

SYNODALITY AND DISCERNMENT

THE AFFECTIVE RECONFIGURATION OF THE CHURCH

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SUMMARY — While most reflections on synodality refer to the discernment of spirits as a crucial element, it is usually not specified what discernment entails. After exploring some possibilities, this article focuses on Ignatian discernment and elaborates what it means for synodality. Firstly, it presupposes God's direct interaction with his creatures, a theological conviction that comes with the spiritual requirement of inner freedom. Moreover, discernment engages one's interiority: it is an affective undertaking. Synodality presupposes a similarly active view of God: it is about "receiving the new things that the Spirit wishes to reveal to us" (Pope Francis). Therefore, it comes with the same spiritual requirement and the same affective focus. As the affective realm is a relatively unfamiliar aspect of Church life, its growing importance amounts to an affective reconfiguration of the Church.

RÉSUMÉ — Alors que la plupart des réflexions sur la synodalité font référence au discernement des esprits comme un élément crucial, il n'est généralement pas précisé ce que le discernement implique. Après avoir exploré quelques possibilités, cet article se concentre sur le discernement ignatien et élabore ce qu'il signifie pour la synodalité. Tout d'abord, il présume l'interaction directe de Dieu avec ses créatures, une conviction théologique qui s'accompagne d'une exigence spirituelle de liberté intérieure. De plus, le discernement engage l'intériorité de chacun : c'est une démarche affective. La synodalité présume une vision tout aussi active de Dieu : il s'agit de « recevoir les nouveautés que l'Esprit souhaite nous révéler » (Pape François). Elle s'accompagne donc de la même exigence spirituelle et de la même attention affective. Le domaine affectif étant un aspect relativement peu familier de la vie de l'Église, son importance croissante équivaut à une reconfiguration affective de l'Église.

Introduction

Under Pope Francis' leadership, the Church is slowly embarking on a synodal pathway and converting herself into a pilgrim, attempting to heed the Spirit's voice. While commentators sometimes note that synodality is rooted in history and tradition, it also represents a profound renewal or "conversion." This affects the way the Church is imagined theologically and the way Church life is organized canonically, as much as the Church's *ethos*; ultimately, synodality is not a set of convictions but a lifestyle, spirituality, or what Jesuits call "a way of proceeding." This latter aspect, which theologians tend to overlook, is as important for the success of the Church's synodal conversion as the theological and canonical ones.¹ Or, in negative terms, when synodality proves difficult, it is usually because of issues related to *ethos*, e.g., a poor listening culture.

In this contribution, I will address this ecclesial lifestyle, with particular attention to the discernment of spirits. Frequently invoked as a method of listening to the Spirit, the discernment of spirits remains remarkably unspecified both in academic reflection and magisterial teaching. It is this shortcoming that this article seeks to complement. I shall first describe the relationship between synodality and discernment and discuss various possible meanings. Then, I focus on the theological depth of discernment, namely, God – or the Holy Spirit – who actively guides human persons. In the third section, I dwell on the affective dimension of Ignatian discernment, which engages one's interiority, to claim that synodality involves an affective reconfiguration of the Church.²

1 — Synodality and Discernment

A synodal way of proceeding attempts to hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church by listening to the various voices in its midst, voices that may stand in opposition to one another. In addition to challenging the Church to living unity in diversity, this variety of perspectives raises the question of

¹ Consequently, my introductory article on synodality contains two sections, one on theological reconfigurations and the other one on new attitudes, practices, and virtues. See Jos MOONS, "A Comprehensive Introduction to Synodality: Reconfiguring Ecclesiology and Ecclesial Practice," in *Annals of Theology* (The Learned Society of Catholic University of Lublin), 69 (2022), 73-93.

² This reflection deepens insights that were published previously as Jos MOONS, "Synodality, the Holy Spirit, and Discernment of Spirits," in Eamonn CONWAY, Eugene DUFFY, and Mary McDAID (eds.), *The Synodal Pathway: When Rhetoric Meets Reality*, Dublin, Columba Books, 2022, 79-90.

truth: in which of these voices does God speak to the Church? The answer cannot be provided solely by having recourse to traditional sources, like the Catechism, the Magisterium, the *Code of Canon Law*, or even Scripture or theological doctrine. Instead, the point of synodality is, in the words of Pope Francis, “to receive the new things that the Spirit wishes to reveal to us.”³ This may involve surprise for, as Pope Francis notes, “[o]urs is a God of Surprises, who is always ahead of us.”⁴

To answer the question of what views should be embraced, which should be rejected, and which should be put “on hold” for now, Pope Francis, the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, the International Theological Commission, and theologians usually reference the discernment of spirits. However, it is rarely specified what this discernment entails. For example, the International Theological Commission uses the word “discernment” forty times in its 2018 text *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*. According to no. 4, discernment is the key activity of synods; they are “to discern, by the light of the Word of God and listening to the Holy Spirit, the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical, and pastoral questions that arise as time goes by.”⁵ The remainder of the section explains only the word “synod,” leaving discernment unspecified, although it seems to relate to the word of God, the Holy Spirit, and actual questions. Other sections hint at further aspects, such as searching for the will of God and listening to the Holy Spirit, the people of God, and the *sensus fidelium*. No. 11 speaks about discerning “the theological principles which must animate and regulate synodal life, its structures, its processes and

³ Austen IVEREIGH, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future. Pope Francis in Conversation with Austen Ivereigh*, London, Simon Schuster, 2020, 93.

⁴ IVEREIGH, *Let Us Dream*, 93. The word featured also in the 2013 interview “A Big Heart Open to God,” in which the Pope is quoted as saying: “... God is always a surprise, so you never know where and how you will find him.” See Antonio SPADARO, “A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis,” *America Magazine* (September 30, 2013), online at <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>; also available in amongst others German (*Stimmen der Zeit*) and French (*Études*) and at vatican.va. It is tempting to read these words as a reference to the British Jesuit Gerard HUGHES’ spiritual bestseller, *God of Surprises*, London, DLT, 1985, translated into many languages, including Spanish.

⁵ INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church” (2018); cf. full text, “Since the first centuries, the word ‘synod’ has been applied, with a specific meaning, to the ecclesial assemblies convoked on various levels (diocesan, provincial, regional, patriarchal or universal) to discern, by the light of the Word of God and listening to the Holy Spirit, the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical and pastoral questions that arise as time goes by.” Cf. no. 113: “Exercising discernment is at the heart of synodal processes and events. That is the way it has always been in the synodal life of the Church.” Clearly, the historical accuracy of the latter statement is debatable.

the events it will involve,” and no. 111-114 speak about “communal discernment.” Ironically, the fact that the word is used in various contexts and combinations without further elaboration, adds to the lack of clarity.

Pope Francis links synodality and discernment.⁶ To mention one example, in his 2015 address at the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, Francis explained that the *sensus fidelium* “prevents a rigid separation between an *Ecclesia docens* and an *Ecclesia discens*, since the flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church.”⁷ Apparently, one finds these “new ways” by means of discernment, yet what that means and how it works is not elaborated beyond highlighting aspects such as speaking up, listening, the people of God, the poor, and God or the Holy Spirit. The same applies to the documents by the General Secretariat and most theological scholarship on synodality: the word discernment is used, some related concepts or practices are mentioned, but these elements are not combined into a coherent description.

My observation on the lack of a precise description is significant in the light of the variety of actual interpretations of the *discernment of spirits* and more-or-less synonymous terms like *discretion*. In 1 Corinthians 12, Saint Paul considers discernment of spirits one of the Spirit’s gifts to some members of the Christian community for building up the community.⁸ In the early Church, 1 Corinthians 12 was understood in various manners, as the fascinating overview by American Jesuit and scholar Joseph T. Lienhart demonstrates.⁹ For

⁶ Cf. SPADARO, “A Big Heart Open to God”; in the interview, the Pope spoke about the importance of discernment for himself: “discernment in the Lord guides me in my way of governing.”

⁷ Available online at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html. For other references, see the overview in Jacques HAERS, “A Synodal Process on Synodality. Synodal Missionary Journeying and Common Apostolic Discernment,” in *Louvain Studies*, 43 (2020), 215-238, esp. 224-236; cf. at p. 224: “Pope Francis’ official interventions illustrate how common apostolic discernment and synodal missionary journey are intertwined.”

⁸ Cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:21: “test everything and hold on to what is good”; Romans 12:2: “Do not model your behaviour on the contemporary world, but let the renewing of your minds transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and mature”; and 1 John 4:1: “My dear friends, not every spirit is to be trusted, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets are at large in the world” (quotes taken from the *New Jerusalem Bible*).

⁹ Joseph T. LIENHART, “On ‘Discernment of Spirits’ in the Early Church,” in *Theological Studies*, 41 (1980), 505-552, including other sources, such as the extensive lemmas on *discernement des esprits* and *discretion* in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, vol. III, Paris, Beauchesne, 1957, 1222-1291 and 1311-1330. Cf. Santiago G. ARZUBIALDE, “Discretio,” in Javier MELLONI a.o. (eds.), *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Ignaciana*, Bilbao/Santander, Mensajero, 2007, 623-637.

example, for early Greek Scripture commentators like Chrysostom (347-407), this discernment is about knowing who was and who was not a spiritual person. It enabled Paul and his contemporaries to distinguish the spiritual person from soothsayers and false prophets. In early Latin commentaries, however, discernment is not understood in relation to distinguishing between persons but between the inspirations (or “spirits”) that accompany someone’s actions or words. Moreover, these commentaries interpret discernment not so much as a historical phenomenon but a contemporary reality that they link especially to clerics.¹⁰

The word is used in literature on the spiritual life as well, with various interpretations. While in Origen’s understanding (ca. 185-254) discernment is about distinguishing between good and bad spirits, for Athanasius (ca. 296-373) it is only about bad spirits or demons that need to be unmasked and rejected. The sayings of the desert fathers illustrate another development, namely that discernment is being understood increasingly in terms of virtues. It is not about the spiritual world, but about uncovering and avoiding vice, often in the form of a lack of control over our passions or an exaggeration of virtue. As Lienhart writes about Evagrius Ponticus (346-399): “[his] demons are not the imaginative, if somewhat obtuse, personalities whom Antony beats, but colourless personifications of the eight capital sins.” Consequently, discernment also meant insight into the spirit of rules or laws so that one was able to apply them well in various circumstances. As Lienhart summarizes: “[Discernment also] functions in the *Apophthegmata* as *epikeia* does in later moral theology.”¹¹ This would develop further into the Benedictine understanding of *discretio* as the virtue of moderation, the “mother of virtues” that belongs especially to the abbot.¹²

¹⁰ See LIENHART, “On ‘Discernment of Spirits’ in the Early Church,” 509-511.

¹¹ See *ibid.*, 511-522, quotes at p. 521 and p. 522.

¹² See *ibid.*, 526-528. For the link between discernment and moderation, see chapter LXIV of the Rule, verses 17-19: “[H]e must show forethought and consideration in his orders, and whether the task he assigns concerns God or the world, he should be discerning and moderate [*discernat et temperet*], bearing in mind the discretion of holy Jacob, who said: ‘If I drive my flocks too hard, they will all die in a single day’ (Gen 33:13). Therefore, drawing on this and other examples of descretion [*discretionis*], the mother of virtues, he must so arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from.” *The Rule of St. Benedict. In Latin and English with Notes*, ed. Timothy FRY a.o., Collegeville, MN, The Liturgical Press, 1980. Cf. chapters II (*Qualis debeat esse abbas*) and LXIV (*De ordinando abbate*) in the Rule. Adalbert de Vogüé’s comments on the word *discretio* in this passage as follows: “entendu au sens de ‘mesure’ ou modération (...), cette qualité consiste à tenir le juste milieu, à égale distance des deux excès opposés, le trop et le trop peu. (...) [*D*]iscretio en est venu à signifier unilatéralement l’absence d’austérités intempérantes, d’exigences immodérées, de zèle excessif.” Adalbert DE VOGÜÉ, *Ce que dit saint Benoît. Une lecture de la Règle*, Vie Monastique, no. 25, Bégrolles-en-Mauges,

According to the fifteenth century Modern Devotion, a reform movement that spread from the Low Countries over Europe and focused on the faithful's personal spiritual life, discernment of spirits means making choices based on what one senses spiritually to be true and trustworthy. It involves entering into contact with the great variety of feelings, impulses, and thoughts that one may experience in one's interiority and evaluating these to find God's will.

So, what does discernment mean in relation to synodality? Obviously, it is not about true and false prophets, nor about clerics or the abbot. Yet what about the Benedictine understanding of discernment as common sense and moderation? My hypothesis is that, in the context of synodality, discernment is often tacitly understood as "trying to be reasonable and wise."

In what follows, I will opt for elaborating upon what Pope Francis has in mind when he speaks about discernment: Ignatian discernment. Two features of Ignatian discernment stand out: God's actively guiding role and the affective nature of discernment. Both enrich the synodal conversion of the Church. The first feature is a reminder of the presence and priority of God himself, which also means a pneumatological shift to an unusually active vision of the Holy Spirit. The second feature means that the whole human person is involved, not just the brain. Thus understood, synodal discernment has a spiritual and theological depth that goes beyond common sense and moderation.

2 — God's 'Direct' Guidance

Ignatian discernment of spirits is about searching for God's will, which should not be understood as a blueprint to be executed but as something dynamic and relational. It presupposes that God is actively involved in the lives of the faithful, accompanying them on paths of love and life. This active notion of God is very present in Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) and can be found in how Pope Francis speaks about discernment and synodality.

Ignatius' so-called Autobiography strongly witnesses to God's action.¹³ Meant to edify and inspire rather than to communicate facts, it is reliable in

Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1991, 283. For an extensive discussion of the abbot's "all-pervasive role," see Claude PEIFER, "The Abbot" (Appendix 2), *The Rule of St. Benedict*, 322-378; for the word "all-pervasive" see p. 322.

¹³ It has been published in various translations under various titles, amongst which "The Pilgrim's Story," or "Reminiscences or Autobiography of Ignatius Loyola, as heard and written down by Luis Gonçalves Da Câmara"; for the latter, see *Personal Writings. Reminis-*

revealing what Ignatius wished to share. He presents himself as a man overflowing with zeal – first for worldly endeavours, and then for God – who only slowly learns to manage his zeal and his inner experiences. Contrasting his own efforts, which fail and lead to despair, with God, who corrects and educates him, he confesses that “[a]t this time God was dealing with him [= Ignatius] in the same way as a schoolteacher deals with a child, teaching him.”¹⁴ (Earlier in the narrative he had made the very same point in relation to, e.g., his physical recovery and the much needed liberation from scruples.¹⁵) To make sure that the point was not missed or glossed over, he added that he was very certain of it: “Now, whether this was because of his [= Ignatius’] ignorance and obtused mind, or because he didn’t have anyone to teach him (...), it was his clear judgement then, and has always been his judgement, that God was dealing with him in this way.”¹⁶

Highlighting God’s teaching role, Ignatius obscured the role played by human teachers. Historical and textual research challenges this account; it is highly probable that Ignatius learned from others also. For example, Irish scholar Terence O’Reilly notes significant parallels between the literature that Ignatius was reading while on his sickbed, during which he lived through a profound and incipient conversion, and the words he later used to talk about his experiences.¹⁷ Ignatius was part of a *milieu* in which discernment was talked about and owes a lot to what others wrote and taught.

The same notion of an active God can also be found in the *Spiritual Exercises* – a manual for retreat givers that is also used as a handbook for spiritual accompaniment – that is a major expression of how Ignatius conceived

cences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters, Including the Text of the Spiritual Exercises, tr. and intr. Joseph A. MUNITZ and Philip ENDEAN, London, Penguin Books, 1996, 3-64.

¹⁴ “Autobiography of Ignatius Loyola,” no. 27, cf. no. 14, “And on this journey something happened to him which it will be good to have written, so that people can understand how Our Lord used to deal with his soul, a soul that was blind, though with great desires to serve him...,” and nos. 28-30 that mean to elaborate no. 27’s statement. For the despair, including the consideration of suicide, see nos. 21-25. Ignatius speaks about himself as “he.”

¹⁵ See “Autobiography of Ignatius Loyola,” no. 5 (“Our Lord was gradually giving him health”) and no. 25 (“... and with this the Lord willed that he woke up as if from sleep (...) Thus from that day forward he remained free of those scruples, holding it for certain that Our Lord in his mercy had willed to liberate him”).

¹⁶ “Autobiography of Ignatius Loyola,” no. 27.

¹⁷ See “The Origins of the Rules for Discernment,” in Terence O’REILLY, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Contexts, Sources, Reception*, Leiden – Boston, Brill, 2020, 145-168, esp. 153-166. Ignatius read three books: the *Life of Christ* (by Ludolph the Carthusian), the *Golden Legend* (by Jacob of Voragine), and the *Imitation of Christ* (by Thomas a Kempis). O’Reilly signals especially Santiago ARZUBIALDE, *Ejercicios Espirituales de San Ignacio. Historia y análisis*, Bilbao, Mensajero, 2009.

spiritual ministry. Ignatius recommends the person who accompanies to abstain from influencing the outcome of the accompanied person's spiritual process and rather to "leave the Creator to work directly with the creature, and the creature with the Creator and Lord."¹⁸ Discussing the Exercises in general and this passage in particular, American Church historian John O'Malley notes: "This immediate action of God on the individual is the fundamental premise of the *Exercises*."¹⁹

This grace comes with a price. God's direct involvement requires openness to God's leadership. Ignatian jargon speaks about "disordered attachments" and the need for "indifference": "For this, namely, that the Creator and Lord may work more surely in His creature, if the soul in question happens to be attached or inclined to something in an ill-ordered way, it is very useful for her to do all in her power to bring herself round to the contrary of that wrong attachment."²⁰ A similar detachment colours the famous "Take, Lord, and receive" prayer at the very end of the Exercises, in which the retreatant offers everything he or she has to God, requesting only his love in return.²¹

Both the conviction concerning God's immediate action and the ascetic requirement of interior freedom shed light on synodality. If synodality is about hearing what the Spirit is saying to the Church in our time, the Church needs to be willing to listen and hear. That holds true not only for the laity, but also for the hierarchy, and for each individual as much as for the People of God as a whole. What Paul Lakeland calls "the grace of self-doubt" is particularly necessary: a humble openness instead of totalized certitude.²²

Pope Francis articulates similar intuitions in his 2020 interview book with Austen Ivereigh. Discussing discernment, he distances himself from the fundamentalist because "he 'has' the truth" and rather promotes doubt and space: "a fruitful thought should always be unfinished in order to give space

¹⁸ "The Spiritual Exercises" (henceforth: *SpEx*), no. 15; I will use the translation included in *Personal Writings*, 279-360. Ignatius nuances that, outside the Exercises, one may promote religious life, a statement we would not make in the same way now.

¹⁹ See John O'MALLEY, *The First Jesuits*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993, 43.

²⁰ *SpEx*, no. 16. For indifference, see especially the so-called "Foundation and Principle," *SpEx*, no. 23. Cf. also the "generosity" that the retreatant is recommended to have towards God, *SpEx*, no. 5.

²¹ *SpEx*, no. 234; cf. various "set pieces" during the Exercises, e.g., the meditation on the three degrees of humility, *SpEx*, nos. 164-168, cf. no. 157.

²² Paul LAKELAND, "Reflections on the 'Grace of Self-Doubt'," in Dennis M. DOYLE, Timothy J. FURRY, and Pascal D. BAZZELL (eds.), *Ecclesiology and Exclusion. Boundaries of Being and Belonging in Postmodern Times*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 2012, 13-17; he owes the term to Margaret Farley, Professor Emerita of Christian Ethics.

to further development.”²³ In words that echo John XXIII’s *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, he states that “tradition is not a museum, true religion is not a freezer, and doctrine is not static but grows and develops.”²⁴ The driving force in all this is the Spirit: “The Spirit continues to guide us in our translating the Good News into different contexts (...). The Spirit shows us new things through what the Church calls ‘signs of the times’.”²⁵ Therefore, “we cannot speak of synodality unless we accept and live the presence of the Holy Spirit.”²⁶

While the point I have been making so far is not absent in the International Theological Commission’s 2018 text “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” it deserves to be stressed more and elaborated at greater length. Admittedly, the text opens its discussion of the theological basis for synodality with the statement that “[t]he principle of synodality is the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God.” At various instances, the document refers to “listening to what the Holy Spirit is saying,” and discusses several aspects that relate to what I have described above as freedom, such as the pilgrim nature of the Church and the need for conversion, including humility and the readiness to listen. Yet the underlying *reality* needs to be thematized more vigorously: it is God, or the Holy Spirit, who leads the Church. The document puts considerable effort into discussing the structural dimension of synodality: the people of God, the bishops, the pope. Obviously, this is an important dimension of synodality and one that involves substantial renewal, since the Church has not figured out the structural dimension of synodality. However, the primordial truth of synodality is that it is God who leads the Church, which comes with a spirituality of openness.

A bold vision of the Holy Spirit that highlights “his” action represents a considerable step forward in the Western tendency to forget or marginalize the

²³ IVEREIGH, *Let us Dream*, 54-55. Cf. similar comments in the 2013 interview with Spadaro, e.g., “the Jesuit must be a person whose thought is incomplete, in the sense of open-ended thinking,” and, “If a person says that he met God with total certainty and is not touched by a margin of uncertainty, then this is not good. For me, this is an important key. If one has the answers to all the questions—that is the proof that God is not with him. (...) The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt. You must leave room for the Lord, not for our certainties; we must be humble.” SPADARO, “A Big Heart Open to God.”

²⁴ IVEREIGH, *Let us Dream*, 57.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 86. Cf. also his comment on the Synod: “Yet the Spirit saved us in the end, in a breakthrough at the close of the second meeting of the Synod on the Family,” p. 88.

Holy Spirit (*Geistvergessenheit*).²⁷ Such a pneumatology dynamizes ecclesiology. As the American Benedictine scholar Kilian McDonnell has beautifully stated: “Without the mission of the Spirit the Church remains in fixity, a splendid stasis, frozen in time, without movement, without an end (...). Without the mission of the Son the mission of the Spirit is devoid of the flesh and materiality that make salvation history possible.”²⁸ Yet, it comes with a spiritual price, namely, detachment, inner freedom, and spiritual openness.

3 — *An Affective Undertaking*

How does discernment function concretely? Ignatian discernment works with one’s interior movements, a somewhat elusive term that Ignatius used for all that is going on in one’s inner world: thoughts, feelings, sentiments, spiritual impulses. For example, the concept of interior movements features prominently in the title of the Rules for discernment: “Rules by which to perceive and understand to some extent the various movements produced in the soul: The good that they may be accepted and the bad that they may be rejected.”²⁹ While that may suggest that discernment is an intellectual

²⁷ For a topical illustration of *Geistvergessenheit*, see my exploration of the epicleses, Jos MOONS, “The Holy Spirit ‘Artisan of the Eucharist’? A Critical Analysis and Evaluation of the Epicleses in the Eucharistic Prayers of the Roman Rite,” in *Horizons. The Journal of the College Theology Society*, 48 (2021), 69-98; it includes a discussion of the technical trinitarian-theological aspects that one cannot avoid when thematizing the Spirit’s agency. The Ignatian sources are remarkably reticent to refer to the Spirit. That *Geistvergessenheit* is usually explained from the suspicion of “illuminism.” Literature is mainly in Spanish. For a useful discussion on the link with illuminism, see Terence O’REILLY, “The Spiritual Exercises and Illuminism in Spain: Dominican Critics of the Early Society of Jesus,” in *Journal of Jesuit Studies*, 7 (2020), 377-402.

²⁸ Kilian McDONNELL, *The Other Hand of God: The Holy Spirit as the Universal Touch and Goal*, Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2003, 228-229; in the concluding pages of the book, he beautifully sketches the complementarity of Son and Spirit. Also worthwhile is John D. ZIZIOULAS, “Christ, the Spirit and the Church,” in *Being as Communion*, New York, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985, 123-142. It is essential to overcome the one-sidedly Christological concern that marked even Yves Congar; cf. the one-sided italics in his old-age statement, “Combien de fois l’ai-je dit: Si je n’avais qu’une conclusion à retenir de mes études sur le Saint-Esprit, je la formulerais ainsi: Pas de christologie sans pneumatologie, pas de pneumatologie sans christologie,” Yves CONGAR, *La parole et le souffle. Nouvelle édition, augmentée de la relecture de Rémi Chéno*, Paris, Mame-Desclée, 2010, 1.

²⁹ For these Rules, see *SpEx* 313-336; for the quote, see *SpEx*, no. 313. The standard commentary is Jules J. TONER, *A Commentary on Saint Ignatius’ Rules for the Discernment of Spirits. A Guide to the Principles and Practice*, Saint Louis, The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1982. For a more developed and applied recent commentary, see Timothy M. GALLAGHER,

undertaking – one *perceives, understands*, and then acts by accepting or rejecting – discernment is essentially an affective undertaking. The objective is to sense or feel God’s will; the Spanish word is *sentir*. That word features prominently in a substantial number of the many letters Ignatius wrote. After detailed instructions, Ignatius often concluded with the wish that God might give his grace so that the addressee might *sentir* God’s will and fulfil it.³⁰ For example, Ignatius once wrote to the Jesuits in Gandía (Spain) full of instructions and teachings on obedience, which he concluded: “By his infinite and supreme goodness may He deign to give us his perfect grace, so that we may sense [*sentir*] his most holy will and entirely fulfil it.”³¹

In other words, what mattered ultimately were not Ignatius’ insights and instructions but rather the Gandían Jesuits’ inner sensing of God’s will. Non-Jesuits also were advised to *sentir* God’s will. Ignatius concluded the famous letter on spirituality to the Spanish Benedictine sister Teresa de Rejadell: “I end by praying the most Holy Trinity to give us, through their infinite and supreme goodness, the fullness of grace, so that we may *sentir* their most holy will and fulfil it completely.”³² Writing to the Viceroy of Sicily Juan de Vega, he concluded: “may he deign to grant [you] his abundant grace, so that we may always *sentir* his most holy will and perfectly fulfill it.”³³

Ignatian scholars agree on the centrality of the word *sentir*,³⁴ yet its exact meaning merits a brief discussion. Clearly, *sentir* is not only about feeling in

The Discernment of Spirits. An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living, New York, Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005; and *Spiritual Consolation. An Ignatian Guide for the Greater Discernment of Spirits*, New York, Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007.

³⁰ In what follows, I reuse with slight adaptations the examples discussed in Jos MOONS, *The Art of Spiritual Direction. A Guide to Ignatian Practice*, New York, Paulist Press, 2021, 25-26.

³¹ *Letters and Instructions*, ed. and tr. Martin E. PALMER, John W. PADBERG and John L. MCCARTHY, St. Louis, The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2006, 201; letter dated 29 July 1547. I have replaced the verb “know” with *sentir*, based on the Spanish original.

³² See *Personal Writings*, 134-135; letter dated 18 June 1536. Here too, *Letters and Instructions* unfortunately translates know: “I close, praying that the Most Holy Trinity by its infinite and supreme goodness may bestow upon all of us abundant grace, so that we may know its most holy will and entirely fulfil it,” p. 22.

³³ *Letters and Instructions*, 307; letter dated 12 April 1550. I have changed “know” to “*sentir*.”

³⁴ Javier Melloni opens the lemma on this word with the sentence: “Estamos ante uno de los términos más característicos de la antropología y espiritualidad ignacianas. En el sentir están concentrados muchos componentes psíquicos y espirituales implicados en la experiencia de Dios vivida por S. Ignacio y propuesta por él.” Javier MELLONI, “Sentir,” in *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Ignaciana*, ed. Javier MELLONI a.o., Bilbao – Santander, Mensajero, 2007, 1631-1637. Cf. “It is for this reason that (as will be shown) the word *sentir* is central in the Ignatian vocabulary of discernment,” John C. FUTRELL, “Ignatian Discernment,” in *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits*, 2 (1970), 47-88, p. 53.

a superficial sense. When the Rules for Discernment state that one should *sentir y cognoscer* the inner movements of the soul, they mean that one should be in touch with one's thoughts, feelings, sentiments, and spiritual impulses in all their variety. Indeed, Jules J. Toner proposes to translate *sentir* in this case as "to get in touch with" and Timothy Gallagher read "to be aware of."³⁵ More generally, the word means something like "to experience," as Javier Melloni suggests in the *Diccionario de espiritualidad ignaciana*.³⁶

What is unclear in these translations is that *sentir* is not only about thoughts, experiences, or spiritual impulses themselves, but also about their "aftertaste" or "resonance." *Sentir* involves particularly what happens *in response to* or *in the wake of* a given thought, experience, or spiritual impulse. James Futrell describes this well: "In the process of discernment, *sentir* comes to mean above all a kind of 'felt-knowledge', an affective, intuitive knowledge possessed through the reaction of human feelings to exterior and interior experience."³⁷

A letter to Francis Borgia provides us with a powerful example of this "felt-knowledge" that grows interiorly as a fruit of the interaction with events and experiences. In 1552, Ignatius was confronted with the Emperor's wish to make the Jesuit nobleman Borgia a Cardinal, a wish that had the Pope's consent but contradicted Ignatius' wish and the policy of the Order. As Ignatius was unsure about his own hesitation, he prayed and meditated for clarity. This process consisted in reasoning and weighing advantages and disadvantages, in the context of prayer, with constant attention to their spiritual aftertaste. When at last his thinking was not accompanied by fear and unrest, but by a calm peace, Ignatius was certain about God's will. Usually calmness, freedom, and peace are indeed signs that one is on the "wavelength" of God.³⁸ The passage in which Ignatius describes the interaction between reflection and sentiments, and the "felt knowledge" that arises from them, is worth quoting as an illustration of the significance of the affective domain.³⁹

[T]here were times, as I turned over the matter in my mind and debated it, when I felt some sort of fear and I lost that freedom of spirit to speak out

³⁵ TONER, *A Commentary on Saint Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits*, 22-23, with extensive discussion in footnote 4; GALLAGHER, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 16-23.

³⁶ MELLONI, "Sentir," 1631. "En definitiva, podemos decir que la traducción moderna del sentir y sentimiento ignacianos es 'experimentar', 'hacer experiencia de algo'."

³⁷ FUTRELL, "Ignatian Discernment," 56.

³⁸ This rule of thumb must be nuanced in many ways; hence the fact that there are twenty-two Rules for Discernment, not one.

³⁹ "Refusing a Cardinal's hat," in *Personal Writings*, 245-246, at p. 245. The passage also illustrates the inner freedom involved and the readiness to be enlightened by God.

and prevent the business [= Borgia being named a Cardinal]. ‘How do I know what God Our Lord wants me to do?’ I thought, and I could not feel sure about preventing it. But at other times, when I began the normal meditations, I could feel these fears vanishing. I continued with this petition on several occasions, occasionally feeling fear, and occasionally the opposite. At last, on the third day, I felt during the normal meditation, and ever since constantly, that my mind was quite made up and that I was decided – in a way that was gentle and left me feeling quite free – to impede the nomination to the best of my ability before Pope and cardinals.

This example illustrates to what extent discernment is an *affective* undertaking. It is about entering into contact with one’s experience both at the immediate level and at the level of the aftertaste of thoughts and feelings.

Obviously, these experiences need to be understood and valued. All that glitters is not gold. Hence the word *cognoscere* in the title of the Rules. This links the aspect of sensing with the ultimate goal of discernment: to make concrete choices. For this, the Rules for Discernment are much needed hermeneutical tools. One of these rules posits that what feels like a drop of water gently falling unto a sponge probably indicates the way of God, and vice versa for what feels like a drop on a stone.⁴⁰ It is in the light of this wisdom that Ignatius evaluated the constancy, clarity, gentleness, and freedom with which his testimony concludes as sure signs of God’s will.

The affective dimension of Ignatian discernment suggests, in the context of synodality, that truth is a matter of the mind as much as the soul: the affective domain has revelatory value.⁴¹ Hearing the Spirit’s voice by sensing what is happening in one’s soul in response to a given idea challenges faith convictions that focus on the conceptual (orthodoxy), practical (charity, morals), or sacramental. Faith should include the affective realm.

Acknowledging the affective realm means that synodal processes should facilitate connecting with his domain. Therefore, Pope Francis’ initiative to introduce small moments of silence between contributions during Synods is a very good idea.⁴² Moreover, applying the Rules for Discernment to the specific

⁴⁰ *SpEx*, no. 335: “With those who go from good to better, the good angel touches the soul sweetly, lightly and gently, like a drop of water going into a sponge, while the bad spirit touches her sharply with noise and disturbance, as when a drop of water falls on a stone (...).”

⁴¹ This point deserves further elaboration; cf. Nicolas STANDAERT, “What Ignatius Did Not Know about Making Decisions,” in *The Way. A Journal of Contemporary Christian Spirituality Published by the British Jesuits*, 53/3 (2014), 32-55; and Mark A. MCINTOSH, *Discernment and Truth. The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge*, New York, Crossroads, 2004.

⁴² Discussed in, e.g., IVEREIGH, *Let Us Dream*, 85.

context of synods, making it clear that harmony, openness, and respect feature amongst the indicators of the way of God, with indicators to the contrary being fear, panic, distorting other people's views, accusations that discredit people or views, manipulations, and sticking to a fixed position.⁴³

Obviously, such an affective spirituality needs to be informed by a certain faith culture,⁴⁴ that is, "some form of prayer, familiarity with the gospel and the Church, service, and living christian virtues such as hope and love."⁴⁵ However, faith culture should not be narrowed down to obedience or weekly Church attendance: "Essentially, it concerns one's relationship to God lived at the service of others, which one may do in a variety of ways."⁴⁶

Conclusion

According to Myriam Wijlens, synodality is about "reconfiguring" ecclesiology and ecclesial life.⁴⁷ That means that it puts things together differently, with another structure and in another order. For example, synodality asks much more dialogue from the Church than is commonly the case, as the voice of all the members of the people of God must be included, yet it remains a process under hierarchical leadership. Synodality also involves shifts in ecclesial practice and spirituality. The virtue of humility remains significant yet transforms into a profound willingness to learn and, as such, it includes the bishops. Moreover, in relation to the lay faithful, humility is complemented with the courage to speak. These and other examples illustrate that synodal conversion is not about entirely new concepts, practices, and virtues, but about changing priorities.

Discernment is one of the elements of the synodal reconfiguration of the Church. Albeit somewhat loosely and without much elaboration, discernment is usually put forward as an important tool for listening to the Spirit. Thus,

⁴³ Interestingly, Pope Francis sometimes lists such criteria, e.g., in *ibid.*, 85-88.

⁴⁴ Cf. the fact that the Rules of Discernment feature in the context of a highly Christ-focused prayer trajectory.

⁴⁵ MOONS, "Synodality, the Holy Spirit, and Discernment of Spirits," 85.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* The documents of the International Theological Commission on the *sensus fidelium* (2014) and synodality (2018) unfortunately propose a too narrow version of this "faith culture."

⁴⁷ Myriam WIJLENS, "Reforming the Church by Hitting the Reset Button: Reconfiguring Collegiality within Synodality because of *sensus fidei fidelium*," in *The Canonist*, 8 (2017), 235-261. Wijlens is a consultant to the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops. Cf. Ormond RUSH, "Inverting the Pyramid: the *Sensus Fidelium* in a Synodal Church," in *Theological Studies*, 78 (2017), 299-325.

synodality makes its significance increase substantially. While obviously part of the Church's tradition, discernment has mostly been relevant marginally, namely for certain traditions of spirituality, such as the Benedictines and the Jesuits, and for specific moments, such as vocational discernment. With synodality, discernment becomes relevant for the entire Church, particularly for bishops.

That configuration may be qualified as *affective* for, at least in the Ignatian understanding, discernment is a deeply affective undertaking. It makes use of inner movements, that one first needs to acknowledge and then to sift. Obviously, God's leadership through Scripture and/or Revelation, the hierarchy, or canon law are not abolished, yet they are complemented with interiority and inner movements. Because of the importance of the affective domain, and in light of the fact that the affective realm is not regularly part of catechesis, seminary training, canon law, or theology, one might qualify this as an affective reconfiguration of the Church. It calls for education and training for all those involved since, without such formation, arguments and discussion will dominate synodal processes, instead of prayerfully listening and *sentir* what the Spirit is saying to the Church.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ That formation should also take into account the communitarian dimension of discernment, which I have not been able to discuss here, and which draws attention to the art of dialogue and conversation. How to develop a culture of listening? How to establish a habit of dialogue that prioritizes sharing over discussing and arguing, let alone condemning? Probably, formation with the help of "secular" expertise about conducting open conversations will prove helpful. For an accessible introduction, see Ladislav ŮRSY, *Discernment: Theology and Practice, Communal and Personal*, Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2020.