


# CLC\*: LAY PEOPLE CALLED TO HOLINESS IN AN IGNATIAN STYLE

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OUR STORY BEGINS WITH A LAYMAN: Iñigo López de Loyola, who, after a long and painful process of prayer, pilgrimage and discernment, understood that God did not want him to be a monk singing in a monastery choir like most of the religious of his time. Instead, God wanted him to spend all his life and energies 'helping souls'.

That is how he began to get together people he met—lay people at the beginning, men and women of all kinds whom he helped to find the ways of the Lord. Time passed and a stable group formed around Iñigo. With these men he formed and founded the priestly order called the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits.

These first companions, together with Ignatius, then formed new 'societies' of lay people, and renewed others which already existed. These groups, also called fraternities or congregations, were an expression of the lay initiative and solidarity characteristic of the spirit of the times, with the aim of 'growing in Christian life and performing good works'.<sup>1</sup>

These little 'societies' of lay people sought the way to holiness in the experience of the Spiritual Exercises, which were given to them by the Jesuits 'with great success'.<sup>2</sup> That is why our history of CLC begins with these lay people who came together in the name of Jesus Christ, who desired to grow in faith and charity by following the 'school' of the Spiritual Exercises—much before December 5th 1584, when Pope Gregory XIII definitely approved the Marian Congregations or Sodalities in the bull *Omnipotentis Dei* (General Principle 3).<sup>3</sup> This is the same desire which impels the CLCs today, causing their birth and growth all around the world.

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\* We use the abbreviation: CLC Christian Life Communities. In Latin countries, the form is a different one: CVX (Comunidad de Vida Cristiana, Communauté de Vie Chrétienne, etc), the letter X referring to Christ, Christian. Despite the differences of languages we are referring to the same reality present throughout the whole world.

*To share a great desire with others*

The CLCs are communities of baptized Christians, men and women who in daily life have become conscious of the serious commitment of their baptism: it not only 'erases' original sin, but also submerges them in the death of Christ and allows them to rise to new life (cf Rom 6, 3-11), a life of following of Christ, in pain and carrying the cross, but with the joy and the hope of sharing with him the Kingdom they are building together. They have found themselves to be more and more possessed and even 'obsessed' by a great desire—the same desire which, five centuries ago, set Ignatius's heart aflame: to correspond fully to all that love he received from God; to serve our Lord in all things.<sup>4</sup>

What brings CLC members, different as they are, together, is certainly not any natural affinity they may have with each other, but a common, enormous and complex word: *desire*.<sup>5</sup> This desire flows from a loving and at the same time imperious call: the call of the King, 'the eternal King, Christ Our Lord', who has before himself 'the entire world', who calls everyone and 'each one in particular' and says: 'It is my will to conquer all the world and all my other enemies and so to enter into the glory of my Father; therefore, whoever wants to come with me is to labour with me, that following me in pain, he may also follow me in glory' (Exx 96).

To that call, men and women who asked humbly 'to be able to hear . . . and to be ready and willing to do what he wants' (Exx 91) gave a personal and affirmative response. They created a community with other lay people who listened to the same call and were possessed by the same desire. That is why 'our Community is made up of Christians: men and women, adults and youth, of all social conditions, who want to follow Jesus Christ more closely and work with him for the building of the Kingdom, who have recognized Christian Life Communities as their particular vocation within the Church' (GP 4).

That is what CLC is: a particular vocation, an answer to a call which changed our lives and made us willing to ask for the help of others to be better able to respond to this call within the Church. That is also why our meetings are not limited to biblical study and theological reflection, aimed at deepening intellectual knowledge. Without disregarding the great importance of doctrine and intellectual formation, what really nourishes our communities and gives them life is sharing—a deep and honest sharing of our lives, our joys, our sadnesses, and our hurts. Most of all, we share our

intimate life and friendship with God and the movements the Holy Spirit produces inside us and in the world around us. The Community helps us to discern those movements and supports us in responding to them with faith and courage.

*A foundational experience: the Spiritual Exercises*

There is no other way to seek, discern and find the will of God for ourselves, personally and communally than by praying. In the CLC way of life, prayer is an important part of the process. And, as we are speaking of Ignatian communities and way of life, the CLC process is also a school where we can learn the many different ways of praying Ignatius put at our disposal: meditation, contemplation, the three methods of prayer (on the Ten Commandments, the capital sins, the powers of the soul, and the bodily senses; by contemplating the meaning of each word of a vocal prayer; by the rhythm of breathing [Exx 238-258]).

But most of all, we can learn the Ignatian way of praying *par excellence*, an interior discipline which teaches us to prepare ourselves to enter the presence of God, to ask truly and from the bottom of our heart for the grace we want to receive (cf Exx 56), to end with a colloquy, that is to say, a dialogue of mercy, thanksgiving, and love, with Mary, Jesus and/or the Father (cf Exx 61). And then, after that, to examine and review our own prayer.

That constant examination of our prayer, trying to see which movements we have experienced and what they mean in real life, is our chief concern as CLC members, and also the main content of our meetings as a Christian Life Community. That is why our communities cannot call themselves real CLCs if their members do not live deeply the central experience of the Spiritual Exercises.

The Spiritual Exercises, specific source and characteristic instrument of our spirituality are, first of all, the experience of Ignatius himself (GP 5).<sup>6</sup> The graces Ignatius received, during his painful and risky pilgrimage to search for and find the will of God, are our patrimony as well, for we are, whether Jesuits or lay people, aflame with the desire following the same ways as Ignatius. And, as CLC members, there is no obstacle to our going through the complete experience just because we are lay people with busy schedules and other difficulties inherent in secular life.

That is why, today, we have the great joy of seeing the vast majority of the members of our Communities seeking to make the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises in one of their many forms: either

thirty days, or four retreats of eight days each spread out over two years, or the Nineteenth Annotation retreat, in daily life, etc.<sup>7</sup> The Exercises are the experience which is really 'foundational' for our communities. Unless the members go through that school of prayer and discernment no community will really become what it should be: a community of discernment, an apostolic community of love which discerns together the signs of God and the signs of the times, in order to be able to respond to them in a mission assigned by the Lord and his Church.<sup>8</sup>

With the help of regular spiritual direction and a daily review of one's life, the passionate love and folly of following the poor and humble Christ in today's world—so strongly experienced by ourselves in the Spiritual Exercises—can be a real possibility (GP 12a). The Exercises lead us to a progressively simpler lifestyle, which allows us to keep our interior freedom and indifference towards the world, as indispensable means for our apostolate. They urge us on to an active participation in the vast field of apostolic services (GP 12b). It is in the gospel showing us the poor and humble Christ, who first fascinated Iñigo de Loyola,<sup>9</sup> that our life must find its inspiration to be able really to be what it should be: a missionary and apostolic life led within the lay way of living.

*To love and serve in all things: a community for mission*

It is from the experience of being passionately and graciously loved by God our Lord and Jesus Christ's Father, and having received the enormous grace of passionately loving this God of grace and mercy, that the imperious necessity of serving him and the people God loves, flows. Christian mission is not a human initiative, but a certainty of being sent by Jesus and the Spirit to serve the world and the People of God, in the same way Jesus was sent by the Father and, in the Holy Spirit, sent the apostles.

The imperious necessity of serving is thus a consequence that flows from the experience of loving Christ, contemplating him, and seeing his life as a horizon from which I can understand and organize my life (cf Exx 135). In the case of CLC, Jesus Christ's life is an impulse and a mandate to lay people to assume the grace of their baptism as a vocation and, most of all, a mission.<sup>10</sup> We are called to live this mission in union with the Church, where Christ, here and now, continues his mission of salvation (GP 6). And, within this Church, we are to belong to a World Community. An important element about the CLC vocation is that it is a

universal vocation. Our commitment is not only with our tiny, cosy local community, but with a World Community, an organized, worldwide body of lay people who try to live Ignatian spirituality and lifestyle and who understand their lives in terms of service of the whole Church and its mission.

That is why, as the World Community's identity has grown over the years, we have come to understand more and more that it is not enough to do any service whatever within society or the Church. Without disregarding little and humble services (GP 12c), we know we are called to the greatest service, the most divine and universal good, to search always for the greater glory of God. This requires of us an ever deeper sensitivity to the urgent needs of Church and society, a readiness to go and serve wherever the needs of the Church may be. It involves an identification with Christ's mission, being his witnesses before all people by our attitudes, words and actions, bringing, as he did, good news to the poor, proclaiming liberty to captives and new sight to the blind, setting the downtrodden free and proclaiming the Lord's year of favour (GP 6, 7, 8). The field of CLC mission knows no limits: it extends both to the Church and to the world, struggling to convert hearts and to transform oppressive structures.

This world conception of our mission was a very clear point at our last General Assemblies. In Rome 79, we began to feel called by God to be a World Community, instead of a World Federation. In Providence 82, this decision was made definite, in a deep process of discernment which brought us to the unanimous decision to be a World Body. Loyola 86 was a time of grace, where the characteristics of this World Body appeared more clearly to us: sent by the Lord and his Church, having Mary as the model of our mission, we felt that it was the whole Community that was sent, in communion of mind and heart. And moving this process forward led to an ever simpler lifestyle which would make us more free, and bring us to live a decisive option for the poor.

We have just finished the XIth Assembly of Guadalajara 90 where, although feeling our poverty and our great need of unity and spiritual freedom as a community of disciples, we approved a new and revised text of our General Principles and General Norms. This text, received by all the World Community, will continue to help us think about our experience and find ways to allow God to continue to make us more truly a World Community in service of the Kingdom. Certainly, this last Assembly and the new General

Principles will aid us to find new forms of communal and organized apostolate which will aid us to respond to the needs of the world and the Church today in a more effective way.<sup>11</sup>

*Conclusion: CLC—a way to holiness*

CLC is a way of life, a way to Christian life, a way to holiness too. The unique call of Jesus Christ for each one who disposes himself/herself to follow his paths is to be holy and perfect as his Father is (cf Mt 5, 48). There are many ways and styles of living this radical appeal, this irresistible attraction, within the Church. Through these twenty centuries of history the Spirit has certainly shown great and divine creativity in inspiring new and different ways of following Jesus Christ in the midst of the world.

One of these special divine gifts was given to Ignatius Loyola, who received these graces not only for himself, but also for us, who would some day be attracted and conquered by his way of loving and serving God in all things, and learn how to follow Jesus Christ according to the method proposed in the Spiritual Exercises. CLC is, thus, the concrete and incarnate way we have found to live out the call and the goal proposed by our baptism.

Our belonging to a World Community, expressed in belonging to a local community, gives us the structure and the means to organize our spiritual life, our communitarian links, our service and mission, in both their personal and communal dimensions. In all that process, we rely on effective collaboration with the Society of Jesus and with other people, communities and institutions which share the Ignatian tradition.<sup>12</sup> As charisms are at the service of the whole Church, lay people and religious can and even must share the same charism—each one in a different state of life—to be helped to live better the charism received by the grace of God. Today's times and urgent necessities show very clearly that Jesuits and CLC members are called to be more and more 'companions': companions of Jesus, and companions one to another in common missions for the greater glory of God.

The new text of the General Principles, with the approval of the Holy See, will then help CLC, during this Ignatian year, to pray, reflect and deepen its identity and the grace of its vocation: making ours the option of Jesus Christ and taking part through him, with him and in him in the loving initiative of the Holy Trinity of bringing redemption to a sinful world so as to become more and

more servants and witnesses of our Lord Jesus Christ in today's world (GP 1,4 and 5).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the speech of Fr Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, World Ecclesiastical Assistant for the CLC, delivered at the World Assembly of Guadalajara, Mexico, from August 28 to September 8 1990: 'The way of St. Ignatius and the charism of CLC', photocopied text, p 4, where a good synthesis of this story of the first 'societies' formed by Ignatius and the first Jesuits can be found.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p 6.

<sup>3</sup> From now on, 'GP' refers to the new text of the General Principles, revised and approved by the World Assembly of Guadalajara 90, awaiting confirmation by the Holy See.

<sup>4</sup> See Kinerk, E.: 'Eliciting great desires: their place in the spirituality of the Society of Jesus', in *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits* 16 (1984). See also Bingemer, M.C.L.: *Em tudo amar e servir. Mistica trinitária e práxis cristã em Inácio de Loyola* (São Paulo, Loyola, 1990), specially pp 52-68.

<sup>5</sup> See Kinerk, E., *op. cit.* p 1: 'Desire is an enormously complex word. In spirituality we talk about "holy" desires, desires which orient a person towards God and which are considered, therefore, to be graces from him.' The whole article can be very helpful too, not only to understand Jesuit spirituality, but also CLC spirituality and way of life. See specially the following chapters: 'Desire for the Cross', 'Desire to help souls', pp 16-18.

<sup>6</sup> We must remark that Ignatius lived and composed the Spiritual Exercises while he was still a layman. Thus they are a kind of experience which can *perfectly* be lived by lay people. They are not at all aimed directly and solely to clergy, in spite of often having been considered so by many people.

<sup>7</sup> See, for these different modalities, *Progressio* Supplement 33, November 1989, about formation of lay guides.

<sup>8</sup> See the final synthesis of the Loyola World Assembly, 'The grace of Loyola 86', in the *Progressio* Supplement with the contents of this Assembly.

<sup>9</sup> See Autobiography 5, 11, 52 and most of all 96, which describes the grace of La Storta. See also a comment on this grace in Bingemer, M.C.L.: *Em tudo amar e servir*, pp 38-43.

<sup>10</sup> See what the Holy Father says about lay people's vocation and mission in the recent letter *Christifidelis laici* 33.

<sup>11</sup> It is worth quoting the final synthesis of Guadalajara 90, 'The grace and call of Guadalajara 90': 'This grace will be particularly important in regard to the way we receive and live the revised General Principles and General Norms. In the second General Principle we are reminded to live and relate to one another in the spirit of the Gospel; and as General Norm 6 emphasizes, this spirit of the Gospel must necessarily be understood in diverse historical and cultural ways, for it is precisely in and through each culture's historical experience that God acts, speaks, and invites a community to share in the work of the Kingdom.'

<sup>12</sup> As it was said by Fr Kolvenbach, in his speech already quoted above: 'Anyone who understands that charisms are at the service of the whole Church will never deny the laity their right of helping themselves by a specific charism which is given to them in their Christian life. They do not become any the less lay persons, but rather lay persons with greater capacities. Nor are they 'semi-religious', but Christians in a religious family with its multifaceted charism. This point of view prevents lay people and religious from feeling that they are autonomous, and self-sufficient, with no connection linking one group to the other. It likewise avoids any exclusivity in the interpretation and practice of the charism. Here, as in everything relating to the People of God, the Trinitarian principle that one's identity comes alive in relationship to others must be foremost.'