

# COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT

## AS A WAY TO RECONCILIATION

William A. Barry, S.J.

As I begin this article I have just prayed the March intention of the Apostleship of Prayer: "That all may understand the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation between individuals and peoples and that the Church may spread Christ's love." When March began, the editors of HUMAN DEVELOPMENT were making proximate preparations for printing the summer issue whose theme was forgiveness between individuals and beginning to focus on this issue whose theme is forgiveness and reconciliation in and between groups. It seemed providential that all over the world people were praying this prayer. We hope that these issues of HUMAN DEVELOPMENT are one answer to this world-wide prayer.

Those who prayed the prayer in March, no doubt, thought of all the conflicts raging at that time between civil groups. The world, after all, was reeling from small and large wars and unrest ranging from Afghanistan and Iraq to Darfur, Kenya, Kosovo and Tibet. They may also have thought of the animosity against Christians so evident at that time. In India and in Iraq and other countries Christian churches and Christians themselves were under attack; in Mosul, Iraq, Archbishop Rahho had been kidnapped and then killed in cold blood. In the United States the candidacy of Senator Barack Obama saw the surfacing of the racial tensions that have bedeviled the country since its founding as a country that countenanced slavery. The candidacy of Senator Hillary Clinton brought to the fore issues of gender bias and whether a female candidate for the presidency or, for that matter, for any office heretofore the exclusive domain of males, is held to a higher standard. What many who prayed this prayer may not have adverted to was the need for forgiveness and reconciliation between the Christian churches and within the Roman Catholic Church itself. Many Christians recognize that the divisions between their churches are a scandal, yet the pace toward forgiveness and reconciliation seems glacial. Within the Roman Catholic Church itself the divisions are no less scandalous. I am talking about the rancor and downright hostility

between Catholics regarding who is faithful to the letter and spirit of the Second Vatican Council, a division that cuts through so many Catholic groupings, parishes, communities of the same religious congregations, priests of the same diocese (or parish), Catholic women and their priests and bishops. I am also thinking of the negativity felt toward hierarchical authority by many women and by many homosexually oriented people. As I prayed the prayer I was conscious of the need for forgiveness and reconciliation in these religious groups as well as in civil groups.

In this article I want to suggest a method derived from the spirituality of the discernment of spirits that might prove helpful to some groups of Roman Catholics who are experiencing difficulty in moving beyond their mutual fears and open or covert animosity.

### REDISCOVERING COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT

In the 1970s when Jesuits and others were rediscovering the individually directed *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, the discernment of spirits took on a new urgency. Individuals began to take seriously their experience of God and to wonder how to decide what, in the welter of their experiences, was from God, what not. Articles and books began to appear describing and theorizing about the Rules for Discernment of Spirits contained in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Jesuits also began to pay attention to the example of Ignatius and his first companions who engaged in an extended period of communal discernment that led to their decision to ask the Pope to allow them to found a new order, the Society of Jesus. Both of these rediscoveries led some to offer communal workshops to groups who wanted God's help to make critical decisions in those heady days after Vatican II. William J. Connolly, S.J., of the Center for Religious Development in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was one of these pioneers, and I worked with him on a few such workshops and then with others, including the late Joseph E. McCormick, S.J.

## PRESUPPOSITIONS FOR COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT

My experience was not vast, but broad enough to come to some tentative conclusions. I noticed that groups would have a good experience during the workshop but that the decisions arrived at either seemed relatively innocuous or were not easily implemented. A couple of experiences made me wonder whether the reason for the lack of real fruit from these workshops, many of which lasted five days, had to do with the absence of some of the presuppositions for a successful discernment of God's desires for a particular group. In *Letting God Come Close* I included "Toward Communal Discernment," based on an earlier article. In it I wrote this:

Communal discernment presupposes before all else that those who will engage in it have experienced the discernment of spirits in themselves. That is, each individual must have engaged in a process of contemplative prayer such as that proposed in the *Spiritual Exercises* and have experienced the movements of the different "spirits" and have discerned which movements were of God, which not. Secondly, communal discernment presupposes that the individuals can and will communicate their experiences in prayer and in prayerful reflection to others. The ability to do so cannot be presupposed since many of us were brought up in a tradition where such communication was not only not encouraged but often enough actively discouraged. The recovery of the individually directed retreat and the development of a type of spiritual direction which requires the communication of religious experience are giving us the tools for the kind of communication communal discernment requires. But the willingness to communicate experience must also be present, and this is often the rock upon which attempts at communal discernment shatter.

I then went on to indicate that the willingness to communicate one's actual experience requires trust between the members of the group, trust that everyone is sincerely trying to find what God wants, not just interested in getting what I want, trust that what I say will be listened to respectfully and with an open heart even if what I experience is different than what the others experience.

In other words, I concluded that for communal discernment to succeed groups need something analogous to what an individual needs for individual discernment. In order to engage truthfully in discernment to discover God's desire for me I need to have a real trust in God based on the experience of God's "everlasting love" and God's forgiveness of my sins. If I do not have this experience-based trust, I will hedge my bets in my relationship with God; I will not be completely open to hear what God has to say about the direction of my life. In a group hoping to discern communally how God wants them to proceed as a group such trust in God must be present in the individuals. But additionally the individuals in the group must trust that the other members of the group have the same dispositions and sincerely want to find God's desire for the group. When groups have a history of open or covert mistrust, communal discernment is impossible unless the members can come to a real trust in one another as sincerely wanting to find God's dream for this group.

## THE PROCESS WE USED

What follows is a description of some of the processes my colleagues and I have used to help people in groups to overcome their fears and to entrust themselves more to one another. I have freely borrowed from the chapter referred to earlier.

First we explain our role as the facilitators by an analogy to the role of the spiritual director. The spiritual director helps individuals to recognize what they want from God, to make these known to God, and to put themselves into a receptive position so that God's response may be heard. Spiritual directors do not manufacture desires or prayer experiences for those they direct but help them to notice what is happening in the relationship with God, to discern what leads toward God and what leads away from God, and to decide what to do about the discernment. So too the facilitators of the group try to help the group to articulate what it, as a group, wants from God and to help the members to approach God in prayer with that desire. Here it is important to remind the individuals that they are asking God to relate to them precisely as members of this group with the group's desire, e.g., to know that God has hopes for **us** as a group. Just as individuals ask God

for what they desire, trusting that God has their good at heart, so too the individuals in this group context approach God with the group's desire trusting that God has the good of this group at heart.

When a group of church members, say a parish group, a congregational chapter, or a group comprised of members of a religious congregation of sisters and their bishop, come together to try to find some common path in their work or living together, it might be wise to have an outside facilitator or perhaps two facilitators who can guide their deliberations in the way suggested here. Such facilitators, however, need to be selected not for their expertise in techniques (although some expertise is needed) but for their trust that God does have hopes for this group and will communicate those hopes to the individuals in the group through their individual and communal prayer and their interactions with one another.

We explain the general structure for each session. As facilitators at each session we will suggest a way for the members to approach God in personal prayer with the desire that God communicate to each one precisely as a member of this group. After the prayer period is over, they return to the group. The facilitators then help them to report to one another as much or as little as they wish of what happened during the prayer. Just as the spiritual director of an individual helps the person to notice and articulate what happened as much as possible without judging it, so too the facilitators of a group ask the group to try to listen without judgment to the experiences shared. Indeed, since the assumption of such group sharing is that we are hoping to hear what God is saying to us as a group, these periods of sharing are approached, as far as possible, with the same contemplative attitude one hopes to have in private prayer. What happens in the sharing then gives the facilitators and the group something to work on for the next session.

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

We usually structured the day into three sessions, morning, afternoon and evening. The whole group

gathers at the beginning of each session, and we give them some orientation for private prayer. Each one prays for forty-five minutes to an hour and then takes a few minutes for reflection. If the group is less than ten, all the sharing sessions are in one group. If it is larger, we break it up into groups of ten or less for the sharing and ask that someone summarize for the whole group in a report. Each session, therefore, lasts at least two and one-half hours. As the process goes on, we may have to vary the structure according to what is needed. For example, at the beginning of a session we may need to canvass the group to find out what their desires are.

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

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

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Because you are precious in my eyes,  
and honored, and I love you,  
I give people in return for you,  
nations in exchange for your life.  
Do not fear, for I am with you.

The Israelites heard these consoling words when they were in exile, their temple destroyed and their hopes at their lowest. We suggest that they ask God to give them a sense of hearing these words as applying to them as members of this group.

They then pray privately for forty-five minutes or so and afterwards return to the group where each one is asked to share whatever he or she wishes of what happened during the prayer. For most groups such an "ice breaker" is reassuring and the variety of experi-

ences enlightening. In a felt way they realize how sincere and faith-filled each one is. They are often surprised at how easy and enjoyable it is to talk about prayer with one another. Depending on how this first session goes, we might either suggest a repetition for the next session or suggest that they ask God to help them to know God's hope for them as a group. When we do move on to the latter point, we suggest private prayer in which each one asks God to reveal God's dream for them as a group.

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

#### OVERCOMING MISTRUST AND ANGER

Any group that has a history together has got some bodies buried somewhere. We have been talking about groups who begin the process with much good will toward one another. Often enough, however, groups do not begin with much good will and trust. This is the case in many of the conflicts in the Church today. Then the negative feelings may have to be addressed even earlier.

One group Joe McCormack and I worked with displayed so much anger, resentment, suspicion, and misunderstanding at the very first session that we wondered whether we had opened Pandora's Box. We had no time to confer as to what to do. For some reason the scene of the apostles in the upper room prior to the appearance of the risen Jesus came to mind. In some fear and trembling I pointed out that their reality had surfaced rather quickly and then suggested that they might feel as the apostles did after the crucifixion when they boarded themselves up in the upper room. I asked them to imagine the apostles' feelings of guilt and anger and suspicion and fear. And into their midst came Jesus saying "Peace be with you." I suggested that they might want to spend an hour in prayer with this text (John 20:19-23) the next morning and then gather again as a group. When they returned to the group the next day, the atmosphere had noticeably shifted. Where before accusations and angry denunciations of

others prevailed, now each one spoke of his own fears and failings and at the same time voiced a trust that God would be with them. They had not yet reached the promised land, but they were on the way toward becoming a group that eventually might be able to engage in communal discernment.

In a 1972 monograph John Futrell makes a perceptive comment: "A community must have achieved the fruit of the First Week of the *Spiritual Exercises* as a community in order to begin true communal spiritual discernment" (p. 169). He does not spell out what that might mean, but I believe that this prerequisite is crucial, and in at least one case, I believe, I saw a group achieve that fruit. A description of what happened might explain the reference to the first week of the *Exercises*. It was a group of male religious who were chapter delegates. They asked Joe McCormack and me to facilitate a four and a half day process that would help them toward being more discerning and open during the chapter which would follow. The congregation was reeling from a heavy financial blow and from departures that had left them demoralized, angry, and suspicious. Among the members of the group were some whom the others held responsible for their problems, especially their financial problems. Early in our sessions feelings of anger, suspicion, guilt, and helplessness emerged. The first two days were stormy, but we could sense a gradual growth in trust. As one man said: "We have thought the unthinkable and said the unsayable."

Toward the end of the second day we summarized the situation in this fashion. "You sense yourselves as broken, needy, helpless, and sinful precisely as members of this congregation and as chapter delegates. A number of you have identified with Simon the Pharisee who scorned Jesus for letting the sinful woman wash his feet. Some of you have voiced resentment at being put into the position of picking up the pieces of a mess caused by others. Some have expressed fears that as a group you will not have the courage to make the necessary decisions. Some of you fear that even God cannot change you. And yet you have also desired healing, have desired that Jesus make you brothers again. We suggest that you present yourselves to Jesus as you are and ask him for what you want. Perhaps you might want to do a repetition of Luke 7:36-50 or you might want to use the washing of the feet in John 13." We also suggested speaking to Jesus on the cross and using the triple colloquy of the First Week of the Exercises (*Spiritual Exercises*, n. 63).

The sharing after this period of prayer was very emotional and very honest. One man asked with tears for the forgiveness of the group. Another reported

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emptiness in prayer and asked the group to pray for him. A couple of men said that the desire for healing was growing in them. Most of the others reported consolation and a sense of being healed. Tears were shed. At the end of the sharing they broke up into dyads for the sacrament of reconciliation. The next day men continued to ask one another for reconciliation. We spent the last two days focusing on Jesus' relationship with his apostles in the gospel of Mark. At the end of the process they felt hopeful and much more trusting as they prepared to enter their chapter.

As a result of what I want to label a group "First Week experience" they seemed able to dream and to hope again as a group. As a group they had allowed themselves to experience and acknowledge before God and one another their brokenness, their sinfulness, and their powerlessness to overcome these obstacles to unity. In addition, they were able to ask God's help to become reconciled to one another. They had done as a group something analogous to what an individual does in the First Week of the *Spiritual Exercises*. My suspicion is that underlying many of the conflicts between Catholics of good will are such acknowledged or unacknowledged negative feelings that we have never thought to bring to God for healing in some communal fashion. Perhaps a process such as the one I have just outlined can be a help to move beyond mutual suspicion and recrimination to healing and reconciliation.

#### CONCLUSION

If spiritual directors need to have great trust in God as their directees face some of the very painful and

harrowing experiences sometimes associated with the process of conversion, such trust is even more imperative for those who facilitate groups in the manner suggested. It is all too easy to gloss over serious divisions in a group, to let sleeping dogs lie, as it were. It is all too easy to present techniques that only can work if prerequisites of trust and contemplative prayer are present. It is also all too easy to give up hope that God can work wonders even on a group that seems at first hopelessly divided. This kind of giving up of hope in God's power is not easily acknowledged. It can be covered over by a judgment that some in the group are just not giving themselves to the process. I have never been a facilitator alone precisely because I feel the need for another so that together we can remind one another to pray ourselves and to entrust the group to God and to trust the good will of all the members of the group in spite of everything. After all, we try to say to one another, they have invited us to help them to become a discerning group; so they must have some hope in God who has called them together. A group is close to becoming discerning when the members can say, as one man did, "During the Spiritual Exercises I came to trust deeply that Jesus had a dream for me. Now I believe that he has a dream for us."

In our beloved Church today there are many deep divisions among us. God wants to help us to become reconciled. Perhaps these thoughts occasioned by reflection on communal discernment can be useful as we look for ways to allow God to bring about such reconciliation.

#### RECOMMENDED READING

Barry, W. A. "Toward Communal Discernment," chapter 11 of *Letting God Come Close: An Approach to the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2001. (I have borrowed liberally from this chapter for this article.)

Futrell, J. C. "Common Discernment: Reflections on Experience," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 4/5 (November, 1972).

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