

Continuity and innovation

The Thirty-Fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (1995)

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THE THIRTY-FOURTH GENERAL CONGREGATION (GC34) of the Society of Jesus was convoked by the Superior General, Fr Peter-Hans Kolvenbach. This General Congregation was called to complete and approve the updating of the Society's own law, such approval being the prerogative of a General Congregation. But right from the moment of convocation, Father General made it clear that this General Congregation would deal with all the questions and issues which the Society was facing in its life and apostolic mission. Father General also asked the whole Society to think and pray about the major social and church issues of our day.

The up-dating of the Society of Jesus' own law

When Ignatius of Loyola died in 1556, the text of the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus was more or less complete, though he had not been able to put the finishing touches to it. The first General Congregation in 1558 approved St Ignatius' text, corrected in several places by Polanco. It was not until the Fifth General Congregation in 1594 that the Latin translation was agreed on, this 1594 edition then becoming the official one. The Society has never touched the text of the Constitutions; the original Constitutions are the same Constitutions as ever they were. The thirty-four General Congregations since the death of Ignatius have interpreted these Constitutions over the course of the centuries by formulating decrees which take the text of Ignatius and adapt it to their time.

There are several reasons for showing such respect towards the early text. Ignatius did not get bogged down in minute details, which always relate to a particular period. The guidelines which he gives usually remain open to the future, thanks to the phrase: 'the superior will adapt according to persons, places and times'. But there is more to it. The Jesuit Constitutions are not a legal code, even if they do have normative status. Rather, they are a book of

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spirituality, a discernment manual, if you like. Two examples suffice. In Part VII, Chapter 2, 'The missions received from the Superior of the Society', Ignatius offers a generous number of criteria to help the Superior send Jesuits on mission. Where are they to be sent? Where the need is greatest and most urgent, where the mission will bear more fruit, where you can reach 'multipliers' (a word precious to Fr Arrupe), where you can reach a greater number, or where there is no one to do the work, where the Society's reputation is at stake etc. Who is to be sent? How and for what length of time? Here again, Ignatius gives various criteria. It is up to the Superior to discern which criteria should be brought to bear in any given situation. The Constitutions do not give a blueprint for missions. Rather they give the Superior a discernment tool to help him take the best decision in a real situation. Part II of the Constitutions, 'The dismissal of those who were admitted but did not prove themselves fit' can be thought of as a short treatise on spiritual discernment. The decision of the Superior to dismiss a candidate who has been admitted can only be the result of discernment, matured in prayer and brotherly sharing.

GC34 has not altered the text of the Constitutions either. However, it has added notes to the text either to explain a passage which has been illuminated in a specific fashion by the General Congregation, or to modify ('to declare') a text according to the provisions of universal church law or of a General Congregation, or, again, to abrogate a passage which is no longer in force by virtue of a contradictory provision. These notes, prepared fastidiously by a team of specialists, are an updating of the text of the Constitutions themselves. But the General Congregation's most important work in revision of the Society's law has been the publication of the Complementary Norms added to the Constitutions.

The Complementary Norms

For the most part, the Complementary Norms come from the decrees of the various General Congregations, especially those which followed Vatican II, that is to say from the Thirty-First (1965–1966) to the Thirty-Fourth (1995). The Complementary Norms follow the ten parts of the Constitutions and together with the Constitutions they make a whole. They give a contemporary account of the life and mission of the Society of Jesus as described in the Constitutions. In these Complementary Norms, we find both continuity and renewal. I will comment on three areas where this

'renewal in continuity' is being charted as we approach the end of the twentieth century.

GC32 (1974–1975) very clearly redefined the mission of the Society of Jesus as 'the service of faith and the promotion of justice'. GC33, which elected Peter-Hans Kolvenbach as Superior General in 1983, confirmed this option of the Society of Jesus at the same time as refining it. Likewise, GC34 confirmed it, at once expanding and deepening it. The decree 'Servants of Christ's Mission', states:

No service of faith without promotion of justice, entry into cultures, openness to other religious experiences. No promotion of justice without inculturation, without communicating faith with others, dialogue with other traditions, commitment to justice. No dialogue without sharing faith with others, evaluating cultures, concern for justice. (47)

Even as far back as the Formula of the Institute of 1540, Ignatius never imagined that one could serve faith without at the same time being at the service of the poor and abandoned. Still more in our own age, thanks to better communications between different parts of the globe and a more systematic understanding of injustices and their causes, we cannot be at the service of the gospel without being committed to the promotion of justice, culture and interreligious dialogue. Over the last twenty-five years this way of talking has been used increasingly by the Magisterium, as by the various Synods of Bishops. Quite clearly, the Complementary Norms on Part VII of the Constitutions on mission express unequivocally this new direction of the Society of Jesus.

One of the most surprising things for the modern reader of the Constitutions is their near total silence on the vow of chastity. Ignatius had only one sentence on the subject: 'What pertains to the vow of chastity requires no interpretation since it is evident how perfectly it is to be preserved, by endeavouring to imitate therein the purity of the angels in cleanness of body and mind' (Part VI, Chapter 1, 547). The vows of poverty and obedience, however, receive all the attention they need from the Constitutions. The imbalance has been rectified in the Complementary Norms, which treat the vow of chastity in a way which takes into account not only its evangelical dimension but also those of modern psychology and sociology. GC31 had already addressed the subject in depth and

with some serenity. GC34 has given its decree on chastity a brief but excellent treatment, integrating all the aspects of Jesuit life.

Another gap in the Constitutions, given our present concerns, is the scant attention they accord to community life. The Constitutions stress the union of hearts and minds (Part VIII, Chapter 1). Even if Ignatius does actually speak about it, as he does in Part III on formation, the Constitutions have practically no interest as far as community life and brotherly relations within the local community are concerned. In the Complementary Norms of Part VIII of the Constitutions, there are several pages on community life. On the whole, these norms come from GC31 and GC32, GC34 not having managed to draw up a decree on the subject. In other places in the Complementary Norms there are still more elements which deal with persons and their mutual relationships. Thus in Part VI, for instance, there is a chapter on sickness, ageing and death (Chapter 4). For all that Ignatius was already talking in the Constitutions about the manner with which illness was to be borne and death to be prepared for, it is nonetheless true that this chapter of the Complementary Norms reveals something of the Society's situation in the northern hemisphere at the end of the century.

Decrees of GC34

Touching on some areas of the life and mission of the Society of Jesus, we have already highlighted what is new in certain decrees of GC34: the expansion and deepening of the mission of the Society (the service of faith and the promotion of justice), and an integrated vision of the vow of chastity. Certainly, three other decrees contribute something new as well: 'On having a proper attitude of service in the Church', the degree 'Co-operation with the laity in mission' and the decree 'Jesuits and the situation of women in the Church and civil society'.

Experience led Ignatius to take a prudent approach to the mission of the Society towards women – by which we should understand 'religious women' – and even more so regarding women in the Society, an experiment which had straightforwardly negative results. The fact that the GC34 has a decree 'Jesuits and the situation of women in the Church and civil society' underlines just how far removed is the milieu of the sixteenth century from that of the end of the twentieth century. The subject of the situation of women in society and in the Church had not surfaced during preparations for GC34. It was probably not a major problem in the Provinces of the

Society. Yet right at the start of the Congregation, a consciousness was dawning. A commission was set up within the Commission on Problems of Injustice so that it could take a stance, as the assembled Society, on a problem which is, by all accounts, a global issue. The contents of the decree are not particularly original, other than that the General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, an exclusively male order, should take an official position on the subject at all. The decree which, like all the others, went through several drafts, was drawn up in contact with a few women outside the Congregation. In this decree, the Jesuits put themselves in the place of women, while recognizing that they were often on the side of men, clearly exercising domination over women. The decree 'Jesuits and the situation of women in the Church and civil society' is above all a call to Jesuits all over the world to take up solidarity with so many women who struggle for a fairer, more just future. This decree is quite new in the history of the Society. In the Complementary Norms this specific question is taken up at the beginning of Part VII as being part of the Society's mission. The entire matter is summed up in a single paragraph.

The decree 'Co-operation with the laity in mission' is the result of a long and difficult process followed at the General Congregation. Collaboration with lay people was an issue treated as a priority at the General Congregation, which was how a large number of Provincial Congregations had wanted it. Until near the end of the General Congregation, a commission had worked on a document setting out a better way of co-operating with lay people in our works. The document did not receive the approval of the assembly and the commission was obliged to go back to the drawing board – which brought about a Copernican revolution. Instead of trying to envisage how lay people could co-operate more with the Jesuits, the new document set out to describe how the Jesuits could co-operate more with lay people in their mission. The new document, which was approved unanimously, shows a Church undergoing change, a Church where lay people, according to the line adopted by Vatican II, are increasingly taking up the place which is rightfully theirs. So the fundamental question undergirding the decree is: how can lay people who are deeply committed to the Church of the next century take advantage of the experience, training and pedagogy of the Society? Evidently, the changes undergone by the document have brought something new to the way that many Jesuits think, while for others, on the ground, this change had already occurred some

time before the General Congregation. There is another new development too: the decree ends with a few paragraphs called 'Some joined to the Society by closer personal bond'. One way of setting up this co-operation with lay people in mission can be that of a special, personal, legal bond between certain individuals and the Society for the purpose of fulfilling certain apostolic objectives. The aim intended is clearly defined: the association is to make possible a better service of the mission of the Society in the world and in the Church. The Society is asking for experimentation in this domain and gives some criteria. In the Complementary Norms, the decree has been given an important place in the shape of the fifteen paragraphs which make up Chapter 5 of Part VII on mission.

In the decree 'On having a proper attitude of service in the Church', it is less a matter of innovation than of adaptation to new situations. Since the beginning, placing oneself at the heart of the universal Church has always been 'the principle and foundation' of the Society. Ignatius and the first companions wanted to bind themselves by a vow to the Roman pontiff for the purpose of being available for any mission entrusted to them by the pope. What is more, Ignatius formulates at the end of his book of Spiritual Exercises a series of rules to be observed so as to have a true sense of the Church. There are two principles underlying these rules: that the mystery of the incarnation is continuing in the Church, and that an ever greater *communio* is a criterion for the discernment of which attitude is to be taken.

At the Congregation of Procurators in 1987, Fr Peter-Hans Kolvenbach had proposed in his final speech a hermeneutical reading of these rules of Ignatius. The General Congregation has taken up the General's text, but bringing it even more up to date. The resulting decree is, consequently, among those which were most laboured upon, every word being carefully selected and weighed. If the text is so nuanced, it is because the subject matter is complicated, much more so than in Ignatius' day. The sense of the people of God is fuller, power in the Church is more collegial, globalization of information and the role played by the media have created another universe of reference. In the hope of 'helping souls' and of serving the Church, the hierarchy has to be taken just as seriously as the *sensus fidelium*. The text says, 'We must try to articulate the *sensus fidelium* and help the Magisterium discern in it movements of the Spirit in accord with the teaching of Vatican II' (317). The problem is most delicate for those involved in the mission of theological

research and teaching. The Jesuit theologian is to be vigilant with regard to the scientific quality of his work and to the moral integrity of his apostolic commitment, neither of which exclude tension or conflict.

Despite – indeed, because of – our sincere desire to live in fidelity to the Magisterium and the hierarchy, there may be times when we feel justified, even obliged, to speak out in a way that may not always win us general approval and could even lead to sanctions painful to the Society and constituting an impediment to our work. (310).

Further on in the text, we read:

If there is a time for speaking out, there may also be a time for silence, chosen by discernment or even imposed by obedience. If there is a time for representation, there is also a time for the abnegation of our intellect and will, which becomes for us a new way of seeing through the clouds of suffering and uncertainty to a truth and wisdom, that of the Cross. (314)

The decree is an open and courageous text. Whilst setting itself in a line of continuity with the past, it still takes account of new realities in the world and the Church. Several paragraphs of this decree have found their way into the Complementary Norms which deal with the mission of the Society.

Continuity in spirituality

Taken as a whole, the decrees of GC34 are well and truly in the tradition of the Society. The General Congregation has tried to draft the texts in the Society's own language, which is to say a language which bears the imprint of the important sources of Ignatian spirituality. GC32 drew its inspiration for Decree 4, 'The service of the faith and the promotion of justice', from the contemplation of the incarnation in the Spiritual Exercises. The Trinity is looking on a world set on a path to hell, and decides to send the Son to save humanity. This was the Ignatian vision into which the mission of the Society was to fit. Even if this contemplation of the incarnation remains implicitly present as the foundation, the explicit point of departure for GC34 is the paschal event; love is stronger than hatred, life is stronger than death. The third and fourth weeks of the

Spiritual Exercises – the passion, death and resurrection of Christ – are to the fore in the basic decree, ‘Servants of Christ’s mission’. In a world where hatred, war, exclusion and hunger are proliferating undiminished, all those who suffer are like the image of the Crucified One. In the vision in the chapel at La Storta near Rome, Ignatius saw himself placed at the side of Christ carrying his cross, accomplishing in the world the mission given by the Father. The ‘Companion of Jesus’ recognized the suffering Lord in all those who suffer and he is himself invited to be one with him in his mission. This companionship is the gift of the Risen One, the one who calls and sends. Without the Risen One, there are no ‘companions of Jesus’. This approach in the Decree ‘Servants of Christ’s mission’ sets the tone for all the decrees of the General Congregation.

But there is another important aspect of Ignatian spirituality which runs through all the different decrees. The Spiritual Exercises end up in the Contemplation to Obtain Love. This last exercise invites the retreatant to strive for that fundamental attitude which is the fruit of the four weeks of the Exercises: to seek and find God in all things, to love and serve God in all things. For God ‘inhabits’ his creation and ‘labours and works’ in all his creatures, as it says in the Contemplation to Obtain Love (Exx 235–236). At several places in the decrees of GC34 this active presence of God in human beings and in the world surfaces. The decree ‘Our mission and culture’ says:

One way of serving God’s mystery of salvation is through dialogue, a spiritual conversation of equal partners, that opens human beings to the core of their identity. In such a dialogue, we come into the activity of God in the lives of other men and women, and deepen our sense of this divine action. (101)

And in the following paragraph:

The work of God in the diversity of human history is seen in the long process of enlightened human growth – still incomplete – as expressed in religious, social, moral, and cultural forms which bear the mark of the silent work of the Spirit. (102)

The same idea is to be found in the decree ‘Our mission and interreligious dialogue’: ‘An open and sincere interreligious dialogue is our co-operation with God’s ongoing dialogue with humanity’

(133). The decree 'The intellectual dimension of Jesuit ministries' begins with this significant sentence: 'Since its foundation, the Society has held intellectual labour in high esteem, as a significant contribution to the discovery of the creative work of God and to the recognition of the legitimate autonomy of human inquiry' (394). Further on in this same decree:

Theological reflection, social analysis, and discernment are phases of a process which Pope John XXIII and Vatican II called 'reading the signs of the times': the effort to discern the presence and activity of God in the events of contemporary history in order to decide what to do as servants of the world. (401)

Let us take one last example from the decree 'Ministerial priesthood and Jesuit identity':

From their Ignatian tradition, Jesuits bring to the ministerial priesthood a profound respect for the ways in which God is already at work in the lives of all men and women. God's action does not begin with what we do; already in the blessings of creation, God has laid the foundation for what we will accomplish through the graces of redemption. Consequently, in the exercise of their ministerial priesthood, Jesuits try to see what God has already done in the lives of individuals, societies and cultures, and to discern how God will continue that work. (177)

These few texts show how much they are steeped in an important aspect of Ignatian spirituality. The Jesuits who met in the General Congregation did not make a decision to insert elements of spirituality into their texts. But their texts reveal how much the Jesuits are – sometimes without knowing it – steeped in the spirituality of their founder, Ignatius of Loyola.

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