
QUAKER

WHEN GEORGE FOX BEGAN BUILDING QUAKERISM FROM THE SEEKER COMMUNITIES OF ENGLAND IN THE 1650s, HE INTRODUCED THE RELIGION OF SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT. "THAT OF GOD" WAS TO BE FOUND IN EVERYONE... WORSHIP WAS TO BE IN COMMUNAL SILENCE. AS EACH SEARCHED WITHIN FOR DIVINE LEADINGS, THE MEETING BECAME "GATHERED"...

JESUIT

... NEITHER QUAKER NEIGHBORS NOR JESUIT PASTORS REALIZED THAT THEIR VERY DIFFERENT FORMS OF RELIGION HAD ONE UNUSUAL COMMON THREAD, THEIR METHOD OF DECISION MAKING. TODAY'S JESUITS CALL IT "COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT." FRIENDS SPEAK OF "THE QUAKER METHOD" OR POINT TO THE PROCEDURE OF DECISION MAKING IN WHICH THE GROUP IS NOT SATISFIED WITH THE MAJORITY VOTE BUT FEELS CONSTRAINED TO SEEK UNITY OR CONCORD.

A TRADITION IN COMMON



MICHAEL SHEERAN, S. J.

October 7, 1986
On May 15, 1733, a substantial-looking gentleman clad in a snuff-colored coat and wearing the broad-brimmed hat of a Quaker signed a deed for a plot of Philadelphia ground south of Walnut Street and east of Fourth. The site was just across the fence from the cluster of small houses known as the Friends' Almshouse.

The signer, although "well known and well liked by his Quaker neighbors and (living) on terms of perfect equality with them," was not exactly a Quaker. For Joseph Greaton, alias John Crayton, alias James Crayton, was a Jesuit priest. (Among Philadelphia Quakers, he usually baptized himself with a Friendlier name like Isaiah Greaton or Josiah Greaton.)

Father Greaton's house near Fourth and Walnut contained 10 rooms, plus an attached chapel designed to look

like an out-kitchen to the casual passerby. Thus was founded Saint Joseph's Church. And the 10-room house was to become the first home of Saint Joseph's University 120 years later.¹

Father Greaton's attire is in the best tradition of the stereotypical Jesuit in disguise. It certainly is consistent with a Jesuit custom. When the Society of Jesus was founded in 1540, Saint Ignatius counseled his comrades that they should not wear a distinctive habit, but should dress in the mode of respected clergymen of the towns that they served.

With this in mind, Matteo Ricci began the evangelization of China in 1583 by shaving his hair and beard and donning the cloak of a Buddhist monk so as not to offend his hearers. When he decided that Confucian thought was a more apt vehicle for Christianity, he traded his Buddhist

robes for the garb of a Confucian scholar.²

Roberto de Nobili walked India for years attired as an Indian sage.

From what we can tell, Father Greaton's guise was not assumed so much to deceive his neighbors as to take the pressure off them. Penn's "Frame of Government" demanded that all monotheists—no matter how silly and scandalous their mode of worship—should be free of religious persecution. And Philadelphia Quakers lived by Penn's principles. But the London Government preferred that Catholic services be repressed, not ignored. So Greaton's "low profile" seems to have helped Catholics to blend into the Quaker community, thus lowering the number of complaints to London about disloyal Quaker government from the Anglicans and the Scotch Presbyterians who also lived in Philadelphia.³

Although Pennsylvania Catholics took their original root in the shade of sturdy Quakerism, it would appear that neither Quaker neighbors nor Jesuit pastors realized that their very different forms of religion had one unusual common thread, their method of decision making. Today's Jesuits call it "communal discernment." Friends speak of "the Quaker Method" or point to the procedure of decision making process in which the group is not satisfied with majority vote but feels constrained to seek unity or concord. And when such unity is attained, both Quakers and Jesuits see in it a reliable sign that God is calling the group in that direction.

In this talk, I'd like to sketch the history and practice of this common trait of Jesuits and Friends.

It all began with the First Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. Paul and Barnabas had been preaching to the Gentiles that they could become Christians by being baptized. The Jerusalem Church had argued that a male must first become a Jew by being circumcized, that only then could he be baptized. To settle this angry doctrinal disparity, Peter presided over the new Church's First Council.

The Council's deliberations moved from heat to light. Finally, to everyone's amazement, James, the leader of the Jerusalem Church, stood up to endorse Paul's position and abandon his own. Recognizing something extraordinary in their agreement, the Council affirmed its surprising concord in a letter which claimed, "It has seemed good to us and to the Holy Spirit" that converts be baptized but not circumcized.

Out of the surprising unity of this first council grew a Christian tradition that overwhelming agreement was a sign of divine endorsement. So widespread was this tradition that by 1170 the Third Lateran Council demanded that, for valid election of a new bishop, all the local clergy who were known for their virtue (the "sanior pars" or "healthy heads" among the voters) had to be in agreement.

This laudable law foundered on the reality that no one could agree on which voters were truly virtuous. Frequently, the election would be contested, Rome would send out legates to investigate, there would be decisions and appeals. Often enough,

before the issue was settled, all contestants would be dead! So, after 75 years, the law was dropped.⁴

Throughout the centuries, Church Councils sought unity as the mark of God's guidance. A new refinement came at the Council of Basle (1431 to 1438) when a participant, Nicholas of Cusa, noted that, although the Council was achieving easy unanimity time after time, the atmosphere was one of political animosity toward a faction not represented at the Council, not one of prayer and of seeking divine guidance. Cusa's observations led him to argue that consensus isn't enough. There must also be the religious peace which is the mark of divine presence. This special concord or harmony or uniting is the guarantee that God guides the group.

With the Reformation, one might expect that the doctrine of divine guidance of religious groups might become the province of just one branch of the Christian Church. The opposite was true. Romans, Mainstream Protestants, and Radical Reformers like the Mennonites and Anabaptists all agreed on the doctrine that a reliable indicator of God's will is the peaceful unity of a decision making religious body. Hence the curiosity that the first century following Luther's 95 theses of 1519 can be understood as a quest for an ecumenical Church Council where the divergences in understanding could once and for all be put to rest.

The attempts tended to founder, of course, since the folks who tried to gather such councils also tried to "assist" the Holy Spirit by inviting only people who saw things their way.

In the 1520's the Anabaptists of Muhlhauser sought a *Konzil der Endzeit*. Believing that the end of the world was imminent, they argued that this Council would declare what Christians needed to believe in order to reach heaven after the final conflagration.

Other German groups developed the theory of the Church Council into their principle of the *Sitzerrecht* or *Lex Sedentium*. For them, each congregation of Christians was eligible to assemble and pray and search Scripture. When they reached unity, this was a divine confirmation of the conclusion they had reached.

1545 saw the Roman Catholic expression of this same belief in the

Council of Trent which reformed Catholic discipline and clarified Catholic doctrine.

It should be no surprise that, in 1540, Ignatius Loyola and his first Jesuit companions spent the season of Lent in daily deliberations over what sort of religious community they should become. Their deliberations, carefully recorded, have come down to us today. The central features were these: 1) going beyond voting; and 2) seeking instead a unity achieved in an atmosphere of prayerful peace. Out of this communal experience and the individual training in spiritual discernment which is central to Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* (Retreats), emerges the Communal Discernment which has been a mark of Jesuit spirituality over the centuries.

What may be a surprise is that Henry VIII had his theologians establish his Parliament as a Church Council so that its determinations might be considered divinely endorsed.

Decades later, in 1647, came the famous Putney Debates about the nature of democracy. Here Cromwell's Army discussed the political future of Britain. They began with the following instructions from Cromwell himself: "I doubt not but, if in sincerity we are willing to submit to that light that God shall cast in among us, God will unite us, and make us of one heart and one mind."

When George Fox began building Quakerism from the Seeker communities of England in the 1650's, he introduced a religion of spiritual discernment. "That of God" was to be found in everyone. The test of spiritual advice was whether it "spoke to one's condition." Worship was to be in communal silence. As each searched within for divine leadings, the meeting itself became "gathered," "covered with the wings of the spirit"—a phenomenon surprisingly similar to the atmosphere which pervades a Catholic Mass at the time of Consecration and of Communion.

Out of such worship comes ideas, leadings. Shared with the community, tested by the prayerful experience of others, these leadings can turn into invitations to the entire community. And the mark of their authority is that the overwhelming majority feel comfortable in uniting with them.

It might be helpful here to let some

Quaker sources speak for themselves so the reader can catch a sense of the experience.

Howard H. Brinton wrote in the early 1950s:

At first sight, it might appear that the Quaker meeting can only be described by negatives—there is no altar, no liturgy, no pulpit, no sermon, no organ, no choir, no sacrament, and no person in authority. No external object of attention prevents the worshipper from turning inward and there finding the revelation of the Divine Will. Whatever is outward in worship must come as a direct result of what is inward—otherwise, it will be form without power. There must first be withdrawal to the source of power and then a return with power.⁶

Eighty years earlier, Caroline Stephen had her first taste of Quaker worship:

On one never-to-be-forgotten Sunday morning, I found myself one of a small company of silent worshippers who were content to sit down together without words, that each one might feel after and draw near to the Divine Presence, unhindered at least, if not helped, by any human utterance. Utterance I knew was free, should the words be given; and before the meeting was over, a sentence or two were uttered in great simplicity by an old and apparently untaught man, rising in his place amongst the rest of us. I did not pay much attention to the words he spoke, and I have no recollection of their purport. My whole soul was filled with the unutterable peace of the undisturbed opportunity for communion with God.⁷

In explanation of Friends' experience, Gerald Hibbert comments, "Suddenly or gradually we realize 'the Presence in the midst,' and the silence becomes fully sacramental."⁸

In the years after George Fox founded the Religious Society of Friends, the tide of communal discernment waned sharply in the other branches of Christianity. For example, Jesuits put their own tradition into practice much less often than they had at the beginning, largely because their key men were assigned so far apart that they could not easily gather to deliberate. True, Roman Catholics still affirm the inspiration of Church Councils and make provision in the election of a new Pope for the special significance which obtains if the election occurs unanimously on

the first secret ballot. And American political conventions superstitiously attempt to simulate party unity and create the illusion of divine endorsement by making their choice unanimous after the *real* balloting is over.

But by and large, the individualism which is the mark of modern Western man has taught us selfishly to see all issues from the vantage point of our own personal interests. However in doing so we become unable to take the vantage point of the needs of the community—we have trouble with communal discernment of God's will.

By contrast with the rest of Christianity, this tradition of discernment has continued, in relative good health, in the Quaker community for almost 350 years. When the Jesuits rediscovered the importance of communal decision making soon after Vatican II, folks like me decided to study how Friends make decisions so we could take the lived tradition back to the Jesuits. I'm reminded here of how the French and California wine makers have recovered from disasters in their vineyards by grafting cuttings from each others' better vines onto their own vinestems. (I'd rather describe my efforts in this language than accuse myself of pious theft!)

Let me offer an example of such grafting. In working with contemporary Catholic groups, I often suggest a series of steps which are taken from the procedure used by Saint Ignatius and his first comrades in 1540. The process asks the group to take all the "cons" of a proposal first, then the "pros," then to seek unity. But I try to flesh out these three steps with practical advice derived from my observation of Quakers and Catholics.

Here is a summary of this "Contemporary Ignatian Approach to Communal Discernment":

1. Prior to gathering together, provide all relevant information on each option to everyone.

2. Begin with prayer for light from the Holy Spirit, perhaps including an invitation to share spontaneous prayer for a few moments. The goal is to focus the ongoing prayer of the community. Try situating the prayer with an appropriate passage from Scripture, the writings of the founder of the community, other documents expressing the spirit of the community.

3. *CONS*: Each person reports the reason he/she has seen in prayer

which oppose the option. Reasons are noted by the secretary (or chair, or clerk). Go in sequence; no one "passes." No speeches. One reason per person the first time around. Questions for clarification are fine; disagreements with judgments of the speaker should *not* be raised now. After the first circuit of the group, anyone who has further "cons" to offer is welcome to do so briefly.

4. *Break*. This must be long enough for prayer over results of step 3, especially examination of conscience over one's reactions during it. Recall as well the reasons "pro" from previous prayer.

5. *PROS*: Each reports the reasons he/she has seen in prayer which favor the option. Proceed as in step 3. (At end of this step, "tap for consensus"—find out whether it is immediately clear to everyone what the choice should be. Usually it's not clear and you need to continue with step 6.)

6. *Break*. Pray over "pros" in light of "cons." Again be sure to examine conscience for reactions during step 5.

7. An effort is made now to *evaluate the weight* of the reasons pro and con. One procedure to try:

a. Each indicates how he/she is leaning (pro, con, pro with amendment) and the principal reason which seems to be the moving force.

b. See whether amendments or deeper understanding will eliminate major "cons."

c. Deal separately with remaining points of disagreement. Those who do not see someone's point of view must make special effort to understand how he/she sees it—"To see with the other person's eyes."

d. At an impasse, either go to the next item (returning later to the point of contention) or break briefly for silent prayer. *If at any time the atmosphere of peace in the group should be disturbed, stop for silent prayer.*

e. Face your real situation. Don't pretend agreement or water down the original proposal so that it loses its effective meaning, e.g., has it still got "teeth" or does it just encourage anybody who agrees with it to carry it out?

f. To determine whether you have enough agreement to stop, ask the following:

If I'm in the majority:

- Is the majority significant?
- Do I really understand how things look from minority viewpoints?
- Am I ready to "own" this decision? (Not: "What they decided at the meeting," but "What we decided at the meeting.")

If I'm in the minority:

- Is the majority significant?
- Have the majority made a strong effort to see how things look from minority viewpoints? Have I done the same about majority viewpoints?
- Do I find in the majority position a conclusion that is likely to be better for us here-and-now, granted that it may not be the best thing that could be done or the eventual thing to which God will call us?

If all the questions can be answered "yes," it is time to stop. In that case, the decision should be clear, and confirmation should be experienced together through shared deep peace—finding God together.

8. End with prayer of thanks and of offering the choice to the Father, reaffirming the group's willingness to carry out the decision. Often this will include spontaneous shared prayer.⁹

In the last 15 years of observing and teaching, I've had the chance to share in Quaker decision making and Catholic discernment. I've seen some good examples and some terrible ones.

Some things I've learned are subtle. For example, a skilled Friend knows how to rescue the meeting from frustrated discussion by transforming the topic. Richard Proskauer of New York Yearly Meeting wrote to tell me of a meeting which had become mired in a discussion of Friends' attitude toward divorce. A weighty visitor from India stood to suggest that they might find more fruit if the topic were shifted to Friends' attitude toward marriage. The tone shifted as everyone focused on the positive commitment each member of the community makes to support the couple who pledge marriage in the Quaker community. Discussing together along this line, the community found light and peace.

Let me conclude my comments by sharing with you three general prerequisites for success. These come in part from another student of discernment, John Futrell, S.J. I can tell you

that I've tested them in lots of settings and found them valid.

First, there must be a shared theology or a shared religious experience which makes the group a "we," a real community. For Jesuits, this is the fact that each has made the *Spiritual Exercises* annually and that all have "picked up" the subculture customs. For Friends, the regular experience of worship in the "covered meeting" or the dedicated work together by members of the Friends Service Committee seem to provide the same communal identity.

Second, there must be one or more documents which verbalize the shared tradition I just mentioned. It may be the writings of the Founder, a formal statement of charism, the mission statement of a university. Friends go to George Fox and Rufus Jones and Thomas Kelly for the same service. What the documents do is to provide expression for the shared experience. They enable the individual to recognize "who we are" as encapsulated in someone's written words. If such statements are not available, there is real doubt whether each member of the group has shared in the same experience.

Third, in a community which is capable of communal discernment, there will be a profound preference in the individual members for the group's conclusion, even when they are not personally led in that direction. As one Catholic Sister said to me, "I'd much prefer to do what my Sisters feel drawn to when they're at their best in prayer than to do what I feel drawn to. I may have part of the picture; but I know that, when they have heard me and still have gone in a different direction, they've got the big picture."

It's a pleasure to be able to speak tonight at this historic meeting house, largely because my talk is a way of paying tribute to Quakers like Tom Brown who have taught me so much about how to find God and his invitations. It's a chance to publicly recognize Charlotte Tinker, my "publisher," and Sylvia Bronner, whose editing converted my clumsy language into readable prose. The efforts of these fine Quaker women turned my dissertation on Friends into a useful book. And it's nice to be able to talk here, where I've witnessed the quality of decision making

evidenced by so many Friends who often came to the Meeting as divided as the early Christians at the Council of Jerusalem but, through struggles they shared with me, came to unity.

And I'm delighted as well that, in celebration of the presidency of Father Rashford, Saint Joseph's University has come to sit quietly for a moment in the aura of the Quakerism which sheltered Catholicism and the Jesuits at the beginning. Saint Joseph's is in Philadelphia today because Quakers were truly Christian to the Catholics of yesterday. Nor are the Quakers only a historical factor. If Philadelphia's Jesuits and their lay collaborators want to rediscover for themselves their own birthright of communal discernment, to graft into their vine a shoot that has always been meant to be their own, they need only follow the lead of Father Groaton and befriend a few Friends.

FOOTNOTES

- [Francis X. Talbot, S.J., *St. Joseph's College, 1851-1926*, (Philadelphia: St. Joseph's College, 1927) Chapter 1 *passim*.]
- [Jeannette Batz, "What Ricci Told the Chinese Sages," *Universitas*, Spring, 1986, p. 11.]
- [Talbot, *op. cit.*, p. 10]
- [For sources of the historical information in this talk, cf. Michael Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1983), Appendix A, pp. 119-130.]
- [A.S.P. Woodhouse, ed., *Puritanism and Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 105.]
- [Howard H. Brinton, *Friends for 300 Years* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), p. 65.]
- [Caroline E. Stephen, writing of an 1872 Friends meeting in *Quaker Strongholds* (n.p., 1891), pp. 11-13, cited in London Yearly Meeting, *Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1973), par. 80.]
- [Gerald K. Hibbert in *Quaker Fundamentals*, p. 6, quoted in Henry Van Buren, *George Fox and the Quakers* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), p. 164.]
- [For further practical suggestions, cf. John C. Futrell, S.J., *Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience*, Vol. IV, No. 3 (Nov., 1972) in *Studies in Jesuit Spirituality Series* (St. Louis: Fusz Memorial, 1972), pp. 172-178.]

(Rev. Michael J. Sheeran, S.J., academic vice president of Regis College, grew interested in the Society of Friends in 1968, while studying religious groups which practice communal discernment. By the mid-1970s, that interest had become the focus of his doctoral work at Princeton University.

Over a period of two years (1973-75), Father Sheeran studied the Quakers in Philadelphia, attending local monthly and annual meetings, conducting extensive interviews, and observing the actual process decision-making. His research culminated in the publishing of *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*.)