



Ignatian Individual Discernment and Ignatian Communal Discernment as part of the Process of Apostolic Planning

Ignatian Discernment for Individuals

"The discerning person acquires knowledge, and the wise person seeks knowledge".

Proverbs 18:15

Few things in life are as paralyzing as facing a big decision. Fear plays such a large role in our consideration of our options—fear of the unknown, fear of closing the door on something good, fear of making the wrong choice. Thankfully, St. Ignatius offers us the wisdom to be able not only to decide, but to discern. Instead of a solitary experience, discernment welcomes God into the process, reminding us that we are not alone as we stand at the fork in the road. How do we do this? Our first step is to strive for indifference, which isn't to say that we don't care about the decision, but rather that we remain in a place of openness, willing to let go of any biases we may have in order to hear the voice of God more clearly.

One of St. Ignatius' great gifts to us is the assurance that God speaks to us through our desires and emotions, and this is a helpful point to remember when making a decision. Ask yourself what your deepest desires are, and remain open to the possibility of being surprised by the answer. As you imagine yourself into the different paths you might take, pay attention to your feelings. Do you experience fear, freedom, doubt? Bring those emotions to God and ask for the Holy Spirit to help you interpret them. Some of the toughest decisions we make are not between a good and a bad choice, but between two or more good options. Which one is the best? St. Ignatius always strove for more, as evidenced by the Jesuit motto "Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam" ("For the Greater Glory of God").

If you are stuck, try looking at your options through this lens, taking time to ask how your unique gifts and abilities might best be used to give the most glory to God. If that feels too abstract, ask yourself which choices would lead you closer to God and which ones further away. The answer might not be obvious at first, so make sure to give yourself time to contemplate the possibilities. Above all, St. Ignatius reminds us that discernment is a

process, as we take time to listen to God and to our emotions while considering our options.

But discernment can also involve community, as we seek advice or even just a compassionate listening ear from trusted friends or spiritual directors. Sometimes they can hear things in our words that we might have missed, a fear unvoiced or a preference just under the surface of our considerations. When others are able to share with us what they hear us saying, we often realize that we are saying more than we thought we were, that our interior knowing simply needed to be reflected back to us so that we could see it clearly. Finally, once a decision has been made, we can ask God for confirmation of our choice. This need not be a booming voice from the sky, but perhaps something as small as an encouraging conversation with a friend or an inner stillness, a sense of peace. Whatever decision you have to make, you do not face it alone. And, of course, you have already made the most important choice of your life: to journey in communion with God. Be assured that whichever road you choose, Jesus' words will ever ring along the path: "I will never leave you or forsake you."

Reflection by Cameron Bellm. **Christ Plays in 10,000 Places: Through the Year with Ignatian Spirituality.** Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States, 2021.

Ignatian Communal Discernment in a Process of Apostolic Planning

Then those who revered the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord took note and listened.
Malachi 3:16

The service of faith calls us to help people become aware of their experience of God. Promoting the justice of God's Kingdom in the service of faith, calls us, among other things, to help communities become aware of their communal immediate experience of God. The Kingdom will be a communal reality, a shared joy. Communal apostolic discernment, which the Jesuit Province of English Canada has been instrumental in refining, promises to be a new apostolic approach to Jesuit mission, one that can help integrate the various dimensions of mission in a unified spiritual practice.

What is communal apostolic discernment?

What distinguishes communal discernment from personal discernment is the role of conversation and social interaction in the former. Both forms of discernment use the felt movements of consolation and desolation to discern the presence, activity, care and will of God. Personal discernment looks within to personal interiority for these movements. While communal discernment presupposes personal prayer and discernment, it also looks without to seek the movements of consolation and desolation in the interactions within a group, and in the qualities of these interactions. Thus a group's conversation is a basic part of the matter for discernment. A meeting can be contemplative experience! The life of the

Risen Christ produces not only redeemed individuals but it also generates the Church. Together we know more about God and God's work in the world than we do by ourselves.

What can be discovered through communal apostolic discernment?

The communal dimension seems to bring a new form of consolation. In the 35th General Congregation, which met in early 2008, many delegates talked about the election of the new General as a powerful and even surprising experience of communal apostolic discernment. It left many with the conviction that the Spirit of the Risen Christ had been very present and active among them in the process. Those who have successful experiences of communal discernment tend to report three kinds of things, in addition to finding the will of God for the group. First of all, they report an experience of communal intimacy that is also a shared felt knowledge of the presence and action of Spirit of Christ among them and in the world. This intimacy is apostolic, for through sharing felt knowledge of God as discerned in ministry and life, the activity of God in our midst and in the world is discerned, as well as the invitation to participate in that divine activity in particular ways. Thus, the union of minds and hearts is apostolic, as the 35th General Congregation suggests when it says that community is the connection between identity and mission. The second thing that can be discovered through communal apostolic discernment is the paschal mystery at work in the world.

When the Spiritual Exercises are used in a communal way, then one discovers that the paschal dynamic of Christ's life is also at work in the life of a group; one discovers where the group is within that dynamic of life, death, new life, as well as the quality of the group's participation in Christ's paschal activity in the world. Thirdly, some feel that communal discernment helps to integrate the service of faith and the promotion of justice by introducing a social dimension to our practice of faith. The attention to and reverence for the individual person as subject, which is a key component of communal apostolic discernment, serves faith for faith grows in the context of the human subject, in the context of meanings and values. It also promotes justice, for reverence for the person in her or his unique subjectivity is a foundation of justice.

Jesuit Province of Canada