Unit 13: The Deliberation of The First Fathers
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THE DELIBERATION OF THE FIRST FATHERS (1539)

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From the personal to the corporate

We refer to what happened to Ignatius at Loyola as a conversion. But it would be more accurate to describe it as the beginning of a conversion. Conversion is a process. When he left Loyola Ignatius had certainly turned to God but, in his penitential mode, he undertook a regime of extreme self-discipline that was inward looking if not narcissistic. He needed to discover a spirituality that would allow him to break through the limitations of this narrow concern with his personal relationship with God. So he learned to reach out to embrace the ‘other’. Since the chief means to this outreach was spiritual conversation, the ‘other’ tended at first to be those relatively few people who crossed his path during his early wanderings. But gradually the meaning of the ‘other’ expanded in line with his expanding apostolic horizon. This horizon was being shaped by his contemplative experiences. The more Ignatius was drawn into the inner life of the Trinity, the more he began to see what they saw:

Here it will be how the Three Divine Persons look down upon the whole expanse or circuit of all the earth, filled with human beings [Exx 102].

Some are white, some black; some at peace, and some at war; some weeping, some laughing; some well, some sick; some coming into the world, and some dying; etc. [Exx 106].

And the more he saw and reflected on what the Trinity saw, the more he desired what they desired. He heard them say, “Let us work the redemption of the human race” [Exx 107].

This universal vision was energising, stimulating, challenging. But it soon dawned on Ignatius that one person alone could make a relatively minor contribution to this enterprise, no matter how generous and energetic he or she might be. But what if others were to share his vision and join him in the task?

Hence came the early efforts of Ignatius, ultimately unsuccessful, to gather followers in Spain. It was only at the University of Paris that he eventually met the young men who, through sharing their faith, prayer, studies and recreation, and especially through their experience of the Spiritual Exercises, formed themselves into a potential apostolic band of “friends in the Lord”. When they had all graduated from the University and received priestly ordination in Venice in June 1537,
they had a further communal experience of sharing in small groups a life of prayer and ministry in some of the towns of northern Italy.

**The Call of Jerusalem**

Through all this eventful time they were developing what they chose to call “our way of proceeding”. This phrase was shorthand for a whole way of life, but especially for a mode of continual decision-making. It was based on what they had learnt from the Spiritual Exercises, particularly around the practice of discernment and the election. But while their original experience of the Exercises had been personal, now much of their decision-making needed to be corporate. In particular they needed to decide how to fulfil the vows they had taken at Montmartre. As Ignatius had experienced many years earlier, and as many of their contemporary fellow-Christians were experiencing, the companions felt strongly drawn to the Holy Land. They had vowed to go there, but realising the unstable political and military situation in the Mediterranean, they had added a rider. In the event of their not being able to travel to, or remain in, the Holy Land they promised to put themselves at the service of the Pope. The *Reminiscences* succinctly say:

Their plan was to go to Venice and from there to Jerusalem, where they were to spend the rest of their lives for the good of souls. If they were refused permission to remain in Jerusalem they would return to Rome, offer themselves to the Vicar of Christ, asking him to make use of them wherever he thought it would be more to God’s glory and the good of souls [85].

This succinct account is fleshed out by Ignatius’ secretary, Polanco. He writes:

What at this time they felt most especially inclined to, was to get to Jerusalem, and then to preach to unbelievers, if they could, or to die among them for their faith in Jesus Christ. And so they all took a vow to go to Jerusalem (if they could get a passage there within one year of their arrival in Venice), and there they intended to commend themselves to God to decide what they should do, not knowing what God wanted of them, whether to return here or remain there; and the majority of them were inclined to the latter alternative. In case they could not get a passage, they voted to go to the Pope, as Vicar of Jesus Christ, so that his Holiness might send them where God would be most served (Summ.Hisp., 57).

Where the *Reminiscences* give the impression that all in the group were of the same mind, Polanco and other authors make clear that there were differences of opinion in the group. These centred, not on the pilgrimage itself, but on the question of whether to remain in the Holy Land indefinitely. In this difference of opinion Ignatius and Pierre Favre were on opposite sides. Ignatius, along with Francis Xavier and Diego Laynez, dreamed of living the rest of their lives in the Holy Land, giving themselves to the service of both Christians and infidels there. On the other hand, Favre and Simon Rodriguez, who were in a minority, wanted to make the pilgrimage but then to return and minister in Europe. In Polanco’s account, since there was no unanimity, the companions decided to defer that decision until they arrived in Jerusalem. By acting in this way the companions strove to maintain their unity and expressed their hope for an eventual consensus.
This episode is enlightening in the context of what we shall be reflecting on today. It is the first clear example of differences of opinion being present among the first companions. This was a group of men who were highly educated and who, for this and other reasons, held strong views. Their desire to do the will of God did not automatically eliminate such differences. It is significant that Ignatius did not try to impose his dream on those who disagreed with him, even in a major issue that affected all their futures. From the beginning he was the group’s leader but leadership was not vested in him alone. It was diffused throughout the group. We will need to keep this in mind.

At the Pope’s Disposition

However, as we know, the companions failed to secure passage on a pilgrim ship in Venice and so this question about how long to remain in the Holy Land became irrelevant. The rider to the Montmartre vows came into effect and they set out for Rome to offer themselves to the Pope. They travelled in small groups, one of which comprised Ignatius, Favre and Laynez. When they were in sight of Rome, Ignatius visited a small, neglected chapel in a place called La Storta and there had a vision. His description of this event in the Reminiscences reads:

One day, a few miles before reaching Rome, while praying in a church, he felt a great change in his soul and so clearly did he see God the Father place him with Christ, His Son, that he had no doubts that God the Father did place him with His Son [96].

This spare account needs to be filled out with material from other early Jesuit writers. Taking these sources together much can be said about this vision and its significance. However, for our purposes it will be sufficient to highlight a few salient points. Ignatius’ experience was one of deep consolation, and was an answer to the colloquy of the Two Standards meditation in the Exercises that he had been making during the journey. In interpreting the vision Ignatius recognised it as applying, not only to himself, but to the whole group of “friends in the Lord”. He saw it as God’s affirmation of the corporate project on which the companions had embarked. It was in a spirit of assurance and determination that he entered Rome. The following year (1538), after numerous contacts between Laynez and the Pope, Ignatius and the other companions offered themselves to Paul III for priestly service anywhere in the world.

Since we are dealing with the time of the Reformation it is tempting to interpret this action of the companions as making a theological statement, even as defiantly taking an anti-Lutheran stance. But while they were well aware that Christendom was in turmoil, this turmoil was centred elsewhere, in Germany and Northern Europe. It was of little immediate concern in Italy. Of course the companions accepted traditional Catholic teaching on the role of the Pope, regarding
him as the Vicar of Christ. But in offering their services to him their motive was more pragmatic than theological. They simply wanted to evangelise, to minister in areas of greatest need, and, because of his position, the Pope was the person most aware of where those needs were. Pierre Favre put it this way in a letter written that same year:

The reason why we have thus put ourselves under his (the Pope’s) judgement and will is the knowledge that he is better acquainted with the needs of the whole of Christendom (To Diego de Gouveia, 1538).

This simple statement will later be filled out more authoritatively in the Constitutions:

For those who first united to form the Society were from different provinces and realms and did not know into which regions they were to go, whether among the faithful or the unbelievers; and therefore, to avoid erring in the path of the Lord, they made that promise or vow in order that His Holiness might distribute them for greater glory to God [605].

**Preti riformati or Reformed Priests**

So at this point in their story who were these “friends in the Lord” in their own eyes and in the eyes of others? Their contemporaries in Rome and Northern Italy (at least those who were friendly) referred to them as *preti riformati*. This was a term used in sixteenth century Italy for priests who were committed to reform, and who showed it by simplicity of lifestyle and dedication to their pastoral responsibilities. There was also a more corporate usage of the term. This applied it to newly founded congregations of priests such as the Theatines, Barnabites and Somaschans. *Preti riformati* would then be the colloquial equivalent of the canonical term *clerici regolari* or clerks regular. Eventually this is exactly what the companions became – an order of clerks regular (priests living under a rule).

However, this development was not self-evident, still less inevitable. The companions seem to have been somewhat taken off their guard by the swiftness with which the Pope took them at their word and began to disperse them. They had made themselves available to him in late November 1538. Shortly after Easter of the following year six of the then ten companions were due to leave in small groups for Sienna, Parma and Naples. This development forced them to take stock and to come to some decisions concerning the nature of their relationship with one another. These were now urgent matters that they had to deal with before the dispersal began. Such was the background of a process of corporate discernment that became known as the Deliberation of the First Fathers. It lasted from the end of March to 24 June 1539.

**Presuppositions as the Deliberation Begins**

The companions do not gather for this Deliberation in order to reopen the whole question of what God wanted them to do with their lives. They enter the process with some basic certainties that they saw no reason to question. These certainties were based both on their own spiritual experience (personal and corporate) over many years as well as on the Pope’s broad acceptance of their priestly project. We see these certainties expressed in the opening paragraph of the text of the Deliberation:

With Lent drawing to a close, as the time was approaching for us to be scattered and parted from one another (something we were eagerly anticipating so that we could the sooner achieve our appointed goal on which we had set our minds and hearts), we
resolved to get together for a good long time before our dispersal, and to discuss our vocation and covenanted way of life (vivendi formula) [1].

Their goal, the purpose and orientation of their lives, is clear. The Deliberation is to be about means, not ends. It is as if they are saying, “Given all that has happened, how do we reach our goal in these new circumstances when the Pope is scattering us to different places and we can no longer remain together?” (Note the question, “How do we reach our goal?”, not “What is our goal?”). Later in the same opening paragraph we find another expression of their inner certainties: “We all had one mind and heart in seeking God’s gracious and perfect will according to the scope of our vocation”. That “scope of their vocation” was not in question. This had gradually been clarified and confirmed over the years since they had first come together as “friends in the Lord”, had first made the Spiritual Exercises, had pronounced their vows on Montmartre, and more recently had, as priests, offered their services to the Pope. The companions are sure of their starting-point and their horizon. However, within these parameters they desire to know the means that will best serve God’s purpose for them.

Differences Rooted in Nationalities

In the same opening paragraph the text outlines some of the difficulties facing the companions in their decision making.

Some of us were French, others Spanish, Savoyards, or Cantabrians. After meeting for many sessions, there was a cleavage of sentiments and opinions about our situation. While we all had one mind and heart in seeking God’s gracious and perfect will according to the scope of our vocation; nevertheless, regarding the more readily effective and more fruitful ways of achieving God’s will for ourselves and others, we held diverse views [1].

Here is described a similar situation to that experienced by the companions in planning their journey to the Holy Land. This is not the first time that differences are arising between them and have to be faced. The text of the Deliberation also anticipates what Ignatius was later to write in Const. 605 (as quoted earlier). The presence of so many nationalities, with all the historical, cultural, and even religious baggage that each brought to the decision making, exacerbated the normal difficulties created by personality differences. It is clear that the companions were very conscious of differences rooted in national characteristics. The text offers a brief reflection on their divided situation.

No one ought to wonder that this diversity of views should be found among us, spiritually infirm and feeble men; even the apostles themselves, princes and pillars of the most holy Church, sometimes thought in opposing ways and handed down in writing their conflicting judgements. So also did many other very perfect men with whom we cannot be remotely compared [1].

The biblical reference is to Gal. 2:11 which records Paul’s confrontation with Peter. The companions are sufficiently aware of human psychology as well as of Church history not to be surprised that they hold diverse views. The only question is how to move from this starting point towards consensus or at least towards an accepted agreement on the issues they were facing. As the Deliberation expresses it:
Since we did hold different judgements, we were eagerly on the watch to discover some unobstructed way along which we might advance together and all of us offer ourselves as a holocaust to our God, in whose praise, honour and glory we would yield our all. At last we made a decision [1].

The “Unobstructed Way”: Prayer and Discussion

This “unobstructed way” that they decide on has two dimension, prayer and discussion. Firstly, prayer.

In full agreement we settled on this: that we would give ourselves to prayer, masses, and meditations more fervently than usual and, after doing our very best, we would for the rest cast all our concerns on the Lord, hoping in Him. He is so kind and generous that He never denies his good Spirit to anyone who petitions Him in humility and simplicity of heart; rather, He gives to all generously [James 1:5], not holding back from anyone. In no way then would He who is kindness itself, desert us; rather He would be with us more generously than we asked or imagined [1].

“We will give ourselves to prayer” is the central statement in this passage. But there is much more. The inner attitudes of the companions are spelled out. Taken together they generate an atmosphere permeated by faith and hope. Firstly, we recognise the very Ignatian polarity between the divine and the human. The companions will do their very best but at the same time they will “cast all our concerns on the Lord, hoping in him”. The discernment process will be a co-operative or collaborative venture. Human effort will be called for and generously given, but on its own it will never be sufficient. “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain” (Ps.127:1).

Secondly, the companions acknowledge that for true and fruitful discernment the Holy Spirit is needed. However, the companions are totally convinced that God always gives his Spirit to those who ask “in humility and simplicity of heart”. The text piles phrase upon phrase to underline the hope and confidence that the companions have in God’s help. God will not look at their efforts from afar but will be with them. He will gift them with enlightenment to understand and courage to decide. Such are their presuppositions. Only when they are embraced can worthwhile discussion begin.
The text continues:

We began, therefore, to expend every human effort. We proposed to ourselves some questions worthy of careful consideration and forethought at this opportune time. Throughout the day, we were accustomed to ponder and meditate on these to prayerfully search into them. At night each one shared with the group what he judged to be more appropriate and helpful with the intention that all with one mind would embrace the truer way of thinking, tested and commended by the more powerful reasons and by majority vote [2].

This quotation gives us the first description of the corporate discernment process itself. It is far from complex or sophisticated. The companions are to pray on the issues throughout the day and to gather in the evening to share and discuss. No particular method of sharing is proposed. A certain informality is hinted at. The stress is on a reasoned approach to the questions they are facing. The companions are not expecting consensus. They will accept the view of the majority. Significantly, perhaps, there is no mention of consolation or desolation. We notice that they do not set a time limit, although presumably they are confident that they can cover all the major issues before Easter. In terms of the Spiritual Exercises they see themselves as discerning in the Third Time of Election. They will later discover that this particular model of a Third Time election is somewhat naïve and simplistic. It will serve for non-controversial issues but will run into trouble when issues become controversial or potentially divisive. But this is the model they use as they begin the Deliberation.

First Question: Union

Two main questions surface for the companions in 1539. The first concerns the future of their relationships with each other in light of their new circumstances. They realise that the casual “friends in the Lord” paradigm will no longer suffice. This had served them quite adequately while they were studying together in Paris, or travelling around Europe free to make their own decisions. But it did not fit the new reality of being sent to different places, individually or in small groups, by the Pope. The text expresses their predicament very clearly.

Given that we had offered and dedicated ourselves and our lives to Christ Our Lord and to his true and legitimate Vicar on earth, so that he might dispose of us and send us wherever he judged it to be more fruitful, whether to the Turks or to the Indies or to heretics or to others of the faithful or pagans, would it, or would it not, be more advantageous for our purpose to be so joined and bound together in one body that no physical distance, no matter how great, would separate us? [3].

The question has now been formulated. We notice the first appearance of the word “body” that will be a key concept in the later Constitutions. At this point, I suggest, it does not have the richer meaning it takes on in the later document, but its appearance is nonetheless significant. It is used to indicate a more formal structure than the informality of “friends in the Lord”. The text, having formulated the question, now gives an example in case anyone has not grasped its meaning.

The issue can be made clear by a case. The Sovereign Pontiff is sending two of us to the city of Siena. Ought we to have a mutual understanding of his concern? Or should we have no more concern for them than we have for those who are not in this Society? [3].
The companions could remain as unincardinated secular priests (not tied to any particular diocese) but totally available to the Pope and carrying out his missions. This would be done on an individual basis and each would negotiate his own bread and board, as it were, according to circumstances. Or, if they so wished, they could find some way of remaining bound to each other. This is what they decide to do and they express their decision as follows:

In the end we established the affirmative answer to this question, i.e. that in as much as our most kind and affectionate Lord has deigned to gather us together and unite us, men so spiritually weak and from such diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds, we ought day by day to strengthen and stabilise our union, rendering ourselves one body with special concern for each other, in order to effect the greater spiritual good of our fellow men. For united spiritual strength is more robust and braver in any arduous enterprise than it would be if segmented [3].

Their companionship and friendship are God’s gift to them, to be treasured and fostered. They would be spurning this gift if they decided to go each his own way. So their friendship will be preserved. However, they also realise that this gift of friendship is not so much an end in itself as a vibrant source of apostolic energy. They will bind themselves to each another in one body “in order to effect the greater spiritual good of our fellow men”. The mutual support that friendship and union give are a primary resource for an effective ministry, especially in difficult circumstances.

From one perspective this first decision of the companions may appear to be self-contradictory. On the one hand they are eager to be dispersed and separated from each other, thus sacrificing their bond of friendship. But on the other hand they want to maintain and even strengthen that bond. Even if not self-contradictory this is at least paradoxical. However, a closer inspection reveals that what they are really sacrificing is one particular expression of friendship, namely that which is made possible by physical proximity to one another. This is not the same as abandoning their friendship or refusing to maintain their bond of union. However, it does leave them with the challenge to be creative in finding ways to strengthen that bond other than through physical proximity.

Here we encounter a crucial constituent of apostolic spirituality, a constituent that introduces a particular kind of tension – within the individual person, and within the group or body to which he or she belongs. This tension is between the polarities of union and mission, to both of which the apostolic person or group is committed. These polarities do not sit comfortably together but tend to pull a person or group in opposite directions. The companions are already facing this tension as they begin the Deliberation, and later it will pervade the Constitutions. But in both documents two principles are established. The first is that they must live the tension rather than attempt to dissolve it (e.g. by choosing one polarity at the expense of the other). The second, already touched on, is that there is a hierarchy within the polarities, namely that the good or value that is union is in service of the greater good that is mission. The two are interlinked, are even interdependent, but for an apostolic group or body mission will always be the end and have the ultimate priority.

Second Question: Kind of Union

The decision arising from the first question on union now leads to the further question: What kind of union will this be? Let us again remind ourselves of who these men are, and what their
self-understanding is at this point. They are a group of secular priests, with a history of friendship behind them, as well as a shared experience of the Spiritual Exercises, who have offered themselves to the Pope for universal mission. They now want to move from their earlier informal relationships with each other to a more formal or structured kind of union. The word “body” has surfaced in their thinking and appears to be important for them. But what sort of body?

To found a religious order is one possible way forward. It may even seem to be the most obvious way but there is no consensus around it. The companions do not know if that is God’s will for them. However, they formulate their second question in terms of founding a new order. In doing so they are not prejudging the issue but giving their prayer and discussion a concrete focus. A vague question does not lend itself to discernment. When we look at the text very shortly we will also notice how simple they keep the question. There is no alternative proposed to establishing a new order. They are not facing themselves with an option between Possibility A and Possibility B. The option is between Possibility A and Possibility Not-A. If they choose Not-A the question has to be reformulated and the discernment process begins again. This echoes the teaching on election in the Spiritual Exercises.

Let us now turn to how this development is expressed in the text.

All of us had already pronounced a vow of perpetual chastity and a vow of poverty before the most reverend Legate of His Holiness when we were working in Venice. The question now was this: would it be advantageous to pronounce a third vow, viz. of obedience to someone from among us? In order that we might more sincerely and with greater praise and merit be able to fulfill the will of God in all details of our lives as well as in carrying out the free wishes and orders of His Holiness, to whom we have most willingly offered our all: will, intellect, strength, and the like [4].

Their answer to this question will determine whether or not they become a new religious order. The way they articulate their question may seem strange to us, referring to a vow of obedience rather than expressly to the founding an order. However, the text implicitly explains the choice of words by pointing out that they are already vowed to poverty and celibacy. If they also
pronounce a vow of obedience to someone within the group, they will canonically become religious.

The companions now have a second carefully phrased question. They begin their discernment with the same approach that had led to an easy resolution of the question on union: prayer throughout the day followed by unstructured sharing in the evenings. But they soon become aware that this second question is proving much more intractable than the first. They are getting nowhere with it. The text reveals:

When we had persisted in prayer and thought for many days without hitting upon any satisfactory resolution of our uncertainty, we put our hope in the Lord and started to cast about for better ways of working out such a resolution [5].

In this frustrating situation they first renew their hope in the Lord. Then they admit that the process that helped them move quickly to a decision on the issue of their union is not adequate for this more difficult discernment. They need to change their approach and they begin by examining the amount of time they are giving to the process.

Our first line of thought went this way: would it expedite our discernment if we all went away to some hermitage for thirty or forty days, giving ourselves over to meditation, fasting and penance, so that God might listen to our desires and mercifully impress on our minds the answer to our question. Or should three or four undertake this enterprise in the name of all with the same intent? Or would it be better if one of us went to the hermitage but all remained in the city, devoting half of every day to this our one principal occupation and the rest of the day to our customary work of preaching and hearing confessions? The half devoted to our principal concern would be the time less crowded with other concerns, more suitable for meditation, reflection and prayer [5]

Three Spiritual Preparations

Three practical proposals are outlined here: (i) that all withdraw from the city and go to a hermitage where they can discern in solitude; (ii) that three or four among them take this course and discern on behalf of the others; (iii) that only one go to a hermitage to pray while the others remain in the city and continue their discernment. These proposals show a lot of flexibility and imagination, and there may well have been others. However, for reasons we need not go into, the companions reject the three proposals recorded in the text. They opt instead, as far as I can see, for an adaptation of the third. They will not send anyone to a hermitage but they will all remain in Rome, dividing their day according to that third proposal. This entails giving half their day to their customary pastoral work and the other half to “meditation, reflection and prayer”. This is to focus on their “principal concern”, i.e. the kind of union God wants for them.

This may seem to provide a more than adequate foundation for their discernment. But no so. The companions also feel a need to look carefully at what they call “spiritual preparations” for each of them individually. The attention with which they spell out these requirements indicates the seriousness of their resolve as well as the problems they are encountering. I quote at length from the text but will interject some commentary as I go along.

The first preparation: each would prepare himself beforehand, would take time for prayer, masses, and meditation in order to strive for joy and peace in the Holy Spirit regarding obedience, labouring as much as he could to have a predilection for obeying
rather than commanding, when the consequent glory of God and the praise of his majesty would be equal [6].

Here there is an expectation that obedience will be seen as difficult and not humanly attractive. The final decision on this issue will need to be made in consolation and so they are encouraged to pray for joy and peace as they face into the discernment process. Linked to this is the need to attain indifference or inner freedom in the light of the possibility that religious obedience is what the Lord wants. Towards this end, they are urged, should they feel a repugnance to obeying, to pray that they be attracted by it rather than by the prospect of yielding authority, always provided that this would give equal glory to God. This is an obvious adaptation of the note at the end of the meditation on The Three Classes of Persons in the Spiritual Exercises. Here, however, the issue is poverty.

When we feel an inclination or repugnance against actual poverty, or when we are not indifferent to poverty or riches, a great help toward overcoming this disordered attachment is to beg the Lord in the colloquies to choose oneself to serve him in actual poverty (even though it is contrary to our lower nature); and further that one desires it, begs for it, and pleads for it, provided only that it would be for the service and praise of the Divine Majesty [Exx. 157].

This is an application of the principle or tactic of agere contra – to go against one’s natural repugnance in order to come to a greater inner freedom.

Such is the first spiritual preparation. Let us now return to the text of the Deliberation.

The second preparation: none of the companions would communicate with any other about this matter at issue, or inquire about his reasoning on it. The point of this preparation was to prevent anyone from being persuaded by another and therefore, biased more toward obedience or the contrary. In this way each would desire as more advantageous only what he derived from his own prayer and meditation.
This preparation, of course, refers to the course of the day before the companions gather for their evening sharing. They do not want to influence one another while individually they ponder and pray about the issue. Each must reach his point of view in solitude before God. We readily recognise the principle similarly enunciated in the Spiritual Exercises that warns the director not to interfere with the direct communication between God and the exercitant, especially during the election process.

When a person is seeking God’s will, it is more appropriate and far better that the Creator and Lord himself should communicate himself to the devout soul, embracing it in love and praise, and disposing it for the way which will enable the soul to serve him better in the future. Accordingly, the one giving the Exercises ought … to allow the Creator to deal immediately with the creature and the creature with its Creator and Lord [Exx. 15].

A comparison between this insistence on personal prayer being unfettered by the influence of any prior sharing or discussion contrasts with common practice today. Now it seems to be more usual that a group will discuss an issue first, and then (as we say) “go away and pray about it”. This reverses the principle used in the Deliberation.

Once more we return to the text.

The third preparation: each one would think of himself as a stranger to our group who would have no expectation of joining it. Thinking this way he would escape being carried by his emotions more to one opinion and judgement; rather, as if a stranger, he would speak his thought to the group about having or not having obedience, would by his judgement confirm and recommend what he believed would be for God’s greater service, and would make more secure the Society’s lasting preservation [6].

What at other times is something greatly to be desired, i.e. a strong sense of belonging to the group, is here acknowledged as a possible blockage. A sense of belonging, with the affective and emotional bonds that it creates, can lead to a lack of perspective and a lack of inner freedom. We have only to think of the bias that being Irish, or belonging to a particular county, creates when Ireland or our native county is engaged in a sporting event. Reason and objectivity go out of the window and emotionality reigns. Something similar, even if not so extreme, can also happen when we are deeply involved with any group, and we are engaged in reaching a decision that affects the group itself. Our very belonging may open us to bias.

The companions recognise that they need to find a way to distance themselves from their own feelings so that they may see the issue clearly and objectively. Hence the suggestion that each imagine himself as a stranger to the group, as a benevolent outsider looking in, but who has no emotional involvement with the group. The Spiritual Exercises present a similar tactic in The Second Method of Making a Good and Sound Election in the Third Time.

I will imagine a person whom I have never seen or known. Desiring all perfection for him or her, I will consider what I would say in order to bring such a one to act and elect for the greater glory of God our Lord and the greater perfection of his or her soul [Exx. 185].

Now the companions adapt this tactic to suit the circumstances of a corporate discernment.
Pros and Cons or Cons and Pros

Only when all the above has been put into practice are the companions ready to turn their attention to the second stage of communal discernment, that of sharing. But they have learned the hard way that this sharing needs to be more structured than earlier in their Deliberation. Once again they turn to the Spiritual Exercises, specifically the Fourth Point in the First Method of Making a Good and Sound Election in the Third Time.

I should consider and reason out how many advantages or benefits accrue to myself from having the office or benefice proposed, all of them solely for the praise of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul; and on the contrary I should similarly consider the disadvantages and dangers in having it. Then, acting in the same manner in the second part, I should consider the advantages and benefits in not having it, and contrarily the disadvantages and dangers in not having it [Exx. 181].

Adapting the question to themselves, the companions consider the advantages of making a vow of obedience, then the corresponding disadvantages; after that, the advantages of not making a vow of obedience, then the corresponding disadvantages. In other words there would be four sets of reasons given. However, in reporting back to the group on the results of their individual prayer and reflection, they seem to have simplified this protocol by simply giving the points that surfaced against vowing obedience, and later those that surfaced in its favour. But let the text speak for itself.

With the foregoing spiritual dispositions, we arranged to assemble, all prepared, on the following day. Each one was to declare all those disadvantages which could be brought against obedience [by vow, to one of our group], all the reasons which presented themselves and which anyone of us had found in his own private reflection, meditation, and prayer. Each in his turn was to make known what he had gathered. E.g. one said, “it seems that on account of our failures and since the words ‘religious’ or ‘obedience’ have unseemly connotations among the Christian people” [7].

Other reasons against becoming a religious order (or vowing obedience) follow. They range widely and display the variety of ways in which the companions understood themselves and their vocation, as well as the civil and ecclesiastical society in which they lived. These reasons are of fascinating historical interest but, as they do not affect the structure of the discernment, we will not go into them here. Having given a sample of these arguments against obedience the text continues:

On the next day we argued for the opposite side of the question, each one putting before the group all the advantages and good consequences of such obedience which he had drawn from prayer and meditation; each one took his own turn to present his reflections, sometimes arguing from the impossible situation that would otherwise result, sometimes simply showing the positive values of obedience [7].

Again a sample list of such arguments follows. A query is often raised about the companions’ decision to present their arguments against obedience first, only then those in favour. It is not what most people tend to do spontaneously, and it is not the way the process is presented in the Exercises. The text does not provide any answer to this query. The companions may sense that some are already leaning towards becoming a religious order, even before the process begins. If so, they may be hoping to provide a reality check by having everyone face the arguments against
this first. Acceptance of obedience will not be steamrolled through the assembly. But this is speculation.

**Toward Closure**

This initial sharing of the reasons against and for obedience that surface in each individual’s prayer lays the foundation for the difficult work to follow. The text makes it clear that the companions need a lot of time to work through the complexities of the issues facing them until they are ready to make a decision.

During many days, from this side and that, we worked over a mass of data related to the resolution of our problem; we examined and weighed the more forceful and important reasons and took time as usual for prayer, meditation, and reflection. By the Lord’s help we did at last come to this conclusion, not only with a majority vote but without a single dissenting voice: obedience to somebody among us is highly advantageous and highly necessary in order to accomplish more effectively and exactly our primary desire of fulfilling God’s will in all details of life, in order to preserve the Society more assuredly, and finally in order to provide properly for all the detailed matters of spiritual and temporal business which arise [7].

So finally they come near to closure. The decision is made. They will found a religious order. They would have been satisfied with a majority decision but in fact they reach consensus. The experience of harmony and joy that accompanies this consensus provides them with what the Exercises call confirmation. They are convinced that God accepts their decision.

These two issues, that of union and that of obedience, were the major ones for the companions during the Deliberation of 1539. But from these first two decisions other questions arose and they continued to discern these for many more weeks. The text concludes:

In all our deliberations over the questions just spoken of and others, we followed the order of discussion and the procedure described above, always giving attention to both sides of every question. Our efforts lasted for almost three months, from the middle of Lent until the feast of St. John the Baptist [24 June]. On that day, but not without long vigils, much prayer and labour of mind and body preceding deliberation and decision, all our business was completed and terminated in a spirit of gladness and harmony [9].

Even at the end the text stresses the “long vigils, much prayer and labour of mind and body” that preceded their sharing and final decision-making. The priority given to what the individual companions do before they come together is one of the most important lessons from this document.
Additional Comments

The predominant approach to decision making in the Deliberation is that of the Third Time, that of reason and reflection. While the companions, during their personal prayer, almost certainly paid attention to their inner movements and their experiences of consolation and desolation, when they came together their sharing concentrated on giving reasons for or against the particular proposal. In other words, as individuals they may have operated to some extent in the Second Time, but as a group they operated in the Third Time.

An argument might be made that the first decision, that on union, took place in the First Time. The ease and dispatch with which this decision was made, as well as the absence of any record of opposing arguments, could point in that direction.

The Deliberation of the First Fathers is a unique document. This is not to claim that communal discernment had not been part of the Christian tradition before 1539. For example, any time that monastics such as the Benedictines or conventuals such as the Dominicans came together in Chapter, they were engaging in discernment. The same can be said of local ecclesiastical synods or indeed of ecumenical councils. But I am not aware of any recorded structure or process for such discernment like that contained in the Deliberation. And, of course, the way in which the companions approached their decision making was closely reliant on the teaching of the Spiritual Exercises.

It is often asked, what happened to this model of communal discernment in the life of the Society of Jesus? Did it continue to be used or did it disappear? The answer lies somewhere in between these two poles. The Deliberation took place at a time when, and indeed because, the group of companions had no authority structure. They were not religious. We have described them as simply an informal gathering of “friends in the Lord”. Ignatius may have been an inspirational leader but he exercised influence rather than authority. The companions were free to disagree with him as in the question of the Holy Land. Some may suspect that he had more sway than others did at the Deliberation. However, the text gives no such indication and there is no evidence as to what arguments he brought to the discussions.

However, once the companions had opted in favour of vowing obedience, and as they moved forward in planning the new religious order, structures of authority came into being. These were clarified in a definitive way as Ignatius set to writing the Constitutions. He favoured what is basically a centralised and hierarchical form of government. This leaves less room, less need, for communal discernment. Nevertheless, elements of communal discernment remain within the Society’s structures. These are most obvious during General Congregations (corresponding to Chapters in other orders) where the authority of the Congregation (representing the body of the Society) over the General is operative.

Elements of communal discernment are also visible in the many one-on-one consultations that are called for in the Constitutions. Even if only two people are involved the dynamic of these interactions is closer to that of the Deliberation than to that of the Exercises (although, of course, the two are linked). The most important of these interactions is that between the individual Jesuit and his Provincial as part of the process of the Provincial’s missioning him in the most appropriate and effective way. Other examples could be given but they are less pointed.

Even though the structure of communal discernment as found in its “pure” form in the Deliberation is not often replicated today, adaptations of it are both possible and desirable. These
can incorporate many of its main elements. This will be done according to the nature of any particular group, its needs, and its willingness to take seriously the communal search for the will of God.