

# THE LETTER AND THE SPIRIT

## Obedience, authority and spiritual discernment

By GILLES CUSSON

**C**OMMUNAL DISCERNMENT, though a term in fairly common usage for ten years now, is still capable of arousing controversy. For some, it is a logical application of the traditional 'discernment of spirits' to an apostolic group. For others, though it might be of use in helping a 'spiritual group' to work better, it seems difficult to reconcile with the traditional manner of government in the majority of apostolic communities. Some see in it the infiltration of a strong democratic element into a structure whose backbone is monarchical, so that it can cause confusion in the relationship of authority and obedience.

What I wish to show here is that spiritual discernment, whether individual or communal, is rooted in a theology of obedience which demands a continual search for the ways of the Spirit; secondly, that these roots concern the manner of integration which characterize the ignatian apostolic spirit — discerning love; thirdly, that the feeling for communal discernment and its function in the relationship between authority and obedience must flow from the understanding of the theology of obedience, and insists that we familiarize ourselves with its demands, if indeed we are serious about creating those genuine apostolic communities recommended by the decree on 'Union of minds and hearts' of the thirty-second General Congregation of the Society of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

### THE THEOLOGY OF OBEDIENCE

When we speak of a theology of obedience, we mean our understanding of it in the context of the Divine Economy; it is from this that the human intelligence can deduce the meaning of government and the role played by discernment in the christian and religious

<sup>1</sup> Cf *Supplement to The Way* 29/30 (Summer 1977), Decree XI, pp 58ff.

life. In fact, if the purpose of christian obedience is to lead us directly to God under the impulse of his Spirit, government and discernment alike are simply the instruments of this direction and have no *raison d'être* except as means towards it. From another point of view, neither exists except in so far as the dynamic of obedience demands that we achieve, individually and in community, the reality of our 'being for God'; which is why one can speak of its elements, and of government particularly, in terms of service.

### *The Obedience of faith*

Such a theology must, of course, begin with the Scriptures. Revelation teaches that man, along with the whole of creation, is made to go to God, and to find his fulfilment in him. This fulfilment is not servitude but the completeness of existence, promised to man and to the whole of creation as their common destiny. Such is the language of faith, which is to be found in the whole of Scripture from Genesis to the Apocalypse, and expressed in myriad ways. For Paul, Jesus is the proclamation of this Revelation, and its full accomplishment is found in him. This is the pauline version of the Good News:

... the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages, but is now disclosed and made known through the prophetic writings to all the nations according to the command of the eternal God to bring about the obedience of faith.<sup>2</sup>

The obedience of faith is, then, for him the consequence of this revelation. Faith reveals to man a bond, an alliance: a loving link of dependence which fastens man and the whole of creation to the source on which the fulness of their being depends. The apostle recognizes that he has been called, ordained and consecrated to proclaim this vital bond of dependence and fulfilment:

Through Christ we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including yourselves, who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

By the obedience of faith, the God of Revelation is received into a person's life. He acknowledges his submission to this living, personal

<sup>2</sup> Rom 16, 25-26.

<sup>3</sup> Rom 1, 5-6.

Transcendence: One which finds its expression — such is the manner of its revelation — in the work of creation and salvation, and makes it its task to ‘sanctify’ men. Man’s sanctification is the fulness of his own growth and that of his universe in its total development.

*The régime of the Law*

If it is true that the obedience of faith is to be identified as a life of fidelity to God which brings man to his fulfilment in him at the peak of christian consciousness, it is equally the result of a long education, across the centuries, of our ‘fathers in the faith’. This historic climb, evolutionary in the truest sense, puts into proper relief the part which the Law has played in the life of faith and obedience. It should help us to understand better the meaning Paul gives to the phrase ‘life in the Spirit’, as, in the footsteps of Christ he makes of it the christian ‘winning-post’ — the end of the road of education through Law.<sup>4</sup>

In the beginning, the Patriarchs expressed in a very personal manner their spontaneous and ephemeral experience of their relationship with the living God. These flashes of awareness were built into structures equally intuitive and transitory. With Moses, however, such experience expands and reaches a level of awareness which becomes communal and national in its scope; and it is out of this awareness that the Law as such is born. Its purpose is simple: that of serving directly the obedience of the faith, which stands forth as a guide for the people, to help them to open their hearts to the demands which flow from their meeting with God; to introduce them to a life which consists in an ever deeper consciousness of living out a covenant with him.

We might say that, in the history of Israel, the role of the Law is that of a schoolmaster. With Moses and the Decalogue, the people begin their religious education, one which is intelligible to them, and affects their lives. As this pedagogical obedience develops — it begins with external essentials such as the order of creation and of justice in relationships which are seen to be of obligation but become progressively more interior, as the covenant is understood to be an interior agreement with the God of life itself — it must needs bring in its wake a free and loving dependence on the vivifying Spirit of the Lord. This was the whole object of the Law; but it had first to be

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<sup>4</sup> Cf Phil 3, 7-14.

sought out in a milieu in which the obedience of faith was first formulated in legal terms, in the language of obligation.

Yet the very history of Israel tells us that if its practice remains on the outside, if it becomes an end in itself, so that it could be expected to achieve its purpose by some sort of magic; if it ceases to be a means of education, then inevitably it ceases to achieve the end for which it was chiselled out. This inflexibility of the Law makes it a prisoner of a system in which the letter has the upper hand and can stifle the spirit. Indeed, the Bible is witness that the chosen people, almost without exception, became satisfied (that is, conscious that duty was being done) with a certain level of exterior practice, without any reference to an interior way which could assimilate, appropriate and rise above the imperatives of the Law. Thus the God of the Covenant complains: 'This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me'.<sup>5</sup> The Law, intended as a way of catching hold of and living by the Spirit, ends up as a yardstick for measuring an exterior and material fidelity, escaping all contact with the Spirit.

### *Life in the Spirit*

At the same time, there existed a 'remnant', who, under the influence of the Prophets, found it possible to rise above the contractual and *quid pro quo* character of the Covenant — even whilst remaining faithful to its practice — and to enliven and enlighten it with the Spirit. This experience was brought to its fulness in Jesus. It was here precisely that the Law, instead of being destroyed, found its full accomplishment and its interior sublimation. The Spirit himself became the 'interior law of charity and love', infinitely superior, both in its suppleness and its demands, to the most sublime prescriptions of the old Law. Where the latter had imposed itself in the name of the order of creation and of justice, the Spirit would command in the name of love: the unique commandment which is twofold, containing the whole of the Law and the Prophets. But the moment of the Spirit could not anticipate the pedagogical role of the Law. The beginning of the régime of a life in the Spirit must wait upon the fulfilment of the Law's function.

And this is the way of it. The educational task of obedience, properly fulfilled, guides, instructs, opens new doors, and, in general, creates by its repetitive methods all that it commands or suggests. It must take special care, in its character of law, never to stifle the

<sup>5</sup> Isai 29, 13; Mt 15, 8.

living Spirit. Its purpose is to serve the Spirit and to set forth the dimensions of the charity and life which give shape to the law's letter, itself incapable of adequately expressing such life.

It is Paul who lays such emphasis on this inspired and educational function of the Law. But nonetheless he insists that we accept our amnesty from its enslavement: 'But we are now discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive so that we serve under the new régime of the Spirit and no more under the dead rule of the letter'.<sup>6</sup> This then is the condition for the Spirit's action in us: not the contradiction of the law — its letter, may be, but not its content; but to go much further, by living in a more personal, a more authentic, a more vibrant manner, in the light of the Law, whether we have in mind to accomplish it or to outstrip it — 'it was said to you . . . I say to you. . . .'<sup>7</sup> There will always be personal and environmental tension: the allurements of the Law, as it spells out order and security, against the risks and difficulties which following the Spirit involves.

Obedience still remains the pedagogue, whose purpose is to lead us to a responsible liberty. He can leave the scene only when the child becomes an adult and able to account for himself, with a living truth inside him, and a faithfulness to life. This is how it happens in family and society as the child becomes an adult. And so it is with the religious person, as he learns, through obedience to the law, what dynamic submission to the Spirit is all about. Unless spiritual education reaches this ultimate of a freedom and a commitment under the guidance of the Spirit, allowing for the case where the education has not yet achieved its results, then obedience — like the Law — runs the real risk of having become an end in itself or got lost among inessentials: appeasing consciences, preserving law and order, a means to efficiency, a power which must have its servant.

Just as fidelity to the Spirit, which is the real 'awakener' and guide of the living, will be the successor of fidelity to the Law incompletely grasped; so an active, committed, responsible obedience is the natural successor to an obedience which is educative of a religious disposition leading to life on the individual and corporate level. It is this life of which Paul speaks:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. You have not received a spirit of slavery which makes you fall back into

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<sup>6</sup> Rom 7, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Cf Mt 5, 17-48.

fear. You have received a Spirit which makes you adoptive children, by force of which we cry, 'Abba, Father . . .'.<sup>8</sup>

However, we cannot be content simply with the fact that this integration does take place. We must look to its source, to its efficacious cause. Only then can we be assured that it is his fundamental experience of faith which truly frees a person, and delivers him over to the Spirit. Let us take Ignatius Loyola as one of those founders in whom the roots of these fertile attitudes, this integration, can be observed in his spiritual, apostolic, personal and communal life.

*Ignatius's fundamental experience*

Up to the age of thirty, Ignatius' lived out the closing years of an era: as a page at the Court of Arevalo, then as soldier and knight of the Viceroy of Navarre. During this period he lived the medieval 'worldly' life, intent on the 'honours' which matched his social status, devoted to 'pleasure' and the winning of the lady of his dreams. Compared with what was happening in the rest of Europe, it was a life of frivolity, heedless and ignorant of the cultural, social and religious events which had the rest of Europe in turmoil. The world of his time was, in fact, in the midst of a cultural revolution. Instability was everywhere: in the class-system, in power politics, in education, in religious and priestly life, in the government of the Church. By the end of the fifteenth century, Pico della Mirandola was leading the new humanism which was spreading throughout Europe; and Savonarola had been burnt at the stake in Florence for his violent denunciations of the corruption of the Papal Court. In 1503, Erasmus was at the peak of his success, supported by the spanish Cardinal Ximenes, who founded the new university at Alcalà in 1508 (it was there, in 1522, that Ignatius came into contact with Erasmianism). In 1513, Fuggers' bank, which held the monetary reins of the whole of Europe, became the official distributors of indulgences for all Germany. In 1517, Luther published his ninety-five theses, and was excommunicated at the Diet of Worms in 1521. All these events paved the way for the 1524 german peasants' revolt, during which twenty thousand were massacred.

It was in 1521 that Ignatius was wounded at Pamplona. As we know, it was his convalescence at Loyola and his subsequent seclusion at Manresa which opened his eyes. Not only did it effect his spiritual

<sup>8</sup> Rom 8, 14-15.

conversion, but it gradually brought him into contact with a new cultural world. He began as a medieval; he was to end up as a man of the Renaissance. His travels and his studies took over his life. He became rooted in a world torn by a new birth and by the reform. He found himself for the rest of his life engaged in a work of authentic reform — and as an outstanding architect of christian renewal, but with his own methods fashioned from his basic spiritual experience. In fact, his settled attitudes were not drawn in the first place from a detailed examination or a methodology which was focused on the social and ecclesial reality of his time. It was rather his continuing faith-experience from Loyola to Manresa which made him so sensitive to the concrete reality of the kingdom — a sensibility belonging to this time and situation, which was at once human, religious and social. His lived experience of the faith, accompanied by a light wholly superabundant, taught him to live within his own truth; and, finding the courage to commit himself whilst remaining his own man, he became truly docile to the Spirit, with a constant openness to the signs which showed him where God was. It was not as though he were given a detailed 'map of life' at Manresa; it was rather that he became simplified, totally open to life and its urgent call, to its ways and to its imponderables. He learnt to rely on the Spirit to lead him whither he would, and always in the direction of the *magis* — the more generous, the more adventurous.

From the outset in Spain, Ignatius would be looking for companions, who, fired by the same apostolic spirit, would work with him to spread the word under the impulse of the Spirit. The group did not achieve the consistency of community for him until, in Paris in 1534, an apostolic community, in the strict sense, came into existence, bound by vows of chastity and poverty, which would assure availability for the work of renewal begun in that moment.

Once at Rome, the Spirit would become definitively active, and determine the future of the group in the Church. The ignatian community was defined by a religious and ecclesial obedience which would ensure the continuance and the rapid diffusion of its spiritual and cultural work, which was to be at the service of everyone for the glory of God with an unlimited availability.

#### *Personal integration: the Exercises*

We must try to isolate the elements, personal and communal, in this experience of christian faith, so that it will help us to clarify our

problem of integration — in the case of Ignatius, of his own charism and that of the Institute he founded.

In a world stricken by rapid and violent changes, in which the drive was towards more efficient, immediate and tangible achievements, Ignatius chose a more authentic and deliberate means, the transcendent road of the Spirit, who would espouse the patience of time and seek out the depths of those hearts predestined for true conversion. Such was the ignatian method set out in the book of the *Exercises*, according to which each person finds himself faced by only one other in his experience of evangelical faith. It is here that we can measure the true integration Ignatius considered would profit the individual.

The Exercises are not a school of 'regular observance' or of a curbing of the will, which the history of their interpretation would often have us believe. Ignatius's intention, based on his own deep experience, is that there should be an apprenticeship for 'life in the Spirit'. What has to be discovered, in each exercitant's education, is how he is to live according to the Spirit. In contrast to other innovators of his time, the humanists and reformers, who were equally intent on imparting a way of life, more evangelical, supple and faithful to the Spirit, Ignatius was not obsessed with eliminating the obsolescent or over-rigid structures of a Church which had become progressively more legalistic. Rather he brought to them a freshness, filled them with a new spirit, refocused them on their unique purpose: the means for living the divine life, in the footsteps of Christ, under the prompting of the Spirit.

There is a point of view according to which the Exercises represent a detailed discipline, a highly-developed pedagogical structure. They present us with what might be called a precise dialectic of experience, by means of which the person is exposed, step by step, to a definite objective: a dynamic which can itself verify the quality of integration by means of the rules for discernment. But the Exercises are also strewn with different kinds of rules, prefatory notes, additional notes, suggestions, various methods of prayer, and a host of other means for helping the exercitant to 'take his spiritual exercises'.<sup>9</sup> However, this complex of prescriptions, according to Ignatius, are set down simply to be of use 'in the manner in which they are found to be helpful', and should be employed at the opportune moment in the

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<sup>9</sup> Cf the definition of 'Spiritual Exercises' which the author gives in the first annotation — Exx 1.



spiritual pilgrimage of the exercitant.<sup>10</sup> They are to serve, that is, the over-all purpose, which is to learn to become more and more disposed to the action of the Spirit, to allow oneself to be led by the Spirit. If the historical interpretation of the Exercises has crystallized the ignatian methods and recommendations, making laws and rules of them which scarcely allow of exception, with the implication that there is something sacrosanct about them; or if there has been a tendency to force people to rely on them for spiritual progress, nothing could be clearer than that all this is quite contrary to the spirit of Ignatius. When he offers all the means and assistance he can possibly think of for the experience of the exercitant, Ignatius intends that they should all be governed by the directive given in the fifteenth annotation, where the director is told to leave the Creator to deal with his creature without interference, and the creature with his Creator and Lord.<sup>11</sup>

During the first period of his active apostolate, that is, until 1541, when he was elected Superior General, Ignatius in his work was always interpreted as acting in this way — seeking to free people for the action of the Spirit. This is why he was so often the object of ecclesiastical censure. Seven or eight times he was hauled before Inquisition tribunals intent on discovering in his teaching doctrinal elements resembling those of the *Alumbrados* or the Protestants, who claimed a charism independent of the institutional Church. But Ignatius was always able to maintain that difficult equilibrium which avoids the extremes, where either truth suffers or life is stifled. It is this intuitive feel for the point where the scales rest, which he so often recommends in the Constitutions when he uses the word 'the mean'.

In this difficult area between the mercurial life according to the Spirit and the inertia of the weight of necessary structures (institutions, rules, legislation), Ignatius was also caught up in the inevitable paradox of religious existence. Was it, in his case, a matter of having one's cake and eating it? No, because this area is also a movable, a mutable: it is itself subject to and a function of a clear and defined objective. In his view, every structure is erected, preserved or changed in terms of its envisaged fruitfulness. Such fruitfulness in no way consists in a mechanical maintenance or fidelity; it is an unconditional openness to the Spirit — demanding a real detachment and spiritual choice — to a life, that is, in which decisions become less and less a question of structures, and more and more those of the Spirit himself taken hold of across and around the structures:

<sup>10</sup> Cf Exx 18.

<sup>11</sup> Exx 15.

The love which moves me and leads me to choose whatever it is in question must descend from on high, from the love of God; in such a way that he who chooses must first experience in himself, more or less, that the love which he has for the object of his choice is solely for the sake of his Creator and Lord.<sup>12</sup>

The reflection and experience of Ignatius, however, takes us even further than this. Even when a person's life is pulled together and given its freedom by the Spirit, so that his spirit becomes alive and possesses a sense of direction according to the divine purpose, the pedagogical structure is still maintained. The task remains: the constant accomplishment of the Law, and the passing beyond it under the rule of the Spirit. The process of discernment must continually seek out these ways of giving true shape to the life and freedom which is given, so that the person hands himself over to the Spirit again and again in new ways. It is here that this freedom finds its fine point. Nothing is easier for us than to neglect the structures in the belief that we are sheltered from the demands they represent; so that we run the risk of escaping the actual terms of the Spirit's discernment and of life in him. On the other hand, we can attach the fruit of the Spirit in robot fashion to the particular structure which appears to meet it, and thus 'freeze' the law, making of it an end in itself, a source of security rather than the occasion of an alertness and an interior vision.

For Ignatius, a man truly free and Godward-pointed, every kind of structure — rules, laws, counsels, directives — retain their importance and utility, in that they are subject to incarnation by the Spirit and by the reality of commitment. At the same time, they never impose obligations; they are never at risk of shackling and constraining us, of acquiring a permanence, of losing their proper function; they are never anything more than means to the end. This is why Ignatius remained so free on the question of means; he was always reaching above them towards their unique end, never using them outside the scope of their real and relative importance.

#### *Communal integration: the Constitutions*

The Spirit animating Ignatius in his practice of the Exercises, where the apprenticeship of life in the Spirit can make a flexible use of the various instruments and the minutiae of the educative process, where these are felt to be appropriate, is discovered again, throughout the

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<sup>12</sup> Exx 184.

length and breadth of his experience in the formation of an apostolic community. It is a Spirit which will direct his efforts for fifteen years of his life: during the time, that is, when he is directing the affairs of his little Company, and, at the same time, writing its constitutions.

We find in the Constitutions the same careful attention to detail, the same diligence in recommending means, in opening up apostolic possibilities, in plotting the route. And the end in view remains the same as it had been in his first experience in an apostolic group: in the availability which detachment demands, in the mobility which belongs to fidelity to the Spirit, which seizes hold of groups and individuals in the following of Christ in Church and world. Everything is ordered towards this essential function — Mission, which is at the very heart of our vocation and its fulfilment.<sup>13</sup> All the rest of the Constitutions are drawn up in function of this Mission — admission into the Institute, formation, the practice of a common life, government and so on.

Let us take up some of the points we have mentioned in order to elucidate this statement: first of all, the intention of the Constitutions is affirmed in the first section of the Proemium. There Ignatius clearly states that he would rather have left everything to 'the interior law of charity and love which the Holy Spirit writes and imprints on the heart'. This law is more crucial, it is to be the chief aid to living according to the Spirit of the Company, rather than any external constitution.<sup>14</sup> But God's intention, which, in the realm of incarnation of the Spirit, is to bring both together through intermediaries and through the experience he has acquired, assure him of the necessity of laws, norms and structures, themselves points of reference in discovering the divine purposes for the individual and for the group. Which is why, he says, 'we judge it necessary to write constitutions which will help us to make better progress in a manner consonant with our Institute in the way of the divine service on which we have entered'.<sup>15</sup> Two words in this phrase should claim our special attention: 'we judge it *necessary* . . . constitutions which will *help* us. . . .'

In the Exercises, numerous rules and prescriptions have their relative character in the fact that they are directed to a particular end. As Ignatius puts it, 'so as better to help', and 'according to

<sup>13</sup> The seventh part of the Constitutions is devoted to Mission. Cf Ganss, *op. cit.*, pp 266-84.

<sup>14</sup> Ganss, pp 119-20.

<sup>15</sup> Ganss, *ibid.*

the progress made by the exercitant'. In the Constitutions, where the details are no less numerous (structures, rules, prescriptions, declarations and so on), Ignatius has the same end in view: to help the person to live a better life in accord with his initial choice. We also have the explicit mention of a point consistently stressed by Ignatius — the flexibility of function of all structures. Here it is a question of the importance attached to the Superior who is appointed precisely to 'adapt the rules and observances to the particular case of each companion, yet with an eye to the apostolic end and the communal bonds of the group'.<sup>16</sup> In fact, in the majority of cases, if not always, Ignatius ultimately has recourse to the judgment of the Superior, who is to decide what appears to him 'to be for the good of each one or for the universal good'.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, as in the case of the Exercises, it is the same approach of Ignatius which assures us that, in the Constitutions as well, we are right to consider them as an instrument in the hands of the Superior and his companions to help each one in his different circumstances to discern God's intention, to live according to his Spirit in the Company, and to accomplish the 'mission' to which all are called in different ways.<sup>18</sup> One of the most significant indications is the following. When he was in the presence of a religious whom he considered mortified, that is, detached, dead to self-love, and given over to God and to his Spirit, Ignatius had no hesitation, even in matters of great importance, of handing himself over to the awareness or the choice of his companion — another expression he used was 'to his inclinations'. As Superior, it fell to him, in the last resort, to interpret the signs of the Spirit. But as far as he was concerned, there was never any question of undertaking this without taking into account the experience and the prescience of the persons concerned. Yet in the case cited above, of the 'mortified' man, he discovered that such a person was in truth better placed to read the signs of the Spirit in faith, and he explicitly made such a person's decision his own. By contrast, if his companion were not likely to be alert to the Spirit, and faithful to his promptings, Ignatius would assume his responsibility as Superior and try to find out what seemed to be most in harmony with the Spirit in the circumstances, and give his orders with greater or less insistence according to the case at issue.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ravier, A.: *Ignace Loyola fonde la Compagnie de Jésus* (Paris, 1973), pp 407ff.

<sup>17</sup> *Constitutions VI*, 5, 602. Cf Ganss, pp 266.

<sup>18</sup> Cf Ravier, *op. cit.*, pp 347-429.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 409-11.

One last example, drawn from Ignatius's correspondence, is his letter to Fr Juan Nuñez Barreto, concerning the King of Ethiopia, on Juan's return to the 'Kingdom of Prester John', is an excellent example of freedom in government allied to the principles of discernment, which always took first place with Ignatius.<sup>20</sup>

### *The place of integration*

The unitive factor in the ignatian way of life, whether in the matter of the individual or the community, is the fundamental direction of the whole of existence delivered over to God; the incessant search for the will of God across the multiple indications by which the footprints of the Spirit can be detected; the fact that everything in him, existence and action, is directed to this effective union with God's being, his plan, his work.

We are told that Ignatius made an examen every quarter of an hour. There can be no doubt that for him this meant a continual verification of his existence against the movements of the Spirit. Examen became for him a practical exercise of personal adjustment to the divine will, of a surrendering of himself to the Spirit which took hold of him and turned away whatever in him was not under the Spirit's guidance. This is why Ignatius was quite happy to see the time for prayer shortened or omitted according to need, as long as there was no question of omitting the examen, even if one were sick or totally inactive.

The practice of Ignatius himself is well enough known to us. But the Exercises and the Constitutions are, as it were, privileged witnesses to this power of integration between the charismatic and institutional aspects of his life. As we have seen, this integration indicates the effective subordination of the one to the other. The structure which is necessary to incorporate the charism is at its service; it gives it its incarnation, its expression. But it is always radically ordered to the charism which fastens us directly to life in the Spirit. This is why, without neglecting or even minimizing it, the structure must always be flexible and subject to every kind of accommodation demanded by fidelity to life and to the Spirit. Conflict can be resolved according to this principle, even if integration demands a constant watchfulness for 'doing the truth', in the light; and even if the light, in its turn, can do violence to the darkness which is always on the look-out to

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<sup>20</sup> Cf *Les Lettres de S. Ignace* (ed G. Dumeige, Paris, 1959), pp 415-24.

creep back both into the intimacy of our personal lives, and into that of the group, no matter how alert and committed.

#### OBEDIENCE, GOVERNMENT AND LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

Religious life today must be redefined in function of life in the Spirit which the Scriptures propose to us as the ideal of the christian life. In this context, the realities of obedience and of religious government take on their full force. They become once more powers of direction working directly in concert, in order to make possible this ideal of life in the Spirit, both at individual and community level.

##### *Religious life and life in the Spirit*

St Paul's ideal of the christian life is life in the Spirit. The biblical journey, as it makes its way across the pedagogy of the Law, is intended to lead to this life, where a person hands himself over entirely to the action of the Spirit, who configures us to Christ and commits us to the work of building the Kingdom as it is proclaimed by the Gospel. At the back of these oft-repeated phrases, we are to see the christian life in the concrete, where it becomes one with the life of the Gospel. Religious life presents us with a radical christian choice, a total consecration of the self to the service of the Kingdom in gospel terms. As religious, we are committed to an incessant conversion to a life in the Spirit, one which encompasses the whole of our existence, in each of its actual moments.

Allowing for the inevitable differences in language, it is not difficult to discover the essential elements of the life according to the Spirit in the personal and community experience of Ignatius, and in the ideal of the apostolic religious life which he sets before us. His experience of faith has led him to the point of mobilizing his life in the service of the kingdom, with the accent on the scarcely perceptible movements of the Spirit. His ideal of discerning love (*caritas discreta*) makes his point clear. His experience of conversion at Loyola had definitively fastened Ignatius to Jesus the Saviour; and generosity was the quality which led him into his service, to follow in his footsteps. But this generosity itself was in need of a discipline. Ignatius could not discover where the means of this discipline were to be found. He could not discover it in a personal prudential judgment, nor in his desires, which were still entangled in the accoutrements of worldly ambition. It had to come from the Spirit

himself, the Spirit of love which takes our measure and proportions it to God's own desires for us. This is the meaning of discerning love: not a 'discreet charity' in the sense of human prudence or *epikeia*, but one subordinated to the discernment of the Spirit, whose fruit it is. For it is 'the Spirit who pours out in our hearts the love of God'.<sup>21</sup>

We have already mentioned how this fidelity to the Spirit led Ignatius, through his experiences of an apostolic group, to the founding of the Society of Jesus. From those first basic happenings, the major preoccupation of his life was to be the same: to 'draw out' the faith through the experience of the Exercises and to form these companions in the same zeal for the kingdom: they were to be directed to evangelical mission by their reading of the signs of the Spirit — the spirituality of the Constitutions.<sup>22</sup>

To live out the religious life according to this most demanding principle of fidelity to the Spirit, both individually and in community, takes for granted a spiritual discernment which is at once constant, highly active and absorbing. It presupposes the basic conditions underlined both by the Exercises and by the Constitutions, involving us in their constant renewal: detachment, availability, interior freedom, mobility and fidelity. The rest of our life takes its shape from this mobility, and focuses our faculties on the imperatives of mission in the Church and the world of today: formation, efficiency, life-style, use of human means and so on.

This context helps us to see the real meaning given by Ignatius to the religious apostolic community in terms of authentic obedience and government. For him, community consists in an atmosphere of communion and communication in the faith, so that we may have a surer, more authentic climate of discernment: the sort of discernment necessary for commitment which finds its time dimension in mission. Hence the question is more than one of merely living together and a life in common; it refers to a truly spiritual sharing: a union flowing from the same vision and experience of the faith, a communion in the same Spirit who is the focus of our union and common commitment. Sharing and communion presuppose communication; and it was Ignatius's desire to create structures of communication for this purpose, 'to strengthen the bonds of love and union'. Thus he

<sup>21</sup> Rom 5, 5.

<sup>22</sup> This purpose given to the Society, 'to educate in the faith' is expressed in the *Formula of the Institute*. It is taken up in the seventh part of the Constitutions, which deals with *Mission*.

laid the greatest emphasis, amongst other kinds of exchange, on correspondence, the forms of relationship which create and preserve unity across distance and physical separation.<sup>23</sup> But all this finds its special meaning in the discernment-objective, to assure fruitful mission in the Church. For him, the jesuit apostolic community is essentially a community of discernment, of a reading of the Spirit for the individual and for groups. He had founded the Society for this purpose.

We will be better Christians in the spirit of the Gospel, better apostolic religious according to the pristine experience of the Society, in so far as we are 'men of the Spirit', of obedience, open as a group to his intentions and faithful to his action in us. Religious obedience does nothing more than extend the obedience of faith, making it more explicit, and linking it with the details of our consecrated existence. In more exact terms, we are to take up together the mission which is ours because of the Society's commitment in the life of the Church and the building up of the Kingdom. Consequently, we are to search out together the signs of the Spirit in the discernment of his demands, in order to respond with a fidelity, at once personal and communal, to the greater glory of God.

#### *Obedience, government and discernment*

We are now in a position to situate obedience and government in the spiritual context in which discernment plays its full part. It is neither a trump-card of democratic government, nor an impediment to monarchical government; it is the essential characteristic of government of the Spirit. Our external manner of life varies according to different epochs and cultures, and can mirror in some fashion the ways in which temporal power is currently deployed. But to demand that these be a direct inspiration to us, and to copy them in our ways of existing as religious groups, would be erroneous. It would lead us along paths where we would risk losing the Spirit and being left to our own proper spirit, with its limited resources and its sophisticated pretensions of doing God's work.

At the same time, the juridical aspect of obedience gives concrete form to the complex hierarchical bonds which link us to the Lord himself and allow the Spirit to take on flesh and enter into the dialogue which is discernment. Yet, at bottom, the act of obedience remains

<sup>23</sup> Cf The letter of 13 January 1550 to the whole Society, on the role and importance of letter-writing in fostering union in the Society. Dumeige, *Lettres*, pp 213-14.



spiritual. It represents God's intention concerning our lives, coming through to us by means of accredited intermediaries and the complex of imprints through which one can read the signs of the Spirit. It is the spiritual way of obedience which opens on to life in the Spirit, which incarnates it, and allows it to unfold with the sort of authentication demanded by well-ordered discernment, as well for the group as for the individual.

In such a context, to govern is indeed a spiritual act, inspired by the search for the Spirit and finding its concrete shape in various kinds of decision: approval, sanction, order, administration, planning, and so on. What specifies authentic obedience is the fact that it always points us towards God according to the Spirit. It is exactly the same with government. Religious government must be seen, across a variety of possible and flexible structures, as an official mandate, a 'mission', which puts us in the situation of direct collaboration for achieving the purpose of religious life. It also commits the Superior to help in the continual discernment, of the individual and the group, to discover and to put into operation the divine Will. Everything is ordered to this end; it is a function of this task of the life according to the Spirit in the service of the Kingdom.

Ignatius demanded that no one should be nominated Superior who did not know what it meant to obey. It was never a question for him of finding someone who was able to carry out efficiently the orders he received. His notion of obedience is at once more supple and more comprehensive. Since obedience must be a seeking after life in the Spirit, it was important to appoint someone who would directly serve this cause, who knew truly what this meant, and who would accept with true humility his task of intervening in the continual dialogue between the creature and his Creator, so as to guarantee and bring to fulfilment individual and group-mission in the Church.<sup>24</sup>

### *The ignatian heritage*

Spiritual discernment in the life of the individual jesuit has never been called into question in the Society. The fundamental experience of the Exercises is designed to be a thorough initiation for every novice. But recently, in speaking of our ignatian heritage, the decree of the 32nd General Congregation on 'The union of minds and hearts'

<sup>24</sup> Cf Ravier, *op. cit.*, esp. pp 408-09, on the qualities necessary in the Superior as set out by Ignatius in the Constitutions.

clearly expressed its thought on the use of discernment at the level of community:

This unitive process in the life of the community can be taken further. There are special circumstances in which it can assume the form of *communal spiritual discernment*, though this kind of spiritual discretion is very different from the normal community dialogue. It is in fact a corporate search for the will of God by means of shared reflection concerning the signs which can show us the path along which Christ is leading us. This process of communal discretion is analogous to the one proposed by Ignatius for arriving at a right personal choice in matters of serious import (cf Exx 169-89).<sup>25</sup>

The decree goes on to specify the conditions of the authentic spiritual group-discernment, formulating the required dispositions and clarifying the role of the Superior in these dynamic moments of the community's life and progress. These specifications are worth special attention in that they can act as a guide to a judicious apprenticeship for a truly efficacious community discernment, the *locus* of an unexpected spiritual leap forward.

### Conclusion

To round off these reflections on the place of discernment in the christian and religious life, and the pattern of authority-obedience which gives our communities their actual structure, perhaps we can do no better than to offer a last citation from the jesuit decree on union of minds and hearts already cited:

To the best of their ability, Superiors must labour for the building of apostolic and ignatian community, which means furnishing the conditions for the multiple forms of trusting and friendly relationship. Where there is question of serious choice to be made in community, the process of communal discernment is recommended, granted that its prerequisites exist, as a specially fruitful way of seeking the will of God.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Supplement to The Way* 29/30 (Summer 1977), Decree XI, p 64.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p 71. This article is translated by courtesy of the author. It appeared in *Cahiers de Spiritualité Ignatienne*, vol I (Quebec, 1976).