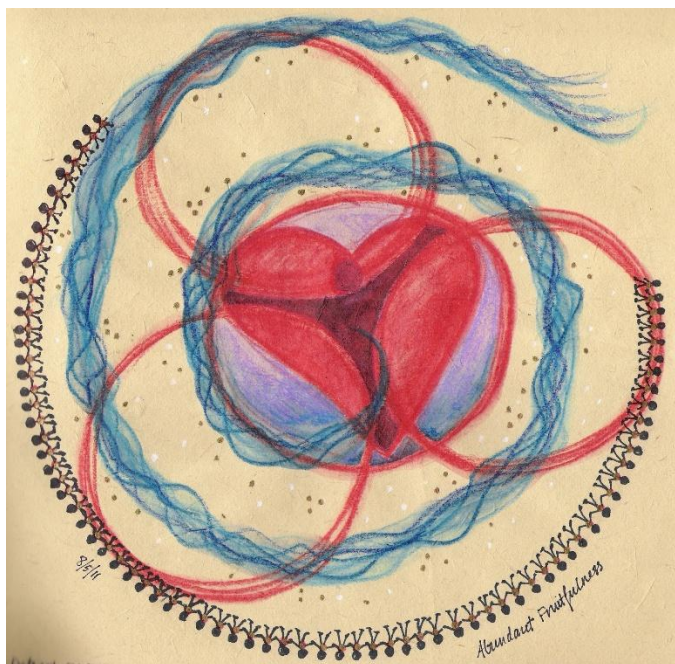


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## Introduction to Communal Discernment

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in which one is *not free* to perceive God's presence or will. Therefore there is a continual process of giving God the "agenda" of our hearts in order to make room for what *God* wants to do in and through us. Listening for the sake of the other takes interior discipline. Speaking from the silence of deeper wisdom is a gift that reveals God's presence in the midst of those gathered.

**Silence/Centering:** The group makes the intention of being together in the presence of God, and for the grace to respond to God's grace. Participants may be reminded to bring to mind the intention of the discernor/presenter, or the intention of the group discernment. It is important for every participant to "arrive," to "check in" within as to how open one is to the God of surprises. Some groups actually gather in silence.

**Presenter/Discerner:** If there is one person discerning a proposal, that proposal would have been communicated to the group beforehand so that the two weeks before the meeting, all would be praying for this intention. The presenter then reiterates the proposal or any amendment to his original proposal that may have been clarified in prayer. All listen attentively, as "disinterestedly" (not having a preconceived "interest" in the outcome or "answer"). The components of the discernor's presentation include:

- Statement of Discernment (aka Proposal)
- Background and Analysis of the Proposed Decision
- Experience of God's Presence: the pattern of consolation (movement toward God) and desolation (movement away from God) as he or she weighed the data and the option, or a sense of confirmation in the Spirit.

The process outlined below is gleaned from both Ignatian communal discernment used for group decisions as well as the concept of "clearness meeting" developed by the Society of Friends. The latter is designed to help individuals be confirmed in the Spirit by a community who listens with the individual to clarify God's will, particularly in weightier vocational questions such as marriage or job opportunities. During the course of these meetings, participants of the discernment group may be introduced to the Ignatian "rules of discernment" and other principles from the *Spiritual Exercises*, as well as components of Catholic tradition as interior tools in preparation for personal and communal prayer and discernment.

### Communal Discernment Flow

The format includes time for silence so that each participant may listen to the movements in his or her own heart as well as to the movements within the group. Much of the "work" in the silence is the recognition of ways

## Silence

**Clarifying Questions:** After a period of silence, the listeners ask clarifying questions to help the discerner “unpack” the proposed direction. These serve:

- to focus the discernment question/proposal,
- as background important to one’s understanding of the situation,
- to elicit signs of God’s call,
- and/or human resistance and confusion.

Silence is imperative during this dialogue as well. Silence between questions allows questions and answers to sink in, and allows all present to attend to movements in oneself, the presenter, and in the group. There may be a facilitator/spiritual director/guide for the group process, but anyone may ask for silence at any time as it allows each participant to:

- Examine himself or herself as to openness or biases
- Build on the questions or insights of others, attending as one body when possible.

Examples:

*“Could we slow down for a moment before moving forward?”*

*“May we have a moment to reflect on what she just said?”*

*“May I have a moment to think about the last question before the next one?”*

## Silence

### Sharing of personal and communal movements:

- Speak out of the silence and peace of God, rather than the rush of many thoughts.
- Discernment is not necessarily about “answers” as much as attending to how God is moving/revealing God’s self in a

given instance, and then our response to what we perceive.

- Anyone in the group who feels disquiet or dis-ease rather than the peace of God in regard to the direction of the discernment process is invited to make this known, as this may be an important contribution.

Examples:

*“I’m feeling a little confusion and tension in the group. Could we take a moment to re-center? What is not being conveyed that needs to be?”*

### Consensus or “tabling”:

The facilitator or another member of the group may speak to the perceived movement or consensus that seems to have emerged. This is a “sounding,” to see how well it fits with the presenter and the accompanying discerners. Again, there may not be closure, and it is important to honor the open-endedness of the process. The process itself draws all the participants closer to God and to one another, which is a laudable end in itself. It may be discerned that more time is needed to continue the discernment, or to put it on hold.

Examples:

*“It sounds as though...Does that resonate with everyone?”*

*“Does it feel like there is closure on this prayer for now? Does anyone else need to speak?”*

*“It seems as though we may not come to some sense of closure on this today. Do we need more information? More prayer time? Does it seem safe to say that we should not move ahead on this for now?”*

### Final prayer

Much of what is experienced is the grace of the process itself rather than the “answer” to the

proposal. Many times the *real* question emerges.



## Importance of the Community of the Church

Each person present *desires* to know and do God's will, or at least desires to desire this. But knowing God's will presupposes that one is spending time coming to know God enough to discern how God acts in one's life. In order that individuals may not be deluded, the community may be an important "check" to distorted perceptions:

- the **community** of discerners gathered
- family and friends
- the **Church** with 2000 years of wisdom
- the **Scriptures** that were an outgrowth of the Early Church's *experience* of the Risen Lord.

At the same time, Christians believe that God reveals Godself to *individuals* as well as to the community. We need to honor these insights, as we have for generations, listening to the genius of the individual saint whose vision nourishes the whole community of faith. God speaks intimately to the human heart. But this personal encounter is always in the context of and for the building up of the community. God

is Trinitarian, communal by nature. We are made in God's image and likeness. Praying for guidance, we make ourselves available to grace, asking for what we desire from God. We do this in private prayer, but also in the context of the **sacramental and liturgical life** of the Church. This participation in the life of the Church helps to sensitize the Christian to God's voice, that is, how God communicates. Participation in these mysteries also makes us responsible to one another; we bring our sisters and brothers before the all-loving God for clarity and healing, for reconciliation and gratitude. All of us are wounded, broken and blinded by our own hurts. We cannot always "see," just as the disciples in Mark's Gospel struggled to perceive who Jesus really was. We engage in a variety of spiritual practices to sensitize ourselves to God's voice:

- **Personal prayer** and reflection that attends to one's own experience in the light of God
- An **examination of conscience** *every day* (or twice a day in Ignatius' case) in order to gain greater self-knowledge and appreciation of God's merciful love
- **Spiritual reading**, particularly the lives and writings of the saints, models of the Christ-life, close friends of God and our personal coaches
- **Attending** to the fact that God is present to us throughout the day, also known as "practicing the presence of God"
- **Choosing to believe** every day that God does speak in the ordinary experience of life, and
- Cultivating **gratitude** for all that is



## Human Faculties

Discernment entails more than *experience*, particularly on a feeling level. **Feelings** alert us to the desire that is our immediate truth, which we bring to the God of Truth in order to be purified, to unveil to ourselves the deepest desire we seek. We desire healing, love, acceptance, a sense of belonging, and communion rather than isolation, but at the same time we are highly defended against being hurt further.

God also endowed human beings with **imagination, intellect, memory** and **will**. Human beings can imagine the possibilities, i.e., of heaven and our best selves. Human beings can and ought to **reason**, to use our intellect to discover the pros and cons of what we may imagine, and the implications of our actions. Our memories help us to remember the patterns of our lives and those of human history. Finally, humans can and ought to **act** on what we perceive to be the best way forward. We must engage our will (**choose** to act) once we have discerned the truth. To bypass the reasoning and analysis of any movement is to relinquish what it means to be truly human. To paraphrase St. Irenaeus, “The glory of God is the human being fully alive.”

### Practice:

In order to prepare for communal discernment, think of decisions in your own life that you could be bringing to a community of trusted, faith-filled individuals who could join you in the prayer for clarity. Share with them the proposed decision and your “data” you have gathered so far. Ask them to pray for your intention, and then gather for a communal prayer modeled on the one above.

Journal ways in YOU hear God’s voice. How does God tend to speak to your heart? If you are unclear on this, ask God to help you to be more sensitized to those subtle movements that bring energy, peace, patience, wholeness, even in times of difficulty. Daily EXAMEN is the best practice: How have I felt God’s presence today? How have I felt God’s absence?

Collect good questions in a journal or notebook, or highlight them in books that you own. Practice the “apt question” for yourself and others, as you listen to people’s stories. Where might God’s wisdom be hidden in the story?

### Group Reflection:

When have you actually practiced communal discernment in your life, whether you called it such or not?

What kinds of proposals lend themselves to this kind of discernment?

In your experience, what kinds of clarifying questions are “leading” or “intrusive” and what kinds of questions help unpack the deeper wisdom to help you find interior clarity?

Is there anyone you know of to whom you go for just these kind of questions rather than answers? Give an example to illustrate the power of an apt question.