

Discerning the road ahead by Cardinal Blasé J. Cupich
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The Society of Jesus sends first-year novices into the world on pilgrimage for months with little but the clothes on their backs. While a 30-day retreat is part of the novitiate, the pilgrimage is meant to give novices an experience of what they learned on retreat. They live detached from their usual support system, totally dependent on divine providence and the generosity of others as they try to figure out how God wants them to live.

The first disciples of Jesus were put in a similar situation. As the risen Lord ascended into heaven, he sent them to proclaim the Good News to all nations. Yet they received no plan, no resources, no advice for doing so. How could they take up a mission to the whole world? Who would help them navigate the inevitable difficulties that would arise as they encountered different cultures? How would they know they were remaining true to Christ's wishes?

The simple answer is that Jesus gave them the gift of his Spirit. But the Spirit is not a power given episodically or occasionally to make up for our limitations. Rather, it is the abiding presence of Jesus, who promised to remain with his disciples in every age, and not leave them orphans.

And it is in prayer, both personally and communally, that we encounter Jesus, interact with the Spirit, share our hopes and heartaches, our challenges and concerns. Our spiritual tradition uses the word "discernment" in referring to this interaction, particularly when it comes to decision making, seeking guidance and taking new initiatives to remain faithful to Christ's mission.

This is why prayer is essential as we individually and communally take up the mission of Jesus in fidelity. All the questions about what we are to do, how we are to do it, when we are to do it need to be brought to prayer, for that is where we learn the will of God with the aid the Spirit, whom Jesus calls our Advocate, our Counselor.

Discernment is needed now more than ever. We find ourselves in a situation similar to those early days of the church, particularly in these days of social unrest, the pandemic and our own internal challenges as a church.

As we look to remain true to the mission of Christ, we rightly ask ourselves, what service can the church bring to addressing centuries of racial injustice that results in real change? How can we, as followers of Christ, be agents of the justice, comfort and reconciliation that is so needed at this time? Where is the Spirit of God leading us to remain open to ongoing renewal and faithful to Christ's mission?

Pope Francis refers to discernment as that prayerful dialogue "born of a readiness to listen: to the Lord and to others, and to reality itself, which always challenges us in new ways" ("Gaudete et Exsultate," no. 172). It is a prayerful listening that allows us to perceive the vital direction of the Spirit, who "enables the church to grow young" and "perpetually renews it," as the Second Vatican Council teaches ("Lumen Gentium," no. 4).

Our local history has many examples of initiatives taken after prayer that brought new life to the church. One such is the initiative led by Bishop Bernard Sheil, auxiliary bishop from 1928 to 1969, in founding the Catholic Youth Organization in Chicago. In a time of unrest and racial tensions, CYO brought together tens of thousands of young people from a wide variety of backgrounds and neighborhoods to share in athletic and educational activities together. The CYO built bridges between young people and helped to overcome divisions in our communities.

In our own day, as we take up the work of reimagining our church life, we have made prayerful discernment the heart of the Renew My Church process. Prayer, both personal and communal, must remain at the heart of our effort to read the “signs of the times,” always staying close to Jesus through the gift of his Spirit as we seek his guidance in carrying out our mission.

Like the Jesuit novices on pilgrimage who learned to trust the Lord more fully, so we are called in these challenging days to trust that the Lord remains with us, abides with us, ever confident that he knows the way.