

## Editorial

# Communal Discernment, Crisis, and Reconciliation

*Geertjan Zuijdwegt, Pieter de Witte, and Stephan van Erp*

On March 31, 2022, Jacques Haers, SJ, celebrates his retirement as Professor of Systematic Theology at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies of KU Leuven. For many years, Jacques has been an intellectual force for good in the many circles in which he has operated: the faculty, the university, the university parish, and the Society of Jesus. To honor Jacques, to celebrate his career and to thank him for his invaluable service this special issue of *Louvain Studies* is dedicated to three themes that are close to Jacques' heart and work: communal discernment, crisis, and reconciliation.

The themes of communal discernment, crisis and reconciliation are closely connected. Reconciliation implies conflict, which must be conceptualized not as a static opposition between two parties, but dynamically, as a crisis or series of crises in a relationship. In the latter conception, reconciliation requires common discernment: the delicate process of identifying right and true ways of being and acting together in a given situation. Deeply rooted in the tradition of Ignatian spirituality, discernment is often misunderstood as an individual practice only. In situations of relational crisis, however, communal discernment is called for. This is true on the micro-level of, for example, a crisis within a family, the meso-level of intergroup conflict, or even the macro-level of humanity's relationship to its common home, the earth. In each case, answers must be found in a process of communal reflection.

Community itself is a tenuous notion. Communities tend to be self-enclosed, and it is their borders that usually cause conflict. Crises can therefore be understood as liminal. They happen at the borders between worlds, people and communities. Discernment in such situations requires the openness to hear what is addressed to you from beyond your own borders or those of the community. The archetypal case of such border-crossing is the demand of the Canaanite woman for the

‘crumbs from the table’, which opened Jesus’ eyes for the faith of those beyond ‘the house of Israel’ – perhaps Jacques’ favorite biblical story.<sup>1</sup> Only when such border-crossing takes place can the liminal spaces in our societies become *loci* of reconciliation.

This special issue of *Louvain Studies* explores the interrelations between communal discernment, crisis and reconciliation with special attention to the liminal spaces that reveal crises in our respective societies. Such fault lines in our societies often open up where powerful institutions or institutionalized social structures come into play. Think of places like prisons, hospitals, churches and nations and of social structures concerning race and gender. Reflection on such spaces in this volume come from a diverse group of scholars, who write from their own cultural and practical embeddedness and their own academic specialization, doing what in the broadest sense of the term is contextual theology.

The issue opens with a review of Jacques’ career, with due focus on his central theological ideas. It draws on his published and unpublished work as well as testimonies from friends, colleagues, and former students. We encounter an inspired teacher, a warm-hearted pastor and a bright intellectual, whose entire theology is built around a notion of creation as “the intimacy with God of all that exists.”<sup>2</sup>

The first article of the volume is written by Joe Drexler-Dreis, who completed his Ph.D. under Jacques’ supervision and now teaches at Xavier University of Louisiana.<sup>3</sup> In *Political Theology and Discernment: Theological Reflection Beyond Abstract Labor*, Drexler-Dreis seeks to clarify the struggle that is entailed by the critical reflection that is part and parcel of the mission of the university. Too often, this struggle is obscured by and absorbed into the neoliberal drive to yield academic produce. By coupling political theology and discernment, Drexler-Dreis seeks to criticize capitalist structures of meaning, value, and legitimacy and to offer other possible structures of meaning and creativity, so as to ensure the relative autonomy of critical reflection from processes of production.

1. Matthew 15:21-28.

2. Jacques Haers, “Common Discernment in Theology,” in *Answerable for Our Beliefs: Reflections on Theology and Contemporary Culture Offered to Terrence Merrigan*, ed. Peter De Mey, Kristof Struys, and Viorel Coman (Leuven, Paris, and Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2022), 660.

3. For the monograph that grew out of this dissertation, see Joe Drexler-Dreis, *Decolonial Love: Salvation in Colonial Modernity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).

In the second article, Judith Gruber, who succeeded Jacques as director of the Centre for Liberation Theologies at KU Leuven, takes the debate on Zwarte Piet (Black Pete) in the Low Countries as a point of departure to theologize about social conflict and cohesion at the intersection of race and religion. After a sketch of the conflict, Gruber situates the dispute in current academic debates about social conflict and reconciliation in relation to the issues of race and racism in contemporary Western Europe. She argues that communitarian approaches, oriented by the idea/l of social cohesion, are prone to reproducing racialized regimes of social belonging and thus run the risk of reinscribing White Christian supremacy-disguised-as-innocence. Instead, Gruber prefers agonistic approaches that allow for the irreducible role of conflict in community formation, to help expose and contest the decisive function of race and racism in the forging of national identity in Europe today, and thus contribute to a theology of (racial) reconciliation.

Pieter De Witte and Geertjan Zuijdwegt co-authored the third article, *Believing in Person: Taking Fundamental Theology to Prison*. Both are appointed as visiting professors on the endowed chair of Detention, Meaning and Society, recently created at KU Leuven, and co-held by Jacques. Their article takes its point of departure in a fundamental theological analysis of what it means to believe (in) persons, inspired by John Henry Newman. They apply this analysis to various aspects of the penal system. First, they elucidate what it means for prison chaplains to trust in people in prison and to believe – with Karl Rahner – that Christ is encountered in them. Second, they draw on Hannah Arendt to argue that a Christian concept of personhood entails a specific view of rehabilitation-as-action. Finally, they explain how a retributive approach to punishment functions as a paradoxical safeguard of the personhood of offenders.

The fourth article is written by Anne Vandenhoeck, associate professor of Pastoral Care and Diaconia at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies and Jacques' close collaborator at the KU Leuven University Parish. Her article, *Homosexuality, Crisis, and Communal Discernment: A Reflection on the Catholic Church's Crisis-inducing Attitude on Homosexuality*, takes a clear stance on the February 2021 *responsum* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) to a dubium regarding the blessing of the unions of persons of the same sex and its aftermath both in Belgium and elsewhere. She argues that the CDF's attitude induces crisis and calls for a process of common discernment, which acknowledges the positive reality of homosexuality in the life of the Church, calls for serving leadership, and closes the gap between doctrine and pastoral care.

Sandra Arenas, another of Jacques' former Ph.D. students and now dean of the Faculty of Religious Sciences and Philosophy of the Catholic University of Temuco-Chile, wrote the fifth article in the volume, *The Awakening of Chile: Demands for Participation and the Synodal Church*.<sup>4</sup> Arenas takes as her starting point converging social and ecclesial clamors in Chile, concerning inequality on the one hand and clericalism and abuse on the other. On the basis of a detailed analysis of the genealogy of a lay synodal response to the crisis of abuse in Chile and the official reactions by the episcopate and by Pope Francis, she holds up the Chilean experience as a *locus theologicus* for exploring what it means to be a synodal Church.

Together, the contributions in this volume address issues of communal discernment, crisis, and reconciliation in a variety of contexts and from diverse perspectives. They offer reflections on different *modes* of communal discernment, ranging from critical academic reflection to lay synods. They discuss different *locations* for common discernment: universities, prisons, churches, societies. Finally, they address different *crises* which call for common discernment: homosexuality and abuse in the church, race and racism in European society, late capitalism in the university, rehabilitation programs and penal structures in the criminal justice system. Amid these manifold crises, the idea and praxis of communal discernment strikes a note of hope. It can issue in what Elias Lopez, in the interview that serves as epilogue to this volume, calls 'discerning reconciliation'. A concept with a bright future, and one of Jacques' enduring contributions to theology and the life of church and world. As editors, we hope that, for those who know Jacques Haers and his thought, this volume will be a feast of recognition as well as a stimulant for further critical reflection. For readers who are not familiar with Jacques' person and work, we hope this volume will be an enjoyable first encounter with the ideas and concerns that have shaped his theological outlook.

4. Out of her dissertation grew Arenas' recent monograph, *Fading Frontiers? A Historical-theological Investigation into the Notion of the Elementa Ecclesiae*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 321 (Leuven, Paris, and Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2021).