

# The Soul of Discernment

A Spiritual Practice  
for Communities and Institutions

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# Practices

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# Introduction

“*H*ow are we to live our lives thoughtfully and faithfully in the midst of all the forces, options, and decisions that characterize modern life? Discernment, the Christian practice of seeking God’s call in the midst of the decisions that mark one’s life, may very well be the single most important Christian spiritual practice for dealing with this contemporary dilemma.” So begins *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making*.<sup>1</sup> There, I proposed that it is possible not only to become acquainted with various forms of discernment from the long history of Christian spirituality, but also, more importantly, to discover practices that work particularly well for you as you discern decisions that arise in your own life. This book is designed as a sequel. Here, the practice of discernment is extended from one’s personal life to the various institutions and systems in which we all live.

Throughout the pages of this book, you will engage in the Social Discernment Cycle. It merits the term *discernment* because it is a process for seeking God’s call in a particular situation. It is called *social* because it deals primarily with human communities in their social-structural, rather than interpersonal, aspects. It is a *cycle* because one completed round of discernment prepares for the next. The Social Discernment Cycle is particularly apt for any discernment that involves a structure, system, or institution. For example, the Social Discernment Cycle could guide decision makers about whether one institution should merge with another. It could also assist individual persons within the merging institutions to determine how they are called to respond in the midst of these transitions.

I envision multiple types of readers for this book, all of whom dwelt in my imagination as I was writing. Some of you are seeking fresh, faith-grounded ways to approach a decision you are about to make, one that is set in the context of some structure, organization, or institution. Some of you may feel stuck in some structure and need to find breathing room. Some may have

found *Way of Discernment* useful and want to extend its perspective from personal discernment to discerning with and in large or small structures. Pastors and spiritual directors, you may find a fresh way to help your parishioners and directees when these seekers bring institutions into your pastoral conversations. I envision leaders of institutions, pastors, chairs of nonprofit boards, and leaders of faith-based organizations turning to Social Discernment for ways to assist your organization to move together into God's future. Finally, I also imagine that those of you who are preparing for pastoral, clinical, or spiritual direction ministries see Social Discernment as a way to minister to the systems and structures that will inhabit your ministries whether you invite them to or not. I hope you take the Social Discernment Cycle into your future pastoral planning.

How is God leading me to act in this particular situation? serves as the guiding question in the first volume. Here, the focus shifts from individual persons to persons in systems, so the question shifts accordingly: How is God leading *us, individually or together*, to act in this particular moment in *our organization*? Rather than offer a variety of processes from which to choose those that fit your personal circumstances and personality, as in the earlier volume, this book focuses on a single more extensive process, called the Social Discernment Cycle or, more simply, Social Discernment. Its multiple steps will make up individual chapters in part 2.

Why this turn? Groups of faithful Christians have always used the best insights of their day and combined them with the wisdom they inherited from the past to develop ways of discerning that meet the needs of their situation. Today institutions and structures are far more complex than those envisioned in the communal discernment practices gleaned from the long history of Christian discernment. In fact, say the authors of *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*, the appearance of structures on a global scale is tantamount to the emergence of a new species on earth.<sup>2</sup> Prior to the last one hundred years, there were few examples of globe-spanning institutions. But today, global institutions are proliferating, overwhelming existing cultures, languages, currencies, and means of communication. Even in the close-to-home structures of family, school, workplace, church, and local community, the complexities are often puzzling and our attempts to move these structures forward in mutually beneficial ways stymied. Our political systems today seem forever bogged down in partisan politics. Our economic arrangements are replete with contradictions. We experience a growing distance between the economically advantaged few and a disadvantaged large majority. We face immense structural problems exacerbated by globalization and an ecological crisis that is not easily repaired. Yet our individual actions

are mediated and magnified by such structures. What are we to do in the face of such complexities?

The way things are now is not the way they have to be in the future. The good can grow and the destructive can shrink. To move in the direction of the good, it is crucial that our institutions mediate grace, that is, grow the good. By employing an effective institution, we can magnify our power to assist in this transformation far beyond what one individual can do.<sup>3</sup> For example, we can ease the growing disparity between those at the top of the economic ladder and those at the bottom if we adjust the tax code to favor those at the bottom, raise the minimum wage, increase educational opportunities, or provide effective and safe child care. The possibilities and the structures for addressing this one situation are many.

The Social Discernment Cycle is designed to address large and small systems, to help us take concrete steps in the face of systemic complexity, be it in one's family, workplace, neighborhood, school, or church, in local or national politics, or in response to the global ecological crisis. The only way we can affect the future is to do the right thing in the present. Social Discernment helps us discern what the "right thing" might be, and, together, take the first step. It helps us make "little moves against destructiveness"<sup>4</sup> as well as "little moves for constructiveness."

Taking our cue from our forebears' penchant for using the insights available to them in their day, this volume wed the theory and practice of discernment to newer tools now available. The Pastoral Circle provides the inner skeleton of the Social Discernment Cycle. This widely used pastoral planning method originated in Europe after the Second World War as the "see-judge-act method." It was further adapted in Latin American liberation theology and finally made widely available in North America by Joe Holland and Peter Henriot in their 1980 volume, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*.<sup>5</sup> The Pastoral Circle cues us to look at groups not as simple collections of individuals but as systems, with the behaviors characteristic of systems. It also reminds us that one of discernment's most effective contexts is pastoral planning. I will introduce the Pastoral Circle more extensively below. The increasingly complex structures in which we live our everyday lives also invite us to use disciplines that did not exist when the discernment tradition was taking shape. The social sciences offer one such tool, social analysis, while mathematics offers a second, systems theory. We will employ nontechnical concepts and practices gained from these disciplines to enhance our discernment in and of systems.

There is a certain amount of overlap between this book and its predecessor because I intend each book to stand on its own. Consequently, I introduce

discernment again, but I do so here with particular emphasis on group discernment. I reaffirm the necessity of spiritual freedom because seeking God more profoundly than any penultimate outcome is one of the essential qualities of discernment. Spiritual freedom is as elusive in social discernment as in personal discernment—it remains always a gift from God. So we will learn to ask for it over and over throughout the Social Discernment Cycle. We continue to approach our potential decision in an attitude of prayer, even as we are doing hard critical work on analyzing the structure. The notion of confirmation, that pause where we bring everything we have done to God prior to finalizing our decision, appears here again, but now we consider signs that suggest that an *institution* is moving toward the good, as are the individual discerners.

This is also a book to “work.” It is one thing to read about Social Discernment and its history, theology, and biblical basis. It is quite another thing to actually discern. Discerners often arrive at an action that is completely surprising to them. But sometimes discerners arrive at the same action that they were contemplating prior to engaging in Social Discernment. In those cases, common sense would suggest that it is a huge waste of time and energy to engage in Social Discernment. Yet, almost to a person, discerners claim that *they* have been changed in the process. As a result of their work in the Social Discernment Cycle, they engage their structure differently, if only in attitude. The good news of Social Discernment: the listening for God that is the heart of discernment can be amply rewarded even if the system appears to change little in the end. Social Discernment can become, then, a privileged way to find God even in places where we might not have thought to look—right in the middle of the often stubborn structures in which we live and work every day.

To facilitate actually doing discernment, each chapter includes a portion of the discernment process in the form of an exercise to do personally or collectively, depending on your situation. I encourage you to engage this portion thoroughly, keeping personal notes or minutes to record the details—whether facts, insights, graces, or struggles—of this step. The process builds upon itself, and a small insight in an earlier step may prove crucial as the process unfolds. So, work the process.

### The Origin of the Social Discernment Cycle

It is important to make clear from the outset that I am not the originator of the Social Discernment Cycle, simply one who has adopted it as central to my work in discernment. It is the focus of a discernment course in the Diploma in

the Art of Spiritual Direction at San Francisco Theological Seminary. Other students preparing for ministry may become acquainted with it through one of the spiritual formation courses titled *Spiritual Life and Leadership*.

The process came to San Francisco Theological Seminary in a 1992 workshop on spirituality and justice cosponsored by the Program in Christian Spirituality. John Mostyn, CFC, and Elinor Shea, OSU, the facilitators of this workshop, were among those at the Center for Spirituality and Justice in the Bronx who struggled through a process of trying to link social justice and spiritual direction. By trial and error, they discovered that they had to develop a whole new way of thinking about humans and the God-human relationship, as well as a new understanding of spiritual direction, in order to establish that linkage. The result of this struggle is what we have come to call the Social Discernment Cycle.<sup>6</sup> The version I use here has had many hands upon it in addition to those of Mostyn and Shea, most notably Maureen Cleary, Nancy Wiens, and the scores of students who have experienced the process in the course of their studies.

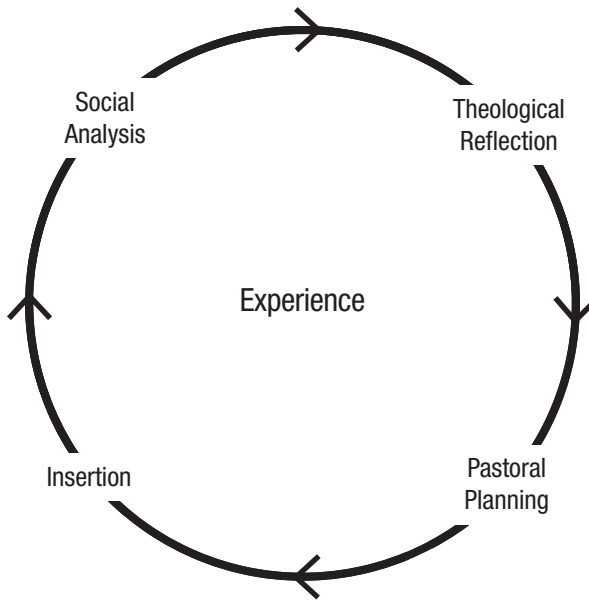
The questions that make up the exercises have a theological grounding. Yet no particular question or wording is intrinsic to the process. These questions have been developed to help elicit the underlying movement of the Social Discernment Cycle with sufficient concreteness. Over the years, individual questions have been modified, dropped, and added, as seemed useful. As I prepared this book, I again tweaked both the exercises and the individual questions. The exercises, then, can be tailored to the individual case, perhaps making them much simpler, if simpler will suffice, but also lengthening them or creating new questions to cover complex or idiosyncratic structures. As you become acquainted with the Social Discernment Cycle, you should feel free to make appropriate adaptations. Nonetheless, I owe a tremendous debt to the participants of the Center for Spirituality and Justice, who persevered through trial and error to develop the underlying conditions, theological perspectives, and original questions.

### The Pastoral Circle

The skeleton of the Social Discernment Cycle is the Pastoral Circle as described Joe Holland and Peter Henriot.<sup>7</sup> This process and its graphic representation in figure 1 share similarities with the praxis circle of Paulo Freire and the hermeneutical circle of Juan Luis Segundo. It illustrates the dynamic linkage between “insertion” (location in the system), social analysis, theological reflection, and pastoral planning.



Figure 1: The Pastoral Circle



From Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980), 8. Used with permission.

In adapting the dynamic of the Pastoral Circle to discernment, we have tweaked the circle somewhat, as illustrated in figure 2. For our purposes, “Insertion” becomes “Noticing and Describing.” What is going on at present, to whom, by whom? Where and with whom are we locating ourselves as we begin the discernment? At the beginning of the process, we draw near to the real-life experience with the system, our own and others’. We want to know what the discerners and others are feeling, thinking, experiencing, and responding. To use Holland and Henriot’s language, we *insert* ourselves close to the experiences of those involved.

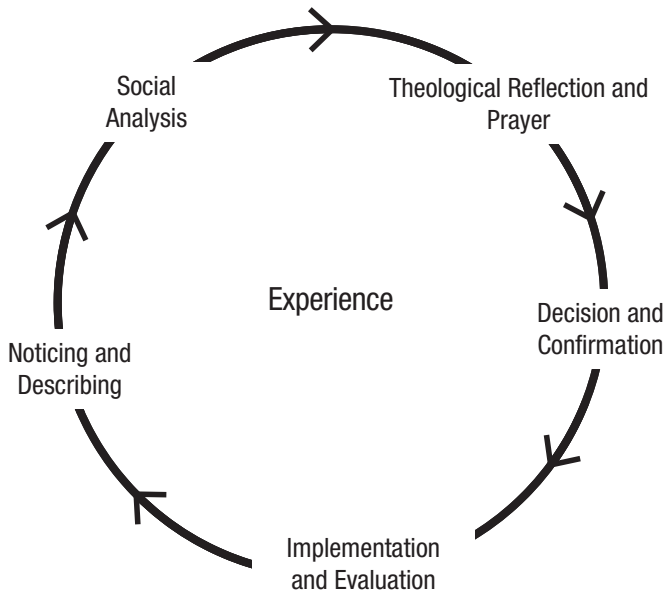
In order to understand these experiences in all their dynamic linkages, we move to social analysis. Here we examine the causes, consequences, and history of the entity. We identify actors and those acted upon. We look for how power flows and what kind of power it is. We try to uncover our assumptions about what counts as useful information for our discernment. Our goal is to peer through the murkiness of the structure, exposing the various linkages that together constitute the system. Juan José Luna insists that these first two steps in the Social Discernment Cycle should not be imposed by

people outside the system. Rather, those who are living it should describe and analyze their experiences in order to develop their power within the system, which is especially important for those who may feel they have little or none.<sup>8</sup>

Holland and Henriot's third movement is theological reflection. The Social Discernment Cycle preserves the important task of theological reflection but enfolds it in an element crucial to discernment, namely, prayer. Discerners are invited to bring all that they have uncovered in the social analysis and theological reflection to personal and/or corporate prayer, laying it all out before God. "And this," as one Jesuit student exclaimed when he saw this addition, "makes all the difference" between problem solving and discernment.

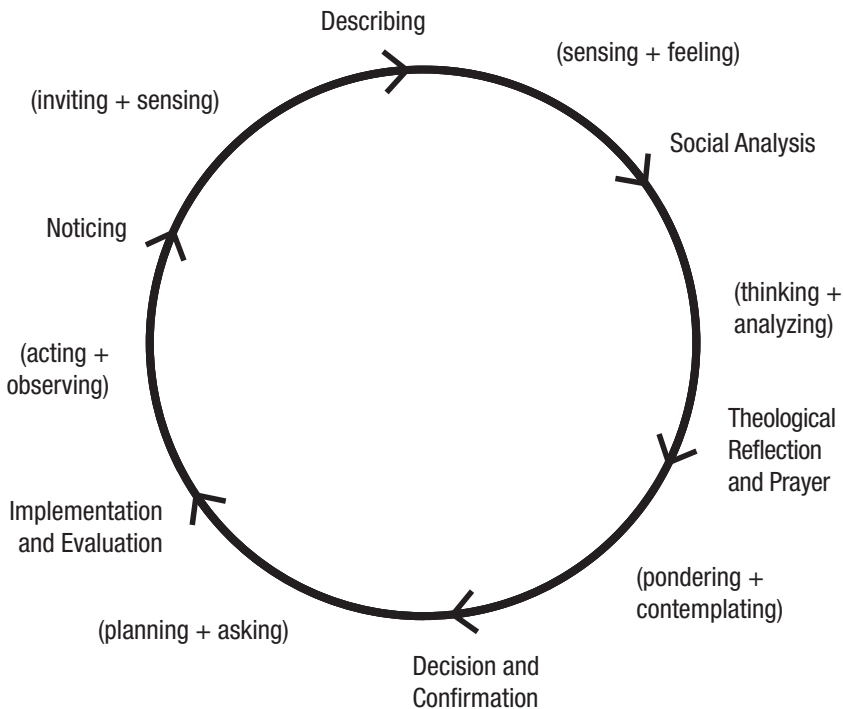
Our version of Holland and Henriot's fourth movement shifts from pastoral planning to selecting (discerning) the single first action that our discernment calls us to. It is not enough simply to pray about the structure; in social discernment we are called to take some action within or on the system. What should this action be? How will we know it is the action we are called to make? Who will be the players in this action? How will we assess the action, once taken? Our final three chapters will add considerable detail to this final movement of the Pastoral Circle as Holland and Henriot originally conceived it.

Figure 2: The Social Discernment Cycle



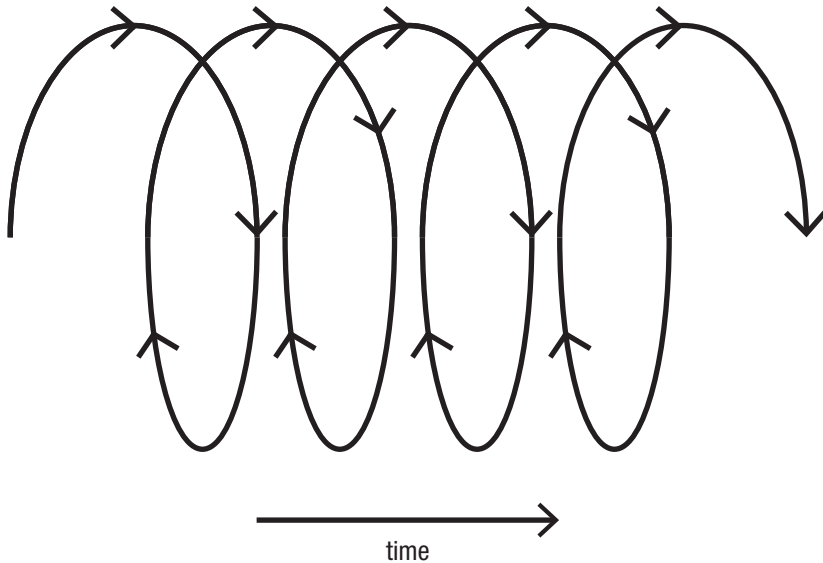
As we move around the circular process, the way we work shifts. As we examine experience, feelings matter immensely, so we seek to notice and reflect on them. Social analysis relies on good hard thinking—which is why folks often complain that this step “isn’t spiritual.” Theological reflection and prayer shifts us to the heart as we try to respond contemplatively to all that we have learned. Finally, the last movement requires action, with all the accompanying planning, thinking, feeling, and prayer that implementation will require. Figure 3 illustrates these shifts.

Figure 3: The Social Discernment Cycle  
(with Modes of Processing)



This image, however, makes it appear that the circle is closed, that a completed discernment process leads right back where you started. In fact, discernment followed by action always brings about a newly configured structure with a new condition of possibility. In terms of Social Discernment, we could say that an action on a system always elicits a *system* response—the system is somehow different. The modified structure leads to a new situation for discernment. Figure 4 illustrates these dynamic shifts over time.

Figure 4: Social Discernment over Time



Basing the Social Discernment Cycle on the Pastoral Circle offers several advantages beyond providing a skeleton upon which to build the discernment process. Its roots in Roman Catholic social justice teaching and liberation theology invite us, from the very construction of the method of discernment itself, to connect discernment to social justice. Oppression is maintained not simply by a series of individual unjust actions. Indeed, the insidiousness of oppression of all kinds is that it transcends individual actors. Personal actions to repair a damaged relationship, while laudatory, do not get at the root of systemic oppression. Rooting out systemic oppression, as well as making lasting system change that enhances positive elements, requires action upon the whole system. Once we move from personal to systemic analysis, we realize why so many of our well-intended actions either make no difference in the system or invite perverse reactions from the system, making a bad situation worse.

### Typical Cases

In order to keep our discussion from flying off into abstractions, we'll follow two cases throughout the process. Hopefully, these extended examples will spur your imagination as you work with your own discernment.

Most of us struggle with systems in which we are minor players—that is, we are not in a position as a solitary individual to easily alter the momentum of the system. The first extended case example is such a situation. It can help clarify the Social Discernment dynamics in a system in which you are the only actor attempting to discern and act in a given system. Although your discernment will unfold very differently, this example is intended to spark your imagination for your own system.

The second case considers the situation of a group discerning within a structure. Here we add the complexity involved in forming the decision makers into a discernment group—an identity that is not in the job descriptions of most decision-making groups! This example will help a discernment group imagine how they will proceed through their system’s discernment.

### Case 1: Group Norms in Eastside High School Sisters’ Residence

Sister Joan Peters lived in the Sisters’ Residence at Eastside, the local diocesan high school, along with seven other sisters.<sup>9</sup> Five taught or otherwise served in the high school, and three, including Sister Joan, resided there but had ministries outside the school. While several of the sisters had lived at the residence for many years—one as long as eighteen years—others were more recent arrivals. Sister Joan herself had lived at Eastside for three years when the “presenting incident” occurred. It involved her longtime friend Sister Katherine.

Sister Katherine had notified her ministry of her intent to retire at the end of the year. She and Sister Joan talked several times about where she would move after her retirement. Eventually, Sister Joan proposed that she consider Eastside, where she would be able to continue with various volunteer and part-time ministries, particularly the spiritual direction and retreat work to which she had devoted herself for many years. After meeting and discussion with the members of the community, all agreed that Sister Katherine would move to Eastside in August.

August came and Sister Katherine settled into Eastside. She began to publicize her spiritual direction ministry in the local parishes, and new clients for spiritual direction began to call. Many of the persons that Sister Katherine had accompanied in spiritual direction in the past also continued to meet with her, despite the additional travel. Soon she began giving retreats to local parishes and groups. Her ministry was taking off in the new site. But on the home front, tensions were building.

Sister Joan began to notice a general sense of irritation with Sister Katherine and puzzled at its origin. All the sisters had participated together in setting the group rules and expectations for the year, and Sister Katherine’s behavior

did not seem to Sister Joan to violate these group norms in the least. What, then, was going on? Observing longer, she noticed that Sister Katherine's use of the residence visiting room for receiving those coming for spiritual direction seemed to spark irritation. But Sister Katherine only used the visiting room during the day, when all the others were busy with their ministries; she had not inconvenienced anyone, at least that Sister Joan was aware of.

After pondering for some weeks the responses that Sister Katherine was eliciting from some community members, she began to realize that Sister Katherine was bumping headlong into unspoken group norms. She had no way to know the specifics of "this is how we do it here"; these expectations had never been articulated. She would discover a norm when she had broken it. Once Sister Joan came to this realization, she decided to use the Social Discernment Cycle to help her understand how things came to this impasse and what she should do when her friend unwittingly violated another unstated expectation—as would surely happen if the last few weeks were an indicator. We shall follow Sister Joan's progress through the Social Discernment Cycle over several weeks' time.

## Case 2: Hope Presbyterian Church Pastor Nominating Committee

Hope Presbyterian Church was in transition.<sup>10</sup> Its pastor of fifteen years had announced a year before that it would be his final year. Following Presbyterian polity, Hope installed an interim pastor at the conclusion of that year to see the church through the transition until its new called pastor was in place. Now, under the guidance of the presbytery's Committee on Ministry, Hope's session (the local congregation's governing body) pondered who should serve on the Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC) alongside the member recommended by the Committee on Ministry.

The nominating committee's responsibility, they knew from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s *Book of Order*, is to assess the current state of the church and to prepare a Ministry Information Form that accurately describes the church, detailing the kind of pastor most appropriate for the next season of the church's life. This Ministry Information Form is then publicized, and candidates who seem appropriate for the position are culled from all those sending in their Personal Information Forms. From the list of those being considered, the nominating committee narrows the selection to several and checks in with the Committee on Ministry, who must eventually recommend to the presbytery that it receive the new pastor into its membership. The nominating committee next selects the single candidate that they believe is most suited to their congregation. They then interview this candidate, observe his

or her preaching in a neutral pulpit, consider letters of recommendation, and follow up on all the appropriate due diligence, including meeting the candidate's spouse and family. Finally, if everything points to this person as the next pastor, they present this candidate to the congregation, who must vote whether to accept this nomination and thereby extend a call.

We shall follow the Hope Presbyterian Church Pastor Nominating Committee's use of the Social Discernment Cycle as they carry out their particular task on behalf of the membership of Hope.

### Itinerary, Theological Grounding, and Note on Language

Part 1 sets out the theology and theory for understanding discernment not just personally or even communally, but *structurally*. The first chapter reviews various understandings of discernment and emphasizes the connection between discernment about institutions, systems, and structures of all kinds and the work of justice. We begin our practices with the Awareness Examen. The second chapter clarifies the role of discerners and how they function in Social Discernment. It demonstrates the difference between an individual discerning about a system in isolation from others and a group discerning together about a system. The practice introduced here asks for the spiritual freedom that underlines discernment. The third chapter defines structure and describes how systems act. At the end of this chapter, I trust it will be clear why the person-to-person interactions we are used to in our personal lives are often ineffective in working with systems. The practice helps select an appropriately framed structure with a scope that will lend itself to discernment.

Part 2 unfolds the various steps of the Social Discernment Cycle. The fourth chapter assists with clarifying the structure and the issue within the structure to be discerned and also raises the issue of the buy-in of the discerners. Its practice invites us to narrate our experience in the system in all its concreteness. The fifth chapter leads us through an uncomplicated social analysis, which can be adjusted as appropriate to the complexity of the system. We also ponder how the process feels to the discerners at this point, with an eye to persevering to the conclusion of the process. It's at this point that people always complain, "This doesn't feel spiritual at all!" The sixth chapter presents the prayer and theological reflection step of the process, the heart of the discrimination that constitutes discernment. This chapter suggests a straightforward process for theological reflection and invites both personal and communal prayer into the heart of the discernment. The seventh chapter challenges our sensibility that a single sweeping action is the preferred goal

of the Social Discernment Cycle, proposing that seeking a first contemplative action (as we have sometimes called the outcome of Social Discernment) is a worthy outcome for the process. Here, too, we begin internally confirming the tentative decision about this first contemplative action. In the eighth and final chapter, the notion of confirmation expands through a discussion of signs that institutions and other structures might, in fact, be moving toward God. These signs, and others like them, I propose, are the structural equivalent of the more person-oriented touchstones treated in chapter 7. This chapter also steps back and pulls together this journey called Social Discernment.

Anticipating a variety of readers, from those who just want a way to breathe easier inside a rigid system to those who will lead discernment processes and still others who prepare future leaders, I include several brief essays in the form of appendixes. These essays relate the Social Discernment Cycle to aspects of the social sciences and discernment literatures. They represent some of the topics and figures that have engaged pastoral theologians over the last two decades that I have tried to integrate into my teaching and writing. This small set is by no means exhaustive (for example, family systems theory is not represented), but it may suggest avenues for developing aspects of the Social Discernment Cycle in the future.

Appendix 1 provides a condensed form of the Social Discernment Cycle. It can serve at least two purposes: (1) If you get lost somewhere on the way through the process, wondering how this or that step relates to the whole, the condensed form may help quickly restore your bearings. (2) It can serve as a skeleton for those who desire an outline to use in less complex discernment processes. The second appendix shows how the Social Discernment Cycle exemplifies the dynamic pattern of Christian discernment, using an overview supplied by theologian Mark McIntosh. The third describes discerners and discernment groups in light of Donald Schön's concept of the reflective practitioner. The fourth describes Social Discernment in light of Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch's theory of change. Those who have explored developmental theories may find the fifth appendix, "Social Discernment and Transformational Learning," helpful in sketching the relationship of Social Discernment to developmental theories. Appendix 6 discusses the resonances and differences between the Social Discernment Cycle and "social technologies" based on the future, such as Theory U.

In *The Way of Discernment*, I made explicit some of my theological assumptions, encouraging readers to clarify their own.<sup>11</sup> Briefly, these theological assumptions, here tweaked toward systems, include these points:

- God is real, and we can trust that this God is actually alive and at work



in the systems in which we find ourselves. Indeed, the Holy Spirit *is* the power of God at work in the world.

- God is the creator of all that is, beginning with the cosmos itself and encompassing the simplest and most complex of systems.
- God did not just create “in the beginning” and then leave the creation to make its own way, but God is continually creating, upholding, and enriching both individuals and systems.
- God created human beings with deep intelligence and with an ability to ourselves reflect on the systems and structures that exist around us in such richness and variety.
- Humans are able to choose, to direct our own future within limits, and to participate in creating systems that enhance life. Yet in that freedom, humans can also choose destruction, sin, rebellion, isolation.
- God’s provident care took form in Jesus, who becomes our premier source for understanding not only who God is, but also how we are to live in harmony with God’s purposes. Jesus, in his turn, sent us the Holy Spirit to be with us and teach us what we need to know and empower us to carry out our vocations in the world. Jesus concluded his work on earth through his self-emptying and salvific death. But death was not the end: Jesus was raised up, and he continues to live as the Christ to whom all creation is drawn. The work of salvation is thereby accessible to all, sealed through the covenant of baptism. Jesus therefore is the ultimate norm for all discernment.
- Reflecting on God and reflecting on humans are two sides of the same reality; we can know ourselves in God and we can find God in probing not only our own self but also created reality itself.
- Humans can participate with God in cocreating the future in all its complexity and richness, and for this task we have been provided means of grace.<sup>12</sup>
- It is impossible to fall outside God’s provident love.

In addition to this list, to which I still subscribe, this volume, stimulated particularly by research into the nature of systems, gives me the opportunity to reflect briefly but more explicitly on the nature of God as Trinity and of the Holy Spirit as the “face of God” at work in our human experience. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity suggests systems and structures as we experience them are faint images of God, who, in the Christian understanding, is simultaneously both three and one (triune). The persons of the Trinity act both in their own right and yet always together as manifestations of the one God. The tensions inherent in describing the triune nature of God cannot be resolved logically, as Christians have affirmed over two millennia, but the very assumptions about God as Trinity in Unity ground within the very

nature of God the processes for discerning and acting in all other created systems.

The Spirit has been spoken of as the lost person in the Trinity—at least in Eurocentric theologizing—a loss brought about through failure of imagination. By splitting sacred and secular, and ruling secular out of bounds for theologizing, the theater of the Spirit’s activity is vastly shrunk to the Spirit’s role in the church and in the individual’s own private spirituality. One could also arrive at the same puny role for the Spirit by beginning from the opposite direction: the secular is where the action is, and Spirit has no place in the secular.<sup>13</sup> Again the Spirit is relegated to its role in private spirituality or to its role in the church—which has no standing in the secular world. In fact, it is the Spirit of God who moves us to recognize Jesus as God’s Word for us in the first place. This Spirit already dwells in every part of creation, including—especially—in what we have come to split off in our imaginations as “secular.” God, as Spirit, is necessarily and intimately involved in every event in the universe. In fact, the Spirit *is* God’s power at work in the world. Once our imaginations are set free to imagine the Spirit at work in the world, we have the theological premise to discern about any and every system, including secular ones.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, a word about language for the divine. Any name we choose limits the deity, and English-language pronouns further confound our speech about the divine. In addition, our prayer language and our theological or discursive language for the divine may differ. What facilitates prayer and conversation for one person is off-putting to another. My perspective, and therefore my language, follows from my Trinitarian and Christian perspective, but even among Christians there are varieties of languages for God used in prayer, theologizing, and worship. John Mostyn, CFC, speaks of the “Mystery we call God.” While I find this a lovely and satisfying way to speak of the divine, it seems unwieldy to use it throughout the book, though you will see it in the central exercise in chapter 6. I have resolved this issue somewhat ploddingly by simply speaking of the divine as “God” throughout the book—though “Spirit” peeked through here and there. But use whatever name for the divine that assists you to pray.

Shifting the language for the divine may not be enough for some individuals and groups who could profit from the Social Discernment Cycle. The very notion of prayer or the images and metaphors suggested for prayer and theological reflection in these pages may be off-putting. Let the final thought of this introduction, then, be “freedom and flexibility.” I invite you always to look for the dynamic under the words and images employed, especially in the exercises, and hold onto it. Then adapt this underlying dynamic to your

situation. If “prayer” is off-putting, perhaps “reflection” will open up the central dynamic of the prayer and theological reflection exercises in chapter 6. If a theological explanation doesn’t work, perhaps there is another angle that will bring home the point effectively. Our God is big enough to work beyond the system of discernment presented here. Rejoice in that reality, and move forward however you are able.

With these few words of orientation, let us launch our discernment journey. We begin with the ancient Christian prayer beckoning the Holy Spirit:

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful.  
Enkindle in us the fire of your love.  
Send forth your spirit and we shall be created  
And you shall renew the face of the earth.