

18 April 1975

75 n. 13

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

This topic, one of the Sedos priorities, is being written about more and more in books and journals, and in this issue we give you a selection of such material. Fr. Häring tells us how to discern the signs of the times while Fr. Faricy writes on what he considers to be the main ones and says how he thinks Christians should react to them in a constructive way. Fr. Tonna has examined Jesuit documentation on the topic and from it has derived the principles for discerning the signs within the framework of a religious community.

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## COMING EVENTS:

STUDY GROUP MEETINGS

<u>ONGOING FORMATION</u>	22 APRIL 1975	4:00 p.m.	SEDOS SECRETARIAT
<u>PRIMARY EVANGELIZATION</u>	24 APRIL 1975	4:00 p.m.	SEDOS SECRETARIAT
<u>SMALL COMMUNITIES</u>	28 APRIL 1975	4:00 p.m.	SEDOS SECRETARIAT
<u>SIGNS OF THE TIMES</u>	29 APRIL 1975	4:00 p.m.	SEDOS SECRETARIAT

Please do not wait to be invited personally to any particular meeting. If you can contribute to one (or more!) come along and join in!!

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE	19 MAY 1975	4:00 p.m.	SEDOS SECRETARIAT
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SEEKING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES by Bernard Haring

To be able to formulate and communicate the message of salvation which remains always identical, it is necessary to know human experience in its favourable aspects and also in its dangerous ones. Above all, it is necessary to know well the situation of the man and the community to which we are sent as messengers of salvation. It is not a question of knowing every detail, fact or statistic, nor of knowing every aspect of events or of science; it is a question of scrutinizing and discerning those events, processes and interdependences which have profound repercussions on the whole moral, religious and social life, in fact on life in all its manifestations.

A. The collectivity of the signs of the times.

We can speak of vox temporum, vox Dei (God calling us through the signs of the times) only because God is the Lord of heaven and earth, because the Creator and Redeemer is present in the whole of human history and thus the signs of his presence are impressed in history. Some of these signs of the times are more perceptible in the Church, others are perhaps more evident in the secular world: but it is a matter of only one order of creation and salvation, and thus it is unthinkable that there should be no profound interdependence between the history of the Church and the total history of man. It will be enough to reflect on how the experience of the solidarity of mankind in the world today has stimulated and fostered ecumenism. The principal events which influence the existence of man are a locus theologicus which neither scientific theology nor evangelization can relinquish. God has not shut himself up in a book nor in a situation. The same God who has revealed his most active presence in the Incarnation, passion death and resurrection is present in the whole of history: the Spirit of God renews the face of the earth and the hearts of men.

We must not speak of the signs of the times as a locus theologicus to be put side by side with the revelation in Jesus Christ: he is the ultimate and definitive Word of the Father to the world, but he is also the Word in which everything has been created. The whole creation, and therefore the whole of history, has the character of a word-event, of an event-revealer. And therefore, since everything has its centre in the Word Incarnate, particularly in the paschal mystery and in the eschatological hope, the signs of the times do not stand beside the revelation in Jesus Christ but are fully integrated in its light: they are part of the full revelation in him who is the Word of the Father. Consequently, the signs of the times can never contradict the revelation which is received in the Son and which constitutes the deposit of faith.

B. How can the signs of the times be discerned?

1. I have already stressed that we can speak of the signs of the times, and discern them as the presence of God, only in the light of faith in Jesus Christ. Only to those who believe in creation through the Word, in the coming of Christ and in the final hope of man can the events of history disclose themselves as signs of the presence of God, that is, as signs of the times.

2. He who says faith says also, necessarily, community of faith and salvation. God does not let himself be monopolized by an individual person or a group: he reveals himself always as Lord and Father of all men. Christ wants the faith to be preached, lived and witnessed to in the community of salvation, the community of his disciples. The Spirit sent to us by Christ operates in all, by means of all and for all. The individualist, even if he looks for his own salvation, can never be in a position to discern the signs of the times. To know in the greatest measure possible the plan of God for our time, we must unite ourselves in faith, in a search, in meditation and prayer. And since God operates in all creation and in the entire history of man, it is necessary that the disciples of Christ unite themselves to all men, with sincere consciences in the search for the true and the good, in discerning and making full use of the signs of the times, pursuing and encouraging just solutions to the many problems which continually arise in economic, cultural, political and social life and so on.

3. The signs of the times are considered signs of the presence of God, Creator and Saviour: it is therefore evident that man cannot discern them without the grace of the Holy Spirit. To be vigilant, and to know how to discern, demands personal prayer and community prayer. In this regard, it must be said that it is certainly not sufficient to recite prayers. It is necessary that there be that life of prayer which gives liberty to the Spirit who cries out in us: 'Abba! Father!' And this prayer becomes spontaneity, creativity, openness, sign of the presence of the Spirit. Only a community of persons engaged in personal and community prayer which is conscious of the presence of God, who calls and gathers all men together, will be capable of listening to the voice of the times and of understanding the more urgent signs of the presence of God in human history.

4. Confidence in the Spirit of God does not permit us, however, the least intellectual and spiritual laziness. We must use all the means which Providence puts today, as today, at our disposal, in order to know better the man of today and the course of history, social processes and relations, and so on. . . . Very often the Church has shown a defensive attitude, full of suspicion in regard to the behavioural sciences, whereas these are an indispensable instrument for the deepening of the knowledge of man. In a closed and static society the point of reference was constituted by the wisdom and prudence of the elders. Today this is no longer enough. Henceforth, the unrenounceable instruments are anthropology, the comparison of cultures, psychology, both individual and social, and also depth psychology. The Church cannot evangelize the world without making full use, obviously wise use, of the new sciences. The working-document for the preparation for the Synod of 1974 rightly underlines that for an effective evangelization, it is necessary that the Church be present in the focal points, where there are formed and where there arise conceptions and ideas on the world, on man and on history (cf. Part III, 1D). Nevertheless, in what follows, the document begins to accuse these sciences (anthropology, psychology, sociology) of characterizing a culture that ignores God and the gospel. It is necessary to ask whether this is a fair judgement or one which is too generalized? And in the cases where it is fair, would it not perhaps be better to attribute a part of the fault to Christians for not being actively present in these focal points of daily life? However, these sciences lose nothing of their importance; they help us to understand better our culture and the actual historical moment, the dynamism of the social processes and the various interdependences between religion, family, economy, culture, politics and so on.

5. Already, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, the degree of the virtue of discernment depends on a connaturalitas with truth and with good. The signs of the times are by their own nature an appeal to vigilance, to conversion and to the reform of structures. He who is not ready to unite personal conversion and renewal of structures in a single synthesis will never be able to discern and read the signs of the times.

This aspect should be stressed also in consideration of the fact that the theology and catechisms of the last decades have too unilaterally emphasized the fides qua, that is the content of revelation, and often in an excessively objective way. The biblical renewal and Christian existentialism have helped us to distinguish more clearly the importance of the fides qua, total openness and the gift of self, transcendence in listening, in receiving and in engaging one's self, without which the pure and simple content of the faith cannot be grasped. The content of faith does not bear fruit by itself. This is valid also for the discernment of the signs of the times: only the man and the community characterized by openness, by listening and by the prayer, 'Here I am, Lord, call me', are connatural with them.

6. Not only because of the waves of contestation and of prophetic protest, but also in order to understand the signs of the times, we must give the greatest attention to the virtue of discernment or of constructive criticism. Sour criticism and that of those who call everything into question without proposing a constructive plan on the other hand, and without having at the same time the will to engage deeply in personal conversion and in social reform, are useless and close the mind to authentic discernment.

7. For the connaturality so necessary for the discernment of the signs of the times, a great hope and profound confidence in God are indispensable. The pessimist and all those who are more confident in themselves than in God will never see the signs of the times in the right light. It is necessary that first attention be given the positive signs of the presence of God. The Christian will not lose his time in useless lamentations about 'bad days', but will look in the first place for what the Lord has done, what is his positive gift. The biblical approach speaks of the kairos, of the present moment, which offers us unrepeatable opportunities to do good, honouring thus the heavenly Father. For those who possess this openness full of confidence, even danger and temptation become kairos, in the sense of a challenge received, in such a way that they do not permit themselves any more mediocrity, and decide for the following of Christ without reserve.

8. While exclusively human optimism conceals from itself, deceiving itself, the greatest dangers, the discernment of the signs of the times renders a man ready also for the criticism of idols and ideologies. He who is sensitive to the signs of the presence of God becomes also capable of unmasking idols and ideologies, collective prejudices and false ideals. Today the criticism of ideologies has become a university discipline; this is also a reason not to renounce the use of such a new instrument. But, I repeat, a true criticism is not possible if persons and communities, including ecclesial ones, are not ready to accept prophetic contestation, and to open their eyes also to their own prejudices, idols and ideologies, and not only to note those of others.

(An excerpt from EVANGELISATION TODAY by Bernard Haring; St. Paul Publications, Slough SL3 6BT, England; 1974.)

## THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES AND EVANGELIZATION

### WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES?

To communicate God's word is much more than an intellectual problem; it is a complex and practical problem. In the first place, for God's word to be communicated it is not enough that it be spoken; the word must be spoken to someone, addressed. This means that God's word should be spoken to people in terms of their own experience. What is involved goes beyond merely intellectual experience. Human experience is broader than that. The problem concerns man's whole stance in the world, his way of experiencing himself, others, the world around him. Evangelization, then, must speak to people in terms of their own experience; it must be incarnate in contemporary culture.

Evangelization is directed to men not in the abstract but as they find themselves in their own historical, social, and cultural context. To evangelize, to announce the message of salvation to others, it is necessary to be aware of the conditions in which those others find themselves, to be aware of their experience at least in a general way. "It is necessary to examine and to identify those social processes and phenomena which can affect a whole generation, a people, or an entire civilization." ("Evangelization and Justice" paper prepared for the Pontifical Commission Justice and Peace, March 1974.) These trends, phenomena, currents reflect the characteristics that mark a particular cultural era; they give expression to man's aspirations; and they modify his existence. These phenomena are the "signs of the times." It is important that evangelization take into account these signs of the times, that it present God's word in the overall framework of the signs of the times, for only in this way will it be able to address the word of God to people today. But what are the signs of the times? Can they be described in any coherent way with particular reference to the spiritual life?

To begin with, we are witnessing today the growth of a general world outlook that seems to be increasingly universal and that seems to be much more than simply the product of the convergence of various national or regional cultures. There appears to be a convergence of peoples, a kind of world-wide meeting of human concerns that has as its product an international and overall, and growing, point of view. And this, in itself, is a sign of the times. Mass communications are both a cause and a result of this convergence of mankind. Not only radio, television, telephone and cable systems, but especially the international news agencies are important factors. One reads the same news, often with the same interpretations presented through selective reporting in newspapers all over the world, especially in those areas where there is a free press. Fashions and developments in popular culture spread rapidly and quickly become nearly universal. The same kind of popular music can be heard almost all over the world. Political ideas rapidly become common property through mass communications and through international bodies such as the United Nations and its affiliates. Important events in any part of the world are immediately known everywhere and take on universal significance. The world is no longer divided into nations so much as it consists, more and more of blocs of nations. For example, at the UN Conference on World Population in Romania in August, 1974, the principal political dialogue was between the developed nations and the less developed nations; they formed two more or less integrated bodies that accepted a common fundamental basis of questions and issues, but that differed in their conclusions.

This growing and increasingly worldwide outlook has certain characteristics; these characteristics are the chief signs of the times. For purposes of brevity and clarity, they will be grouped here into four clusters. 1. Mankind understands itself more and more as a unity, as a collectivity, which is moving into a future for which it is responsible. This future-orientation of man and his responsibility gives rise to crises of hope. But, as human progress continues, man becomes more the master of nature and tends to interpret his world in secular terms. And, as world society becomes more organized and man becomes more conscious of himself precisely as human and as having a properly human dignity, the question of human freedom becomes more important. Future-directedness, crises of hope, secularity and freedom seem to be, today, the most important signs of the times in terms of which God's word must be spoken if it is to be addressed to contemporary man.

Man today sees himself and society in terms of progress, in terms of moving into a future for which man is responsible, in terms of a world with possibilities for the future, a world-to-be-built. The watchword today is the "new," whatever is closest to the future. It is the future that draws man, that moves him to grow, to transcend present limitations in the direction of a better future. If evangelization is to address man as he is today, it must deal with real problems and contemporary man's greatest problem is the problem of the future. God's word, then, somehow, must be formulated in categories that are not static but dynamic, not looking romantically and nostalgically toward the past in the manner of the nineteenth century, nor mired in the existential present in the manner of the Middle Ages, but directed toward the future.

2. One aspect of the problem of the future is the problem of hope. Hope looks to the future. It gives us the momentum or impetus to take the next step into the future. Without hope man is paralyzed, turns to despair, drops out. As the future gains primacy in human consciousness, hope becomes more important as that human quality or attitude that is indispensable in order to cope with the future. Faced with his awesome responsibility with regard to the future, man today tends to lose hope. He sees the world energy crisis, the shortage of natural resources, the lack of food to feed the world, the overwhelming and accelerating increase of the world's population, the recurring crises of the environment. He sees himself situated in the world, facing his own future and the future of his family, and he feels inadequate to deal with the unknown that the future holds. He loses hope or, more generally, becomes anxious in the face of the future.

Modern man suffers from the general conditions of contemporary existence. He is overwhelmed by immensity, by the seemingly infinite structure of the universe, by the apparently infinite axis of time that stretches back millions of years and that reaches forward indefinitely, by the immensity of the human mass, by the difficulty in communicating with others, by the impersonal blind hostility of large human institutions. And in the face of all this he is afraid. What is the root of this fear; what is the core of mankind's present unrest and anxiety? Ultimately, it is the fear of death, the fear of personal death and the fear of the death of mankind. It is more than simply fear of the future; it is the fear that there will be no future. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit priest-scientist who so well understood and diagnosed twentieth century anxiety, put it this way:

Tomorrow? But who can guarantee us a tomorrow anyway? And without the assurance that this tomorrow exists, can we really go on living, we to whom has been given--perhaps for the first time in the whole history of the universe--the terrible gift of foresight?

Sickness of the dead end--the anguish of feeling shut in.

This time we have at last put our finger on the tender spot.

What makes the world in which we live specifically modern is our discovery in it and around it of evolution. And I can now add that what disconcerts the modern world at its very roots is not being sure, and not seeing how it ever could be sure, that there is an outcome--a suitable outcome--to that evolution. (The Phenomenon of Man)

Mankind is not sure of the future's outcome, nor even that there will be any suitable outcome, any ultimate future. Man today is like a miner trapped underground; before he can decide to climb back up the mineshaft, he needs to presuppose two things: that the other end of the mineshaft is open, and that there is light and fresh air on the other side of that opening. In the same way man today is confronted with the long and painful effort of human progress. That effort cannot be made if there is no hope for an ultimately successful outcome; at present, because the question is just being formulated in our time, hope is uncertain, and the effort is being made but with anxiety, with a weakness of hope in the future. Failures in hope can be expected to be more frequent as man becomes even more conscious of the problem of the future. Man is coming of age, and he is having interior doubts. This is a sign of the times.

3. A third sign of the times is that of secularity, of the ongoing secularization of man's view of reality. Western culture, and--increasingly--world culture, has undergone and is still undergoing a progressive desacralization of persons and things and, at the same time, a rationalization of thought--the withholding of emotional participation in thinking about the world. This is a continuing process of transformation, a double transformation: of man's way of understanding the world, and also of his way of understanding his relationships with the world. He sees the world less and less as dominated by divine forces and more and more as subject, really or potentially, to his own domination and control. Accompanying this desacralization of man's worldview, there is a progressively objective and unemotional attitude toward the world, a kind of pragmatic and scientific objectivity. Man today sees the world less in sacred terms and more in secular terms; this process of transformation of understanding is called secularization.

As human progress goes on, as man continues to dominate nature, he sees nature and all reality more in secular terms, as not sacred but secular. This secular and matter-of-fact approach to the world is, in fact, the most important psychological presupposition of human domination of the world. And it is a sign of the times.

4. Finally, it should be noted that almost everywhere in today's world there is a preoccupation with man himself, with his dignity as a person, with human rights, with the relationship between person and community, and--especially--with human freedom. There are several levels of concern with man's dignity, rights, and freedom. African liberation movements fight for political freedom. Many Latin American countries struggle to be liberated from North American economic domination, and throughout the world men seek freedom from the power of multinational corporations. There is, then, a concern for the freedom of peoples. At the same time, there is, in the face of so much contemporary violence against persons, an intense interest in the rights and freedom of the individual person. There are, nearly everywhere, battles being fought for freedom. There are, for example the black civil rights movement and the chicano movement and the American Indian movement in the United States,

the movement in western countries for women's liberation, and the struggle for freedom in Northern Ireland. All of these, seen globally, mark an important sign of the times: man's search for freedom from all that oppresses him and keeps him down, freedom from ignorance, freedom from institutionalized violence, economic and social and political freedom, freedom to be truly human in keeping with man's intrinsic human dignity.

These are the principal signs of the times: progress, lack of hope, secularization, freedom. They indicate what men are searching for in contemporary society; they are the names of contemporary man's aspirations. They give titles to the questions that man is asking today. To be effective, from the viewpoint of man's interior life, evangelization must present God's word in the form of answers to the questions that are in man's heart.

#### CHRISTIANITY AND THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

The Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et spes, states that:

...the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its expectations, its longings, and its dramatic characteristics. (Doc. of Vatican II, W. Abbott)

What does the Church have to say to the spiritual questions, the spiritual needs, in the heart of modern man?

Paradoxically, Christianity has given rise to much of the future orientation in present world culture. Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy has written:

A question about the future of Christianity would be out of order. "The Future and Christianity" is no casual combination of words like "the future of motoring" or "the future of Europe". Christianity is the founder and trustee of the future, the very process of finding and securing it, and without the Christian spirit there is no real future for man...

In apparent doubt whether there is still any future in Christianity, people have been demanding in recent years that we save Christianity from destruction. . .But "saving" Christianity is unnecessary, undesirable, impossible, because it is anti-Christian. Christianity says that he who tries to save his soul shall lose it. Our supreme need is not to save what we smugly presume to have, but to revive what we have almost lost. The real question is: Do we have a future? Then, we would have to be Christians. (The Christian Future)

In the Old Testament, God reveals himself to Israel in Israel's history. That revelation is a promise and even a guarantee, an announcement of the promised future. Israel's religion and its relationship with God is covenantal, is based on promise, for covenant means promise. The two central categories of the religion of Israel are covenant and exodus. Both are future-oriented categories. Just as God was in covenant with Abraham

and Isaac and Moses, so is he always in covenant with his people, promising them the future. And Just as God was with his people in the exodus, leading them to the promised land, so is he with Israel in history, leading Israel into the promised future. God is not "up there" nor "out there," but "up ahead," leading his people, going before them into the future that he has promised them. God calls his people into the future, into the inheritance that he has for them. There is no essential change in the New Testament. In the resurrection of Christ, God has promised to us the future, the world to come. This future is what we are building toward.

The Second Vatican Council, in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, brings the Old Testament and the New Testament images of covenant, exodus, and the risen Christ as the head of God's people together. Gaudium et spes sees history as moving toward a future goal. The risen Christ is the goal of all history and the future focal point of mankind's progress. Christianity is essentially future-oriented. This future-orientation must be stressed in evangelization.

1. Also, Christianity alone possesses the ultimate answer to the contemporary question of hope. What are the conditions of hope? What conditions, when fulfilled, make hope in the future possible? Hope has two conditions. First, it must be interpersonal. We hope only in persons, not in things. Hope requires a certain mutuality between persons. Secondly, hope, to exist, must be based on the assurance of an ultimately successful outcome for the future. Hope must be anchored in some guarantee that there is, at the end, a way out of present difficulties. These two conditions of hope in the future: that man's hope be in a person, and that it be in a person who assures man of an ultimately successful future, are fulfilled in, and only in Jesus Christ risen. Christ risen hold man's future firmly in his hands. He is God's pledge to man of man's ultimate future. The risen Christ is the Lord of the Future, and the only real and solid ground of man's hope.

The Church's answer to the problem of anxiety about the future, and to the problems of suffering and death, is the cross of Christ directed toward the resurrection. The suffering of the individual person can have meaning as a participation in the redemptive suffering of Jesus, and can be a share in God's work of redeeming the world. The death of the individual person can be a participation in the redemptive death of Jesus who has made of death a passage to future life. Furthermore, the whole direction of the world's history is toward the death and transformation of the world at the end of time. The doctrine of the second coming of Christ and of the end and final transformation of the world has important implications in an age of progress and of awareness of the future. The Church, in its evangelization, must find ways of formulating and presenting the paschal mystery, the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus, in such a way that contemporary man can understand how his everyday life can be a participation in that mystery, a dying and rising with Christ, and in such a way that the whole movement of the world into the future can be seen in terms of a struggling movement toward the world to come.

Given the future-orientation of the contemporary point of view, and the radical need for hope, the cross can no longer be presented, if it ever was, as a symbol of sadness or suppression or defeated resignation. Rather, the cross, ordered to resurrection, must be seen as the answer to the suffering and worries of men. The cross is the true symbol of progress towards the future, a progress that is made with laborious effort and in pain and suffering. The suffering and death of Jesus Christ are not only the model for man; it is

Christ's redemptive act that gives meaning and efficacy to man's work of building the world toward the future, in the direction of Christ's second coming. The cross, then is not only the symbol of what man has to undergo in the way of expiation; it is also, and primarily, the expression of "the creative but laborious effort of mankind climbing toward Christ who awaits it." The cross is the symbol of progress through difficult labor. In The Divine Milieu Teilhard de Chardin writes:

Towards the peaks, shrouded in mist from our human eyes, whither the cross beckons us, we rise by a path which is the way of universal progress. The royal road of the cross is no more or less than the road of human endeavor supernaturally righted and prolonged. Once we have fully grasped the meaning of the cross, we are no longer in danger of finding life sad and ugly. We shall simply have become attentive to its barely comprehensible solemnity.

2. What does Christianity, in its evangelization, have to say to the secular dimension in contemporary culture? The problem here is considerable, largely because, although there is much Protestant theology of secularity today, there is very little coherent Catholic theological reflection on the problems posed for Christianity on the increasing secularization of the modern world. Something, however, may be said on the question. For one thing, "secularity" must be distinguished from "secularism." Secularism is a materialistic view that restricts reality to this material world. It is a form of naturalism that denies the importance and even the true existence of the sacred. The increasing secularization of the modern world can be understood as a gradual and progressive desacralization, or secularization, of areas of the world which are not any longer regarded as sacred. Examples are the secularization of civil government with the clear distinction between Church and state, the secularization of science with the increasing independence of science from religious thought, and the secularization of nature in the rise of modern science and technology.

The attitude of the Church in the face of increasing secularization should be two-fold. First of all, the sacred must be affirmed. The sacredness of the person as created by and ordered directly to God is paramount; this sacredness is the basis of human dignity and human rights. The sacredness of the Church itself, of its ministry through the word and the sacraments, and of man's relationship with God must be upheld and stressed. But, at the same time, the secular is to be distinguished from the sacred; and the secular order is to be affirmed in its secularity. The whole process of the increasing secularization of the secular sphere has God as its source; as Creator, God makes things to be, to be themselves, and to grow in their own identity and autonomy. God, in his creative activity, makes the world to be the world, the secular order to be--increasingly in the process of history--secular. The secularization process, therefore, has Christian value. And there exists a Christian responsibility to be involved in the world as the world, in the secular order as secular--not somehow to baptize the secular, but to build it on its own terms, as secular.

3. Lastly, does Christianity have something to say in response to modern man's quest for freedom? This is, of course, one of the major themes of contemporary theology, as evidenced in the Latin American theology of liberation. But even before there was a theology of liberation, from the beginning, Christianity has been a religion of freedom. An important part of the Church's mission, like that of Jesus, has always been, "to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom to captives, ...to set the downtrodden free."

Gaudium et spes declares that "the Gospel announces and proclaims the freedom of the sons of God, and repudiates all the bondage which ultimately results from sin." Jesus Christ has freed man and as St. Paul says, "When Christ freed us, he meant us to remain free." The truth revealed in Jesus and through his Church makes men free.

In the Old Testament, God frees Israel from political oppression, from "the house of slavery," to lead her across the desert to the promised land.

And Yahweh said, "I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave drivers. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. I mean to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that land to a land rich and broad, a land where milk and honey flow." (Exodus 3,7-8)

But Israel herself, by her own infidelity to God, fell victim to a new kind of slavery, but still with a hope to be freed. This hope is fulfilled in Jesus, who "came to save his people from their sins," and to give his life as a ransom so that men might be freed.

Christian freedom is freedom in the Spirit, interior freedom, but this interior freedom is not unconnected with social, economic, and political freedom. On the contrary the freedom that Christianity brings is freedom from sin, and sin is often found in the very structures of human society as well as in the hearts of men. Sin within the person has consequences in society, and so it comes about that situations arise which are objectively sinful even though perhaps involving no immediate subjective responsibility at the time that those situations exist. Sinful structures, social, economic, and political, do exist in society; they are objective states of sin. Situations of unjust distribution of wealth, of oppression of various kinds, of starvation, of homelessness, of inhuman living conditions; all these are sinful situations; they have been called conditions of institutionalized violence.

It is, clearly, part of the Church's mission to condemn such objectively sinful societal structures, and to work towards overcoming them. The denunciation of societal injustice and the effort to remedy injustice has a long history in the Judeo-Christian tradition, marked by many Old Testament prophets, such as Amos, and--in the New Testament--by the Beatitudes. Christianity, then, in its evangelization, can and must speak, at several levels, to the hunger for freedom that is so much in the hearts of men today.

(Excerpts from Evangelization and spiritual life by R. Faricy, SJ; as found in Documenta Missionaria-9: EVANGELIZATION, edited by Mariasusai Dhavamony, SJ; Università Gregoriana Editrice, Roma, 1975)

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES: Discerning them in community

- . How does a Christian community discover God's plan of Salvation for the social systems in which it is involved? The discovery is essential, if that community is to be faithful to its mission to those systems. And it is possible - if the basic rules are followed.
- . As a contribution to the formulation of these rules, we have read for you four recent studies on communal discernment as this has been developed by Ignatius of Loyola and his followers (1). The insights are, of course, partial and further contributions will have to fill in the blank spots. Little is said, for example, about the criteria and content of the indispensable checking of one's reading of a Sign with the main thrust of the global plan as this is revealed in Scripture. But the insights are there - and they are precious, if we want to go beyond our personal discoveries into communal and ecclesial discernment of God's mission to us - as individuals, communities and Church - for the World.
- . "Ignatian discernment requires a continuing dialectic of the existential work of God, as manifested through concrete actual situations and the word of God revealed in Christ, in the Gospel and in the living tradition of the Church" (2). This is the source. It is supported by a) prayer, which opens one to the Spirit, b) the gathering of evidence, which ensures a thorough understanding of the existential situation, c) confirmation, which may be external and/or internal. "It is the function of Ignatian discernment to build the bridge between general principles and specific actions, not through "baptized" human prudence, but through prophetically interpreting the existential word of God in events" (3).
- . "The discernment of spirits - the sifting apart of interior experiences in order to ascertain their origin, whether from the Spirit of God or from the Evil One - begins in Christianity with the response of faith or or unbelief to Jesus Himself...the fundamental attitude of the Christian believer as that of true spiritual liberty, absolute openness to the Spirit and the unique desire to achieve perfect communion with God...It is this attitude which must rule all one's choices" (4).
- . "The validity of a present choice among possible alternatives is confirmed by comparing one's interior experience of peace, tranquillity and contentment in this specific choice (or lack of this peace) with the peace and tranquillity enjoyed in the primordial experience of openness and surrender to God in Christ" (5).
- . Communal discernment becomes a process undertaken by a community as a community for the purpose of judging what God is calling that community to do. In common with individual discernment, it has:
  - a) the element of freedom of the spirit, taught through prayer and trust in God; this means freedom from emotional duress, from time-tables, from prejudice, from ignorance; it grows into humility, trust in each other, purity of heart
  - b) the element of a reflective grasp of the governing principle of an alternative's conduciveness to bringing about the Kingdom, of the nature and purpose of one's community
  - c) the element of a clear formulation of the genuine alternative, particularly through "brain-storming" and other devices of group dynamics
  - d) the element of a serious effort to become informed.

7. Once the above attitudes are ~~assured~~, the immediate preparation for the communal act of discernment can take the shape of prayerful reflection on alternatives; each member of the community must pray and think on his own before the community meeting. During this, it seems necessary to avoid debate and adopt dialogue. Ideally each person should speak to the whole group. But dialogue aimed at mutual tolerance would be of little use. It should aim at finding the right answer. No sides are taken, no one has as yet a conviction about the right answer to the question.

8. The discernment meeting requires a chairperson who rules out all debate. The normal steps would then be:

- a) presentation of reasons for each alternative
- b) prayerful reflection, in private, over the reasons presented in step (a)
- c) presentation of private evaluations to the group
- d) prayerful reflections on (c) and further evaluations
- e) voting; there is an opinion that if the issue has to be decided by vote, the discernment has failed; but this does not seem to be the case: it could be a test of the attitudes stressed above, under 6. A refinement of this method is to break down step (a) - first to share the arguments contrary to the alternative(s) under scrutiny and then (after prayer) to share the arguments in its favour. The separation of pro's and cons into separate periods saves time and gains in clarity by eliminating debate.

9. The conclusion reached, in any case, is to be tested by looking for confirmation from God through the movements of our spirits, through ratification by religious authority and through experience. Allowance should be made, however, for a "negative conclusion" which would involve the recognition of the need to use another method to make the decision - or in at least provisional acceptance of the original proposal(s), or in revision of it (them).

10. The dynamics of communal spiritual discernment is "possible only for persons with the faith-view of all reality. Individual members of the community must be truly praying. All real evidence must be gathered and clarified and individually discerned by each member. All must share conscious communion in the communal charism, which is the "touchstone" community experience for communal discernment" (6). This involves the need for truly open sharing and listening. In any case, unanimity is not the same as a unanimous opinion. It is the shared peace of all recognizing that they have discerned the word of God to the community here and now, even when some persons have discerned differently as individuals. The prerequisites to attain this situation seem to be (a) communion, (b) common agreement on the basic expression of this communion in words today and (c) common commitment to carrying out the decisions reached through communal discernment.

11. Experiences in the use of this method has produced insights about the techniques which help bring together the results of the deliberations of small groups to some kind of unanimity in the total group.

- a) the open forum is useful when the differences are not really very great. Members of the various groups are simply asked to explain to the whole group their reasons for arriving at their conclusions. It often strengthens the spirit of searching together (as opposed to the parliamentary one of representing one's position).

- b) Recycling deliberations is useful when the small groups reach conclusions which are wide apart. It consists in progressive deliberations. For example, if there are four options, the first is confronted with the second. The survivor is then confronted with the third, and so on.
- c) Fish bowl, or concentric circle technique consists in letting an inner circle of a few persons discuss the question while the others listen in an outer circle. Those in the inner circle gradually move out to the outer one and vice versa, until everyone has had a chance to participate in the inner circle.
- d) Representatives of each of the small groups could usefully discuss differences before the total group. It often happens that if they achieve consensus, the whole group will do it, too.

12. Fr. L. Orsy S.J. has attempted a first theological evaluation of communal discernment (7) "On the one side, there is the naive conception that God has a special blueprint for our lives in all details...On the other side, there is the simplistic belief that God leaves us fully autonomous, and that we create our way of living as we wish to do it. In truth, our God is neither the meticulous and oppressive planner, nor the distant and cool observer. He is a friend with great love who has dreams about our future but who respects our freedom as well. Again, systematic theologians have never succeeded in bringing these two aspects together in harmonious concepts and thus in dispelling the system. Fortunately, however, good Christians have been able to discover the guiding hand of a friend" (8). For Orsy the basic question is what is communal discernment? He attempts a first answer by proposing the following theses.

1. 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.
2. It is not new in the Church: the Council of Jerusalem reveals all of its essential elements (Acts 15, 1 - 35). Those involved prayed - that is, allowed God to dispose their hearts for the truth. James used the words of the prophets, the signs of the times, shrewd wisdom to come to a conclusion - not without making concessions to the concervative party. The text significantly refers to the silence of the assembly during the speeches. They were aware of their limitations.
3. It is a process in which the light and strength of God and the blurred vision and weakness of man all play their role. In it, a sinful community forms a judgement in God's luminous presence. The final result usually manifests something of all those ingredients.
4. The correct theological meaning of discernment is the perception or discovery of a movement of grace, although the term is often used to include the procedural technique that best disposes a person for such discovery.
5. For a community intent on praying, the most legitimate expectation is the presence of the risen Lord.
6. The dialectics of prayer and reflection may lead to the discovery of new graces, even unexpectedly. In any case, it has a healing effect on the community.
7. The sharing of information and insights benefits all toward a better judgement and wiser decision.
8. The judgements and decisions will correspond to the potentials of the group and the situation.
9. The best and most legitimate expectation is that, through discernment, the community takes a step forward in the service of the Lord.

10. No community has a right to put a question to God merely at its own good pleasure. To fix a date for God's extraordinary intervention is to tempt Him. To set a day by which ordinary deliberations should be concluded can be wise planning.
11. The conversion of an individual person, as well as that of a community, cannot be produced at pleasure.
12. Communal discernment is no substitute for critical intelligence. Consolations and desolations are not necessarily criteria for truth. The discerners are not infallible. Hence the outcome of every discernment process is fallible. Prayerful reflection during communal discernment will not supplement for the lack of long years of devotion and purification.
13. If consensus can be reached, praise be to God. If not, let us recall that to disagree is Catholic.
14. To assess the value of the outcome of a community discernment process, we must keep in mind that the experience of peace and joy in the Lord is compatible with erroneous judgements and objectively wrong decisions.

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 Futrell, J.C.: Communal Discernment  
 Toner, J.J. : A Method for Communal Discernment  
 Orsy, L. : Toward a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment

1. See also Bibliography in Appendix B.
2. Futrell, J.C.: Ignatian Discernment in STUDIES in the Spirituality of Jesuits, vol. II, no. 2, p. iii
3. ibidem p. 51
4. ibidem p. 74
5. ibidem p. 79
6. Futrell, J.C.: Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience, in STUDIES in the Spirituality of Jesuits, vol. IV, no. 5, p. iii
7. Orsy, L.: Toward a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment, in STUDIES in the Spirituality of Jesuits, vol. V, no. 5,
8. ibidem p. 41

#### APPENDIX A: Guidelines

##### Some Practical Guidelines from These Theological Reflections

The following practical guidelines flow from our theoretical reflections. They do not contain new insights. They suggest practical conclusions, attitudes, and actions for communities intent on discernment.

1. A community intent on discernment should recall the words of the Lord: "For which of you desiring to build a tower does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?" (Luke 14:28).
2. A community should not imitate any historical model of discernment literally unless its members' own circumstances are identical or very similar to that model, and their own resources are as abundant as those whom they follow. Since the first Fathers of the Society of Jesus were a small and deeply contemplative community, formed and trained by Ignatius for many years, and since they deliberated over an exceptional religious issue to which God only could give a reliable answer, their method and resources may have been unique, at least in parts, and may need serious adjustment before other communities begin using it for different kinds of issues.

3. While an ordinary community concerned with lesser issues may not be able to operate with such deep insight and such firm design as the first Jesuits did, its members should be perfectly able to find the next step in the service of the Lord. Therefore community discernment should never be presented as so difficult as to make it impossible to do it well here and now by an ordinary group that wants to do it according to the measure of its own gifts.
4. Communities are blessed by the Lord in different ways. The issues they face are different too. Hence adjustments in the method of finding the next step in the service of the Lord are always necessary. No pattern is universal.
5. In all communities peace is a fundamental condition for successful discernment. If there is no peace, a sincere search for reconciliation is recommended. It should be the only object of discernment.
6. To expect an answer from the Father is right when the question is put in the name of the Lord Jesus and is inspired by his Spirit. But no one should tempt God by raising a question out of his own resources and then postulating an answer by a fixed date. Such presumption has been abundantly condemned in the Scriptures. The community should know how to wait patiently when He alone can give the answer. Remember that no human effort can hasten His coming and that our impatience can easily lock us into a false solution.
7. When the community has the capacity to resolve a problem by creating a solution from its members' own resources of grace and nature, they should do all they can with that foolish courage that should be typical of Christians. The fundamental rule for any method is that all the exchanges and deliberations should be soaked in prayer.
8. The community can make good progress by focusing in prayer and reflection on the opposite sides of the arguments, especially when the answer to a question must be a yes or no. This was the method of the first Jesuits; it suited their purpose perfectly. And it may suit the purpose of some latter-day communities as well. But the method is not exclusive of other procedures.
9. When the question does not allow a simple yes or no as answer, other methods must be worked out that allow for steady, on-going contributions from many sources. You must use different working methods for deciding the questions, "Should we build a tower?" and "How should we build it?" This distinction is particularly relevant for communities who are intent on writing constitutional documents.
10. While all should make an effort to understand and judge every point of view, all should accept also the one-sidedness of a prophet and the penetrating but circumscribed insights of a genius. Many times in history a unique inspiration from God or an unusual insight into nature made a prophet or a genius unreceptive to arguments which seem good to everybody else. The community should treasure such persons. They make up in depth what they lack in breadth.
11. Throughout the process of communal discernment each participant should participate wholeheartedly, both in giving and in receiving. If a member fails in either way, the whole body will suffer.
12. Peace, consolation, and encouragement are signs of God's grace and of his presence. They confirm the conscience of the community that is intent on taking the next step in the Lord's service. The objective value of such a step can be considered in two ways. First, in relation to the community: It may be the best for them because it is the most they can do. Second, in relation to other communities, including the universal Church and our human society: It may be good or bad, it may bring progress or disaster. An incompetent child can do his very best in driving a train and still cause it to derail and involve many others in the disaster. A competent man drives it properly and assures peace for all. This rule is not cancelled out by the true belief that the presence of the Risen Lord enhances the capacity of the community to serve the Lord.

13. For practical purposes the expression "seeking and finding the will of God" should be taken as meaning "to seek and find the next step in the service of the Lord".
14. Community discernment should be an ongoing process. The actual time of discernment is no more than an intense period in the continuously evolving life of the community. Discernment must blend into a broader movement of life.
15. Community discernment must be a self-correcting process. When the community articulates what the next step is, there is a fallible human element in its judgement. It is subject to correction. Since our sinful condition makes our vision blurred, our insights limited, our decisions less than the best, we must continually examine and re-examine what we are doing.
16. In community discernment there should be room for dissent. Indeed dissent should be welcome and manifest for all to see. The dissenting voices of today are often the beginning of a new dawn for tomorrow. No one should be pressured into a common opinion. God loves persons in a community.
17. Community discernment can be a powerful instrument of progress in the life of a religious community provided we do not expect wonders and miracles from it. It can assure quiet growth in grace and wisdom.

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LISTS OF DOCUMENTS RECEIVED DURING MARCH COMPILED BY SISTER AGNETTA, SSPS.

## I. INTERNAL DOCUMENTS

<u>Code No.</u>	<u>Institute</u>	<u>Title of Document</u> (number of pages in brackets)
1.481	RSCM	RSCM/RSHM Adresses 1975. (24)

II. External Documents

<u>Code No.</u>	<u>Organization</u>	<u>Title of Document</u> (number of pages in brackets)
4.1708	Cor Unum	Conseil Pontifical Cor Unum (24)
4.1709	Tribune de Caux	In crisis Catalysts of Change: Caux Report '74 (18)
4.1710	WCC	1976 CWME Operating Budget and Askings.(7)
4.1711	Populorum Progressio Institute	Progress Report: July 1974
4.1712	Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society	Report for 1972 and 1973 (90)
4.1713	FIDES	Polonia: Una Chiesa sensibile ai problemi missionari (5)
4.1714	FIDES	Maurizio: Collaborazione Ecumenica e Interreligiosa (5)
4.1715	DIA	"Multimedia Zambia", a real example of ecumenism(1)
4.1716	DIA	Tanzania -1975, Literacy Campaign deadline.(3)
4.1717	DIA	Moratorium is part of Africa's Liberation struggle
4.1718	FIDES	Nigeria: Attività del Segretariato Cattolico nel 1974. (3)
4.1719	Melanesian Institute	The Melanesian Institute (4)
4.1720	PWV	Note Speciale 36. (24)
4.1721	Centre St.Dominique	Stages Theologiques d'Hiver 1975(6)-1976
4.1722	AMRSMP	AMRSMP Report, 14 February 1975 -(44)
4.1724	Global Education Associates.	Global Education Associates.(pamphlet) (3)
4.1723	AMRSMP	AMRSMP Report, 21 February 1975. (58)
4.1725	Irish Times	Challenge of legal justice within mission order (4)
4.1726	Conferência dos religiosos do Brasil	Centro teologico de estudos e espiritualidade da vida religiosa. (1)
4.1727	World Bank	World Bank Atlas (22)
4.1728	UISG	Discussion guidelines for English group monthly meeting, March 4, 1975 (3)
4.1729	MARC	Managing your time: a workbook. (13)
4.1730	UISG	Meeting of English speaking Superiors General and Councillors of Rome, Feb. 1975.
4.1731	UISG	English group monthly meetings for Superiors General and Councillors of Rome - report of the task force on one social need of Rome (2)
4.1732	UISG	Needed: Residence for the Ecumenical Institute.(1)
4.1733	UNDP/ONGO	Strengthening collaboration with non-Governmental organizations: Reports. (11)

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| 4.1734 | UISG   | Discussion guidelines for English group monthly meeting, March 4, 1975. (3)  |
| 4.1735 | Brazilian Bishops                                    | Promovendo, animando, coordenando a vida religiosa no Brasil.  |
| 4.1736 | DIA  | Letter of the Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Province of Kinshasa to their Seminarians (1)                                |
| 4.1737 | DIA  | Malawi: Local Sisters discuss their problems (1)   |
| 4.1738 | Research Institute of the Lutheran in Finland        | The Church in the Development areas: publication n° 17 (14)  |
| 4.1739 | Lutheran World Federation, PMV                       | Christian Faith and the Chinese experience: Papers and reports from an Ecumenical Colloquium held in Louvain, 1974 (204) |
| 4.1740 | Superiors General Italian of 4 Missionary Institutes | Il sinodo e l'evangelizzazione ad gentes. (22)   |
| 4.1741 | P.F. Bloy (ed.)                                      | Papers on Urban-Industrial issues in Africa and the challenge for the Church.(15)  |
| 4.1742 | Daneel, George                                       | South Africa's choice: voluntary change or violent change (1)  |
| 4.1743 | WCC/CWME   | Report of the urban industrial mission desk WCC, to the CWME advisory group on urban industrial mission (10)             |
| 4.1744 | UISG   | Self-evangelization of women religious (4)   |
| 4.1745 | UISG   | The CARA Report (5)  |

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NEWS FROM AND FOR THE GENERALATES

ONGOING FORMATION COURSE: Saint Paul University, 223 Main Street, Ottawa, Canada

From 4:00 p.m. Sunday 15 June to 2:00 p.m. Friday 11 July 1975, an ongoing formation course will be held for priests, brothers, sisters, and lay missionaries on the theme: "Reading the Signs of the Times" with the following programme:

- (a) The prophet and his reading of the signs of the times (8 hours).
- (b) Trends of today's world: secularization, atheism, democracy, religious liberty (20 hrs).
- (c) Non-Christian religions: can they lead to the fulness of revelation? (8 hours)
- (d) A Case study: the conversion of an African people (8 hours).
- (e) The urban mission and liberation (8 hours).
- (f) Liberation quest among Indians in Canada: a case study (8 hours).
- (g) The new ministries as an evangelical service to men and women of today (8 hours).

Boarding Fees: \$10.00 per day; \$50.00 from Sunday evening to Friday evening; \$70.00 for weekend boarders.

Registration Fees: \$140.00 for the whole course.

The course will be held at Maison St-Jean Vianney, 14,800 est, Boulevard Gouin, Montreal (not in Ottawa). Apply to: Henry Goudreault, OMI, Institut des Sciences Missionnaires, 223, rue Main, Ottawa, Canada, K1S 1C4.