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Discerning for
the Synod

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Pope Francis has made it clear that he is committed to ensuring that the forthcoming Synod will be one in which all the members of ‘the faithful’ are actively involved – and that the process used will be a model for what is involved in community discernment. Since it is Francis himself who is primarily responsible this new emphasis on synodality and discernment in the Church, this is a good time to explore what the pope sees as the nature and purpose of discernment. In this article I shall focus mainly on the distinctive features of the kind of discernment that Francis sees as appropriate for Church gatherings. Then towards the end I shall offer some brief suggestions about how this style of community discernment might be put into practice ‘on the ground’ in local, national and international meetings.

THE NATURE OF DISCERNMENT

Francis has given us some very important accounts of the nature of discernment in various documents, particularly in *Amoris Laetitia* (AE) paragraphs 164 to 312, and *Gaudete et Exultate* (GE) paragraphs 132 to 139 and 166 to 177. Much of this material concerns personal discernment. But Francis spelled out his understanding, not only of *personal* discernment but also of *communal* discernment in an important dialogue with his friend Antonio Spadaro SJ, who wrote it up in an article called ‘The Government of Francis: Is the driving force of the pontificate still active?’ in *La Civiltà Cattolica* on 5 September 2020 – an article which includes several direct statements of Francis. Another important source is the book *Let us Dream Together* which Francis wrote with the collaboration of Austin Ivereigh.

A key point that emerges, especially from the Spadaro article, is that communal discernment is something very different from working for consensus by finding the common denominator of the contributions and viewpoints of the different participants. That kind of consensus involves making many compromises and a certain

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watering down of proposals that seem in any way unusual. On the other hand, Francis insists that when we engage in the process of discernment, though we are of course using our reasoning powers and being prudent, we are going beyond them, seeking ‘a glimpse of that unique and mysterious plan that God has for each of us’ (GE 170). For him, discernment ‘calls for more than common sense; it is in fact a gift of the Spirit’ (GE 166). And, therefore, we must allow the *Spirit* to surprise us.

Furthermore, discernment as proposed by Pope Francis, as by Ignatius Loyola before him, relies primarily not on a purely rational calculation of the pros and cons of a proposed policy, but on a ‘discerning of the spirits’. In practice, this means *sensing* the rightness of a particular action or policy through the ‘consolation’ that it evokes in us. Another way of putting this is that the Holy Spirit gives one a *sense* that this proposed policy or this action is fully in conformity with what Jesus would want us to do.

In *Let Us Dream Together* Francis speaks of ‘sensing the prompting of the Spirit’. He also notes that ‘sometimes the Spirit acts to show us that we are looking in the wrong direction’, that the real issue is not what we thought it was. And he maintains that in a synodal process a sense of disappointment ‘is likely to reveal an agenda; you came wanting to achieve something, and when you didn’t get it, you feel disappointed’. He also says that ‘the bad spirit’ encourages ‘debilitating conflicts’.

In the Spadaro article Francis spoke of the dialogue that took place during the Synod for the Amazon, regarding the priestly ordination of *virii probati*. He said: ‘There was a discussion ... a rich discussion ... a well-founded discussion, but no discernment, which is something other than arriving to a good and justified consent or relative majorities.’ He went on to say: ‘We must understand that the Synod is more than a Parliament ... on this subject it was a rich, productive and even necessary Parliament; but no more than that.’

One of the more interesting statements made by Pope Francis in his dialogue with Fr Spadaro is the following:

‘Above all, there is no discernment on ideas, even among the ideas of reform, but on the real, on the stories, on the concrete history of the Church, because reality is always superior to the idea. For this reason the starting point is always historical.’

When Francis says that ‘the starting point is always historical’, this does not at all mean that we have to be wedded to doing whatever was done in the past. On the contrary, he is encouraging us to recall how the Church was led in the past to take Spirit-inspired *new* initiatives, in order to open ourselves to hear the voice of the Spirit

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in the present and for the future and be ready to take whatever initiatives to which we are *now* being called.

Reflection on the history of the Church indicates that the *Spirit* has inspired quite a wide range of ways in which different Christians can live out their call to follow Jesus. There has always been room for a variety of responses which are not in competition with each other.

THE OVERFLOW

Francis says: ‘What characterizes a synodal path is the role of the Holy Spirit. We listen, we discuss in groups, but above all we pay attention to what the Spirit has to say to us’ (*Let Us Dream*, p.85.) Francis is so insistent on this that it is clear that he is calling us to a kind of radical conversion of our usual rather vague faith in the work of the Holy Spirit. He is inviting us to *trust* that the Spirit wants to be actively engaged in shaping our insights and our decisions – and in leading us in new directions far beyond anything we might have previously hoped for or expected.

This is spelled out in some detail by Francis in his account of the nature of community discernment. He frequently refers to what he calls ‘the Overflow’. As he explains it, ‘overflow’ is ‘the solution to an intractable problem [which] comes in ways that are unexpected and unforeseen.’

‘Such overflows happen at the crossroads of life, at moments of openness, fragility, and humility when the ocean of [God’s] love bursts the dams of our self-sufficiency and so allows for a new imagination of the possible. (*Let Us Dream*, pp.80-81.)’

The *key* point here is that when we come together to engage in a community discernment, each of us must be willing to let go of our previous agendas and be fully open to the voice of the Spirit. Then there can be a real breakthrough – the emergence of some new option or energy which comes as pure gift from ‘the Beyond’. This new reality can, if we allow it, replace our own ideas and expectations and offer a new way of going forward *together*. Francis goes on to say that ‘what matters most is that harmony which enables us to move forward together on the same path, even with all our shades of difference.’ For him the very essence of a synod is summed up in the literal meaning of the two Greek words ‘*syn*’ which means ‘together’ and ‘*odos*’ which means ‘path’; so the word ‘synod’ means walking together.

The harmony and togetherness which Francis is calling for is not the kind of consensus we might work for by having a succession of votes and making compromises. It comes rather as a gift from the Spirit. In a very interesting statement he notes the importance of

mediators when politicians come together to agree on a common law and says that ‘mediation is a science, but also an exercise in human wisdom’. He suggests that in a synod the Holy Spirit plays a role that is analogous to that of the mediator in the political field.

SCRIPTURAL BASIS

We can turn to chapter 15 of ‘The Acts of the Apostles’ to see a striking example of the kind of discernment that was used by the young Christian community. A significant number of the Jewish converts were deeply upset by the pioneering work of Paul and Barnabas among the gentiles. It was not that they did not want gentiles to become Christians, but that they were convinced that in order to be true Christians they would have to take on all the obligations of Jews, including being circumcised and adopting the strict Jewish rules about what kind of food one could eat.

When this issue came to a head and had to be addressed by the leaders of the young Christian community, there was no question of having a parliamentary-style debate or counting numbers on one side or the other. The process adopted was rather one of *discerning* where the Spirit had been at work. So, Peter reminded the community of how God had challenged him so powerfully in his vision of the cloth containing all kinds of animals, and the message ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean’ (Acts 10:15). Peter pointed out that this was followed immediately by the conversion of the gentile Cornelius and his group and ‘ratified’ by the outpouring of the Spirit on them: ‘God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. God did not discriminate between us and them’ (Acts 10:8-9).

Peter’s account of this work of the Spirit must have touched the whole group deeply and left them open to listening. ‘The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them’ (Acts 12-13). It is clear that, once again, the whole group recognized that this was truly a work of the Spirit. Those who had been raising objections were now willing to go along with the proposal of James, which was in fact a full acceptance of the validity of the approach of Paul and Barnabas, with just a minor conciliatory gesture towards those who had opposed it.

The participants at that gathering probably saw their main work as ensuring that the small Christian community of the time wouldn’t split into two – those who remained Jewish Christians and the new people brought in by Paul and Barnabas. But the result of the discernment and decision taken at that first council of the

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Church had an ‘overflow’ effect that greatly surpassed anything that the group could have expected. It led to the Church becoming a worldwide religion, a universal community in which the Jewish Christians were just a tiny minority. It opened up the possibility of the Christian faith being embodied in a myriad of different cultures – something that only now, since Vatican II, and especially since Francis became pope, is beginning to be taken seriously.

INSPIRATION OF INDIVIDUALS AND SMALL GROUPS

A reflection on the past history of our Church shows that Spirit-inspired new initiatives rarely come out of parliamentary-style debates and compromises. Inspiration generally first comes through individuals or small groups. As the story of the Council of Jerusalem in the Acts of the Apostles illustrates, it was the *new* approach of Paul and Barnabas which led to the Church becoming truly worldwide. A similar pattern can be seen down through the history of the Church. For instance, the personal inspiration of Francis of Assisi led, over a period of years, to the development in the Church of a new rich spirituality which emphasised simple living and love for the Earth.

Much more recently, we find that the major changes in theology, spirituality, and the life of the Church brought about by Vatican II, came first from the personal inspiration of Pope John XXIII. And his initiative in calling the Council was brought to fruition by the unexpected recognition of the value of the theology espoused by a relatively small number of theologians such as Yves Congar, Karl Rahner, Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac and John Courtney Murray. These were people whose views had previously been seen as maverick, even quasi-heretical. The ‘overflow’, which came when the main body of bishops ‘bought into’ the inspiration of John XXIII and the theological insights of these few scholars, was far greater than anybody might have expected beforehand. The Council brought about a quite radical transformation of Church teaching on a whole range of subjects that would have been almost unthinkable for most Catholics – and most bishops – even a few years earlier.

The coming of Pope Francis is another striking example of an ‘overflow’. When the cardinals gathered to elect a successor to Pope Benedict they wanted to elect somebody who would solve the financial problems of the Vatican and, hopefully, put some limit to the excessive power of the Roman Curia. What we have got with the papacy of Francis is a far greater emphasis on compassion rather than on law and the quite radical commitment of Francis to the practice of synodality at every level of Church life.

DISCERNING FOR THE SYNOD

In order to illustrate the reality of the ‘overflow’, Francis himself cited what happened in October 2015 at the Synod on the Family. He recalled how the bishops got deadlocked:

‘Each side, entrenched in ‘their’ truth, ended up being imprisoned in their own positions. Yet the Spirit saved us in the end, in a breakthrough at the close of the second (October 2015) meeting of the Synod on the Family. The overflow, in this case, came above all through those with a deep knowledge of Saint Thomas Aquinas, among them the Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn. They recovered the true moral doctrine of the authentic scholastic tradition of Saint Thomas, rescuing it from the decadent scholasticism that had led to a casuistic morality. (*Let Us Dream* p. 88.)’

All of these examples indicate that when Church leaders are engaged in community discernment it is important for them to be *open* to listening for – and listening to – the Spirit-inspired calls of individual members or small groups – inspirations which have arisen from their own personal discernment.

IT CAN TAKE TIME

An important lesson that we learn from the history of the Church is that there are times when there was almost immediate acceptance by the Christian community as whole, and by Church leaders, that key new initiatives were fully in line with the call to be followers of Jesus. But more commonly it has taken some time for this general recognition to come; and in the meantime the ‘pioneers’ were often left feeling rather isolated and unsupported. We might recall the great difficulties with Church authorities experienced by Mary Ward, foundress of the IBVM Sisters (now CJ and Loreto Sisters), and of St. Mary MacKillop, foundress of the Josephite Sisters.

The time required for general acceptance depends partly on the degree of willingness of the members of the group to let go of their own agendas. But it also depends on the degree to which it is evident that those who are calling for the new initiative are *not* simply pushing some personal opinion but are truly inspired by the Holy Spirit.

These lessons from history throw light on the frequent insistence by Pope Francis that, ‘time is more important than space’. And it helps us to understand why Francis recently took the unusual step of postponing the date of the upcoming synod from 2022 to 2023. Of course, a main reason for this postponement was the insistence by Francis that there be adequate time for a deep and extensive

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involvement of Church members and others in the early stages of what has now become a three-year synodal process.

But we can surmise that Francis was also thinking of how, over the four years of Vatican II, there was a very significant ‘education’ of the bishops – a deepening of their understanding of what the Spirit was calling them to do, and a growing willingness to follow the Spirit. No doubt he was adverting to the fact that the more radical and controversial decisions were taken only in the final session of the Council. In the gaps of several months in between the four sessions of the Council the bishops had returned to their own dioceses and could get a sense of the response of ‘the faithful’ on the ground to the new approaches that were being suggested. And the Holy Spirit had time to work on the bishops themselves, leading these men who had been brought up on an older theology and spirituality to open themselves up to what they would have previously considered to be very ‘far out’ ideas.

DISCERNMENT ‘ON THE GROUND’

All this suggests that the gatherings ‘on the ground’ in each diocese and each region need to have a very different tone and style from the usual kind of consultations and meetings which Church leaders have practised in the past. It will be essential that the gatherings be facilitated by people who are familiar with the process of group discernment. The skills involved will, in some respects, be more similar to those of spiritual directors than to those of business consultants.

It will be essential to establish from the very beginning a *prayerful* atmosphere that will evoke in the participants an openness to listening to each other. This will be a situation where people feel safe in sharing the deep feelings and longings which well up in them in response to what others have shared, rather than giving speeches which they have prepared beforehand. All this will, hopefully, create an ambiance where people are listening for the voice of the Spirit.

It will be important to ensure that the questions which the participants are invited to address are appropriate for this kind of discernment. The main question should not be: ‘What do we have to say to the world?’ It could instead be: ‘What is God saying to me, to us, at this time? Where is the Spirit touching *me* at this moment, and what is the Spirit nudging *us* to hear and to do?’ The participants could be invited to remember that the Incarnation means that Jesus is fully embodied in this world and that therefore the Spirit of Jesus is speaking to us through all that is happening in the world. So a key question might be: ‘What is the Spirit telling us

about how Jesus is responding lovingly to the present situation in the world and the Church – and how is he inviting *us* to respond?’

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

At this point I venture to recall an experience which may give an indication of what I would like to see happening in these meetings. About fifteen years ago I was privileged to take part as a visitor-participant in a gathering where about two hundred members of a spiritual community were exploring their deepest purposes and the structures which would best enable them to fulfil these purposes. A great variety of strong opinions were expressed by different members of the group.

At one key moment a woman spoke briefly but with great feeling on some particular issue in a way that touched everybody there. At that point, one of the facilitators immediately put her ‘on the spot’ by saying: ‘Share your vision with us—what you stand for and what you believe our organization should stand for.’ The woman responded by outlining her vision, speaking spontaneously from the depths of her heart. When she had finished there was a deep silence. It was becoming evident to the participants that she had become a kind of instrument or medium who had been given the gift of putting words on what the whole group had been groping and struggling to articulate.

At one level what she had said was new. But her words had struck a cord in the hearts of the group, so that they could now recognize that she had given conscious expression to the deep unconscious desires of the group as a whole. So her words had brought harmony and a sense of togetherness which was far deeper than a consensus at a purely intellectual level. Furthermore, it had evoked a new energy in the group to live out what they now saw as *their* vision and purpose which she had articulated so powerfully. The facilitators then invited the group to take a long break to give people time to reflect on what had been said and to see whether it had been an adequate expression of the vision and purpose of the group.

As I reflect now on this event, I am inclined to interpret what happened in Christian terms. I would suggest that the woman was inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak ‘heart to heart’ to the group so respectfully and so authentically that her words provided a channel through which the light and the wisdom of the Spirit could move the hearts of her colleagues, bring enlightenment to their minds, give them a deep sense of their unity in their diversity, and infuse them with new energy for the path they were being called to travel together.