

PROCESSES FOR COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT:
DIOCESAN SYNODS AND ASSEMBLIES

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Some years ago the English theologian, Nicholas Lash, reflecting on belief in God in contemporary western culture, repeatedly used the image of a school when referring to the Church. At one point he said, "this, . . . is the kind of school the church exists to be: a place within the wider culture in which contemplativity, attentiveness, openness to truth, all truth, might—even in the present darkness, conflict and confusion—be learned in patient labour waiting on the ending of God's utterance, God's word of peace."¹ The Church at every level is a place of attentiveness and learning, a place of discernment and response to God's word, calling people into communion of life with one another and ultimately with the community of life that is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Every effort at reform and renewal in the Church has to be grounded in attentiveness to God's word revealed in the Scriptures, in the life of the whole Church, and in the wider world. Therefore, a diocesan synod or assembly as an exercise in reform and renewal must listen attentively to the promptings of God's Spirit and in the light of this effect the necessary reform.

In the Irish context, within which I work, there have been no diocesan synods since the end of Vatican II; but practically every diocese has had some form of assembly since the early 1980's. It is these, rather than synods, that have been used to effect renewal at the diocesan level. I suspect that, consciously or otherwise, the assemblies were deemed to be more flexible and possibly more effective instruments of renewal and reform than synods. As Giles Routhier has observed, a formal synod is not necessarily always an expression of the synodality of the Church; nor is synodality confined to the convocation of formal synods.² Obviously, from a juridical perspective they are different realities. Nevertheless, the 1997

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¹ "Among Strangers and Friends: Thinking of God in our Current Confusion," in *Finding God in all Things: Essays in Honour of Michael Buckley, SJ*, eds. Michael J. Himes and Stephen J. Pope, (New York: Crossroad, 1996) 62.

² See comments by Giles Routhier, "Amérique du Nord. Pratiques synodales au Canada," in *Synods and Synodality: Theology, History, Canon Law and Ecumenism in new contact. International Colloquium Bruges 2003*, eds. Alberto Melloni and Silvia Scatena (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005) 345-346.

Instruction on Diocesan Synods does suggest that the principles governing synods should also in general govern other diocesan assemblies.³ However, their pastoral outcomes and effectiveness in a local church can be very similar.

In this paper I propose to review, firstly, but briefly the theological nature of the synod and assembly, as this work has already been more than adequately done by others. I then propose to look more extensively at the nature and theological significance of the discernment process. Finally, I will suggest that this process is one that may provide some compliment to the juridic accent normally associated with synodal gatherings and their processes.

What is a Diocesan Synod?

The Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops describes the diocesan synod as "a consultative gathering or assembly, convoked and chaired by the Bishop, to which priests and other faithful of the particular Church are called . . . so as to help the Bishop in his task of leading the diocesan community."⁴ In summary the same document states: "[I]t is an act of episcopal governance and an event of communion."⁵ It is a means for assisting the bishop in advancing "the good of the whole diocesan community."⁶ The synod provides an opportunity for the bishop to exercise his teaching role in the Church, "discerning, instructing and correcting," so that all may know and share in the same ecclesial faith. Already, these statements with their emphasis on the role of the bishop could easily obscure the fact that a synod or a diocesan assembly is not simply the affair of the bishop but is an event that expresses the true nature of the local church, one of whose characteristics is synodality.

³ "In so far as 'diocesan assemblies' or other such ecclesial gatherings resemble the object and composition of diocesan Synods, and to ensure their legal effect in the government of a particular diocese, it is desirable that they should be formally situated within the canonical discipline of the Church by reference to the prescriptions of law currently in force and by this present Instruction" (Congregation for Bishops and Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, *Instruction on Diocesan Synods*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cbishops/documents/rc_con_cbishops_doc_20041118_diocesan-synods-1997_en.html)

⁴ Congregation for Bishops, *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops*, (Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops) 184, par. 167.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Canon 460.

The Local Church: A Structured Communion

Gilles Routhier has amply demonstrated the richness of synodality as a defining characteristic of the local church and how this in turn has implications for all the churches that constitute the whole Ecclesia.⁷ In the first instance, synodality expresses and actualizes in a concrete way, like the Eucharistic celebration, that the Church is a communion of persons, who are called into communion of life with one another and ultimately into communion of life with the Triune God. All who are members of the ecclesial communion are equal in their dignity, although their roles may vary, whether they are participating in a Eucharistic celebration or a synodal process or simply living out their Christian vocation in the course of their daily lives. Thus the bishop has a particular role of teaching, sanctifying, and governing within the hierarchical structure of the local Church and in communion with the entire Church and the other members of the episcopal college. While he re-presents the gospel and the apostolic faith to his particular community, he is also situated in the midst of this community and ministers in a fashion that is collaborative and complementary to the contributions of all the baptised and other ordained ministers.

The Bishop in the Service of Communion

Vatican II emphasized the fact that the bishop has a responsibility to listen carefully to his presbyters and all the faithful so that he can be more effective in promoting their welfare, encouraging their collaboration, building up the Church, and so giving glory to the Father.⁸ Bishops are recommended to initiate and promote dialogue in a spirit of charity and prudence, with their presbyters and all the baptized, so that they might carry on the mission of the Church in a way that is suitably adapted to the needs and circumstances of their local church.⁹ Presbyters in their parishes, too, are urged to adopt an attentive disposition towards those in their care, so that they can recognize the signs of the times and support their parishioners in making the most appropriate responses in the situation. Presbyters are strongly encouraged to notice the gifts of the laity, to

⁷ "La synodalité de l'Église locale," *Studia Canonica* 26 (1992) 111-161; *idem*, "Les implications, pour l'Église universelle, de la reviviscence des synods diocésain," *CLSA Proceedings* 57 (1995) 355-376; *idem*, "Les 'Remonstrances' adressées aux évêques du Québec: expression contemporaine d'un droit ancien?," *Science et Esprit* 59/2 (2007) 309-332.

⁸ *Lumen gentium* 27.

⁹ *Christus Dominus* 13, 16 and 30.

ensure that these are well used and coordinated for the good of all, and to be confident in trusting the ability of the faithful to take the initiative in pastoral action.¹⁰ The council in its various documents shows that the life, ministry, and well-being of the Church is not the sole responsibility of any one person or group but is a corporate task, where various members have their own particular roles to play. It is these foundational principles established in the conciliar documents, then, that are reflected in the code.

The 1983 code in its first canon on the diocesan synod decrees that the membership of the synod is to include "priests and other Christian faithful of a particular church".¹¹ The previous code had restricted membership to the clergy, as had been the custom for the greater part of the Church's history.¹² This immediately signals a very significant change in the nature of the consultations and deliberations that occur in the synod. Thus it becomes a forum in which there is a greater representation of all the people of the diocese, their needs and concerns, their insights and wisdom, their aptitudes and willingness to contribute to the building up of the Body of Christ. This new inclusiveness confirms a greater appreciation for the nature of the Church as a communion of all its members. It also gives a specific opportunity for the faithful to exercise rights and duties ascribed to them earlier in the code whereby they are to be facilitated in building up the Body of Christ (c. 208), promoting the growth of the Church (c. 210), making known their spiritual needs, (c. 212 §2) and expressing their opinions on matters pertaining to the life of the Church (c. 212 §3). It provides a balance in the hierarchical structuring of the Church and ensures that episcopal governance is enriched by the serious contributions and cooperation of all the baptized. It witnesses to the fact that the ministry in the Church is an organic function and not a polarized or divisive reality.¹³

The convocation of a synod or an assembly is not left solely to the discretion of the bishop; he is obliged to consult his presbyteral council before doing so, although he is not absolutely bound by their counsel (c. 461 §1). This obligation, however, does highlight something of the

¹⁰ *Presbyterorum ordinis* 9.

¹¹ Canon 460.

¹² See James A. Coriden, "The Diocesan Synod: An Instrument for Renewal for the Local Church," *The Jurist*, 34 (1974) 68-93.

¹³ See John P. Beal, "The Exercise of the Power of Governance by Lay People: State of the Question," *The Jurist* 55 (1995) 1-92.

structuring of the local church as governed by the bishop in collaboration with his presbyterium. During the revision of the code consideration was given to obliging the bishop to consult the diocesan pastoral council, but this was rejected on the understanding that the synod was an act of governance of the diocese and therefore exceeded the competence of the pastoral council.¹⁴ While the bishop may not have the duty to consult the pastoral council, he still has the right to do so; and in certain situations prudence may demand no less. Furthermore, it is to be understood that in forming his decision to convoke a synod or an assembly the bishop will listen to all the members of his Church in the course of his pastoral visitations and in his normal round of pastoral engagements throughout the diocese. Thus, the whole local church has its various mechanisms, formal and informal, for communicating with its chief pastor and making known its views which he should hear with patience and charity. Not every instance of a bishop's ministry must be legislated for in order for it to be useful and fruitful.

Frequency of a Synod or Assembly

While the code leaves the determination of the frequency of these synods or assemblies to the discretion of the bishop, prudence and good pastoral governance would seem to recommend that they should occur on a reasonably regular basis or at least that they should be summoned as the pastoral needs of the diocese begin to change or significant issues emerge that need addressing in a comprehensive fashion. The Church is *semper reformanda*, a condition which is as applicable at the local level as it is at the universal level. As an event or process, the assembly or synod can act as a powerful catalyst for all the people of a diocese to revisit and renew their own commitments to the gospel and explore ways of expressing it in their particular circumstances.

An Important Kerygmatic Function

A synod or an assembly can serve an important kerygmatic function in the local Church. It can bring the gospel light to bear on particular concerns within the community, enabling people to engage with them while becoming renewed in vision and energy. The occasion of the synod or assembly can be a moment for catechesis in a diocese regarding the nature

¹⁴ See Giorgio Corbellini's commentary on the diocesan synod in *Exegetical Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* English language edition, ed. Ernest Caparros (Montreal: Wilson and Lafleur; Chicago, IL: Midwest Theological Forum, 2004) III/2, 1047.

of the Church, the responsibility that all share for its mission and well-being, or to draw attention to a particular issue in need of reflection.¹⁵ Indeed, the influence of the assembly or synod can extend far beyond the confines of the Church as others see and hear of the efforts expended by the community to renew its mission. This can occur by means of the publicity that the event will receive from Church and secular media organizations.

A Task of Inculturation

A diocesan synod recognizes that the Church is local as well as universal, that it is an incarnate reality, situated in a particular place and time, receiving some of its human features from the local cultural and socio-political realities of the place where it is situated. It is the appropriation of some of these features which helps the Church to minister credibly *in situ*. Indeed, in our time, the provision of a mechanism for listening, sharing, and discussing issues of common concern is one that has a particular appeal, given our contemporary desire for openness, accountability, and transparency with respect to all our institutions. While synodality is not to be confused with participative democracy, nevertheless the value given to this form of governance today lends an appeal to the natural synodality of the Church's own life and contributes to the reception of acts of diocesan or episcopal governance. Anything that smacks of monarchical or autocratic styles of leadership is not well received, at least in modern developed democracies. Furthermore, while the Church may have its own rich heritage to call upon in terms of an ecclesiology of communion, it should not be closed to learning from good practice in other institutions which can help to purify its own structures and it may require some humility to admit and accept this on occasion.

A Pneumatological Reality

The listening and learning that characterize a synodal process are an expression of the presence and action of the Spirit in the midst of the community. Each member of the community is gifted individually by virtue of baptism and is a temple of the Holy Spirit. The whole community is also gifted by the same Spirit enabling it to embody the presence of the risen Christ in the world. Thus, the same Spirit is working in each and in all towards the same goal, effecting a communion of life and love of all for one another and of all for the Father.

¹⁵ *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops*, 188, par. 173.

A Doxological Dimension

Finally, as Routhier has rightly observed, a diocesan synod or assembly can have a doxological dimension. In and through the processes of the event people hear once again the call of the Father to listen to his Son, whose voice is mediated by the power of the Spirit. Having heard the word of God addressed again in a variety of voices and in the final outcome of the proceedings authorized by the bishop, the local church is invited to respond to this fresh call with enthusiasm and renewed commitment. This response is an act of faith and an act of worship. Indeed this is why it is recommended that the synod begin and end in the context of a significant liturgical celebration.¹⁶

A Process of Discernment

Although the code does not use the word 'discernment' in its canons on diocesan synods, the Instruction on Diocesan Synods does speak of the bishop exercising a role of discernment during the synod. It states: "[H]aving heard the members of the Synod, his will be the duty of discernment of the various opinions expressed, he will scrutinize everything and retain that which is good."¹⁷ The implication here is that the bishop will be attentive to the discussions and debates taking place lest participants begin to move in a direction that is not consistent with the teaching of the Church or its accepted practices. Again at the conclusion of the synod the bishop is to make another act of discernment, now "seeking to discern the will of the Spirit" at this time in the diocese, so that the decrees or decisions are "not the imposition of an arbitrary will."¹⁸ This suggests a more serious act of discernment. However, it is noteworthy that in all of the discussion about synods and assemblies little attention is paid to a process of discernment as such.

Discernment has always been esteemed in the Christian community not merely as part of the virtue of prudence but as one of the direct gifts of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ Generally, it is thought of as an individual activity

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, par. 174.

¹⁷ *Instruction* 1.2

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ A most helpful survey of approaches to discernment is to be found in Mark McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth* (New York: Crossroad, 2004); also Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996). Some useful and general articles on discernment include: Benedicta Ward, "Discernment: A Rare Bird," *The Way Supplement* 64 (1989) 10-18; *idem*, "Towards a

where a person attempts to discover God's will for them in their particular circumstances. As the earliest history of the Church testifies, it is also a communal activity; and it is on this aspect that we will focus here as a way of contributing to an important dimension of the synodal process.

According to Ladislav Örsy, "communal discernment in its best and purest form is the articulation of a contemplative insight into the working of God's grace in a community."²⁰ It is a contemplative insight because it depends less on human effort and more on God's gracious gift: "it is the discovery of God's plan for the community through the light of faith infused into the minds of the members."²¹ It is a communal process where the community as such judges where God is calling it to be at this time. It "engages simultaneously and interactively all or a representative group of a community functioning as a community."²² True discernment relies not just on the demands of the moment; it has to engage seriously with the way in which God has interacted with humankind in the past, for which it must turn to the scriptures. As Luke Timothy Johnson points out: "The Word of God in scripture, therefore, is an essential aspect of the church's discernment in decision making. It is in that Word—that set of symbols and stories—that the church finds the grammar for deciphering the Word spoken here and now."²³ He later defines discernment as "that habit of faith by which we are properly disposed to hear God's Word, and properly disposed to respond to that Word in the practical circumstances of our lives."²⁴ Johnson shows very comprehensively how the interplay

Theology of Discernment," *Ibid.*, 129–140. On communal discernment see John Carroll Futrell, SJ, "Ignatian Discernment," *Studies in Jesuit Spirituality* 2 (1970) 47–88; *idem* "Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience," *Studies in Jesuit Spirituality* 4 (1972) 159–192; Ladislav Örsy, "Towards a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment," *Studies in Jesuit Spirituality* 2 (1970) 129–176; Jules Toner, SJ, "A Method of Communal Discernment," *Studies in Jesuit Spirituality* 3 (1971) 121–152; Howard J. Gray, "Foundations," *The Way Supplement* 85 (1996) 7–16; Andrew Hamilton, "Correct Weight for Communal Discernment," *Ibid.*, 17–27; Virginia Varley, "Fostering the Process of Discerning Together," *Ibid.*, 84–97. See also David Lonsdale, *Listening to the Music of the spirit: the art of discernment* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1992); Jules Toner, *A Commentary on St Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits* (St. Louis, 1992); *Discerning God's Will: Ignatius Loyola's Teaching on Christian Decision-making* (St. Louis, 1991).

²⁰ "Towards a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment," 134.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Jules Toner, "A Method for Communal Discernment of God's Will," 125.

²³ *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church*, 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

between the experience of the community and individuals within it with their scriptures and faith tradition can lead to significant insight and deeper self-understanding by the community itself.

While in modern times attention to processes of discernment tend to be associated with those in the Ignatian tradition, it is an approach that has a long history in the Church, whether one takes the Council of Jerusalem, later councils, or the early monastic communities. The Rule of Benedict has been described as "a guide to discernment through daily life."²⁵ Indeed Mark McIntosh has demonstrated how discernment played such a central role in the works of people like Origen, Augustine, Maximus the Confessor, Catherine of Siena, and many other important figures in the history of the Church.

In the early Dominican tradition, the structures of governance in the Order marked a new departure in discerning pastoral needs and responding to them. The structures of governance were so designed as to facilitate the maximum representational participation by all the members in the decision making processes of the Order. All office holders, whether the Master General, a Provincial Prior or a Conventual Prior, were answerable to their respective chapters, never to an individual. Numerous checks were set in place to ensure that decisions made at chapters were executed. This was done by the appointment of *visitors* and *diffinitores*, who visited individual friaries and provinces and then reported back on their findings to the next chapter, both provincial and general, where remedial action could be taken.²⁶ As will be shown below, a discernment process must end in good fruits. The Dominican tradition certainly attended to that element of the process. Their whole approach implied that a community or the Order as a whole was a gifted and responsible body and that wisdom and prudence were not confined to those with official positions.

However, Ignatius of Loyola paid more attention to discernment and did more to systematize it than any other person in the Christian tradition. Most people are aware of the Spiritual Exercises as a method for individual discernment. Less known, but also foundational for communal dis-

²⁵ Benedicta Ward, "Discernment: A Rare Bird," 16.

²⁶ For a full account of the governance structures of the early Dominicans see G. R. Galbraith, *The Constitutions of the Dominican Order, 1216–1360* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1925); for further sources see André Vauchez and Cécile Caby, *L'Histoire de moines, chanoines et religieux au moyen âge: Guide de recherche et documents, L'Atelier du médiéviste* 9 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003) 142–146

cernment, is the "Deliberatio primum partum," the discernment process developed by Ignatius and his early companions as they struggled with the decision whether to establish a fully constituted religious community or not. The main features of the communal discernment process proposed by Ignatius can then provide us with a point of comparison for diocesan synods or assemblies.

A basic presupposition for discernment, according to Ignatius, is that God speaks to human persons and communities in and through the circumstances of time and place in which they find themselves. It is here that they must choose the course of action that best responds to God's word. Thus, a dialectic is set up between God's word in Scripture and the word which God is addressing to persons here and now. The insight arrived at as a result is more than intellectual knowledge, it is a kind of "felt-knowledge," involving the intellect and the senses.²⁷ Secondly, within the Jesuit tradition of discernment is another presupposition that all the members of the Society are prepared to achieve the end of the whole body, in their case it is "the ever greater service of Christ in his Church in companionship by going anywhere in the world to help people in need of Christ."²⁸ There are then three basic steps in the discernment process: 1) prayer for light from the Holy Spirit; 2) gathering all the possible evidence for judgment; 3) the continuing effort to find confirmation during each step of the discernment process as well as for the final judgment.

Prayer of Discernment

Dedication to prayer is essential for authentic discernment, so that those involved will be as free as possible from "self-seeking, prejudice or fixations caused by insecurity" and free to allow the light of Christ to shine on all the dimensions of the issues for consideration.²⁹ The purpose is primarily to achieve true freedom, not a divine revelation about what to do but an attitude of genuine openness to the work of the Spirit. This needs to be accompanied by a faith that is convinced that God can lead persons to their proper goal and a willingness to do it once it has been revealed to them. Such a process requires time and patience because God's ways are not ours and the unfolding of God's plan is a divine prerogative. It is one of the advantages of a serious discernment process that it gives

²⁷ See John C. Futrell, "Ignatian Discernment," 56-57.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

as much attention to the will and the affections as to the intellect and tries to achieve a harmony between them.

Gathering the Data

The priority given to prayerful preparation of attitudes and dispositions is neither an alternative nor a substitute for becoming well informed about the issues to be considered. All the possible evidence must be gathered and analyzed in a respectful manner, so that this too can be reflected upon in prayer. Having all of the evidence required to make a good decision is critical, and the lack of it often hampers a fruitful discernment process. An integral dimension of this information gathering is that one listens to others and what the Spirit may be saying to them in the depths of their prayer. "In the individual's search for God's will, it is not the intellectually excellent, the learned and or the astute, who are necessarily capable of success. It is rather the pure of heart."³⁰ It is why the rule of St. Benedict also counsels that the youngest should speak first, because God often uses the least likely as instruments of the Divine word and also by speaking first they are not intimidated by the seniors who may have other insights. Furthermore, the Spirit works in all members but in a way that is organic, with a view to building up the whole body.

The disposition adopted as the group reviews the data is also significant and can be approached in a way that is sensitive to the work of the Spirit. Commentators note that dialogue rather than debate is the more appropriate approach in this stage of the process. This requires attentive listening to the various presentations that are made. In a debate, which is the normal parliamentary way of proceeding, one side attempts to persuade the other, usually from a predetermined perspective and with a view to convincing or indeed vanquishing the other side.³¹ This is hardly an appropriate way for a group of people attempting to hear what God, through the Spirit, is saying to them, to reach the truth of the matter. While debate is valuable and often essential in human affairs, it does not

³⁰ Jules Toner, "A Method for Communal Discernment of God's Will," 135.

³¹ Here too the early Dominicans made provision in their chapters for the maximum participation by the membership of the Order in the regulation of its affairs to avoid sectional interests or lobbyists monopolizing agendas. The membership of a general chapter was to be composed for two successive years of elected members, one from each province, and in the third year of the provincial priors. Furthermore, a general chapter could change the *constitutions* only by passing an ordinance to that effect at three successive general chapters.

seem to be the most appropriate way of proceeding in a discernment process. As options are reviewed then, in the Ignatian tradition, the usual way is to put the negative positions first, then reflect on these prayerfully and later do the same for the positive alternatives.

The Final Confirmation

Finally, there is a need for confirmation for the judgment reached in response to God's word. This can be an internal confirmation, an external confirmation by authority, or both. Internally, those making the final judgment should experience a profound inner peace and contentment, manifested in a deeper faith, hope, and love and a willingness to carry out the decision reached. External approval was vitally important in the Jesuit discernment process, whether by the local superior, the superior general, or the pope. Unless a decision taken is confirmed by just authority justly exercised then it cannot be claimed as following the plan of God. The early Jesuits were guided by a sense of the unity of the mission of the Society and that of the Church. Obviously, in the case of a diocesan assembly or synod the approval of the bishop is essential. His oversight normally ensures, too, that the decisions are consistent with the good of the whole Church.

Comparisons and Contrasts:

It is immediately obvious that there are striking similarities between a process of communal discernment and a diocesan synod or assembly. Both work from an awareness: that God's word is mediated through the scriptures and also through human agents and structures; that God's kingdom continues to be extended through the participation and cooperation of human persons; that God is calling all people into deeper communion of life with one another and with the persons of the Trinity; that the Church is a *communio* with an hierarchical constitution whose bishops are the final arbiters in interpreting God's word; that the Holy Spirit is present and active in all the members of the Church; that human intelligence and wisdom play a vital role in knowing and responding to God's word in the lives of individuals and communities but they do not exhaust the riches of God's wisdom.

However, there are differences between the two approaches and perhaps it is here that some fresh insight may be gained. Inevitably the code takes a juridical approach to the issue of synods; but subsequent official commentary does not go beyond this approach in its guidance and clarifications. This brief reflection indicates that by giving greater attention to

the work of the Spirit, the word of God, and an ecclesiology of communion the processes of a diocesan synod or assembly could be greatly enriched. A few comments will illustrate the point.

While official documentation recommends prayer for the success of the proceedings it does not elaborate on how a well structured prayerful process might contribute significantly to a discernment of God's word for the diocese in its particular place and circumstances. The official literature tends to emphasise petitionary and liturgical prayer, without any mention of a prayer of discernment. In processes of communal discernment more emphasis is given to reflective, contemplative prayer in seeking after the promptings of God's Spirit.

The current juridic approach to synods and assemblies may too easily and unintentionally cast their processes into a parliamentary style of operation. They can too easily aim at doing or achieving what is humanly wise and prudent, without paying sufficient attention to how they are responding to God's call. While the legislation does demand that "all the proposed questions are to be subject to the free discussion of the members during the sessions of the synod,"³² it makes no provision for how a sound process of spiritual discernment might operate. Were attention given to this issue, then it may be easier to avoid another hazard in such assemblies, namely, the formation of lobby groups or pressure groups. What has been said above about the value of a dialogical approach rather than a parliamentary style debate is applicable in this context. Here, too, the Dominican tradition of passing decisions through three successive chapters before they become binding, offers another avenue of exploration which may be helpful in the contexts of synods or assemblies. It certainly guards against hasty decisions being made in the heat of the moment.

The fact that a bishop engages in a process of communal discernment with all the baptized in his diocese strengthens the reality of the Church as a communion and allows the members to have a genuine sense of organic membership within a living body. It can also liberate the members and the bishop from some of their own narrow angles of vision so that they can see the Kingdom of God as much broader and more dynamic than they had experienced it to date. It can have the added advantage of generating a renewed sense of responsibility on the part of all the faithful for the mission and well-being of their local Church. When the bishop

³² Canon 465.

engages seriously in a diocesan process of discernment, then, he is not simply availing himself of counsel, which in itself is a prudent thing to do;³³ he is exercising a role of genuine service in the local church by empowering its members to explore and assume their rightful roles and responsibilities in building up the Body of Christ.

It may well be that a serious discernment process in a synod or assembly may yield no clear direction at the moment. This does not mean that the exercise was fruitless. In fact, it may have achieved a far more significant outcome in giving the members a real sense of communion, the creation of a unity of mind and heart among them. Örsy has wisely observed that "it is too much to expect that in the course of discernment, the best judgment will always prevail. . . . the legitimate expectation is rarely the emergence of what is best in the group, but the standard that the majority of members can somehow reach and grasp there and then."³⁴ He compares the effort of the group to a field of runners. No one expects that all will keep up with the best; the group achievement will be less than the best; the achievement of the group will not be in its speed but its unity.

The Church is a pilgrim people. It is on a constant search for truth and direction as its members journey together towards their final destiny. They will never have a full grasp of the truth and often all they can find is the next step on their way. The synodality of the Church is an acknowledgement of this reality: it recognizes that constant reorientation is needed but that it is done with the companionship of fellow-travellers, with the support of official guides and ultimately under the direction of God's Holy Spirit.

³³ See George B. Wilson, SJ., "Wise Consultation by Leaders," *Human Development* 14 (1993) 7-10.

³⁴ "Towards a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment," *Studies in Jesuit Spirituality* 2 (1970) 155.