

Ways of knowing →

→ → →  
Levels of knowing  
attention/intensity

Experience

**Level I:**  
Superficial  
Outward existence

Experience

**Level II:**  
Physical  
Internal existence

Experience

**Level III:**  
Psychological

Experience

**Level IV:**  
Mysterious

Conscious awareness  
in our simple faith,  
Enjoying and learning  
from pleasurable expe-  
riences and consoling  
feelings

intensity levels

+ aroma of bacon  
+ a gentle breeze  
+ smell of a rose

**Level I:**  
Barely attract atten-  
tion, Inconsequential  
feelings

+ master a computer  
+ superb music  
+ gourmet meal

**Level II:**  
Demands attention  
Color to feelings

+ appreciate a friend-  
ship  
+ delight in being

**Level III:**  
Intensify attention  
Relish feeling of ten-  
der joy

+ stillness with God

**Level IV:**  
Passive attention  
Deep stillness  
Gentle oneness

Consciousness of One  
who is present, Learn-  
ing in each experience  
our own emotional re-  
sponse to pain and small  
or great struggles

intensity levels

- slight itch  
- smell of garbage  
- hearing a noise

**Level I:**  
Slight focus of atten-  
tion

- deep headache  
- close finger in door

**Level II:**  
Demands attention  
Throbbing feeling

- gnawing self doubt  
- loss of a close friend

**Level III:**  
Clutches attention  
Painful feelings  
Ache

- waiting for God  
in darkness

**Level IV:**  
Purifying waiting  
Desert experience  
Oneness of seeking

## Not Just a Personal Matter

Carol Ann Smith SHCJ

SINCE 1970 WHEN the Society of the Holy Child Jesus re-committed itself to discernment as the way in which we would approach our life and mission, our attention has, for the most part, been on personal discernment. Increasingly, the social dimensions of discernment have attracted my attention, showing me that a sensitivity to them can help me to discern, whether individually or communally. By "social" I mean to direct attention to the impact upon others that one's experience of consolation and desolation has. The way in which we notice those spiritual movements within and the way in which we act in light of them does have an effect upon the individuals, groups and institutions with whom we interact.

As we become aware of our role as citizens within a global family, closely networked to so many others around the world, it seems to me that we are discovering new ways in which we are being affected by other's consolation and desolation. Such awareness may be heightening our consciousness of the critical need for gospel-based decisions, but, at the same time, they may heighten our feelings of frustration and powerlessness. We may wonder if our lives make any real difference in the big picture.

Our spiritual heritage challenges us to deeper faith in God working through us and at times in ways hidden from us — even in the global scene. Cornelia's self-description, "I'm cosmopolitan, the whole world is my country, and heaven is my home" has been a strong reminder to us to stretch our minds and hearts to worldwide concern. In the following passage, after speaking about the vows, Cornelia goes on to point to the significance of cultivating three virtues.

. . . not forgetting to cultivate their handmaids and attendant 'angels,' our *old* friends, though ever new, Vigilance, Humility, and Fidelity.

These are the ever darling companions of our religious life, always ready to brighten the clouds of our own natural defects, turning these defects even into some hidden treasure to be stored up for heaven, and at the same time bringing with them the strength of

a hidden life in God; and it is in this obscurity from all human view that the Divine Light shines, and in this hidden life we are clothed with our coat of mail, that we may be enabled to fight spiritually in the army of God's church militant. (January 5 1856)

Those "old friends" are surely ones which are required for and developed by discernment. While Cornelia links their practice and development with one's personal holiness, she also links them to the Society's broader mission in the church. It is her deep faith which allowed her to live in the conviction that God acted through her local life in saving ways for the world.

Growth in personal discernment as a way of living requires a heightened awareness of one's experiences of consolation and desolation. Gradually I am coming to a deeper understanding of how significant those two interior qualities are to being a responsible member of any group. One's decisiveness with regard to one's consolation or desolation is a significant part of one's decisiveness for the reign of God. While there may be little (but not nothing) I can do to determine whether I will be in consolation or desolation on a given day, my response to my own experiences of consolation and desolation is within my control.

My response has real consequences not only for myself, but also for the myriad number of people whose lives are affected, even indirectly, by mine in a given day. That may sound pious or a bit dramatic, but it is all too real and painfully concrete for me when I consider how my succumbing to the desolation which may be signalled by discouragement, fear or doubt can impact my friends and colleagues. While I may move beyond the effect of the desolation upon me, it may continue to make more difficult the choices of another. "Bad Hair Days" are not only a personal matter! Consolation, too, can effect change in others. When hope rather than cynicism prevails as I read about proposed legislation, there is a better chance that I will write my congressional representative in an attempt to give voice to the values reflective of the reign of God.

The social impact of consolation and desolation has also become clear to me through being with groups of university faculty, staff and administrators who meet regularly to reflect upon their university experience in terms of the consolation and desolation it has held for them. A very different way of being together results when one gathers with others with the intent of listening for the consolation and desolation in the narrated experience. The focus is upon God's action within both

consolation and desolation. The members of the group seem to become grounded in a new, albeit mysterious, confidence that each one's experience is very precious and part of the larger drama of the reign of God. A very different interpretation of events results from "reading" one's experience — whether personal or communal — from the perspective of consolation/desolation. A month filled with "endless meetings" or "nerve-rattling deadlines" can reveal a discernible pattern of God's action and one's own response. The way forward into the next stretch of time opens up with some clarity about where to look for God's action and how to be more attentive and decisive. And, possibly, very different action results from having taken such a perspective on experience. At the very least, one sees that the action is certainly meant to begin with oneself. The reign of God must become a reality within my own heart as well as in the structures and procedures and institutions around me.

This practice of meeting regularly to share how the Word of God has touched one's daily experience also gives concrete expression to two qualities which feminist writers continually mention: mutuality and caring. Both qualities are meant to characterize the relationships of disciples who are equally followers of the Risen One. Continued sharing of the action of the Word of God in our lives quite naturally leads to the development of a faith-based mutuality and caring. We see before very long the deep hungry searching for God in another and the other's efforts to be faithful to God, to self and to others, wherever the search leads. And that sight mirrors "as in a glass darkly" the movements in our own journey, making us aware of the steady thread of mutuality within otherwise very diverse experiences. Our caring is also transformed in the process of sharing. We find ourselves more deeply in alliance with the Holy Spirit,<sup>1</sup> wanting the best good for another to happen, for that best good to become apparent to her/him when it does happen. The sight of another's dance with God — whether in midnight black or dawn rose or even in fog — cures our "fix-it" ways and leads us more in wisdom's ways of silence and gentleness.

So, in a graced mutuality that is more profound than similarity and with the Spirit's own caring for each other as motivation, we discover ourselves approaching each other, looking within our diverse experiences

*the  
Risen Christ  
always  
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regardless  
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or predicament*

for the consoling action of the Risen One within them. From within our experience we find that our way of approaching others and of being with others is deeply transformed. What may begin as an attempt to develop further one's own discerning heart leads to an opportunity to develop more discerning conversations and relationships throughout our daily lives.

But such opportunities carry their own challenge. Suddenly we are finding ourselves in places in others' lives which we never anticipated would be opened to us. It is not surprising if a bit of trembling ensues. Certainly we are faced with a choice to continue or to back out of this sacred space and, instead, to find a safe garden swing! Contemplating the Annunciation at this point could be a good thing to do. Whatever choice we make will be more authentic and just if we take some time to reflect upon what is required of us as "discerning listeners." While some knowledge and skill<sup>2</sup> is required, it is even more important that the listeners be willing to be transformed in the process. The offer of transformation comes in many guises but it will surely be an invitation to deeper interior freedom to be with Jesus in his proclaiming the reign of God.

The strength for that mission comes, as gift, in the Risen Life of Christ. Theology reminds us that Christ is present to us today only as the Risen One, even when our experiences seem far from the Resurrection. The Risen Christ is shown in the gospels as One who always consoles those he meets — regardless of their mood or predicament. And the gospels show the Risen One joining groups of believers, themselves in varying experiences of consolation and desolation. Reading the stories of the appearances of the Risen Christ with an eye for the way in which he consoles the individuals and groups is very instructive. The "increase of their faith, hope and love" as a result of their meeting with Jesus almost jumps off the page. And those who were consoled by the Risen Jesus were empowered by that consolation for a worldwide mission which began in simple towns and noisy markets.

1. This concept is developed by William Connelly and William Barry in *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* as pertinent to the personal spiritual director. I am suggesting that the reality occurs for any who engage in on-going faith-sharing with others.
2. A few thoughtful readings of Ignatius' *Rules for Discernment* with an eye to what they tell us to look for in our own experience can give us clues of what to attend to as we listen to others as well as of what stance to take toward some aspects of others's experiences.

## Contributors

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