

THE CONSTITUTIONS OF ST. IGNATIUS: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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WITH THE PREPARATION of the General Congregation XXXLL, the issue of continuity and change in our Society is alive again; not so much for the internal spirit, because the Spiritual Exercises grew out of the gospels and have a quality of timelessness. The Exercises can be as fresh and refreshing today as they were in the sixteenth century. Rather, the issue is alive for the external structures, because by their nature they are embedded in space and time; they are exposed to the vicissitudes of human history.

Indeed, spirit and structure do not age together. The spirit may remain young over a long span of life, and it may demand a change, at times even a radical change, in the structures that have grown old. Then reform must follow. If it does not come in good time, the community risks a steady decline, due to internal tensions, and to an inability to communicate a youthful spirit through outdated structures, either to the Church or to the world at large.

For the first time in our four-hundred-year history, our Society is taking a close look at the many structures that we inherited. Although most of them have served us well, the world has changed around us. Hence the question must be faced: should we change any of our structures? If so, which are to stay, which must go?

We are torn between fidelity to our heritage and courage to start new things. In order to choose intelligently among many options, we would like to understand the dynamics of continuity and change. Are there any norms to guide us?

We cannot avoid the disturbing issue of development by saying, with a certain naivete, that the spirit is what matters; and provided this is kept, any structures will do. Such a statement betrays a lack of sensitivity towards history. The identity of a religious order was never made up from spirit alone; communities were never disembodied ghosts. The emergence of each group was a concrete event,

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inspired by grace, manifested in the flesh. Indeed we distinguish the monks from the friars, and the friars from the regular clerks, and the regular clerks from the members of secular institutes, just as much by their typical organization as by their specific inspiration. Jesuits are no exception. Today, as ever before in history, the name *Society of Jesus* evokes both identifiable structures and a particular spirit. Indeed, structures play an integral part in the identity of religious communities, including ours.

Neither can we escape the bothersome problem of 'continuity *versus* change' by defining some structures as so important that without them our Society would lose its identity. The twenty-seventh General Congregation, in 1923, did what our earlier fathers had refused to do: it determined the *substantialia instituti* by designating static structures as permanent fixtures in our communal existence. This situation did not last long. The thirty-first General Congregation, in 1966, abrogated the list of substantials and clearly stated the norm for future adaptation: 'Whatever will contribute most in the circumstances to the knowledge, love, praise and service of God' should be our organizational principle.¹

However, these extreme positions do not solve our problem and do not present us with the desired norms. Let us try, therefore, a new approach, at the risk of making a fresh mistake. We suggest that there must be a continuity in our structures as well as in our spirit; and that this continuity must be found in the specific and permanent balances of living forces that operate in our Society and not in any static fixture.

The balances that protect the life of our communities and mark our identity are not rigid. They can change and shift *within certain limits*, according to the local or historical needs. Continuity is broken only when the forces that make up the balance are seriously upset or destroyed. Identity supposes a delicate structural equilibrium, not without some movement caused by added weights and counter-weights in the course of history.

A practical, although partial, list of such structural balances will explain our mind better than any theory.

1. The life of our Society is built on the harmonious inter-play of contemplation and action. St Ignatius intended us to be a contemplative order, although not an enclosed one. Contemplation must

¹ Cf Ganss, G., S.J.: 'The Substantials of the Institute', in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, vol IV (October, 1972), p 12.

lead to action in the spirit of the Contemplation for Obtaining Love. Active participation in building God's Kingdom must lead to contemplative insights. As long as this balance is kept, even if contemplation and action are undergoing changes, each in its turn, there is continuity in our development. St Ignatius did not want any common prayer in our communities, still less did he want the celebration of solemn liturgies. His attention focused on the individual and personal aspects of contemplation. Today we understand better how much community prayer and liturgy celebrated in community can add a new and rich ecclesial dimension to our prayer life. To introduce them would not break continuity; it would give new strength to our contemplation.

Also, our activities could expand into new fields, well beyond the the apostolate through schools. There are many new institutions in our modern society that are in sore need of the infusion of the light of the gospel, and of the healing power of God's grace and charity. We can move into any new type of apostolate provided that the action feeds into contemplation.

2. There is another interesting balance built into our Constitutions by St Ignatius himself, between the role of the general congregation and that of the superior general. All matters of importance and all matters that concern the whole Society are reserved to a general congregation. To such congregations all can contribute through the so-called *postulata*; although it is admittedly a deficient procedure for gathering inspiration from a community as large as ours. No doubt structural changes are due, in order to assure that not in theory but also in practice all the inspirations are tapped in view of a general congregation. Further, the composition of the congregation should be reformed in many ways; it should operate more regularly than in the past. All such changes are possible. Continuity would be broken only if the congregation abdicated its responsibility to be the ultimate judge and discerner of the spirit and structure that constitute the identity of the Society.

Apostolic enterprises require speed and efficiency. The superior general is the steward who is entrusted by the Church and the whole Society to bring good order into our apostolic enterprises, and to take good care of the individual persons. The structures surrounding his office could be changed in many ways: for example, he could be elected for a term of years and not for life; he could be offered providence and advice in other ways than by the present organization of Assistants. Such changes would not be against continuity,

provided that the General remain responsible for the ordinary government of our Society and for the application of our general laws to particular circumstances. The right balance between the collegial wisdom and personal government is what matters. In technical terms, the ignatian ideal is preserved as long as there is a harmonious play between the legislative and executive power, although the structure of each may change.

3. Balance between centralization and local autonomy is another characteristic of our Constitutions. Strong centralization exists on the level of jurisdiction, autonomy on the level of the ownership and possession of goods. The unity of the universal Society is preserved through the closely-knit hierarchy of offices: of the superior general, the provincial and local superior. A world-wide organization needs central power, otherwise it does not have unity. Provided that this unity and cohesion is retained, the structuring of offices can be changed in several ways. Indeed, they have been changed already. Besides regional provincials, we have others with power over certain types of apostolate, such as secondary and higher education, missions, formation, and so on, according to the local needs. Again, in some Assistancies, a superior is appointed with real power over all the provinces. Obviously, the traditional three-level government – general, provincial, and local – is not articulate enough to deal with modern complexities. Thus a fourth level tends to be added in diverse ways.

There is plenty of freedom to make similar changes, provided the equilibrium between the centre and the periphery is retained. In all human organizations, the weight of power requires a counter-weight. St Ignatius balanced the power of central jurisdiction with the right of local communities to own and to possess material goods. Neither the superior general nor the provincial has the right to transfer goods from one house to another, or to accumulate property under his own power for unspecified purposes. But they have a duty of vigilance over the administration of goods in local communities.

Clearly there are disadvantages in the ignatian system. An abundant central fund could provide for new undertakings, could back worth-while apostolates. But there are advantages too: the charity and generosity of local communities must contribute to the universal good of the Society. Our strong central jurisdiction, so necessary for the apostolic works, needs a balancing force from the periphery, as much as local communities need direction and strong cohesive force through central jurisdiction. If the interplay of those two forces

were destroyed, if jurisdiction and ownership were joined together within the competence of the same offices, the continuity of a delicate equilibrium may be broken.

4. St Ignatius introduced an unusual balance in our Constitutions in the matter of poverty or in the use of material goods, by allowing a certain amount of inequality among the communities. Even if this balance existed more on paper than in reality, it reveals something of the mind of its architect. The Constitutions certainly admit, in fact they make inevitable, that some houses, such as colleges, should be well provided for; whilst other houses, such as the so-called professed houses, should live in uncertainty, and at times experience real hardship. Such provision is bound to lead to inequalities.

It is tempting to say that the first step toward solving the problem of our religious poverty is to introduce an equality in the standard of living in all communities, or in communities of the same region. Yet, we wonder if the lack of equality was not intended by the balanced mind of St Ignatius, a strategist in his own right. By allowing the houses to be different, some of them significantly poorer than the others (all had to be poor in some way), he introduced living tensions into our Society. Such tensions can keep religious poverty alive better than any rule. The stability of colleges is assured through foundations. The support of communities in direct pastoral work is left to God's providence; if hardship follows, it is accepted as a way of life. The message of Ignatius is that in our midst we need poor communities to witness to the presence of the Kingdom through their physical privation; just as much as we need well-funded communities, lest the stability of the apostolate be allowed to suffer: that is, a kind of existential provision to keep poverty alive. Universal laws can be distinguished out, but no one can distinguish out a poor community of brethren living in the neighbourhood. Our norms for poverty can change; but among the communities living in frugality, we need some that are ready to go to an extreme for the sake of the apostolate.

5. The balance between creative apostolic enterprise and the acceptance of a mission either from the pope or from one of our superiors is well known to all. Creative enterprise was never absent in the history of our Society. Superiors and subjects were actively searching for places where the need was the greatest and where the greatest good could be accomplished for God's glory. In fact, it was this creative search that led Ignatius and his first companions to offer themselves to the pope to be sent anywhere in the world. They

reasoned that the head of the Church knew better than anyone else where the needs and possibilities were. This active search for increasingly effective apostolic work is an integral part of the life of our communities. It must be carried out consistently both by superiors and subjects, even if imperative command and blind obedience give up their place to discernment. Our superiors must not be merely inward-looking persons who take care of their communities only; they must promote and lead apostolic enterprises. *Cura personarum* must be integrated with *sollicitudo ecclesiarum*. Our Constitutions proclaim us to be active searchers.

To be sent was so important for St Ignatius and his first companions that they found in the *missio* the most radical expression of their ideal of religious life. They wanted to excel in it. For its sake they gave up ascetical and devotional practices dear to them: vigils, fasts, prayers and penances. Their specific way of serving the Lord was in the ready acceptance of any *missio* for the sake of the Church.

The ways and means of being sent may have changed through the centuries. Yet if we lose the sense and the practice of *missio*, we lose our speciality in the Church. We do not exist for the good of our own members only, or for creating a pleasant and spiritual community around us; we go beyond it all; we are sent and work for the Church.

Granted, a great deal of reflection is necessary on this issue. Our old way of life must be integrated with a new ecclesiology. Our pattern of government must take into account the discoveries of several human sciences. But when all adjustments are made, our apostolic initiatives must still be integrated with the grace of *being sent*. The balance here is between creativity and obedience. The modalities may change; the substance must stand.

6. On this point, we have spoken about balances that exist in the Constitutions. Now, let us describe one that is *needed*. We do not have a good machinery for change. The Constitutions contain good provisions for keeping our heritage. They do not give us laws to guide the Society through changes. Our structures are too static.

St Ignatius, and with him all our founding fathers, were educated in the classical world-view. They searched for perfection in beautifully constructed forms, in right proportions that, once discovered, were to stay forever. For them, a change was legitimate as long as it happened on the road to the perfect form. Once that form was reached, change meant destruction. This mentality is expressed in the Constitutions: there are elaborate safeguards to keep what once

was built. Succeeding general congregations displayed the same mentality when they forbade provincial congregations to discuss even the possibility of changing some of our structures.

Our age pays far more attention to history. We know that human understanding rarely achieves perfection. The quest for beauty and right proportions must go along with the intellectual and spiritual development of mankind. New questions arise. The answers are not in old books; we have to search for them. The world changes around us, and we must respond to those changes. But we jesuits do not have a good constitutional machinery to do so. New challenges arise with astonishing speed and regularity. We do not have a regular and flexible general congregation to deal with them. Nor do we have a healthy and vital constitutional organ in the provinces, or perhaps in the assistancies, to respond. The price we pay for this lack of machinery is high. There is a prolonged crisis-atmosphere when speedy responses and actions are needed. There is too much excitement, not enough serenity. Also para-constitutional organs (assemblies, congresses, committees, etc.) are formed; some of outstanding value, others more dubious. Structural changes are necessary to find our place in peace in a fast moving world.

With a new confidence and good conscience, we can work for the reform of some of our structures. It is possible to change individual structures if we keep the balance of vital forces. But among all the changes, it is good to recall that the Society of Jesus existed well before the Constitutions were completed. The first fathers created structures and balances. Such external things contributed to our progress through history. But after all, the communities were kept alive by dedicated persons. The future of the Society, too, rests with persons.