

Discernment in Common at the Jesuit Refugee Service: A Synthesis



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Executive Summary

This briefing document synthesizes the core principles, practices, challenges, and aspirations of "Discernment in Common" (DC) within the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), as detailed in a report. Based on a survey of 33 JRS leaders and practitioners, the report establishes DC not merely as a decision-making methodology but as a foundational spiritual practice and a "way of life." Rooted in the Ignatian tradition of St. Ignatius and the first Jesuits, DC is a collective, contemplative quest to seek and find God's will—the *magis* (greater good)—in the mission to accompany, serve, and advocate for forcibly displaced people.

JRS represents the most extensive practical application of Ignatian communal discernment in contemporary humanitarian and social inclusion work. The practice is distinct from conventional business or parliamentary decision-making, as it relies on listening to spiritual movements—consolations and desolations—within a community united by prayer and a shared mission. Its effectiveness hinges on essential conditions, including interior freedom (Ignatian indifference), relational trust, deep listening, and, most critically for JRS, the genuine inclusion of refugee voices, who are considered the *locus theologicus*—the place where God's will is revealed.

The lived experience of DC at JRS is marked by a profound tension between "Lights" and "Shadows." The Lights include moments of grace, transformative unity, and decisions imbued with shared peace, particularly when refugee perspectives genuinely shape outcomes. The Shadows, however, are significant and persistent, including severe time constraints, heavy workloads, donor pressures that can sideline the mission's spiritual core, and a lack of formation in Ignatian spirituality among many collaborators.

To navigate these challenges, JRS practitioners have developed a robust set of best practices. These include intentionally creating spiritual space through prayer and reflection, employing the structured methodology of "Spiritual Conversation," and integrating DC into the organization's strategic and operational rhythm. The ultimate path forward calls for an institutional and personal conversion: deepening the Ignatian culture, deliberately creating space for reflection to combat administrative urgency, and fostering accountability and an openness to the "God of surprises."

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The Foundational Vision of Discernment in Common

Discernment in Common (DC) is described as being "inherent to the way of proceeding of the Society of Jesus" and foundational to JRS since its inception in 1980. It frames the search for God's will as a collective spiritual endeavor rather than a solitary pursuit.

Historical and Theological Roots

The practice of communal discernment traces its origins to the earliest days of the Jesuits.

- **The Deliberation of the First Fathers (1539):** This event is the historical wellspring, demonstrating how a diverse group of St. Ignatius's first companions deliberated together to form a religious order, guided by the Holy Spirit.
- **Modern Renewal:** The practice was systematically reintroduced by Fr. Pedro Arrupe in 1971 and is a clear priority for the current Superior General, Fr. Arturo Sosa. General Congregations have established DC as the "prior condition for apostolic planning."
- **JRS Inception:** Fr. Pedro Arrupe's founding vision for JRS explicitly established spiritual conversation and communal discernment as integral, not auxiliary, to its mission. JRS is now the "most extensive practical application of Ignatian communal discernment in contemporary humanitarian and social inclusion work."

Defining DC within JRS: A Way of Life

For JRS practitioners, DC is a richly textured spiritual process, universally understood as a quest for divine guidance. The survey revealed several key definitions:

- **A Contemplative Process:** A prayerful and reflective series of conversations aimed at arriving at a clear direction, ideally with consensus and without a vote.
- **Seeking the *Magis*:** A process that allows the community to "seek and find God's will for the best possible development of his mission on Earth."
- **A Shared Journey of Listening:** A collective effort of listening to God's Spirit, to one another, and crucially, "to the concrete realities around us." The process requires creating a space of trust, prayer, and honest dialogue.

Distinction from Conventional Decision-Making

It is essential to distinguish DC from other models. It is not:

- **A Business Discussion:** Which aims for the most reasonable administrative decision.
- **A Parliamentary Exercise:** Which is based on majority/minority interests.

While DC requires quality information and rational argument, it ultimately relies on identifying **spiritual movements** or discerning what can "reasonably generate greater love and service for the glory of God." This distinction is critical as JRS operates within the "structure of the International humanitarian and social inclusion world" and must constantly strive to be mission-driven rather than purely administrative.

Essential Conditions for Effective Discernment

The success of DC depends on a fertile ground of specific spiritual, relational, and contextual conditions that allow the Holy Spirit to guide the community.

Spiritual Prerequisites

- **Interior Freedom (Ignatian Indifference):** This is the most crucial condition. Participants must be detached from their own interests, prejudices, fears, and personal preferences to be free to "assume whatever is the greater good in the light of the Gospel."
- **Passion for the Mission:** A deep desire for God's will to advance, which means putting the "JRS mission above personal interests." This passion is directed by the criterion of "greater need," "greater fruit," and "greater universality."
- **Prayer in Common:** Personal and communal prayer is a non-negotiable requirement that keeps the community focused as servants of the *missio Dei*. The Eucharist is considered a privileged mode of communal prayer.

Relational and Communal Dynamics

- **Union of Hearts and Minds:** The group must have a shared sense of purpose, built on mutual knowledge and trust.
- **Deep and Active Listening:** A capacity for mutual respect where every voice is valued as a unique contribution to the search for God's will.
- **Spiritual Communication:** The ability to recognize and articulate the "internal movements" of consolation (peace, hope, encouragement) and desolation (unease, fear, discouragement).
- **Openness to Conversion:** The humility to "change one's mind" after listening and praying over what others have shared.

JRS Contextual Adaptations

JRS's unique mission requires specific adaptations to the practice of discernment:

- **Genuine Inclusion of Refugee Voices:** This is cited as the **most crucial condition**. Refugees must be genuine participants, not merely objects of discernment. Their lived experience reveals God's presence and is essential for authentic decision-making.
- **Mission Rooted in Lived Realities:** Discernment must be anchored in the realities of refugees, asylum seekers, and host communities.
- **Intercultural and Interfaith Approach:** JRS has pioneered methods for discernment in religiously diverse contexts, requiring accommodation for interfaith teams and going beyond ethnic and religious boundaries.
- **Inspired Leadership and Formation:** Effective DC requires leadership formed in Ignatian spirituality and the "spiritual and intellectual" formation of all participants.

The Lived Experience: Lights and Shadows

The practice of DC within JRS is a dynamic process characterized by both profound moments of grace and significant human and institutional struggles.

The "Lights": Moments of Grace and Transformation

When practiced sincerely, DC yields transformative results that affirm its value.

Light (Positive Outcome)	Description
Unity and Value	Participants report a consistent feeling of "being included and valued." The process strengthens unity, focus, and leads to decisions with "shared peace and collective ownership."
Transformation via Inclusion	The most profound light reported is the transformation that occurs when "refugee voices genuinely shape decisions," redirecting JRS away from assumptions toward effective programs.
Moments of Grace	When deliberately engaged, DC is described as "fruitful and feeling like a moment of grace," confirming that the group is responding to the signs of the times.

The "Shadows": Human and Institutional Obstacles

Despite its potential, the practice of DC is frequently hindered by practical and spiritual challenges.

Shadow (Obstacle)	Description
Tyranny of Time and Workload	Time constraints and heavy workloads are a near-universal challenge, threatening to reduce DC to quick consultations rather than deep reflection.
Spiritual and Formational Deficits	A significant portion of staff is "not acquainted with our spirituality," and in some secular contexts, discernment lacks a Christian grounding. Initial confusion is common.
Organizational Blocks	"Strong opinions or hierarchical structures" can limit free expression, turning the process into a debate. Personal preferences can be placed above the call of the Spirit.
Inconsistent Practice	In some locations, DC is not practiced regularly and is seen as a "missed target" because daily work resumes with frenzy, making it hard to "keep the flame alive."

Systemic Challenges in the JRS Context

JRS's operational environment presents multi-layered difficulties that strain the capacity for authentic communal discernment.

External Pressures

- **Donor Dependency:** In many contexts, JRS is "almost totally dependent on donor requests," which severely limits the ability to make decisions based on spiritual discernment. Decision-makers often prioritize "donor requirements and financial procedures" over the spiritual core of the work.
- **Funding Gaps:** Discernment is difficult when the mission runs "without financial aid" and there are continuous problems meeting the needs of our staff, volunteers and refugees and migrants.

- **Identity Struggle:** There is a noted danger of siding with the humanitarian/NGO dimension, "overemphasizing the 'professional' aspect" at the expense of JRS's spiritual identity.

Leadership and Formation

- **Lack of Spiritual Culture:** A reported challenge is that people in leadership posts sometimes are "not Catholics" and show difficulties "to know the Jesuits and their spirituality."
- **The Ununderstood Concept:** The term 'Discernment in Common' is frequently "not well understood," highlighting the crucial need for training and awareness-building.
- **Leadership Effectiveness:** A respondent noted a "great difference in reflectiveness and effectiveness" between different types of leadership, emphasizing that "field leadership is key."

Operational Environment

- **Crisis and Conflict:** JRS has developed methods for "rapid discernment processes" in emergencies, but working in "war areas" (e.g., Mozambique or Ukraine) strains organizational capacity.
- **Political Hostility:** Increasingly hostile government views towards migrants and refugees create a challenging external environment where JRS must grapple with falsehoods and policy changes.

Best Practices for Cultivating Discernment

Despite the challenges, JRS practitioners have developed and affirmed concrete approaches that translate the ideal of DC into actionable, Spirit-led practice.

1. Creating the Spiritual Space

- **Prayer and Reflection:** Begin and end all major meetings with prayer or silent reflection. Introduce the practice of the Examen (personally or collectively) to review internal movements and maintain a memory of the process.
- **Conducive Environment:** Arrange discernment in quiet places free from distractions. Sufficient time must be allocated, as DC "cannot be done in a rush."
- **Relational Trust:** Cultivate an atmosphere of deep listening and mutual respect where every voice is valued.

2. Methodology of Spiritual Conversation

This is the essential tool for DC, moving a group from discussion to deep, prayerful listening.

Phase	Description
Phase 0: Preparation	Clearly indicate how the final decision will be made from the beginning to manage expectations. Select participants and a moderator.
Phase 1: Acknowledging Reality	Acquire full, high-quality information about the matter to ensure the discussion is rational and informed. Analyze pros and cons.
Phase 2: Personal Prayer	Individuals reflect on their inner movements, identifying consolations (light, peace, hope) and desolations (unease, fear, discouragement).

Phase 3: Shared Rounds	Round 1 (Sharing): Each person shares their reflection without debate. "Round sharing" ensures all voices are heard. Round 2 (Resonance): Participants share what resonated from others' contributions. Round 3 (Synthesis): The group identifies shared insights and potential paths forward.
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3. Organizational and Strategic Integration

- **Choose the Matter Well:** Reserve DC for important matters where the path forward is unclear to avoid "banalization of the term."
- **Formation and Leadership:** Provide training on DC methodology, Ignatian spirituality (especially consolation and desolation), and the consultative nature of the process.
- **Regular Review:** Conduct an annual spiritual review of the year for each local team to ensure DC is an ongoing process.

4. JRS's Unique Contributions

- **Inclusion of Refugee Voices:** Utilize methods like need assessments involving refugees and Accountability to the Affected Population (AAP) to ensure migrants and refugees are "genuine participants."
- **Intercultural Approaches:** Adapt spiritual conversation for interfaith and cross-cultural teams. In non-religious situations, foster commitment around shared values, vision, and ideals.
- **Strategic Fidelity:** Actively use DC for strategic planning, such as deliberating on regional priorities for the global strategic framework, to ensure decisions remain mission-driven.

Conclusion: The Path Toward Institutional Conversion

The consensus within JRS is that DC is "more than a method; it is a way of life" that requires **humility, vulnerability, and trust**. For it to flourish, a path of institutional and personal conversion is necessary.

Key imperatives for the future include:

1. **Deepening Ignatian Culture:** There is a critical need to share the JRS mission, vision, and values among all staff and provide Ignatian leadership formation, especially at the field level. At the same time, the director or leaders of the organisation must take DC seriously and leave room for its practice in decision-making.
2. **Fighting the *Anti-Magis*:** JRS must deliberately create space to pause, reflect, and pray. Individuals must commit to letting go of personal agendas and attachments to seek the greater good of the shared mission.
3. **Accountability and Openness to Surprise:** The organization must hold itself accountable to its spiritual foundations. Participants must have the courage to say, "I don't know," and be "open to the God of surprises."

By fully embracing the spiritual demands and transformative potential of Discernment in Common, JRS can "revitalise" its mission and ensure its accompaniment continues to be a profound encounter with the Spirit, leading to greater fidelity and effectiveness in serving those most in need.