

Communal Ignatian Discernment: A means for corporate discovery of and response to the desire of God for the group or community

Approaching the concept through a series of questions:

- What do we mean by this term: communal Ignatian discernment (cid)?
- What examples do we have in the Ignatian Tradition?
- What presuppositions do we have to have about a group for them to undertake cid?
- Can we outline a basic method for doing cid?
- What are some things to avoid?
- What should we be looking for when we practice it?
- How much time will cid take?
- Should we make EVERY group decision by means of cid?

I. Communal Ignatian Discernment – a definition

The practice of discernment (of both spirits and of God’s will) was a common enough spiritual pursuit throughout the Christian Tradition – attested to in the letters of St. Paul and often discussed in the writings of the Fathers of the Church and later mystics and theologians. The practice was raised to a high methodological art by Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th Century, however. For Ignatius, the heart of his own vocation or call was to be obedient – particularly to the will or desire of God – as he understood it to be expressed in his regard. Such obedience presumed some capacity to discover what it was that God willed. The very word obedience is rooted in the Latin verb which best translates “to hear.” One can only “hear” God’s will when one understands the myriad “voices” of human life and learns to recognize among them the voice (experience) of God.

Thousands of men who joined his company and countless other men and women have historically been catechized by his brilliant insights into the workings of the human mind and heart, learning to distinguish the voice of God from all others on the journey into spiritual (and psychological) freedom.

The practices of ordinary discernment of spirits, and discernment of God’s will in specific instances require a personal discipline and attention to the thoughts and affections that give rise to the inner desires of one’s life. These practices on a personal level are well documented and rather consistently practiced by those whose spiritual journeys are shaped by Ignatian Spirituality. To be successful, such practices generally need to become habitual to those who see them as worthwhile.

But what of the practice of a **group** of persons tracking the various spirits within and among the members of the group, and discerning **God’s will for the group**. Given the intricacy of attending personally to spirits and to God’s desire for one’s life, wouldn’t the task of tracking the movement of spirits within and among a group be impossibly complex?

The answer to the question is the classical Biblical line: with humans, yes, but with God all things are possible (Matthew 19.26). One of the central beliefs of the Christian faith is that God desires human persons to know and follow the Divine will for the good of the persons

themselves and for the common good of all. Seeking and finding God's desire is finding the essential goodness of creation. How could God want to thwart that?

The task is none-the-less, complex and demands both work and humility. It requires also a vulnerability of persons with and toward one another. Only with a group that one truly trusts is it possible to undertake communal discernment with any degree of confidence.

II. Communal Discernment in the early history of the Jesuits:

The example of communal discernment that is regularly held among those who are concerned with the various practices that come under the heading of Ignatian Spirituality is the Discernment of the "first fathers" of the Jesuits who prayed together, served the poor, fasted, and met regularly to deliberate and discern their *corporate* future. The group of some 11 men had already committed themselves to any work the Pope should assign them, but the question of whether they should attempt to stay together in some sort of vow based structure had not been considered up to the point. Should they stay together and effectively establish a new religious order? Should they simply allow themselves to be missioned separately by the Pope to the far flung corners of Christendom to follow the interior call they experienced toward service of God's poor and the proclamation of the Good News? Should they accept the authority and be obedient of one of their members?

In the months between March and June of 1539, the men came together to enter into a process of discernment together to discover God's will for them as a corporate body, not anyone of them individually. They undertook the corporate discernment while they continued the works of mercy and evangelization that they had committed themselves to in Rome. Each man made the decision an intention of his daily Mass, and they each undertook prayer and penances to the end that they would be utterly free to hear and follow God's will in all things concerning this decision. Each one carefully discerned his own thoughts and feelings about the distinct decisions to be made and they appointed a time to come together and disclose the reasons against the proposal and then other times to listen to the reasons for the proposal. Then both pros and cons were discussed and each man's thoughts and feelings disclosed to the group. In this way they helped each other to discern the workings of the Spirit of God from among the various "voices" that were calling on them.

The two-fold decision to stay together and to take a vow of obedience to one of their number as leader was discerned as the will of God for the group. On April 15, 1539 they celebrated the Eucharist and then solemnly signed a document affirming the common decisions. With these decisions, pending Papal approval, the Society of Jesus was born. For the following two months the men continued their intensive practices of prayer, penance and reflection, begging God for the gifts of confirming graces. The deliberation was considered officially "complete" on June 24, 1539.

III. Preconditions for a group hoping to undertake successful corporate discernment

As is evident from the description of the communal discernment of the first Fathers of the Society, there are some requirements that any group who hopes to successfully discern God's will for them will meet. These are listed here with a brief description of each. Much more could be said about each pre-condition.

- A. Every member of the group must have a **deep faith in God** and hold the conviction that God desires a direction or outcome **for this group** or community, not just the individual members of the group.
- B. Every member of the discerning group has to **agree to enter into prayer, penance, and self examination** according to the principles of a personal discernment of God's will and the common commitment. Following the principles of Ignatian discernment of God's will, all would preferably be in a state of condition of spiritual grace equivalent to having at least received the graces of the Kingdom, the Two Standards, the Three classes of persons, and at least the second degree of humility in order to be reasonably confident that each is FREE enough to perceive God's will. This is a fairly high degree of spiritual freedom, and what a group might well decide to do is to recognize that all may not be so free, so the group will be more cautious about being certain that the outcome is fully God's will and seek greater confirmation.
- C. It is imperative that **each member** of the group **have some training and practice in Ignatian discernment** of spirits and of God's will, and that each member of the group can articulate his/her thoughts and feelings in a way that discloses the various spirits moving him or her..
- D. It is necessary that the **group members trust each other** enough to speak freely and with confidence. It is essential that each member of the group be confident that every other member truly desires to know and follow God's will to the best of each one's ability. (One can not be suspicious that some members are not free, do not desire God's will, have a hidden agenda, etc.)
- E. It is best if someone who is utterly disinterested in the outcome, but knows the process of discernment **facilitate the process**. Listening carefully to the tones, words, body language, and other subtle clues for the movement of spirits both evil and of God in the whole process.
- F. It is necessary that everyone in the group admit to its reflection **all relevant data for the decision** that the group is reasonably capable of collecting. So it is important that everyone in the process read and study any data distributed in the group ahead of the group's meeting, and keep a reasonably careful journal about his/her thoughts and feelings as the study of the data and one's personal prayer about it proceeds.

- G. It is necessary before the process begins that **every member** of the group involved **agrees to accept the outcome** and to support it as God's will unless it is definitively shown not to be so.
- H. It is urgent that members who discover within themselves strong resistance to some information or to the process, that each person pray deeply for interior freedom and peace and then **be willing to lay out with some clarity their objections or concerns** as important data.
- I. It is important that **the group has the authority to make the decision** they are attempting to discern. If they are a leadership group of a larger body, it must be clear that the body has commissioned them to make this decision, that it is within their purview to do so. Further, all members of a larger group should be expected to enter into prayer for the freedom and wisdom of those making the decision.

IV. A basic Method of undertaking CID.

A method for practicing group discernment is built around the following pattern:

Before the group begins its actual discernment it establishes some "rules" for proceeding. The amount of time that will be given to the process, the breaks in meeting time, the degree of consensus needed for a sense of discerned direction (usually something between 66% and 75% is a substantial enough consensus. The group may decide that a greater degree of consensus is important for this or that question.

1. Assertion of the question to be discerned – usually in a positive statement (for example: “ The CLC community of the United States will undertake a strict food fast every Friday in repentance for the United States’ Involvement in the Iraq War until the war ends.” Or CLCUSA will request that a Bishop be appointed as ecclesial assistant by the National Conference of Bishops.” Etc.)
2. A period of prayer and personal discernment of spirits in the context of some period of time for a serious study of relevant data on the topic by every participant. This is by way of simply allowing the statement to arouse spirits of evil and of God in order to expose each person's attachments regarding either side of the question. It is wise if each person keeps a journal of key movements regarding the question and any important data regarding being a participant in the discernment.
3. The group meets and each person carefully shares the fruit of his/her discernment of spirits when considering the topic in light of prayer. At the end of this session everyone spends time in prayer and asks for the grace to know God's desire in this matter, and the freedom to hear one another. After this meeting every person should “discover” to him/herself how they feel and think about this proceeding and what so-and-so said, etc. Keeping track of one's affect and thoughts throughout is very important.

4. Members now take proportional time to surface every possible argument against the statement. The group listens to all the negatives and prays for light to weigh them in light of the Gospel, CLC's vocation, the teachings of the Church etc.
5. Again, everyone spends time in prayer for interior light and peace – the group puts away the “cons” (negatives) and simply prays to know and follow God's desire on this matter.
6. The group then takes proportional time to discover every possible reason FOR the assertion. Follow the same procedure as was outlined for the negatives.
7. Now the members go apart and carefully weigh the cons and pros in light of each one's sensibility of God's desire to him or her, listening carefully for the various spirits of good and of the dark that will be stirred up at this time.
8. As each member listens carefully to the thoughts and feelings of his/her own heart, he/she determines which of the pros and cons are significant and worth listening to.
9. The group comes back together and listens carefully to each person sharing his or her sense of the weight of each of the reasons for and against.
10. The guide helps the group determine whether it is functioning at this point in a prevailing consolation or desolation. The members pray together for interior freedom and actual disponability regarding this question.
11. Group members cast a vote or preference for or against the statement as given. If consensus is reached, everyone is asked if he or she can “live with” the decision in grace or if they feel so strongly that more time is needed for prayer for indifference. Even as this determination of consensus is sought, every member needs to feel free to express a degree of commitment to or alienation from the issue at hand.

Note: It is imperative at this point that all involved in the discernment process listen carefully to their own hearts and heads to determine what spirits are operating most strongly. The general rule is that if you can pin-point the focus of your consolation/desolation (why are you specifically afraid, angry, dismayed etc. at this moment or conversely why are you specifically filled with confidence, hope, courage, enthusiasm etc). What is the exact cause or location of these experiences? When you can answer this questions then you work or vote against desolate thoughts or affects and work with consoling thoughts or affects.

12. Once a decision emerges the group spends proportionate time praying for consolation to confirm the decision. The group members continue to “read” their own personal spirits both around the question and in general. (Be aware that this activity is very demanding both emotionally and intellectually and you may well be very tired – with its attendant emotional let down).

13. In the implementation of the decision, be sure that the group continues to pray for confirmation as to whether this is God's desire, but moves forward to enact the decision as well as possible.

We are never guaranteed that we have certainly discovered God's will for ourselves or our associations, but if we remain open to God's desire and move forward with courage we can be assured that God will find ways to clarify our perception of His will for us as persons and as organizations committed to the Reign of God on earth.

V. Some things for groups to avoid when trying to discern God's will

1. Undertaking a significant discernment without a guide.
2. Failing to give a reasonable amount of time to the discernment.
3. Expecting to make a successful discernment without adequate information and analysis of the topic or alternatives. Prayer is no substitute for homework and research – both have to be in place.
4. Attempting to discern a decision that your group does not have competence to make.
5. Taking too little time for prayer, for reflection and for personal sensing of the spirits moving each person.
6. Trying to pack too much into a short time and exhausting the participants. As much as possible discernment needs to take place in a context of peace and quiet – both physically and mentally.
7. Allowing people to participate who cannot discern their own movements of spirits. (Successful discernment generally presupposes that participants have made the Exercises – at least to the second week of the process.
8. Allowing any member(s) of the group to manipulate, overwhelm or intimidate others in the group.

V. What should we be looking for when we practice Communal Ignatian Discernment?

Overall, when a group is practicing discernment in its decision making, it should look for Gospel fruitfulness in the subsequent work of the group – that is, members should love each other more, there should be deeper commitment to prayer and concern for the poor. The means to implement well-discerned decisions should be forthcoming. If God wants the work done, God will provide the means. This doesn't mean that the group should sit around waiting – as in everything, the community begins to act with the expectation that the graces and resources will surface as the work goes forward.

But groups should also expect suffering and difficulty – usually from outside forces. Some form of persecution, challenge, etc. Just because our direction is truly toward God’s will we won’t be spared difficulty and suffering. On the contrary, the Third week of the Exercises follows upon the discerned decision of the call and choice. Generally speaking, such suffering is not from “natural causes” so much as from the forces of evil within culture and within persons. The “enemy,” as Ignatius termed all forces that seek to destroy the people and things of God, does not want any group to find and follow the call of the Kingdom in the world. It will stop at nothing to stamp out goodness.

Ordinarily, however, the difficulties will not arise within the group, unless some members of the group are not able to discern from failure to recognize their own spirits. Contentiousness, anxiety, anger, back-biting, jealousy etc. DURING the discernment process is to be expected and looked for **as dark spirits** (desolation) within the discernment. This should be pointed out to those so engaged, and all involved need to pray for peace, mutual affection and patience – or whatever virtue is needed to overcome internal conflict. Discernment cannot go forward in an environment of distrust and anger or anxiety between or among those discerning – the members must fight to overcome such attitudes and behaviors or the discernment can not go forward.

Members should also look for peace, confidence, courage, compassion and understanding to one another (often surprising us) and great joy in the agreed upon outcome. Joy and peace are the most frequent signatures of God’s presence and care, but don’t overlook courage, patience, attentiveness – even practiced by those for whom they are not usual virtue. Expect to be surprised by the people in the room – especially people you know the best. Expect God to shower the group with wonderful graces of care and respect so that the work of discernment can be implemented. **GOD WANTS THE DIVINE WILL TO BE EMBRACED – BECAUSE IT IS FOR EVERYONE’S GOOD!**

VII. How much time will Communal Ignatian Discernment take?

Time can be a difficult reality to factor. Generally speaking, a group that is practiced at discernment will move faster on any one given decision. Groups that are just starting will need more time.

If the group can foresee the need for the decision ahead of the time when the decision will be required, so that adequate time can be given to the research, study and other forms of preparation – not the least of which is prayer and penance – then the outcome will be better assured to be authentic.

Time should be factored into the decision-making meeting for prayer, for relaxation and community building, for thoughtful discussion and debate, for recreation, and for resolving unexpected (or expected) conflicts or personality clashes.

If a group is willing to engage in significant prayer, study, review of resources etc. before coming together the time of the actual decision making could be considerably

foreshortened. All this prior work, however, should be considered part of the discernment process itself, and participants should be expecting sharp experiences of both consolations and desolations. What can't be done as well without getting together is the very human process of developing community bonds of friendship and mutual trust of each other's communication and decision making styles.

Too little time often induces anxiety, which then eats away the little time that is there. I would say that the more important the decision is for the group's ultimate apostolic work, the more time should be built in for the best human conditions possible.

Can a decision be an authentic discernment if the group works together only "virtually"? Yes, if everyone is willing to give his or her best effort and attention to the project for the duration of the time the decision is being made.

I have never heard of a group taking **too much** time for a discernment – if they are actually working at the process, but I assume it is possible. A good friend, now deceased, who was a Jesuit that guided many groups in discerned decision making spoke often of the defeat of discernments by inertia once the Desire of God is fairly clear. In such cases the group panics and can't implement so they endlessly revisit the discernment – hoping for another answer possibly. Never underestimate the power of evil to attempt to disrupt God's work – even in the holiest places!

The original deliberation and discernments of the first fathers took several months of fairly concentrated effort, so major discernments that concern the future and wellbeing of a community ought to be given enough time to do it well, but then have a plan for implementing the discerned decision as soon as possible.

VIII. Should we make EVERY group decision by means of cid?

Another way to ask this question is 'when do we discern a decision, and when do we simply humanly decide?'

The answer to either question is not cut and dried, but generally speaking decisions that 1) will greatly affect the existence or future life of an organization, 2) stir up great conflict or division within the community and risk its life or well-being, or 3) directly affect the apostolic mission of a group should all be discerned decisions.

These are the decisions about which God would undoubtedly have a will. There may be some decisions of implementation of larger decisions that don't need a special discernment process as much as they need to be faithfully reviewed within an on-going discerning way of evaluating or goal setting.

In this case, the leadership group of an Ignatian community, for example would set aside time to discern major decisions of policy, direction change, development, leadership or new apostolic ventures. But the leadership would subject ordinary business of fund raising and

spending, hiring of staff, evaluation of progress, and accountability of resources to a rather ordinary discernment of spirits in a corporate exercise of Examen. When leaders function in an ordinary discerning style it is relatively easy to see and determine when a formal discernment of God's will is necessary.

It might be valuable for leadership groups to formally discern their goals early on after new leaders are chosen by discernment, in order to "practice" discerned decision making in this (new) group, but then to conduct ordinary business in a more relaxed "Examen style" of discernment until serious conflict about values or resources challenges the group toward a more fully developed discernment process.