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## *SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT*

(Maurizio COSTA, S.J.)

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The Vatican, 13 November 1978

Dear Mr. President,

His Holiness Pope John-Paul II has received with great pleasure the good wishes you sent him on the occasion of his election and the assurance of the filial affection and prayers of all the members of the Christian Life Communities. He asks me to pass on to you his warm thanks.

The Holy Father is very glad to be able to count on your spiritual help at the time when he takes up his heavy responsibilities, with all his heart he sends his encouragement and Apostolic blessing to you and to all who dedicate themselves to the service of the Church in your Federation, and to their families.

Please be assured, Mr. President, of my own best wishes in Our Lord,

(signed) J. CAPRIO  
Substitute

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Mr. Marte VINZONS  
President of the World Federation  
of Christian Life Communities  
ROME

## SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

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Maurizio COSTA, S.J.

### Editorial note

*This talk was given by Father Costa last August, during a CLC formation course organised by the Italian National Federation. We felt it deserved a wider circulation and so we offer it to you, in the hope that it may help towards a better understanding of spiritual discernment, and also a deeper grasp of CLC way of life, seeing that CLC aims to form men and women who are able to discern in the midst of their daily lives. Father Costa is the Ecclesiastical Assistant of the CLC group in Genoa.*

*Father Costa takes enormous pains to go into the question thoroughly, and the article deserves careful and equally painstaking reading, - and we suggest, reflection and discussion in your CLC group!*

## I - SOME PRELIMINARIES

1. I feel a bit uneasy about dealing with this theme

...

a) because it is such a broad subject. It would be much easier just to speak about personal spiritual discernment. But, for CLC members, I must obviously also say something about spiritual discernment in common - and, also this has only fairly recently become discussed in the Church, it has already accumulated a large bibliography and links with other disciplines: psychology, sociology, dogmatic theology, moral theology, spirituality... as well as many less academic subjects.

b) Added to that, can such a broad subject be dealt with adequately in a comparatively short article? Will what I say be properly understood?

c) To understand what is said about spiritual discernment, one must, I think, have had some previous experience of it. Here I am not so worried, because you to whom I speak have just finished the eight-day Spiritual Exercises, individually guided, and so will at least have had experience of personal discernment. Nevertheless, is the experience we have had sufficient to root it deeply in our hearts? Anyway, it only touched on personal spiritual discernment, not discernment in common.

d) Finally, in trying to give you a 'picture' of spiritual discernment, I may make it all sound far too static - whereas spiritual discernment is essentially dynamic, a developing thing.

2. Looking at it from a more positive angle :

a) *Spiritual discernment is extremely important in itself.* Many problems of life, spirituality, theological reflection, are problems of knowing the will of God and attaining a more mature freedom - problems of spiritual discernment. They cannot be solved purely by speculation or by forcing them into the categories of 'universal laws'. They are problems which entail coming to recognise and carry out the will of God according to the norms of Holy Scripture, reason, the teaching of the magisterium of the Church,

as well as in the light of the 'signs of the times' in the life of the Church and the world. In all this there is the constant danger of falling into paganism, situation ethics, moral subjectivism, pandering to one's own whims, becoming a slave to one's instincts, abusing one's liberty ... One has to try to go beyond the railway-lines and work at the interior level of the Spirit (and this brings the danger of being too facile, pharisaic, becoming a slave to the law). Without spiritual discernment, one is living in the world of the Old Testament or of paganism - certainly outside the world of the New Testament and the life of the Spirit.

b) All this is true in any age but it is especially true today.

c) ... and it is especially relevant for CLC members

- CLC spirituality derives from the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and spiritual discernment is rooted in the Exercises. CLC spirituality derives from other Ignatian sources, too, and notably from a particular way of understanding life in community. The Ignatian community must be a community of discernment. One's own vivid personal experiences of discernment should build up a CLC community and deepen the spiritual communion among its members.

- The spirituality of CLC is essentially a *spirituality for those who live in the midst of the world*. The purpose of spiritual discernment is to help people to 'incarnate' the will of God in real life, link faith with life under the guidance of the Spirit.

- CLC spirituality is *apostolic, missionary*. While spiritual discernment is certainly relevant within more monastic and 'enclosed' types of spirituality, it has a special meaning and importance for those with an apostolic vocation, especially when one considers the many problems such a vocation entails.

## II - SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT IN THE LIGHT OF THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Here I want to try to clarify exactly what spiritual discernment is, and I am going to do it in relationship with the Spiritual Exercises.

We have already said that discernment is rooted in the Exercises; one might go further and say that the Exercises are themselves a full experience of spiritual discernment. So if we analyse the Exercises in some of their elements, it should help us to understand discernment.

1. A brief look at some experiences of the Exercises

A) The Exercises can be considered as a sort of spiritual oasis (the Exercises done over a set time : a month, eight days, five or six days) or as a way of life (living according to the principles and inspiration of the Exercises in one's ordinary everyday circumstances); There should be a relationship between these two - a causal relationship of means to an end : The Exercises done in retreat should help one to live in ordinary life according to Ignatian spirituality. A similar relationship exists between periodical spiritual 'flashes' from the liturgy, the sacraments, personal prayer and life considered as a perpetual prayer. The Exercises cannot be thought of as isolated 'islands' in our life. The retreat as a spiritual 'oasis' must lead to a greater maturity in our spiritual approach to ordinary life, out of retreat : to make real for ourselves the characteristically Ignatian way of living the gospel.

B) Let us begin by considering more in detail what we mean by the Exercises as a spiritual 'oasis' :

a) "Spiritual Exercises" (as Annotations 18, 19, 20 remind us) can mean the whole Ignatian process as outlined in the book of the Exercises, or particular elements in that process (cf. Annotation 1). Here, when we refer to Spiritual Exercises, we mean the whole Ignatian process.

b) *Five fundamental elements in the Exercises* :  
In general, we could say that the Exercises are a vivid experience of God, which unfolds, under guidance, in an atmosphere of listening to the Word; an experience which leads to a conversion which is a complete and perpetual offering of oneself to Christ and the Church, and to a search for God's will in every circumstance of life. But it seems that one can distinguish five fundamental elements in this :

1. *Activities* : spiritual activities (which is why we speak of Spiritual Exercises) which fit together according to a certain set of priorities. Prayer and making a choice are essential in this, but listening to the Word and conversion are even more important.

2. *Rhythm* : These activities have their own characteristic rhythm, dynamism. Every type of spirituality has its own rhythm. St. John of the Cross would describe his as an ascent to God by way of purification of the senses and the Spirit. St. Theresa of Avila would use the terminology which has become classical in the last few centuries : the transitus through the three ways: purgative, illuminative, unitive. Personal growth in God through the Exercises seems to come about by starting with a broad canvas and, by degrees, examining the implications and what makes up this broad picture. Or, from another angle, seeing the goal one is aiming at and then carefully discerning the means. And/or learning from the world around us, reflecting on it in the light of spiritual principles - and returning, with a new insight, to the world. In the process of all this, one begins to integrate the world in which one lives with the faith one professes and, *pari passu*, one develops as a more integrated person-in-the-world. (Translator's note : *It seems that this is well illustrated in the dialectic existing between the Foundation, at the beginning of the Exercises, and the Contemplatio ad Amorem, at the end. One begins with a global view of man's position before God and sees the implications of this position, on a broad canvas. In the course of the first, second, third and fourth weeks, one explores these implications in detail, in the light of one's developing knowledge and love of Christ our Lord. At the end of the Exercises, one returns to the 'broad canvas' to see it transfigured, and the world itself transfigured*).

3. *Persons*: In the Exercises, the human 'actors' are the retreatant and the director, and it is essential that there should be a real dialogue between them. (See various Annotations). But the relationship between retreatant and director is the means of bringing about a much more fundamental relationship - that between the retreatant and God (AN notation 15). In fact, the chief 'actor' is always the Holy Spirit. He is the real 'director', guide. Both the human 'director' and the retreatant must be his humble and ready disciples. Without the Spirit there are no real spiritual activities, no true Spiritual Exercises.

4. *The content* : The activities of the Exercises work around a certain content, certain themes. This does not mean that every theme, individual part of the content, is equally essential. But there must be some content and what it consists of must be geared to the interior dispositions and development of the retreatant. One might say that the content works on two planes : the Word of God in all its richness and resonance, and the data of reason - and the personal history and circumstances of the retreatant, in his own circumstances of time and place.

5. *Surroundings and atmosphere* : For a proper experience of the Exercises, they must be done in an atmosphere of recollection and interior solitude.

c) *The purpose of the Spiritual Exercises* :

Here there are different views and, in general, we can distinguish two main lines of thought. According to one school, it is the process of election (choosing-in-Christ) which is fundamental. According to the other school, the Exercises are mainly aimed at developing the retreatant's ability to pray, meet God in prayer. Personally, I think the Exercises contain both elements and would not put one above the other. Rather, I would unite them and see them as leading to each other. In the Exercises, Ignatius certainly wants to form a contemplative in the midst of action, unite the person to God in both his activity and his freedom, his intellect and his will. For that to happen, the act of choosing must itself be a prayer and the exercise of freedom in choosing God's will as it is known here and now must bring about a union, meeting with God. The processes of prayer and choosing are intimately linked. Prayer is not just essential as the condition of discernment and election; it must also help the retreatant (in and out of retreat) to seek and find God in every aspect of life and the world - to meet God in the process of exercising his freedom to centre everything on God.

2. *Spiritual discernment : characteristic and centre of the Exercises.*

We can follow the same scheme in a further examination of what we mean by spiritual discernment, because that process and the Exercises are so intimately linked with one another.



A) Like the Exercises, spiritual discernment can also be considered as a spiritual 'oasis' or as a way of life.

- As a way of life, discernment is a habitual attitude and spiritual experience, something that is continual and spontaneous, throughout everyday life. It is a developing process of ongoing search for the will of God in one's world and one's mission : an attitude of faith, a way of relationship with God, a way of living in his continual presence : a continual prayer.

- As a spiritual oasis, it tends to come and go in its intensity. It is a sort of punctuation mark during life, where one is especially aware, vividly, that one is making a spiritual discernment. Gradually, the 'oases' produce something more permanent - a habitual attitude, a way of life. It is important to realise that there is this ongoing relationship between what we call the 'oasis' and the way of life. One leads to the other, whether for the individual (in personal spiritual discernment) or for the group (in spiritual discernment made in common). If we are conscious of this causal connection, we shall avoid the danger of over-valuing the oases in themselves, instead of seeing them as the means to building up discernment as a way of life.

B) Now we can turn to a closer examination of this spiritual 'oasis'.

a) In the broadest sense, spiritual discernment means the whole experience of seeking God's will and following it lovingly. In this sense, it includes the entire process and development entailed in making oneself more mature in choosing what most conforms to God's will. More specifically, we can understand spiritual discernment as a particular step on this spiritual journey : the search for God's will which comes immediately before the free decision to follow it. In the broadest sense (above) 'discernment' can mean the same as 'deliberation'. In the more specific sense, it cannot because it only refers to a stage in the process of deliberation. It is especially important to remember that when one is talking about spiritual discernment in common.

b) The five fundamental elements of spiritual discernment :

Here again we can proceed in a way similar to that which we followed with regard to the Exercises, and distinguish five elements : *activities, rhythm, persons, content, atmosphere*. For simplification, I deal with the first two together :

1-2. Activities and rhythm : how to carry out spiritual discernment? What are the steps in the process of searching for God's will and a decision to follow it? It seems there are four such steps:

- i) Spiritual discernment does not begin with abstract principles but from experience : a reaction to a real event, and the internal feelings which arise as a result of it: consolation or desolation, interior movements of the Spirit. This is spiritual affectivity. We are familiar enough with affectivity in the physical order. If I prick my finger, I get an unpleasant sensation; if someone caresses me, the experience is pleasant. Looking at a beautiful bit of scenery or a great work of art gives me a pleasant sensation, too, but it is different to that which I experienced from a caress. Ugliness produces an unpleasant feeling - which differs from that coming from a pricked finger. There is a very sophisticated kind of affectivity at work here, owing more to the discernment of the mind than to the senses.

If we go on to the world of the spirit and of grace, we find a further kind of affective reaction : when I am experiencing the action of the supernatural. Here, too, I experience pleasant or unpleasant reactions (consolation and desolation).

So the first step is that of feeling, experiencing, sensibility to the world or motions within me. One can also 'feel' principles, bring to one's consciousness criteria and the data of reason or faith.

- ii) The second step is reflection, and this is what we mean by discernment in the strict sense, where we weigh up the data accumulated in the first step. It is a time for taking a clear look at the data, comparing them, making judgements on the whole situation,

in the light of faith and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, with the background of the gospels, and the situation of our own lives and our mission as members of a CLC group, our General Principles, our CLC style of life. The mind, enlightened by faith and grace, evaluates the data, analyses the possible choices, ponders the reasons 'for' and 'against' each choice, so as to be able to bring together the data of faith and reason with the data of the concrete situation. This is the most tiring of all the steps - and the most delicate. Success does not depend just on being intelligent. Intelligence must be fortified by wisdom, prudence, the love that comes from on high (cf. Wisdom 9: 1-18; Philippians 1: 9-10). Above all, one needs the gift of discernment, which one must humbly pray for, because the mind, of its own power, cannot make the will freely and lovingly embrace God's will. During this step there is a sort of leap; the decision is a free act which cannot be determined by the intellect. It is rather like the act of faith. One can call to mind the evidence for the divinity of Christ (miracles, Jesus' own testimony, etc.) but even if, like the blind man in John 6: 65 we can reason about this evidence, we cannot without grace affirm that Jesus is God. That comes "not by flesh and blood" but by revelation "of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:17; John 6: 65).

Often, too, in our decision-making, the evidence is far from clear and one wonders whether one has thought of, or analysed, all the reasons 'for' and 'against', all the possible choices. It is not the number of "for's" and "against's" that counts; one may arrive at a situation where there are only two reasons (but weighty ones) 'for' and a number of (less weighty) reasons 'against'. To pass to the third step, the decisive factor is the Spirit who is Light and Love.

- iii) And so we get to the third stage : decision. Here, free will enters in at its fullest. During the second stage (work of the intellect) and the third (work of the will) there is a double danger, analogous to those operating when one tries to make one's act of faith more mature. On the one side, there is the danger of rationalism; on the other, the danger of fideism. Fideism would mean making the leap of faith without proper attention to what precedes it (the preliminaries of faith), the work of reason which prepare and enlighten the motives of faith. Rationalism consists in

acting as though it were possible for reason to attain faith by its own power, forgetting that faith is free and supernatural. Similarly dangers arise with discernment : intellectualism and voluntarism. Voluntarism means making a decision without proper attention to the data of reason and deciding arbitrarily according to my personal feeling. Intellectualism means deciding entirely according to the data of reason, without considering the leap of faith which goes beyond what reason would indicate and, above all, with out taking account of faith and grace.

- iv) Finally, the fourth stage takes us back to the situation in which we find ourselves : doing God's will, not just deciding what it is (James 1: 22-25; Matthew 7: 24-27, 21, 28, 31; Luke 8: 21). True discernment must entail incarnating the will of God in real, everyday life.

These four steps apply in both personal discernment and discernment done in common. In discernment in common, one should add that it is not necessary for all the members of the group to go individually through the first three steps. It may sometimes be better for different steps to be assigned to different people, according to their different gifts, charisms. The one who is good at collecting data may not always be the best to evaluate them. Some may be excellent at giving counsel but hopeless in making decisions (because of scruples or emotionalism). Some may be too imprecise for collecting data but good at evaluating it. Others may excel at the intuition and synthesis necessary for the third step but not so good at the earlier ones. And so on.

For an inexperienced group it may be better for all to take a full part in all the steps, but as the group matures and members get to know one another, I think we should respect the different charisms and use them in the way best suited to making a good discernment. In doing this, however, one should not fall into the error of over-valuing the power to decide at the expense of the ability to reflect or to gather data. That has no place whatever in spiritual discernment - or in a gospel attitude. It may be useful now to analyse more closely spiritual discernment done in common :

(cont. on p. 21)

## YOUTH - PROGRESSIO

In the last issue, Sr. Roberta Williams, SNJM wrote about several different methods of prayer she has found helpful for young people. She had also begun to outline some "Ignatian Themes" which could be used in various ways; e.g. as a preparatory form of the Exercises, or as a help in one's ongoing integration after a retreat experience; individually, or in a group situation. The following is a continuation of her article (see November 1978).

We find Sr. Roberta's contribution to be really valuable, and hope that you do too. As she herself expresses at the close of her article, many of you have surely developed approaches to prayer and life integration - please, share whatever you can with us! We need to let each other know what "works well" and too, what doesn't work well in our communities.

By the way, if any of our readers would like to contact the authors of past articles in YOUTH-PROGRESSIO personally, for more information, or just for fun, please write to us in Rome for their addresses.

May God our Father bless your work throughout this new year, and keep us one in His love!

Peggie TELSCHER

## INTEGRATING PRAYER AND DAILY LIFE

=====  
(Part 2)

### 3. FIRST WEEK

#### Fable: THE CHAIR AND THE FURNITURE DOCTOR

by Jude FISCHER

Once there was a chair, an ugly, scuffy beat-up chair, un uglier more beat-up chair you never did see. His paint was all chipped and peeling, his colors drab and dingy. So disgusting was he to look at! He couldn't stand himself anymore every year he had gotten uglier and uglier. There were dents and scratches, unsightly marks and spots, loose legs, a broken rung. Poor chair! He couldn't remember that he had ever looked nice, really. One coat of paint after another, that was all his life had been. He looked so terrible that people would say, "Let's cover all that ugliness over". And with a fresh coat of paint he'd look better for awhile; then the paint would start to chip off making him look worse than before, all over again. So it was black over red over blue over green over white over yellow, layer after layer built up on him. Poor chair - he had forgotten what he was like underneath.

Then one day he found himself in the hands of the furniture doctor. He couldn't tell you how he got there exactly, it was all so bewildering, a lot of hustle and bustle, some kind of journey in a truck, and there he was. He didn't pay much attention anyway for he had been around so many places, and it was always more of the same. He was tolerated as serving a function, but despised for his lack of comeliness, his ugliness.

## HEALING ?

Now the furniture doctor took chair and washed him gently. There was something about his touch that stopped chair for a minute, puzzled him. Then he struggled it off and braced himself for another coat of paint. But to his surprise it didn't come. Instead the furniture doctor started scraping the paint away. Ouch! That hurt! Yet there was healing in those hands that hurt.

Patiently the furniture doctor went through layer after layer -- and as he worked he sang to the chair :

*"The furniture doctor knows you, chair  
knows the beauty that is there,  
knows you're not beyond repair  
With some tender loving care".*

The song soothed chair a bit. Yet with his raw quivering surface he didn't know what to think. What was happening? Why, if anything, he looked uglier than before, clashing with all the others. "I can't stand it", he screamed, "Stop it, cover me over, leave me alone!" But day after day the furniture doctor persisted. Oh, sometimes he gave chair a rest for a few days, and chair was relieved, though he was terribly self-conscious in his half-exposed state. Yet the furniture doctor's shop was just sheltered enough from the onslaught of critical onlookers that chair was able to endure it.

And painstakingly the furniture doctor scraped away through black, red, blue, green, white... Now chair sensed some change in furniture doctor's touch. Always gentle, always careful, he was now still more so, as if afraid of hurting something. And as the last coat of paint, the yellow, began to fall away, chair caught the first breathtaking glimpse of what he was underneath -- not paint at all, but wood, beautiful wood. Now chair began to understand what furniture doctor was doing, and why his touch had changed so--having reached the last layer, he didn't want to scratch or mar the beautiful wood he was about to expose.

## REVEALED !

Chair eagerly awaited seeing more of himself. Little by little it appeared, and finally he was down to bare wood all over. What a glorious sensation! He revelled in it. He sang and danced a joyous dance. And in his joy he left the furniture doctor, for freed from his bonds of paint, free to be himself at last, he didn't need him anymore. Life was new and exciting and he felt in harmony for the first time.

Then gradually his cloud of glory dissipated a little. He began to settle down. Sometimes he came back to the furniture doctor and watched him at work. He saw many chairs, tables, desks, pass through the furniture doctor's hands, and restored to their original radiance by him. And it seemed to chair that often they began to reflect the beauty of the furniture doctor himself. Funny how he hadn't noticed before how rough and dull his wood really was.

He started spending more time with the furniture doctor. Instead of occupying himself with a million other things, he would sit near the furniture doctor all day and keep his eyes on him, and one day the furniture doctor said to him, "I think you're ready now." And he came over and started rubbing him with something rough he called sandpaper. Ouch! It hurt, but this time chair was sure that furniture doctor knew what he was doing. The furniture doctor rubbed and rubbed, then he got some finer paper still, and ah! This time it was nice; never had he had such a nice massage...

Then he rubbed on a strange substance that brought out all the warmth and beauty of the wood and gave him a fine satin smooth finish. Never had chair dreamed he could be so beautiful. He was so proud of himself, he called a passer-by to sit on him. And with that, chair nearly collapsed, so wobbly he was. So taken up was he in that beautiful wood that was his, he had forgotten his loose legs! Dismayed, back to the furniture doctor he went. The furniture doctor let him wait around awhile to experience how weak he really was. Then he glued him solidly together, giving some of his strength to chair. And the broken rung he mended too. Gratefully, chair went away. At last he was whole, sturdy, and beautiful. At last he could go forth on his own.



## NO WORRY

Some days later he looked at himself. He saw a few scratches here, a bit of dust there, a marred area elsewhere. Suddenly he felt an old fear surface-how long would it be until someone came along and covered him again with a coat of paint. He struggled with despair. But then he stopped long enough to look at the furniture doctor. And suddenly he realized clearly what he had long had a glimmer of. He needed the furniture doctor-not just to fix him up once-but he needed him always. He had come from the furniture doctor; he was restored through the furniture doctor, and only through the furniture doctor would he continue to remain and to grow in beauty. He needed him to dust him off, to polish him up, to sand him now and then, to be his strength. Yes, he was never meant to live a life independent of the furniture doctor. Every day he needed to look at the furniture doctor, and then he didn't have to worry about those coats of paint.

*This fable was taken from the RESTORATION newspaper, a publication of MADONNA HOUSE, Combermere, Ontario, Canada.*

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### 4. THE SECOND WEEK: The Five Questions (encountering the Lord).

Here are five questions asked by Jesus to people who come into his life. What would your answer be if he asked them of you right now?

*Who do you say that I am?*

*Do you love me?*

*What do you want?*

*What do you want from me?*

*Do you believe in me?*

Do you know people you have asked these questions of -- or who would be willing to have you ask them? Can you list them with the reasons you think why? Can you share this exercise with your group?

5. THE SECOND WEEK : The Two Standards  
(U.S. CIC's National Formation Program: The Spirituality Cycle No. 4)

Begin with Luke 4:1-14 -- the Temptation of Jesus in the Desert. Ask people to re-write in their own words each of the three things the devil said to Jesus to show what Jesus was being tempted to. Then ask if they can identify the spirit of good and the spirit of evil active in this temptation of Jesus. The second activity could be the one we mentioned in another context: finding titles, pictures, ads, stories, etc. that are examples of the spirit of evil alive in our world today. A sharing then, and a prayer service is part of this session.

\* \* \*

6. CONTEMPLATIO : from Frankl.

... The man marching next to me whispered suddenly : "If our wives could see us now! I do hope they are better off in their camps and don't know what is happening to us!" That brought thoughts of my own wife to mind. And as we stumbled on for miles, slipping on icy spots, supporting each other time and again, dragging one another up and onward, nothing was said, but we both knew each of us was thinking of his wife. Occasionally I looked at the sky, where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark band of clouds. But my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise.

A thought transfixed me; for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is, set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth -- that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: *THE SALVATION OF MAN IS THROUGH LOVE AND IN LOVE.* I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way -- an honorable way -- in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words: *"The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory"*.

... The men were silent, their brains numb. My mind still clung to the image of my wife. A thought crossed my mind: I didn't even know if she were still alive. I knew only one thing -- which I have learned well by now: Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved. It finds its deepest meaning in his spiritual being, his inner self. Whether or not he is actually present, whether or not he is still alive at all, ceases somehow to be of importance.

I did not know whether my wife was alive, and I had no means of finding out... but at that moment it ceased to matter. There was no need for me to know; nothing could touch the strength of my love, my thoughts, and the image of my beloved. Had I known then that my wife was dead, I think that I would still have given myself, undisturbed by that knowledge, to the contemplation of her image, and that my mental conversation with her would have been just as vivid and just as satisfying. *"Set me like a seal upon thy heart, love is as strong as death"*.

(Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning, pp. 58-61)

These are only a few examples of prayer/life integration experiences which can help CLC'ers grow more and more into people of prayer-in-action. You yourself, I am sure, have developed and are developing others. I hope we can share for our mutual benefit, in the real spirit of our movement.

Sr. Roberta M. WILLIAMS, SNJM

#### A MONTH IN THE SLUMS OF PALERMO

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For the second consecutive year, a group of students affiliated to the CLC in Malta organised a month's social work in a slum area of Palermo. We invited other youths who were willing to help in such a project to share in this experience.

Preparing ourselves for this experience was very important. The group, led by Paul Zammit S.J. and Louis Borg S.J., met regularly once a month. During these meetings, we built a community atmosphere. Through the prayers we shared, we came to understand each other better. We also understood our mission clearly: to give ourselves totally to the children we were to work with, to give until it hurts.

All 30 of us arrived safely in Palermo, and we soon settled into the old convent where we lived for the rest of our stay. We were to be the "professori" of a "colonia" run by five of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity. This was a type of summer school, situated in a notorious region of Palermo, La Kalsa; notorious for its desolate slums and hardened criminals.

(cont. on p. 30)

(cont. from p. 12)

- *Creating an atmosphere of faith*

- Listening to the Word of God and/or other texts fundamental to the group's spirituality.

- Personal prayer and offering to God of the dispo<sup>n</sup>ibility of each member of the group.

- Communal prayer; offering of the group to God and asking for light and docility to the Spirit.

All this is aimed at providing the necessary atmosphere in the group and its members, before God and among one another.

- *Deciding the roles and functions of each member of the group.*

- *Deciding the formulation of the question* about which the discernment is to take place, and why the discernment is taking place. The question must be :

- within the competence of the group;

- important for its life and mission.

- *Sharing the relevant data*, by one or several members, with the fullest openness possible.

- *Time for study, reflection, private prayer.* This is the individual discernment by members.

(Some of these things may already have been done on some previous occasion.)

- *Sharing by each member of personal reasons 'for' and 'against'.*

- *Communal decision.* This should not be an argument but an analysis and evaluation on the value and weight the various 'pros' and 'cons' will bear and where the Spirit seems to be leading the group.

(If it is difficult to see where the Spirit is leading the group, one should start the whole process all over again and go through it more slowly.)

- *Period of silence and personal prayer*, to attain a real internal liberty and docility and to counteract any possible pressures which may have arisen in the course of the group discussion.

- *Trying to arrive at a unanimous agreement*. This may come quite spontaneously, or more gradually, after overcoming tensions, differences. It should never come about as a compromise or with feelings of resentment : it should always be accompanied by the peace of Christ. Unanimity may well mean that some will have to give up their own personal views for the good of the group.

(One must be realistic about this and be conscious of our limitations. Total and complete unanimity is something to be worked towards rather than something that occurs easily. It might be necessary to have recourse to a vote - not to show a victory of the majority over the minority but as a guide to where the group is at that moment. The danger of doing this, of course, is that it may disrupt unity and reduce the process to a sort of parliamentary procedure...

- *Confirmation* : This could be done in two ways:

- By the experience of spiritual consolation in the group as a result of the decision.

- By the agreement to the decision by someone who has some authority over the group (e.g. the bishop).

- *Conclusion* : Prayer of thanksgiving, to acknowledge that the decision was taken under the grace of God.

### 3. Persons : who is doing the discernment?

a) We have already said that the chief 'actor' in a discernment is the Holy Spirit, and the whole process should be undertaken in response to his guidance, in faith.

b) The human 'actor' can be an individual person (in personal spiritual discernment) or a group (in spiritual discernment in common). All discernment is really 'in common', because, even when it is a personal act, it is still an act-in-the-Church; an act undertaken to cope with a particular situation, here and now, but also an act which has its place in the history of salvation. Further, while all

discernment is directed to the glory of God, it is also directed to the building up of his community on earth - our brethren. This is why spiritual discernment should always be done in an atmosphere of genuine spiritual dialogue: hence, for CLC members, the need for spiritual guidance and the central position given to discernment and the Exercises in the spirituality of our Movement.

It is clear enough that personal discernment and discernment done in common differ because the human 'discerners' differ. That brings up the question of whether to speak of 'communal spiritual discernment'. Personally, I prefer to call it 'spiritual discernment done in common', partly because, as I have suggested, all discernment has a communal dimension but partly because I think the latter expresses more clearly that individuals are discerning in communion with one another (not necessarily with the whole of the community). For instance, a CLC group may be too large for real 'community discernment' and one may have to split the group into smaller sub-groups. This is another reason, of course, for stressing the importance of CLC groups being small, if the real CLC life is to be carried out.

#### 4. Content : about what should we discern?

a) What do I want to discern? In the broadest sense, the will of God. But, in making the subject of the discernment more precise, it sometimes takes a long time to decide exactly what, in this particular instance, one is trying to discern and how to phrase the question. For instance, say I am trying to choose an apostolic activity. Am I trying to choose a new activity I have not undertaken before, or decide a priority among those I am already engaged in - or am I trying to find out how I should carry out one of these two possibilities? The situation is sometimes even more complicated. For instance, trying to decide the apostolate for a group, one has to decide what to do, where to do it, how to do it, how long one should do it, who should do it, etc... In addition, with discernment done in common, one must decide whether the decision is within the competence of the group and how important it is for the group's life and mission.

Should the personal problem of one CLC member be the subject of discernment by the whole group, in common? Taking into account what Paul VI says in his document for religious, *Evangelica Testificatio*, I would say that individual problems which do not affect the life and mission of

the group should not be the subject for discernment in common by the group. To do so might harm the personal freedom of the individual to decide his own affairs. But, providing that it does not take up time the group needs for more pressing matters, I do think that group members should feel free to share their problems with their group, and then the other members may be able to offer advice and comment, always leaving the final decision to the individual concerned. This can be of very real help and support to members.

I can discern about any of the acts which mark out my journey through this world: "*Examine all things; hold on to what is good*" (1 Thess 5: 21). But discernment is more specifically applied to those spiritual landmarks which the Exercises call 'spirits' (as in the Discernment of Spirits) : interior feelings, motions, which incline one towards or against some particular course. These 'spirits' may show themselves to us interiorly (in the form of a psychological resonance of 'consolation' or 'desolation') or exteriorly (some act of love or its opposite which happens to us from outside). Such 'spirits' come to us from God, the devil, or from one's own character, one's unconsciousness, one's social environment, a book...or from the signs of the times (cf. Luke 1: 56).

One can also exercise discernment about the motives and criteria which reveal themselves and condition our discernment about the will of God.

b) As with the Exercises, in thinking about discernment one can distinguish *external data* (from the individual or the group - principles of faith and reason or facts coming from actual events) and *internal data* (individual leanings, inclinations, attractions, repulsions). We can also distinguish the *unchangeable data* (criteria and principles from faith and reason) and the *changeable data* (arising from particular situations in life). The difficulty, however, is not in enumerating the different kinds of data (first step) but in assessing them and evaluating them (2nd and 3rd steps).

5. Atmosphere : For discernment, personal or in common, to succeed, there must be the right atmosphere -in the persons and in their environment.



a) For personal discernment, the ideal qualifications in the individual should be :

- *Spiritual maturity* : (see Hebrews 5: 13-14; Eph 4:14-15). He should have a solid spiritual formation and lead a spiritual life really united to God. He must have self-knowledge and self-mastery, know his limitations as well as his gifts, be aware of what is happening around him and be able to reflect on events as well as on himself with regard to them. He must be open to the Spirit (1 Cor 2: 11-13) and possess balance, a unity of life and simplicity of heart. He must also be :
- A *seeker* : genuinely keen to find out and carry out God's will, and with a certain ingenuity in discovering ways of doing this, together with generosity, peace, magnanimity, an acknowledgement of God's lordship over his world and a loving respect for God's action in history. He should be frank in assessing his own motives and possess a proper sense of values, together with indifference, a realisation that he cannot find God's will by his own efforts - and the hopeful and trustful attitude of a pilgrim not yet in sight of his destination. He also needs :
- *Conversion, purification of heart*, so that he not only hates sin but also his own tendency to worldliness, and realises he is constantly in need of further conversion, seeing the temptation to paganism and phariseism as constant enemies to the life of the Spirit. This presupposes a real and constant self-abnegation and mortification. Add to this :
- A *personal relationship with God*, and
- A *sense of the Church*. Discernment takes place in the Church, Christ's work is continuing in the Church - and I am part of the Church.

Finally, he needs to be able to assess the positive possibilities of situations as they arise - how they can

lead him better to do God's will, to do what is more pleas  
ing to the Lord - not just how the world can lead him away  
from God.

b) For spiritual discernment in common,

- Dispositions in the individual member of the group  
should include all that is said above about personal  
discernment, plus :

- a sense of being really part of his community : the  
Church, CLC, the family : a community that has its  
own mission and apostolate before God.
- A determination not to let his own opinions and  
tastes get in the way of his freedom to assess and  
accept the views of others.

Finally, he must accept the fundamental rules of dia-  
logue.

- Dispositions of the group :

- It must be a real community with a real communion.
- It must agree what the discernment is about and how  
the discernment is to be carried out.
- It must also agree on basic values and criteria.
- It must see itself as part of a larger whole : the  
national and international CLC and the Church it-  
self.
- It must have a good knowledge of CLC General Princi-  
ples so it can distinguish between changeables and  
non-changeables and, with regard to the latter, have  
no set ideas about structures and individual ways  
of doing things.
- It must shun mere legalism.

- The group must accept its own limitations and realize, too, that, both in the process of discernment and in the life of the group in general, the initial joyfulness and enthusiasm may well give way to unforeseen and perhaps severe tensions, which, surmounted, should themselves lead to a new depth of faith and trust and union.

So far - internal dispositions in the members of the group. But group discernment also needs external conditions : an atmosphere of community prayer and personal prayer, faith, hope, charity, listening to God, docility to the Spirit, freedom and truth. This presupposes an interior solitude in each member of the group - which does not at all exclude dialogue with the spiritual director (in the case of personal discernment) or with other members of the group (for discernment in common).

c) The purpose of spiritual discernment

When we were talking about the Exercises, we discussed whether they were primarily an experience of union with God or an experience of seeking and finding and doing his will. We suggested that they were both together, with no priority between them. It seems to me that we can say the same thing about the purpose of spiritual discernment : it is not primarily an exercise in contemplation nor primarily a purely practical exercise, but both. In CLC, spiritual discernment (personal or in common) leads the individual and the group to be able to recognise God's presence in all facets of daily life and it does this by encouraging one to use one's free will to make decisions about what God wants from day to day. So the purpose of discernment is not just to make decisions, nor just to teach one to pray, nor just to be an occasion for meeting God. It is all three, closely linked together. Nor is spiritual discernment a panacea for all the evils of life, neither does it take the place of other spiritual experiences and methods (which may, in fact, have a lot in common with discernment and be a preparation for it). In brief, spiritual discernment is not :

- A review of life held in common;
- discussion, dialogue;

- a sharing of experiences;
- group dynamics;
- a prayer group or a mixed prayer/action group which leads to a meeting with God and the making of a decision.

### III - SOME CONCLUSIONS

#### 1. Problems not dealt with

I just want to outline these and leave them to your own reflection as individuals and in your groups.

In the Exercises, a spiritual guide is essential. He seems equally essential in discernment. What would such a person do in the discernment process? Who would he be : a member of the group? an outsider? the priest-assistant? another priest? There is much scope for reflection about the whole question of what a priest's role should be, not only in discernment but in a lay group itself. It is an important question, not just for the priest but for all, because proper discernment needs not only self-knowledge in individual members but a deep and warm mutual-knowledge of one another, and what each member is best at contributing to the discernment and the group.

Another problem, of course, is how to form people to carry out discernment in common.

#### 2. Spiritual discernment as a spiritual 'oasis' and as a way of life.

Pretty clearly from what we have said, the individual experience of discernment must lead to a more mature ability to practice discernment in everyday life. How does this happen? Is it automatic? If not, how does one bring it about? I think that, if the individuals and group are leading a genuine CLC way of life, this will be of enormous help to ensuring that discernment gradually becomes habitual in everyday life. CLC seems to have a more powerful

pedagogy than most other lay movements, especially in this matter of discernment. Our groups form our members to practice discernment in everyday life by the opportunities they give for experiencing 'oases' of discernment, particularly through the Exercises themselves and through the periodical discernments in common held in the group. Not only is the way opened up to discernment in the personal problems of life but in the problems of the group and the national and international Movement.

If the power to discern in everyday life is at the root of the whole meaning of CLC, one must end by affirming again the central role of the Exercises in CLC - because it is in the Exercises that one obtains one's deepest experience of discernment.

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(cont. from p. 20)

Each morning, the children would come, wearing torn dirty clothes and a broad smile. They would greet each "professore" in turn, and soon settle to begin a new day at the "colonia". We were to help them be creative and constructive : they made all sorts of decorations and models out of coloured paper, ice-cream sticks, sea-shells and other simple materials. We were also to instil a sense of team work so that the sixty children were divided into six teams. Each team competed with the others during the games we organised for them. They were also awarded points for their behaviour and work.

Often we took them to the beach or out into the countryside. This helped them to get out of the miserable environment they lived in. Many of them had never been out of the slum area before.

Many of the children needed individual attention. Coming from poor, large families and a violent atmosphere, they were largely neglected, left to roam about the streets where they learn to steal in order to assure themselves of something to eat during the day. The lack of parental love often showed itself through such abnormalities as speech defects and mental retardation. A few found so little love at home that they refused to communicate with us or with other children. They would sit in one corner all day without uttering one single word. To our great joy, we found that these children would soon start mixing with the others after a short spell of constant understanding, love and attention.

To the rich people of the city, these children were to be looked down upon. They are the delinquents of tomorrow. Common thieves. To us, the children were something far more precious, for we could see that behind each dirty and hostile appearance was a child who was longing for someone to love and understand him. We could see in each of them a child whose talents and personality were being stifled by the inhuman conditions they lived in, and by the general indifference of society as a whole. Indeed, both spiritually and materially, they are the least of our brothers.

Each Sunday, a few of us would go round the slums with Sr. Alvin gathering the children for Mass. Here, we came into touch with the misery in which the children and their families lived. Often, a family of fifteen would sleep in a home of two rooms. The father was generally unemployed, and often children of 11 and 12 would work 48-hours a week selling fruits for just 4000 lire a week. If the child happened to be a girl, she would be paid 3000 lire a week. In coming into contact with the miserable conditions these families lived in, we could easily understand their restlessness and generally violent tendencies.

In this environment, we admired very much the five Sisters from India who left their homes and families to dedicate their lives to these children and to their families who, after all, did not always appreciate the work they were doing for them. Sisters Domenica, Helsa, Punya, Linda and Alvin were a source of hope and Christian love: always prepared to help the neglected, the abandoned, the poorest of the poor. They worked unceasingly always with a smile on their face, a smile which reflected the warm way in which they welcomed the poor into their lives.

It is to them that we owe a hearty thank you for the work they do to better the lot of the poor, and for sharing with us the opportunity of this experience, an experience which certainly made us aware of the poor conditions in which many of our brothers are living today.

*Adrian PADOVANI*

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