

CHAPTER 2010 : SPIRITUALITY (4)

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Conference on Discernment

“The most dangerous people in the world are contemplatives who are guided by nobody. They trust their own visions. They obey the attractions of an interior voice but will not listen to other people. They identify the will of God with anything that makes them feel, within their own heart, a big, warm, sweet interior glow. The sweeter and warmer the feeling is, the more they are convinced of their own infallibility.....such people can wreck a whole city or a religious order or even a nation. The world is covered with scars that have left in its flesh by visionaries like these.” Thomas Merton ‘New Seeds of Contemplation.’”

Discernment is seeking the deepest yearnings of God's heart for us and for our communities; it is a gift of the Spirit and such discernment must be noticed; accepted, treasured, and surrendered to if it is to be received. And for us missionaries of Africa there is the why of our discernment – to take us ever deeper into Africa – and by that I mean to be ever more present in those areas where we are most needed, in the fracture zones, in areas that have been untouched by the gospel, in areas where no one else wants to go. Yes our discernment is all to do with our life of service; how to become more impassioned by the gospel we dare preach and how to become better disciples in the light of that gospel.

We are all called to become impassioned witnesses of the Risen One because the very future of our Society depends on it. Such a vocation as ours in Africa and elsewhere surely must be seen as our human and evangelical response to the very concrete situations of terrible suffering and injustice that we are witnesses to; it is a response to discernment in order to be there with the people and somehow be life-giving for them through our ministry and outreach. Our discernment, then, surely is how to live ever more fully our charism which has been there from the very beginning to become witnesses and palpable signs of God by our fraternal love, by our sharing, by our integrity, by our deep rooted prayer life and by our readiness to go wherever the Spirit would have us go. Such discernment is a very basic demand of our mission. As a cautionary word we must say that there is no fool proof method of discernment. There is no fool-proof systematic method that will guarantee group unanimity at the deepest level and let us be aware that in any discernment process there are bound to be tensions and even conflicts.

Discernment is not magic, nor is it something that can just be turned on when it is needed. The gift of discernment flows from a life stance of reflective prayer. To the degree that one allows the Word to have an effect on the events of daily life, one is

learning to discern. Communal discernment is an experience of group reflection on God's Word and is, therefore, the effort of each member of the community to hear the word that God speaks in his own heart and through the lives and wisdom of the other members of the community. As a community we must want to discern for we must decide together the way to go forward. For that we need to reflect on our shared vision and wisdom that has been handed down to us from the very time of the Cardinal and that has been elaborated upon throughout our history. We must also have a commitment to the process, to time, energy, honesty, and personal vulnerability. More than an individual commitment to speak one's truth, there must be a community desire to speak, to hear, to synthesize all that we hold deep within us. We must see this as a journey that we will take together and in which we must also be committed to support one another and to accept the outcome gracefully.

We face decisions that are not just individual decisions in a community context, but decisions of the community itself. Communal discernment is not just the sum total of the personal discernment processes of each community member. The subject of communal discernment is the corporate entity, the body, the we. What is the will of God for us? Therefore let us be conscious of the bonds that hold us together, that make us a body rather than a loose association of individuals. Each and all must be aware of and must own our common vocation, purpose, charism, and mission in the line of our founder and all that we built upon over the last decades.

Trust is essential. We must trust ourselves and our personal experience and wisdom, we must trust each other, and above all we must trust the Spirit to be at work in all that we are doing. For that to happen I believe certain elements are essential to our community discernment. But first let me say that the Spirit is not to be found in falsehood or in the ego, or in personal agendas. Maybe, just maybe, we need to stop fooling ourselves and realise that often our best desires and projects are servants of our own ego's, our own deepest self concern and self love. There has to be willingness on the part of everyone to let go of the need to control, to win, or to always be right. So let us look at some of what I consider to be the important elements of our discernment process.

- The absolute necessity of a personal capacity for personal individual discernment.
- The necessity of prayer and for a deep personal faith.
- I must have enough faith to allow the Spirit to reach and touch me so that I am not afraid to speak from the heart. I must also believe that other members of the group are trying to be in touch with what is deep within them at this time. If that is the case hopefully there will be a sincere mutual listening that we can treasure. We must all try to hear and to speak our own wisdom that is given to us by the Spirit. This must make us to truly open up to one and all.

- I must have faith in the Spirit, believing that the Wisdom of God is indeed being shared in the gathering. I must believe that the Spirit desires to guide us and will do if we allow it to happen. Obviously, this is a prayerful, reflective, faith-filled process, not a political exercise!
- Indifference: this is of critical importance. It is a difficult stance, but it is an absolutely necessary one if the Spirit is to be free to function within the group. Each person must approach the process completely open to all possibilities. To hold and to cling rigidly to the way we would like our Society to be in the future without really looking at all the possibilities could well interfere with the work of the Spirit. The community needs to recognize attitudes and behaviours that are sins against the Spirit. These include a refusal to cooperate with the process, an attitude of distrust, an effort to influence another's opinion or decision, and pre-deciding. Indifference will preserve us from the narrowness of our own ideas and our own way of perceiving things, yes indifference will preserve us from our own particular interest and our conscious or subconscious desires. When the process is working well and when I know there is a certain indifference on my part then I know that I don't have to push my point for my own satisfaction I can be open to hear other voices and other points of view and may even realise that they are somewhat more praiseworthy than my own.
- Haste prevents an authentic discernment. Discernment, first and foremost, demands that a group surrender to deep personal and communal reflection; thus be careful not to jump to unwarranted conclusions

Don't forget that we come here as group remembering our history, remembering especially the elements that make us whom we are, remembering the orientations given to us by the last few chapters; but more especially remembering how the Lord has been with us in our various missionary endeavours. We need to realise just how much we have achieved as a Society, just how powerfully we have tried to be faithful to our calling; but we must also be aware of our failings, of where we may have erred from the road we should have travelled. We do have our common starting point – our past, our vision since the very foundation of the Society; in that sense I am sure that deep down we all share the same aims and desires for the welfare of our Society and the future of our ministry in Africa.

As we look back over our history we must be able to see the light and the darkness and be aware that none of us can be the complete fulfilment of the desires of God or of the Society's charism. This is our shared memory and our shared experience and it will help us to move forward and embrace the future with even more courage. This anamnesis, this remembering will hopefully bond us even closer together and reinforce, therefore, our identity, our union, and our sense of purpose. All this needs to be firmly in place at a time when many differences of opinion and outlook, many diverse aspirations and dreams, are likely to surface; for surely there will be differences of opinion, differences of approach, different points of view. There will certainly be also

different dreams and aspirations regarding how we see the future. The bonding of our group may well be severely tested in the discernment process; so too will the inner freedom of each person, as well as the inner freedom of the body. Sometimes as a Society we can be less free than the individual member. However, when there is a union of hearts and minds, rooted in shared memory and experience, we can emerge from the discernment process stronger and more united. So an *'esprit de corps'* is really needed – and if it is there, then the obedience that will accept the final decisions will be joyful and will bring consolation that will last because they will truly be our decisions.

So my prayer is that there be:

- Silence to listen to ourselves and to each other, without fear, without the interference of prejudices or projections. Yes enough silence and solitude in order to receive the word of God and the word of the other deep within our hearts so that we will always be able to say what we have to say appropriately and at the opportune moment.
- “fasting” from words, detaching ourselves from our opinions, allowing ourselves plenty of wide-open space and time.
- Light so surround us and guide us.
- Courage and strength to accept with a glad heart the decisions that will be taken.

Some authors consulted for this conference:

- Mary Benet McKinney OSB Review for Religious July/August 1999
- Brian O’Leary SJ Religious Life Review Volume 47 no 251 July/August 2008
- Sofia Baranda F. Rscj

What we want in a leader

I would like to draw your attention to certain qualities that we could see as vital for leadership:

- Humility: to lead one has to be whole and human and therefore humble. The leader accepts that he doesn’t know everything, that he doesn’t have all the answers, that he can’t do everything; he is thus well aware of his limitations. He cannot play all the instruments in the orchestra but he is able to talk the same language as other members of the orchestra and somehow is able to see the larger picture.

- **Courage:** He needs courage to be able to take calculated risks; to face fears, the unknown; yes why not to be ready to go to the other side of the lake, to leave, if necessary, the security of the known, the tried and the tested.
- **Man of God:** A man of God, a man for others- not a spiritual guru, not a mystic but someone who is striving to live out a gospel filled life who knows the importance of personal prayer because without it he knows that something would really be missing in his life.
- **Man of integrity and Congruence:**
- **A team player:** a man who is used to seeking advice; who knows what it is to listen to others, to be aware of their aspirations and is not so defensive about how he perceives things and what he holds to. In other words a man who is deep down a community man – not a loner, a man who believes in collaborative ministry.
- **A man of generosity and service:** A man who believes in a life of service and who is able to encourage others in their gifts and in their self giving. Leadership must always be exercised as a service.
- **A man of vision**

Whatever the qualities of a leader he will always know his own limitations and incoherencies and this will help him to consult. Good leaders may know the pain of loneliness and uncertainty but they will know that they are not alone but together with their brothers they are held in the Father's embrace.