AN OLD MAN'S STAFF? AN OLD WOMAN'S WHEEL?

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IN AN ARTICLE WRITTEN almost a decade ago, John W. O'Malley stated his regret that so few non-Jesuit authors had written about Ignatius and the Ignatian tradition.[1] That lacuna has certainly diminished in recent years, and this present issue of *The Way Supplement* will further contribute to bringing non-Jesuit perspectives to bear on Ignatius.

Both within and outside the tradition, Ignatius is sometimes given credit for realities which in fact existed long before him. Discernment of God's will, for example, did not begin with Ignatius! And while he has perhaps been judged over-indulgently by Jesuits, he has also been blamed for many things by those who stand outside the tradition. Some would lay a 'militarization' of religious life at his door; others would claim that he fostered a discipline of prayer which deadened the spirit.

Ignatius' earliest Jesuit interpreters tended to emphasize either the ascetical or the mystical aspects of his teaching, giving rise to divergent understandings of Ignatian spirituality, especially of Ignatian prayer.[2] There is no doubt that for the majority of feminine religious congregations founded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and claiming some tie with the Ignatian tradition, the ascetical emphasis prevailed in their understanding. In the inevitable tension between institution and prophecy, letter and spirit, dependence and freedom, it was the first element of each dyad which prevailed. In an ecclesial context which stressed asceticism, uniformity and legal definitions, interpretation of the Ignatian tradition, and of the *Spiritual Exercises* in particular, 'crystallized methods and recommendations, making laws and rules of them'.[3]

In this article, I intend to look specifically at one element of the Ignatian tradition—the organizational structures of authority—and to test it against the contemporary experience of women religious. The question of authority is indeed a sensitive one, and to address it thoroughly would require a development of both obedience and discernment as well, obviously beyond the scope of this article.

Search for structures of fidelity

The search for establishing governmental structures which favour fidelity to God's covenant and a search for God's will in everyday life did not originate with Ignatius. Long before Christian times, Israel struggled through various governmental crises. There are three critical moments in Israel's history which can tell us something about leadership structures within the biblical, pre-Christian community. Through each of these moments of crisis, Israel learned something which purified both its concept and its practice of authority.

The first moment of crisis is described in 1 Sam 8–12. The time is the eleventh century BCE. Israel had been settled in the promised land for more than a hundred years and was experiencing a new challenge. The tribal structure which sustained and unified it up to that point was no longer able to strengthen it against enemies who attacked from without. Israel did not have the political, military or social unity necessary to confront these warring peoples; it recognized the monarchies of the neighbouring nations as a powerful instrument of unity. And yet for Israel to have a king called the existing theology into question and forced the community to a new theological reflection on its deepest identity. Traditionalists within the community held that Israel was to have no leader but God and that to acknowledge a king's authority would be an affront to the unique rule of the Lord.

Progressives, on the other hand, recognized that new situations call for new structures. They realized that only a united people could face the many internal and external threats which challenged Israel and they saw a monarchy as an effective unifying force capable of leading the people into a new age. For this group, the king was only God's representative, God's image and ambassador. They recognized God's hand in human history and perceived God's will in the events leading to the choice of Saul as leader of the people.

This historical situation provides questions for us today. What is the relationship, for example, between the structure of government in our civil society and our practice of authority in our provinces and congregations? To what extent are our structures a reflection of the socio-cultural values which surround us? How able are we to adapt our theologies of obedience and authority to new historical challenges, to embody a leadership which is based on the best gospel and congregational traditions and yet responsive to the needs of the times?

Israel passed through a second structural crisis in the eighth century BCE. Israel and Judah had by then had a long succession of

monarchs whose fidelity was always judged according to their capacity to image Yahweh's own leadership of the people. Any king or queen who acted outside of the law of God brought doom on all the people.

The institution of the monarchy, like all institutions, had a tendency to become autonomous, to forget that it existed for the people and not for its own self-preservation. Whenever the monarchs no longer saw themselves as God's representatives or when their primary concern was not to care for all of God's people but rather to further their own interests, the prophetic voice arose to call them back to fidelity to the covenant. And so we hear Isaiah's call to Achaz not to trust in political and military alliances, but to stand firm in God alone; Amos' warning to Jeroboam that his house will be destroyed because the people are perishing while he remains unconcerned; Jeremiah's scathing expression of antagonism toward King Joaquim: 'Woe to him who builds his palace at the expense of justice and his upper rooms by unrighteousness, who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing and does not give him his wages' (22,13). When the established authorities neglected their primary duty to defend the rights of the oppressed and to rule with justice and equity in the name of God, the prophets proclaimed God's judgement against them.

This second moment of crisis in Israel's leadership challenges us too when the object of our governmental structures becomes clouded, when community leaders forget that their primary duty is to be at the service of life and of people. It also questions us regarding our response to the prophetic voice in our midst. Surely the prophetic gift and the gift of authority are two distinct forms of leadership. But both are necessary in a community. A group whose governors are unchallenged by prophets risks totalitarianism; a community where the prophetic voice is not mediated into/through unifying structures of government risks falling into chaos.

The third moment of crisis in Israel's history came through the experience of exile which shook the foundations of its faith. The monarchy, which had come to be seen as both sign and channel of God's blessing, had been destroyed and the prophetic voice silenced. People were challenged once again to deepen their perception of God's action in the community, to come to a new understanding of the divine promises, to perceive God's covenant expressed in their history of exile and dispersion. The crisis of leadership within the community was, perhaps, one of the most significant factors in this purification of faith. Israel had to ask where its unity really lay. It is

not by chance that during the post-exilic period the written word became a strong source of unity within the Jewish community. The patriarchal, monarchical and prophetic traditions were remembered and were consigned to writing in a new synthesis. The community reorganized itself around the '*Today* if you hear his voice' and took new hope from God's presence in its midst.

This third crisis of Israel's history challenges us with the following questions: Do we trust in the power that lies within a community brought together by the Word or do we long to return to the clarity of the past? Are we waiting for a pillar of fire or cloud to lead us or do we trust in the power of the Word acting in our midst and leading us from within?

It is well known that Ignatius grappled with the question of the internal authority of the religious congregation he and his companions were to found. Certain elements of their search echoed Israel's own struggle. From 1534 until 1539 Ignatius and his early companions professed vows of poverty and chastity as well as a vow to go to Jerusalem or, if this were not possible, to go anywhere in the world where the Vicar of Christ might send them for the good of souls. These five years of experience, however, raised the question of how the group was to be structured in order to stabilize it as a group of companions whose lives were given for the 'good of souls'. It was only with the three-month deliberation in 1539 that the group determined to vow obedience to one among them.

Several elements were crucial in the decision to make a vow of obedience. First of all, it sprang from a deep experience of God shared in a group of discerning companions—companions with different opinions on the subject. Each member of the group was to prepare himself by 'prayers, sacrifices, and meditations', not speaking about the matter with the others. He was also to imagine himself outside the group, in order to be as free and objective as possible in his search for God's will in this matter. Only

> . . . after many days of thinking through the many pros and cons of our problem and examining the more serious and weighty arguments, while carrying out our usual exercises of prayer, meditation, and reflection, at last, with the help of the Lord, we arrived at our conclusion, not just by a majority but without even one dissenting . . .[4]

From the time of his conversion, Ignatius had actively sought God's will for himself; when he was joined by companions, that

search continued and became communal. The goal of the deliberation about obedience was whether or not a vow of obedience would help the group to find and fulfil the will of God more sincerely.[5] In the later Constitutions as in the life of the society, discerning God's will regarding the apostolic mission to be accomplished remains the primary goal of those who exercise authority. How God wishes to realize 'the good of souls' through the Society of Jesus is the overarching purpose of all those called to this authority.

While the stability of the group of companions was a focus of governance, this stability was also in view of 'the good of souls'. What was unique about the Society of Jesus was that its members were to be geographically mobile and free to go anywhere the good of persons required their presence. Those in authority were to be, so to speak, the meeting place between the needs of the world and the personal talents and call of individual members. They were to play a particular role in the discernment of God's will, a role for which they needed an overview of needs as well as a deep knowledge of individual Jesuits.

To guarantee that the superior would in fact have the necessary elements to be this 'meeting place', Ignatius wrote into the Constitutions the requirement of 'manifestation of conscience'. The discovery of God's will for a person in terms of mission was to take place in dialogue between those responsible for sending Jesuits to a specific geographical location and the person to be sent. Manifestation of conscience was also a means by which superiors sought the will of God for the entire Society of Jesus at each new moment of history.

The world in which Ignatius lived was a hierarchical one. Princes were subject to kings, knights to princes. As a soldier and a knight, Ignatius had been subject to the Viceroy of Navarre. All creation was seen as hierarchically ordered as well: humans were subordinate to angels, animals to humans, plants to animals. In domestic life, women were subject to men, slaves to masters, children to parents. Evidence of this hierarchical understanding of the universe is found throughout Ignatius' writings, perhaps nowhere more obviously than in the Principle and Foundation of the *Spiritual Exercises*. It is not surprising, then, that the organization of the Society of Jesus reflected this hierarchical structure. In fact, all authority resided in the person of the Superior General who was, above all, to be a man of prayer, with a deep experience of God which would help him to recognize God's will in persons and events around him.

Experience of women religious

Centralized government for the sake of mission was a departure from the monastic tradition. For women, even within the monastic tradition, centralized government was unheard of. The Council of Trent had forbidden the 'government of several monasteries of nuns to be centralized in the person of a single Abbess'.[6] All institutes with a centralized government were to be subject either to a local ordinary or to a male institute. In her attempt to found a fully apostolic congregation modelled on the Society of Jesus, Mary Ward foresaw full powers of government residing in the Superior General of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary who was to be subject to the Pope alone and not subject to a male order or a local ordinary. Indeed, this provision for the government of the Institute was one of the stumbling blocks to its ecclesial recognition.

The strongly hierarchical world view which marked Ignatius' world and his experience was, in the ecclesial context of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reinforced by a strong tendency to uniformize religious congregations. That time was marked by strong concern for papal approbation of congregations and their constitutions, an approbation often deemed necessary to protect and assure the apostolic freedom and mobility of religious in the face of diocesan claims. But the constitutional revisions required to obtain approval frequently drained constitutions of their charismatic originality and their distinctive elements. It is true that constitutions clarified the rights and duties of individuals, of those entering as well as those exercising authority. But they became an inadequate instrument to express and form a common ideal, to sustain and foster a common mission.

In terms of authority, the prevailing hierarchical view, expressed in the 1917 Code of Canon Law, was quite simple: the Church was composed of the governed (the laity) and those who govern (bishops and ordained priests who share in their authority). Most apostolic religious congregations of women founded during those centuries generally adopted structures reflecting a hierarchical mindset. These hierarchical models, which, many today would claim, are quite foreign to women's mode of perception, tended to foster within communities both an over-protective attitude and a kind of 'caste' system. Superiors were to care for the spiritual and material needs of their sisters ('children'?). Without a strong personality core, rarely formed at the age of sixteen to eighteen when young women entered religious life, this maternal care tended to infantilize sisters. Rather

than take personal decisions in some areas, they waited for 'mother' to decide.

In some communities, certain persons were considered 'superiors', being moved from one community to another, always as superior, when their six-year term expired. Special places at table, in chapel and in the community room reinforced a public perception of their separation from the 'ordinary' sister. In addition, the spiritual context of those times stressed asceticism, so that sisters were urged to accept difficulties with superiors as a necessary part of life. Public criticism of those in authority was uncommon and was considered of extreme gravity.

For many women's apostolic congregations, as for the Society of Jesus, *mission* remained at the heart of authority. Superiors bore the responsibility for sending sisters to where the need, as they saw it, was great. For women, however, one essential factor was missing. While in apostolic congregations superiors often exercised in fact a role as spiritual guide in the community, toward the end of the nineteenth century that role was limited by a decree of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, predecessor of the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes.[7] Previous to that decree, the constitutions of my own congregation, for example, included a chapter on 'Direction' which specified the climate of openness in which dialogue was to take place between the superior and individual sisters. This dialogue was, no doubt, an essential element in an apostolic congregation, not only as a means of spiritual growth of individuals, but also in determining whether or not a sister was both apt and called internally to a particular mission. In its approval of women's constitutions at the time, however, the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars required that such chapters on direction be eliminated and that 'for the time being' such direction be limited to public transgressions of the rule. While, in fact, the Vatican decree did not forbid an account of conscience by a sister to her superior, it forbade the superior to demand it. In requiring that both the practice and the reference to 'intimate manifestation of heart and conscience' be eliminated, it created a climate in which dialogue about the internal forum of conscience was strongly discouraged. 'Subjects' were even urged to denounce any superior who insisted on such manifestation of conscience.

The Vatican decree merely formalized a 'temporary' policy that had already been in practice for several decades. Though the decree applied to all non-clerical orders, women's apostolic congregations

were particularly affected. In a book on the government of religious communities published in 1875, we read this explanation for the limitation and for its particular application to women:

> The words 'for the time-being' which the Sacred Congregation customarily adds in restricting manifestation of conscience are explained by the precarious state of modern congregations. That these words are especially found in the approbation of institutes of women is due to the infirmity of the naturally more excitable sex, which is less discreet, more inclined to curiosity and deprived of those guarantees which a priest offers to manifestation of conscience made in confession. One may believe, therefore, that these restrictions are neither definitive nor applicable to institutes of men . . .[8]

Whereas 'spiritual conversation' was an essential element in the Ignatian understanding of authority and obedience, this essential underpinning was severely restricted in women's apostolic congregations, creating a climate focussing much more on external observance of rules than on a communal search for God's will in everyday life.

There is no doubt that in the process of the approval of constitutions in recent years, the question of authority continues to be a painful and central one for women religious. The theological foundations of the required statement about obedience to the pope are unclear, to say the least. While all Catholics owe respect and recognition to the Vicar of Christ, tying such respect to the vow of obedience seems to confuse two distinct principles in the Church: the prophetic and the institutional. More pertinent for our topic here is the question of internal structures of authority.

As women religious continue to search for structures coherent with their experience as women, which Ignatian insights might be helpful and which ones harmful? It seems to me that there are three principles which are important as a basis for authority structures within women's congregations: trusting our feminine experience; integrating modes of discernment in non-hierarchical communities; focussing authority on both community and mission. First and foremost, women must continue to trust their own experience and discover God within it. More and more, feminine images and models are used to articulate an experience of God. These images and models are helpful to both women and men as they seek to balance a spiritual tradition which has above all valued men's experience (Ignatius' included). With some shining exceptions, it is male experience which has been considered normative and 'authentic' and which has

provided a common vocabulary. And so in articulating their experience of God, women bring their specifically feminine insights so that God's word and image are discerned in their fullness.

Secondly, in apostolic communities, discernment of God's intentions continues to be the primary task of authority. This discernment is exercised in a relational, non-hierarchical way. Increasingly, women religious see themselves as part of a community of equal disciples. As they read the New Testament with the lenses of feminist scholarship, they recognize there the anti-patriarchal stance of Jesus who called all to a discipleship of faith, love and commitment. In describing renewed structures of government in revised constitutions, they emphasize this vision by referring to 'team government', to 'collegial modes of operation' and to 'decision by consensus'. Recognizing that this ideal is not always the reality, they have likewise made provisions in their constitutions for situations where communal discernment is not possible, perhaps because of a lack of interior freedom, and where consensus cannot be reached. Their intention has been to express a 'non-hierarchical' mode of government, one which in fact recognizes the equality and responsibility of all and where the word of God is discerned equally in all.

Thirdly, structures within the concentric local, provincial and congregational communities have mission as their focus. This mission is by nature communitarian in that it is the mission of the congregation as a whole. Attentiveness to the quality of community relationships, the responsibility of all the members, is likewise essential to discernment. A community life marked by open dialogue and sincere interaction about one's faith experience provides a healthy context for discernment of God's will 'for the good of souls' and can be a great support to the apostolic commitment of individuals.

As women discard hierarchical models, they come to a renewed understanding of the responsibility of each person for the life, mission and future of the congregation. Co-responsibility becomes a reality, not just a word. Responsibilities within the community are seen as diverse and changing; those serving the community in leadership positions are recognized as having a particular function to fulfil. One of the most impressive realities within women's communities is the way in which authority is passed from one administration to the next. Elections are usually ritualized in a joyful way which makes it quite clear that a sister is being called upon at a particular moment in time to exercise the functions of government. She will bring to the role her own gifts and talents for the good of the community and its mission.

Speaking of obedience, the counterpoint to authority, in the Constitutions, Ignatius states:

> . . . everyone of those who live under obedience ought to allow himself to be carried and directed by Divine Providence through the agency of the superior as if he were a lifeless body which allows itself to be carried to any place and to be treated in any manner desired, or as if he were an old man's staff which serves in any place and in any manner whatsoever in which the holder wishes to use it.[9]

If Ignatius was influenced by monastic literature in his use of symbols here, then the 'staff' referred to is no doubt an artisan's tool.[10] It is clear in this passage that Ignatius is underlining only one aspect of obedience: availability for mission. Never does he advocate an unthinking attitude. Indeed, the individual's thoughts, feelings, experience are essential to discovery of God's will. But images are powerful and often form our mentalities more than theoretical arguments. If women were searching for an 'artisan's tool' as an image of authority, what might the symbol be? Certainly the circle is a more meaningful image for women than an 'old man's staff'. Might one not rather use the image of a spinning wheel, a wheel which weaves the thread of life? In an occupation exercised by both women and men (witness Gandhi), women throughout the ages have spun threads of varying colours and textures. The wheel passes from one to another, each spinner bringing her own artistic vision to the task. Attentively the spinner follows the lead of the always active wheel and the fragile or tough thread which will be woven into a cloth of beauty and utility. Just so, structures of authority are like that spinning wheel, meant to facilitate the weaving of a strong cloth but always in terms of the creativity of the spinner. If the wheel becomes defective, it must be repaired, reformed, recreated, or redesigned. It is, after all, only an instrument, but a necessary one at that.

NOTES

[1] O'Malley, John W.: 'The fourth vow in its Ignatian context: a historical study', in *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, vol XV (January 1983), pp 4–5.

[2] O'Malley, John W.: 'Early Jesuit spirituality: Spain and Italy', *Christian spirituality* vol III (New York, 1991), pp 3–27.

[3] Cusson, Gilles: 'The letter and the spirit: obedience, authority and spiritual discernment', *The Way Supplement* 36 (Summer 1979), p 90.

[4] 'Deliberation of the First Fathers' as found in Futrell, John Carroll: *Making an apostolic community of love* (St Louis, 1970), pp 188–194, [8].

[5] *Ibid.*, pp 13–18.
[6] Session xxv, *De regularibus*, c 7. See Callahan, Francis J.: *The centralization of government in pontifical institutes of women with simple vows* (Rome, 1948).
[7] *Quemadmodum*, 17 December 1890.
[8] Valuy, B.: *Du gouvernement des communautés religieuses* 5th edn (Lyon-Paris, 1875), p 618.
[9] Ignatius of Loyola: *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, edited by George E. Ganss (St Louis, 1970), no 547, p 249.
[10] See *Constitutiones monachorum* ch 22, no 5 in PG 31, col 1409.