

# Outline – *Decision Making*

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## Some Helpful Distinctions

### Discernment

- Secular use: the ability to see and understand people, things, or situations clearly and intelligently.
- Religious use: Gift of the Spirit, openness to being led to God's will
- Can be personal or communal
- Requires trust, willingness to be in a place of holy indifference while at the same time attending to the movement of the Spirit in personal experience, emotions of the heart, concrete reality, scripture, tradition
- Similar to what Quaker tradition calls "sense of the meeting", the leading of God.

### Consensus

- Secular meaning: General agreement, unanimity, group solidarity in sentiment and belief
- Alternative to formal or codified processes that are based on adversarial assumptions (such as Roberts Rules or voting)
- Be careful about quick "unanimity" on issues of any substance -- can sometimes be a result of failure to hear or include all voices.
- Operational definitions of consensus in group processes:
  - Acceptable resolution that receives consent and can be supported, even if not the preferred option for each individual
  - Characterized by a process that seeks to take into account all views and to reconcile conflicting positions or minority views with creative resolutions
  - Depending on norms agreed, may be declared achieved even if those unable to give consent are willing to stand aside.
- Not always possible or reasonable to seek.

### Subsidiarity

- In Christianity / Roman Catholic Church: a principle of social doctrine that what individuals are able to do, society should not take over, and what small societies can do, larger societies should not take over
- In Government, Politics & Diplomacy: the principle of devolving decisions to the lowest practical level; the idea that a central authority should perform only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more local level.
- Doesn't see individual as a solo but as a social being, with smaller and more immediate social structures as primary (family, community).

### Collaboration

- Secular meaning: the action of working with someone to produce or create something
- In process terms, often refers to an inclusive process where two or more people or organizations work together to realize shared goals.
- So broadly used and in so many settings that it does not refer to a precise technique or set of steps; refers rather to the value of cooperation and shared learning, effort, and achievement.
- May be distinguished from Consultation by the degree of agency or shared responsibility that the parties hold.

## **Consultation**

- Secular meanings: A conference at which advice is given or views are exchanged, or a discussion about something that is being decided, or the act of looking for information from an expert source.
- In process terms, refers to the points at which either experts or stakeholders or members are asked for input or feedback or advice prior to a decision being made.
- “Member engagement” is often intended to achieve consultation, and sometimes also collaboration.

## **Authority**

- Secular meaning: The power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience
- While power is defined as "the ability to influence somebody to do something that he/she would not have done", authority refers to a claim of legitimacy, the justification and right to exercise that power
- Many sources of such power or legitimacy are possible: governance role, delegation, expertise, law or precedent, legal permission
- By itself (“from above”) insufficient without the perceived obligation to obey on the part of those over whom authority is exercised (“from below”)

## **Decisions vs Choices**

- A “choice” is made from among two or more options that must be weighed or resolved.
- Various process methods can aid groups in making choices, with or without consensus.
- A “decision” may or may not require a choice – it can also be the conscious commitment to the **one** path opening in front of a person or organization, characterized by thoughtful assent rather than avoidance, denial, or faintheartedness or other source of stasis.
- Decisions of this sort are the cognitive outcome of contemplative discernment processes.

## **Some Process Advice for Decision Making in Faith Contexts**

1. Always start with clarity about authority – Which person or group has designated responsibility to hold or lead or decide the matter? This isn’t the last word on who is involved, just the **container**. Don’t be afraid of it. Use authority in service.
  - And while we’re talking about containers and authority, be attentive not to abdicate your own authority to facilitators or consultants like me; we have a specific delegated authority to help you, but not the ultimate responsibility for your life, decisions, or relationships. Take your own authority seriously.
2. Always think about the nature of the issue – Does it lend itself to eventual consensus / unity? Is it substantial enough to warrant the work of achieving consensus, in light of mission? Does it represent a call to discern God’s will? Does the pressure of real world consequences allow enough time for processes of discernment or consensus? Be realistic.
  - Don’t let your capacity to **think** be submerged in “**process correctness**” – which is usually an unconscious defense against the existential anxiety of having to face a tough issue and make imperfect decisions that contain risk.

3. Once you are clear about the first two things (Appropriate authority? Nature of the issue?) you can set about using one or some process techniques to help you address the issue. For example:
- If using discernment, take the time needed to arrive at clarity. Discernment engages heart and emotion, spirit and prayer, thoughtful reflection, patience.  
**Ask for the grace to discern God's will for you.**
  - If aiming for consensus, air out what seems agreed and what concerns or reservations exist. Work to find new formulations that address the concerns of all, or that permit those with objections to be satisfied that they were heard and are willing to give consent or to stand.  
**Ask for the grace to be at peace with the imperfection of "good enough."**
  - Be willing to negotiate or compromise or exercise unilateral legitimate authority if the issue cannot be resolved through discernment or consensus processes. This may be inherent in the issue, not a judgment on your shared commitment to unity.  
**Ask for the grace to live humbly with having done your best, even though it was imperfect.**
  - Honor the shape\* of a productive deliberation in process steps. It keeps things unfolding whether in discernment, consensus-seeking or other decision mode. Be gentle but clear, especially when converging to a decision. A new direction at the last moment can be raised and can be followed if it is quite evidently a better option...but if it is not so clearly better, it can be handled like an objection or concern in the consensus process.  
**Ask for the wisdom to know when to open out, and when to come to closure.**

**\* The Shape of a Deliberation**

