

# HOW TO MAKE A COMMUNAL DECISION

## INTRODUCTION

Our experiences of prayer in the *Spiritual Exercises* can help us to make decisions, either individual or communal. Making a communal decision occurs over a number of weeks of prayer and discussion.

Ignatius asks us to make an important life decision while contemplating the life of Jesus. *The Two Standards*, *The Three Types of Persons* and *The Three Kinds of Humility* help with this by giving us a context for recognizing our interior movements and learning the correct criteria for making a decision. By following this formal process, we are better able to attain some spiritual freedom and, therefore, make a better decision. The steps for making a communal decision are given below. Read them, but don't worry about remembering the steps, they will become familiar to you and your community as you use them.

## SIX STEPS IN DISCERNING A SIGNIFICANT COMMUNAL DECISION

1. The **first step** in making a communal decision is to **research an issue** you think might be of interest to you and your community. This step is taken in the light of the graces and insights given to you and your community during your prayer with the *Spiritual Exercises*. An example of an issue might be homelessness in your city. Leave time to share on various issues at your **community meeting**. Listen to the issues and the discussion around them. In a second round of sharing, identify any common themes or insights that emerge. Try to articulate a common issue.
2. The **second step** in this process is to **pray in the coming week** over what you have heard and then **compose an open-ended question**, i.e., one that has many answers, which you think is in the hearts and minds of community members. An example might be, "*How can our community help the homeless this year?*" Bring this to the next meeting and share it. If similar questions are given by other members, use part of your meeting to formulate

a clear open-ended question, such as, “*How can we help at the homeless shelter this year?*” If there is time begin listing possible answers.

3. The **third step** is to agree on a specific answer and reword it to the satisfaction of all. An example might be, “*We will help at the homeless shelter on five weekends this coming year*”. In addition, the group will compose its opposite, which in this example would be is, “*We will NOT help at the homeless shelter on five weekends this coming year.*” Each member takes these two statements home and before the next meeting lists the **advantages and disadvantages** of each statement, thus producing four columns. Bring your four columns to the next community meeting. Share your four columns by going around the circle, each person giving his or her reasons for *one column* until the community has a complete list for that column. Do the same for the other three columns. Pray over what you have heard in the sharing in the coming week. Come to the next meeting with a **provisional decision**, having read step four.
4. At this meeting each member first shares one reason, taken from the four columns, which influenced him/her the most, without naming their provisional decision. This process helps the group recognize whether there is **CONSENSUS**. The description of **CONSENSUS** is found below. Read this **before** your meeting. If consensus is evident, then the fourth step follows, which is each person, in turn, indicates his or her **provisional decision**. A **communal** provisional decision is then made.

## **CONSENSUS**

*Consensus in a group is a special form of confirmation. It is not simply majority rule or unanimity. It means that everyone in the group will be satisfied they and others have been listened to, that the gifts of each member have been acknowledged and that a free and effective process has been followed. The group will know itself as loved by God. Members will have a sense of wonder and of being drawn into the future, despite the group’s limitations and past sufferings. The group will experience consolation as a gift from the Holy Spirit.*

*The group will have an awareness of transcendence and experience the beauty, truth, and goodness of God as well as union with God. The fruits of consensus for the community are:*

- *the consoling insight of seeing the Paschal mystery in the life of the group, since the decision means dying to self for the sake of the universal community of life,*
- *group members may feel a special sense of wholeness and consolation,*
- *all are committed to the decision and its implementation with realistic hope and joy,*
- *an experience of a freeing and creative love operating in the group.*

*Consensus is experienced as a **unanimous decision**, made in true consolation, that is to say, all are satisfied with the process and the decision. It may also be experienced as a **high degree of agreement**. If this is the case, try to get unanimity by asking those not in agreement to state their objections to the decision and discover what will satisfy them in implementing the decision. Keep in mind the reasons against the decision, even as the group implements it. If there is a **low degree of agreement**, the group would be wise to revisit the general issue and look for another proposal for discernment.*

5. The **fifth step** is **SEEKING CONFIRMATION** of the decision. If consensus is reached, go round the circle once again, this time indicating whether or not you experienced consolation. Describe your experience briefly. If you are not in agreement with the communal decision, state your objections and make suggestions for change.
6. The **sixth step** is **implementing the decision**. Many a well-discerned decision is lost in implementation. Make sure that communications and delegation are dealt with as soon as possible after the decision is made. As the group works through various items of implementation it will become aware of the costs to the group. When members face these costs in union with Christ suffering and still wish to do the work, they will have another experience of consolation.

**On the following pages you will find two examples of Ignatian prayer, which may help you and your community make a *significant communal decision*.**

# TWO PRAYER EXERCISES FOR UNDERTAKING A COMMUNAL DECISION

## **PRAYER HOUR 1**

### A MOMENT OF DECISION

#### **DIRECTIONS FOR PRAYER**

I contemplate the action of the early Christian community in **Acts 11:27-30** as an example of a communal discernment.

#### **OFFERING OF MYSELF**

I beg God for grace that all my intentions, actions and operations may be directed purely to the praise and service of the Holy Trinity.

#### **A PREFACE TO THE MYSTERY**

It is not always possible, due to time and circumstances, to use a formal process of decision-making. However, the weeks of prayer over the *Spiritual Exercises* are times of grace and spiritual growth for communities. They provide the foundation for making an important communal decision. This work involves increasing the beauty, diversity and novelty in the universal community of life by living in an attitude of forgiveness and by befriending humans, plants and animals that are suffering or oppressed. When we do this, we contribute to the evolution of greater freedom for the cosmos.

#### **BRINGING MY WHOLE SELF TO THE MYSTERY**

I read **Acts 11:27-30** and place myself with the early Christian community.

#### **THE DESIRE OF MY HEART**

I ask for an intimate knowledge of Jesus Christ, who became a creature like one of us for the sake of the universal community of life, that I may imitate Him in His respect for all life and love Him in the fullness of communion with all creation.

#### **SOME POINTS FOR REFLECTION AND CONSIDERATION**

**First point:** I see the disciples making a decision to contribute to famine

relief. I hear what they are saying.

**Second point:** The reading from Acts describes a moment of decision for the early Christian community. As I reflect on this reading, I think of how the Spirit was active in this young Christian community and what resulted from the decision they made.

**Third point:** I consider the four elements that precede a good decision. They are: **first**, an intimate knowledge of Christ's beauty, goodness, truth and oneness with us and the Trinity; **second**, a knowledge of true and false impulses coming to us from our cultural, political and social environments; **third**, an awareness of our usual ways of making decisions and meeting a commitment; **fourth**, responding with a deep desire to be with Christ in His work.

## **DIALOGUE**

I ask Mary to ask Jesus to help our faith community focus on making a communal decision and to guide us to an issue that is important for our community. I go with Mary to Jesus to ask for the same guidance. I go with Mary and make the same request of the Trinity.

I close with the prayer Jesus taught us.

## **PREPARATION FOR SHARING MY PRAYER**

As I recall my prayer with step one, I write in my journal what I wish to share with my community.

## **PRAYER HOUR 2**

### **JESUS TEACHES HIS FOLLOWERS**

#### **DIRECTIONS FOR PRAYER**

This contemplation on Jesus' teaching can help us when we begin the process for making a communal decision.

#### **OFFERING OF MYSELF**

I beg God for grace that all my intentions, actions and operations may be directed purely to the praise and service of the Holy Trinity.

#### **PREFACE TO THE MYSTERY**

Freedom can be thought of as external. So, one is a *free citizen* or *free to move*. Freedom is also an internal disposition. In Jesus there is a new stress on *interior freedom*, and on making decisions to start something unpredictably new. Jesus brings about the latter by being with the poor as a friend and healer, living in an attitude of forgiveness that informs all His words and actions and making liberation and freedom an interior movement, as well as an external event. His life provides us with a way to liberate and restore healthy relationships of all in Earth's community of life. He is an evolutionary force for freedom, and hopes we will follow His example.

#### **BRINGING MY WHOLE SELF TO THE MYSTERY**

I read **Luke 6:27-38** or **Matthew 5:38-48** and place myself in the crowd, listening to Jesus.

#### **THE DESIRE OF MY HEART**

I ask for an intimate knowledge of Jesus Christ, who became a creature like one of us for the sake of the universal community of life, that I may imitate Him in His respect for all life and love Him in the fullness of communion with all creation.

#### **SOME POINTS FOR REFLECTION AND CONSIDERATION**

**First point:** I see and hear Jesus talking to the crowd, giving us His new vision for the community of life, one of compassion and forgiveness. I watch the expressions of amazement or, perhaps, disbelief on the faces of those in the crowd.

**Second point:** Darwinian thinkers believe that morality is *hardwired* in our brains and therefore, determined by our genes. So the choice is not whether an action is moral or immoral, but whether or not to chose the nerve cell activity in our brains, which we call morality. This attitude is an example of what John Haught calls “a metaphysics of the past” because it “rules out the coming of something genuinely new”. (*God After Darwin*, p. 86) Jesus is the genuinely new expression of *spiritual freedom* giving us a way to make good decisions by cultivating a forgiving, loving attitude.

**Third point:** I ask for the humble freedom of Jesus as I consider the steps in making a Communal Decision. Are there any tasks or issues facing my community? What are they? I develop an open-ended question related to the one I consider most significant, and list the answers to this question. I use this for entering into a discerning process for making a communal decision.

## **DIALOGUE**

I ask Mary to ask Jesus to help my faith community and me to focus on and make a communal decision and to guide us to an issue that is important for our community. I go with Mary to Jesus to ask for the same guidance. I go with Mary and make the same request of the Trinity.

I close with the prayer Jesus taught us.

## **PREPARATION FOR SHARING MY PRAYER**

As I recall my prayer with step one, I write in my journal what I wish to share with my community.

## IF YOU WISH, REFLECT ON ANY OF THESE ADDITIONAL POINTS

*You may find them helpful in making a communal decision.*

**First point:** I remember that the disposition for making a good communal decision is one that includes all members of Earth's community of life. Reflection on relationships with our plant and animal kin, and their relationships with each other, is one way to think about being united with a common purpose and mind. I read **Philippians 2:1-11** and enter into the mystery of being united with my CLC group and Earth's community of life. Jesus Christ became a creature like one of us for the sake of this community. I seek to imitate Him in His respect for all life and love Him in the fullness of communion with all creation.

**Second point:** I reflect on the following story of friendship with trees and ask myself how this friendship affects the decisions of those involved.

*The Chipko movement is a method of non-violent resistance based on Gandhi's method of satyagraha. It acts to prevent the destruction of rural forests in India, which are a critical resource for rural villagers. For decades, the trees in these forests were increasingly felled by industry. The first Chipko action took place spontaneously in 1973. Chipko leaders and participants are mostly women acting to preserve their communities and their livelihood. They place their bodies between the trees and the loggers' saws and axes. The name "Chipko" comes from a word meaning "embrace" and that is what the women do; they put their arms around the tree they wish to protect. They know what many of us don't; that the members of Earth's community of life are our kin, deserving of respect, needing to be listened to and valued and taken into account when making decisions.*

**Third point:** I reflect on the story below, an illustration of being united in love, with a common purpose and a common mind. I draw fruit from my reflection.

This excerpt, from an essay by Joy Williams, describes the author's experience of buying 5 adjacent lots, totalling one acre, on a two-lane road in

Florida, 30 years ago. Since then, all the land adjacent to her acre has become a housing subdivision. Roads were built, trees and wildlife uprooted, driven out or killed. The author decided to let her acre just be- no building, except for the small cypress house and cottage already there, no lawn, no garden. In 1990, she had a wall built around the acre.

*“Behind the wall was an Edenic acre...Although the wall did not receive social approbation, its approval from an ecological point of view was resounding. The banyan, as though reassured by the audacious wall, flung down dozens of aerial roots. The understory flourished; the oaks soared, creating a great grave canopy. It was odd. I fancied that I had made an inside for the outside to be safe in...Inside was cool and dappled, hymned with birdsong... An osprey roosted each night in a casuarina that leaned out over the lagoon, a tree of no good reputation and half-dead, but the osprey deeply favoured it, folding himself into it invisibly in a few seconds each nightfall. A pair of yellow-crowned night herons nested in a slash pine...A single acre was able to nurture so many lives, including mine. Its existence gave me great happiness.” (One Acre, by Joy Williams, in Harper’s magazine, February 2001)*

**Fourth point:** I reflect on these wise sayings.

- *“Better than a thousand useless words is one single word that gives peace.”* (a saying of the Buddha)
- *“Forgiving is the only reaction that does not merely react but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act that provokes it.”* (Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*, p. 241)