

**THE VALUE AND ROLE OF CONSCIENCE AND DISCERNMENT IN THE
DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN A RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY-AS-FAMILY**

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ABSTRACT

The article conveys the invaluable part that our conscience as well as discernment plays in decision-making in religious communities and in individual lives in general. Our conscience as Christians and as religious must be very much active and alive, if we are to be functional in every area of life and if we are to uphold our dignity.

We can keep our conscience alive when we unite our spirit with God's spirit through the process of discernment. Through discernment, we will know the right thing to do or the best decision to make since at the moments of discernment, God's will is spoken to our hearts through our consciences.

The article also presents that decision making is a process that is all-encompassing. It involves our daily lives and every living person at one point or the other, makes decisions on what he/she wants. Even though everyone, especially adults, have the right to decide, the members of religious Communities do not exercise such right completely since they are bound by the vow of obedience to listen and accept the will of God through their Superiors, Hence the Superiors, who are responsible for decision-making in the communities, should make the truth their focal point and this can only be possible when they are discerning, as St. Paul puts it. The Constitutions and the examples of our Founders should be our yardstick for judgment.

When a religious community abides by the promptings of the Holy Spirit, it becomes a family of God.

INTRODUCTION

The human conscience is a viable tool for the transmission of God's message and intentions. It is so because the conscience is the invisible person, I will say the image behind the mirror. It is invisible because it is the human spirit and since God is spirit and Immortal, he speaks to us through the spirit and we can only be in connection with him when we are in our good spirit.

Every human person is of 3 make- ups, the body, which is also known as the flesh, the Soul and the spirit. The body is the physical part of man that can be seen and touched. The body is like a cloth the inward man wears. It is the part of man which relates with the earth through the five (5) senses. The bodily activities are fueled by the blood circulation from the heart and coordinated by the Brain. And that is why when the brain is damaged; a person begins to behave in an abnormal way; making un-coordinated speeches and acting below expectation.

The soul refers to the mental faculty of man which consists of his intellect, his emotions and his reasoning or will. It is not physical. With the soul, man interacts with the mental realm.

The Spirit is the part of man that is able to contact God and can know God's will. With the spirit, man interacts with the spiritual world.

Today most people have developed their minds that, they can understand the letters of the "bible" not the spirit. But Jesus says; "the words that I speak to you are spirit and they are life" (Jn. 6:63b); so you must be spiritually discerned to understand it. It is in the spirit that our conscience dwells. Our spirit (conscience) is always atoned to God and his words while our soul (mind) tends towards the flesh.

The Holy Spirit takes up the role of our own spirit (conscience) when we truly and fully lay down our lives. However, when one is not fully mature in God, there is an in-balance, in that, though the spirit attempts to play his role, we struggle to function as regular beings. Thus we are most likely going to hear two voices. But as one grows in the Lord, learns to live by grace and feeds on the word of God, then him or her will more and more be able to subject the flesh to the things of God. Members of the religious community family are human persons with Body, Soul and spirit and by implication are conscience people who are even better opportune to be discerning. The religious should be ambassadors of this truth.

When we live in the spirit, we give absolute control of ourselves to the spirit of God (living by grace) and then, most of the inner voices we hear are those of the Holy Spirit. He will inspire us, teach us, remind us, correct us and rebuke us when we do wrong. When a religious is spiritually discerned, her decisions are born out of the irreplaceable designs and will of God. The decisions made in any religious community should ordinarily be concrete, concrete in the sense that the decisions are in no way influenced by our human sentiments. Rather, they should be based on truth suggested by our good consciences and the Holy Spirit through a proper discernment.

Our conscience is our Moral strength, our sense of right and wrong. The English Dictionary defines it as “a motivation deriving logically from ethical or moral principles that govern a person’s thought and action. It is conformity to one’s own sense of right conduct, it is a feeling of shame when you do something Immoral”.

Our conscience is associated with the good in us. For instance when we were much younger, we learned from our Catechism teachers, that there are two voices speaking in us; the good voice from God and the bad voice from the devil. And our parents also, in a bid to bring us to the awareness of making the right decision, will explain that the voice of God in us is the good voice that speaks very gently to our hearts, telling us not to do the wrong things. And the bad voice from the devil is often forceful and tends to dominate the good voice, always telling us the contrary.

As an adult now and as one who has embraced the religious life, I will say from my experience that my conscience represents the divine person in me. It is a voice, the voice that speaks within. A voice that speaks God’s will to my heart and spurs me to act accordingly. The conscience is that voice that abides to the natural laws which are derived from the law and commands of God.

It is our conscience that keeps our spirit attentive that we could recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in us and the image of God in others. So that respecting God’s image in others, we invariably honour and give glory to God. As Pope Francis puts it “working with the conscience means, listening to the truth, to the good. Listening to God”. Thus we become those striving towards the perfection that God wants of us and not only that, we will become ambassadors of Justice and truth.

Our conscience brings us to the awareness of the super natural person, working with, for and in us, so that we do not think we are in total control of our being. Rather, that we are answerable to a Master. It brings to the door steps of our hearts, our own vulnerability, and thus we do not see ourselves as God or superior over others but strive at every yielding, to the spot where we are found wanting, to be reconciled back to the one whose grace is sufficient for us.

The conscience allows us to know the will of God through the Holy Spirit whispering softly to our hearts through the process of discernment.

WHAT IS DISCERNMENT

Discernment and conscience are closely related. While our conscience notifies us of a good course or the right thing to do, discernment enables an objective confirmation of that truth. A well discerned decision is that borne out of a clear heart. When a heart is clear, it means there are no junks in there. The heart is free of every form of bias, and that the heart has being taken possession of by the Holy Spirit.

Moments of discernment are times when we seek the truth from God. And during these times, we must pray intensely and be ready to submit our will to the will of God which the Holy spirit may present to us.

Discernment means involving God in a dialogue about an issue. It could be a personal discernment process which we often do as individuals, for example, discerning our religious vocation. It could also be about a family issue, community or congregational matters which may involve more people but the important thing remains that, the individual members of the family, community or congregation should go in to prayer with the same intension at heart. Thus they are united at heart with the particular purpose. The Holy Spirit can easily speak same truth to our different hearts when we are not divided but truly united. Let us take for instance, the family of Zachariah (Luke 1:59-67). When his wife Elizabeth muttered a name for their son “John” and Zachariah wrote the same name, even though they had not communicated to each other and Zachariah could neither speak nor hear. But by the power of the spirit, they got the same inspiration. The spirit working in us is never a spirit of confusion. Most often we make mistakes or regret certain decisions we have taken because we do not involve God through prayer. Some other times because we must have fixed a particular answer in our heart as to what we want and, even when the truth is pointed out, we do not accept. That is why, to discern well, one must deviate from the personal good to the good of the community, so that he or she can freely promote the truth no matter how hurting or painful it may be.

St. Paul in (1Thessalonians 5:21-22) teaches that it is the responsibility of all Christians to be discerning, when he says “But examine everything carefully, hold fast to that which is good, abstain from every form of evil”. In (1Jn. 4:1) the Apostle John gives this warning: “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirit to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world”.

The religious are considered by others as models and great teachers of the good news both by their words and deeds. It becomes irresistible that we must live up to these expectations that fate has brought us. Notwithstanding, people who encounter us should feel safe, respected and appreciated, both members of our community and those outside the community. Our religious communities should be like an ideal family where God’s Presence is felt, and not a museum or hot oven as some communities today have become. The members of such communities live as total strangers not trusting themselves or as if it were a survival of the fittest. Every member in a religious community should be treated the same as others and the constitutions of each religious community should be the yardstick for our evaluations. We should make the truth as inspired by the Holy Spirit our focal point so that we do not deviate or become compromising both as members and as leaders in the community.

The key to living an uncompromising life lies in one’s ability to exercise discernment in every area of life. For example, failure to distinguish between truth and error leaves the religious person subject to false teaching which can lead to unbiblical mindsets.

Unfortunately, discernment is an area where most people stumble. They exhibit little ability to measure the things they are taught against the infallible standard of God’s word, and they unwittingly engage in all kinds of unbiblical decision making. Discernment

intersects the life of the religious at every point and God's words provide us with the needed discernment about the issues of life. It is important, therefore, to have a sound knowledge and understanding of the scriptures if we are to make concrete decisions. Not only concerning ourselves but most importantly, if we are in the position to make decisions on other people or on matters that affect the larger community

There is no other person with whom we collaborate with during discernment, but God and so when God is involved in such process, He takes the upper hand and every other knowledge or persons, or abilities, or suggestions are subject to him. He inspires every outcome or result of the discernment. But this can take place only when there is an absolute acknowledgement of the power of that voice within.

Sometimes we dominate the reality of the presence of God, by yielding to our strong passions, emotions and desires. Discernment can never be completely done all by ourselves. No, God must be involved and that requires that we immerse ourselves in prayer. In this kind of prayer, we must project the attitude of listening. We should listen more than asking or talking. The scenario should be like that of a child asking the father for a favour. She only presents her request and then listens to hear what the father has to say; trusting that whatever the father says is good.

In discerning, clarity of intention is very important, so that we take our situations to prayer exactly the way they are because nothing can be hidden from God. To do this more effectively, one must have a clear knowledge of the issue with which he or she is going into prayer, so that the decision taken is not based on mere speculation. There should be an objective examination of the issue, to avoid a biased judgment.

It is important to bear in mind also that the one with whom we are dialoguing in prayer is not a human person. He is divine and his ways are not our ways. We can only move in conformity with his ways, if we have abandoned ourselves and are now living in the spirit. Living in the spirit entails that we no longer do the things we want to do but what God wants us to do. And then we can make good decisions that will build our religious communities rather than destroy them.

DECISION-MAKING AS IT RELATES TO OUR RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Decision making is a process that is unavoidable in our everyday lives as human persons, as a group and as a community. We certainly, must make decisions that cover our daily activities, weekly, monthly as well as annual programs. That is why for organizations or communities, there are authorities set up, that serve also as decision makers.

In the religious community family, those who make decisions are the superiors of different levels and their counselors. These people make plans from gathered facts and take decisions that affect both the individual members of the community and the community as a whole.

Decision making involves identification of a fact and gathering of information. Every adult person has the right to decide what he or she wants and is also expected to take responsibility of his or her decision. We can decide to eat whatever we want to eat, to go wherever we wish to go, to mingle with those we want to mingle with, to take up a particular profession that best soothes us, to get married to a person who appeals to us and even to take up a religious vocation.

In the religious communities, there could be the need to decide on a particular project to embark on, a particular sister to place on a particular apostolate, who to admit into the Novitiate or who to approve for first or final profession. There could also be the problem of deciding if a sister leaves or remains in the congregation or community.

We should arrange these items in the order of priority so that we take more care on the very sensitive ones. People who live outside the religious community make decisions for themselves while members of religious communities go by the biddings of their constitutions as directed by their superiors. This is because in professing the vow of obedience, they willingly give up the right to hold on to their own will.

A religious community is a family of people coming from different nationalities, but finding their common root in Christ Jesus. The difference in language, colour, race, cultural belief and value, age, gifts, talents and personal preferences, become the unifying factors and elements of building up the community. In the community, fraternal love is shared among members. Every member of the community is gifted in one area of the apostolate, but all work towards achieving the one goal of the founders and foundresses. When a young lady or man who desires to serve God as a religious is admitted, he or she is introduced into the life and spirit of the community as exemplified by the founder or foundress of such community. The decisions made about every member of the community should be based on the above.

This is because our founding Mothers and Fathers lived a life of truth and practical charity and were inspired by the Holy Spirit. To discern well, there must be a subject, and this subject must be known and clearly understood; we must resign from our own judgment and lean wholly on God (Proverbs 3:5-6).

With our conscience and discernment, we become rational in our reasoning, We make valuable decisions that can accommodate every individual differences, decision that has focus.

A person who is discerning must be still at heart because it is in the quietness of our hearts that God speaks to us.

Decision-making out of a well discerned conscience results in:

Building of trust: the members of the community become more trusting, believing everything to be the will of God.

There is the feeling of satisfaction; everyone is happy with the decision

Such decisions lead to building up the community; it promotes peace and encourages coexistence.

God takes a suitable position in our hearts and in our communities since He worked with us all the while.

REFERENCE

1. Carol Glatz (Catholic news service.) July 1.2013.
2. The Good news Bible

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