

CREATIVE AND FAITHFUL ADAPTATION

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TIMES CHANGE, but words on the page, once printed, stubbornly remain the same. The need to adapt the Ignatian *Constitutions* to different times and circumstances is not a new phenomenon. Even during Ignatius's own lifetime, the *Constitutions* had to be introduced into the considerably varied conditions of Jesuit houses in Rome, Spain, Portugal, Germany in the throes of the Reformation and India. And the process of reinterpreting and adapting them in order to provide the fundamental identity and framework of Jesuit life in different continents over a period of more than 350 years has continued, with varying degrees of struggle and success.

Corporate bodies like the Society of Jesus have to keep reinterpreting their founding documents in order to survive; otherwise they become fossils. The Jesuits' formal and authoritative way of adapting their *Constitutions* is not by changing the text but by means of official additional documents issued by successive General Congregations, the supreme legislative body of the Society of Jesus as well as the letters and other writings of General Superiors. These documents restate the Jesuit identity and way of living the gospel in response to the needs and circumstances of successive generations. The process of adaptation, however, is not contained in and limited by official documents. It is a living process: Jesuits, formed by the *Exercises* and the *Constitutions*, adapt them continuously, in fact, by the very manner in which they live in and respond to constantly changing social, political, cultural and religious circumstances across the world. In this process of continuous, lived adaptation, official documents do sometimes take a lead and set a pattern (as certainly happened with General Congregation 32 in 1974–75); sometimes their function is rather to articulate and reinforce what has already happened in contemporary Jesuit life in the continuing process of living adaptation. More often than not I suspect they do both.

The need to adapt is not a new one. Adaptation of the Ignatian *Constitutions* in recent times, however, does seem to include some new elements which are worth identifying and reflecting on. First of all we seem to be acutely aware of the hermeneutical problems that are connected with any attempt to interpret and adapt to new circumstances documents from a previous age that have some kind of normative value. In the Church modern historical-critical approaches to biblical interpretation have brought these problems increasingly to the attention of thoughtful Christians. We have become aware, therefore, of certain facts about the texts we use for prayer and preaching: that any document is historically conditioned; that behind the text lies a mass of often unstated presuppositions, beliefs and historical circumstances that influenced the writing of the text and contribute to its meaning. We have also become aware that our own interpretations and adaptations of these texts are likewise conditioned by our own (often unstated, even unconscious) assumptions and beliefs, as well as by the historical and cultural conditions in which we live. Interpretation and adaptation of the Ignatian *Constitutions* cannot afford to ignore these relevant factors.

Secondly, on a rather different tack, another feature of the present situation is the fact that religious congregations other than the Jesuits are taking all or part of the Ignatian *Constitutions* as an expression of their own identity and way of living.¹ The degree to which these congregations have adopted and incorporated into their own constitutions the actual text of Ignatius varies, of course. And this seems to depend partly on what each congregation judges to be possible or desirable for itself, and partly on what the Roman authorities will allow. In her introduction to the 1979 edition of the *Constitutions* of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Sister Immolata Wetter, who was then Superior General, wrote:

Four areas of the Ignatian *Constitutions* could not be included, in spite of Mary Ward's original intention to adopt them, as seen in her Third Plan. With due consideration for changes which have taken place in the Church and in society, those constitutions have been omitted which concern the fourth vow of obedience to the Pope, the division of the members into grades, the manifestation of conscience and the establishment of colleges with their particular type of formation.²

As well as incorporating portions of Ignatius's text into their own constitutions, some congregations have also added further paragraphs of their own composition to fill gaps and to determine how Ignatius's text is to be interpreted and adapted. So, in addition to the living process of adaptation that I have already mentioned, we also have to consider the adaptations which are formally codified in the constitutions of religious congregations other than the Jesuits, and which thereby become official and normative for the members of those congregations.³

In the wake of these developments a cluster of questions arises about the prospects for genuine adaptation of the Ignatian *Constitutions*. To mention some: what are the characteristics of a process of genuine adaptation? Is it possible, desirable or necessary to distinguish between genuine and non-genuine adaptation? What criteria do we use to distinguish adaptations which are genuine and legitimate from those which are not? By what authority are adaptations acceptable or not? The purpose of this article, however, is not so much to try to answer those questions in any definitive way, if at all, but rather to point to the fact that they exist and to explore some of their ramifications.

Genuine adaptation: creative and faithful

Genuine adaptations of written texts have two noteworthy features. The first is that they are creative; the people who are adapting the written word to different circumstances from those in which it was written have the freedom to be innovators, to respond creatively to these new circumstances. And the second characteristic, which can act as a balance to the first, when necessary, is fidelity; fidelity to the text and to the intentions of the original writer(s) of the text. Putting on a Shakespeare play in modern times and in modern dress offers a helpful example. Transferring Shakespeare's text to the contemporary theatre with its range of possible light and sound effects offers wonderful scope for creativity. In this process the text and the drama it creates yield previously unseen meanings, new jokes and comic situations, fresh dramatic and psychological insights, new ranges of mood and feeling. On the other hand, the more innovation this process introduces, the more the literal purists are likely to protest about infidelity to Shakespeare's sacred text.

If we are to be both creative and faithful, therefore, in our adaptations, whether of Shakespeare or the Ignatian *Constitutions*

(or the gospels for that matter), we need to have penetrated beyond the mere letter of the text and grasped its spirit, its purpose, its meaning in the larger and deeper sense. A fundamentalist type of literalism is neither truly creative nor genuinely faithful. It ignores the fact that meanings of words change, and that circumstances alter meanings; it encourages casuistry; it tyrannizes into slavish dependence rather than creative freedom; it limits the meaning of fidelity to preserving the letter of the text, on the mistaken belief that the letter is more important than the deeper spirit, meaning and purpose.

Genuine fidelity demands that we understand as much as possible of the circumstances in which the original text was written, including especially the intentions of the author(s) and the kind of document we have as the basis of our adaptation. It also demands, so it seems to me, a commitment to share, as far as possible, the intentions, attitudes and dispositions that the author(s) brought to the writing of the document.

Ignatian Constitutions: what kind of document?

Present-day commentators differ in their descriptions of the kind of document the *Ignatian Constitutions* are. There is, however, a widespread consensus that we are not to read them primarily as a book of laws, rules and regulations. It was not Ignatius's primary intention to write a collection of laws and precepts, on the model of Roman law or the modern Code of Canon Law. Secondly, modern commentators agree on the fact that the *Ignatian Constitutions* form a unified whole which has its own distinctive and rather unusual structure.⁴ Their structure and unity spring from the fact that they describe, in some detail and stage by stage, the progressive incorporation of an individual Jesuit into the body and mission of the Society, and his human and religious preparation that this entails. They also describe the means that are used to enable the Society to carry out its mission and to unite the members among themselves, so that together they can 'go forward' in the service of God and neighbour. Developing this idea of the unifying structure of the *Ignatian Constitutions* in another article in this *Supplement*, Howard Gray sees them as less a set of laws than an expression of Jesuit identity. He describes the kind of document they are in terms of four principal images: as a wisdom document which describes how the individual Jesuit and the Society as a whole learns to choose the paths which most lead to God; as a

description of a pilgrimage of an individual and communal human spirit which includes the progressive personal assimilation of a vocation; thirdly as a commitment to compassionate service and a description of the forms this service progressively takes as a man is gradually incorporated into the Society which is already engaged in a mission of worldwide compassionate service; and fourthly as setting out a way of becoming contemplative even in the midst of intense activity.⁵

These two facts, that the *Constitutions* are not a set of laws and that they form an organic whole, have certain implications when it is a question of adopting or adapting them in such a way that they become the whole or part of the constitutions of a religious congregation of women. If they were a code of laws, it might be easier and more legitimate to adapt eclectically; certain sections or particular rules could be adopted where they seem to fit the new circumstances, and others simply discarded or creatively replaced according to need. Given the organic unity of the Ignatian *Constitutions*, however, piecemeal adaptation runs the risk of destroying, or at best damaging, the unity of the whole. Nor is the danger merely in the realm of aesthetics: the risk of damaging a pleasing unity. It also touches upon the more serious matter of authentic fidelity to Ignatius. Particular paragraphs in any written document take their meaning from the context in which they appear. So, for instance, in the gospels, our understanding of Jesus's parables depends upon the setting in which they appear in a particular gospel. Similarly in our adaptations of the Ignatian text, if particular paragraphs are left out, not only will much be lost, but also there is the risk that those that remain will take on a different emphasis and a different meaning from what was originally intended.

Recent adaptations

In the years since Vatican II some of the adaptations of the Ignatian *Constitutions* for congregations of religious women have tended to be piecemeal and selective. Various factors appear to have contributed to this. Sometimes this is what the congregations in question wanted. Another influential factor, however, directly or indirectly, has been the influence of the Roman authorities in the shape of the Congregation for Religious. They have let it be known or assumed that if the revised constitutions of congregations of religious women who want to adopt the Ignatian *Constitutions*

are going to be accepted and approved, they may not adopt the whole of Ignatius's text. This means that the Ignatian *Constitutions* come to be treated differently from other classic foundation documents of religious orders. If a congregation of religious women wanted to adopt the Rule of St Benedict, for example, it is highly unlikely that they would be compelled to incorporate only certain parts of the Rule and to omit or change others. So it is equally unsatisfactory to insist that congregations of women who have an Ignatian identity and way of life adopt only those pieces of Ignatius's *Constitutions* that the Roman authorities permit. The Ignatian heritage is entrusted to the Christian community as a whole, and in particular to those who are called to live in the Ignatian tradition. There is a certain irony in the situation when the arbiters of what constitutes an authentic Ignatian way of life are the members of a Roman congregation who stand outside the Ignatian tradition and seem to want to level out differences and unique gifts which belong to different religious families.

I would like to single out for discussion at this point two areas in which full adoption of Ignatius's *Constitutions* has proved to be particularly difficult. The first of these is the naming of ministries appropriate to women. Evidently, Ignatius wrote the *Constitutions* for a body of men, most of whom would be priests, and as far as we know he did not envisage that congregations of religious women would want or be able to adopt them in their totality. In the *Formula of the Institute*, in the description of the missions and ministries appropriate to members of the Society, he emphasizes those which are appropriate to priests and which in the social conditions of the time were carried out almost exclusively by priests, certainly by men rather than women. Here it is evident that when Ignatius's text is adopted by congregations of religious women, there is need for adaptation.⁶

Mary Ward looked forward to the time when women would 'do much'. In present-day discussions about possibilities for women in mission and ministry we find both a conservative and a more adventurous position, with many varieties in between. Those who hold the conservative position take the present possibilities for women in the Church as established and acceptable, and are not looking for change. Those who take a more adventurous stance want to expand the range of ministries and missions for women to include, among others, those of the priest.

These two positions are reflected in some of the adaptations of the Ignatian *Constitutions* that have taken place in recent years. The 1979 *Constitutions* of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary tend to take the less adventurous option. For the 'third experiment', of the novitiate, where Ignatius recommends that the novices should 'spend another month in making a pilgrimage without money and even in begging from door to door at appropriate times for the love of God our Lord', the 1979 adaptation of that paragraph omits mention of a pilgrimage.⁷ Similarly, in adapting chapters in which Ignatius discussed the training of those who are 'in probation', the same 1979 *Constitutions* leave out his recommendation that the students should gain practice in giving the Exercises 'to some in whose cases less is risked'.⁸ The same tendency to take a conservative position on the possibilities for women is also reflected in the practice of omitting references to 'sermons' and 'lectures' that the members of the Institute might give.⁹

Another area of apostolic religious life in which congregations of religious women are at present finding it difficult to be allowed to preserve the Ignatian heritage in its integrity is that of obedience for mission. This is partly due to the tendency to compel them to conform to a general, uniform pattern of religious life such as is reflected in the Code of Canon Law. This touches on Ignatian obedience in particular.

The Ignatian *Constitutions* allow provincials, local superiors and individual Jesuits great flexibility and freedom in carrying out the missions they have received. Throughout his text Ignatius constantly points out that stipulations he makes are to be varied and changed according to different circumstances of persons and place and 'according to what seems best in our Lord'. The aim to be kept in view is the 'greater service of God our Lord' and the better service of one's neighbour. The means by which that is to be carried out are subjects for discernment, discussion and responsible freedom on the part of superiors and individual Jesuits. The *Constitutions* exist to enable the Society as a whole and the individual members to fulfil their mission in fidelity to God, not to act as a hindrance.¹⁰

The cornerstone of this obedience, however, is openness between the individual member of the Society and his superiors, which is enshrined in the obligation of what Ignatius calls 'manifestation of conscience'.¹¹ The superior is able to accept people into the Society or dismiss them as unsuitable, assign them to appropriate

kinds of training, formation, missions and ministries because he knows their abilities, their strengths and weaknesses, even their inner and most personal areas of experience, attraction, desire. He knows these because the members of the Society consent to tell him. This openness and knowledge are so integral to the Ignatian understanding and working of obedience that the *Constitutions* present the 'manifestation of conscience' as an obligation.

Womens' congregations who have recently wanted to adopt the Ignatian *Constitutions* in their entirety have not been able to do so, largely because the modern Code of Canon Law forbids religious superiors to oblige their members to 'manifestation of conscience'. (The anomaly here is that the Society of Jesus can continue the practice by a special dispensation from canon law, which apparently is not available to women!) And, as with the question of possible missions and ministries for women, so also here we find a range of adaptations of the Ignatian text. The 1979 *Constitutions* of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in an adaptation rather than a direct borrowing of a paragraph of Ignatius, state that it is 'of great and even extraordinary importance that the superiors should have full knowledge of their subjects'. But whereas in the Ignatian *Constitutions* this is explicitly so that the superior can assign the member of the Society to an appropriate mission, this link with mission is omitted here, and the knowledge is seen as being more for the purpose of general direction and guidance, 'so that they may be able to direct and govern them better, and by caring for them, guide them in the paths of the Lord'.¹² These 1979 adapted *Constitutions* omit at this point both Ignatius's clear explanation of why openness is linked with mission and his exposition of the obligation of 'manifestation of conscience'.

By contrast, the 1985 *Constitutions* of the Loreto Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary are more in accord with Ignatius on this matter. They incorporate almost everything that Ignatius says at this point about the superior's knowledge of the members of the Institute and its link with obedience for mission. The differences are slighter: (1) since as yet a woman cannot be a priest, the possibility of an account of conscience to a superior in sacramental confession has been replaced by a strict injunction of confidentiality; (2) the Ignatian phrase 'manifest his conscience' is turned into 'give an account of her life'; and (3) the *obligation* to give such

an account becomes an *encouragement*, along with a reference to safeguarding the requirements of canon law.¹³

This greater closeness on this very important matter between the Loreto *Constitutions* and those of Ignatius, in comparison with the 1979 *Constitutions* of the other branch of the daughters of Mary Ward, reflects more widespread differences of adaptation between the two. In general the *Constitutions* of the Loreto Institute incorporate more and change less of the actual text of Ignatius. They are closer to Ignatius in setting out the primary apostolic intent of the Institute.¹⁴ They tend to give greater freedom and flexibility to local officials with correspondingly less centralization.¹⁵ They are more adventurous in opening up possibilities for ministry for women.¹⁶ Both Institutes also add sections of their own composition on different aspects of the Institute's life, with a clear indication that these are not part of Ignatius's text. These additions which serve to show the lines along which the Institute is adapting Ignatius's heritage to its own way of life, also attempt to adapt the *Constitutions* to modern times in much the same way as the documents of successive General Congregations do for the Society of Jesus.

Conclusions

Though the Ignatian *Constitutions* clearly do not enjoy the same kind of canonical status as the gospels, they are nonetheless a privileged text for more than one community, and a comparison of ways of interpreting and adapting the two sets of documents can be instructive.¹⁷ Both the gospels and the Ignatian *Constitutions* helped and continue to help to fashion the individual and corporate identity of members of a community. Adaptations of the documents are therefore subject in some way to acceptance by that community. In both cases the community for which the texts helped to articulate an identity and a way of life was in existence as a living and therefore changing reality for some considerable time before the documents came to be written. The writers of the documents therefore draw on oral sources and their own and others' lived experience in the process of writing.¹⁸

Modern developments in biblical interpretation show that a valid interpretation and adaptation of a text of this kind fulfils several conditions. As far as possible it takes into account, among other matters, the circumstances in which the text was composed, including the experience and condition of the community in which and

for which it was written, and the character, intentions and aims of the author(s) of the document. It also respects the nature and overall structure and unity of the text in question, so as to be able to interpret and, where necessary, adapt each part in reference to its place in the whole. This presupposes a real attempt to get into the mind and spirit of the author in the setting of his/her own times in order to be both creative and faithful in interpreting and adapting. In the case of both the gospels and the Ignatian *Constitutions*, a valid adaptation also demands that those who are responsible for the adaptation genuinely try to live according to the text they are adapting.

It follows from this that a mere literal application of even the whole of a text in a different situation from the one in which it was written is not sufficient for genuine adaptation. Equally invalid is random or arbitrary borrowing of parts of the text which seem to have immediate and *prima facie* relevance. A simplistic literal application to present-day situations of the Sermon on the Mount, for example, will not faithfully represent the spirit of the gospel.

Those who have had the task of adapting the Ignatian *Constitutions* to become the privileged document for congregations of religious women have carried out their task by selecting parts of Ignatius's text, omitting or changing words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs where it was thought necessary or desirable, and adding paragraphs of their own either within the original text or separately. This process of selecting and changing brings its own problems. As we have seen, any selection or change, while being creative and innovative, runs the risk of damaging the integrity of the received Ignatian heritage; of leading to misinterpretation of the spirituality of Ignatius; of creating a community which claims to be in the Ignatian tradition but which, for instance, might be far more monastic than Ignatius ever intended or have a different theory and practice of obedience.

I am not arguing, however, that selection and change should not take place in the process of adaptation. Extreme and uncritical integralism is as misleading as eclectic literalism. However, when we select from and change Ignatius's *Constitutions* in order to adapt them, we should also be aware of and examine critically our own underlying assumptions on which our adaptations are based. I mean, for instance, our assumptions about the nature, structure and unity of Ignatius's text; about the extent to which we see religious life as essentially or necessarily monastic; about the

relationships between mission and community; about the possibilities in ministry and mission for women in the present and future Church; about the extent to which obedience and the account of conscience are linked; about how we understand mendicant religious poverty; about the meaning of being contemplative in the midst of an intensely active life; about the possibility of apostolic religious life being truly radical in the present time, as Ignatius's form of it was in his time; about the extent to which we believe that all forms of apostolic religious life have to be brought into line with the explicit provisions of a universal code of canon law, which may tend to obfuscate the gifts of particular religious families. Our adaptations of the Ignatian *Constitutions* are inevitably coloured by what we believe about these and other relevant questions. Upon our attitudes in these matters rests our ability to hold both creative innovation and profound fidelity in our adaptations.

NOTES

¹ The idea is not entirely new. As is well known, Mary Ward, early in the seventeenth century, formed a plan for adopting and adapting the Ignatian *Constitutions* for her own Institute, but ecclesiastical authorities made it impossible for her to carry it out.

² *Institutum Beatae Mariae Virginis, Constitutions*, (Rome, 1979). To be referred to henceforth as *ConstIBMV*.

³ Howard Gray's article earlier in this *Supplement* has some interesting observations about how the spirit and principles of the Ignatian *Constitutions* might be adapted in collaborative work between Jesuits, laypeople, clergy and other religious. See pp 27ff.

⁴ They would disagree with the judgment which Bobadilla, one of Ignatius's earliest companions, put in a letter to the pope in 1557, the year after Ignatius died: 'The *Constitutions* and *Declarations* are a labyrinth of the most confused nature; they are so numerous that no one, neither inferior nor superior, can arrive at knowing them, even less at observing them'. Cf *Ignatius Loyola and the founding of the Society of Jesus*, by André Ravier (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1987), p 249.

⁵ Ravier is basically in agreement about the unity of the *Constitutions* and develops his own images of their structure in equally interesting ways. Cf *op. cit.*, pp 250-261.

⁶ *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, translated and edited by George E. Ganss, (Institute of Jesuit Sources, St Louis, 1970, pp 63-74). To be referred to henceforth as *ConstSJ*.

⁷ *ConstSJ*, [67]; *ConstIBMV*, 45/67.

⁸ *ConstSJ*, [408], [409]; cf *ConstIBMV*, p 147.

⁹ E.g. *ConstSJ*, [280], [402]; compare *ConstIBMV*, 179/280; 305/645 and p 147.

¹⁰ See the Preamble to the *Constitutions*, *ConstSJ*, [134].

¹¹ Ignatius explains the reasons for 'manifestation of conscience' in *ConstSJ*, [91]-[97].

¹² *ConstIBMV*, 64/91.

¹³ *Constitutions of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Casa Loreto, Rome, 1985) sections 68, 69. To be referred to henceforth as *ConstLoreto*.

¹⁴ Compare, for instance, the different ways in which the two adaptations deal with *ConstSJ*, [52] on the primary purpose of the Society of Jesus: *ConstIBMV*, 33/52; *ConstLoreto*, 34.

¹⁵ Compare, for instance the two versions of *ConstSJ* [424]: *ConstLoreto*, 201 accords more individual authority to the provincial than the corresponding paragraph in *ConstIBMV*, 232, 233/424.

¹⁶ They are less tied to a framework of secondary schools and encourage members of the Institute to give the Spiritual Exercises as one among a diversity of ministries. Cf *ConstLoreto*, 191-196 and especially 364-388.

¹⁷ For a helpful discussion of issues connected with biblical interpretation, cf 'The bible in the Church today' by Bernhard W. Anderson in *Theology Today*, April 1980, pp 1-6; 'Scripture: recent Protestant and Catholic views' by Avery Dulles, *ibid.*, pp 7-26 and 'The responsibility of biblical theology to communities of faith' by Paul D. Hanson, *ibid.*, pp 39-50; also *Historical criticism and theological interpretation of scripture* by Peter Stuhlmacher (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1977), esp pp 61-91.

¹⁸ André Ravier shows how the construction and content of the Ignatian *Constitutions* reflect closely the experience of Ignatius and his companions from their days in Paris up to the time of writing. Ravier, *op. cit.*, pp 252-256.