

# Apostolic Discernment In Common

## Peter Hans Kolvenbach



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ROMA - Borgo S. Spirito, 5

On Apostolic Discernment  
in Common

TO THE WHOLE SOCIETY

Dear Brothers in Christ, P.C.

1. Occasionally I am asked how the Society manages to make such an easy transition from one Generalate to the next. The question is even more pertinent when the new General was familiar with only one small part of the Society, a complex and suffering part, to be sure, but one in no way typical of the generality of the Church or of religious life. I'm always happy to be able to answer that the Society's spiritual and apostolic dynamism does not depend only on superiors but on creative participation, generous collaboration and multifarious consultation among Jesuits. It is as an apostolic body, that is, all together, that the Society incessantly scrutinizes, in and for the Church, the signs of the times.

At this time the whole Church is trying to be, in a torn and wounded humanity, the mystery of communion in the Spirit. At this time most of our provinces are searching, by means of apostolic planning which involves the maximum possible participation, how to embody in our lives and in our works the proclamation of the faith and the promotion of justice in the name of the Gospel. At this time, on the occasion of the Congregation of Procurators and the attendant Province Congregations, the Society is entering upon a period of spiritual discernment about itself, and so, of spiritual and apostolic renewal. For these reasons, it is an opportune time for me to draw our attention once again, and in a new way, to apostolic discernment in common.

### I. THE ANNUAL LETTERS OF 1986

2. Apostolic Discernment in Common: such was, in fact, the specific theme proposed this year for annual letters. Superiors were invited to describe their practice in this regard and, besides, to prepare for this by means of a communal reflection with their consultants, done as a true discernment.

As a result, the letters which were sent to me have made reference to the efforts of the Society in the area of Communal Apostolic Discernment: their successes, their difficulties, and the obstacles encountered. This report will be an attempt first of all to synthesize the positive and negative aspects indicated in these letters, before offering the help which many requested as an orientation in this area.

**Apostolic discernment in common** Peter Hans Kolvenbach is a profound concept that delves into the heart of spiritual and communal decision-making within the context of the Society of Jesus, commonly known as the Jesuits. This article will explore the essential elements of apostolic discernment as articulated by Peter Hans Kolvenbach, the 29th Superior General of the Jesuits, who served from 1983 to 2008. His teachings and practices regarding discernment emphasize a collaborative approach that integrates individual and communal insights, fostering a deeper understanding of God's will in a rapidly changing world.

# Understanding Apostolic Discernment

Apostolic discernment is rooted in the Ignatian tradition, which prioritizes finding God in all things. It involves a careful and prayerful process of making decisions that align with one's mission and values. Kolvenbach's contributions to this tradition are significant, as he emphasized the importance of community in discernment.

## Key Principles of Apostolic Discernment

- 1. Prayer and Reflection:** At the heart of discernment lies the need for prayer and reflection. Kolvenbach encouraged individuals and communities to engage in regular prayer, seeking divine guidance in their decision-making processes.
- 2. Community Involvement:** Apostolic discernment is not a solitary endeavor. Kolvenbach stressed the importance of gathering input from others, fostering an environment where diverse perspectives can be heard and valued.
- 3. Critical Engagement with Reality:** Discernment involves a critical examination of the realities faced by individuals and communities. Kolvenbach urged Jesuits to engage actively with the world, understanding the social, political, and economic contexts in which they operate.
- 4. The Role of the Holy Spirit:** Recognizing the presence of the Holy Spirit is essential in the discernment process. Kolvenbach taught that the Spirit guides individuals and communities, illuminating paths that may not be immediately apparent.
- 5. Action and Reflection:** Apostolic discernment is a dynamic process that includes both action and reflection. Decisions made should be continually assessed and adapted in light of new insights and experiences.

## The Process of Apostolic Discernment

Kolvenbach outlined a structured approach to apostolic discernment that leaders and communities can follow. This process encourages a deeper engagement with God's will and fosters unity within the community.

## Steps in the Discernment Process

- 1. Identifying the Issue:** The first step involves clearly defining the issue or decision at hand. This requires an understanding of the context and a sense of urgency regarding the decision to be made.

2. **Gathering Information:** Collecting relevant data and insights from various sources is crucial. This may include consulting Scripture, church teachings, and the experiences of community members.
3. **Praying for Guidance:** Engaging in communal and personal prayer is vital. Jesuits often use Ignatian contemplative prayer techniques to seek clarity and openness to the Holy Spirit's guidance.
4. **Engaging in Dialogue:** Open and honest dialogue among community members helps to surface different perspectives and insights. This dialogue should be characterized by respect, humility, and a willingness to listen.
5. **Evaluating Options:** After gathering insights and engaging in dialogue, the community should evaluate the possible options. This evaluation should consider both the potential impact of each option and how well they align with the community's mission.
6. **Making a Decision:** Once options have been thoroughly evaluated, the community can make a decision. This decision should reflect a consensus and a collective commitment to the chosen path.
7. **Implementing the Decision:** After a decision has been made, it is crucial to implement it thoughtfully and deliberately. This includes assigning roles and responsibilities, as well as setting timelines for action.
8. **Reflecting on the Outcomes:** Finally, the community should assess the outcomes of the decision. This reflection allows for adjustments to be made and fosters a culture of continuous improvement.

## **The Role of Peter Hans Kolvenbach in Apostolic Discernment**

Peter Hans Kolvenbach's tenure as Superior General marked a pivotal moment for the Society of Jesus. His approach to apostolic discernment was characterized by a deep commitment to the values of Ignatian spirituality and a strong emphasis on social justice.

### **Influences on Kolvenbach's Thought**

- **Ignatian Spirituality:** Kolvenbach's understanding of discernment was deeply rooted in the teachings of St. Ignatius of Loyola, emphasizing the importance of personal experience in the discernment process.
- **Social Justice:** Kolvenbach was a staunch advocate for social justice, believing that discernment should always consider the marginalized and oppressed. He encouraged Jesuits to engage with social issues, advocating for

those whose voices are often unheard.

- **Global Context:** Recognizing the complexities of the modern world, Kolvenbach called for a discernment process that was responsive to global challenges, including poverty, violence, and environmental degradation.

## **Kolvenbach's Legacy in Apostolic Discernment**

Kolvenbach's legacy in apostolic discernment is evident in several key areas:

1. **Educational Initiatives:** He promoted educational programs that emphasized discernment as a skill to be developed among Jesuit institutions, preparing future leaders to make informed and compassionate decisions.
2. **Communal Practices:** His teachings encouraged communities to adopt regular practices of discernment, embedding these processes into the life of the Jesuit order.
3. **Social Engagement:** Kolvenbach's emphasis on social justice has led Jesuits worldwide to engage in various social enterprises, advocating for the marginalized and promoting human dignity.
4. **Spiritual Formation:** Kolvenbach's contributions to spiritual formation programs highlighted the importance of discernment in personal and communal growth, fostering a deeper relationship with God.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, **apostolic discernment in common Peter Hans Kolvenbach** encapsulates a holistic approach to decision-making that integrates prayer, community engagement, and social justice. Kolvenbach's teachings continue to inspire Jesuits and others seeking to align their lives with God's will, fostering a spirit of collaboration and compassion. By embracing these principles, individuals and communities can navigate the complexities of modern life with faith, purpose, and a commitment to social justice. This discernment process is not just a method; it is a way of life that reflects the core values of the Jesuit mission.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What is apostolic discernment according to Peter Hans Kolvenbach?**

Apostolic discernment, as articulated by Peter Hans Kolvenbach, refers to the

process of seeking God's will in decision-making, particularly in the context of serving others and fulfilling one's mission in the world.

## **How does Kolvenbach's understanding of apostolic discernment apply to modern social issues?**

Kolvenbach emphasizes the importance of discernment in addressing contemporary social issues by encouraging individuals to reflect deeply on their values, the needs of the marginalized, and their responses to societal challenges in light of faith.

## **What role does community play in apostolic discernment, according to Kolvenbach?**

Kolvenbach highlights that community is essential in apostolic discernment as it fosters collaboration, shared insights, and collective prayer, which enrich the discernment process and lead to more informed and compassionate decision-making.

## **How can individuals cultivate apostolic discernment in their daily lives?**

Individuals can cultivate apostolic discernment by engaging in regular prayer, reflection, seeking guidance from mentors or spiritual leaders, and actively listening to the needs of their communities to align their actions with their faith.

## **What challenges might one face in the process of apostolic discernment?**

Challenges in apostolic discernment may include personal biases, societal pressures, emotional turmoil, and the difficulty of balancing various responsibilities, which can cloud judgment and make it harder to hear God's call.

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