

WHAT IS AN 'IGNATIAN CONGREGATION'?

By MARY MILLIGAN

IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA FOUNDED only one religious congregation. And so, in a strict sense, there is only one 'Ignatian congregation': the Society of Jesus. Why, then, this article? In the 450 years since the foundation of the Jesuits, numerous other religious institutes have claimed to be 'Ignatian congregations' as well. Just how, then, is this expression to be understood?

In a survey conducted in 1975, Caritas McCarthy S.H.C.J. attempted to determine the extent to which women's congregations were influenced by Ignatian spirituality. Her questionnaire of over forty items described ways of being 'Ignatian', ways in which feminine congregations incorporated the Ignatian tradition into their life and mission, especially through their constitutions.

The question of 'influence' is never an easy one to determine. Whether similarities can be accounted for because groups arose in the same cultural, religious milieu and therefore drank at the same sources or whether one in fact drew on the other is often unclear. The purpose of this article is therefore not to provide guidelines to clarify one's Ignatian identity, but rather to clarify the issues and to provoke further reflection on possible responses.

First of all, a look at history. From the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries, numerous congregations of women religious devoted to active works of charity were founded. Unlike their monastic sisters, these women meant to be 'in the world', to go out to those in need and meet them where they were. Neither the cultural nor ecclesiastical climate favoured the realization of such a vision. It was commonly understood that a woman was to be 'enclosed', either in the home or in a convent.

In the mid-sixteenth century the Spirit seems to have breathed a great apostolic wind across Europe. History remembers especially Angela Merici, Mary Ward and Ignatius of Loyola as carriers of this apostolic breath. The story of Mary Ward in particular has been well documented in the pages of the *Supplement*.¹ While the women struggled for ecclesiastical recognition of their intuition,

Ignatius was able to obtain that recognition within his own lifetime. Foundresses who came after him, therefore, found his vision not only meaningful as a support to the apostolic life but also accessible and ecclesially acceptable.

The Ignatian influence

The Ignatian tradition influenced these groups in a variety of ways. There are, it seems to me, four principal routes by which this tradition affected congregations: 1) through reliance on Ignatian texts in the formulation of their own constitutions; 2) through influence by individual Jesuits; 3) by modelling certain works or structures on those of the Society of Jesus; 4) by inspiration drawn from Ignatian christological and apostolic vision. It is evident that these four ways are not mutually exclusive and, indeed, some congregations may recognize the presence of all four at the moment of foundation. On the other hand, no one element requires that the others be present.

First of all, a reliance on Ignatian texts. Numerous are the founding persons who wove Ignatian texts into their own primitive constitutions. The great variety of texts used and creative ways of incorporating them precludes a complete study here. There are, however, some general lines that can be noted. While some foundresses did have access to the full Jesuit Constitutions (e.g. Mary Ward, Cornelia Connolly), the great majority were familiar with the Summary rather than the Jesuit Constitutions themselves.² The Summary, dating from the time of Ignatius and first published in 1560, is a collection of excerpts from the General Examen and the Constitutions. Losing the organic development of the Constitutions which follow a person from the time of entrance through incorporation into the Society and on into apostolic ministry, the Summary resembles a collection of rules. While, according to De Guibert, it includes 'the most characteristic expressions of the Society's spirit',³ its focus is more ascetical than apostolic. Not only does the Summary lack the organic development of the Constitutions, but it omits key Ignatian points. Ignatius's *caritas discreta* is not mentioned in the Summary, for example. Nor is the necessity of adapting one's manner of acting according to circumstances! According to the Constitutions, even though the proper response in a particular circumstance 'can be taught only by the unction of the Holy Spirit (1 Jn 2, 20.27) and by the prudence which God our Lord communicates to those who trust

in his Divine Majesty', nevertheless the importance of adapting to a variety of circumstances is to be stressed in initial formation:

In general, [scholastics] ought to be instructed about the manner of acting proper to a member of the Society, who has to associate with so great a diversity of persons throughout such varied regions. Hence, they should foresee the inconveniences which may arise and the opportunities which can be grasped for the greater service of God, by using some means at one time and others at another.⁴

Writing of the relationship of the Summary to the Constitutions, Joseph Veale states:

It was as though someone took *King Lear* and extracted the great speeches and lyrical passages, arranged them in some rough logical order, dismembered the text, dislocated the dramatic structure and destroyed the story. And then said, there you have the essence of *King Lear*. Besides, it is as though the dismemberer of *King Lear* had omitted 'And take upon's the mystery of things as if we were God's spies'.⁵

At least one foundress, aware of deficiencies of the Summary, supplemented them by her own reflections.⁶

The Summary and the Constitutions were not the only Ignatian texts which congregations of women religious incorporated into their constitutions. Some appended Ignatius's Letter on Obedience to their constitutional texts.⁷ Others included his Rules of Modesty or directives for those fulfilling a specific office.⁸

The 1864 constitutions of the Society of Mary Reparatrix express well the motivations which led them to draw heavily on Ignatian texts:

Recognizing like all other religious orders the necessity of having written rules and constitutions, the Society of Mary Reparatrix, rather than drawing them from its own inspiration, has borrowed from those of the Society of Jesus which are filled with supernatural wisdom and solemnly approved . . .⁹

A second category of Ignatian influence comes from contact with Jesuits, either on the part of the foundress or in subsequent generations. While Ignatius was quite clear that the Jesuits as such were not to have a feminine branch, numerous are the congregations which claim a Jesuit as their founder or whose foundress

was strongly influenced and guided by a Jesuit. When foundresses of apostolic congregations sought counsel regarding the writing of their constitutions, it was most often to Jesuits that they turned. Though Franciscans and Dominicans influenced women's congregations through preaching, spiritual direction and especially through third orders, the Jesuits had a quasi-monopoly on advising women's congregations regarding constitutions.¹⁰

In this category, the degree of effective Ignatian elements in the life of the congregation varies widely. The influence of Fathers Tournely and Varin on Madeleine Sophie Barat was strong; the unified direction and essentially apostolic nature of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus gives witness to this influence. On the other hand, an 1858 edition of the constitutions of the Sisters of St Joseph of Lyons, founded by Jean-Pierre Médaille S.J. two centuries earlier, reads: 'They will do their utmost to take the spirit [of the Visitation] and to attain the end that St Francis de Sales had initially proposed'. Several recent studies have emphasized the relationship of Médaille's *Maxims of perfection*, written for 'Christian souls chosen by God to practise gospel perfection in religion or in the world', to the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius.¹¹

It is here, rather than in the category of Ignatian texts, that the *Spiritual Exercises* should be addressed since it is the *experience* of the Exercises which was pivotal for some foundresses and remains so for some congregations. This experience was mediated not by a text but by the direction of a person, almost always a Jesuit. At the end of the seventeenth century, for example, several congregations began, under the influence of Jesuit retreat masters in northern France, to provide opportunities for women's retreats. For several foundresses, the experience of the Exercises was so powerful and determining that it influenced the spirit and mission within the congregations they founded. In this category are especially those groups whose primary ministry is retreat work, specifically accompanying women according to the dynamic of the Ignatian Exercises.¹²

The influence of Jesuit priests is not limited to the origins of congregations. The eight-day annual retreat or thirty-day tertian-ship retreat served as vehicles for Jesuit influence. Whether 'Jesuit' influence was always synonymous with 'Ignatian' influence might be questioned. Until recent years, how many religious claimed to have 'made the Exercises' each year because their constitutions prescribed that their annual eight-day retreat be given by a Jesuit!

And yet St Ignatius would hardly have recognized some of these experiences: four hour-long conferences a day, sometimes supplemented by an 'instruction', and no personal conversation with a director! In these retreats Ignatian symbols and vocabulary often masked the fact that the deep Ignatian spiritual dynamic was absent.

Finally, it is important to recognize a certain influence of the Ignatian tradition through books authored by Jesuits. As of 1850, the number of apostolic women religious grew to such an extent that authors began to write specifically for that audience. Along with Jesuit authors of previous centuries, their names appear on the lists of books sisters are authorized to read, especially during their formative years.

A third category of congregations adopted what we might call certain 'Ignatian structures'. These structures vary greatly. Some groups have from their origins included a tertianship and the thirty-day Ignatian Exercises in their initial formation programme usually just before final profession.¹³ Others required various 'experiments' during initial formation. The adaptations of the Ignatian experiments in women's congregations are interesting and instructive. As in the Ignatian Constitutions, the Spiritual Exercises, usually in abbreviated form, are included, as is service in various works or offices of the community. 'Work in a hospital' is replaced by work in the community infirmary. And what feminine congregation could have required that its novices spend a 'month in making a pilgrimage without money and even in begging from door to door . . . '!' Not only was enclosure the order of the day for women religious, but society in general would quickly categorize such women.

The constitutions of the Sisters of Mary Reparatrix state the general purpose of these experiments as 'renunciation and the will to follow Jesus Christ'.¹⁴ This statement echoes Ignatius's explanations of the second experience—to serve in a hospital—which was intended to give 'clear proof of themselves to the effect that they are completely giving up the world with its pomps and vanities, that in everything they may serve their Creator and Lord, crucified for them'.¹⁵ The experiments were adapted by women's congregations to the requirements of enclosure; they were always seen in terms of the formation of the young sister.

One of the reasons for the suppression of Mary Ward's Institute in 1631 was the fact that the general superior had been given full

powers of government, exempt from the local ordinary. The Council of Trent had forbidden the centralized government of several monasteries of nuns by a single abbess.¹⁶ Indeed, previous to the nineteenth century religious generally lived in autonomous communities, a practical consequence of the conventual enclosure required of women who wished to be recognized as religious. Centralized administration was, however, common among those 'active' religious institutes founded after the French Revolution. In her study of the constitutions of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Jeanne de Charry R.S.C.J. writes that the general structure of the Society as a unified body, with mobility of its subjects, is modelled on the Society of Jesus. It is the monastery, though, with its educational apostolate, which seems to have served as a model for community life within the Society of the Sacred Heart.¹⁷

Some congregations also took a fourth vow, but this fourth vow does not necessarily imply Ignatian influence. The Congregation of Our Lady of Charity, founded by St Jean Eudes in the seventeenth century, had a fourth vow of service to the women and girls who were the object of their ministry; the Hospitaller Religious of St Joseph, whose constitutions are based on the Rule of St Augustine, took a fourth vow of service to the poor. It is possible, however, that some congregations influenced by the Jesuits did come to the profession of a fourth vow through the Society of Jesus.

A fourth category is constituted by congregations which are 'Ignatian' only in a very general sense. No Jesuit is associated with their founding; there is no textual dependence on Ignatian texts in their constitutions; nor is there evidence of a direct Ignatian influence in the structure of these congregations. Indeed, one might ask, are they 'Ignatian' at all? And yet this category can throw a particular light on the question 'What is an Ignatian congregation?' since it is often in the realm of the 'spirit' that the Ignatian influence is posed.

My own congregation falls into this category. The Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary were founded in Béziers in the south of France in the mid-nineteenth century by a diocesan priest, Jean Gailhac. The statement of purpose of the congregation, the 'end of the institute', was expressed as 'undertaking any work which could contribute to the salvation of souls'. Father Gailhac had received his priestly formation in the seminary of Montpellier, and

it was no doubt there that he came into contact with Ignatian thought.

As founder of a religious congregation, he worked in close collaboration with the first three general superiors, and himself ensured unified direction and spirit which both he and the sisters considered of utmost importance. In 1887, three years before his death, after a previous unsuccessful request to the Holy Ghost Fathers, Gailhac contacted the Society of Jesus to ask if they would ensure the continued direction of the congregation after Gailhac's death. The reason he states for his choice is a broad and general one—a common spirit: '... I have tried to inspire in [the sisters] the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ which is the spirit of your holy and illustrious Institute'.¹⁸

What constituted this 'spirit of Jesus Christ'? What was it that Gailhac sensed in the Ignatian tradition which would support the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary in fidelity to their clearly apostolic mission? Why was it that Mary Ward was inspired to 'take the same of the Society' in 1611? What is it that prompts a group like the *Xavières*, recognized as recently as 1963, to 'root their spirituality and mission in the spiritual tradition of St Ignatius of Loyola'?¹⁹ What is it that the so called 'Ignatian congregations' seek in the Ignatian heritage?

Ignatian supports to apostolic life

There are, it seems to me, three main elements of Ignatian spirituality which made it attractive to founders of apostolic religious congregations and which continue to make it helpful to some congregations today. These elements are: unity of life; a pedagogy of apostolic freedom; and a way of discipleship focussed on the humanity of Christ.

Ignatius's unified vision of life was certainly a gift to the Church. Rooted in his mystical experiences, especially that which took place on the banks of the River Cardoner, he sensed that all creation was somehow 'in God' and that God was to be found in all things. This unifying vision became the principle and foundation of his own life and also found expression in the Principle and Foundation of the Spiritual Exercises. It led him to intuit that God is to be encountered and contemplated in all things, in action in the world as well as in solitude and choir.

This unified vision is expressed throughout the Constitutions. Ignatius so interweaves the glory of God, the good of the neighbour

and one's own personal holiness that each can be described as the *aim* of the Society of Jesus. For him, one cannot exist without the other. One paragraph of the Constitutions describes this unity in the following way:

For the preservation and development not only of the body or exterior of the Society but also its spirit, and for the attainment of the objective it seeks, which is to aid souls to reach their ultimate and supernatural end, the means which unite the human instrument with God and so dispose it that it may be wielded dexterously by his divine hand are more effective than those which equip it in relation to men.²⁰

It is clear that 'helping souls' or the 'salvation of souls' is the sole aim of the Society and that personal holiness is an indispensable means to this work. God's glory is truly the *life* of the human person so that God's glory, personal holiness and the salvation of others are intertwined in an essential unity. 'Works of charity' or 'works of zeal'; then, are neither distractions nor 'sidelines'. As ways to 'help souls', they are themselves means of union with God.

In our own times, as in Ignatius's, action to 'help the neighbour' requires that one 'associate with so great a diversity of persons throughout such varied regions'. Rather than give a series of rules to cover all possible situations, he formulated what we might call a 'pedagogy' of apostolic freedom. One must never stop learning to be an 'instrument in the divine hand' in relationship to the mission of Christ in this world. This 'pedagogy' is a second contribution made by the Ignatian tradition to apostolic religious congregations.

Recognition of and sensitivity to the Spirit of God was a lesson that Ignatius had to learn through his own experience. To scan one's inner landscape in such a way as to distinguish the source and direction of the various movements is both a life-long and an everyday task. The Spiritual Exercises were meant to be a school of such discernment. In the broad context of all history and all creation, the retreatant focusses on the person of Jesus while at the same time testing different levels of response to him. The sensitivity to the Spirit experienced in a retreat setting is meant to be formative of a way of being in the world. This 'discernment of spirits' enables one to find God in a diversity of settings and in all kinds of people.

A number of women's congregations founded to meet concrete needs recognized in this capacity for discernment a gospel way to

help them determine how to respond to those needs. Especially as they walked in uncharted ways, they sensed in the Ignatian tradition an ongoing formation in apostolic freedom which would serve them well in responding to new situations. Nourishing their contemplative spirit in the midst of work, it provided support for their own God-given capacity to follow 'the interior law of charity and love which the Holy Spirit writes and engraves upon [their own] hearts'.²¹

Finally, some foundresses recognized in the Ignatian tradition a way of discipleship in which contemplation of the humanity of Jesus Christ was central. It would be false to imply that a focus on the humanity of Jesus originated with Ignatius or necessarily implied an Ignatian influence. Ignatius inherited the rich tradition of meditation on the life of Christ, no doubt through Ludolph of Saxony. Indeed, devotion to the humanity of Jesus, which had so influenced Christians as of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, constituted the spiritual climate in which Ignatius lived. Symbolized by the crib and the cross, Christ's humanity was the focus of meditation and mysticism, of prayer and devotion.

The nineteenth century, an epoch which saw the great flowering of apostolic religious life, emphasized this focus anew. Many congregations were rooted in the French school of spirituality whose centre was Jesus in his humanity.²² The accessibility and popularity of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises provided a way of deepening this central insight and led many a community to build the annual 'spiritual exercises' into their way of life.

Each year sisters remembered again the Incarnation and its deepest dynamic; they stood before a cosmic scene and recalled the *why* of the birth of Jesus. They again heard his message of good news and saw him minister to the poor and outcasts of his own society. They measured their own generosity against that of the Saviour and once again 'elected' to be with him in his paschal journey. Though often the resolutions which witnessed to the retreatant's good will were far from a true *election*, they did serve to redirect certain aspects of life (at least during the sometimes short time they were remembered!). In short, the example of Jesus's attitudes and action toward others motivated their own gift of themselves in the context of their everyday life.

This prayer on the humanity of Jesus was often extended on a daily basis through methods based on the Spiritual Exercises. In pre-Vatican II days when in Roman Catholicism it was not common

to use the bible as a source of personal prayer, meditation books which presented preludes and points based on the life of Jesus provided biblical nourishment to countless numbers of religious.

Conclusion

We have seen that Ignatius's own spiritual experience which enabled him to 'find God in all things' is at the heart of the Ignatian tradition. Like all other saints and spiritually gifted persons in the Church, Ignatius of Loyola touched upon the central mysteries of Christianity, giving certain accents and emphases to those mysteries. He articulated clearly the oneness of a life given totally to God through the service of one's neighbour and he founded a religious congregation meant to embody that insight. To 'help souls' to enter into the same dynamic of interior purification and freedom which allows one to 'find God' in the circumstances of one's own life and world through a process of deep spiritual discernment, Ignatius formulated the Spiritual Exercises.

The experience of God in Jesus, the One sent by God to love the world and give his life for all people, is at the heart of apostolic spirituality. Through a variety of paths, members of apostolic religious congregations come to this experience. Some choose to follow an explicitly Ignatian path consistent with their own history and traditions; others use other paths. For those who can walk the route of the Ignatian tradition, the experience of God which is the object of the Spiritual Exercises must somehow be explicit in their spiritual search and apostolic endeavour. Ignatian 'means'—the *book* of the Exercises, the Constitutions, certain governmental structures—have significance insofar as they facilitate this experience which is at the heart of any 'Ignatian' congregation.

NOTES

¹ Cf *Way Supplement* 53 (Summer 1985), on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of Mary Ward's birth.

² Cf McCarthy, Caritas: 'Constitutions for apostolic religious', *Way Supplement* 14 (Autumn 1971), pp 33-45.

³ De Guibert, Joseph: *The Jesuits: their spiritual doctrine and practice* (St Louis, 1972), p 568.

⁴ *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, translated and edited by George E. Ganss (Institute of Jesuit Sources, St Louis, 1970), p 204. *Const S.J.* [414].

⁵ Veale, Joseph: 'How the constitutions work', *Way Supplement* 61 (Spring 1988), p 9.

⁶ Soubiran, Marie-Thérèse: *Réflexions sur le sommaire des constitutions de la Compagnie de Jésus pour servir à notre institut* (Institute of Mary Auxiliatrix). The constitutions of religious

congregations referred to in this article are found in the library of the Centre Culturel 'Les Fontaines' in Chantilly, France. Unfortunately, the interesting collection of constitutions in that library has not yet been catalogued.

⁷ For example, the Society of Mary Reparatrix and the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

⁸ Religious of the Retreat of the Sacred Heart founded by P. Huby S.J. and Mlle Jeanne de Francheville in 1883.

⁹ *Plan abrégé*, approved 1864 [29].

¹⁰ Langlois, Claude: *Le catholicisme au féminin* (Paris, 1984), pp 197-198 and note 95.

¹¹ Cf Hennessy C.S.J., Ann: *In search of a founder: the life and spiritual setting of Jean-Pierre Médaille, S.J., founder of the Sisters of St Joseph* (Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, 1988), pp 149-159; Roccasalvo C.S.J., Joan L.: *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius according to Jean-Pierre Médaille S.J.* (Brentwood, 1990).

¹² The Religious of the Cenacle and the Retreat Sisters are cases in point.

¹³ Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Sisters of St André.

¹⁴ Société de Marie Réparatrice, undated.

¹⁵ *Const S.J.* [66].

¹⁶ Session XXV, *De regularibus*, c. 7 as cited in Francis J. Callahan: *The centralization of government in pontifical institutes of women with simple vows* (Rome, 1948).

¹⁷ De Charry R.S.C.J., Jeanne: *Histoire des constitutions de la Société du Sacre-Coeur* (Rome, 1977), Vol I p 104.

¹⁸ Archives of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary.

¹⁹ *Les Xavières*, undated promotional materials.

²⁰ *Const S.J.* [813].

²¹ *Const S.J.* [134].

²² The nature of the French school of spirituality made it open to a variety of influences. It is often these congregations which found themselves at home in the apostolic climate of the Ignatian tradition.