

From the Ignatian Tradition

ON HOW TO HELP STUDENTS IN SPIRITUAL MATTERS

A Testimony of the Beginnings of the Marian Congregation

The Sodality of Our Lady, better known as the Marian Congregation, traces its origin back to 1563, when a group of students of the Jesuit Roman College¹ took the initiative 'to establish a Sodality and to commend it to the protection of the most Blessed Virgin'.² The Jesuit Fathers were glad to support the initiative and soon extended the Sodalities to all the Jesuit Colleges in Europe.

In a text of 1564,³ Fr Alfonsus Sgariglia SJ, who was closely involved in the beginnings of the Marian Sodality, proposed an outline of 'how to help the students of the Roman College in spiritual matters', which very much resembles the Rules of the Sodality. He declares that, in applying his proposal, the Society 'can hope for all the fruits, which are expected from the German College and Seminary with little or almost no fatigue', and that this is 'in conformity with the Institute of the Society and with the purpose of the Schools. For if the students make no progress in their spiritual life, all is lost.' He further expresses the hope to direct 'those who are apt for more, ... to the greater service of God'.⁴

Spiritual care for the extern students—those not studying to enter the Society—was one of the principal preoccupations of the Society of Jesus. For not only did 'the fathers send [their children] to [the] schools more to

¹ The Roman College was founded by St Ignatius in 1551 as a school for both Jesuit scholastics and other students. It became the Pontifical Gregorian University in 1584.

² Fr Malavolta SJ, letter of 1564, MHSJ, *Monumenta paedagogica Societatis Iesu*, volume 3 (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1974), 356. The name usually associated with the founding of this sodality is that of Jean Leunis (Léon), a Belgian Jesuit then still a scholastic teaching grammar at the Roman College.

³ MHSJ, *Monumenta paedagogica Societatis Iesu*, volume 2, 630–632.

⁴ By 'greater service' is meant entry into the religious life.

be instructed in virtue and Christian life, than in science',⁵ but the colleges were also to become a major source of vocations.⁶ This care is mentioned in the Jesuit Constitutions (IV.7.2.[395]): 'In these schools measures should be taken that the extern students are well instructed in matters of Christian doctrine, go to confession every month if possible, attend the sermons, and, in sum, acquire along with their letters the habits of conduct worthy of a Christian'.

The Marian Congregations were accordingly an excellent means to pursue the spiritual aim of the Jesuit Colleges. And they were a success since, thirteen years after the building of the first Sodality, 'there were thirty thousand youths dedicated to a life of more than ordinary holiness in the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary'.⁷

The following is an extract from the Rules of a Sodality of the Roman Seminary⁸ from the year 1574. Regulations that relate to the admission and expulsion of members and to the various offices (prefect, counsellor, etc.) are omitted. Normally in a College there were several Congregations, each accepting members of a certain category (mostly based on age). Each Congregation was under the supervision of a Jesuit Father (simply called 'Father' in the Rules) and had a prefect, elected from among the students about every two months: his task was to be an example and encouragement to the others and to report any abuses to the Father.⁹

Rules of the Congregation for Members of the Roman Seminary

Laws and Regulations of the 'Major Sodality', so known as being that of the older students

[1] This Sodality is devoted to the particular honour and reverence of the most holy Virgin, Mother of God, to whom it has inscribed itself for ever as its patron and advocate. Its purpose is to admit and encourage

⁵ *Monumenta paedagogica Societatis Iesu*, volume 2, 630.

⁶ As shown by a letter of Juan Polanco in 1567: 'With regard to what pertains to progress in the spiritual life, it is my great joy that many [pupils] are found to be strongly inclined to a virtuous and pious Christian life, and some even to the Counsels of our Lord [i.e. the life of the evangelical counsels in poverty, virginity and obedience]' (*Monumenta paedagogica Societatis Iesu*, volume 3, 398).

⁷ William V. Bangert, *A History of the Society of Jesus* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1986), 57.

⁸ The Roman Seminary was founded after the Council of Trent, which promulgated that every diocese had to have its own seminary. The care of it was confided to the Society of Jesus.

⁹ This is a translation of 'Regulae Congregationis convictorum Seminarii Romani', *Monumenta paedagogica Societatis Iesu*, volume 4, 170ff.

all those who, burning with a desire of a pious Christian life, strive to flee all stain or contagion of vice as well as to protect and augment the charisms and gifts bestowed upon them by heavenly grace. They are also those who, driven rather by excellence of virtue than by fear of any punishment, love the rules, discipline and regulations of the Seminary to such an extent that they desire to outshine the others with their example by holding and observing them with the utmost diligence to the glory of Christ our Lord and to the honour of the Mother Virgin.

[2] All who have applied for this Sodality will expiate, either while still in the time of probation or after probation and admittance, for the sins of the whole of their previous life by making a general confession. This will serve not only to purify spirit and soul in the sacrament, but also to obtain a plenary indulgence, which the Vicar of Christ has granted to the Sodality.

[3] Every member will practise the sacrament of confession once a week and receive Holy Communion every fortnight,¹⁰ as well as on the feasts of the Blessed Virgin (if his confessor does not decide otherwise). In order to reap more profit from these practices, he shall prepare himself diligently. The preparation consists, on the one hand, of daily examination of conscience with careful attention to one's words, deeds and thoughts (on the entire nature and circumstances of this examen they will be instructed by a confessor or by the Father in charge of the Sodality). On the other hand, preparation consists in the attentive reading of some books of devotion recommended by the authoritative opinion of the confessor. Immediately after Holy Communion all will gather in the Chapel of the Sodality and spend a quarter of an hour in thanksgiving for the divine Goodness.

[4] Nothing is more effective to foster a holy life and to obtain daily ever-greater favours of our Lord Jesus Christ than prayer and meditation alongside the Blessed Sacrament. Therefore the members of the Sodality should at least every Sunday and on the feasts of the Blessed Virgin gather in the chapel at the moment of rising. There they will stay to meditate on the life of Christ or on some other aspect indicated by the Father for half an hour with attentive devotion of both spirit and soul. In addition they will pray for the work of the Catholic

¹⁰ The rules of the Roman Seminary prescribed that every seminarian had to confess his sins and receive communion at least once a month (*Monumenta paedagogica Societatis Iesu*, volume 4, 79).



Madonna and Child with Two Saints, by Giovanni Bellini

Church militant,¹¹ for the departed souls of the faithful, for the conversion of non-believers, for the return of heretics, for the Sodality itself, for the personal or common well-being—left to the discretion of the Prefect.

[5] To maintain a reverent honour and memory of the Blessed Virgin and to gain her assistance and ever-new gifts, the members will daily pray with devotion the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin¹² or the rosary. In like manner they will not let pass one of her feast days without honouring Our Lady with a solemn fast.

[6] On a fixed day of every month all will gather in the chapel and recite together one Nocturn and Lauds of the Office of the Dead in commemoration of their companions who have passed away.

[7] At the beginning of every month names of saints will be allotted according to custom. These saints are not only associated with a certain grace, which each should ask of his saint in prayer, but also with a virtue, in which each should exercise himself to the utmost during this month with the help and assistance of the same saint. And when his

¹¹ The reference is to the Catholic Church here on earth, one of the three dimensions of the Church; the others are the Church 'triumphant' in heaven, and the Church 'suffering' in Purgatory.

¹² The Little Office of Our Lady is a liturgical devotion to the Blessed Virgin, in imitation of the Divine Office. It was recommended to all seminarians, but the members of the Sodality should make an effort to pray it daily 'with devotion'.

saint's feast arrives, he will give expression to his devotion by practising some voluntary penance, the matter of which is left to his own discretion, but always after consultation with the Father.

[8] Thrice a week there will be a meeting of all the members of the Sodality: one on Sunday just after the prayer session¹³ in order to hear the Father's exhortation; a second on the weekday when they take a break from their studies; and finally a third on Saturday at the least inconvenient hour of the day. In these meetings they will talk partly about things pertaining to the common interest of the Sodality, and partly about anything relating to the desire for a devoted and holy life; especially, however, about the outstanding deeds of the saints, above all of those who are honoured in a particular way by the members in the present month, in order that such examples will stimulate them to apply themselves with more vigour to their task and to the practice of virtue.

[9] A few times a year the whole group will make a pilgrimage to the so-called Seven Churches.¹⁴ In the meantime a certain number—chosen by the Father—should go to a public hospital. There they will engage in humble services and attend mercifully to the poor and bodily sick. In addition they should zealously try to educate the souls of those who are still ignorant of the Christian doctrine.

[10] The members should take the utmost care to conserve peace and union of hearts, not only among themselves, but also with their other companions. For the sake of Christian charity they will stimulate themselves mutually to the practice of virtue with exhortations and advice. Above all they should beware of all kind of foul-mouthed talk and slander, nor ever say anything which might offend someone or destroy the unanimous bond of hearts in one way or another. Moreover in so far as they surpass the other students in age and doctrine, they must try to excel also in wisdom, modesty and seriousness. Finally, all members of the Sodality should conform themselves to the example of the most holy Mother of God, in whom shines the splendour of the

¹³ Cf. §4.

¹⁴ The pilgrimage of the 'Seven Churches' was very popular in Ignatian Rome. It consisted in visiting and praying in the four major principal basilicas: St Peter's, St Mary Major, St John Lateran, St Paul-Outside-the-Walls, and the three lesser basilicas: Holy Cross, St Lawrence-Outside-the-Walls, St Sebastian-Outside-the-Walls.

most holy virtues. Thus, anyone should be able to understand from their actions and behaviour to which Sodality they belong.

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