his true and legitimate vicar on earth so that he might dispose of us and send us wherever he judged it to be more fruitful, (...) would it or would it not be more advantageous for our purpose to be so joined and bound together in one body so that no physical distance, no matter how great, would separate us?”* As we can see, the historical moment that the group and each member was passing through was noted; a preference was solicited; and they saw whether there was an alternative (yes or no). Then finally they formulated the proposal in a simple and precise way.

At the end the group decided in favour of *“the affirmative side of the question, that is, that in as much as our most kind and affectionate Lord had deigned to gather us together and unite us, men who are so spiritually weak and from such diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds, we ought not to split apart what God has gathered and united; on the contrary, we ought -- day by day -- to strengthen and stabilize our union, rendering ourselves one body with special concern for each other, in order to effect the greater spiritual good of our fellow men. For united spiritual strength is more robust and braver in any arduous enterprise than it would be if segmented”*. Thus, unity was the criterion for discernment, and reciprocal love was the way open for them to respond the God’s will.

Since their discernment needed to be subjected for approval by a higher authority, the ten added a footnote: *“We want it understood that nothing at all that has been or will be spoken has originated from our own spirit or our own thought; but only that project which our Lord inspired and the Apostolic See then confirmed and approved”*. They intended to present the result of their discernment to the Pope so that, through his word, God’s Will would be expressed in a definite manner, and the discernment process brought to an end. Another thing to note is the following: it seems that the group had experienced the first two ways of making a choice, as described in the *Spiritual Exercises* (nos. 175-176).

Vowing obedience to one of them

Once the first issue was settled, the ten companions moved on to tackle another question, one *“more difficult and no less worthy of consideration and forethought. (...) Would it be advantageous to pronounce a third vow, namely, of obedience to someone from among us, in order that we might more sincerely and with greater praise and merit be able to fulfil the will of God in all the details of our lives as well as in carrying out the authoritative decision of the Pope, to whom we have most willingly offered ourselves, our will, intellect, strength, and the like?”*.

This time discernment proved more difficult: the ten companions *“spent many days in prayer and thought for many days without hitting upon any satisfactory resolution of our uncertainty”*. In other words they found themselves deadlocked. However, *“we put our hope in the Lord and we started to cast about for better ways of working out such a resolution”*.

They all acknowledged that they were unable to reach a decision, and therefore, they desisted, not wanting to force the issue. In order to preserve unity, they together sought a way out of the impasse. It could have seemed a waste of time; but, indeed, this was not the case. Jesus did not exempt the ten companions from the hard work of discernment, resulting in their journeying in the dark in their yearning and searching (cf Jn 12: 1 ff).

This dark interlude, however, had a positive effect. It helped them to enhance their ability to remain united, even at a time when, due to their different characters, they were experiencing

difficulty in remaining united. After all, they had just decided to be 'one body'. Jesus took them seriously.

What did they actually do? They faced this difficulty together. In effect, it was an exercise in unity. Three proposals were put forward: 1) that they would all retire in a hermitage; 2) that only three or four would retire to a hermitage, and that their final decision would be accepted by all the others; and 3) that they would remain in the city, spending half the day in discernment, and the other half doing ministry. At the end *“after examining and discussing these possible course of action, we decided that we would all stay in the city”*.

Three interior preparations

At this point the group continued with their communitarian discernment to find a way out. They decided *“to propose the following spiritual preparations for each and every member of the whole group”*.

The first was to ask God to grant them the *opposite* of what one held as right: *“Each would ready himself beforehand, would take time for prayer, Mass, and meditation in order to strive for joy and peace in the Holy Spirit regarding obedience, labouring as much as he could to have a predilection for obeying rather than commanding, when the consequent glory of God and the praise of his majesty would be equal”*.

The second was that once each one was fully aware of his freedom and responsibility, *“none of the companions would communicate with another about this matter at issue or inquire about his reasoning on it. The point of this preparation was to prevent anyone from being persuaded by another and, therefore, biased more toward obedience or the contrary. This way each would desire as more advantageous only what he derived from his own prayer and meditation”*.

The third was that each one was to evaluate autonomously which was the best, and then, to accept as his own the final decision of the group. *“Each one would think of himself as a stranger to our Company as if he would have not expected to be received. Thinking this way he would escape being carried by his emotions more to one opinion and judgment; but rather, as if a stranger, he would speak his thought to the group about having or not having obedience and he would by his judgment confirm and recommend what he believed would be for God’s greater service and which would more secure the Company’s lasting preservation”*.

This third attitude is extremely important. Sometimes it could happen that one or more members take part in communitarian discernment with a prior attitude that *“if I don’t like the final decision, I won’t abide by it”*. As a result, when a decision is to be put in practice, these members would say: *“After all, it was you who decided”*. By such behaviour they distance themselves from the group. This attitude, sometimes, is exhibited in ‘passive and silent resistance’ which, in effect, prevents the decision from being put into practice and, above all, exposes a division which everyone thought was not there or which had been overcome.

Perhaps the ten Jesuits slowed down the process so that this temptation could come out into the open. Sometimes, to maintain and strengthen the unity of a group, it might be necessary to suspend the process and postpone the conclusion of the discernment. If a decision is taken just the same, the danger is that some negative attitudes would be enhanced and these could eventually cause divisions within the group.

Reasons: for and against

The next day the group met again: *“Each one was to declare all those disadvantages, which could be brought against obedience by vow to one of our group, all the reasons which presented themselves and which anyone of us had found in his own private reflection, meditation, and prayer”*.

The three most relevant reasons against obedience were:

- *“It seems that, due to our failures and sins, the words “religious”, or “obedience” have unseemly connotations among the Christian people.*

- *If we wish to live under obedience, we will perhaps be forced by the supreme pontiff to live under some Rule already drawn up and officially established. So it will happen that all our desires which we have judged to be from Our Lord will be frustrated; for there will be no opportunity and freedom to work for the salvation of our fellow men, the one very thing, after concern for our own salvation, which we have had in mind.*

- *If we promise obedience to someone, not as many men will enter our company to labour faithfully in the Lord’s vineyard, where the harvest is very great but where few true labourers are found. Human frailty and weakness is such that many look out more for themselves and their own interests that they do for the wishes of Jesus Christ and for the complete denial of self for his sake”*.

The following day the group discussed the opposite proposals, *“each one putting before the group all the advantages and good consequences of such obedience which he had drawn from prayer and meditation; each one took his turn to present his reflections, sometimes showing the positive values of obedience, sometimes showing the negative consequences of doing the opposite”*.

The negative consequences were: *“If without the agreeable yoke of obedience, this Company of ours had to carry on practical undertakings, no one would have any precise charge, since one would pass off the burden onto another., as we have many times experienced.*

Again, if this Company were without obedience, it could not long endure and persevere. That would be a turn of events in conflict with our basic intent which is to keep our Company alive in perpetuity. Now, any group is kept alive by obedience more than by anything else”.

The arguments in favour of obedience were:

- *“Obedience brings about an uninterrupted life of heroic deeds and heroic virtues. For one who truly lives under obedience is fully disposed to execute instantly and unhesitatingly whatever is enjoined him, no matter whether it be very hard to do or engenders embarrassment, ridicule, and public humiliation.*

- *Nothing so casts down all pride and arrogance as does obedience; for pride makes a big thing of following one’s own judgment and will, giving way to no one, and pursuing grand and extraordinary projects beyond one’s reach. Obedience is diametrically opposed to this attitude: For it always follow the judgment of another and the will of the other. It gives way to all, and as much as possible, is joined with humility, the enemy of pride.*

- *Although we have committed ourselves to obey the supreme pontiff and shepherd in general and in particular, nevertheless, he could not possibly spend his time on the innumerable details and contingencies of our affairs; nor would it be right for him to do so even if he could”*.

Analysing and pondering

Once the diverse opinions were expressed and listed, the group passed into a new phase of the discernment process. Now it was the time to analyse (using the mind) and to ponder (using the heart) the diverse opinions, to ‘feel’ which one of these had ‘more weight’. It was a rather long phase. *“For many days, from this side and that, we worked over a mass of data related to the*

resolution of our problem; we examined and weighed the more forceful and important reasons and took time as usual for prayer, mediation, and reflection”.

It is a very delicate moment in the discernment process. It is during this phase that the members’ differences become more evident: differences in their sensitiveness, in their interpretation of the vocation (and of the charism), and so on. The debate, understandably, becomes heated and emotionally taxing. People find it hard to listen to and agree with each other. This is due to the fact that at this point, it is not simply a matter of expressing, in a detached way, an opinion (“according to me”); now one is expected to offer his reasons, his vision – that is, all that leads him to lean towards a specific decision and which reflects his uniqueness and confirms his personal identity.

What is at stake here is the readiness to ‘play’ by the rules of the Trinitarian dynamism of reciprocal love: giving of oneself and also ‘one’s’ reasons to the other, and welcoming in oneself the other with ‘his’ reasons. This entails being prepared to defend the other’s reasons as if it they were one’s own. It means that both should be prepared to acknowledge as important and persuasive the other’s motivation. It also means emptying oneself, becoming a gift to the other, in order to be able to live together “speaking the truth in love” so that “we will in all things grow up into him who is Head, that is, Christ” (Ef 4:15).

It was at this point that the hearts and souls of the ten Jesuits became concretely one again. The group, having become “one heart and one soul” could listen to the Holy Spirit in ‘its’ soul; He who renders audible, loud, and clear, the Word of Jesus.

With one voice

Finally, “by the Lord’s help, we did at last, - not just with a majority judgment but without a single dissenting voice --, come to this conclusion: Obedience to someone among us is highly advantageous and highly necessary in order to actualize more effectively and exactly our primary desire of fulfilling God’s will in all details of life, in order to preserve the Society more assuredly, and, finally, in order to provide properly for all the detailed matters of spiritual and temporal business which arise”.

As we can see, the group had reshuffled the previous list of the various proposals. These three were the ones deemed to carry ‘more weight’ during the discernment process. Thus, it was that each member of the group, individually and as a body, felt that these three proposals were ‘theirs’. This means that the communitarian discernment process is not geared to make one opinion prevail upon the others; but rather it allows the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16) to emerge, albeit slowly.

After this decision the group tackled other topics: “*we followed the order of discussion and the procedure described above, always giving attention to both sides of every question”.* On the feast day of St John the Baptist, after three months “*of tiring mental and physical effort, all our business was completed and terminated in a spirit of gladness and harmony”.* What a discernment process should leave in its wake is a deeper unity.

A dream comes true

After two years – on 22nd April 1541 – the six companions still in Rome solemnly professed their vows at St. Paul’s Basilica. It was an event during which reciprocal love was tangible. During the previous months the Church had approved the Company, and St. Ignatius had been elected Superior General. “*On the Friday following Easter, the six Jesuits went to St. Paul’s Basilica. There they reconciled themselves to one another. It was then decided that Ignatius would celebrate Mass and that the others would receive the Blessed Sacrament from his hands. They would then*

pronounce their vows in the following manner (...). After Mass and prayers at the privileged altars, they gathered around the main altar. Each one then went up to Ignatius to be embraced and given the kiss of peace. It was a moment filled with devotion, affection, and tears. Each one experienced an ever increasing serenity and an urge to praise our Lord Jesus Christ” (Source: ‘*Oblation of the First Fathers*’, by Ignatius of Loyola). The dream had become a reality.

(The parts of the *Deliberation* quoted were taken – with some adaptation – from *Studies 4* (1974), a translation by Jules J. Toner, S.J.)