

# A MODEL OF FORMATION

By EDWARD KINERK

IN THE TIME OF Ignatius a German novice was distressed and thinking about leaving. After exhausting other approaches, Ignatius asked him to wait several days, during which time he was not obliged to keep the rules or to obey anyone. He did whatever he wanted, sleeping late and eating whatever he pleased. Put at ease by this gentle treatment, the novice resolved his difficulties and remained in the Society.<sup>1</sup>

This simple anecdote reveals much about Ignatius's manner of proceeding in matters of formation. Certainly, he expected Jesuits to cooperate with the normal routines of the community. However, he cared less for rules than for discovering young men who possessed the interior freedom to give themselves as generously as possible to the praise of God and service of neighbour. He knew that the novice was capable of living in the Society, and he knew that keeping the rules was not the real issue. By relaxing the law, Ignatius freed him to choose what he really desired. Ignatius formed men by making them free.

This article studies the Ignatian model of formation found in the *Constitutions*. The first part reviews three texts: Chapter four of the General Examen,<sup>2</sup> which interviews candidates to the Society, Part Three of the *Constitutions*, which describes novitiate life, and Part Four of the *Constitutions*, which treats studies in the Society. The second part of the article considers the appropriateness of the Ignatian model for the twentieth century.

## *The General Examen, Chapter Four*

In this section Ignatius previewed for candidates the ascetical practices and the experiments of the novitiate. Periodically he interrupted his commentary with queries, 'Are you willing to . . . ?' 'Can you desire this?' 'Do you want to . . . ?' He wanted the candidates to know what to expect. He also wanted them to make a commitment actively to participate in their formation.

The descriptions and questions from this chapter introduced candidates to three levels of interior freedom. The first is the freedom of detachment.<sup>3</sup> Ignatius assumed that all who wanted to enter the Society would have known that the novitiate meant a radical break from the past. Novices left possessions at home. They separated themselves physically and emotionally from relatives and friends. They put aside their own opinions, accepting correction from others and obeying their superiors in all things. Ignatius did not accept candidates who could not detach themselves from the people, places and possessions of their former lives.

The second level of freedom is trust in God's grace. After describing the detachment needed to enter the Society, Ignatius told the candidates about the various experiments<sup>4</sup> which make up the Jesuit novitiate even today. There are six: the Spiritual Exercises, a month serving in a hospital, another month making a pilgrimage without money, service in low and humble tasks at the novitiate, teaching catechism to children or to the uneducated, and preaching and hearing confessions.

Ignatius did not consider simple detachment to be sufficient. He himself had been detached before his conversion, willing to surrender everything to become the bold and gallant knight.<sup>5</sup> The experiments tested the novices' reliance on grace, their freedom to trust God in all and above all. Would they rely on God instead of their own resources? Would they choose God's call over all human considerations, and often in spite of them? Would they make decisions according to the lights received from a discernment of spirits, or would they ultimately fall back on needs for power, security and even pleasure? Each experiment placed the novices into situations where they either risked vulnerability to God's grace or fled to the familiar comforts of strengths and defenses.

During the Exercises the novices tried to set aside obstacles to grace so that they could hear and respond to God's call. What ought they do for Christ?<sup>6</sup> Would they labour with Christ even in suffering?<sup>7</sup> Could they desire poverty, insults and to be counted as worthless because this was the way Christ was treated?<sup>8</sup> The Exercises always invite the extra mile; they set no limits to generosity or trust. When the retreat had finished, Ignatius would have known the extent of the novices' generosity to grace as well as the directions in which grace had been pointing.

The other experiments allowed the novices to act on the graces they had received during the Exercises. In poor and unsanitary

hospitals they put aside every worldly concern so 'that in everything they may serve their Creator and Lord'.<sup>9</sup> On pilgrimage they travelled without money in order to 'place [their] reliance entirely on their Creator and Lord'.<sup>10</sup> At the novitiate they worked in 'various low and humble offices'<sup>11</sup> to show that they could be a source of grace for others even in unimportant and undignified labours. They taught catechism to children and the priests among them preached and heard confessions. After teaching and preaching they were evaluated for soundness of doctrine, prudence of judgment and skillfulness of manner, for the Society's charism required men of apostolic talent; but equally they were evaluated for the effect which they had on those whom they served. Did they draw men and women to God? Did they communicate the Gospel or did they call attention to themselves? Were they channels of grace?<sup>12</sup>

The third level of freedom is ecclesial, and it stems from Ignatius's profound grasp of the incarnation. He believed that Christ's Spirit was present in the Church as surely as he believed that the same Spirit had spoken to him at Manresa. For him it was not enough that the novices detach themselves from families and possessions, and that they depend on God's grace in all things. He also wanted men who could hear the call of Christ from within the graced, yet sinful, persons and structures of the Church.

He insisted that novices develop such freedom through their practice of the manifestation of conscience and obedience.<sup>13</sup> Were the candidates willing to manifest themselves openly to their superiors, not only that they might be given personal direction, but also that they might be directed in the apostolate? Could they obey their superiors in all things, looking beyond the frailty of individuals and considering that in them 'it is the very Lord of everything who is obeyed'?<sup>14</sup> By their practice of obedience and the manifestation of conscience the novices made themselves vulnerable to God's grace mediated through other persons and through the structures of the community.

At the end of the chapter, Ignatius reminded the candidates of the importance of rejecting the world and embracing 'whatever Christ our Lord has loved and embraced'. Then he placed before them this question. Since the Lord's lot was one of humiliation and suffering, did the candidates desire to imitate Christ even in these, 'since he is the way which leads men to life'.<sup>15</sup> Recognizing that human weakness might make such desires difficult for many

good people, he went on to ask if they could at least desire to have this desire.<sup>16</sup>

The desire to embrace the lot of Christ, or at least the desire to desire it, is the pinnacle of Ignatian spirituality and the fullest expression of interior freedom. Ignatius did not choose suffering or humiliation because he enjoyed them. And he valued good judgment and even a good reputation for the sake of effective apostolic service. However, he believed that the disciple should imitate the master, and his love for Christ moved him to ask that Christ's lot be his.

When he placed this desire before the candidates, he wanted them to understand that suffering and humiliation were ordinarily not the exalted agonies of a far-off martyrdom. Ignatius suffered more at the hands of the Church he loved than at the hands of the 'infidels'. What would be the candidates' attitude, therefore, if they were hurt 'by someone inside the house or the Society where [they] desire to obey, be humiliated and gain eternal life'?<sup>17</sup> Ignatius invited the candidates so to free themselves from the world and from self-love that they could follow a Christ who lived neither in the splendour of the heavens nor in the isolation of the desert, but a Christ who dwelt in the midst of people and structures who were both holy and sinful at the same time.

### *Part Three of the Constitutions*

Part Three describes life in the novitiate houses. This section does not have the richness of the General Examen; the experiments are not even mentioned. On the other hand, novitiate life put theory into action. Ignatius preferred deeds to words; he expected novices to practise the lofty ideals of detachment, trust and ecclesial faith in the ordinary details of their lives.

Detachment from the past was a real separation from the world: novices did not correspond with anyone who would distract them from their purpose;<sup>18</sup> they left the house only when absolutely necessary and then with a chosen companion;<sup>19</sup> and they called nothing their own.<sup>20</sup> With the help of good example<sup>21</sup> and instructions on the spiritual life<sup>22</sup> they gained insight into their strengths and weaknesses. Alert superiors gave them tasks designed to enhance their virtues and counteract their faults. 'If someone is . . . inclined toward pride [let him exercise himself] in lowly matters.'<sup>23</sup>

Novices learned to live for Christ alone, 'stripping off from themselves the love of creatures . . . in order to turn their love upon the Creator'.<sup>24</sup> As always, Ignatius sought to express freedom in particulars. For instance, the novices entrusted care for their health and physical comforts to the judgment of superiors. If they asked for something different in diet, clothing or quarters, they accepted whatever decision the superior made as 'more suitable for the divine service and [their] own greater good in the Lord'.<sup>25</sup> If they were sick they practised patience and obedience, 'leaving care of everything else to the superior and his ministers'.<sup>26</sup>

Since the novices had undertaken a way of life in which they would love and serve Christ in the Church, it was important that their obedience be complete. In addition to carrying out promptly whatever the superior commanded, the novices tried to bring 'their entire wills and judgments wholly into conformity with what the superior wills'.<sup>27</sup> In this way they could be confident that they were conforming themselves more completely to God's will. They obeyed everyone, novice director, infirmarian and cook, never considering the person but only 'who he is for whose sake they obey and whom they obey in all, who is Christ our Lord'.<sup>28</sup>

#### *Part Four of the Constitutions*

'After the proper foundation of abnegation . . . and also the required progress in virtues, it will be necessary to provide for the edifice of their learning.'<sup>29</sup> Following the novitiate, the newly professed generally studied at one of the colleges or universities of the Society. Part Four, the longest section of the *Constitutions*, gives instructions for the Society's educational institutions, with an abundance of material on the academic and pastoral formation of the scholastics.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, Ignatius gave only limited instructions about their spiritual life. He cautioned that enthusiasm for numerous devotions and penances would have to be tempered in order to preserve time and energy for studies, and that service of neighbour must wait until the proper preparation had been completed.<sup>31</sup>

The novitiate had cultivated and evaluated interior freedom. At the colleges the scholastics put their freedom to work through studies. Studies required detachment. Scholastics had to sacrifice immediate apostolic gratifications in order to prepare themselves for the greater good. They also had to put aside any hope of personal gain or academic fame,<sup>32</sup> even though they were expected

to be as excellent as possible in their classes.<sup>33</sup> Studies demanded trust. Ignatius encouraged the scholastics to study with enthusiasm, confident that they could not 'do anything more pleasing to God our Lord'.<sup>34</sup> Finally, the scholastics' studies made no sense without ecclesial faith, for Ignatius expected them to put aside their own academic interests in order to study what would be most beneficial to the mission of the Society in the service of the Church.<sup>35</sup>

We can summarize briefly the model of formation in the *Constitutions*. First, Ignatius put greater emphasis on evaluating the vocations of candidates and novices than on nurturing their growth, although he was interested in the latter as well. Second, the heart of Ignatian formation is the cultivation of the three levels of interior freedom: detachment, trust in God's grace and the freedom to find God incarnate in the Church. Third, Ignatius's manner of proceeding was experiential. He wanted ideals tested and expressed in deeds, not only in the six major experiments but also in the relatively insignificant tasks of the novitiate. Fourth, the long academic training was an exercise in interior freedom. Ignatius expected the scholastics to manifest detachment, trust and ecclesial faith in applying themselves to their studies.

#### *The Ignatian model today*

Obviously, the interior freedom which Ignatius sought in formation continues to be desirable, and many of the means which he employed to test and cultivate freedom are still used in novitiates throughout the world. On the other hand, the emergence of the human sciences, particularly psychology, has changed the style of formation for all religious communities. We understand much more about the delicate process of human maturation. The austere Ignatian vocabulary of abnegation, humility and obedience now confronts a psychological perspective which recognizes that the fragile self must grow strong before it can give itself away. This does not mean that Ignatius's insights have no place, but sensitive formation personnel must now invest energy and resources into the personal development of the men and women in their care.

Ignatius tested and challenged a freedom which he expected to be relatively well developed. Formation in the *Constitutions* is probationary: it evaluates candidates to determine whether or not they have the spiritual and natural gifts to become good Jesuits, to integrate themselves into the Society of Jesus.<sup>36</sup> Today, our psychological orientation encourages us to accept even the most

rudimentary signs of freedom and to hope for future development. Articles on religious formation now speak of growth, affirmation and self-worth, and they tend to emphasize nurturing over evaluating. Of course, neither approach exists in the extreme. Ignatius was a sensitive genius at promoting spiritual and emotional growth; and formation directors today draw expertly from the resources of psychology to evaluate the very growth they try to nurture.

Generally speaking, contemporary novitiates based on the *Constitutions* have successfully utilized the insights of modern psychology, and formation directors have translated the vocabulary of sixteenth-century spirituality into the growth-oriented language in which twentieth-century candidates structure their experience.<sup>37</sup> Care for good spiritual direction, use of the individually directed retreat, including the full Spiritual Exercises, and adaptation of the six experiments to meet individual needs are all ways in which Ignatian formation fits quite comfortably with psychology's attention to individual development.

On the other hand, the Ignatian model cannot be reduced to a programme for individual emotional and spiritual growth. The *Constitutions* allow for an infinite variety of adaptations, but always with the goal of a ecclesial freedom rooted in grace, a freedom which demonstrates itself in action. The Ignatian formation model relies on experience and evaluation to determine if a person is detached and if a person can trust in God's grace. Above all, it evaluates whether a person can give himself or herself in grace and in freedom to structures larger than personal needs and desires. Psychology can help us strengthen these freedoms and even to evaluate them. However, we must remember that psychology cannot measure a person's reliance on grace; and excessive attention to personal growth may make it impossible for young religious to sacrifice personal concerns for the sake of incorporation into community and Church.

Another difference between our time and the sixteenth century is secularization. Ignatius could generally assume that a candidate to the Society of Jesus knew what religious life was all about and that he respected its value. The formation task which remained for Ignatius was to evaluate the man's potential for living in the Society and to train him in the areas which distinguished the Society from the better known religious communities.

Today nothing can be assumed. The rapid secularization of the once Christian cultures of the West has eliminated almost overnight

any awareness and esteem for religious life which, until quite recently, formation directors took for granted. Ignatius expected that candidates 'should be persons already detached from the world and determined to serve God totally, whether in one religious institute or another'.<sup>38</sup> Today the burden of proof is on religious life. The young person who comes to a religious community often comes with the idea that the community must demonstrate its worthiness rather than the other way around. Candidates are not arrogant, but they are bombarded by a culture which exalts power and possessions, and looks askance at commitments which eschew security and call for sacrifice.

Secularization has made formation personnel more apologetic in their approach. If earlier we erred by demanding a conformity which dampened enthusiasm and often ignored novices' God-given talents, today we err by trying to make the novices happy at all costs. Experiments, intended by Ignatius to test freedom, can be designed to buffer novices from the less pleasant aspects of community life and the more crucifying demands of apostolic service. When solicitude for the novices' happiness combines with excessive attention to personal development, we risk forming men and women into narcissism and not into loving service.

Of course, we understand that formation flourishes on idealism, and in this way formation is a constant source of renewal for the entire religious community. We want novices to experience the best our communities have to offer, and we have also found that novices often bring the best out of our formed members. However, we must be clear about what *best* means. The best religious community does not simply nurture its members, but it provides them with the opportunity to live with other sinful men or women of faith who likewise try to serve as Christ served. The best apostolic service does not always bring immediate satisfaction, nor does it always utilize a person's talents to the fullest. The best apostolic service fosters faith in others and meets the needs of the People of God. Ultimately, we want the novices to experience the very best of our community's charism. For Ignatius, this was the opportunity to so identify with Christ that the novice would prefer poverty to riches, insults to fame, and being misunderstood to being understood.

#### *Challenges for the future*

Although psychology and secularization necessarily affect the way in which we do religious formation today, the formation model



in the *Constitutions* still challenges us with the rigour of its demands and its emphasis on interior freedom. The final paragraphs suggest some areas in which we might use Ignatian principles of formation more effectively.

First, we should conscientiously preview for candidates what they can expect and what will be expected from them. Similarly, we should scrupulously ascertain that candidates possess the necessary emotional and spiritual resources to live out our communities' charisms. We always hope for growth and for the generous outpouring of God's grace, but we must not be unrealistic. The most important formation decision of all is the decision to admit or not to admit. In a time of reduced vocations the temptation is great to relax standards for admission and pray for miracles, but problematic vocations drain the energy and time of generous members of the community and reduce even more our contributions to the apostolate.

Second, we should not hesitate to ask candidates to make a real break with the past. While we appreciate the role of family and friends, we must find structures which allow candidates to show true detachment from the past. Detachment can take many shapes, including detachment from family and friends, but it may also involve life style: dress, entertainment, use of time, habits of recreation and use of automobiles. The detachment which comes from breaking with the past is the first opportunity which candidates have to demonstrate their seriousness about religious life both to the community and to themselves. The initial break is not just one step among others; it is the all important first step which will set a tone for many decisions to follow.

Third, Ignatius valued deeds more than words, and he expected novices to prove their desires through actions. Although spiritual and emotional growth are important, by themselves they do not indicate that a person belongs in religious life. We should not hesitate to require concrete behaviour by which novices actively demonstrate that they share in the community's charism, and we should not be reluctant to make evaluations on the basis of what we observe.

Fourth, Ignatius sent novices into situations where they had to choose between God's grace and their own insecurities. Experiments can give novices the opportunity to move beyond the security of their strengths in order to experience God's power working through their weaknesses. Anything less cheats both the

novices and our communities. Novices need to *experience* that God's grace is more powerful than their fears and anxieties; and communities have a right to know whether their novices will make crucial decisions based on a trust in God or based on the demands of self-preservation. We are naturally reluctant to judge the faith of another. The Ignatian experiments, properly administered, will reveal the logic by which a novice lives and afford us material on which to base such a judgment.

Finally, we must find out if novices today have the degree of maturity and faith necessary to find God in the community and in the Church. Some candidates are so suspicious of institutions and authority that they can see nothing of good in the structures of community and Church. They cannot find God's Spirit in anything which is less than perfect, and in a very real sense, the incarnation scandalizes them. Other candidates bring such a personal need for structure and authority that they blind themselves to any blemish or fault. They cannot find the Spirit in the Church because they cannot see the Church as it really is. The most significant challenge for religious formation today lies in the formation of young men and women who can live with the tension and ambiguity of a Church which mixes virtue with weakness and sin with grace.

Several years ago a young Jesuit in training went to live for several months in one of his province's largest communities. At the end of his experiment his novice director asked him what he had learned. He responded, 'I know now that Jesuits are human. I found out that these very human Jesuits are also sinners. And I found out that one can be human and holy at the same time'. This man has the potential to become an effective and happy Jesuit.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Fontes narrativi de S Ignatio de Loyola*, vol II, pp 482-483. Translation mine.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article I will consider the *Constitutions* to include the General Examen and the Constitutions proper, which are divided into ten parts. I will use the translation of George Ganss, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, translated, with an introduction and a commentary, by George E. Ganss, S.J. (St. Louis, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> *Const* 53-63.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-79.

<sup>5</sup> Ignatius Loyola, *The autobiography of St. Ignatius Loyola*, translated by Joseph F. O'Callaghan. Edited with introduction and notes by John C. Olin (New York, 1974), p 21.

<sup>6</sup> Exx 53.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>9</sup> *Const* 66.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-100.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 261-265.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>30</sup> See *Ibid.*, 351-359 and 366-391 for the academic, and 400-414 for the pastoral.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 360.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>36</sup> In 1975 the Thirty Second General Congregation of the Society of Jesus identified 'integration' as the most significant feature of Jesuit formation, meaning both personal integration and integration into the apostolic body of the Society. *Documents of the Thirty First and Thirty Second General Congregations*, (St. Louis, 1977), p 445.

<sup>37</sup> For example, throughout this article I have used the words, 'interior freedom', as if they came from Ignatius's pen. The word which most commonly appears in the *Constitutions* is 'abnegation', but this term has too negative a connotation today to be useful. Interior freedom is an acceptable replacement, as long as we realize that the freedom which Ignatius would have in his men was impossible without the cross.

<sup>38</sup> *Const* 53.