



Communal Apostolic Discernment

A Toolkit



*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 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

TOOLS FOR COMMUNAL APOSTOLIC DISCERNMENT

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.

This Toolkit. For these reasons, the Provincial encourages the communities and ministries of the Province to incorporate communal apostolic discernment into their normal practices, in ways that seem appropriate to each community or ministry. We propose here a "toolkit" of basic practices to help build habits of communal apostolic discernment in the Province. These tools were originally developed by Peter Bisson S.J., Earl Smith S.J., and Elaine Regan-Nightingale (CLC) from the pioneering work in communal spiritual life and discernment of John English, S.J and Gilles Cusson, S.J., both of our Province, and others, such as George Schemel, S.J., of the Maryland Province, as well as from the practices of the Christian Life Communities. Erik Oland S.J. and Gilles Mongeau S.J. have edited the original document and added instruments for apostolic planning. The tools in this toolkit concentrate on five kinds of skills: spiritual conversation, spiritual conversation in small groups, communal discernment, communal decision-making, and fifthly, apostolic planning. We hope that these tools or practices will help Jesuits and colleagues to become more intentionally and responsibly engaged in the life in the Spirit of our communal and apostolic life together.

Contents. This toolkit has four kinds of resources. In first place are six basic tools, with three extra ones for going deeper and engaging in apostolic planning. Secondly come supplementary explanations that enrich the explanations in the Tools. Thirdly we have included a bibliography of resources for more extensive exploration and study. The tools themselves are arranged in increasing order of complexity, where the later ones build on and presuppose the preceding ones.

Basic Tools:

1. Spiritual conversation
2. The Check-In
3. The Review
4. Spiritual conversation in small groups
5. Communal discernment
6. Communal decision-making

Extra Tools:

7. Communal graced history
8. A framework for specifying outcomes
9. An examen/evaluation for ongoing apostolic planning

Supplementary

Comments:

- a. On recognizing communal consolation and desolation
- b. Using the tools in secular terms

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For help. For questions about how to use this Toolkit, feel free to contact the *Service for Discernment in Common* and its Director, Laurence Loubières, xmcj

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Introduction

*John said, "There is the Lamb of God!" When the two disciples heard what he said, they followed Jesus. He turned and saw them following; "What are you looking for?" he asked. They said, "Rabbi," (which means 'Teacher') "where are you staying?" " **Come and see,**" he replied.*

John 1: 36-39



Communal apostolic discernment. Communal apostolic discernment helps a group to recognize how the Spirit of Christ is active among them and what decisions the Spirit is inviting them to make. It helps the group to recognize how they are responding to or resisting Christ's Spirit, and allows them to use this recognition to make good communal choices for building the Kingdom. It can be practiced for two purposes: to build community and to make apostolic decisions. These two purposes are closely related. Most find that good community building is not exclusively inwardly focused but leads outward to mission. Community is not only for mission, it also is a tool for discernment and, as GC 35 says, it also is mission, for it witnesses to what we hold dear.

A basic skill. Communal discernment, whether for decision-making or community-building, is largely a matter of spiritual conversation. Spiritual conversation provides much of the data for communal discernment. It becomes communal discernment when those involved in the conversation became aware of and advert to the communal spiritual movements in the conversation. In a group, various practices help to keep the conversation spiritual, and help the group to reflect on what is happening to them spiritually. This Toolkit consists mostly of such practices. Thus, communal discernment is basically a structured and guided group spiritual conversation.

A basic insight. Communal apostolic discernment is not about debating positions and winning arguments, nor is it about solving problems. Like personal discernment, it is about putting God's will first, following the leads of grace and attending to the quality of our engagement in God's presence to us in the issue at hand. While the following suggestions are for Ignatian communal discernment, probably any good tool for communal decision-making, when used in a spiritual way, can become communal discernment.

Knowing Ignatian spirituality. These Tools often presuppose that the reader is familiar with the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola and with the terminology of Ignatian spirituality. They also presume an Ignatian habit of prayer, including a practice of the examen of consciousness and the review of prayer. The Tools in this kit can be adapted for use in secular terminology, and we offer some short suggestions for doing so in the last "Comments" section.

How the Tools work. Each of the following Tools is broken down into a number of practices, which we try to identify and explain. As the practices become habitual, they will become skills. Tool #1, spiritual conversation, provides the basic pattern for all the subsequent ones.

How the Tools are organized. The presentation of each Tool begins with a Scripture passage that helps the reader enter prayerfully into the description and explanation of that particular Tool. Then the discussion has five sections: “What,” “Why,” “Matter for Discernment,” “How,” and “Explanatory Notes.” The “What” section briefly describes the tool. The “Why” section explains why the tool is important and why it might be used. The “Matter for Discernment” explains the subject matter or object of focus of the conversations. The “How” section is the heart of each “Tool.” It explains in step-by-step fashion what is done. The “How” sections are often divided into two subsections, suggestions for personal prayer, and suggestions for sharing during a meeting. While the personal preparation and prayer is a necessary prerequisite, the Toolkit assumes the reader already knows such practices, so the writers concentrate on what happens in the meetings. The “Explanatory Notes” section contains supplementary material, which is not necessary for a basic understanding of the Tool but which does deepen the explanation.

Who the Tools are written for. While the Tools are written for anyone who might use them, they are especially written for those who will lead these conversations. In the text we call such a person the “leader.” The “What,” “Why,” “Matter for Discernment,” and “How” sections are useful for all participants to read. The “Explanatory Notes” at the end of each Tool, as well as the “Supplementary Comments” at the end of the Toolkit, are especially useful for leaders to read, and for any who want a fuller understanding. The leader may use the What, Why, Matter for Discernment, and How sections of each Tool as templates to prepare printed guides for prayer to be handed out to the group, or could even copy or print these sections directly in order to support the group in its structured conversations.

Terms: “leader.” The “leader” may be the superior, team leader, director of work, a group member who has aptitude or skills in group process and communal discernment, or an outside facilitator. However, we hope that this presentation is clear enough for all persons to use, regardless of their prior experience of communal apostolic discernment.

Terms: “group.” In the text we use the term “group” to mean a community or a ministry team or work team, or any other group of persons whose work or life brings them together for common projects and which gives them some shared identity. Communal discernment works better when the members of a group already know and trust each other somewhat.

Leader’s attitude. Trust the Spirit! The leader’s basic role is to help the group enter into conscious spiritual conversation with each other about the group’s life and about the agenda

at hand, and the leader should never get in the way of the Spirit's work in the group. While the leader's role is helped by skills in the Spiritual Exercises and group spiritual dynamics, nevertheless a leader should not be overwhelmed by such technical aspects, for the principal worker in communal discernment is the Holy Spirit. The next most important worker is the group and its humility and openness to the Spirit. The leader's role depends primarily on trusting the Spirit working in the group. The guidelines, suggestions and tips that follow are merely helps to this task.

Basic Tools



Tool #1

Spiritual Conversation



Thereupon Mary set out, proceeding in haste into the hill country to a town of Judah, where she entered Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leapt in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and cried out in a loud voice:

"Blest are you among women and blest is the fruit of your womb. But who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me? The moment your greeting sounded in my ears, the baby leapt in my womb for joy. Blest is she who trusted that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled."

Then Mary said:

My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit finds joy in God my saviour, for he has looked upon his servant in her lowliness; all ages to come shall call me blessed. God who is might has done great things for me, and holy is his name; his mercy is from age to age for those who fear him. He has shown might with his arm; he has confused the proud in their inmost thoughts. He has deposed the mighty from their thrones and raised the lowly to high places. The hungry he has given every good thing, and the rich he has sent empty away. He has upheld Israel his servant, ever mindful of his mercy; even as he promised to Abraham and his descendants for ever."

Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months, and then returned home.

Luke 1: 39-56

I. What: Spiritual conversation does not have to be explicitly about spiritual things. While it can be, spiritual conversation is mainly about the quality of listening and the quality of speaking. It means paying attention to the spiritual movements in the other person as well as in oneself during the conversation, which necessitates attending to many other levels of what is being expressed. Such a quality of attention is an act of reverence, welcome and hospitality for others as they are, and takes seriously whatever is going on inside the parties to the conversation. This can be done in any context, while discussing any topic. Spiritual conversation is composed of two foundational skills or practices, active listening, and intentional speaking. These are the basic building blocks of any communal discernment.

II. Why: The main purpose of spiritual conversation is to create an atmosphere of trust and welcome so that people may more readily express themselves frankly. It allows them to take seriously whatever is going on within them. This transparency makes the perception of spiritual movements easier and, eventually, the Spirit's involvement.

III. Matter for Discernment: The object of attention is the other person or persons in the conversation and what they are experiencing, as well as oneself and what one is experiencing. The guiding question for one who is engaging intentionally in spiritual conversation can be "What is going on in the other person and in me, and what is the Lord up to here?"

IV. How Two basic skills or practices make up spiritual conversation, active listening and intentional speaking.

A. Active listening: The goal of active listening is to seek to understand others as they are.

◇ It means listening not only to what the other person is saying, but also to what they mean to say, and to what they might be experiencing interiorly. Above all it means listening also to the person.

- ◇ Such listening is called “active” because it means paying attention to more than one level of expression of the other. To do so, one must be actively engaged in the process.
- ◇ It means listening to the other now as he or she is speaking, and not instead concentrating on what one will say next.
- ◇ Active listening means welcoming non-judgmentally whatever the person says, no matter what you think about what is being said, or what you think about the person. Each is an expert in his or her own experience. We should listen from the point of view of the Presupposition of the Spiritual Exercises, that is, to be
 - ▲ “more ready to put a good interpretation on another’s statement than to condemn it as false” (*Spiritual Exercises n.22*).
- ◇ We should expect that the Spirit is speaking with us through the other person.
- ◇ Non-judgmental welcome can mean exploring what the person is saying, for example by means of follow-up questions or expressions of interest and sympathy.
- ◇ Non-judgmental welcome does not mean criticizing or disagreeing, at least not at first, and not until the other person trusts you, and not until you think you have understood what the person means. This is a profound welcome of the other person in his or her radical uniqueness.
- ◇ If you criticize or challenge before trust has been established and before you have understood what the other means, then the other person will probably not feel free to be frank and sincere.
- ◇ Active listening means allowing one to be affected by the other.

◇ Active listening is demanding, for it requires humility, openness, patience and involvement, yet it is also a profound gift to others of taking them seriously.

B. *Intentional speaking*: This is the equivalent to active listening, and

◇ refers instead to a similar quality of speaking. There are not good expressions for this now, so we choose the expression “intentional speaking.” The goal of intentional speaking is sincere expression of oneself, of one’s experience, feelings and thoughts.

◇ Intentional speaking is based in a habit of listening actively to oneself in order to be aware of how one is responding interiorly to the other during the conversation. This inner self-awareness then guides how one engages in the conversation, seeking always to remain free of selfish motivations in what one says. This self-awareness gives one’s speaking its “intentional” character.

◇ It means speaking from one’s own experience, and from what one is indeed thinking and feeling, while respecting the needs of active listening.

◇ Intentional speaking means taking responsibility not only for what one says, but also for what one feels. In intentional speaking, one never blames the other for what one is feeling. For example, instead of saying “You made me angry when you said x...” say “When you said x, I felt angry because I thought...” By not blaming the other for what you are feeling, you keep the exchange free and transparent by avoiding making the other defensive.

◇ It means sharing the truth as one sees or experiences it, not imposing it.

◇ Intentional speaking is self-giving, a free, generous offer of a gift to another, in reciprocity for being actively listened to.

V. Explanatory Notes: A good way of understanding the relationship between active listening and intentional speaking in spiritual conversation is by analogy to Ignatius's second preparatory comment in the *Contemplatio ad amorem*: love consists in a mutual sharing between two persons. One shares what one has with another who has less of it, and welcomes from another what one has less of. Thus when one has honour, one shares it with one who has less honour, similarly with knowledge, etc. In response to being spoken to in an intentional manner, one listens actively; in response to being listened to actively, one speaks intentionally. The one encourages the other.

- Spiritual conversation, and its component skills of active listening and intentional speaking, presupposes a regular personal practice of the Examen of consciousness. Without a habit of discernment and the self-awareness of the operations of one's own freedoms and unfreedoms that grow with the practice of the Examen, then one can neither listen actively nor speak intentionally.
- Non-judgmental active listening presupposes that the one you are listening to is an expert in his or her own experience. One can discuss the interpretation of the experience, but this must come with the establishment of trust.
- The Spiritual Exercises Commission of the French Canadian Province, in their 2009 report, identify spiritual conversation as a basic Ignatian mission. It is something that anyone of an Ignatian spirituality can practice daily, and which is a foundation for any other Ignatian apostolate.
- The attention, gratitude, reverence and reciprocity of active listening and intentional speaking, and hence of spiritual conversation, are rooted in faith.

Tool #2

The Check-in



*Yahweh, you examine and know me,
You know when I sit, when I rise,
You understand my thoughts from afar.
You watch when I walk or lie down,
You know every detail of my conduct.*

Psalm 139: 1-3

- I. What:** If a group has not yet learned skills in active listening and intentional speaking, the “check-in” is a simple technique at the beginning of a meeting that models such behavior very simply, and which usually deepens the quality of the rest of the conversation. The “check-in” is a short expression of the disposition or inner state of each participant at the beginning of the meeting, perhaps accompanied by a very brief explanation of why he or she is feeling this way. The check-in is not normally a summary of the significant moments in the person’s life since the previous meeting, but merely a description of their current disposition. For example, “I’m feeling fine,” or “I’m distracted by work waiting for me on my desk” are appropriate check-ins.
- II. Why:** The check-in serves to show what disposition participants bring to the meeting. In Ignatian terms, it serves to express if a participant is in consolation or desolation. By bringing out some aspect of each participant’s current inner state, the check-in is a way of saying that each person is welcome as they are now, and that their inner disposition is important data for the conversation because that person is important to the group and its work. In other words, the check-in functions as an acknowledgment and welcome. It also places each participant on an equal footing by suggesting that each person’s contribution is important.
- III. Matter for Discernment:** The object of attention in the check-in is the state of each member of the group at the beginning of the meeting.
- IV. How:**
- A. *Opening.*** The leader calls the meeting to order, and perhaps opens with a prayer.
 - B. *The check-in round.***
 - ◇ The leader invites the participants to express, briefly, how they are doing or feeling at that moment. A general question might be helpful, like “How are you doing?” or “How are you as you come to this meeting?”

- ◇ The leader allows a pause to give people a chance to recollect themselves, then either invites spontaneous check-ins or invites someone to begin then proceeds in an orderly fashion to the others. Someone may pass, if they wish.
 - ◇ If someone reports being in desolation or otherwise poorly disposed in what seems an important way, then it is probably good to respond to the person by exploring what is wrong. This can happen right away, in which case the group should be involved; it can be placed on the agenda to be responded to with the group later in the meeting, or it can happen outside the meeting. Acknowledging the desolation also acknowledges the person. If the desolation is not acknowledged, it will probably indirectly influence the subsequent meeting somehow.
- C. Closing.** Once the check-in is complete, the leader briefly thanks everyone, then moves on to the next item on the agenda. If something came up during the check-in that should be dealt with during the meeting, then it is put on the agenda in an appropriate moment.

V. Explanatory General comments

Notes:

- While active listening and intentional speaking can be practiced any time anywhere, not every meeting will be a structured spiritual conversation. However, a check-in at the beginning, even a short one, models active listening and intentional speaking in a short but real way, which in turn can affect the quality of all subsequent conversation. If one is looking for one simple technique that can give any meeting or group conversation a spiritual quality, this is it!
- The check-in is a way of acknowledging each person as important, and important in the same way. It opens an atmosphere of sincerity of speaking, equality of status, and the importance of each person's presence and contribution. If something like this is not done, then people will often seek indirect ways for their persons to be acknowledged, which will distract from the meeting, not because

the acknowledgement is not important, but because the seeking of acknowledgement will be done indirectly and not explicitly, which introduces an unacknowledged agenda into the meeting. The check-in also says implicitly that how people feel about things is important data for the discussion of the matter on the agenda, even if other data are important too

- One can be creative with how the check-in is done. Variety of practice is helpful for a group, since not everyone responds equally well to every activity. For a change, people could be invited to make a drawing to express how they are feeling. If the meeting is part of an ongoing deliberation, then the check-in could be about what has stuck in people's minds since the last meeting, etc.
- If the group has not met in a long time and participants have not yet had a chance to socialize and "catch-up" with each other's recent stories, then it can be appropriate to lengthen the check-in to include some significant moments in each one's life since the last meeting.

Role of the leader

- In the check-in, the leader's main role is to ensure that each person is acknowledged and welcomed as they are, and that the whole process is brief.
- If the leader is part of the group, then the leader also shares, but never first.
- Depending on what is expressed, especially if there is desolation, some follow-up may be helpful, within the group or outside it, as seems appropriate.
- If the group is in desolation, then this must be acknowledged, otherwise the desolation will affect the subsequent business.

Tool #3

The Review



Now while he was with them at table, he took bread and said the blessing; then he broke it and handed it to them.

And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; but he had vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?'

Then they set out that instant and returned to Jerusalem.

Luke 24: 30-33a.

- I. What:** This is a short, reflective act of awareness that looks back over the whole conversation. It is part of the conclusion and completion of a meeting. In the review, participants reflect back on the meeting in order to get some comprehensive awareness of their experience of it and participation in it. It can take various forms: an evaluation, an expression of gratitude or appreciation, an appropriation of the meeting. It is like a check-in, but comes instead at the end of a meeting. Often this exercise is called an evaluation, but because of the various forms it can take, “review” is a more comprehensive term.
- II. Why:** A review of the meeting helps to complete the meeting. It can perform functions of evaluation, gratitude, communal self-awareness, and an apostolic function of bringing some forward movement to the conversation. The review gives participants the chance to engage intentionally in the quality of the conversation, trying to discern what the conversation meant, maybe identify how the group was consoled or not, and assess not only the quality of the conversation but also the quality of their own participation in it. The appreciation exercise performs a similar function for the group and its communal spiritual life as does the review of prayer after a Contemplation in the Exercises. Thus, even though it is short, the appreciation brings out the forward movement in the conversation by identifying its possible spiritual meaning, and how it might be better conducted by the leader and the participants next time. In this way, the assessment helps the group to assume responsibility for its own communal spiritual life, and also helps to build the agenda for the next meeting.
- III. Matter for Discernment:** The matter for discernment is the whole conversation from beginning to end, especially how one experienced it. This includes not only how the meeting was conducted and what happened at it, but also the quality of one’s own participation.
- IV. How:** The leader indicates that the meeting is drawing to a close, and invites the group to enter into a review of the meeting.

- 5-20 minutes is usually an appropriate amount of time, depending on the size of the group and the importance of the meeting. Like the check-in, the review is short, but important because of the effects it can have on the meeting, as explained above in the “Why” section.
- The leader then proposes a question or a choice of questions to focus the reflection. The choice of question and kind of review should be guided by the importance of the meeting, the degree of need to learn from it, the time available and the energy of the group at this time.
- After asking the review question or questions, the leader proposes a short time of reflection, then invites responses. These may be offered spontaneously, in which case not everyone will speak during the allotted time, or the leader may systematically go around the group inviting responses.
- Here are some possible questions to guide the review:
 - ◊ *Evaluation*: An evaluative review tends to focus more on the process of the meeting than the content, and is useful for planning the next meeting. The question may be as simple as “How was the meeting for you?” or more involved, such as “What helped your participation in the meeting? What hindered your participation in the meeting?” or “What did you find helpful or unhelpful?”
 - ◊ *Gratitude or appreciation*: A review of gratitude or appreciation is more general than an evaluative review, and responses will deal with both process and content. The question may be “What do you feel most grateful for in the meeting?” or, “What do you most appreciate from the meeting?”
 - ◊ *Appropriation*: An appropriation review engages the participants to synthesize or integrate their experience of the meeting in order to identify some chief meaning of the meeting for them. The question

for this kind of review may be something like, “What is the main thing (or meaning) you are taking away from this meeting?”

- If it is desirable to touch on content, process and experience of the meeting, then the leader can ask an evaluation question and a gratitude or appropriation question.
- Hearing each others’ reviews allows the group to hear itself in action in a reflective mode. Hearing others’ reviews will also affect each one’s sense of the meeting.
- If the leader notices some interesting patterns in the review, then it may be appropriate to point these out. Otherwise, a simple thank you at the end suffices to conclude the review.
- A written evaluation can be done at the end of a long meeting that is outside of usual meetings of a group, for example, one that lasted a few days, or was a special workshop. It is still good to do a brief oral review together, for hearing each other benefits the whole group, which in turn becomes part of the experience and remembered significance of the meeting. Written evaluations benefit the leaders and planners of the meeting, but do not have immediate impact on the group.

V. Explanatory General comments:

Notes:

- The review is like the reflection after prayer in the Spiritual Exercises, or like the Examen of consciousness at the end of a day.
- Check-in and review can be understood as “bookends” of a meeting or of group conversation. While these two simple techniques do not completely transform a meeting into a spiritual conversation, they can deepen the quality of listening, speaking and participation. In this way they support the meeting in a “bookend” way by giving it a spiritual framework. The check-in at the beginning welcomes each person, and sets a simple model for active listening and intentional

speaking. Even if the rest of the meeting is conducted in a “normal” way, a check-in at the beginning can deepen the quality of the rest of the conversation. A review at the end lends a reflective dimension to the whole experience: by valuing each participant’s experience of it; by encouraging participants to discover an overall sense to it; by encouraging them to take collective responsibility for it, and in these ways preparing for the next meeting.

Tool #4

Spiritual Conversation in Small Group



That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.

While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them.

Luke 24: 13-15

I. What: If the number of people involved in a spiritual conversation is more than 2 or 3, then in order to help maintain the spiritual quality of the conversation and to help the participants become aware of how the Spirit is acting in the group, the conversation needs to become more structured than it would be among two or three people. In this regard, two practices are helpful. First is a round of active listening and intentional speaking, often simply called the “first round” or “personal sharing.” Secondly comes a round of reflection on the first round, often simply called the “2nd round.” These two practices are very helpful for group decision-making, which will be discussed in Tool #5. For now, we discuss small group spiritual conversation as though there were no explicit decision to be made. In many contexts, spiritual conversation in small groups is called faith-sharing. Ignatian spirituality tends to make the discernment element of witness and sharing more explicit and organized.

II. Why: The purpose of small group spiritual conversation is to discover how the Spirit of Christ is active in the group, to build communion of hearts and minds (which is not unanimity of opinion!), and to strengthen communion so that the group may be a more discerning group. It also teaches the disciplines of active listening and intentional speaking in groups, which are essential for good communal discernment and decision-making. As a group builds habits of spiritual conversation, it learns to share felt knowledge of God at work in their lives and in the world, which in turn becomes an important witness, even if it happens only within the group. The group thereby builds habits of communal discernment, and community is deepened. Deepened community is a better instrument for finding God’s presence, care and will. If the group or its leader needs to make a decision, then the group’s spiritual conversation can offer extremely helpful data for making it.

III. Matter for Discernment: The explicit object of attention of spiritual conversation in small groups can be a scripture passage, a document or other matter of common interest, or simply the members’ experience of life and work over a certain period of time, perhaps since the last such meeting. No matter what the explicit

focus for the conversation is, the basic matter for discernment are the subjective qualities of how each one has experienced that focus or, in other words, the feelings, insights, consolations and desolations that one has experienced in its regard.

IV. How:

A. Preparatory personal prayer.

Prayer. Before the conversation begins, perhaps during the meeting or before it, members of the group spend some time in personal prayer or reflection on the matter to be shared about. The amount of time given to this is a question of judgment usually for the group leader, and depends on factors like the seriousness of the topic, whether the meeting is routine or exceptional, and the group's proficiency at spiritual conversation. In any case, the time should be long enough for people to become aware of their inner movements and to decide what they will share with the rest of the group.

B. The meeting.

1. *Opening prayer and call to attentiveness.* The leader opens with a prayer, or invites someone else to do so. The opening prayer distinguishes the meeting time from ordinary time, and designates it as spiritual. It also invites people to quiet. For example, the leader can pray for the light of the Spirit so that the group may recognize what God is doing among them, or ask for the grace to listen receptively. A little silence and some simple ritual go a long way!

2. *Check-in.* See Tool #2.

3. *The 1st round, or round of personal sharing.* In the first round of the spiritual conversation, people share something of what occurred during the preparatory personal prayer. If there are more than two or three people in the group, then the interaction of active listening and intentional speaking needs some structure and guidance so that the relationship between them stays reciprocal, the listening stays active and the speaking stays intentional.

- ◇ Each person shares what he or she has decided to share, which may also be a decision not to share at this time. The sharing is done in an orderly fashion, and it is the leader's role to ensure this. For example, the leader can invite a particular person to begin, then continues with the next person and so on in a circular fashion until all have had a chance to speak. Or the leader may choose to let people speak out spontaneously, whenever they are ready. The latter option takes more time.
- ◇ When one's turn to speak comes, it is one's task to speak intentionally, and in particular to speak from what occurred during the time of personal prayer and reflection. One should not let one's sharing be influenced by what one has heard from someone else in the 1st round. When one is speaking in the first round, one does not comment on what another has said.
- ◇ While one person speaks, the task of all the other members' is to listen actively. In the 1st round, this means no interruptions, comments or discussion of anyone's sharing, and above all no criticism or correction. The only kind of interruption that is appropriate is a request for repetition or clarification if one did not hear or understand what was being said. Should an inappropriate interruption or comment happen, then the leader should stop it immediately but politely, and either move on to the next sharing or, if someone was interrupted, encourage that person to continue, without shaming the one who interrupted or commented. If the leader does not stop comments or interruptions during the 1st round, then at least someone in the group will probably feel that this is not a trustworthy environment for self-expression and they will modify their sharing and their participation accordingly. Trust is the medium of spiritual conversation and when it is violated the spiritual quality of the conversation is undermined. If people are not used to active listening in a group, then at the beginning of the meeting the leader should explain that active listening in the first round implies no comments or interruptions.

- ◇ When one is listening, one should not let oneself be offended by or take personally the word of another. It helps to do this if one distinguishes between the persons and the thoughts and feelings they express.
 - ◇ No one should take so much time that one rambles or that others do not have enough time for their contribution. If the time for the meeting is limited, then it is appropriate for the leader to suggest a maximum time for each sharing. If the leader suggests a time limit, then it must also be enforced, politely but firmly. This is a matter of justice in the group so that each has an equal opportunity to share, and each contribution is equally valued. If someone does go overtime, it is enough simply to say “thank you” and move on to the next person. So that people respect the allotted time, it is important that they decide in advance what they will share, which should be part of the preparatory prayer or reflection. If there will be a time limit for personal sharing, then this should be mentioned at the beginning of the meeting.
 - ◇ Once everyone has had a chance to speak, the leader returns to anyone who passed up their turn and asks if they would like to share at this time. If not, then the 1st round is complete. If so, then he or she has the same time as the others had.
4. *Prayerful pause.* Once the first round is complete, the leader invites the participants to thank God in their hearts for what has been shared and for how they have been affected by what they have heard. The leader invites people to note how they have been affected by what they heard in the first round. Sufficient quiet time should be allowed for people to become aware of what they are feeling and to put words on the awareness. A few minutes are usually enough, but this depends on the nature of the group and on what has been shared. This pause also prepares for the 2nd round.

5. *The 2nd round, reflective sharing.* The 2nd round is a response to the 1st round. These reflective responses are where the communal movements of spirits in the group start to become manifest, which are therefore essential data if the spiritual conversation is to take on a communal discernment character. The 2nd round enables the group to notice what is happening spiritually to them through the conversation.

◇ The leader invites the members to share how they have been affected by what they have heard, and may suggest possible “effects” like these:

▲ What did you hear?

▲ Were you struck by a common theme? By something absent but which you expected to hear?

▲ Were you especially touched by a particular sharing?

▲ What emotions are you feeling now, in response to the first round?

▲ Did any insights occur to you? What were they?

▲ Where did you experience harmony with the others as they shared?

◇ The focus of attention in the 2nd round is what was experienced in the 1st round. This is not a chance for someone to supplement what they said in the first round.

◇ The disciplines of sharing and listening from the 1st round are maintained here. One may comment on what was said in the earlier round, but only in terms of how one responded interiorly to it.

◇ Usually 2nd round contributions are shorter than 1st round ones. If someone takes more than two minutes for a 2nd round sharing,

then they probably are not speaking from how they were affected by the 1st round and are instead offering another “1st round” kind of sharing.

- ◇ The 2nd round can be done by proceeding around the group, or in a spontaneous manner where people speak when they are ready. Not everyone needs to speak, but there should be enough time for everyone to speak who wishes to.
- ◇ While the 2nd round is often shorter than the 1st, it is very important, for it is what enables the group to become aware of what is happening to itself as a group. This is where the signs of the Spirit acting in the group begin to be manifest, and where the conversation begins to take on a communal discernment quality.

6. *Review of meeting.* See Tool #3.

7. *Concluding prayer of thanksgiving.* The leader, or someone else, closes with a prayer that is an appropriate grateful acknowledgment of what the group has experienced.

This material has been adapted from *Focusing Group Energies: Common Ground for Leadership, Organization, Spirituality – Structured Resources for Group Development, Volume 1*, p. 14-16, and *Facilitators’ Manual – Structured Resources for Group Development, Volume 2*, p. 14-15; by The ISECP Group, George Schemel, S.J. et al.; 1992.

V. Explanatory Preparation:

Notes:

- People participate better in small group spiritual conversation when they have good interior self-awareness. For practitioners of Ignatian spirituality, this comes from a habit of the Examen of consciousness.
- If the matter for prayer is a scripture passage or some other document, then a period of personal prayer over that passage precedes the communal sharing. The leader or the group can decide what amount of time is appropriate.

- If the matter for prayer is lived experience, then the communal sharing is preceded by a period of personal prayer with one's experience, seeking to recognize how Christ has been active there and how one has responded to Him. Again, the leader or group can decide what amount of time is appropriate.
- Someone should prepare the meeting space so it is comfortable, welcoming, and sets a spiritual and respectful mood.

General observations:

- *Use of silence:* Times of silence are appropriate, and help to establish the grateful and respectful spiritual context for the conversation. Moments of silence can help to heighten participants' awareness of their experience.
- *Confidentiality:* What is said in the group stays in the group, unless the group agrees otherwise. Talking outside the group of what has been shared confidentially there can greatly harm trust in the group.
- *Importance of the 2nd round:* The second round of sharing is where the communal movements of spirits become noticeable. These communal spiritual movements, in turn, indicate how the Spirit and the group are interacting. Thus, if there is consolation then the group is probably cooperating with the Spirit; if there is desolation, the group is probably resisting the Spirit. From the patterns of consolation and desolation can be inferred what the Spirit is trying to do. The second round is where the group starts to experience itself acting as a group, where the many "I's" start becoming a "we", and where communal intimacy in the Lord is built.
- *The 2nd round and apostolic outreach:* The 2nd round is where forward apostolic movements or possible questions for discernment emerge in a group that practices 1st and 2nd round spiritual conversation habitually. Even if the conversations are undertaken primarily for community-building and to discover what the Lord is doing among

them, if the group is of an apostolic spirituality –which all Ignatian groups are— then forward movements and questions for discernment will sooner or later emerge in the 2nd round is where this will begin.

- *Frequency*: Not every community or team meeting needs to be a small group spiritual conversation with 1st and 2nd rounds of sharing. But to do so regularly, for example monthly or every other month, helps to build the group into a discerning community.
- *Size of the group*: Experience suggests that the ideal number of participants for small group spiritual conversation is about 8. With much more than 8, then listening takes longer and participants tire. Then more group structures and dynamics are needed to sustain the spiritual quality of the conversation and to allow the group to experience itself as a group. With fewer than 8, less structure is needed, and there is more room for spontaneity, if time and mutual respect allow.
- *Importance of discipline*: The disciplines that maintain an atmosphere of trust, active listening and intentional speaking in a group conversation or meeting are important for many reasons. They help make each participant feel welcomed in their particular uniqueness of character and whatever their current mood might be. Furthermore they acknowledge the data of each one's interiority (such as emotions, moods, ideas, insights, decisions, etc.) as important. Finally, by giving everyone equal time and opportunity, each person is treated as equal to the others irrespective of their status, ability and willingness to speak, or the extent of their experience or depth of their insight.
- *Related graces*: This kind of sharing and listening can lead to powerful experiences of acceptance, of recognizing Christ in others, and of feeling accepted by Christ through others. Some participants experience healing of past pains and new freedom through such welcome, even if what they were freed from never came up as a topic in the conversation. These related graces underline the importance of the disciplines that promote trust in the group.

Role of the leader

- In Tool #2, the leader's main roles are to ensure an orderly spiritual conversation, to listen attentively for consolations and desolations in the group, and to help the group recognize these. With regard to the orderliness of the process, the leader invites each participant to share the results of their prayer, without allowing interruptions during any sharing, and reminds people to share from felt knowledge, and not to debate others.
- If the leader is also a participant, then the leader also shares, but never first, as this could condition the sharings of others.
- A judicious use of prayer, silence and symbol by the leader helps set the spiritual tone and framework for the conversation.

Tool #5

Communal Discernment



Now while he was with them at table, he took bread and said the blessing; then he broke it and handed it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; but he had vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?' Then they set out that instant and returned to Jerusalem

Luke 24: 30-33a

I. A. What: Communal discernment occurs when a group engaged in spiritual conversation seeks to identify the communal movements of spirit that they are experiencing. This new level of reflection moves the group from the *experience* of spiritual movements to their *identification*. The 2nd round of a group spiritual conversation allows a group to experience communal spiritual movements, which also happens in the 1st round but happens more strongly and obviously in the 2nd. But the 2nd round does not necessarily help the group to recognize its own communal spiritual movements. Some participants or the leader will usually be able to do so, but for the group itself, as a group, to recognize them, another step is needed: a 3rd round of spiritual conversation where the group directs its attention to its own conversation and interactions in order to discern what consolations and desolations they were experiencing there, especially during the 2nd round.

N.B.: Communal *apostolic* discernment occurs when the group's discernment is about a question about what they will do. This leads to decision-making, which is discussed in the next Tool, #6.

II. Why: A group moves from spiritual conversation to communal discernment in order to recognize the interaction between themselves and the Spirit, to become more engaged in their own communal spiritual life, and to take responsibility for it. This involves noticing what the Lord is doing among them, being grateful for it, and allowing the gratitude to move the group to generosity.

III. Matter for Discernment: In communal discernment, the object of the group's attention in communal is its own conversation and other interactions, their qualities, and the inner spiritual movements of the members of the group in response to these interactions.

IV. How:

- *3rd round.* The meeting proceeds as in Tool #4, with the addition of a 3rd round after the 2nd, and before the conclusion of the meeting. The

3rd round of conversation allows the group to turn its attention to the qualities of their interactions in their conversation, and to how the individuals experienced these interactions, especially during the 2nd round. In the qualities of these interactions the spiritual movements of consolation and desolation can be identified.

- *Transition and pause.* After the 2nd round, the leader announces the transition to the 3rd round, and its purpose of bringing the group to the act of communal discernment. The leader suggests a prayerful pause of a few minutes to allow participants to reflect on what happened in the 2nd round, and to become aware of how they were affected by it.
- *Identification of communal consolations and desolations.* The leader then invites participants to suggest what they recognized as communal consolations and / or desolations during the 2nd round, possibly also in the 1st. Once most or all have shared, then the leader may share her or his perceptions of what the communal consolations and desolations may have been.
- *Discussion.* Once all have shared an opinion who want to, then the leader promotes an exchange that moves toward some degree of agreement about at least some communal movements of consolation and desolation and what they might mean for the life of the group. While continuing in the spirit of active listening and intentional speaking, the 3rd round can take on the character of a discussion, that is, it can have a quicker style of interaction than would be typical in the 1st and 2nd rounds. A good quality of listening and speaking having been established in the 1st and 2nd rounds, hopefully this quality will be maintained in the discussion.
- *Conclusion.* Once an approximate agreement has been reached about the identification and interpretation of at least some communal spiritual movements, the leader may then conclude with a review of the meeting, followed by a closing prayer of gratitude, as in tool #3.

V. Explanatory

Notes:

- The movements of consolation and desolation discerned in the qualities of the interactions in the group indicate when the group is in harmony with the action of the Spirit among them, and when the group is resisting the action of the Spirit. Consolation indicates that the group is probably in harmony with the Spirit's action, and desolation probably indicates the group is not in harmony with the Spirit's action. Recognizing both the moments of harmony and disharmony can help the group infer how the Spirit is drawing them forward.
- Communal consolations and desolations. In order to identify the group's spiritual consolations and desolations, it is necessary to be able to recognize communal movements of spirits. A fuller discussion of this can be found in "Supplementary Comments A" at the end of this Toolkit. As a rule of thumb, anything that enhances or energizes the group's active listening and intentional speaking is probably a communal consolation, and anything that detracts from or depresses its active listening and intentional speaking is probably a communal desolation. More specific signs of consolation can be: where the group found insight, union, truth, acceptance, greater inclusivity, an increase in energy, etc. More specific signs of desolation can be: withdrawal from the group, decrease in energy, not listening actively, not speaking intentionally, avoiding reality, not telling the truth to each other, etc.
- In order better to recognize communal spiritual movements in a group, it helps to know Ignatius of Loyola's two sets of Rules of Discernment in the Spiritual Exercises. The Rules of Discernment for the Second Week will help one recognize the differences between true and false consolation, and true and false desolation.
- If a group has an apostolic spirituality and is listening well to the Spirit, then a regular practice of communal discernment will sooner or later raise questions for communal decision and action, that is, will move the group outwards to mission.

Role of the Leader

- As in earlier tools, the leader's role is to help the process unfold in a fair and orderly way, and to maintain the spiritual quality of listening and speaking. In the 3rd round, the leader may have to become more vigorously involved in the exchanges, helping the group to name some communal movements of consolation and desolation, and perhaps even negotiating some common agreement on what has been going on spiritually in the group.

Tool #6

Communal Decision-making



...and so we have decided unanimously to elect delegates and to send them to you with our well-beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have committed their lives to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accordingly we are sending you Judas and Silas who will confirm to you by word of mouth what we have written. It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves not to impose any burden on you but the essentials..

Acts 15: 25-27

I. What: The desire to find God’s will for the group with regard to a decision for action turns a communal discernment process into a communal apostolic discernment process. The process of communal decision-making is that of communal discernment as explained above in Tool #5, with the addition of five new elements:

- a question for decision
- the relevant data
- the grace of consensus
- the grace of confirmation
- implementation

The key element is the grace of consensus. The other elements listed above either lead up to it or support it. While a communal decision-making process can last over many meetings, depending on the nature of the decision to be made, basically the 3rd round of a communal discernment process turns into a search for consensus.

N.B.: In a religious community, normally the superior is the decision-maker, not the community. A religious community may still go through such a process. In this case, the community makes a decision tentatively, and it is up to the religious superior to confirm it or not.

II. Why: The purpose of communal apostolic discernment for decision-making is to come to a communally discerned decision in Christ by means of the grace of consensus. Consensus is not necessarily unanimity, but where every member of the group feels their concerns have been taken seriously, and can freely accept, support and implement the decision. Consensus is discussed in more detail below in the Explanatory Notes section of this Tool, as well as in Supplementary Comment A at the end of the Toolkit.

III. Matter for Discernment: The matter for discernment is the question for decision, and the communal spiritual movements that the group experiences in relation to it.

IV.How: The overall communal discernment process leading to a communal decision can take many forms. Depending on the nature and complexity of the decision to be made, the various elements of the process might need to happen over many meetings. Rather than offer a possible model or recipe for a communal decision-making process, the writers leave the concrete form to the ingenuity and discretion of each group and leader. To support this ingenuity and discretion, we provide here explanations of the five elements that need to be added to a communal discernment process in order for it to become a communal apostolic discernment process.

1. Formulating the question
2. Praying with the data
3. Seeking consensus and making the decision
4. Seeking confirmation
5. Implementing the decision

If the process occurs over many meetings, then each meeting needs a clear goal, and should be preceded by personal prayer about the matter at hand.

A. The question for decision.

Much of the time of a communal decision-making process will typically be spent in preparatory elements 1 and 2, that is, in discovering an issue and formulating it into a question for discernment, and gathering the relevant information.

How does a potential issue for communal decision arise? Such issues can arise from inside the group or from outside. If a community or team regularly practices spiritual conversation and communal discernment (e.g. Tools #4 and #5), then an issue for decision might very well arise from the Spirit working with the group in the 2nd rounds. An issue can also arise through opportunities or challenges in the community's environment and their work.

A communal discernment for decision should be done for something of importance to the group, not for routine matters. Many practical matters do not need communal discernment. For example, one does not need a communal discernment to decide to fix the microwave! Whether something is a significant issue is a question of judgment, of course. But two rules of thumb can help: if the issue is outside the competence of various member's normal roles and capacities, and if it is something about which members experience strong feelings because it somehow affects all of them and commits them to some action, then the issue might be significant enough to warrant a communal decision-making process.

Once a potential issue for communal decision has been identified, then formulating it into a question is an important step. It is important because everyone should know what they are praying about, and everyone should have the same question for their prayer, reflection and research. The question should also be significant to the group, that is, something that will commit it to some kind of action. The possibility of a commitment will provoke spiritual movements in the members. Formulating the issue into a question can have two steps, a general exploratory one and a specific one focused on the decision.

The exploratory statement of the issue should be an open-ended question, that is, one which can have many possible appropriate responses that can be explored, and which cannot be answered simply by 'yes' or 'no'. For example, "We have a budget surplus. How shall we use it?" After various possibilities have been researched and prayed over personally and communally, then the issue can be narrowed to a more specific question, one which focuses on action and which necessitates a clear decision. This question should be expressed simply, clearly, in a positive manner and in a way that focuses on the group's action, something like, "We will do x." More than one session may be needed to pass many possible responses to the issue to one possible response that will become the question for decision.

B. Gathering the data

External or objective information may be needed for the decision, information that may be found through research. Such information answers questions like: “Is this feasible? Is it legal? How much will it cost? How long will it take to implement? How long will the effect last? Do we have the financial and personnel resources to do this? Are there alternatives? Does this fit with our mission? Who will benefit? What are the disadvantages? What are the advantages” etc. The spiritual or interior data will come from prayer, but this needs to be informed by the objective or external information.

If more external information is needed than is available in the group, then the issue should be deferred until the needed information has been gathered and made available. There should be clear agreement about who will be getting the information and when it will be supplied to the group.

Often the information-gathering phase occurs between the general issue and the formulation of the specific question for communal decision. Once the specific question for decision is formulated, some more external data might still be needed.

Once the question for decision has been formulated and the necessary external information has been gathered and made available, then the group is ready to seek consensus.

The data do not carry the decision. Rather, what carries the decision is the group’s growing awareness of the Spirit’s initiative in their communal life.

C. Seeking consensus

Communal decision-making is usually done by means of the grace of consensus. This is a sign of the will of God for the group or,

put in other words, a sign of the most loving action that the group can choose. Consensus does not mean uniformity or unanimity. It does mean that at the end of the discernment process everyone in the group feels that their positions have been taken seriously, and that they can freely accept the decision reached by the group, be in communion with the group, and participate in implementing the decision. This is different from decision-making by majority. In decision-making by communal discernment and consensus, there are no winners or losers. The grace of consensus can be received in various forms, as explained below. It is important to note that each of these forms of consensus is a grace given by the Lord; one form is not better than another.

1. *Spontaneous consensus*: after each member of the group has shared their personal, prayerful response to the question, and after the 2nd round of sharing, it may be clear in the 3rd round that all the members have come or can come to one position. This is the easiest and quickest way to come to a consensus decision. It is also fairly common.
2. *Compromise consensus*: No spontaneous consensus emerges after the first two rounds of sharing about the question. There is a high degree of agreement among many or even most of the members, but this agreement is not shared by one or some members. It is important to ascertain the reasons for all the positions. Once these reasons are shared, spontaneous consensus might emerge.

On the other hand, spontaneous consensus might not emerge once the reasons for the differing opinions are shared, and those with the differing opinions might not be able to resolve the differences. In such a case, in subsequent sharing and discussion, someone (perhaps the facilitator, but not necessarily) may suggest a third position, different from the other positions, probably a compromise, to which all members can freely give their consent and agreement to support. This new position becomes the consensus and group decision.

It may also be that the minority can be content with and accept the majority position provided their concerns are dealt with during the implementation of the decision.

3. *Consensus with reservation*: No spontaneous consensus emerges after the first two rounds of sharing. Furthermore, after further sharing and discussion, the dissenting positions prayerfully cannot justify changing their positions, nor can the majority prayerfully concede that the minority concerns warrant changing their own position. There seems to be a stalemate. Here, the dissenter(s), while maintaining their alternative position(s), may freely agree to support and work with the majority position in its implementation, which then becomes the group consensus decision. There must be no coercion on either side.

4. *Consensus about no consensus*: No spontaneous consensus arises after the first and second rounds of sharing. After further prayerful sharing and discussion, no compromise consensus or consensus with reservation on the issue at hand seems possible. Thus the group has a consensus that there is no consensus about the question at hand. In this case, the issue or question must be reformulated, or entirely put aside.

In the above processes, a pause might be a good idea between the discovery that there is no spontaneous consensus and the search for another form of consensus, or between the elaboration of a new position and the next round of sharing. In all things, of course, good sense must be used.

(Material on consensus adapted from Fr. Joe McArdle, S.J., Sr. Mary Lou Cranston; "Discernment," Manresa Jesuit Spiritual Renewal Centre, Pickering, ON. [No date])

D. Confirmation

The grace of confirmation should always be sought after a decision. This helps to minimize the risk of communal self-deception, and

also helps to assure that the decision is consonant with the wider common good beyond that of the group.

The grace of confirmation is experienced as a sense of rightness or fittingness of the decision with the group's charism and history, with their experience of Christ. Confirmation should be sought in prayer after a decision has been made, but it may be sought at other moments as the decision-making process moves towards implementation. Confirmation has two forms, subjective and objective.

1. *Subjective confirmation:* Subjective confirmation is a sense of consolation about the decision reached. In this phase, each member of the group indicates whether confirmation was received, and describes it briefly. This can be done shortly after the decision is made, or in a subsequent meeting soon after the decision.
2. *Objective confirmation:* This is confirmation from outside of the group's interior experience. The form of objective confirmation will vary according to whether the group itself is the final decision-maker, or some other agent is.

In a religious community, especially one of apostolic spirituality such as the Jesuits, the community does not usually make the final decision. Rather, its decision is provisional, and the superior has the final say. Depending on the matter, either the local or the major superior is the final decision-maker. In the wider church, some decisions will require that the local ordinary, usually the bishop, be the final decision-maker. In instances where a religious superior or ordinary is the final decision-maker, the superior's concurrence with the group's provisional decision is a form of external or objective confirmation.

Whether the group itself or some other agency is the final decision-maker, another important form of external confirmation is whether the grace of consensus and commitment to the decision

can hold during the implementation phase. Tough experiences during implementation might not be desolations but rather costs of discipleship or, in terms of the Spiritual Exercises, Third or possibly Fourth Week consolations.

E. Implementation

Well-discerned decisions can still flounder or fail if their implementation is poorly done. Indeed it is good to consider that a decision is not complete until the steps of its implementation have been decided too.

Communication and delegation are crucial aspects of implementing a decision.

It will be helpful at this phase also to consider reasons against the decision, if any were raised earlier.

Implementation questions ask: Who will do it? With what resources? Who will help? By when will this be done? Who needs to be notified? When will the implementation be reported back to the group?, etc.

The concrete demands of implementing a decision can provoke apparent turmoil in a group. This does not necessarily mean a weakening or even dissolution of the original commitment to the decision. While this may be the case, more likely apparent turmoil is rather the cost of commitment, the cost of discipleship in following where the Lord is leading. In this case, the apparent confusion is more likely a Third Week grace of remaining with the Lord in the decision. As the group works through the various needs of implementation, it will become aware of what the decision will cost them in terms of time, delegation, expense, change, etc.

V. Explanatory

Notes:

- *The adventure.* Communal apostolic discernment or communal decision-making is a demanding and exciting process. It is demanding

if the issue is significant, and because there is always the risk that the process may provoke division in the group. For this reason, the decision moment of a communal apostolic discernment can even be somewhat frightening. If done well and the group is ready, then communal apostolic discernment can be very rewarding, as the act of decision can be a powerful communal experience of union with Christ and with the group. Such an experience can transform a group and bring it to a new level of spiritual life.

- *Prerequisites: habits of discernment.* Not any group is ready to do communal apostolic discernment. The members of the group should be willing to be affected by the others, and should already have some habit of spiritual conversation and communal discernment.
- *Prerequisites: communal freedom.* In order to come to a good communal decision, a group must be spiritually free with regard to the decision to be made, at least when it comes time to make the decision. This means at least two things: freedom for, and freedom from. In order that God may have the initiative in the process, the group must be free for the Spirit to lead them. For this to happen, they must be free from pre-set agendas, fears, hurts, passivity, over-enthusiasm, and anything else that can get in the way of the Spirit's leading. Members of the group should be ready to give over personal control of the decision, to let go of their own hopes and plans for the matter at hand, so that the new life of the risen Jesus may act in and with the group. When it comes to the moment of seeking consensus, the group should either be in consolation, or at equilibrium –not moved one way or the other– in order to make a good decision.

Role of the leader.

- In communal apostolic discernment, the leader's main role is to listen attentively for whether consensus is emerging or not, and then to help the group recognize this.

- The leader may have to be particularly attentive and active in the overall process (which may take many meetings) at two moments: at the beginning of the process to help the group move from a general issue to a question for discernment; and during the search for consensus, if spontaneous consensus does not emerge, to help the members interact with each other so as to arrive at a common agreement.
- If spontaneous consensus does not emerge, then it is particularly important to respect the minority opinions and hesitations. This attention and care helps the persons with these positions feel and be included in the group. Furthermore, their hesitations and differences may later become important aspects of the implementation.
- During a typical 1st or 2nd round of sharing, it may be quite appropriate for someone not to share. However, when it is a question of decision-making, during the consensus-seeking phase, it is important that everyone share, at least during the initial round, because everyone will be involved in the implementation, if a decision is made.

Extra Tools

for Deepening
Communal Spiritual
and Apostolic Life



Tool #7

Communal Graced History



And I said to you, “Do not take fright, do not be afraid of them. Yahweh your God goes ahead of you and will be fighting on your side, just as you saw him act in Egypt. You have seen him in the desert too: Yahweh your God continued to support you, as a man supports his son, all along the road you followed until you arrived here.

Deuteronomy 1: 29-31

I. What: A communal graced history is a group's story of grace. This is the story of the group retold in a prayerful, discerning way in order to go beneath "what happened" to what God was doing and how the group responded to God's action, whether consciously or unconsciously. The history normally consists of four parts: a light history, or history of consolations; a shadow history, or history of desolations; a hope history, or history of forward movements and moments of group self-transcendence; and fourthly an appropriation step where the previous elements come together in one story. The first three parts correspond to the Paschal Mystery of Christ's life, death and resurrection.

II. Why: The Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures is the story of Israel retold to make manifest God's action in it and Israel's responses to God. The Gospels are the story of Jesus retold to show God's action in Jesus's life, death and resurrection, and Jesus's responses to God's activity. The Book of Acts is the story of the very early Church retold to bring out the action of the Spirit of Christ in the Church, and the responses of the early Christian communities.

A communal graced history is a discernment tool that enables a group to discover something similar about their own story. The results may not become canonical like the graced history of Israel or the graced history of Jesus, nevertheless the exercise helps a group discover how God has been with them all along: how Christ in the Spirit has been and continues to be present and active among them, and how his Pascal mystery of life, death and resurrection is also at work in them.

The communal graced history also shows a group the typical patterns of interaction between them and the Spirit of Christ working among them. A communal graced history exercise helps the group to evaluate the quality of its interactions with God at work among them and in the world. By discovering the patterns of grace in their story, a communal graced history helps a group become more grateful and generous, and

to discern its particular identity or charism, vocation and mission.

Knowing one's communal graced history helps decision-making, since a good decision is normally in harmony with the group's graced history, and thereby in harmony with its charism and mission. Thus by following the leads of consolation, the group can improve the quality of its engagement in Christ's activity in them and in the world.

III. Matter for Discernment: The matter for discernment is the group's story as the members have experienced it, whether directly or indirectly (e.g. through stories handed on by others).

IV. How: The communal graced history has four parts: the light history, the shadow history, the hope history, and fourthly an appropriation that puts together the three previous parts into one history of grace. The three parts of light, shadow and hope correspond to the paschal dynamic of the life of Christ, life, death and new life, which is also at work in us, especially when we are free.

Each step has its own content, but can follow the pattern of communal discernment as set out in Tool #5. Each of these steps should be worked on in separate sessions so as not to confuse them or to tire the participants.

A. Light History, or History of Blessing

Purpose. In this dimension of the graced history, the group discovers its communal consolations how the Lord in the Spirit has been active among them, and how the group has cooperated with His Spirit active among them.

1. Personal prayer:

- ▲ *Prayer*
- ▲ I imagine myself with Jesus with this group.
- ▲ I ask the Spirit to show me when and where I have experienced

consolation, or significant satisfaction, or positive energy in my involvement in the history and work of this group.

- ▲ With Jesus as my companion, I relive my experiences of consolation in the events, routines and persons of this group.
- ▲ I consider how I have been blessed by sharing these consolations with others in the group.
- ▲ Often I speak with the Lord about these things.
- ▲ *Reflection.* After this time of remembering, I reflect on the Trinity's presence and action in the group's story, as I have been given to recognize it. What aspects of the group's life have helped me recognize God's presence and action? What did I feel when during the times that I recognized it? What do I feel now?
- ▲ I give thanks to the Lord. I end with an Our Father, or a Glory Be.
- ▲ *Preparation for sharing.* I reflect on what the Lord is inviting me to share with the group.

2. Meeting:

Opening. The leader welcomes everyone, and recalls the purpose of the meeting, which is to discover some significant aspects of the light or blessed dimension of the group's graced history. The leader opens with a prayer, or invites someone to do so.

1st round of sharing. After a pause long enough to allow people to recall their prayer preparation, the leader invites the members to share results of their prayer or prayerful reflection, and goes around the group, one by one, in a circular fashion.

Once everyone has had an opportunity to share, the leader thanks everyone.

2nd round of sharing. This can be shorter than the 1st round, and people may speak out spontaneously. It would be very helpful for the fourth step of compiling a composite graced history if someone

could record the observations made in the 2nd round. The record should be in a form that others can use.

These questions can be handed out with the suggestions for personal prayer. Then, prayerfully to introduce the 2nd round, the leader recalls them, summarizing, shortening or adapting them, as the leader judges appropriate:

What impressed me or affected me as others shared?

Where did I experience affective harmony with others as they shared?

What gave me a sense of union with the Lord at work in the group? in the world?

What have I learned about communal consolation in this group?

When it seems that everyone who wishes to has spoken, the leader closes the round with a brief word of thanks.

3rd round. This can be done in a discussion mode. Here people could discuss what they think the communal consolations were in the 2nd round, and try to name them.

With such ideas in hand, then the group could also discuss what they think are the patterns of consolation in the group's history, the patterns of the Lord's action with them, or the patterns of their cooperation with the Lord.

These results should also be recorded. If time permits, this 3rd round can be very helpful to the purpose of the whole graced history. If time does not permit, then the fourth, appropriation step does something similar to what the 3rd round does.

Conclusion. Brief evaluation and appropriation may be done. The meeting should conclude with a prayer of thanksgiving for what the group has discovered.

B. Shadow history, or sin history.

Purpose. In this dimension of the graced history, the group discovers what its communal desolations have been, and how it has communally missed, ignored or resisted the Lord's action among them and in the world.

1. Personal prayer.

Prayer. I imagine myself with Jesus, with this group.

With Jesus as my companion, I ask the Spirit to show me when and where in the life and work of the group I and we have resisted recognizing the Lord's action among us, or resisted cooperating with this action. For example, when have I experienced significant dissatisfaction with the group or my participation in it? When has fear motivated words or actions? When has preoccupation with personal agendas or old ways affected the group's work or life together? Has there been lack of transparency, for example have there been subgroups acting on their own, apart from the whole group? What has disempowered the group, made it passive?

I express deep sorrow for these resistances.

I unite myself with others' sorrow for these things.

I speak often with the Lord.

Reflection. After this time of remembering, I reflect on the patterns of my and of my group's resistances to the Lord's action among us and in the world. I reflect on the aspects of social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of life inhibit me and us from recognizing and cooperating with the Lord's action for us and for the world.

I reflect on how the Lord has stayed with us and brought me and the group through these sinful aspects of our graced history. I reflect on what the Lord is trying to teach us through this recognition of our communal desolations.

I give thanks to the Lord. I end with an Our Father or a Glory Be.

Preparation for sharing. I reflect on what happened to me during this time of prayer, and on what the Lord is inviting me to share with the group.

2. *Meeting:*

Opening. As above, except the purpose of this meeting is for the group to discover the shadow dimension of its graced history.

1st round of sharing. As above.

2nd round of sharing. As above. The questions to prepare for the 2nd round can be:

What impressed or touched me as others shared?

Where did I experience affective harmony with the group?

What gave me an increased sense of union with the Lord at work in this group? in the world?

What have I learned about communal desolation, and communal consolation, in this group?

Remember to record the results of the 2nd round.

Optional 3^d round. As above. Here people could discuss what they think the communal consolations were in the 2nd round, and try to name them. Were there any communal desolations in the 2nd round?

With such ideas in hand, then the group could also discuss what they think are the patterns of desolation in the group's history, the patterns of their resistance to the Lord's presence and work among them, and what it is that the Lord has been trying to do that they have been resisting. Does this shed further light on the group's light history?

If a 3rd round is done, then these results should be recorded, together with those of the 2nd round.

Conclusion. As above. Brief evaluation and appropriation may be done. The meeting should conclude with a prayer of thanksgiving for what the group has discovered.

C. Hope history, or history of forward movements.

Purpose. In this dimension of its graced history, the group discovers what its hopes are, that is, the elements in their life in which the Lord is nudging them forward into new life. These often are elements of self-transcendence such as courage in times of failure, humility in success, strength out of weakness, hope against hope, etc.

1. Personal prayer:

Prayer. I imagine myself with Jesus, with the group.

With Jesus as my companion, I ask the Spirit to help me recall the story of the group in the wider context of the world, especially the various movements and developments in apostolates, communal life, spirituality, social consciousness, etc. I ask that I may recognize in these things the Lord working to draw the community and the world more deeply into the fullness of life.

I consider too when groups or communities have become aware of what is going forward in these movements or developments, and how they interpreted their involvement in these movements. I consider how my group has been or is involved in such developments.

I talk often with Jesus about these things.

Reflection. After this time of remembering, I look for elements of transcendence in the group's story, such as compassion and insight flowing out of sin and disorder; humility in times of success; isolation, or fragmentation leading to forgiveness, a sense of belonging and freedom; courage in the face of failure, strength out of weakness and vulnerability; hope and faith when there is little reason for optimism. I look for aspects of culture, society, the economy or politics that nurture such forward movements.

I reflect on how the Lord might be drawing us forward.

I give thanks to the Lord. I end with an Our Father or a Glory Be.

Preparation for sharing. I reflect on what happened to me during the prayer, and on what the Lord is encouraging me to share with the group.

2. *The meeting:*

Opening. As above. The leader recalls the purpose of this exercise, that is, to discover how the Lord is drawing us forward in new ways into his action in the world, for the world.

1st round of sharing. As above.

2nd round of sharing. As above. The questions to prepare for the 2nd round can be:

What impressed or touched me as others shared?

Where did I experience affective harmony with the group?

What gave me an increased sense of union with the Lord at work in this group? in the world?

Where did I experience an increased awareness of the forward movements of hope or transcendence in the group?

What have I learned about communal spiritual movements in this group?

Someone records the results of the 2nd round.

Optional 3^d round of sharing. As above. As above. Here people could discuss what they think the communal consolations were in the 2nd round, and try to name them. Were there any communal desolations in the 2nd round?

With such ideas in hand, then the group could also discuss what they think are the patterns of forward movement in the group's history, the way the Lord moves us into new, greater forms of life. What is the group like when it follows God's forward movement? Does this shed further light on the group's light and shadow histories?

If a 3rd round is done, then these results should be recorded, together with those of the 2nd round.

Conclusion. As above. Brief evaluation and appropriation may be done. The meeting should conclude with a prayer of thanksgiving for what the group has discovered.

D. Appropriating our graced history.

Purpose. The group puts together the light, shadow and hope dimensions of its story to get a comprehensive, if incomplete, account of the patterns of interaction between them and the crucified and risen Lord at work in the world, in the power of the Spirit. This is its graced history, which is a major aspect of its particular identity, charism or vocation. Once appropriated, the graced history can become a tool for decision-making.

1. Personal prayer:

Prayer. I imagine myself with Jesus, in the midst of the group. I imagine the persons in the group, and the whole group.

I review the records of the past three exercises, and savour the memories of what I heard and felt. I review the questions for the 2nd and 3rd rounds of sharing.

With Jesus as my companion, I ask the Spirit to show me how the Trinity has been present and active in the group, now and throughout our history. I also ask the Spirit to show me the ways in which the group has typically cooperated with, resisted and moved forward with the Lord's action among us.

I recall my recognitions of different communal movements of consolation and desolation, moments of communal freedom, and what they indicated about the nature and quality of the interactions between the Lord and us.

What does this three-part story mean to me?

I speak often with the Lord.

Reflection. How would I characterize the various movements of consolation and desolation in the group? the moments of communal freedom? What is the group like when it is experiencing these movements?

What happens to the group when it follows consolation? What happens to the group when it follows desolation?

What seem to be the patterns and qualities of interaction between the group and the Lord?

I give thanks to the Lord. I end with an Our Father or a Glory Be.

Preparation for sharing. I reflect on what happened to me during the prayer, and on what the Lord is inviting me to share with the group.

2. *The meeting.*

Opening. As above. The leader recalls the purpose of this concluding exercise, to discover the patterns of the group's graced history, so as to be able to praise the Lord better, and to have a basis for good discerned decisions.

1st round of sharing. As above.

2nd round of sharing. As above. The questions to prepare the 2nd round can be:

What impressed or touched me as others shared?

Where did I experience affective harmony with the group?

What gave me an increased sense of union with the Lord at work in this group? in the world?

Where did I experience a sense of recognizing the group's identity in the Lord?

What have I learned about how this group and the Lord act with each other?

Have I been surprised by anything I have discovered?

Someone records the results of the 2nd round.

Optional 3rd round of sharing. As above. As above. Here people could discuss what they think the communal consolations were in the 2nd round, and try to name them. Were there any communal desolations in the 2nd round?

With such ideas in hand, then the group could also discuss what they think are the patterns of interaction between the Lord and

the group, and try to name or characterize the group's identity in the Lord. What has the Lord been doing in and through the events that have been significant for the group? in and through the light, shadow and hope dimensions of the group's graced story? Given its graced history, what may the group expect to experience when it is making a good decision?

If a 3rd round is done, then these results should be recorded, together with those of the 2nd round.

Conclusion. As above. Brief evaluation and appropriation may be done. The meeting should conclude with a prayer of thanksgiving for what the group has discovered.

V. Explanatory Communal graced history and Scripture.

Notes:

Scripture recounts a graced history when it tells the story of God's action in the story of Israel, the story of Jesus and the story of the new community called church. A group's graced history helps move a group from events and happenings to what is really going on beneath the surface, to what God is doing and how people are responding to that. Because of the similarities of communal graced history to Scripture, the latter's sacred stories about Israel, Jesus and the Church provide norms and criteria for a good graced history of any group.

Using the communal graced history in decision-making.

A good decision should produce a sense of resonance or fit with the graced history.

A communal graced history exercise helps a group come to know itself as a group, as a "communal person," if you will. As graced, the history discovers the Trinity's dream for the group, where the Trinity reveals the characteristics of the group's graced identity or vocation especially at the level of general goals or goal qualities of the group's graced identity, of its own particular likeness to Christ. Thus, by appropriating its communal graced history, especially in its forward movements, a group comes to know the goal features or apostolic stance of the particular form of sanctity of this group. Knowing this is essential for

choosing objectives well. This is what a harmony between a good communal decision and group's communal graced history means. Of course, it is always possible that the Lord might call a group to something so new that its identity will change. In that case a "fit" with its previous graced history might not be an indicator of a good decision. Such instances are probably rare.

In Tool #3, on communally discerned decision-making, the graced history would be particularly important in phase 4, "making the decision," and in phase 5, "seeking confirmation."

Matter for decision-making might often arise from a group's shadow history.

Variations: adding or subtracting components.

Steps can be added to the procedures proposed above. For example, a group might choose to go through its story in more detail, breaking it up into historical phases, looking at the light, shadow and forward movements in its remote past, in its middle past, and its recent past. A group could look at its present by asking how its graced history helps it to read the signs of the times, that is, to recognize or resonate with what the Lord is doing in major social, political, economic, cultural or religious transformations typical of the day in the wider world.

No matter how the communal graced history exercise is compressed or expanded, it should always seek to discover the paschal dynamic and pattern of Christ's life among us, that is, the movement of life, death and new life, toward the fullness of life.

The fourth step of appropriation could be done in the manner of a 3rd round discussion of the previous three exercises. For this approach to work, the appropriation step should happen close in time to the previous one so that the memories are fresh. Furthermore, the group should already have good skills and habits of spiritual conversation. The group should also be in consolation.

Variations: personal graced history.

For various reasons, a group may decide to spend some time doing personal graced histories. This can produce a strong sense of

acceptance and belonging in a group, and detailed spiritual knowledge of each other. Furthermore, if a group is very reluctant to do its shadow history, even fearful, it will be easier to start with personal graced histories to build the necessary trust in the group for a full communal graced history.

Variations: content.

Instead of the group's general story, the content of the exercise can be the group's experience of a theme or question that is already part of their lives.

Community-building effect.

Usually the graced history exercise is done by a group who is already formed; they already are a community. The members have a history with each other. People already know each other, and their interactions have patterns that are part of the matter for prayer. However, the communal graced history exercise can also be used to build communion among people who are new to each other, but who are connected by a common theme, question or interest. In this case, then the first round of sharing is over the personal experience of the matter, and the 2nd round of sharing starts to build commonalities. By the time the group gets to the hope history or to the appropriation phase, important communion will already have been built.

Advantages and disadvantages.

It takes a lot of time to do a communal graced history, especially if the group is large. This is a disadvantage. Another disadvantage is the fear that can be generated by the prospect of doing the communal shadow history – a group that is not new, a group with a history will have a sinful dimension, and facing it intentionally can be uncomfortable. The practices of spiritual conversation can manage many of these tensions, and indeed most of them if the group is mature and free. Those who have done a communal graced history are usually delighted, even astounded by the results, because it generates a strong sense

of intimacy, acceptance and belonging in a group. Moreover, the discovery that the group's life is also Christ's life at work in them is profoundly consoling. Like all forms of communal discernment, the communal graced history both builds community, and sets up a good basis for soundly discerned decisions. It can even help a group discover the decisions the Lord is inviting them to make. The communal graced history also disposes a group very well for communal discernment; in this way it is a superb and deep preparation for an ongoing habit and attitude of discernment.

Possible time frames.

Depending on the size of the group, a communal graced history can be done in a few sessions over a day or two, or the meetings can be spread out over a longer period, such as a few weeks or longer. Then the various phases 1, 2, 3 and 4 are spread out over the designated time. The more the exercises are spread out, the more important it is to have good records of the 2nd rounds of sharing, as well as of the 3rd rounds, if they are done. Each of the "Meeting" sections should be done in a single meeting.

Tool #8

A Framework for Specifying Outcomes



*And the Word became flesh and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory,
the glory as of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth.*

John 1:14

- I. What:** a simple chart that helps organize conversation and reflection when an apostolic group is moving from a more general orientation to choosing specific outcomes that incarnate that orientation.

- II. Matter for Discernment:** the choice of one or more specific outcomes that we will try to achieve in a set period of time to deepen or move forward an apostolic orientation or value.

Universal Apostolic Preferences	Our Goal for this year (Specific, Achievable, and Relevant)	Means/Actions to reach our goal (With Time-Frame)	Ways we will know we have moved forward (interior and exterior)
<i>To show the way to God, especially through the Spiritual Exercises and discernment</i>			
<i>To walk with the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice</i>			
<i>To accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future</i>			
<i>To collaborate with others in the care of our common home</i>			

Tool #9

An Examen/Evaluation for Ongoing Apostolic Planning



This exercise serves as a first personal step in the annual evaluation of apostolic outcomes. The fruits of this examen are brought to spiritual conversation and communal discernment.

In the Spiritual Exercises, the **examen prayer** is essentially a sapiential reading, not of a written text, but of your own lived experience. It is essentially a short-range As I look over my experience of the events of a fixed period of time (a day, a week, a month, and so on) or of a particular event,

- Where was I moved to greater interior peace, greater zeal, greater faith, hope and love?
- Where did I sense movements of reconciliation, healing, liberation, greater acceptance?
- Where do I sense now greater confusion, less hope and love, less commitment as I remember what happened?
- What does all this mean at a deeper level for my participation in this process? How is God at work in me and through me? In the group? For the province?

Getting Started

Find a comfortable and quiet space in which to pray and reflect. Take the time to pause and remind yourself of the task you are about to begin and commit yourself to doing it well. Once you are seated in a comfortable position, take a few deep breaths and become peaceful and settled interiorly. Take the time to become really present to the task at hand.

If it is helpful, offer yourself to God (as you understand God) for God's greater service and praise in this exercise.

The Examen

Begin by reflecting on your personal consolations and desolations in the apostolate, using the questions in the box above. Become aware of the ways you are moved to generosity and zeal in your community or work, and the ways in which your community or work already lives from the UAP, and any resistances that prevent greater collaboration with the life-giving energies of the UAP.

Take time now to recall the specific goals you set as an apostolate to incarnate the UAP and the means you gave yourselves to advance on this path; recall also the signs you determined would help you know that you were advancing towards these outcomes.

Begin to review the year, noticing the successes and setbacks, the consolations and resistances experienced in trying to bring these specific outcomes to life.

Take a step back and ask yourself:

- what have we learned about ourselves as an apostolate, and about the outcomes we chose?
- Where was the Spirit at work among us?
- What opportunities did we miss?
- What strengths and limitations of our apostolic enterprise have been revealed to us in a new light?

WRITE DOWN YOUR ANSWERS TO THIS LAST QUESTION in a few concise sentences and **bring them with you to spiritual conversation.**

Supplementary Comments:

- On Recognizing Communal Consolation and Desolation
- Dispositions and Obstacles
- Using the Tools in a Secular Way



Supplementary Comment A:

On Recognizing Communal
Consolation and Desolation



The list of descriptors is presented here is incomplete, and the descriptors are not ranked in order of importance.

If one is unsure whether a group is experiencing consolation or desolation, it is always helpful to ask where the experience is taking the community.

Here are some helpful Scripture passages related to communal consolation and desolation:

1 Corinthians: chapters 12, 13 *The particular manifestation of the Spirit is granted to each one to be used for the general good. ... 1 Cor. 12: 7*

and Galatians 5: 13-26 *Instead, I tell you, be guided by the Spirit, and you will no longer yield to self-indulgence. ...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control. No law can touch such things as these. All who belong to Christ have crucified self with all its passions and longings. Gal. 5: 16, 22-24*

Descriptors of Communal Consolation

- A group recognizes itself as an instrument of God in the midst of confusion and pain.
- The group knows itself as the beloved of God.
- There is an increase of faith, hope and love among and between group members.
- There is a sense of new freedom in the group to be renewed and transformed.
- The group is given a new image of itself (and often) as a instrument of service.
- The talents of members are recognized and used towards the shared group goals.
- In human weakness God's creative presence is expressed and magnified.
- The group has an openness to acknowledge and deal with obstacles that otherwise prevents group members from acting in a united way.
- The group is given an expansiveness that includes others.
- Group members possess a new capacity to listen to another.
- The group moves forward in original ways.

- Group members accepts reality with a certain peace and acceptance.
- The group will have an apostolic thrust, a movement of love in action
- The group is committed to 'a discerned decision' and its implementation
- Servant leadership characterizes the group's ethos.
- Group graces as a whole are more than the sum of its parts.
- A group's decision awakens its members to God's joyful presence.

Descriptors of Communal Desolation

- Fear is present and is a predominant emotion among group members
- There is a preoccupation with personal agendas and old ways ineffectual ways of doing things.
- The group becomes stuck in a rut as a vehicle caught in sand on a beach.
- There are patterns of dishonesty (saying what they really don't feel, too polite with each other, a refusal to say 'what's really on my mind'.)
- The truth is denied.
- The group is unwilling to face suffering as a constitute part of the discernment.
- There is avoidance of a required decision leading to the achievement of the group's aim(s).
- Hanging onto past hurts rather than facing and dealing with present desolations.
- Self (or the group) negative images surface.
- Expressions of arrogance like a superiority of opinion become evident
- There is competition among and between group members
- A group member(s) might choose to employ manipulation and control tactics.
- There is a absence of humour among group members
- Hopelessness predominates within the group.
- The integrity of the process unfolding is threatened by a pattern of urgency to complete it.
- Identifiable signs of group disunity appear.

This information is edited from a Christian Life Community (CLC) formation sources. It is the work of the late Fr. John English, S.J. and some anonymous lay collaborators.

The Consolation of Consensus:

Description

- Everyone in the group realizes that they and the others have been heard.
- Everyone recognizes that the gifts and differences of each have been acknowledged.
- Everyone is at peace with the outcome.
- Everyone has a sense that the process has been free and effective.
- The group knows itself as beloved by God. Recognizing this love actually at work in the group will be a surprise and lead to a sense of wonder.
- The group feels energized or empowered and drawn into the future despite its limitations and past failures.
- The consensus is experienced as coming from beyond the group –from the Holy Spirit.
- Part of the experience of consensus includes a sense of finding God in all things in order better to respond to, serve and love God in all things. The group’s sense of things in God, e.g. its sense of beauty or goodness is in the beauty or goodness of God.

Fruits of Consensus

- The group is given the consolation of insight into its own experience of the Paschal Mystery and of its own willingness to consider suffering with Christ in the future, because of this decision or for other reasons.
- The group understands that its decision might lead them to experiences of rejection; they might even know this from their communal graced history. The group faces this with equanimity and willingness to bear such pain in the future for the sake of the body of Christ.
- The group recognizes that implementation will involve the group in suffering. Yet the group is united in this.

- The group recognizes that the consolation of consensus is more than a sense of group unity.
- All the members are committed to the decision and to its implementation.
- The group recognizes love at work in the group, and sees how it frees everyone so that creative gifts get expressed; the group's creativity is visible to the group.
- The group may experience creativity it did not know it had, hope in the face of obstacles or a sense of universal compassion.
- The group undertakes the labor of implementing the decision with a realistic hope and with joy in the power of the risen Christ

Material on consensus taken from John English, S.J.,
*Christian Life Community Manual of Formation, Phase III: Sharing
Experiences of the Spiritual Exercises*; Guelph: Office of English
Canada CLC, 1994; p.175-177.

Supplementary Comment B:

Dispositions and Obstacles



Dispositions

One of the goals of a practice of discernment, whether personal or communal, is to attain an intelligent, discerning and deciding love. In communal discernment, it is to attain such a love together.

A personal habit of prayer or reflection on one's life is essential to communal apostolic discernment. In the Ignatian spiritual tradition, the examen of consciousness an ideal practice that disposes one to communal discernment.

An ability to speak from felt knowledge is crucial. If one speaks only from the head or only from the heart, then this will probably provoke desolation in others, and may even be experienced as insincere.

The spiritual freedom to share, be vulnerable, and to welcome others as they are, is important.

The spiritual freedom to let one's personal hopes or expectations for a decision be shaped, even transformed by what God is doing in others and in the whole group. This is a willingness to become an ecclesial or corporate person.

An expectation or hope that God speaks to and in a group, for the sake of the group and for the sake of others.

Communal apostolic discernment is not about debating positions and winning arguments, nor is it about solving problems. Like personal discernment, it is about following the leads of grace and attending to the quality of one's engagement in God's presence and action. Hence, humility is the foundation for a discerning love.

Obstacles

A common obstacle is the idea that God speaks primarily to individuals, in the privacy of the heart, and not to groups. This comes from the cultural prejudice of individualism. This will lead to a resistance to have one's spiritual identity be partly communal.

A primarily conceptual understanding of and relationship to the spiritual life, or to the Spiritual Exercises will lead to an inability to speak from felt knowledge.

Fear of sharing and the related fear of vulnerability are other common obstacles.

If one's spirituality is primarily that of the First Week of the Exercises, then one will probably not be able to enter comfortably into the mission and communal orientations of communal apostolic discernment, which is Second Week. A practice of the examen of *consciousness*, or of awareness of God's presence and of one's availability to God, which does not reduce *consciousness* to moral conscience, is essential for moving from a First to a Second Week stance.

Unwillingness to let go of one's prior expectations or hopes with regard to a potential decision.

Our intellectual training prepares us not to take the data of consciousness seriously, and therefore to separate experience, meaningfulness and value from measurable fact. This marginalizes, privatizes or dismisses the data of consciousness, and faith with it, from all decision-making that is considered serious and objective. In this way, human subjects and indeed all things are emptied of any transcendent meaning, and treated as objects. This is a powerful intellectual prejudice that militates against discernment in general, and against communal discernment in particular, for communal discernment requires not only taking seriously the data of consciousness but also making them "public" at least within the group.

More tips for leaders

Good uses of silence, symbol and ritual are important to setting the faith context of these exchanges.

A leader must use discretion and common sense to vary procedures and timing. Flexibility in a group is a form of justice that helps to honor differences and helps each to contribute constructively.

Supplementary Comment C:

Using the Tools
in a Secular Way



Much of what has been explained above can be expressed in secular language. The language of Ignatian discernment can often be replaced describing the experience. For example, instead of asking about consolations and desolations, one can ask about what a person feels and thinks, about hopes and fears, joys and anxieties. One would leave out language about relation to God, but focus on language that points to the effects in persons of the relationship with God. Thus the language of experience can often translate into secular language what one would say in the religious language of discernment.

The transposition from Ignatian or spiritual terminology to the language of experience requires creativity and flexibility.

Any good secular group decision-making process can become communal discernment if it is used in a spiritual context and manner. To avoid spiritual language, but have a spiritual attitude, the skills of sharing, that is, of speaking and listening, explained in Tool #1 are essential.

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This short list of material for further consultation is by no means complete. It simply offers suggestions for extra reading, should one want to follow up.

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