

Summary Document No 10

Discernment. It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves

At the first synod of the infant Christian Movement in Jerusalem some 20 years after the death of Jesus, a critical issue that would decisively determine the direction and shape of its Mission, was debated, amended and finally accepted by all those present, including apostles, Paul's companions, and elders.¹ It concerned whether non-Jews ('gentiles') could be accepted into the Christian community, and on what conditions. This first collective act of discernment and decision-making in the infant Church reconciled two quite polarised positions and the decision, clearly and authoritatively stated in a letter to the Christians at Antioch in Syria, was introduced with these words: "It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves ... (Acts 15: 28).²

Years before the synod, the Apostle Paul had chosen the Greek words '*diakrisis*' (διάκρισις), '*diakrinein*' and '*diakrinomai*' to explain in his letters to the communities he had founded a variety of related notions, including '*distinguishing*', '*differentiation of good and evil*', '*ability to distinguish between spirits*', and '*critical examination of the miraculous signs*'. He had also identified "*discernment of spirits*" (διακρίσεις πνευμάτων) as one of the *charismata* or gifts received at Baptism (1 Cor 12:10).³

For Paul, *diakrisis* is a communal exercise at the thinking, moral heart of the Christian community (*koinonia*) or society of shared identity and life in Christ. It is the process of *discerning* what is 'of God' and what is 'not of God', and it demands a rigorous honesty and transparent commitment to truth: "...do not despise prophesies, but test everything..." (1Thess 5:21)

Diakrisis or 'discernment' is central to the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola, where it has deep ecclesial and incarnational significance, is always to be exercised within the community of Faith and its living Tradition (*sentire cum ecclesia* - 'thinking with the mind and heart of the Church'), and always to be centered on Jesus Christ.

Whenever Paul had established a new Christian community and taught the newly baptised the basic values they should follow, he insisted they take their independence seriously, work out how to integrate those values by themselves, and deal confidently with the challenges of adult discipleship. Murphy-O'Connor (2008) writes:

It would be difficult to imagine a cleverer way for Paul both to make his own opinion heard and to insist that the responsibility for a decision lay with the community. Perhaps the situation will be clarified if we think in terms of values and structures. It is the role of an outside authority figure to insist on values, whereas it is the duty of the community to determine the structures in which the values come alive. Thus Paul believed that he should stress the need for the community to purify itself, but felt that he could not impose a solution. The community had to decide how precisely this should be effected. He could point them in the right direction, but they had to find the way themselves. He thereby very carefully balanced his duty of parental oversight (1 Cor 4:15) against the autonomy of the local church. He could suggest and guide, but

¹ In the early 2nd Century, the 'elders' were the regarded as "the college of apostles". Cf. Ignatius of Antioch (c.110 CE), Letters: *Magnesians* 6:1; *Trallians* 2: 1-3).

² This is the English translation in the Jerusalem Bible. The English Standard Version reads: "... it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..."

³ <https://charlesasullivan.com/4344/st-paul-on-the-discerning-of-spirits/>

his converts had to make the decision for themselves. Otherwise they would never mature as Christians.⁴

1 *Cor* 6: 1-8 is a powerful example of a crisis point in the Corinthian community, where Paul takes it for granted that the local community will have the inner resources to reach consensus and to solve its own problems without outside intervention.

The theological foundations of Paul's ecclesiology are his revolutionary doctrine articulated in *Galatians* 3: 27-28 – “there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus” – and his image of the Body of Christ where the interdependent parts constitute one Body (1 *Cor* 12), the community (*koinonia*) or society of shared being. *Inclusion* and *interdependence* are key constitutive ideas in Paul's understanding of Christ and the Church.

Discernment and the Plenary Council

In preparing for the Plenary Council in 2021/22 the bishops have increasingly called on all Australians to discern what the Spirit is saying:

We invite all Australians to engage in an open and inclusive process of listening, dialogue and discernment about the future of the Catholic Church in Australia. Your voice is needed – join in. Speak boldly and with passion, listen with an open and humble heart. With faith and guided by God's Holy Spirit, we journey together, toward the future.⁵

Many Australians have been deeply discerning God's will, interpreting the 'signs of the times' and listening to the voice of the Spirit - not just recently, but since Vatican II. What they have discerned – their *sensus fidei* - can be found in the 17,547 individual and group submissions written in response to the question: *What do you think God is asking of us in Australia at this time?* Their priorities have also been identified, with 'inclusion of all' as the first.⁶ That discernment has been further distilled in the Discernment Papers focused on the 6 National Themes.⁷

Just as the first synod in Jerusalem had to discern a solution to a critical issue, the Australian Plenary Council will have to discern solutions to a range of critical issues for the Church in this nation. *Diakrisis*, pondering together and in prayer on where the Spirit is leading, and arriving at consensus solutions is what the Council must do, so that all members of the Church in Australia can genuinely walk together on the same road and in the same direction. St John Chrysostom was emphatic: *synod* (*syn* 'together' + *hodos* 'road') and Church are synonymous.⁸ At the close of the Council, the participants should be able to say, clearly and authoritatively: “It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves”

⁴ Jerome Murphy O'Connor, “Paul the Pastor,” *Thinking Faith*, August 8, 2008. https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20080829_1.htm

⁵ Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB (Council President): <https://www.infoans.org/en/sections/news/item/51118-australia-archbishop-costelloe-sdb-appointed-president-of-2020-australia-plenary-council>

⁶ Peter Wilkinson, “*Plenary Council: Priority Issues identified in Diocesan Reports*”: Cf. Document # 97 at <https://www.catholicsforrenewal.org/documents.htm>

⁷ Plenary Council: <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/?s=discernment>

⁸ *Synodality and Primacy During the First Millennium: Towards a Common Understanding in service to the unity of the Church*. Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. (September 21, 2016) # 3 http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/ch_orthodox_docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20160921_synodalit_y-primacy_en.html