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# **ATTITUDES FOR SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT IN GROUPS**

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# ATTITUDES FOR SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT IN GROUPS

*A conference given by Fr. Elias Royón, SJ, in Rome, June 24, 2013 to the Legionaries of Christ in preparation for the review of their constitutions in the territorial assemblies and in the General Chapter<sup>1</sup>.*

## I. Introduction

I would like my first words to be in gratitude for the trust implied in this invitation. My heartfelt greeting and thanks to the Vicar General and to all of you. I hope that the Spirit we have invoked will make this meeting effective. We entrust ourselves to the Mother of the Church born on Pentecost.

I've been asked to speak to you about spiritual discernment, more exactly about the attitudes that make community discernment in the Spirit possible – personal and community attitudes that can help to search and find God's will for the Legion, first in the territorial assemblies and then in the general assembly.

## II. Difficulties in Making Choices

This is a transcendental moment and therefore, you want to open yourselves so that the Spirit will truly be the primary protagonist. However, the Spirit's action in the world and in the Church is always by means of historical and human mediation. In this case, these mediators are all of you, those who will participate in the territorial assemblies and in the general assembly afterwards. This is the great responsibility each of you has.

Human mediation is always imperfect. People have deficiencies that can block mediation, that is, cloud their abilities to transmit and receive God's will that they seek and desire. We can also close ourselves to listening to and receiving the manifestation of God's will that is expressed through the mediation of their brothers who participate in the assemblies. All, whether they are acting as transmitters or receivers are weak mediators, defective, but still mediators; the only mediators we have, weak, but necessary. That is how the Church wants it. You will be the ones who have to examine, pray, discern; paragraph by paragraph, the working document of the Constitutions and finally, offer an opinion.

### a. Interior combat: Need for vigilance

The Gospel passage about the disciples of Emmaus shows us that it is not easy to interpret the signs and language of God. Precisely because they are problematic, the mediations and their implications are frequently ambiguous and debatable, especially because *the costs of accepting God's will are unforeseeable and the logic how to fulfill the Gospel is baffling.*

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<sup>1</sup> Since the conference was given to an all male group, the language is non-inclusive and has generally been left that way in English. [Translator's Note]

Choosing the option God desires runs into resistance, difficulties and deceptions that are often subtle. Jesus too, immediately after his baptism was tested by Satan, as the three synoptic Gospels tell us (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13; Mark 1:12-13). He was tempted to abuse his messianic power, diverting it from the goal the Father had given him. The saving plan of the Father is opposed by the worldly plan of the Enemy. On another occasion, Jesus, himself, called Peter “Satan” when he wanted to abandon the plan entrusted to him by the Father which would lead to the glory of the Passion. The “human way” of Peter excludes the passion and only accepts the triumph (Mark 8:31-ff).

These experiences of testing and temptation of Jesus are repeated in the life of the Christian, but also, and we shouldn't forget it, in the events and works of communities, groups, institutions and religious congregations. In this moment in which you have to discern in an Assembly, as I will mention later, it is necessary to keep very much in mind the existence of the possible deceptions and temptations of the Evil One.

Our interior freedom is difficult to practice. Not only because it runs into external obstacles, but also because we have even more subtle obstacles within us. The spirit of God is not the only one that works in us. Someone else also is exercising influence. There is a battle between the drive to love and the drive of selfishness – love trying to open oneself up; selfishness being attached to self and resisting opening oneself up. The anti-gospel logic hiding in our heart reveals itself in multiple ways: in the desire for riches, prestige, leadership, the desire for power, control, vanity about our image ... all deeper in ourselves that we can imagine. We can't be naïve – but at the same time, the strength of the ‘Evil One’ is rooted in his skill and subtlety, in his capacity for deception. That is what makes him truly strong and fearsome.

When we need to choose, trying to act without malice, we never realize, not even in our own conscience, that we may be seeking power and prestige, or our personal interests or those of our group; those we want to advance, or those views I share. When we are defending a specific choice we are capable of masking it with a thousand excuses.

We have to take spiritual combat seriously, as Pope Francis has said on various occasions. The Gospel warns us that “the spirit is strong, but the flesh is weak.”, and therefore suggests the need to stay awake and pray not to fall into temptation (Mark 14:38). The watchfulness that Jesus recommends to us (see Matthew 26:41) is part of the essence of the attitude of discernment.

#### **b. “Prepare Yourself” for choosing: Purification of the heart**

This is why preparation for a provincial or general chapter or for a territorial or general assembly in your case is so important. There is an urgency and a responsibility to prepare yourself, convert yourself, with the grace of God, into docile instruments, faithful mediators that express what God wants in this apostolic body in the Church in this historical moment. At the same time, prepare yourselves to be docile receivers that welcome the manifestations that express God's desires.

In a chapter, in an assembly, all the tasks you have to do: working, dialoging, informing, taking part in the sessions, the committees, the private conversations ... can be moments of discernment, that is, sincere seeking of God's will. Or it can simply be moments of argument, of criticism, of manipulation, of pushing my agenda, of imposing my opinions on others, or the opinions of a particular group, including campaigning for a point of view. In other words, we can listen to what the Spirit wants to tell the Assembly, to the Congregation, or try to make everyone listen to us. It all depends [...] on the personal or collective attitudes that we have or believe in.

It is not enough to be indifferent<sup>2</sup>. It is necessary that the body of the chapter, of the assembly is indifferent. There are personal and group indifferences. We can be open or closed personally or as a group. There is personal searching and group searching. There is personal and collective consolation. There is personal and collective desolation. The preparation will be principally purification of the heart, purification of our disordered affections (in the language of St. Ignatius). It includes religious as individuals as well as the group, the community, the assembly that is going to choose.

### **III. What is Discernment in the Spirit?**

Institutions, just like individuals, turn to all the available resources in order to assure making good and correct decisions. They consult advisors and experts. They collect as much information as possible. They prepare guidelines and orientations, criteria for making choices, &c. They also have recourse to an activity which is termed *discernment*, which is defined as "to distinguish one thing from another, accenting the differences that exist between them."<sup>3</sup> Things are sifted, they are sorted. Some are considered suitable for achieving the chosen objectives and others not. As a consequence there is a choice, a decision made.

But positions taken for decision-making by Christian persons, communities, groups and institutions, according to criteria formed from scientific or sociological analysis, based on our own or others experience or good practices are not enough. Christian choices, and even more, decisions regarding the life and mission of religious, should be always enlightened and guided by the light of the Spirit and conform to Gospel values. So, to practice, not just a simple discernment, but a discernment according to the Spirit, is unavoidable. It carries with it a series of specific demands. Without a doubt spiritual discernment demands the analysis of the real, scientific facts, analyzed and perceived as well as possible. It does not ignore or eliminate them, but goes beyond this analysis. Choices made while considering only these facts will not be sufficient to guide a life of dedication to Jesus and his Kingdom.

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<sup>2</sup> When Fr. Royón speaks of 'indifference', he uses it as referring to freedom of spirit, to being indifferent toward all that blocks that freedom. It does not refer to indifference as disinterest, apathy, indolence, insensitivity or reluctance, but rather to a healthy neutrality toward our tastes, inclinations or personal interests that always gives preference to what the Holy Spirit is dictating.

<sup>3</sup> The original Spanish text gives the definition from the dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy. This is the only authoritative dictionary of the Spanish language and thus a standard reference throughout the Spanish-speaking world. [Translator's note]

Discernment is a permanent need in the life of a mature Christian. It asserts itself as a constant in a Christian's life in order to grow from being a child in the faith to being a mature person. And it occurs in every phase of Christian life. Benedict XVI says in *Caritas in veritate*: "Knowledge is never purely the work of the intellect. It can certainly be reduced to calculation and experiment, but if it aspires to be wisdom capable of directing man in the light of his first beginnings and his final ends, it must be "seasoned" with the "salt" of charity. Deeds without knowledge are blind, and knowledge without love is sterile."<sup>4</sup> So we are not dealing with persons discerning and choosing only by the light of their reason and natural means within their grasp, but by the light of the Spirit that Jesus promised us: "The Advocate, the holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name—he will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you" (John 14:26).

#### **IV. Distinguish between Methodology and Attitude**

We need to make a distinction between methodology – the concrete forms of discerning – and discernment itself, which refers to an interior attitude.

##### **a. A way of living, a way of locating oneself in history**

Discernment, above all, is a way of living, a fundamental attitude. It is a way of locating oneself in history, in one's personal existence. It means to live taking into account that God is present in that history and directs that history: "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). It is believing that our own life and the life of a religious congregation in our case, are projects of the Lord that we have to bring to fulfillment and whose elements are revealed to us little by little, not all at once. There will be surprises. Don't forget that God is love and faithfulness, but he is also mystery.

##### **b. Seeking God's will**

We respond to a call, to a vocation. This attitude can be identified with what we call today, "to live life as a vocation". It requires the conviction that there is such a thing as the will of God, that God directs history and that there is a will, a love, a gift of God for our congregations. It is not our project. It is his. We need to seek out God's will for us – in some moments and situations in a very special way, like the moment you are now living.

*Seek with the confidence that we will find because God comes out to meet us.* God doesn't put us in a maze so that after getting dizzy looking, we might or might not find the exit. His will is a gift, a present that ultimately, he wants to give us. Seek and you will find, but once found this will has to be followed. This is what making decisions is about.

So we have to begin with an attitude of faith and confidence that God wants to communicate, that he wants to speak to us, that he wants to make his will known and that we can know it. A belief of the writers of the Bible is that God is continually sending signs to humanity. That is what Ezekiel said in the eighth century BC: "Son of man, look carefully and listen intently. Pay strict attention to everything I show you" (Ezekiel 40:4).

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<sup>4</sup> Encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict XVI, 30.

Psalm 19 tells us that the heavens declare, the firmament proclaims, the day pours forth speech, the night whispers (see Psalm 19:2-3). St. John tells us in the prologue to his Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1) and in the fullness of time, God makes the Word human. He communicates in our language. We can speak with him in a common language.

God is above all Trinitarian communication. Therefore, the great need of Israel is: Listen! And the greatest reproach of the prophets is the lethargy of heart that fails to listen to the Word of God. The “Emmaus syndrome” can happen to us. We hear, but we don’t listen. We hear, but we don’t communicate. We are up to date on all the news, but it doesn’t dawn on us what it means. We have all the information, but we don’t come to the right conclusions. We interpret everything from our point of view, according to how we feel.

## **V. Requirements for Discerning in Groups**

From what we have said so far, it is clear that discernment requires leaving plenty of room for the action of the Spirit. Decision is not the fruit of an effort of the will. A decision is discovered, it is not manufactured, and the Spirit reveals it to us little by little. The process of discernment as we have been suggesting, takes into account all our talents and considers the facts and the different analyses of reality; but in the end, it is the Spirit who brings light to the will in order to choose a particular option. *This means that in all those who participate in the search, there exists a series of spiritual conditions that guarantee and make fruitful the process of deciding.* The first can only be that which summarizes our consecration to the Lord In the religious life.

### **a. Following and identifying with Christ**

In discerning, we need the Spirit to reveal Jesus to us, because only by contemplating him will the Father reveal to us his will for us. Only by contemplating Jesus will it be possible to choose according to God’s will. Our discernment will always be a discernment from Jesus, which is to say: from the desire and the living of our following and identification with Him who made of his existence a fulfillment of the will of the Father (see John 4:31-34). It’s about trying to live “with Him and like Him” – to be deeply affected by him, attached to his values, his attitudes, his preferences.

On the human level, any decision is determined by the values that live in the heart of the person making the decision. Every choice, even when it appears spontaneous, is made from an emotional frame of reference that is not chosen nor constructed for the occasion, but which is already present and is the fruit of the specific way we live and act. It is like an attitude already existing in the depths of the person and which acts almost without our realizing it. Our emotions and our sensitivities can be Christianized or not. They can be either in tune or not in tune, “influenced”, “attached” to the person and the values of Jesus and of his Gospel.

When we are trying to begin such an important process, as the Church is asking us to do, identifying with Him whose food was, “to do the will of the Father” cannot be a secondary task.

## **b. The spirit of communion<sup>5</sup>: One heart and one soul**

Possibly, one of the most decisive requirements for a true discernment is the attitude of living the whole process with the strong desire for communion. A text – like that of the Constitutions, that is called to be for all of us the source of holiness and apostolate – should already (in the process of studying it and discerning) provoke a dynamic of communion that enriches it with the contributions the Spirit inspires in all the participants in the territorial and general assemblies.

The danger is not that we have and manifest our different points of view concerning the constitutional texts that we have under consideration. These different points of view can be a richness. They should translate themselves into richness and complementarity. It is the Spirit who creates communion and makes us feel like living and active members of the same body. If we let ourselves be carried by His unifying force, differences will be reduced and rewarding. If, on the other hand, we concentrate in pushing our own opinions in opposition to the opinions of others, then consensus will be impossible and we will create differences, breaking communion.

From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has taken up the theme of the Spirit as the creator of harmony in ecclesial communion. That's how he spoke in this homily on the feast of Pentecost: “the Holy Spirit would appear to create disorder in the Church, since he brings the diversity of charisms and gifts; yet all this, by his working, is a great source of wealth, for the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of unity, which does not mean uniformity, but which leads everything back to *harmony*. In the Church, it is the Holy Spirit who creates harmony. One of Fathers of the Church has an expression which I love: the Holy Spirit himself is harmony – “*Ipse harmonia est*”. He is indeed harmony. Only the Spirit can awaken diversity, plurality and multiplicity, while at the same time building unity. Here too, when we are the ones who try to create diversity and lock ourselves in our idiosyncrasies and our exclusivity,<sup>6</sup> we bring division” (May 19, 2013).

The spirituality of communion, affirmed by St. John Paul II, is the capacity to see above all, what is positive in the other in order to welcome and value it as a gift of God: “not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a ‘gift for me’” (*Nuevo Millennio Ineunte*, 43). I believe that we could apply here the words of the document *Vita Consecrata* about the spirituality of communion: it “promotes a way of thinking, speaking and acting which enables the Church to grow in depth and extension” (*Vita Consecrata*, 46).

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<sup>5</sup> Usually in English, we hear the word ‘fellowship’ for this concept. However, in Catholic circles and especially in the English translations of Vatican documents, the word ‘communion’ is preferred, so we will stick with that usage [Translator’s Note].

<sup>6</sup> Vatican translation was “*close ourselves up in what makes us different and other*” which seemed a little opaque [translator’s note].

### c. Examination and purification of our “disordered affections<sup>7</sup>”

We discern from within our own personal circumstances. We cannot forget that each one approaches the process of discernment with the weight of his or her own circumstances and in the light of his or her own personal attitudes. It would be naïve to think that they will not influence the opinions that we form and the decisions that we make. Nor can we claim that we will not be affected by any circumstance, but we can try to be aware of them and how they can take away our interior freedom.

These circumstances may be related to human, psychological, religious, spiritual or community points of view; to situations of greater or lesser commitment, of agreement or disagreement with the plans and direction of the institution, &c. Frequently, this pattern begins from our own perception of reality, although it costs us to recognize that we are living under the influence of a specific circumstance that weakens or shapes our freedom of choice.

It would be naïve and irresponsible to think that my specific circumstances will not influence me, that what is important for the Assembly is my intellect, my experience, my knowledge of Canon Law, of theology, of the consecrated life, &c. Of course, all this will help, but me – what’s going on inside me? What is my interior freedom like? My circumstances accompany and influence me. We should not forget that those who participate in an Assembly like ours, or in a general chapter of any religious congregation, don’t do it as their own personal representative. The majority are there as representatives of their brothers who have elected them. This means that they should represent the ideas or the opinions of the group – that there is a demand and a responsibility to dedicate themselves to serve the apostolic body of the Congregation as well as possible.

Let’s recall briefly the Gospel passage about the disciples of Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Two disciples who love Jesus, who have been inspired by him, who left everything, who followed him, who stayed with him for a specific amount of time, who saw his miracles, who heard his teaching ... but in this moment they are in a specific set of circumstances. They are sad, desolate, without understanding, in darkness – they have even left the community – they have gone. They have firsthand information: they have heard Peter, John and Mary Magdalene; but their interpretation of these facts that speak of the resurrection of Jesus is conditioned by the circumstances they are living after Jesus’ death. They are only able to say, “We were hoping.”

That is what can happen to us when we begin to discern in an Assembly or in a Chapter. We come in with our own baggage, living our own personal circumstances. We need to make a deep self-examination in the presence of God. This comes before any group discernment can occur. It is an implicit demand for all those who will be discerning. Its purpose is to place us all in the same situation of freedom, since some of those previous circumstances can become attitudes that make more difficult the presence of the freedom needed for the process of group discernment. Logically, we will have to purify ourselves of any circumstance blocking

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<sup>7</sup> This is another phrase that is not much used in English outside Catholic writings. ‘Affections’ is a catch-all term that means the emotions, passions, desires – most anything that is not of the reason or will. ‘Disordered’ refers to the effect of original sin on these ‘affections’, removing them from the orderly way they were originally meant to function in God’s plan and making them a problem for following God’s will.

our interpersonal relationships through envy, jealousy or competitiveness ... inhibiting communication between any members of the group.

Of course, we cannot change these circumstances in a few days, but it is strongly recommended to become aware of them and their influence on our decisions. It will be necessary, therefore, to open ourselves sincerely to God and recognize what the situation of our own hearts is. In my opinion, you are in a good situation. You have time to prepare yourselves interiorly. The time remaining before your Assemblies is a precious time to “prepare yourselves” for discernment. St. Ignatius insists a lot in the need to “prepare oneself before doing the Spiritual Exercises and drawing fruit from them. Together with studying and reflecting on the texts, prepare yourselves to listen to God, when you listen to your brothers. For this, it is essential to know and accept your own “disordered affections” that threaten your freedom and enter into a process of purification from that disorder through divine grace.

## **VI. Necessary Attitudes for Group Discernment**

Together with the requirements mentioned so far, it would be useful to note some interior attitudes that insure the possibility and correctness of spiritual group discernment.

### **a. Docility to the Spirit**

This is the opposite of “enlightened” attitudes – the self-sufficiency that weakens the shared search with the pretense of seeking and finding God’s will on my own. Those who believe themselves free from the need to search and learn in reality aren’t listening to God, although they believe that they are seeking him. They don’t listen to others because they already know it all. Before beginning the process of discernment, they are already certain about the decisions that need to be made, about what should be done in this specific situation, which option should be chosen &c.

There is a similar attitude that wants, although with the best intentions, to impose on the group their ideas about this or that text because they believe themselves to be better informed or prepared. They are convinced that they are right. This is one of the greatest deceptions of the Evil One.

### **b. Openness to the Spirit’s surprises**

In this time we are living wonderful experiences of God’s surprises: the resignation of Benedict XVI and the election of Pope Francis. What a surprise!! It would be good if in the Church we all came away with the conclusion that it is possible for the Spirit to surprise us – that God speaks to his Church and to each one of us in this way.

When faced with the attitude of “having all the loose ends tied up”, let yourselves be surprised by the Spirit, for we know not where he comes from nor where he goes (see John 3:8). He makes all things new and tells us: “My ways are not your ways” (see Isaiah 55:8).

Group discernment demands openness to the surprises of the Spirit that reach us through our brothers. Here, there is always a problem: opening yourself to a word from God, to a manifestation of God that has a human face, a human first and last name, a human history, human defects ... to do this demands faith.

### **c. Indifference: Freedom of spirit**

First of all, we need to say that this is a gift of the Spirit. St. Ignatius asks: “That God place me in indifference.” It is a gift that we have to ask for – not just for ourselves – but for the Assembly that is discerning, because all should have the attitude of indifference. A group or a team that is discerning is never the sum of the individuals that make it up. It has an “extra”, that is added to it when it is pierced by the Spirit.

Indifference doesn't mean to avoid tipping the scales at any cost. It doesn't mean renouncing my opinions or the reasons I have for or against the proposals being made. The only tendency I need to avoid is the disordered attachment that blocks free choice. Each member of the group and the group as a whole is indifferent if they feel themselves wrapped in the freedom that brings the conviction that God and his will are first and that everything else, including those who are making the choice, are only the means for reaching him. In other words, it is the recognition that in the center of our lives there is only one thing that matters: God. Everything else is relative.

Discernment is possible when there is a strong experience of faith – not just personal faith, but also group faith. It is an act of listening to and confidence in God, who guides individuals and groups, who has a will, a specific project for these groups, congregations ... and who through his Word, manifests the signs of the times in his Church, in specific situations and circumstances – and in a special way, in group discernment, through brothers who discern together. It is God who calls the group. The group should live its “identity” in faith and be open to the faith of the entire Church. If we don't believe this, it is not possible to discern in the Spirit. We can speak of discernment, but it means more than a dialogue, a deliberation, a sharing of opinions and views, like the administrative councils of businesses when they seek what most suits them in specific situations.

The search for this will has to be done starting from the spirit of God, that is, from the spirit of the Risen One, not from my particular spirit. The group should open itself to the Spirit that “will guide it into all truth” (John 16:13). That's why we say that discernment is spiritual, that is, it is done in the Spirit and under his influence. The group opens up to the Spirit when it chooses indifference, that is, when it desires to live in the dynamic of purification of heart; with the attitude of leaving behind “our own loves, desires and interests,” when it makes the choice to support each other.

When this attitude is shared by the whole group, it avoids that the shared search will break the union of hearts and makes possible that the strong become listeners and the weak will be heard. A spiritual environment always favors listening to the weak.

We conduct our search within an environment of listening to others, within an environment of listening to the spiritual experience of all. It is not enough to list logical reasons and

conclusions, of explanations according to human wisdom. We need to listen to the spiritual experience of each person, heard while considering the logical reasons and the text of the specific paragraph in front of us. This experience takes place in the context of sentiments that show states of consolation or desolation, whose origins need to be considered.

Prayer, which makes discernment what it is, and not just a simple deliberation, should not be lived merely on a personal level, but also on a group level – in a childlike relationship with God that makes us all feel like brothers and sisters, and children of the same Father. “With one heart and one soul,” the group asks for the grace of the Spirit, asks for indifference, purification of heart and openness to each and every one.

#### **d. Sense of Belonging to the Group Discerning: Immediate group and the Movement**

Belonging is effective and affective, not just juridical. That means that the experience of communion in the Spirit is the experience that makes us feel like living and active members of the same body, that which makes us members of the same human family (see 1 Corinthians 12:4-30). Communion is based on the sense of belonging that makes us co-responsible and feel “inside” the body and not on its edges, which makes us rejoice and suffer with it and with its members, which motivates me to be interested and that its circumstances, its present and its future are important to me. If I have criticisms to make, I express them “inside,” only seeking the good of the body and no other interests.

#### **e. Listening: The essential condition for discerning in the Spirit**

When discerning as a group, it is essential to listen, since we open ourselves to listen to God’s will by listening deeply to each of our brothers. But this is not as easy as it seems, since it means giving space within ourselves to others, to their points of view, to their convictions. It is an attitude of personal respect toward others since true listening demands being ready to change opinions when listening to the opinions of others. In reality, it is accepting that others can question us, that the Lord speaks to me through this or that person. This openness unmask our ambiguities and prejudices. It tests our certainties to see if they are authentic or false – if we are really seeking what God wants or if we are seeking ourselves without admitting it, or if we want our proposals and opinions to prevail over the others.

Of course, this does not mean that I don’t have personal opinions in this business or that I haven’t made an effort to personally study and reflect on the texts of the Constitutions which we are trying to discern in order to form an opinion. It means that I am aware that we are in a process of group discernment, that I open myself to listening to the Lord, that I am truly seeking God’s will, that I don’t possess the entire truth myself, but that I share it with others.

The attitude of starting out without being open to changing my opinion means that, in fact, I am not going to listen, and in the end, shows that I am not seeking what God wants, because I think I possess what should be chosen by the rest.

There are forms of “listening” that are not authentic attitudes for group discernment. There is the armor-clad listening: “I already know what you want” and I put up my barriers. I hear

someone's contribution and I think, "I already knew what he was going to say." "I know what's hidden behind those words." There is also dialectic listening. I listen to your arguments in order to refute them. You are still speaking and I've already thought of thirty responses. It is the listening of a master to a disciple and it is also not proper to discernment, in which we are all disciples, listening to the Spirit. There is a listening in which we hear ourselves in the other and pick out what confirms my position, setting aside what is different from what I think.

Listening, on the other hand, implies an openness to receive, patience to accept the rhythm of the other, capacity to accept the unforeseen or surprising, and the graciousness to evaluate the content of something that is not well presented.

Listening must be vulnerable. I am ready to allow what I hear to change the opinions I come to and my prejudices. It is an attitude that recognizes in all persons the capacity to know the truth, to be mediators who transmit God's will to us. And when we say "all persons," we understand all persons who participate. We don't arrive with a rating for those who make up the group, valuing them according to their intellectual capacities, their experience, their preparation or the level of like or dislike that they have toward my ways of understanding the questions, if this one is or is not part of my clique...

## **VII. Conclusion**

We could conclude with a summary inspired by one of the most original parts of St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises, which serves as a help for making good choices (*Spiritual Exercises*, 136 and following<sup>8</sup>).

### **a. Two places**

Our projects can be argued in Babylon or dialogued in Jerusalem.

In Babylon we always speak from outside, because it is a place we don't belong in. It is a place of exile, of captivity, where there is no communion. We are not equal, youths and elders, conservatives and progressives, northerners and southerners, moderns and post-moderns ... it always divides us. In Babylon differences are excluding, arguing divides.

In Jerusalem, we are at home. The Lord who has called us, gathers us and gave us the city. Conversation unites us. We dialogue. We respect and welcome diversity. There is only "us" – one heart and one soul, which grows to fulfillment, sometimes through very hard work.

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<sup>8</sup> This corresponds to the meditation on the "two standards" or "two flags".

## **b. Two styles**

There are two basic attitudes that are transformed into two styles: pontificating in an overpowering manner, defending our own opinions without the least doubt, wrapped in absolute truth. Or, the style of Jesus, side-by-side with sinners; simple and humble, that proposes, listens, shares. That is why people commented admiringly “Never before has anyone spoken like this one” (John 7:46).

A group in which all pontificate will achieve peace with difficulty and will be totally sterile.

## **c. Two attitudes**

One attitude is humble, confident prayer. To avoid being deceived, we need a light from above – a light that doesn’t come from us, a light that reveals the “shining deceptions”, the “false lights”. We need to ask for the grace to defend ourselves from them and to know how to unmask them for ourselves and for the group.

The other attitude is the one of feeling enlightened. We are convinced that our attitudes or solutions are the true and efficient ones, that we are not going to be deceived. We don’t even accept the possibility of being deceived.

## **d. Two essential orientations**

The first orientation is toward the Lord Jesus. In all discernment we cannot omit an explicit orientation toward Jesus, the Lord, a fervor for Jesus and his cause, a passionate process of identification with Christ. This orientation brings with it an emptying of myself of my ego and of my assumptions, without which it is impossible to discern.

The second orientation is toward the world. It will be an unconventional orientation towards the world, as something “outside” ourselves and on the fringe. It is a contemplative attitude that is expressed as a capacity to see through appearances and avoid the shallowness of first impressions and hasty decisions. This is a world that we are sent to heal and cure, to cast out its demons and to announce the Good News.

Elias Royón, SJ

# **SUMMARY OF CONFERENCE ON SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT IN GROUPS**

**Fr. Elias Royón, SJ**

# **ATTITUDES FOR SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT IN GROUPS**

## **Summary of the Conference of Fr. Elias Royón, SJ**

### **I. Introduction**

The conference deals with personal and group attitudes for conducting a group discernment in the Spirit that permits us to seek and find God's will for a group.

### **II. Difficulties in Making Choices**

The Spirit always acts through historic and human mediation. In this case the mediations are the participants in the group that meet for group discernment. But we have to consider all mediations as imperfect and capable of blocking the action of the Holy Spirit.

#### **a. Interior combat: Need for vigilance**

In the process of discernment there exist difficulties and interior resistance at the moment of choosing God's will. We have to remember the existence of possible deceits, subtle at times, and temptations from the Evil One. Our interior freedom is difficult to practice because we are not subject only to external obstacles, but to our own internal selfishness: desire for riches, prestige, leadership, desire for power, dominion, preserving our image, &c... The Evil One takes advantage of all this to subtly deceive us. Therefore, we have to take seriously the great need to "watch and pray, because the Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." The vigilance that Jesus recommends to us in the Gospel is the essence of the attitude of discernment.

#### **b. Preparation for choosing: Purification of heart**

We have to prepare ourselves, convert ourselves, open ourselves to God's grace in order to be docile instruments, faithful mediators who express what God wants from the group, as well as to welcome the manifestations of his divine will. In a group in discernment all conversation, dialog, assignments, &c... can either be moments of discernment or of lobbying to seek our own interests. It all depends on the personal and group attitudes. It is not enough to have a healthy personal indifference toward our own interests. It is necessary for the whole group to have that attitude, as well as openness of heart. For this we have to purify our hearts from the disordered affections that we have because of our own self-love.

### **III. What is Discernment in the Spirit?**

According to the Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy, “discern” means: “To distinguish one thing from another, accenting the difference between the two.”<sup>9</sup> But when it’s time to make a decision involving the life and mission of Christian groups and institutions, scientific studies and analyses of the situation are not enough. The guidance and illumination of the Holy Spirit is absolutely necessary. These decisions should also be in accord with Gospel values. Discernment, therefore, should be a constant in Christian life in order to make the transition from the faith of a child to mature faith. But discernment in the Spirit bears with it a series of specific demands. “The Advocate—the Holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name—he will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you” (John 14:26).

### **IV. Distinguish between Method and Attitude**

We have to distinguish between methodology, that is, the specific forms of discerning and discernment properly speaking, which refers primarily to interior attitudes.

#### **a. Way of living and locating oneself in history**

This means to live while remembering that God is present in history and directs it. “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). It means believing that personal and group or community life is a project accomplished little by little and therefore, there will be surprises.

#### **b. Seeking God’s will**

This attitude can be identified with what we now call “to life as a vocation”. It is being convinced that we have received a call to seek and find God’s will for us. It is seeking with the confidence that we will find, since God comes out to meet us. Therefore, an act of faith and trust that God wants to reveal himself, as the Old Testament prophets experienced it, is essential.

### **V. Requirements for Discerning in Groups**

Leave ample room for the action of the Holy Spirit. The process of discernment takes into account all our faculties and considers the facts and analysis of reality, but it is the Spirit who sheds light on our will to help us choose a specific option.

#### **a. Following and identifying with Christ**

Only in contemplating the person of Jesus, will the Father reveal his will for us. Our discernment will always be a discernment starting from Jesus. Therefore, we have to be profoundly influenced by and attached to his values, attitudes and preferences. We have to be aware that all human decisions are conditioned by the scale of values of the person who chooses and by an

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<sup>9</sup> “*Distinguir algo de otra cosa, señalando la diferencia que hay entre ellas.*”

emotional framework that is not chosen. Our emotions and sensitivities can be evangelized to be in tune with those of Christ.

### **b. Spirit of communion: One heart and one soul**

One of the requirements most decisive in the process of group discernment is to live it with a strong desire for communion. The danger is not in having and professing different opinions, which can be a richness if we allow ourselves to be moved by the force of the Spirit. Then, the differences will be channeled and valuable. While it is the Spirit who inspires the different charisms of the Church, He is also the Spirit of communion, of unity, of harmony. We are the ones who promote differences when we enclose ourselves in our individualism and exclusivity and when we provoke divisions.

### **c. Examination and purification of our “disordered affections”<sup>10</sup>**

We cannot forget that we all participate in the process of discernment with the burden of our own circumstances and attitudes. It would be naïve and irresponsible to think that my specific circumstances will not influence me, that what is important is my intelligence, experience, knowledge, &c... it is necessary to be aware of our circumstances and examine ourselves sincerely before God to verify how our interior freedom is and to be able to purify what blocks our interpersonal relationships: envy, jealousy, competitiveness, &c... So, it is essential to know and accept our own “disordered affections” which threaten our freedom and enter into a process of purification of these disorders with God’s grace.

## **VI. Necessary Attitudes for Group Discernment**

Together with the already mentioned requirements, the following attitudes should be pointed out.

### **a. Docility to the Spirit**

It is rooted in prayerful and humble listening, the opposite of “enlightened” attitudes, of the self-sufficiency that weakens the shared quest with the arrogance of seeking and finding God’s will on one’s own. It requires avoiding the attitude of those who believe they’ve got nothing to learn, because they know it all or those who although with good intention, force the acceptance of their own opinion within the group because they believe they are better informed or prepared, since they believe that they are in possession of the truth.

### **b. Openness to the Spirit’s surprises**

We don’t know where the Spirit comes from or where it goes (see John 3:8). It makes all things new, since the ways of God are not our ways. The surprises of the Spirit come to us through our brothers, and so we need to be open and have faith.

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<sup>10</sup> This is another phrase that is not much used in English outside Catholic writings. ‘Affections’ is a catch-all term that means the emotions, passions, desires – most anything that is not of the reason or will. ‘Disordered’ refers to the effect of original sin on these ‘affections’, removing them from the orderly way they were originally meant to function in God’s plan and making them a problem for following God’s will.

### **c. Indifference: Freedom of spirit**

Indifference is a gift we need to ask for, not only for each of us individually, but for the whole group that is discerning, since all should practice indifference. Indifference does not consist in renouncing our opinions or reasons for or against another opinion. Rather, it is the detachment from our disordered affections that block our free choice. It requires a strong experience of faith, which is not only personal but also communitarian. The group opens itself to the Spirit when it adopts indifference, that is, when it desires to live the dynamic of the purification of the heart with the attitude of leaving behind self-love, my desires and my interests, when it opens to the possibility of being supported by others. This attitude avoids breaking the union of hearts and makes possible that the strong make themselves weak by listening and the weak are listened to.

### **d. Strong sense of belonging to the group that discerns**

Beyond a belonging that is merely juridical, this is a belonging that is affective and effective. It deals with the experience of communion in the Spirit that is what makes us feel that we are living and active members of one body, which makes us participants in the same human family (see 1 Corinthians 12:4-30).

### **e. Listening: Essential condition for discerning in the Spirit**

Listening is essential for group discernment. It means to open ourselves to the opinions of others, to their points of view, their convictions. Of course, it is not as easy as it looks. It is an attitude of respect for the person, because it demands having the attitude of being open to changing our opinion when we listen. It is accepting that others may question us and accepting that the Lord speaks to us through others. It does not mean that we don't have our own judgment. It means being aware of being part of a process of group discernment.

Some forms of listening that are not genuine are:

- a. Armor-clad listening: "I already knew what you were going to say";
- b. Dialectic listening: I listened to your arguments in order to refute them. This is the attitude of a master, a teacher.
- c. Listening in which we hear ourselves in the other and choose what confirms our position

True listening implies:

- a. Attitudes of openness
- b. Patience to be open to the rhythm of others.
- c. The capacity to make the unforeseen and surprising fit into my way of thinking.
- d. The graciousness to value a content that is poorly formulated

Listening implies vulnerability. I am prepared to let what I hear alter my dispositions and my prejudices. I recognize in others the capacity to know the truth and to be mediators who transmit God's will.

## **VII. Conclusion**

To sum up:

### **a. Two places**

Our projects can be argued in Babylon or dialogued in Jerusalem. In Babylon, we are strangers, not equal, captives. There is no communion, only differences. In Jerusalem, we are at home, invited by the Lord, dialoguing with respect and receptiveness in order to come to a consensus.

### **b. Two styles**

We can pontificate, defending our opinion in an overpowering way. Or, we can speak like Jesus did, side-by-side with sinners, simple and humble, who proposed, listened and shared.

### **c. Two attitudes**

One attitude is humble and confident prayer, in order not to be deceived through the help of grace. The other is that which believes it is enlightened, convinced that it is the correct position and that it cannot be deceived.

### **d. Two essential orientations**

The first orientation is toward the Lord Jesus. It leads us to empty ourselves. Without it, discernment is impossible. The second is toward the world that we are called to heal and cure, whose demons we are called to cast out, to which we are called to announce the Good News of Jesus.