

Ignatian Charism and a Jesuit Parish



Recently I spent a week with a group of Jesuit tertians . Tertians (the phrase refers to a third probation) are ordained Jesuits who, after some years of post-ordination placements, spend reflective months, undergo, a second time, the thirty-day Ignatian Spiritual Exercises and prepare for their final profession in the order. I was teaching them The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus . Written by Ignatius Loyola, The Constitutions represent the fundamental rule of the Jesuits, their characteristic 'way of proceeding' in ministry and governance. The Constitutions encapsulate, in words at least, the fundamental charism of Jesuit ministry in whatever work. Coming as it did in the week before the annual feast of Saint Ignatius on July 31, teaching The Constitutions led me to reflect, somewhat more deeply, on how that Ignatian charism might show up in a Jesuit parish, such as Saint Ignatius Parish in San Francisco.

It is always risky to reduce a complicated and rich tradition into a few concise, formulas. The Constitutions represent a ' living' document which has been several times amended in its 450 year tradition. Periodic Jesuit General Congregations (there have

been 35 in the long history of the Jesuits) help to keep it, indeed, a living document and serve as an ongoing interpretive mechanism of the Jesuit way of proceeding. If I were forced, however, to state in a few concise formulae what the Jesuit charism is which should be found in every Jesuit ministry (whether a university, high school, a parish or a social work, such as the Jesuit Refugee Service), I would choose the following traits: (1) An Unflagging and Unstinting Service to the Mission of the Roman Catholic Church; (2) A Continuous Call to Individual Catholics and to the Church, Itself, to Ongoing Conversion as Disciples of Jesus; (3) In Whatever Ministry a Jesuit Finds Himself, Attention to Three Paramount Goals: (A) Formation in a Deeply Personal Spirituality; (B) A Commitment to the Service of Faith Which Includes a Promotion of Justice; (C) A Genuine Commitment to Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Dialogue. A brief word is in order to each of these three paramount mission and ministry goals of the Jesuits.

I. An Unflagging and Unstinting Service to the Mission of the Roman Catholic Church

Wags often enough like to say to Jesuits: “ I know you are Jesuit, but are you Catholic?”. The joke wears exceedingly thin, even brittle, after the first feeble attempt. Professed Jesuits take an explicit fourth solemn vow (besides the usual ones of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience) of special obedience to the pope in regard to missions. Jesuits promise to take on any work or to go anywhere in the world the pope chooses to send them. The Constitutions even assume that any direct missioning of a Jesuit to a ministry by his own Jesuit Superior General or Provincial takes place as a kind of mere subordinate delegation, derived from this papal fundamental right to mission Jesuits to any work, any place in the world. Sometimes people try to brand a Jesuit work by the

adjective ' Jesuit' and to imply, thereby, a sort of exclusion of or caution about the more fundamental adjective, 'Catholic'. This does not represent truth in advertising. In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius drew up a sophisticated and subtle set of rules' for thinking with and within the Catholic Church'.

To be sure, the Catholic Church exists in service to the even more fundamental thrust of the Kingdom of God preached by Jesus. It exists to nurture souls and bodies into a joyous and heartfelt commitment to discipleship (a close and tender following) to Jesus. As an essentially ' pilgrim' church, the Catholic Church journeys with humankind in its laborious search for integrity and human flourishing. Doctrine develops because humankind does. As Vatican II insisted, the church which accompanies the joys and sorrows of humanity is not only a teaching church but, itself, learns. The first trait of any Jesuit work is that it is profoundly and unapologetically Catholic, adhering to that creed we recite every Sunday as a statement of what it is we fundamentally believe.

II. A Continuous Call to Individual Catholics and to the Church, Itself, to Ongoing Conversion as Disciples of Jesus

The early Jesuits were a reforming order. They saw the crying need for ongoing conversion of individual Catholics and, yes, for the church itself. It is often said of the Jesuits that they created, in response to Luther and Calvin, a Counter-Reformation. When Jesuits criticize the church, in some fashion, it is in function of this profound call to conversion. A group which boldly (almost audaciously) named itself " the company or companions of Jesus" clearly wanted to follow the gospel's mandate to full discipleship. John O' Malley S.J. in his now classic history of the early Jesuits, The First Jesuits, (Harvard University Press, 1995) shows how the Jesuits subtly corrected one-sided and

reactive policies of the Counter-Reformation Church. Against the Protestants' emphasis on preaching the word, the Catholic Church, in an overly reactive corrective response rather uniquely emphasized the sacraments. Ignatius, however, unabashedly put pride of place in The Constitutions on preaching the word of God. The Counter-Reformation church, in opposing an exaggerated and individualistic emphasis of Protestants on personal experience, insisted that all experience of God was mediated through the hierarchical church. Ignatius, in contrast, in The Spiritual Exercises, recommended a direct personal unmediated relation with Jesus and God.. At a time when the church tended to restrict the cultural sway of the church to a European Christendom, the Jesuits insisted that Chinese Christians did not need to become western or European to become Catholics.

Pope Benedict XVI, in an address to the Jesuits, echoed a favorite formula of the Jesuits that they are called to serve 'at the frontiers of faith', to go where others do not go, to address issues of faith (e.g., inter-religious dialogue) which are, as yet, unsettled or unresolved. Naturally, there exists a subtle tension between this second characteristic of Jesuit ministries and the first. Unambiguously Catholic, to be sure, Jesuit ministry also calls for a truly living Catholic tradition, critically appropriated; a continuous reading of 'the signs of the times' and a ministry often lived 'on the margins' (or, perhaps, better 'the interface') between church and society. If as Vatican II insisted, ecclesia semper reformanda (the church is always in need of reform, as an institution and in its members), this Jesuit call to discipleship is also a call to continuous reform. That strikes me as the deepest sense to the Jesuit continuous insistence on the magis (the more or the better) and on Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam (the greater glory of God).

III. In Every Jesuit Ministry: (A) A Commitment to Formation in Deeply Personal Spirituality; (B) The Service of Faith as Involving the Promotion of Justice; (C) Commitment to Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Dialogue

(A) Commitment to Formation in Personal Spirituality

The Jesuit Order stems from deep experience of God which Ignatius encountered in his cave in Manresa and, later, shared with others in his famous Spiritual Exercises. Ignatius wanted to help people find God in all things and confront obstacles to doing this by discernment (or testing) of the spirits. In the Spiritual Exercises Ignatius carefully noted that there are many roads to God, many different forms or ways of praying and that a director of the Spiritual Exercises should honor whatever “ exercise” best helps souls to grow closer to God and Jesus. Ignatius does provide a method for doing this, suggests different modalities to pray with imagination (even using all of the five human senses in our prayer) but he knew that God remains the great initiator in prayer.

From early on, Jesuits gave the Exercises, guided people toward prayer and to find God in their lives, founded lay confraternities of prayer and service. This is a privileged ministry such that some variant of formation to and in personal spirituality should be found in every Jesuit work. In The Constitutions and elsewhere, Ignatius also fairly profusely praised something as seemingly mundane (yet accessible!) as spiritual conversation.

(B) Commitment to the Faith That Does Justice

The explicit Jesuit formulation, “ The service of faith and the promotion of Justice” only dates from Jesuit General Congregation 32 (1972) but, in some sense, its insistence on linking faith to the promotion of justice is as old as the gospel and the

gospel's linking of the kingdom of God preached by Jesus to a genuine this-worldly transformation of relationships. Jesuit documents also insist that every Jesuit ministry must include some real effort at promoting justice in our broken world. One Jesuit document refers to the commitment to the faith that does justice this way: "The instinct to live fully in God's love and, thereby, to promote a shared, lasting human good is what we address by our vocation to serve faith and promote the justice of God's kingdom." Another Jesuit document states the goal as follows: "Working together with our colleagues, every Jesuit ministry can and should promote justice in one or more of the following ways: (a) direct service and accompaniment of the poor; (b) developing awareness of the demands of justice and the social responsibility to achieve it; (c) participating in social mobilization for the creation of a more just social order."

Commitment to Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Dialogue

Jesuit General Congregation 34 (1995) speaks of ecumenism as our new way of being Christian and an indispensable ingredient in Jesuit ministry. It also lifts up inter-religious dialogue as a necessary element for promoting peace and justice in our broken and now highly inter-connected globalized world. The Congregation took notice of the fact that the Holy Father has repeatedly asked Jesuits to make inter-religious dialogue an apostolic priority for the third millennium.

By any sober accounting, Saint Ignatius Parish embodies in its programs these Jesuit charisms and priorities. It sponsors several social outreach programs for the homeless and those in prison. It presents adult formation programs in spirituality, sponsors retreats, advent and Lenten prayer sessions etc. It is, however, worth noting that many in the parish have expressed a desire for much more explicit attention to this aspect

of Jesuit formation in spirituality. The Jesuit commitment to the magis (the greater good) always allows for improvements even to good already existing programs. It is that third paramount goal for any Jesuit work—commitment to ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue—which strikes me as the area which calls for much more explicit attention at Saint Ignatius Parish. We lack, at present, any special programs to further them.