

# JESUIT COMMUNITY: COMPANIONSHIP WITH AND IN JESUS

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**I**N SPEAKING OF jesuit community, I would like to take as my primary illustration the community which exists among the ten american provincials in the United States. For brevity of expression I will call this community the Jesuit Conference, though I realize that this expression includes many more jesuits than the ten provincials who form the central board of the Jesuit Conference.

It may seem odd to speak of the ten provincials in the Jesuit Conference as a community, but I feel that it not only *is* a community, but it highlights some specifically jesuit characteristics more obviously than other forms of jesuit community might do. That is why I have chosen it as a primary illustration.

The Jesuit Conference meets several times a year, more or less, depending upon the number and importance of the questions to be handled. Its task is to determine broad policy decisions for the ultimate approval of Father General, which will then be implemented and executed nationally in all of the Provinces of the United States. The data and options for these policy decisions are prepared and discussed in local communities and provinces, under the coordination of a central staff, before they are presented to the Jesuit Conference for study and acceptance.

The process which the Jesuit Conference follows in its determination of policy is that of ignatian discernment, in its various forms. In some ways this is a very time-consuming process; but for matters so important it is the surest way available to strive to discover God's desires for the Society. In an eight or ten-hour working day, as many as four hours may be given to prayer, meditative reflection, or group faith-sharing within or outside the liturgy. In this process it is absolutely essential that each participant know, as well as possible, 'where the others are', in terms of seriousness, detachment, consolation or desolation, clarity of conviction, a sense of God's presence or ab-

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sence, etc. Each has to share from time to time his thoughts, his feelings, his fears, his doubts, his hopes and disappointments, his apprehensions and the like, with the others, both at the beginning and throughout the course of the discernment process, so that possible movements of the Spirit may become evident. When biases, prejudices, or lack of understanding appear in oneself or another, they have to be challenged and confronted; so that ambiguities can be resolved, peace restored, and mutual trust and confidence founded. This kind of confrontation may be painful both for the challenger and the ones challenged; but it is indispensable and can only be made on the grounds of a previously-experienced acceptance, respect and affection. The process both presumes and promotes openness, frankness and utter honesty with oneself and one another. It requires humility, a willingness to be corrected, and an acceptance of the constant possibility of ignorance or self-deception.

It demands that each member have a great *faith* in the group, not only in the sense that each is able to believe in the others as persons; but more radically in the sense that each genuinely believes that the Spirit is present and working in the group as such, drawing it, as a community, to the discovery of God's will. Each must believe that God may choose to address *him*, as a member of this community, in and through this community, in a way quite different – and at times surprisingly so – from God's communication with him as an individual on the very same question.

To embrace the way of communal discernment, therefore, is to confess that God wishes to direct his word immediately to the group as a whole, to the *community* of the Society, in those matters which touch upon common concern. It is to believe that God's first word is to his people, and to individuals as members of the people. To believe this theoretically is easy: it is a datum of any orthodox theology. To believe it practically and concretely is very difficult; it means to look around the room at those other nine men, and to believe that somehow God desires to speak to us more profoundly and more specifically than he will speak to me – even in the very instant that I am deeply and genuinely moved to believe that God's word to me is saying something different from, or even contrary to, where the community is being led, and where in fact it eventually goes. This kind of belief in the community as the *locus* of God's self-revelation for us calls at times for extraordinary detachment, and for christian openness to the possibility that God's will may on occasion appear to me to be foolish and unreasonable. It requires in

a very concrete way the willingness to surrender even my own reason to the demands of faith. It is foolishness for the sake of the gospel. It is very trying, it tests patience, it provokes and purges pride and stubbornness, it humiliates all pretensions to a personal purchase on wisdom. It takes great faith in community – in a very unsentimental and deeply religious sense.

All of this means that you have to be or become very close friends. And that is unquestionably the case in the Jesuit Conference. The depth of affection, concern and companionship that exists among the provincials is remarkable. The group genuinely looks forward to a meeting, even when the business is arduous, just for the sheer pleasure and enjoyment of each other's company. We can relax utterly and informally with each other; conversation can be both brisk and immediately intimate, without defensiveness; laughter comes easily. It's just good to be together. This ease, warmth and intimacy have been bought by long hours of very fruitful suffering together on a deeply human level, as I have described it above, in order to seek and discover God's desires of us individually and as a group. The intimacy which this process demands is both its suffering and its blessing.

While human affection and jesuit community are the by-products of this process, its primary purpose is an outward-looking, apostolic one. The group gathers, not primarily for its own consolation and supportiveness, but in order to make decisions and take actions which will enhance the service of the Society in America to the Church and the People of God. It is called into being and is sustained in existence by our vocation to the ever-greater service of our neighbour. *Caritas Christi urget nos*: love for the Christ incarnate and suffering to be reborn to glory in the human family and the world today. Were it not for this apostolic motivation, this group would never meet, this community would never have been born. This is clear and fundamental – and thoroughly jesuit.

It is a community whose apostolic discernment is submitted to its Superior for subsequent discernment and decision. The recommendations of the Jesuit Conference on matters of policy are submitted to Father General for his own discernment. He may accept and make his own a recommendation of the Conference; he may reject it and decide not to act upon it; he may modify the recommendation, and make this new formulation decisive. In all this he takes into consideration not simply the product of the provincials' discernment but, even more importantly, the dynamics and motivations of the

process: all this he must evaluate in the light of his personal knowledge of the provincials and his more universal perspective on the life of the total Society. What is important here is that his decision, when submitted to the Conference, is a 'mission' to the group, a command to apostolic service which is accepted in obedience as a revelation of God's will here and now – however specific, partial, and limited – embraced in faith and love. It is this willingness to submit finally to obedience which enables this community to undertake discernment in the first place, and which subsequently energizes it to implementation. Without this kind of obedience, there could be no community, no Jesuit Conference; since, existing as it does for apostolate, it exists for mission. And a 'sending' requires an authoritative sender.

The effectiveness of this interaction in discernment between the Jesuit Conference as obedient subject and the General as authoritative sender depends upon at least two things. First, that there exist a bond of personal, human understanding and affection between the provincials and the General. They must know, respect and love one another, with a special emphasis on mutual trust and confidence in the Lord. Due particularly to the availability, openness and personality of our present Father General, all the american provincials feel and appreciate this bond. Secondly, even deeper faith is required in the ways of God, which are surely not our ways – this especially when the General is led to modify or change a recommendation which the community of provincials had discerned as apparently accurate with great care and universal peace. 'Right reason' may be twice confounded before a given provincial says his *fiat voluntas tua*. But his embrace of obedience is empowered by his love of the Mystery which he knew from the start was beyond comprehension. (The poetry in these lines would be quickly dissolved if chapter and verse were cited.)

As a community, the Jesuit Conference is very 'open' in the most fundamental sense. It is open up, out, and down – porous in every direction, while being distinguishable and unequivocally itself. We have already mentioned how it is open to Father General and his influence. It is also in dialogue with and influenced by the provincials of other assistancies as individuals or as groups. It is by nature and design open to the influence of and responsible to the committees, provinces and communities of the United States. It is in dialogue with the bishops as individuals and as a Conference and with other agencies of the Church, as well as non-Church agencies and

groups. As a community it is open to, sees itself situated within, the whole Church and the universal Society.

But even more concretely, it is an open community in the sense that it can exist vigorously and as a distinct entity, without the need for permanent residency together of its membership and without rivalry for the other communities to which its members belong. Each provincial lives in a particular residence, with whose members he surely feels a sense of community. More fundamentally, as a provincial there is a real sense in which his province is his community. Very likely, there are also other communities, jesuit or non-jesuit, of which he is a member. To all these, the Jesuit Conference as a community is open: without for all that ceasing to be a genuine jesuit community with all of the essential notes which characterize such as community.

What are the characteristics of a jesuit community which I have tried to illustrate in the description above? I would propose that they are the following:

1. Jesuits in community are very good friends (CHARITY),
2. motivated by the shared desire for ever greater service of the neighbour in companionship with Christ (APOSTOLATE),
3. whose Spirit and desires are discovered through communal discernment (DISCERNMENT), and
4. ratified by obedience, which founds and forms this apostolic community of love (OBEDIENCE).

These, I would submit, are the four essential strands of genuine community life in the Society. Obviously, they are not chronological steps, or disparate and separable realities. They intertwine, overlap, and even fuse at a variety of inter-sections. Each of the ingredients in complex combinations can find expression in a variety of concrete forms and style, depending upon persons, places, and circumstances, thus leaving us with a rather analogous attribution for the term, 'jesuit community'. But they would appear to be the four basic and essential dimensions of any jesuit community wherever it is found, since I believe that any other ingredients or dimensions are either presuppositions for or consequences of these fundamental strands (for example, the vows or personal prayer or communal liturgy or whatever), when one considers jesuit life from the perspective of community.

The continual challenge facing any group of jesuits is to keep these four emphases in proper balance and focus, each with other. If one or more among them become superficial, the proper tension

in balance is lost, and the community becomes deformed. A few illustrations may help.

Let us say that undue and disproportionate stress is put upon community as the locus of *intimate friendship* to the neglect of apostolate, discernment and obedience. Without a very conscious *apostolic* orientation, a group can become introverted, self-centred, 'cozy' and even sentimental in its 'togetherness'. Without genuine *discernment*, relationships can remain superficial, unchallenged or naturalistic. Or community 'discussions' can become 'ego-trips' of self-revelation for the sake of 'personal growth' in a very diminished sense of the word – as has happened to some devotees of badly handled 'T-groups'. Without *obedience*, a group can lose its vital sense of mission, and thereby become isolated from a lively consciousness of its role in the mission of the universal Society. No matter how many lay-people of whichever sex such a group has in for dinner or days, it has become a fundamentally 'closed' community. At the extreme, its breadth of vision can have narrowed to a kind of solipsism. These are some of the hazards that can beset those residential groupings which are popularly called 'small communities' in religious life today, since one of their principal motivations is personal supportiveness and intimacy of friendship.

Let us say – another illustration – that the strand of *apostolate* is given disproportionate emphasis in view of the other three ingredients. This will promote and encourage a compulsive task-oriented activism, so congenial to the american work-culture and ethic. By neglecting the value of and the leisure for cultivating deep *personal friendships* in charity with his brothers, a jesuit becomes a rugged individualist, a loner, an 'iron man' (until he cracks and collapses for want of human affection given and shared). He will relate to peers in their functional roles rather than as persons. This neglect of personal jesuit friendship can perdure, especially when the community neglects *discernment* as well; since communal discernment is one of the principal means in jesuit life whereby brothers can be brought to know and love one another intimately and strongly, without the least suggestion of sentimentality or unhealthy introspection, since it is outward and apostolically oriented. As described above from personal experience, it engenders love in a crucible of suffering. It is the jesuit way: the path to the 'glory' of deep human affection through painful, personal crucifixion. And if obedience, in all its implications, is neglected, the final door is closed to personal growth in faith-filled humanity, since a healthy relationship between a

superior and his brother in Christ requires its own brand of intimacy, mutual sharing of love and trust, and docility to the movements of the Spirit on the part of each. Obedience serves, too, to keep a man loose, flexible and open to other possible apostolic assignments, and thus relates him very actually to the universal mission of the Society. Imagination need not be stretched to see in this description some of the failings of our larger, 'traditional' jesuit communities.

Illustrations could be multiplied and almost indefinitely nuanced (I am conscious that the above tend towards caricature); but these two should suffice to make the point. The *balance* of these ingredients is as important as their presence or absence, and to the extent that each is deepened without prejudice to the others, a community will become progressively more unified in Christ and effective in apostolate.

The illustration I have chosen, the Jesuit Conference, has served to exemplify the four basic strands in jesuit community-relationships, and to indicate the need for a proper balance between each. But I must admit that one of the most appealing features of this illustration for me is the fact that it is a non-residential community.

Its members do not live together under the same roof all the year round. For a full appreciation of jesuit community, I think it is most helpful and suggestive to ponder this fact, along with the implications it entails. Let me list briefly some of the observations that it evokes for me:

1. As was mentioned above, jesuits can and do participate as members in several jesuit communities simultaneously. The group with whom a jesuit resides is, of course, one of these communities. He is also a member of the larger communities of Province and Society. More often than not, he will pursue the apostolate in a corporate way with a team of fellow-jesuits with whom he forms community, though—more and more frequently today—these team-members may not live in the same residence. At the same time, he may meet on a provincial, regional, or national level with fellow-jesuits engaged in the same apostolic area (education, social ministries, pastoral apostolates etc.), who together clearly form a community. Certain communities may be temporarily formed by a mandate for a specific task: as, for instance, the task forces for the preparation of the thirty-second General Congregation; and these can be, despite their transitory existence, genuine jesuit communities. When and insofar as groups like these fulfil the four basic ingredients described above, they are genuine jesuit communities.

Thus, jesuit community can take a variety of very flexible forms. Community is not a univocal term for jesuits. Unlike the case of religious who vow stability, residential community is only *one* of the many possible forms of community for jesuits, and it would therefore be a serious error for a jesuit to consider residential community as the exclusive or normative model.

2. The four basic essentials of jesuit community life are ideals towards which we strive, but which are attained more or less perfectly in the different communities of which we are members. It is not unusual to find that they are less perfectly attained in residential communities than in some others. There are a variety of reasons for this: size, different apostolic works, disparity in age, temperament, interests and the like. To witness a somewhat less than ideal fulfilment of the four ingredients in a residential setting, and then conclude that 'Community life is crumbling in the Society', would be to succumb to the error of conceiving community on an exclusively residential model. I believe that jesuit community is deepening and flourishing as never before in my life-time, even though tensions in residences have never been higher. These tensions arise partially from the expectation that the ingredients of community life must somehow be achieved univocally and exclusively on the residential base, when in fact this is where they are often most difficult to achieve. A good case could be made for returning to the original Society terminology of '*houses* of the Society', insofar as many jesuits share much more deeply in community with groups other than the one in which they reside. It is no jesuit heresy to admit that our *primary* jesuit community may not be our residential one.

3. This is not to say, on the other hand, that a residential grouping should not strive to become a vital community, despite the difficulties. What seems important is to look squarely in the eye the fact that 'togetherness under the same roof' or physical propinquity does not in and of itself constitute jesuit community. This inference (residence together equals community) is much too frequently and quickly drawn, to a point where the impression is given that shared residence is *primary* and essential to jesuit community, while the four ingredients of charity, discernment, obedience and apostolate are a kind of 'icing on the cake'. Indeed, so heavily is togetherness or co-existence weighted on occasion that the exercise of apostolic discernment is assiduously avoided, 'lest *community* be disturbed, disrupted or destroyed'.

There is a way in which a statement like this makes a great deal of



sense as a wise and prudent caution; but this should not lull us into false complacency or blind us to the fact that such a group has a distance to travel before the ideals of jesuit community have been realized, however imperfectly.

4. Though it is highly desirable and normally to be expected that a jesuit will live in a residence with other jesuits, it would be misleading to say that a man is 'living outside of community', when his apostolate requires that he reside alone or with non-jesuits. Again this would be to conceive of jesuit community exclusively and normatively in residential terms, thereby setting narrow limitations on rich and flexible possibilities for jesuit apostolic community. We encounter this misunderstanding in such statements as, 'he is living (or working) outside the Society', in order to convey that a jesuit is either not residing in a house of the Society or is not serving in an institutional apostolate founded or sponsored by the Society. But, properly understood, every jesuit, wherever he resides or works, 'lives in jesuit community' when the four basic ingredients are fulfilled in his experience. Surely Francis Xavier was a 'community man', albeit largely through correspondence. Thus it is especially incumbent upon jesuits who do not reside in houses of the Society to find ways to share actively with other jesuits in a vital community life.

These are some of the observations which the Jesuit Conference as a non-residential illustration of jesuit community suggests and evokes. This example serves, thereby, to broaden our perspective on the topic of community, liberates us from certain untested presuppositions, and encourages us to imagine very flexible possibilities for patterns of life-style in service to the neighbour.

In conclusion, then, my thesis is that the crux of jesuit community is *apostolic discernment* which presumes *obedience* to the 'ultimate discernor' and fosters deep, *personal relationships*: and this whether the community is residential or not. To seek communally and consciously God's desires for us is to recognize that the bonds which join us are drawn from our companionship in the Christ of the Exercises, as we struggle to labour with him, our Lord and King. Companionship with/in Jesus: this grounds the quality and intensity of our lives together. Nothing else.