

No. 3	Ecclesial Discernment, Decision-making Processes and Participatory Bodies
FD reference	81-86, 93-94, 103-106
Explanation Restate the point in plain language a parishioner will understand on first reading. Avoid the words used in the original heading where a simpler word will do.	Ecclesial Discernment for Mission The Church today must listen carefully to God’s Spirit when deciding how best to live and share the Gospel. This kind of listening is not about pushing personal opinions or winning arguments. It is about praying, being humble, hearing each other with respect, and seeking together what God wants for His people. We begin by listening to God’s Word in Scripture, in the liturgy, in the teaching of the Church, and even in the cry of the poor and the events of daily life. God also speaks in our conscience, guiding us deep within. The process of discernment involves: • Clearly naming the issue we are considering. • Taking time for prayer and reflection. • Setting aside personal interests to seek the common good. • Listening respectfully to everyone. • Searching for a shared understanding that reflects God’s will. Discernment is a spiritual practice, not just an organizational tool. It requires trust, openness, and formation so that leaders and communities can grow in this way of listening together. By doing so, the Church stays faithful to her mission and walks forward as one body guided by the Spirit. Decision-making Processes Discernment for Mission When the Church makes decisions, it’s important that the process is clear, fair, and respectful. Everyone involved has a role to play: • Leaders must explain what the decision is about, who will be consulted, and who will make the final choice. They should make sure people have the information they need to give good input. • Those consulted should share their thoughts honestly and carefully, keeping confidence when needed, and offering clear suggestions. • Once a decision is made, all members of the Church are asked to respect it, even if they personally hoped for another outcome. At the same time, they can still give feedback and, if necessary, appeal to a higher authority. Participatory Bodies In the Church, decisions are not made by leaders alone. Baptised members take part through parish and diocesan councils and other groups that already exist in Church law. These include parish pastoral councils, finance councils, diocesan synods, and similar bodies in the Eastern Catholic Churches. Each group has its own role: some focus on parish life, others on finances, others on pastoral planning. Members are chosen because of their gifts, experience, and commitment to the faith. They help the Church listen to the Holy Spirit, understand the needs of the community, and make decisions that serve the mission of the Gospel. For these groups to be effective, they must truly function—not just exist in name. They should meet regularly, follow proper guidelines, and allow members to contribute meaningfully. It is important that women, young people, and those

	who are poor or on the margins are included, so that the Church hears a wide range of voices. By strengthening these councils and ensuring they are active, the Church can make decisions together in a way that is faithful, transparent, and responsive to the needs of the people.
What the Final Document says Three to five sentences drawn from the cited FD paragraphs. Explain the idea; do not reproduce long extracts.	The Final Document explains that when the Church makes decisions, it must always begin by listening to the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. Discernment is not just about opinions but about prayer, humility, and openness to what God wants for His people. Everyone's voice matters, especially those who are often overlooked, because the more people are heard, the richer the process becomes. Leaders must guide the process clearly, while those consulted should share honestly and respectfully. In the end, decisions should be accepted in faith, even if they differ from personal views, because they are made for the good of the whole Church.
Terms to explain Explain any terms a parishioner may not know with a one-liner	Holy Spirit – God's Spirit who guides, strengthens, and inspires the Church. Word of God – The Bible, where God speaks to His people through Scripture. Discernment – Prayerfully listening and reflecting to understand what God wants. Conscience – The inner voice where we sense right and wrong in God's presence. Synodality
Sample answers Provide sample answers as prompts in case (but let the discussion flow first)	Steps Taken • "We have already begun listening to Scripture and praying before meetings." • "Our parish council has started inviting more voices into discussions." Steps Underway • "We are learning how to share respectfully and listen to one another." • "Leaders are clarifying the issues before decisions are made." Difficulties • "Sometimes it's hard to accept a decision when it doesn't match my opinion." • "Not everyone feels confident to speak up, especially those on the margins." Perspective Coming to View • "I see that discernment is more than opinions—it's about listening to God together." • "The more people are heard, the stronger and more faithful our decisions will be."

81. In order to promote relationships capable of sustaining and orienting the mission of the Church, a priority must be made to exercise the evangelical wisdom that allowed the apostolic community of Jerusalem to seal the result of the first synodal event using the following words: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). This is discernment that can be qualified as “ecclesial,” since it is the People of God that undertake it in view of mission. The Spirit, whom the Father sends in Jesus’ name and who teaches everything (cf. Jn 14:26), guides believers in every age “into all the truth” (Jn 16:13). Through the Spirit’s presence and enduring action, the “tradition which comes from the apostles progresses in the Church” (DV 8). Calling on the Spirit’s light, the People of God, who participate in the prophetic function of Christ (cf. LG 12), “works to discern the true signs of God’s presence and purpose in the events, needs and desires which it shares with the rest of modern humanity” (GS 11). This discernment draws on all the gifts of wisdom that the Lord bestows upon the Church and on the *sensus fidei* bestowed upon all the Baptised by the Spirit.

In this Spirit, the life of a missionary and synodal Church must be re-envisioned and re-orientated.

82. Ecclesial discernment is not an organisational technique but rather a spiritual practice grounded in a living faith. It calls for interior freedom, humility, prayer, mutual trust, an openness to the new and a surrender to the will of God. It is never just a setting out of one’s own personal or group point of view or a summing up of differing individual opinions. Each person, speaking according to their conscience, is called to open themselves to the others who share according to their conscience. In this sharing, they seek to recognise together “what the Spirit is saying to the Churches” (Rev 2:7). As ecclesial discernment entails the contribution of everyone, it is both the condition and a privileged expression of synodality, in which communion, mission and participation are lived. The more everyone is heard, the richer the discernment. Therefore, it is essential that we promote the broadest participation possible in the discernment process, particularly involving those who are at the margins of the Christian community and society.

83. Listening to the Word of God is the starting point and criterion for all ecclesial discernment. The Scriptures testify that God has spoken to His People to the point of giving us in Jesus the fullness of all Revelation (cf. DV 2). They indicate the places where we can hear His voice. God communicates with us first of all in the liturgy because it is Christ himself who speaks “when scripture is read in the Church” (SC 7). God speaks through the living Tradition of the Church, the Magisterium, personal and communal meditation on the Scriptures, and the practices of popular piety. God continues to manifest Himself through the cry of those who are made poor and in the events of human history. God also communicates with His People through the elements of Creation, whose very existence points to the Creator’s action and which is filled with the presence of the life-giving Spirit. Finally, God also speaks through the personal conscience of each person, which is “the most intimate centre and sanctuary of a person, in which he or she is alone with God and whose voice echoes within them.” (GS 16). Ecclesial discernment demands the continuous care for and formation of consciences and the maturing of the *sensus fidei*, so as not to neglect any of the places where God speaks and comes to meet His People.

84. The steps of ecclesial discernment will differ depending on the various places and their traditions. Based on the synodal experience, we have identified some elements of discernment which should be included:

- a) clearly setting out the object of discernment and disseminating information and the means for adequately understanding it;
- b) giving sufficient time for prayerful preparation, for listening to the Word of God and for reflection on the question;
- c) an inner disposition of freedom regarding one's own interests, both personal and as a group, and a commitment to the pursuit of the common good;
- d) listening attentively and respectfully to each person's voice;
- e) searching for the widest possible consensus which will emerge when our hearts burn within us (cf. Lk 24:32), without hiding conflicts or searching for the lowest common denominator;
- f) the leaders of the process formulate the consensus in such a way that allows the participants to say whether they recognise themselves in it or not.

The discernment process should lead to a mature acceptance by all of the decision, even by those whose individual opinions are not accepted. The process should also provide for a period for reception by the community that will lead to further review and assessment.

85. Discernment always unfolds within a particular context, the complexities and specificities of which must be grasped as completely as possible. For discernment to be truly 'ecclesial', it should make use of the appropriate means. These include an adequate biblical exegesis to help interpret and understand biblical texts while avoiding partial or fundamentalist interpretations; a knowledge of the Fathers of the Church, of Tradition and the teachings of the Magisterium, according to their varying degrees of authority; the contributions of the various theological disciplines; and the contributions of the human, historical, social and administrative sciences. Without these latter, it is not possible to grasp the context in which and with a view to which discernment takes place.

86. The Church enjoys a wide variety of approaches to and well-established methods of discernment. This variety is a gift as it allows adaptation to different contexts and shows itself to be fruitful. Keeping our common mission in view, we should bring these different approaches into dialogue, ensuring that neither loses its specific character nor becomes fixed in its way of proceeding. It is essential to offer formation opportunities that spread and nourish a culture of ecclesial discernment focused on mission in local Churches, starting from small ecclesial communities and parishes. This is particularly necessary amongst those who hold leadership roles. It is equally important to encourage the formation of facilitators, whose contribution is often crucial to the process of discernment.

93. It is of fundamental importance, if the processes of decision-making envisaged here are to bear fruit, that they be conducted in an orderly manner and that the people involved assume their own responsibilities:

- a) in particular, it is up to the relevant authority to: clearly define the object of the consultation and deliberation, as well as clarify with whom ultimate responsibility for taking the decision resides. They need to identify those who ought to be consulted, including those who have a specific competency or are affected by the matter under consideration. They also need to ensure that everyone involved has access to relevant data so that they may make an informed contribution to the process;
- b) those who are consulted, whether individually or as members of a collegial body, assume the responsibility of: offering their input honestly, sincerely, with an informed conscience and acting in good conscience, respecting the confidentiality of the information received, offering clearly formulated thoughts that identify their main

- points. This will enable the pastoral authority to explain how they have taken the consultation into account should the decision differ from the opinions offered;
- c) finally, when the competent authority has formulated the decision, having respected the consultation process and clearly expressed the reasons for it, by reason of the bond of communion that unites them, all the Baptised should respect and implement the decision. They should do this even if it differs from their own opinion, but they should also be free to participate honestly in the evaluative phase. There is always a possibility of making an appeal to the higher authority according to the provision of the law.

94. Implementing the processes of decision-making correctly and resolutely, and in a synodal style, will further the progress of the People of God in a participatory way, especially by utilising the institutional means provided for in Canon Law, in particular participatory bodies. Without concrete changes in the short term, the vision of a synodal Church will not be credible, and this will alienate those members of the People of God who have drawn strength and hope from the synodal journey. Local Churches need to find ways to implement these changes.

103. The Baptised participate in decision-making, accountability and evaluation processes through institutional structures, primarily through those already provided for the local Church set out in the existing Code of Canon Law. In the Latin Church these are: Diocesan Synod (cf. CIC, can. 466), Presbyteral Council (cf. CIC, can. 500, § 2), Diocesan Pastoral Council (cf. CIC, can. 514, § 1), Parish Pastoral Council (cf. CIC, can. 536), Diocesan and Parish Finance Council (cf. CIC, cann. 493 e 537). In the Eastern Catholic Churches these are: Eparchial Assembly (cf. CCEO, cann. 235 ss.), Eparchial Finance Council (cf. CCEO, cann. 262 ss.), Presbyteral Council (cf. CCEO can. 264), Eparchial Pastoral Council (cf. CCEO cann. 272 ss.), Parish Councils (cf. CCEO can. 295). Members participate on the basis of their ecclesial role and their differentiated responsibilities and capacities (charisms, ministries, experiences, competencies, etc). Each of these bodies plays a role in the discernment needed for the inculturated proclamation of the Gospel, for the community's mission in its milieu, and for the witness of the Baptised. They also contribute to the decision-making processes through established means. These bodies themselves become the subject of accountability and evaluation, as they will need to give an account of their work. Participatory bodies represent one of the most promising areas in which to act for rapid implementation of the synodal guidelines, bringing about perceptible changes speedily.

104. A synodal Church is based upon the existence, efficiency and effective vitality of these participatory bodies, not on the merely nominal existence of them. This requires that they function in accordance with canonical provisions or legitimate customs and with respect to the statutes and regulations that govern them. For this reason, we insist that they be made mandatory, as was requested at all stages of the synodal process, and that they can fully play their role, and not just in a purely formal way in a manner appropriate to their diverse local contexts.

105. Furthermore, the structure and operations of these bodies need to be addressed. It is necessary to start by adopting a synodal working method. Conversation in the Spirit, after appropriate adaptation, may constitute a reference point. Particular attention should be given to the way members are selected. When no election is envisaged, a synodal consultation should be carried out that expresses as much as possible the reality of the community or the local Church, and the relevant authority should proceed to the appointment on the basis of its

results, respecting the relation between consultation and deliberation described above. It is also necessary to ensure that members of diocesan and parish pastoral councils are able to propose agenda items in an analogous way to that allowed for in the presbyteral council.

106. Equal attention needs to be given to the membership of the participatory bodies so as to encourage greater involvement by women, young people, and those living in poverty or on the margins. Furthermore, it is essential that these bodies include Baptised who are committed to living their faith in the ordinary realities of life, who are recognisably committed to an apostolic and missionary life, not only those engaged with organising ecclesial life and services internally. In this way, the ecclesial discernment will benefit from a greater openness, an ability to analyse reality and a plurality of perspectives. It may be appropriate to provide for the participation of delegates from other Churches and Christian Communions, as happened during this Synodal Assembly, or representatives of the religions present in a territory. Local Churches and their groupings can more appropriately indicate criteria for the composition of participatory bodies suitable to each context.