

Conference with Fr. Nicolás on Ignatian Leadership
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Meeting with Superiors and Directors of Works of the Province of Castille

The truth is that I approach this theme of leadership with a bit of apprehension, for obvious reasons. First, I am not an expert. I am sure that you know many more theories and better ideas than those that I present here. Secondly, because I recall the phrase “physician, heal thyself”. Out of everything I say here, I prohibit questions such as “Have you done all this?” All this is forbidden because *doctor, heal thyself* does not work. And third, because the risk of speaking in public and not practicing what I preach could make me come across as a liar. So, I am going to attempt to put together some simple reflections. You can mull over what I say, as well, and between us we can come up with a measure of good leadership.

I will reflect upon what spiritual leadership means. I will also reference, in my own way, Lowney’s book on heroic leadership and the leadership of the Society of Jesus. The title is a bit glorious, but you understand it perfectly. Then, I will make some reflections on how our leadership is based on our decisions of spiritual discernment. I believe this will touch all of our communities and institutions – what kind of leadership we can develop.

I. On Spiritual Leadership

With regard to spiritual leadership, I will offer three references that I will develop further when we talk about discernment.

First, all leaders in an apostolic or gospel context must reinforce and motivate their members and communities to the values and attitudes that we consider evangelical. The primary function is the reinforcement and animation of these attitudes and values.

Secondly, there is the basic concept of understanding authority as service. Pope Benedict’s renunciation has been, they say in Rome, the last great lesson of the great teacher Ratzinger, showing how the Pope is in service of the church, and not the other way around. The pope is not the ultimate figure, the ultimate figure is Christ, and when one’s service to the Church cannot be done well, he retires, because the Church is much more important than the Pope. The lesson left is that our entire concept of authority is always a form of service and no more.

And thirdly, within the context of St. Ignatius, the principal function of the leader, and to this I refer to the communities above all, is to help the community grow in Christ. In the Ignatian concept of service there is always the very important fact that growth leads to transformation. If there is no transformation, this means the process has failed. The ultimate objective is a person’s transformation, and, through individuals, the transformation of society. But this is produced through a process of growth. There are no instantaneous transformations, even though sometimes we are attracted to the idea of instantaneous change. Sometimes we believe that St. Paul fell from a horse that did not exist – and, in the Acts of the Apostles, there is no horse. The Acts tell us that Paul went to Arabia for three years, and later returned to Jerusalem to see if what he

understood was in line with the apostles, etc. It is a long process and in light of his letters we see also how St. Paul went on doing, forging...

II. Heroic Leadership

I am now going to make a reference to a book that has struck a chord, because it has flattered us by talking of Jesuit leadership as heroic leadership¹. The title sounds great, especially to Jesuits. I am going to address some of the points I believe are most important.

The first coincides with all I have read about leadership. As you know, it is an area that has produced much literature. Where they all agree, and Lowney as well, is that with good leadership there *must be an understanding of ultimate purpose*; we need a vision. Without vision there is no leader. I can say that in my visits to the Society, when I encounter a province in disorder – and yes they exist – the leadership always lacks vision. The two things go together. They lack vision, objectives, direction and the province begins to take care of itself, and leaders then emerge who self-define themselves as leaders, or begin to make decisions that the province will not be able to sustain long-term. In that famous Latin phrase attributed to St. Ignatius, in terms of the Society of Jesus, the vision must be broad, global, and in accordance with the Gospel. The phrase is “*non coerceri maximo*”², there is nothing, however big it might be, that can limit the apostolic imagination of a Jesuit, particularly that of a superior. We can see it in the courage with which some of the great missionaries in our history went out facing an entire continent – in times with no airplanes, internet, nothing – and were capable of becoming these audacious and imaginative missionaries, they had been people who truly believed beyond their own limited capacity. Even those in poor health knew how to carry out a creative vision and eventually move across the continent. Like Anchieta, who traveled on the back of a mule throughout Brazil and until he arrived in Peru and Bolivia. In his time these things were done by those with ideals and vision.

The second part of good apostolic leadership is a great adaptability in light of the long journey. Today we complain that society is changing and we have all types of crises – cultural, religious, economic... But this is not new. It has always happened, and the most creative times of the Jesuit apostolate have been times of crisis. Crisis is good when it produces creativity to survive and to keep offering quality service. Perhaps part of this capacity for adaptation to changing situations is the awareness, maintained strongly by deeds, of the active presence of God in all things. A person who believes God is in all things has no fear. I recall my last public address in Japan was moderating a discussion between a French missionary and a Japanese Franciscan. The topic was the parable of the sower. The missionary spoke of the sower as a missionary who goes forth and spreads the word of God. The Franciscan said, the sower IS God, who has sowed in the people’s hearts, and the missionary comes to gather the harvest. Therefore, when one preaches and the homily touches the heart of the congregation, they respond. But this is harvest because God has been working the hearts of the people for centuries.

¹ Lowney, Chris. “Heroic Leadership”. Loyola Press, 2005.

² Non coerceri maximo, contineri minimum, divinum est (Not to be confined by the greatest, yet to be contained within the smallest, is divine).

I believe the whole world has looked with admiration at how the Japanese people reacted to the earthquake and tsunami two years ago. This reaction is not spontaneous. It is cultivated. God has been working in the hearts of all people. The moment of crisis arrives, they react with a dignity, a depth, an attentiveness, and a capacity to empathize with others, compassion and helping others that we have not seen in any Christian country. Americans at home, in Rome, when they saw the television, said “that is impossible”. If there is a blackout the norm, in many places, would be an immediate looting of shops. Alternatively, Japanese were in the supermarket. The earthquake began. The lights went out. They took their things and exited in a line. This, where have we seen it? God was working there, using the culture, the religions, and whatever else. Then it was clear that there existed the treasure of humanity and a deep, incredible compassion. I believe that this helped the Jesuits in their previous missionary work. Out of enculturation came the acceptance of culture as a place where God works, humanity grows and positively accepts dialogue with other religions, in this way some Jesuits have been pioneers. This indicates that there was a faith and confidence that God goes first, and that we are not discovering what is not, but we are following God who works in the hearts of others.

Another element of this book is that of Magis. This has given many Jesuits the capacity to face, without fear, situations that would break down the boundaries of a person or group. Yesterday I was told that during the Korean War they did an experiment: They took prisoners of war, put them in a camp, and systematically gave them bad news – the death of a relative, a bombing, a lost battle, an illness – all bad news. The war ended and they were told that it was over. The prisoners then realized that there were no fences, railings, dogs, guards, barbed-wire in their camp. And not one of them had escaped. The fear had stopped their imagination and the possibility of escaping. This is the effect of fear. Not one of them wanted, at the end of the war, to return home. They were frozen. *Magis* is possible only if there is no fear, and therefore it is part of a leadership where instead of fear, there is confidence. Confidence that in despite of everything, we can continue forward, undertake difficult work, speak with the atheist, or speak – now – of frontiers, an image that has resonated well with all of the Society of Jesus because the frontier speaks directly to overcoming fear. To go to the most difficult situations, this is only possible when there is no fear. And this helps us see why, in the New Testament, when Jesus appears, especially in the stories of the resurrection, the fundamental message is “Do not be afraid.”

Another element of Jesuit leadership, a powerful moment and what we are seeing now with the new Pope Francis, is to see how *Ignatian spirituality* affects us. What happens when a Pope is formed in Ignatian spirituality? The Pope has been a novice master, provincial, he has had all of the elements to enter deeply into an Ignatian spirituality, and we are all expectantly waiting to see the Ignatian signals. And we see them, from his interior liberty, from not being attached to anything. On Holy Thursday, speaking with the priests, he told them two things. One, that a shepherd “live with the odor of the sheep”, encouraging priests and bishops to be with the people. It is a powerful image. But the other thing he told them is: Prepare liturgies well, with dignity, but please do not be attached to the trappings. And he used the word rags [*trapos*]³. Something unheard of in a pope, talking about liturgical vestments. But this is Ignatian, as well –

³ “From the beauty of all these liturgical things, which is not so much about trappings and fine fabrics than about the glory of our God resplendent in his people, alive and strengthened, we turn now to a consideration of activity, action.” (Pope Francis, Chrism Mass, March 28, 2013)

don not be attached to anything. To serve, and do it well, but without attachments. This is Ignatian. The liberty of oneself. To be completely free of one's own ego. In Ignatian spirituality one hopes for a total liberty from ego. Part of the dynamic of the exercises and Ignatian spirituality is interior liberty. An interior liberty that permits us to choose, seek always, and become closer to God's will. We will never have it in hand, therefore we will try to change our minds. We will be able to say, between that which we have seen, this is what gets us closer to God's will, without affirming that it is complete. But what there is is the liberty to keep searching.

Five years ago, in the 35th General Congregation, these decisions of ours were discussed in which we seek the letting go of self. In the Congregation's preparations it was said that in the Society of Jesus there is not a crisis of obedience, but there is a crisis of leadership. The Jesuit will protest a lot, but finally he obeys. In the end, let us not exaggerate...

But there is a crisis of leadership, and this crisis of leadership can come precisely from these attachments that in the end trap us, and are difficult to let go. A good leader should above all be free, capable of changing his opinion, because he has peace knowing that what we all seek is God's will, not the superior's will. This is extremely important, and if it is what we seek, then the opinion of all is important, and listening, consulting, and eventually arriving at a better decision is part of the system of obedience.

Another important element of good leadership is *developing habits of reflection*. The superior who is super-occupied and barely has time to sit and breathe will be a poor superior. If he does not have habits of reflection to ponder things and help his community, when they go to consult him, he will have much difficulty.

In a seminary that we had in the Philippines, P. Jim Moran, a Filipino, presented a Johari window in the army. The two variables were intelligence and work. And he said, he who is not intelligent, nor works, is the soldier. He who is not intelligent, but works, is the sergeant. The one who is intelligent and works is the captain, who works a lot. This is what characterizes the army. But he who is intelligent, but does not work, is the general. Why does not he work? Because he needs time to think, reflect, develop strategies and a battle plan. If the general, the general of the army, that is, lacks capacity to reflect, the army will go down in defeat. This helped me a lot, in the time that I was provincial, to seek time to reflect.

One does not have to be afraid to be a leader with valor. Not long ago I saw on the Internet a definition of Valor. It said: Courage is fear that has said its prayers.⁴

Another element, and I am nearly done, is *it is important for good leadership to distinguish between the goal and the means*, to not confuse them, or lose oneself in the means. With means we can have very different opinions, but the important thing is that we have clear goals, and not whatever mean will serve. Knowing how to distinguish ends and means is very important to not lose time in irrelevant discussions.

⁴ El valor es el miedo pasado por la oración, o el coraje es el temor que ha hecho sus oraciones.

And so, an element that is not in the book, but is very important. *Good leadership has to be always open to evaluation and continued assessment.* Why is that not in the book? Because the author is very kind and only wanted to put in good things about the Jesuits. He came to Manila when I was there and gave a lecture, speaking of factors that he considered part of the heroic leadership of the Society and did not say anything negative. Then a Filipino Jesuit raised his hand during the question time and said, “You have not said anything negative. Is that because there is nothing negative in our leadership?” The author began to backpedal, change the subject and escaped, but the Filipino came back and said, “You have not responded to my question. Is there nothing we can learn about leadership?” Then, he answered, “Well, since you insist, there are two things. One is that the Jesuits, as with all clergy, are resistant to review.” It is a little like Charlie Brown in the cartoons. There is one that I really like where he is playing baseball, it is raining and they are losing, as always, and Charlie Brown⁵ says, “How is it possible that we lose when we have such good intentions?”

The cleric tends to confuse his effort with the result. And when evaluation is discussed he always says, “is it that I am not doing well or what?” Then it becomes personal and is difficult to evaluate. Yet evaluation is normal in any institution, business and for any objective. To learn to integrate evaluation into our leadership is extremely important. Occasionally, in the Society, we have a system that after three years, the consultor does an evaluation of the superiors and then it is decided if they will continue or if that was enough, and they can be changed. This is not automatic. That is, a superior is not named for six years. This is not in the Constitutions nor in the rules that we have. It is three years and depending on an evaluation can be continued, and in any case, not for too much time. Generally six years is considered the limit. Evaluation is important.

The second thing that Lowney said, is that we have to apply numbers to this. This is hard for us, because we believe that in the Gospel everything is spiritual so to quantify things and say that a certain percentage of the people do not like my homilies does not sit well with us. My homilies reach 30%, which is okay, but there are 60-70% that do not like them. We do not like this, quantification bothers us. “God works in hearts,” we say, and we put it in the hands of God or the Holy Spirit, and we do not want to quantify or carry out a concrete evaluation that can help us improve our service. This is something fairly general. I experimented with it in meetings with local superiors in Japan, I have experimented with it in other sites as well and it seems that it is cross-cultural. The cleric is not a good subject for evaluation. He feels threatened.

III. Leadership Based on Spiritual Discernment

Now I am going to say a few things about how leadership is based in spiritual discernment. The ultimate norm in our leadership is God’s will. This is clear. The problem is that we cannot define very easily God’s will as if we had it in hand. The most we can say is that we get close to it, that it is as close as possible. If the ultimate rule is God’s will, secondly, this means that leadership is about a process, not a fixed unit or an instantaneous thing. We are talking about a process – how is God’s will found? And here is where discernment enters. How can we arrive closer to this will of God? It is more of a process than a conclusion arrived at by

⁵ Character from the cartoon Peanuts, created by Charles M. Shultz

one superior. So that this process is real and spiritual, we need two ingredients, and later I will tell you three conditions.

Between the two ingredients the first is the community. God's will is found in community. Whether it be the church, the diocese, the religious community or an apostolic work, a school or community of students. This is a crucial ingredient. You need to have community to be able to discern. If there is no community it is very difficult to discern. For discernment to be true, you must have a true community.

Secondly, of course, is the *principle of liberty*. Liberty as principle. What I refer to is to all service in religious life, and I say this with certain solemnity because it seems to me that it is one of the things that is not understood in certain places, the principle that we serve God freely. In complete freedom. Religious service is free and therefore, the superior has to motivate, explain, communicate, but cannot force and say "Here I am your superior and you do not have to do anything more than obey." That is an abuse of authority. It is a free service and a self-donation that we make by entering religious life, and also as we develop our growth in Christ within religious life. This principle of freedom has to be kept alive. Therefore, the concern of the superior is going to be how to involve the community in the process. I have seen, when I was provincial, individuals who would not enter into the process of institutional discernment, for example, but later, if the vote did not favor their own plans, they would come to me, as provincial, to say, you cannot permit this. In that moment you have to tell them, "you have had your opportunity, you have had the opportunity to participate but did not want to, and now you want to use power. This power is illegitimate". That is to say, that there are methods and processes that respect the dignity of the collaborators, that respect a series of principles that have a deep meaning and that cannot be overlooked. Therefore you need these two principles, those of community and liberty. And what are the three conditions?

The three conditions are: *That the community, those who discern, participate in the vision, that is to say, they also practice interior freedom.* If there is no internal freedom in a community there is no discernment. I have seen community discernments that have fallen apart, and from the beginning you could see there was no freedom. It was a pre-made decision and then the process is not true and breaks down in the end. There is no happiness, no consensus, and no sense of saying: we have walked and we have come closer to God's will. The first condition is, therefore, internal freedom. With all choices that are possible.

The second, complete information. If information is not given to all who participate in the decision, this decision is corrupt. One must give complete information. That is, suppose a superior says "I am not saying anything, but what do you all think?" And all think "A" and only then the superior says, "well, I am going to decide 'B' because I know things you do not", that is an abuse of authority. If I know things that you do not know, I have to tell them at the beginning, not at the end to shield and hide myself.

The third condition is that we all participate in the same type of religious values, because if we do not have the same religious valuation, we cannot arrive at the same objectives. For example, the idea of poverty, especially in economic crisis. What does this mean for our way of working, of laboring, of getting closer to others? The option for the poor has to be something

participated in so that it can be part of the decision. The act of what we seek first and foremost is apostolic fruit, that we are not here working to create an ivory tower or cultivate a career or to strengthen the prestige of an institution, but we want to serve the students, if it is a school, or serve the community if it is a parish, etc. Then, fundamental values like justice or a way of being that respects others.

And finally, if we want to add a fourth condition, I would add one, certainly, for religious superiors: *Ignatian criteria*, with which the Jesuits are very familiar. For example, *Magis*, to seek the best fruit and the greater good for all. That is, there is a desire for growth and betterment of the quality of our service that is a part of these Ignatian criteria. “The greatest need”. This has very practical consequences. There are provinces where they are considering opening a high school, or university, or not. Then, what must be studied is the situation of the country, and to see what the greatest necessity is. If it is general primary education, then that is where we need to put our efforts. If it is a university because high schools are already covered, then we take the risk of working towards a university. There is always that criterion, very Ignatian, which is the greatest need. Then, as they told us at the 35th General Congregation, when no one else is responding to this necessity. There is the concept of “the field is abandoned” because it is a difficult field, because it is difficult to access. This is what the Pope called “frontiers” and what he asked the Society of Jesus to attend to. We should not enter in competition with others who already want to do what we want to do. This competition serves us little. Sometimes there are elements of competition where there is no other option than to accept the ability to offer a quality service. But, if there are many who want to do this service, why do they need the Society of Jesus? There is also the factor of “no one wants to respond to that”. When someone tells me he does not have work, I always tell him that service to the poor is open. The roads and traffic all go in the direction of serving the powerful. In service to the poor there is no traffic and if you want to run, then, you can run as far as you wish. And I think it is true. That is where the Society of Jesus has to have options and then, naturally, it is something viable and possible within the Church. That is, we ought not create our own domain.

IV. Conclusion, Final Synthesis

As a way of summarizing I will talk about the conditions to be a leader, almost aphorisms. In one of my readings on leadership it says, **“If you find yourself on top and alone that means there is something you are not doing well.”** This means that the superior who finds himself all alone is not doing something well; that he is not participating in community, or involving others. I find myself with the general council, and that in communicating and participating with the council I neither find that I am alone, nor do I have to feel like I am alone. They say “it is the General’s work up there.” But there is no “up there”, it is a work of service and therefore we have a community of service and the problems that I can convey, and in all of them, the General Council helps me.

“The most difficult person to govern is oneself.” This aphorism is evident.

“When they give you a kick in the rear it means that you are ahead.” Sounds good, no? To not be afraid because they criticize me, because if they give you a kick in the rear it is a good sign. It means that you are moving forward, and you do not need to worry about it.

“The best leaders are great listeners.” They know how to listen to learn.

“If you want to know how a leader is doing it, look at his community.” Look at the people, at his collaborators, or look at the students if you want to know what a professor is like.

“The greatest error is to not ask anyone what you are doing wrong.” Because we all make mistakes, we all commit errors, and then, it is part of the evaluation that we spoke about earlier. I believe that being capable of asking others what they think and receiving this feedback helps us greatly.

In summary, I will say the things that I have found helpful and can be condensed into five ideas:

Distinguish between leadership and management. They are not the same thing. The manager does things well. The leader does good things. They are different. Management is a part of leadership but it can be done in a technical manner and with help of techniques.

Secondly, **enable others so they can work well.** Train to think, imagine, and do. The leader serves his collaborators so they do the work. A good leader gives little to talk about. His collaborators give much to talk about, and the leader is the one that enables them to do so.

The third is **“vision”**. Ignatian, ecclesial, evangelical. A sense of direction. The leader has to be capable of formulating this vision, which then becomes a part of the lives of others. I recall an Anglican priest who was made director of a school in Tokyo. He was convinced that they needed changes to put the students more in contact with nature, creativity, imagination, etc. But he saw that the professors were on another path. And he began to say this: the Japanese education system is not good, it is missing this, and that. But he patiently did not change anything. After two years the teachers began to say what he had been saying two years ago. He told himself that this was the moment. He began to make changes. They were well-received by the students but the professors... they lost 20% of the students who did not want anything new, but they gained another 20% of new students whose parents wanted this new type of education, more imaginative, integral, etc. The problem came when the students graduated from the middle school – and went to the next grade. Then they began to protest because they missed it. Finally the solution was to make this priest director of the next school, where he continued the process of change. All of this means that the important thing is that the vision is shared. A single person with vision cannot change anything.

The fourth key idea is a **person worthy of confidence**. The leader has to be honest, direct and consistent. An inconsistent leader creates a mess with his colleagues. Consistency begets confidence. When a provincial loses the confidence of a province he cannot continue forward and has to change quickly. The individual cannot see it and believes that he is doing well, but has lost confidence, people will not follow him, and he must change quickly, because if he does not the province will disintegrate. It is important that the leader be a person of confidence. What is happening today with the political world? Today we do not have leaders. There are not any. There are inconsistencies such that the public cannot follow this type of leader. And the same

happens in religious life. And in institutions that have an evangelical inspiration, Ignatian, a leader is needed who is basically consistent. Not perfect, because nobody is. But inherently consistent, and who creates confidence.

Finally, I think it is very important to **develop meaning**, develop significance. In terms of Jesuit life, when we discover that, in Ignatian terms, there is a part in our life, whatever it may be, that must be carried in a particular way, it is important to communicate this to all of the provincials, local superiors, consultors and such, so that there is a growth of purpose, or Management of Meaning. Therefore, part of leadership is communicating. A leader must be a great communicator, because if he is not capable of communicating meaning, he will not bring forth the development he wants. The leader has to be a communicator, without making himself a protagonist. When the leader becomes a celebrity, leadership diminishes. The leader cannot be the center. He makes others the center. It is the work, the institution, the school, the social center, the parish, that becomes the center and all is directed there. When we are ourselves in the center, whether it be in a position of leadership or as an individual, then the influence we could have is lost. And the leader comes who believes he is everything and is strictly necessary and has to last forever...but we know that is not so. Therefore, he has to communicate a vision, but without centering it on himself. We said at the beginning that the great lesson of Benedict XVI is to have seen this, that sometimes the leader has the obligation of stepping down to serve. When a German journalist published a book-length interview with the Pope⁶, the Pope then said if a pope realizes that he is no longer capable of handling the duties of office, then he has a right, and also an obligation to resign. And he speaks of obligation. This is very important. Communicating significance supposes a capacity for communication that has to be part of a shared leadership, so that the others are at the center and not oneself.

Many more things could be said, but one must not abuse the patience of those listening...

Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, SJ
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(Original: Spanish)

⁶ Seewald, Peter. "Light of the World". Ignatius Press, 2010.