





# STUDIES

## in the Spirituality of Jesuits



A Method for Communal Discernment  
of God's Will

Jules J. Toner, S.J.

Published by the American Assistancy Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality,  
especially for American Jesuits working out their *aggiornamento*  
in the spirit of Vatican Council II



# STUDIES

## in the Spirituality of Jesuits



A Method for Communal Discernment  
of God's Will

Jules J. Toner, S.J.

Published by the American Assistancy Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality,  
especially for American Jesuits working out their *aggiornamento*  
in the spirit of Vatican Council II

## THE AMERICAN ASSISTANCY SEMINAR ON JESUIT SPIRITUALITY

consists of a group of Jesuits from various provinces who are listed below. The members were appointed by the Fathers Provincial of the United States in their meeting of October 3-9, 1968. The purpose of the Seminar is to study topics pertaining to the spiritual doctrine and practice of Jesuits, especially American Jesuits, and to communicate the results to the members of the Assistancy. The hope is that this will lead to further discussion among all American Jesuits -- in private, or in small groups, or in community meetings. All this is done in the spirit of Vatican Council II's recommendation to religious institutes to recapture the original charismatic inspiration of their founders and to adapt it to the changed circumstances of modern times. The members of the Seminar welcome reactions or comments in regard to the topics they publish.

To achieve these purposes, especially amid today's pluralistic cultures, the Seminar must focus its direct attention sharply, frankly, and specifically on the problems, interests, and opportunities of the Jesuits of the United States. However, many of these interests are common also to Jesuits of other regions, or to other priests, religious men or women, or lay men or women. Hence the studies of the Seminar, while meant especially for American Jesuits, are not exclusively for them. Others who may find them helpful are cordially welcome to read them.

### THE MEMBERS OF THE SEMINAR ARE:

- William J. Burke, S.J., Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts 02167
- Thomas E. Clarke, S.J., Woodstock College, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, New York 10027
- James J. Doyle, S.J., Bellarmine School of Theology, 5430 University Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60615
- John C. Futrell, S.J., School of Divinity, St. Louis University, 220 North Spring Avenue, St. Louis, Missouri 63108
- George E. Ganss, S.J., School of Divinity, St. Louis University. His address is: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, Fusz Memorial, 3700 West Pine, St. Louis, Missouri 63108. (Chairman of the Assistancy Seminar and Editor of its Studies)
- Hugo J. Gerleman, S.J., The Institute of Jesuit Sources, Fusz Memorial 3700 West Pine, St. Louis, Missouri 63108. (Secretary of the Assistancy Seminar)
- John C. Haughey, S.J., America Staff, 106 W. 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10019
- David B. Knight, S.J., Christ the King Church, Grand Coteau, Louisiana 70541
- Vincent J. O'Flaherty, S.J., Rockhurst College, Kansas City, Missouri 64110
- John R. Sheets, S.J., Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53233
- John H. Wright, S.J., Jesuit School of Theology, 1735 Le Roy Street, Berkeley, California 94709

Copyright, 1971, by the American Assistancy Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality  
Fusz Memorial, St. Louis University  
3700 West Pine Boulevard  
St. Louis, Missouri 63108

## CONTENTS

### A METHOD FOR COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT OF GOD'S WILL

by

Jules J. Toner, S.J.

#### A Summary

<u>Introduction</u>	Page
A. <u>The main reason for failure in communal discernment:</u> a method is used which is inappropriate to the nature of this enterprise.	121
B. <u>An example of successful method:</u> the <u>Deliberatio primorum patrum.</u>	122
C. <u>The purpose of the present study:</u> to develop a method based on the <u>Spiritual Exercises</u> and the <u>Deliberatio.</u>	123
D. <u>Elements in the method proposed here:</u> the essentials in any method of searching to find God's will, and also some practical procedures for orderly communal reasoning which is in accord with these essentials.	124
E. The meaning given to "communal discernment" in this study.	124
I. <u>Remote Preparation for the Act of Communal Discernment.</u> This is similar to the preparation for the "election" in the <u>Spiritual Exercises.</u> There should be:	126
A. <u>Freedom of Spirit.</u> Unless the freedom of spirit as herein described is attained and maintained, everything else, including even the formulation of alternatives and gathering of data, is of questionable validity. This freedom is the key to success in any discernment, and requires:	126
1. Desire of the participants to do God's will, whatever it is, before knowing it;	127
2. Their trust in God and in one another, and thus their commitment of themselves beforehand to the decision that will be reached;	127
3. Their readiness to give all the time and energy that are needed and concretely possible;	128
4. Ignatian "indifference";	128
5. Freedom from prejudgments of the issue.	129
B. <u>Reflective Grasp of the Governing Principle of Communal Discernment.</u> The will of God for a community is that	130

alternative, among those in accord with the community's specific nature and purpose, which is more conducive to the Kingdom of God.

- C. Formulation of the Genuine Alternatives, that is, those which are concretely possible and are truly live options. 132
- D. An Effort to Become Informed. History and the realities of the present concrete situation are words of God about what should be done in the future. 133
- II. Immediate Preparation for the Communal Act of Discernment. 134  
This preparation should entail:
- A. Prayerful Reflection on the Alternatives. Hard thinking with docility to the Holy Spirit, seeking confirmation from him that one's reasons are really the contribution he intends one to make to the communal effort. 134
- B. Private Reflection by Every Participant, to Form His Opinions Before the Meeting 135
- C. The Indispensability of the Foregoing Reflections. 137
- III. The Communal Act of Discernment: Dialogue or Debate? 137  
The value of debate in some circumstances is admitted. Nevertheless, given the aim of discerning God's will, given our dependence on the Holy Spirit in doing so, given the relation between those doing so together, debate seems inappropriate or, at least, less appropriate than dialogue as a method of communal reasoning in this enterprise. Some ways of dialogue are also inappropriate.
- IV. The Steps in the Dialogue within the Communal Act of Discernment. This is a series of suggested steps, put in temporal sequence, calculated to move the discussion along in good order while preserving the attitudes of mind and heart gained in the remote preparation, safeguarding dialogue from the encroachments of disputatious tendencies, and so making possible a sharing in the Spirit of the fruits of private prayer and reflection. 139
- A. Step 1: Presentations of reasons for each alternative. 140
- B. Step 2: Prayerful reflection on the reasons presented in Step 1. 141
- C. Step 3: Presentation of evaluations. 142
- D. Step 4: Prayerful reflection on the evaluations and further evaluations. 142

E.	A note on <u>revision of the alternatives (1)</u> .	142
F.	Step 5: <u>The Voting</u> .	143
G.	A note on <u>revision of the alternatives (2)</u> .	143
V.	<u>Confirmation of the Communal Judgment</u> : spiritual consolation, ratification by religious authority, and by experience in executing the decision.	144
VI.	<u>The Problem of Time</u> . This is a real problem, but not so great as might appear at first glance. Ways of shortening the process.	145
VII.	<u>An Adaptation of This Method--to Achieve Harmony, Rather Than Discernment</u> . This adaptation meets the current need for anything which promotes mutual understanding and living peacefully with pluralism, while growing toward fuller unity. The steps in an adaptation of the method to meet this need.	146
	Footnotes	151

### Editor's Foreword

Father Jules J. Toner, S.J., the author of the present issue, is the Director of Novices at Colom-biere College, Clarkston, Michigan. He has long been interested in developing a method of communal discernment of God's will. Likewise he has had wide and successful experience in working with religious communities of men and women who were seeking such a method. The members of the Assistancy Seminar, thinking that this matter was one that ought to be treated, invited him to their meeting and with him discussed a paper which he had prepared on the topic. All of those present found this discussion stimula-ting and helpful and he rewrote his paper in the light of it. The Seminar is deeply grateful to him and happy to publish this study of an associate member.

# A METHOD FOR COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT OF GOD'S WILL

by

Jules J. Toner, S.J.  
Instructor of Novices  
Colombiere College  
Clarkston, Michigan  
48016

## Introduction

Unity and peace in serving God together, with assurance that they are carrying out God's will, are what religious communities look for as the fruit of community discernment. But frequently greater polarization and frustration are the result--or, at least, continued division and uncertainty about God's call to the community. Yet these men or women who compose communities are persons of sound intelligence, with a common vocation from God, all desiring to desire only to know and do God's will. Why then, with so much going for them, do they too often fail in this crucially important enterprise?

### A. The Main Reason for Failure: Inappropriate Method

My own observation and that of others more experienced than I lead to the conclusion that the root of failure lies in the way that the group goes about the task, a way which takes little or no serious account of the dynamics involved in an effort to find God's will. The dynamics of a communal process aimed at discerning God's will for action by the community must be very different from the dynamics of a process which aims only at a humanly wise, efficient, administrative decision by a majority vote, at best a decision which constitutes a viable compromise of several competing interests, none of which may be a response to God's call. Campaigning, formation of parties, manipulation of debate by parliamentary tactics, compromises from positions of conviction already adopted before discernment begins--what has all this to do with an honest and humble searching for God's will? Corporation boards of directors or state legislatures are not models for discerning God's will.

To adopt the same measures they do for decision-making, with the addition of prayer for light and some devices suggested by group-dynamics experts, does not seem an adequate answer to the need of those who are seeking for a way to find God's will for them.

B. An Example of Successful Method: The Deliberations of St. Ignatius and His Companions

There is a way for communal discernment worked out by a group in the very experience of seeking to find God's will at the crucial moment of its members' life together. It was under the leadership of a man who had previously worked out a way for individual discernment of God's will that has had an unparalleled influence and success in the Church for centuries. That man was Ignatius of Loyola. His way for individual discernment of God's will is contained in his well-known book, the Spiritual Exercises, especially [6, 8, 313-336]. The way for communal discernment which he and his companions fashioned is contained in a document which Jesuits refer to as "The Deliberation of the First Fathers" (Deliberatio primorum patrum),<sup>1</sup> often called the Deliberatio. After being buried from sight for generations, this document has in recent years become more generally known and has excited considerable interest. English translations of it have appeared.<sup>2</sup> Some brief account of the historical setting, some general statement of the method used, along with discussion of the general principles, have found their way into print. To my knowledge, however, no detailed step-by-step description of how to do it, based on the Deliberatio, has been published so far.<sup>3</sup>

The Deliberatio gives an account of the discussion held by Ignatius and his companions when they were searching to find out whether God wanted them to form a new religious order in the Church and, if so, what its nature should be.<sup>4</sup> For that purpose they worked out a method. Shortly after beginning their discussions, however, they experienced much tension and disagreement. This situation necessitated a further development of their method, one which would take fuller account of the character of their enterprise as distinct from other community or corporate efforts at decision-making. All these men had been formed by the

Spiritual Exercises and their method shows that influence at every step.

### C. The Purpose of the Present Study

However, in order to meet the need for method in communal discernment of God's will reference to the Deliberatio does not suffice. No detailed, step-by-step, description of the method employed by Ignatius and his companions can be found there. Much of what is there must be interpreted and fitted together by the reader. Only when the reader is familiar with the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and makes the effort to hold the Deliberatio against that as a background, can all the important implications and presuppositions of what is said in the Deliberatio be explicitated. Further, even when all this is done, the practical demands of orderly procedure in accord with the the basic directives in the Deliberatio require adding and arranging a number of steps neither mentioned nor clearly implied in the text. Therefore, while the method worked out in this paper is based on the Deliberatio and the Spiritual Exercises and intends to include all that is given there by way of method, it goes beyond what is in the Ignatian documents. The Deliberatio offers one method of communal searching for God's will, and this paper offers one way of interpreting and filling out the statement of that method. I do not pretend to state the method of communal discernment nor even the way of interpreting and filling out the indications of method found in the Deliberatio.

The ideal way of presenting the method worked out in this paper would be to print the Deliberatio, provide a paragraph by paragraph commentary on it, show how each step in it grows out of the Spiritual Exercises, and then, relying on that historical introduction and justifying whatever I say by reference to it, do what I have done in this paper. Such a way of proceeding would result in a small book and go beyond the immediate needs of those for whom this paper is intended. My project is a limited one, which leaves aside all that is not called for in order to help those whose practical need is more urgent than their theoretical interest. Even to meet this need, however, a minimum

of theoretical explanation and justification is called for in order to make the method understandable and acceptable to critically intelligent readers.

#### D. Elements in the Method Proposed Here

Before undertaking the main project, it will be advisable to clear away one likely misinterpretation which could distort the whole meaning of what I am doing. This misinterpretation could arise from the manner of presentation called for by the very purpose of this paper; for, in order to be of practical help to beginners in discernment by this method, I shall set down a whole series of steps to be taken one after the other. This gives the reader the false impression of a complex and rigid method, designed to get automatic results, to manipulate people into agreement. Really, the method has just the opposite intent.

There are two sorts of elements in it. First, there are those elements which are essential to any way of searching to know God's will, which are generally accepted in theory but easily and commonly overlooked in practice. Surprisingly, a full and ordered synthesis of these is, at least to my knowledge, nowhere readily available. So I have attempted to provide it, along with some brief explanations, in I, II, and V. Secondly, there are some elements which are not essential to every way of seeking to know God's will but seem to me especially apt for doing so in the communal effort. These are set forth in III and IV. Put together, these elements form a rather demanding set of directives to help persons who want to really deny themselves, in the gospel meaning of that phrase, and to devote their intelligence and affectivity to the search for God's will in companionship under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

#### E. The Meaning of "Communal Discernment"

Before setting down the stages in communal discernment of God's will, a formal statement of what I refer to by that phrase will help to avoid confusion by eliminating from consideration other discernments with which it could be confused. By "communal discernment of God's will," I mean a process undertaken by a community as a community for the purpose

of judging what God is calling that community to do.

The community can be a personal or functional one or both. It can be a lasting one; or it can be a transient one, which is bound together by a common love for God and a common desire to find what His will is for them in the project which brings them together for a time--an ad hoc community as it were.

There are many sorts of discernment carried on under the influence of the Holy Spirit, not all aiming at discerning God's call to undertake one of several proposed courses of action. Thus, Christians also discern what is true Christian doctrine, what is genuine experience of God in prayer, what prophets are truly from God, and so on. I am not concerned with these other sorts of discernment except insofar as they bear on discovering God's will about action for a community.

Further, the discernment of God's call to the community can be done by an individual or by a number of individuals cooperating or by the community as a community. By undertaking the process as a community, I mean initiating and carrying through a series of genuinely communal acts leading toward a communal goal. By a communal act, I mean one which of its nature engages simultaneously and interactively all or a representative group of a community functioning as a community. Not every discernment of God's will for a community is necessarily a communal discernment, not even if the discerning is done by the head of the community, not even if it is done by the head with the help of some or all of the individuals within the community. For this may be done without any genuinely communal act.

Thus, one way for a superior of a religious community to discern God's will involves seeking advice from a few or many individuals in the community; proposing the alternatives for choice to each one, asking each to deliberate, to put the matter before God in prayer, and to report to the superior what conclusion he is led to. This is a good way. By force of circumstances, it may be a more common way than a communal discernment and, in some circumstances, the best way in any case. Nevertheless, it is not what I refer to as a communal discernment in the strict sense

of the word, for there is no communal act, no mutual activity of the members as a body, as a discerning organism. There is only a dialogue between the superior and each of the individuals helping him, not a dialogue among these individuals.

#### I. Remote Preparation for the Act of Communal Discernment

The immediate preparation for communal discernment of God's will is individual prayerful reflection on the alternatives. Now, this reflection itself can require laborious remote preparation of mind and heart. No one who has had experience of the Spiritual Exercises should be surprised at this; for prayerful reflection on the alternatives, along with the discussion, corresponds in communal discernment with the "election" of the Spiritual Exercises. Now, the individual seeking through the Spiritual Exercises to find God's will should not enter on the election until he has attained the required "indifference" to all but God's will, has an adequate understanding of the alternatives for election, has understood and is holding firmly in mind the basic principle by reference to which any reason has force in his decision, and is informed on how to go about the election. There is no reason to think preparation for communal discernment should be much different or less demanding. It is a presumption that any group of relatively good Christians can at a drop of the hat enter on discernment of God's will and do it with a few prayers and a lot of hot debate that renders most efforts at community decisions fruitless and even harmful. Let us, then, look at the steps in remote preparation for communal discernment.

##### A. Freedom of Spirit

First in order of importance as well as in time are self-examination, meditation, and prayer directed to attaining certain attitudes which put one more intensely into relationship with God and free the mind and heart for seeking the truth under the influence of the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup> Even formulating alternatives and gathering data should come after or run concurrently with this self-examination, meditation, and prayer which lead to these attitudes; otherwise, we tend to blind ourselves to

alternatives we do not want and to see as data only that which fits with what we want. These attitudes are not to be counted on as constant character traits of the participants in the dialogue. Each time one enters into communal discussion about God's will, these attitudes need to be attained or renewed at least temporarily before entering on the next steps of the discernment process. If regularly renewed in preparation for such meetings, they will tend to become character traits, shaping the person's spontaneous responses.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it would be well to intensify them as a preparation for each discussion.

(1). Those seeking to know God's will can succeed only if they seek it with the intense desire to do it as well as to know it. Anyone who seeks to find God's will with the intention of deciding after he finds it whether he will do it or not already has a barrier to finding it. He is not yet free from the blinding effect of self-will, of selfish interest. He will very likely end thinking his own will is God's will.

(2). Along with the sincere desire to know and do God's will must go sustained and intense prayer with absolute trust in God's willingness and power to lead us to our goal, with a complete distrust of merely human effort without God's help. This sincerity toward God and trust in Him must overflow into trusting the sincerity of others in the enterprise, trusting that they are honestly trying to open themselves to God and be led by Him to a knowledge of His will. This trust must include all: those with and those without authority, congenial and uncongenial to me, the old and the young, and so forth. Without this mutual trust, the Holy Spirit cannot reach us through each other, and the whole communal character of the enterprise is frustrated from the start.

Such trust in God and in each other means freedom of spirit for anyone joining in this enterprise to commit himself beforehand to the group's final judgment unless it is disconfirmed by just authority or by experience in carrying it out. This holds even though, before the final judgment of the group, one should arrive at a different opinion for himself. Unless the members are willing and able to have this trust and make this commitment, they cannot have a communal discernment. They

can only have a profitable conversation by a number of individuals, each seeking to form his own opinion and to act on it.

(3). Trust in God that He will lead us to know his will is not a trust that He will certainly do so quickly. God does not submit to our timetable. God has His own time. The Spirit breathes not only where but when He wills. So, when we undertake the search for God's will, we must do so with readiness to give as much time and effort as is needed and possible in the concrete circumstances, and we must not try to undertake finding God's will in very grave problems when there simply is not time nor energy to do so at the moment,--unless, of course, circumstances beyond our control force us to do so. Human efficiency may help avoid wasting time, but it will not assure quick and easy results. The Holy Spirit may lead us quickly and easily or slowly and painfully. We have to begin by valuing the knowledge of God's will so much that we are ready to pay whatever price is concretely possible in time, effort, and patient waiting, without yielding to discouragement when the price is high.

(4). Even with all the foregoing attitudes, the participants in communal discernment are far from ready to engage in discussion or even to reflect on the issues in preparation for discussion unless they have attained an indifference to all but God's will. Anyone who is keenly aware of how our minds work when our own interests, our desires and fears, are involved, knows how difficult it is to arrive at a judgment not distorted by emotion. Anyone who has experienced the Exercises of St. Ignatius knows how little hope there is of finding God's will without indifference to all except His will and how very difficult it is to achieve and sustain this attitude of indifference even with protracted meditation, prayer, and self-examination. So, a communal effort to find God's will requires, previous to thought and discussion, examination of our emotional attitudes, repentance, and prayer, to free our hearts for God's will, whatever it may turn out to be.

As an aid to this single-heartedness, Ignatius urges us to go directly counter to any desire which impedes it by praying intensely for the opposite of that desire.<sup>7</sup> In the present context, this going against self-

will involves praying especially hard for light to see the reasons on the side of the alternative or alternatives we do not want and searching harder for these. Besides such prayer, Ignatius also suggests that in our drawing up and weighing reasons we try by some device to disassociate ourselves from the results of any conclusion to be reached, e.g., imagining the decision will in no way affect our lives but only the lives of others we hardly know and with whom we are not emotionally involved,<sup>8</sup> or imagining that any of the anticipated painful consequences of the decision are over with, as we look back from a future point of existence.<sup>9</sup>

It must not be thought that we have to be free of all spontaneous affective responses to the opposing alternatives in order to achieve such indifference. That would mean affective deadness; Ignatian indifference does not at all mean that. What it means is that we are so fully and firmly set in our hearts on doing God's will that any spontaneous self-centered inclination or repugnance to one alternative or another will not be able to weaken that set of our hearts or even hinder the clarity of our judgment about which alternative is God's will. In other words, we have a freedom of spirit which makes it possible to see the truth unobstructed by desire and fear and to hold firmly to our radical choice of doing whatever appears as God's will.

(5). Even when this freedom from emotional duress is attained by God's help, we still have to gain freedom from hidden prejudgments about the issue at stake. These judgments, despite our good intentions and indifference to all but God's will, can effectively close the question before we even begin to reflect and discuss. As far as we can, we have to become aware of these prejudgments and consciously renounce them. Each of the alternatives to be discussed has to be accepted as a possible object for an affirmative judgment, even the one I have until now viewed negatively; correlatively, each one of the alternatives has to be accepted as a possible object for a negative judgment, even the one I have until now judged to be God's will. Consciously admitted ignorance about the right answer to the question at issue is the only valid starting point for discernment. No one can really be entering into an honest

search for God's will with a prejudgment, a conviction about what the answer is.

When and only when the attitudes described just above have in some adequate degree been achieved, is one ready to reflect on the issue and enter into a discussion. That degree is adequate which gives the subject a reasonably solid assurance that he can say "yes" to God's will expressed in the decision of the community and that his own contribution to the dialogue will not be adversely affected by his prejudgments or by his desires and fears. His freedom of spirit need not be such that he could face any decision however difficult with this assurance; it is adequate if he can face this one with such assurance.

These attitudes are the key to success; the whole enterprise depends on them. They are essential; without them this method cannot help, nor can any other method. No doubt, if a community sustains its effort to be continually searching for and doing God's will, if this becomes their way of life, they will all continually grow in humility, trust in God, trust in each other, purity of heart, freedom of spirit. And the more they do so, the more readily and certainly they will find God's will together. So, we should not be unreal in our expectations of and demands on ourselves before ever beginning or we will never begin. What we must demand of ourselves is an honest effort to be aware of how we fail to maintain these attitudes in our reflections and discussions. Self-examination and prayer by each one after every experience in communal discussion will keep us growing in our capacity to find God's will together and prepare us to do it together better and better.

#### B. Reflective Grasp of the Governing Principle

The principle (or principles) which is to govern the communal reasoning must be a principle agreed on by all participants. They need a common principle by reference to which reasons can be justified to everyone in the discussion and comparatively evaluated by all. Without such a principle, there can be no real communal act of reasoning; there can only

be a communication of different ways of reasoning based on different principles. To use an extreme illustration, if one person's basic principle for judging alternatives is their value for maintaining peace and quiet and another's principle is their value for keeping life exciting, their reasons will lack all force for each other. They may understand each other better as a result of discussion, but they cannot hope to have a communal act of reasoning. Even to reach a compromise decision, they would have to adopt some basic and agreed-on principle, e.g., what will be most just to all in the group is the better alternative.

Certainly, the overall purpose of the Christian community as a whole in history is the establishment of the Kingdom of God; and any genuine means for doing so must be in accord with the Law of Christ taught in the New Testament. The first and most general principle for judging which alternative, among those in accord with the gospel, is God's will is the greater conduciveness to bringing about the Kingdom of God. No reason for any alternative can count unless it shows that this alternative helps to establish the Kingdom of God. This much is necessary, but it is not sufficient to make a reason count. It must be shown that this alternative will help more than the other or others to bring about the Kingdom.

However, different particular communities within the one Christian community have different calls from God to strive in different ways to express and promote the Kingdom. Each community has its own specific nature and purpose. What is for each more conducive to the Kingdom of God will usually be found within the specific range or scope of its communal vocation.<sup>10</sup>

Any decision, then, which that community reaches, as that community, will be concerned with ways of expressing its nature in the life of its members or with the means to achieve that purpose for which the members are united in community. The nature and purpose of the community is the principle on which all consideration of the alternatives for decision depend; so, this nature and purpose must be clear to all and must be kept firmly in mind during private preparation for the communal discussion and during the discussion itself.

Further, since this principle is to serve for communal reasoning and must be agreed on by all the participants, the formulation of it within the context of communal discernment cannot extend beyond those elements which are acceptable to all at this time. Insofar as the formulation does extend beyond those elements agreed on by every participant, it cannot be a principle for communal reasoning. For example, insofar as those engaged in the common effort disagree on what the constitutions of the community say about poverty or obedience, they cannot reason together about how to implement poverty or obedience in the concrete circumstances of the present historical situation. They must either begin with what they can agree on or begin working toward some agreement on which they can base their discussion.<sup>11</sup>

### C. Formulation of the Genuine Alternatives

Once our hearts and minds are ready, the next step is a clear and precise formulation of the question at issue, a statement of genuine alternatives for choice. Any ambiguity in the formulation may result in wasted effort and frustration. By genuine alternatives I mean those which are practicable in the concrete and desirable enough to be live options. Some alternatives are possible in the abstract but impossible in the concrete or possible in the concrete but so undesirable as to be dead options before discernment is even begun. Any but genuine alternatives merely clutter up the process. The alternatives once settled on in a rough way, a satisfactory formulation of them almost always calls for great care to attain both precision and clarity.

Sometimes the unrefined alternatives arise without difficulty from the situation, in fact, force themselves on us, for example, when a community has a shortage of manpower and several established apostolates demanding more men if they are to survive. One or another has to be dropped. Which one? At other times a community is faced with situations in which something needs to be done, but the situation itself does not clearly indicate any particular ways of acting as the only genuine alternatives. For example, after a decision about withdrawing from some apostolate, the question arises about how to do it with the least pain or

harm to others. At such times, sensitivity to the situation and to the persons involved, along with lively practical imagination, are called for. Much work may have to be done in brain-storming about possible alternatives and then narrowing down the list. Some devices of group-dynamics are useful here.

What must be insisted on, in every case, is that even at this step, just as much as in any later step, all must be done only after obtaining the freedom of spirit described above. Otherwise we may miss the alternatives which the Holy Spirit is leading us to consider and nullify the whole effort right at the start.

#### D. An Effort to Become Informed

Whether to know the genuine alternatives or to engage in prayerful deliberation on these, an effort to be well informed is called for. Stress on the primacy of freeing our spirits and putting them in tune with the Holy Spirit when trying to discern God's will by no means relieves us of the effort to become as well informed about the issue as is reasonably possible in the circumstances. Rather it puts an even more serious demand on us to do so. For the realities of the concrete situation calling for discernment and decision are themselves words of our provident God. Those who want to be docile to the Spirit of God must listen attentively to these words and ponder them intently and reverently. Without doing so, one runs the danger of not even understanding what the alternatives really mean.

It will frequently, even usually, be necessary to have some sharing of information at this step if all are to be as well informed as possible. This can be accomplished in some instances by bibliographies and/or distribution of printed material; but a meeting may also be needed in which experts may give input, questions may be asked and answered, comments offered, additions made. It is important that this session be kept prior to and distinct from the session at which reasons based on the data are given or reasons evaluated so that there may be time after it for the participants to reflect and pray over the data and form their reasons

prayerfully and reflectively. New and weighty data may come to light after the reasoning sessions have begun; if so, the group has to take time out for each individual to consider in prayer how this data affects his own reasoning before the group continues with communal deliberations.

Gathering and organizing information may even turn out in some cases to be the main problem. Once the participants are adequately informed, the decision may come without delay and with a consensus. But, in other cases, the increase of information may bring about greater difficulties in forming opinions and result in greater diversity of opinion.

## II. Immediate Preparation for the Communal Act of Discernment: Private Prayer and Reflection

When and only when the foregoing remote preparation has been completed, are the participants ready for the immediate preparation.

### A. Prayerful Reflection on Alternatives

Now each individual, in private, prayerfully reflects over the alternatives. The Holy Spirit may be expected to give light to see what he wishes each one to see for the sake of all, but he will not ordinarily excuse anyone from the hard work of thinking. On the other hand, thinking not done with desire for and docility to the guidance of the Spirit, done merely with confidence in one's own natural capacities, will lead only to a humanly prudent judgment at best. Such a judgment may well be foolishness to God's infinite wisdom, or at least not useful for the communal effort. So each must pray and think in order to see the meaning of the data as God wants him to see it for the sake of the community's discussion and then seek confirmation from God that his thoughts are what God intends him to contribute to the communal effort.

This confirmation will be an experience of God's presence and action, not just a sense of satisfaction in having worked out some interesting and intelligent reasons. Whether intense or mild, it will be a religious experience. Some experiential signs of God's presence and action on our minds and hearts are given by St. Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises, [316]. Careful and thoughtful reading of this brief statement, along

with [314-315], will throw considerable light on the meaning of "confirmation" as used in this context.

B. Private Reflection by Every Participant to Form His Opinions Before the Meeting

A crucial point about the sort of communal discernment we are concerned with has to be made here. It is a point that is very easily overlooked or even resisted by those who see communal discernment of God's will after the model of group decision-making in which God's will is not the central concern and in which the natural dynamics of human psychology rather than the influence of the Holy Spirit are counted on to reach the right results. Once we see by Christian faith the dynamics at work in a search for God's will, we see that everyone's view counts, not just in order for him to feel heard and important and ready to accept the group's decision, but as an important contribution in finding the truth. This being so, each one should, in his immediate preparation for dialogue, form his own opinions independently. There are at least two main reasons why this is so.

The first reason is that, as was said above, the Holy Spirit may lead the group to the truth through someone less eminent in intellectual gifts, less aggressive in his personality, less forceful in his talk, but more fully yielding to the influence of the Spirit. In the individual's search for God's will, it is not the intellectually excellent, the learned and/or astute, who are necessarily more capable of success. It is rather the pure of heart. There is no reason for thinking the case is essentially different in a communal search for God's will. A certain level of intellectual development is important, a level adequate to understand the issues, to grasp the data and the principles, to follow the discussion. But beyond that whatever opens men to the Spirit and to each other is of greater importance. Those less gifted but more open to God may have a crucial role to play.

The second reason for everyone's reaching his own views in private prayer and reflection is this. In a group there will be persons of different temperaments, characters, cultural backgrounds and experiences in

life. Because of these differences, each is prepared by God's providence to notice some facts or some facet of truth that others may not be able to notice. God, St. Paul tells us, made each of us with his own gifts for the sake of all. All complement one another. The Spirit works in all as parts of one organism. Even the mistakes of this or that individual may serve the purpose of the Holy Spirit for the whole group by affecting the group in a certain way, for example, by balancing an opposite mistake, stirring up a new way of thinking by reaction, and the like. For we cannot even assume in any communal effort that the Holy Spirit will lead each one to see the correct conclusion in his private prayer and reflection before dialogue with the other members of the group. If that were true, there would be no need for the main step of dialogue. What trust in the Holy Spirit will lead us to expect is that He will lead each one into that way of thinking which will enable him to contribute to the common effort. This could mean that He will even allow some of the community to think up reasons which do not themselves point to the right conclusions but which within the discussion stimulate the group or jolt them into ways of thinking which finally lead to the right conclusion.

For the reasons given, each one should strive to arrive at his own thought on each alternative and to do so under the influence of God in prayer. This becomes an impossibility in many cases if the members of the community during the time of immediate preparation for the meeting discuss their reasons instead of working them out privately with hope that the Spirit will let each one see what He wants him to see. The other way of proceeding is effective in a situation where opposing sides are preparing for debate, forming pressure groups, trying to assure votes for their respective sides. But all that sort of thing is utterly opposed to an honest communal effort to find God's will. Asking for information is, of course, completely acceptable; but how this information shapes up into reasons for or against a proposed course of action should be the result of each one's private prayer and thought. Otherwise, some valuable contributions to the general discussion may be lost. During the meeting and after, everyone's reasons can be thought about by everyone

else.

### C. The Indispensability of the Foregoing Preparation

Only on condition of having made adequate individual preparation, both remote and immediate, should anyone feel he has a right to actively participate in the discussion. If he has not so prepared, then his interventions may only serve to impede the working of the Holy Spirit in the group, to confuse the discussion, to hinder growth of peace and union of minds and hearts. Given the openly stated purpose and spirit of this enterprise, given the trust that all are putting in each other, for a person to join in the dialogue is an implicit declaration that, as far as he can judge, he has fulfilled the preparatory requirements in some satisfactory measure.

### III. The Communal Act of Discernment: Dialogue or Debate?

The goal of knowing God's will and the fact of our dependence upon the Spirit in attaining that goal indicate something important about the appropriate way of carrying on the meeting. Dialogue, even a special kind of dialogue, as we shall see, seems to be the appropriate way. Debate is not appropriate, whether it is debate carried on in an orderly manner, with all the niceties of parliamentary procedure observed, or an informal one carried on in conversational style. Why dialogue is preferable to debate will be evident if I make clear what I am referring to by the terms "dialogue" and "debate."

In debate the participants have already adopted convictions, have taken sides on the question at issue. From this it follows that arguments are urged in order to support each one's own conviction and to refute any opposing conviction. So, each one listens to those who disagree with him as to the opposition to be refuted. A debate is a conflict, a battle of minds. Certainly, it is possible to carry on debate in a friendly spirit; nevertheless, the debaters as debaters are opposed. They are contestants, competitors, trying to defeat each other in the minds of the listeners or even hoping for the ultimate triumph of winning over the opposition to a position already adopted as true. In a debate only one side

can win; the other side must lose.

In dialogue the case is very different. No one has as yet a conviction about the right answer to the question. No sides are taken, no position is settled upon as the one to defend or to refute. Each participant is ready to search out and present reasons for and against every alternative. He is also ready to listen with an open mind to others as helpers in trying to let the truth appear, not with a desire to make his own conviction appear as true to others. In dialogue, all succeed or all fail together.

When we hold in mind what is involved in debate and dialogue and at the same time what we aim to do in communal discernment of God's will, debate seems inappropriate or, at the very least, less appropriate as the mode for carrying on discussion. For it does not seem possible that anyone should honestly enter on a process of discerning God's will if he already has a conviction about what God's will is. If such a one enters the discernment process without really renouncing his conviction, he is playing a game or else covertly transforming the process into a debate; he is either not serious or else intends to persuade others from a position of certainty. Even if he should methodically but not really renounce his conviction, he is still not really trying to discern God's will. He is only seeking a methodical confirmation of what he thinks he already knows.

If the participants begin with really admitted ignorance and take sides only as role-playing, for the sake of searching out truth by pitting contrary opinions against one another, "debate" does make sense as a possible method in searching for God's will. I would, however, prefer to call this method dialectic rather than debate properly speaking. And, in any case, it seems less apt than dialogue, as I have described it above, in a search for God's will. Just playing the role of debaters can tend to close minds to each other, to make the participants listen to the reasons on the other side with their minds set on refuting them rather than on being enlightened. This could lead to premature solidifying of positions and so to debate properly speaking.

I am not saying debate is bad in itself. It is good to have firm convictions when these are well founded. It is good in some situations to take a stand and debate. (As a matter of fact, I find myself doing so at the moment.) Conflict and debate have an irreplaceable value in human striving. All I am saying is that debate is not an appropriate instrument in a communal discernment of God's will. It may be true that the method presented in this paper strains out the values of debate. But straining out its disvalue and gaining the values of dialogue are well worth that price. You cannot have all of these together.

If debate is not appropriate, neither is every form of dialogue, e.g., a relatively unstructured dialogue in which a few more aggressive and eloquent men do all the talking. This is not a communal dialogue. To be such, all, in one way or another, have to be heard. Ideally, each man should speak to the whole group. If, however, the community is too large, each might be heard in small group meetings; and one or other member of each group might present to the whole community the reasons which come from that group. The great importance of each person arriving at and presenting to the subgroup his own thought has already been established.

Less appropriate than unstructured dialogue which aims at a genuine communal decision, less appropriate than debate, in fact altogether outside genuine communal discernment, is the sort of dialogue which aims only at mutual tolerance. Those who listen to each other with no intention of letting go their own convictions, intending only to understand each other better and to live in pluralistic peace are not searching together to know God's will for them as a community and are not even putting their own convictions to the test as is done in debate. Even those who enter on practical discussion, ready for the sake of concerted action, to do what the community decides, but are unwilling to consider letting go their present convictions if in conflict with the community's judgment, even these are not really searching communally to know God's will.

#### IV. The Steps in the Dialogue within the Communal Act of Discernment

The several steps for carrying out the communal act of discernment

are calculated to preserve the attitudes of mind and heart gained in the remote preparation, to safeguard dialogue, and so to make possible sharing the fruits of private prayer and reflection. In order to carry out these steps there is need of a chairman who rules out all debate, overt or subtle, and holds all speakers to the aim of this particular meeting. If the participants are not to lose interest, he must graciously keep the discussion moving so that no loquacious participant can waste time and must see to it that the meetings begin and end promptly at assigned times.

A. Step 1: Presentation of Reasons for each Alternative

At the first two or more discussions, each one presents his own reasons arrived at in private reflection and prayer. To avoid debate, to assure that each man remains open to opposing alternatives and to all the reasons given for each of them, only one alternative should be dealt with at each meeting,<sup>12</sup> and all participants should support that alternative. If the alternatives are X and non-X, then for the first meeting all should think up reasons for non-X, and for the next meeting all should think up reasons for X. If the alternatives are X and Y, then reasons for X rather than Y are to be presented at one meeting and afterwards for Y rather than X in another meeting.

It is advisable, even necessary, in most meetings for all to take notes on the reasons given, since they will at a later step be evaluating the pros and cons. It would help if someone capable of taking accurate notes acted as a secretary, keeping a record of the main reasons given. When all have spoken, he could read his summary list of reasons for others to check with. The chairman could ask for any correction of the secretary's report and for any added reasons that may have occurred to anyone during that meeting.

Once the reasons are all stated, then the chairman allows questions for clarification. These may be concerned with the meaning of a word or a statement. They may also be concerned with the principles behind the reasons or the assumed fact implied by them. There may be inquiries about what this or that reason has to do with the greater service of God, whether

it is a reason which holds for the whole community or only for some individual who has a personal problem to work out, why certain good or bad consequences are said to follow from acting one way or another, and the like.

The whole aim at this step is to understand the reasons given, what they are and how they are validated. This involves confrontation of inquiry but not of debate: a man can be pressed very hard to explain what he means and why; but no one attacks what he says, neither openly nor by innuendo. Neither is there any evaluation of reasons as cogent or trivial, no balancing of reasons against one another at this point.

#### B. Step 2: Prayerful Reflection over the Reasons Presented in Step 1

After the reasons have been presented and clarified, each one privately, without consultation except for the sake of information, is to think over the reasons given in order to arrive at an evaluation of them. Each tries to judge (1) which reasons for each alternative are weightier for that alternative, more worthy of consideration, and then (2) which weightier reasons for any one alternative outweigh the weightier reasons for the other alternative or alternatives when all are brought into evaluative confrontation. (It might take two distinct reflection periods and discussions in Step 3 to cover these two distinct evaluations. It all depends on how complex the problem and the reasons are.)

This private effort at evaluation is, of course, to be carried on prayerfully, looking to the Holy Spirit for light to understand and for assurance through experience of His fruits, faith, peace, courage to face difficulty in carrying out God's will, etc.

Each one should bring from his own prayerful deliberation only a provisional judgment, still leaving himself entirely open to all the differing judgments of others, maintaining a stance of indifference to the outcome, since his own present opinion is not yet the community's conclusion about what God's will is for them.

During this reflection period at Step 2, each one would also do well to examine himself to see whether, during the communal discussion in Step 1,

he preserved that freedom of spirit attained in the remote preparation (see I, A) and is preserving it now.

### C. Step 3: Presentation of Evaluations

Each one reports to the group the results of his prayerful evaluation arrived at in Step 2. Then a procedure like that in Step 1 can be followed: The chairman has the secretary read back to the group the weightier reasons for each alternative as they came through in the meeting, along with an evaluation of the opposing weightier reasons; he asks for correction, or added evaluative judgments, and then opens the floor for questions.

### D. Step 4: Prayerful Reflection on the Evaluations Presented and Further Evaluations

If no sign of consensus with a general peace in God is evident after the evaluations are presented and clarified, there should be time for private reflection and prayer on the evaluations presented and for self-examination on how well freedom of spirit (see I, A) has been maintained. After that, there should be another discussion, and so on, until the group feels that further evaluation of reasons is not needed or is not possible, that they have worked as far as they can in this concrete situation toward the ideal goal of unanimity. Then is the time to take a vote.

### E. Note on Revision of the Alternatives (1)

Before remarking on the vote, it would be well to note that in the course of the dialogue (perhaps during the time for questioning and discussion after the reasons have been given or after the evaluation of reasons), it may become clear that the statement of alternatives at issue is defective. Hidden confusions or devisive elements in the statement may have shown up. New information which changes the whole picture may have been brought to light. In such cases, it is necessary to revise the statement of the alternatives before continuing with the dialogue. To be wooden about the statement as first formulated is to show a lack of docility to reality and a lack of sincerity in the search for God's will.

#### F. Step 5: The Voting

There is an opinion that if the issue has to be decided by vote, the discernment has failed or is not a discernment properly speaking. It is understandable that, if the vote is close, the participants might feel uneasy, and, if time allowed, would want to continue the discernment process. But if time does not allow, and especially if the vote is not close, I know of no reason for saying that the discernment has failed. The Holy Spirit may have very good reasons for not bringing the process to a unanimous decision. He might intend an occasion for growth of faith and humility and loyalty to the community in those who are on the short side of the vote. He might intend to keep those on the majority side thinking about the matter at issue, even though they ought to begin acting in the way decided. It could even be that some of the members in the discussion have not really attained the conditions necessary to open them to the Holy Spirit. But on what grounds do we assume that every participant must have done his part well and that the Holy Spirit has to bring us to a unanimous decision or we cannot trust the results as His work? If we were to apply such a principle to the Church at large or to General Councils, it would negate the validity of almost all that we see as the work of the Holy Spirit in the world through history.

Rather than call the decision by vote into question, what we need to do is to stress what was said above about trust in God and in each other and about commitment to the results of the community's discernment (see I, A, 2). It is, of course, possible that the final judgment of the group might be that some should do one thing and some another, according to their own inspirations. But then that would have to be one of the alternatives, opposed to all doing one or all doing another, an alternative from the beginning of the discussion or one which is added in a revision of the alternatives.

#### G. Note on Revision of Alternatives (2)

If the need to revise the statement of alternatives for decision has not been called for before the vote, it may be requested at, or even after,

the time of the voting. For the vote may be very close and the group as a whole feel confused and uneasy about the decision. Since the reasons for division of the vote can be found by examining the record of reasons given on both sides, it may appear possible and advisable for the group to eliminate from the statement of the issue whatever gives rise to the split of opinion. This, of course, is not always possible: the split in opinion may be over that which is the very heart of the issue. As was noted just above, it might seem best to add an alternative, allowing members to do one thing or another. But this is not always possible nor desirable as a real solution.

#### V. Confirmation of the Communal Judgment

In any case, the conclusion reached through the dialogue and tentatively assumed to have been reached under the influence of the Holy Spirit, whether it was adopted unanimously or by majority vote, is to be tested by looking for confirmation from God through the movements of our spirits, through ratification by religious authority, and through experience when carrying out the decision.<sup>13</sup>

A confirmatory sign that the conclusion is of God can be found in the peace it brings to the community, peace in God, union in God, intensification of faith, of hope, of charity, of courage to carry out the decision despite obstacles and pain. (The opposite of these would be a counter-indication.) Note that what is looked for as confirmation of the conclusion reached is a religious experience, not merely a psychological one. Just the coming to a conclusion after a sustained effort, being relieved of the uncertainty and tension endured in the demanding process, this can account for a sense, even a shared sense, of peace, of well-being. Having worked together through a difficult task can bring a common sense of union and optimism. Again, reaching a decision that we were inclined to before beginning discernment, one which naturally appeals to us, can obviously make us feel contented. None of these experiences or like ones are any confirmation of finding God's will. They can be had by any group, even a group of persons who could not care less about the will of God--

"and Herod and Pilate became friends that very day." If any experience is to count as a confirmation from the Holy Spirit, it must be a religious, a God-centered experience. Misunderstanding on this point could be disastrous: it is so easy to feel contented at having one's own way or at getting out from under strain and to mistake this contentment as a sign of God's will.

In fact, without denying the value of confirmation by religious consolation, the difficulty of judging it with certainty is such as to make us look for further confirmation by authority and experience. For those who accept the scriptural view of just authority justly exercised as from God and to be obeyed with the obedience due to God, the ratification of a communal decision by religious authority justly exercised will be a more certain confirmation than any affective religious experience. And no decision can, for the moment, be acceptable which just authority justly exercised rejects. If this confirmation is had, each one in the community can and should accept the decision as his own, even though he may have voted otherwise in the meeting. Now, all can be of one mind and heart in taking this decision as the will of God for the present. Later on, experience in carrying it out may indicate that God is now leading us to question some aspect of it or even the whole of it. So, we have to keep the work of discernment an on-going part of our lives.

Certainly, the signs of God's action should be looked for all through the process as indicators of how things are going. The presence of opposite signs is also a negative indicator, calling us to reexamine our attitudes and to pray. But times of confusion and tension are to be expected as normal stages to be gone through. They frequently precede and prepare us to receive humbly and gratefully the enlightening and unitive action of the Holy Spirit.

## VI. The Problem of Time

The foregoing description of a proposed method seems to demand a great expenditure of time. When the question at issue is very important and difficult or when the group doing the discussion is very large, it

will take much time. As we mentioned above, we must be ready to give the time necessary and not try to schedule the Holy Spirit. However, the method is not as time-consuming as might at first appear. The exclusion of debate and rhetorical persuasion eliminates very much time-consuming talk; and further, in good part the speakers will not need to expound new reasons but only to confirm what has been said by others. What is more, there are ways of shortening the process in some cases without hurry or loss of essentials. Thus, when the subject matter is not very complicated and the number of persons involved not too great, it is possible to eliminate time lags between the steps of the process so as to complete all but the final part of the confirmation at one meeting, whether it be a day or part of a day. For example, if all prepare for the meeting in their regular prayer of that day or during a few days before the meeting, the meeting can be carried out in something like the following schedule: fifteen minutes for one alternative, fifteen minutes for the other, fifteen minutes for prayerful reflection on the reasons, fifteen minutes for presentation of evaluations, fifteen minutes for reflection and prayer over the evaluations, fifteen minutes for any further comment on the evaluations and for voting. The meeting is finished in an hour and a half.

VII. An Adaptation of This Method--to Achieve Harmony, Rather Than Discernment

There are other aims for communal discussion than that of discerning God's will for the community. One of the major ones in our time is that of learning to live together with better mutual understanding, love, and trust, despite conflicting views on Christian doctrine, religious ideals, and the like, with hope of growing in union of hearts and even of growing toward union of minds as well. The method described above can easily and fruitfully be adapted for use in discussions with that aim. It will help greatly where members of a community have difficulty carrying on a calm and friendly and rational conversation about such matters because some feel badly threatened by new ideas and others feel misjudged and rejected because of their new ideas. This adapted way of using the method may at times be a more immediate need and of much greater value for the

community than the discernment process for bringing about emotional concord despite intellectual differences and for beginning a movement toward agreement on basic ways of thinking as Christians and as members of a religious community.

The following way of adapting the method may serve for this purpose; or those wanting to adapt it for themselves may find a better way. The steps will be put down very sketchily, and the reader may fill them out himself, in the light of all that has been said above about the method when it is employed for discernment of God's will.

(1). The several different views are formulated.

(2). Before the meeting, the attitudes necessary for openness to the Holy Spirit and to each other are striven for by self-examination and prayer, openness about the very subject matter to be discussed. They are:

- (a). Intense and prayerful desire to know the truth, to understand and grow out of any fears and desires that hinder my understanding the truth;
- (b). Distrust of human intelligence alone but trust in the Holy Spirit to lead us to all truth that we need to know;
- (c). Trust in the others engaged in this effort that they are intelligent persons who are honestly seeking the truth with openness to the Spirit and to each other;
- (d). Readiness to listen and to speak modestly, patiently, openly;
- (e). Freedom from desire to show that I have been right and others wrong, readiness to rejoice in finding out my error if others are right and I am wrong;
- (f). Freedom from prejudgments insofar as each one can manage to attain it now, with his convictions put aside, and with himself open to the possibility that any view proposed may be right, or perhaps none of them but some other which may emerge. (If one begins from conviction, he can at best aim at mutual tolerance; he cannot really aim at growth toward agreement with an open mind. If, however, mutual and loving tolerance can be achieved, and nothing else, that is a great

achievement.)

(g). Belief that if the participants prepare as best they can, the Holy Spirit will enable them to enlighten one another, so that each gives and receives light.

(3). The subject is studied as time allows, with special and sympathetic attention given to views till now rejected out of hand.

(4). Each one reflects prayerfully in order to arrive at his own reasons in support of each of the opposing views. Everyone must try to see reasons for every view, not just for the one he has been holding. In other words, all try to take on one another's points of view, try to experience how the matter looks from the other side. This is perhaps the crucial point of the whole method. In this it differs from the sort of dialogue in which each one listens with an open mind, but never really tentatively adopts and defends the other view.

(5). The meeting for dialogue is held. A distinct meeting is to be devoted to the reasons supporting each of the opposing views, or a distinct part of a meeting, without any confrontation of the two or more views. Once the reasons have been presented, the secretary may read back his record of them and ask for any additions or deletions. Then anyone who has thought of further reasons may give them. Finally clarifications of positions and of the reasons for them may be asked for, but no argument is allowed. Every one at each meeting supports the same position.

(6). All reflect and pray over the reasons and clarifications given in the preceding meetings. It will be well in most cases to allow ample time for this step, but not so long that interest dwindles and the discussions at Step 5 grow dim in memory. If the question is a thorny one, requiring much thought or research on the reasons presented, then a week or more might be allowed. Experience will show what is better.

This time for prayer and reflection on the discussion is also a fitting time for self-examination by each one on how well he has preserved, during the meeting and after, the attitudes noted under 2, a-g. This could well be done after any following meetings also.

(7). A meeting is held, or meetings, in which each one tells how

all the reasons now shape up for him, how he now thinks and feels after all the foregoing steps have been gone through. Again, no arguments, no attempt to decide by vote which view ought to be adopted.

As was stated above, this is one way of adapting the method. Whatever way is used, there are several essentials to keep in it: self-examination and prayer to attain the right attitudes and self-examination on how these attitudes have held up during discussion, sincere striving to find reasons for each view proposed, and complete exclusion of debate. These are essential in order to remove obstacles and so release the intelligence and the plentiful but sometimes latent good will of religious communities so that they may live as they truly desire to live for the greater glory of God in the world, with peace, as companions in Jesus Christ.



## FOOTNOTES

1. The original Latin text is in Monumenta Historica Societatis Jesu, Constitutions, I, 1-7. Vol. 63, Monumenta Ignatiana, Series Tertia, Tome I, pp. 1-7.
2. Two are: Dominic Maruca, S.J., "The Deliberation of Our First Fathers" Woodstock Letters, Vol. 95 (1966), 325-333, and John C. Futrell, S.J., Making an Apostolic Community of Love (The Institute of Jesuit Sources: St. Louis, 1970) pp. 188-194.
3. John C. Futrell, S.J., discusses the Deliberatio in his valuable study on the role of a superior according to St. Ignatius (Making an Apostolic Community of Love, pp. 122-123). In these pages, he enumerates the main steps that are explicitly stated in the Deliberatio and comments very briefly. His interest centers on: 1) understanding of Ignatian discernment in general, 2) the superior's discerning of God's will for the individual subject in dialogue with that subject and others, 3) the superior's discerning of God's will for the community in dialogue with others who individually give him the benefit of their experience, learning, and prayer. Much of what he says can be helpful when applied to communal discernment; but he has little to say expressly about the latter. He speaks slightly more at length on the subject in his earlier, justly admired, essay on "Ignatian Discernment" in Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits, Vol. II, No. 2 (April, 1970), 47-88. See in particular pp. 67-73.

Michael Sheeran gives an interesting and scholarly discussion of Ignatian discernment of God's will in "Discernment as a Political Problem," Woodstock Letters, Vol. 98 (1969), pp. 446-464. But he takes only passing notice of the Deliberatio. His interests are pretty much like those listed above as Futrell's. He does not throw light directly on communal discernment.

4. Some point to the situation in which this method was created and to the fact that Ignatius did not use it later as evidence that it is not according to his mind that such a method should be used once we have the vow of obedience, the Constitutions, and superiors. Research is still in progress to clarify Ignatius' practice during his generalate; it looks as if the historical data on which the above conclusion is based is true. Whether the historical data sustains the conclusion is altogether another matter. There is another set of facts which has to be taken into account. Ignatius urged superiors to consult with subjects. The communal discernment which is presently practiced in the Society of Jesus is consultative, not legislative. Our present cultural milieu is vastly different from that of Ignatius in the mode of exercising authority in the Church and in civil society, and superiors are now faced with immensely more numerous and more complex problems. They have correspondingly greater need for consultation. They have, in fact, called upon their fellow Jesuits to give them the benefit of communal discernment; and Ignatian obedience would lead subjects to

respond to this call generously and readily. In any case, the purpose of this paper is not to justify the practice of communal discernment but to aid those who do want to undertake it.

5. The limits of this brief paper make it impossible to include any detailed directions on how to do this. Those familiar with the Spiritual Exercises will already know a way. But even these may need some help inasmuch as this preparation has the aspect of preparation for communal as distinct from individual discernment--not to mention that even those experienced in making the Spiritual Exercises can profit from a director. Fathers John Futrell, S.J., George Schemel, S.J., Michael Sheeran, S.J., and others have developed ways of preparing through workshops for participation in communal discernment. Their work has been widespread and fruitful.
6. Engagement in communal discernment to know God's will, when prepared for in the way this method calls for, is, like making the Spiritual Exercises, a powerful way of opening us to the Holy Spirit and by his grace growing toward Christlike love that finds expression in doing always the Father's will. So, no matter what else comes of it, this sort of discernment will surely unify the participants with God and with each other. Those who have given themselves to the task in this way testify to this result.
7. Spiritual Exercises, [16, 157].
8. Ibid., [185].
9. Ibid., [186, 187].
10. I say "usually" because it is possible, in unusual circumstances, that God may call a community to act as a community beyond the specific "scope of its vocation" in order to meet some need.
11. The adapted form of this method given below (VII), may be of help for working toward a commonly accepted view of the specific scope of a community's vocation.
12. In a brief discernment, one meeting may be used to cover several of the steps set down here. In that case, it is important that a distinct part of the meeting be given over to each step and that some way of indicating, even feeling, the break be devised, e.g., getting up and walking around the room, changing positions in the circle, or the like. Let this possibility of streamlining be understood from here on in this paper.
13. For a fuller statement about confirmation than the one given here, see John C. Futrell, "Ignatian Discernment," (Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits, II, no. 2 (April, 1970), 62-65.



## THE TITLES SO FAR PUBLISHED IN THIS SERIES

These Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits are presently published at irregular intervals, usually three or more a year; but the volumes are numbered according to the years. Thus, those published in 1969 make up Volume I, those in 1970 Volume II, and those in 1971 Volume III.

## The Numbers Published So Far Are These:

- Vol. I, no. 1 (September, 1969). John R. Sheets, S.J. A Profile of the Contemporary Jesuit: His Challenges and Opportunities.
- I, no. 2 (November, 1969). George E. Ganss, S.J. The Authentic Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: Some Facts of History and Terminology Basic to Their Functional Efficacy Today.
- Vol. II, no. 1 (February, 1970). William J. Burke, S.J. Institution and Person.
- II, no. 2 (April, 1970). John Carroll Futrell, S.J. Ignatian Discernment.
- II, no. 3 (September, 1970). Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J. The Response of the Jesuit, as Priest and Apostle, in the Modern World.
- Vol. III, no. 1 (February, 1971). John H. Wright, S.J. The Grace of Our Founder and the Grace of Our Vocation.
- III, no. 2.(April, 1971). Vincent J. O'Flaherty, S.J. Some Reflections on the Jesuit Commitment.
- III, no. 3 (June, 1971). Thomas E. Clarke, S.J. Jesuit Commitment-- Fraternal Covenant ? John C. Haughey, S.J. A New Perspective on Religious Commitment.
- III, no. 4 (September, 1971). Jules J. Toner, S.J. A Method for Communal Discernment of God's Will.



# THE AMERICAN ASSISTANCY SEMINAR ON JESUIT SPIRITUALITY

---

## P R I C E S   and   S U B S C R I P T I O N S

STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS, as the masthead inside the front cover explains in greater detail, is published by this Seminar. From the nature of the case these studies are focused on Jesuit problems and interests. But others who find these essays interesting or helpful are cordially welcome to read them.

Presently the PRICE is 25 cents per copy, plus the mailing costs.

SUBSCRIPTIONS will be accepted for the issues of one academic year. The number of issues each year cannot be stated definitely now, but probably it will be five. These subscriptions must run from each November through the following October, because changes in our mailing list can be made only once a year. Subscriptions received here after June 1, 1971, must be paid in advance, at \$1.65 inside the United States, and \$1.85 outside.

### TO THOSE WHO DESIRE TO SUBSCRIBE:

It will greatly facilitate our office work if you use the form below.

- - - - - Cut off here - - - - -

The Secretary of the Assistancy Seminar  
Fusz Memorial  
3700 West Pine Blvd.  
St. Louis, Missouri 63108

Dear Father:

For the enclosed \$ \_\_\_\_\_, please add the following name to your list of subscribers:

\_\_\_\_\_  
PRINT your name here

\_\_\_\_\_  
Address

\_\_\_\_\_  
Zip code

**The American Assistancy Seminar**

St. Louis University, Fusz Memorial

3700 West Pine Blvd.

St. Louis, Missouri 63108

Non-Profit Organization

U. S. POSTAGE

**PAID**

St. Louis, Mo.

Permit No. 134



