FIRST THINGS

A Postmodern Asceticism

The ignatian way to God—what Father Arrupe called *"our* way"—leads each person not through a hermitage or an orderly monastic life, but through spiritual conversation and self-manifestation, and through communal discernment for mission. So the way has gone from the beginning, as we have learned during the past decades of *re-founding,* and so the way has to continue.

For the ignatian way was shaped by the lives of the first Friends in the Lord. Diverse as they were, the Friends in the Lord collaborated intimately to create a company in mission with Christ. They felt strongly that their experiences of friendship came from the heart of God. Look at the "first deliberation," a formal interaction which we have a record of, from this viewpoint. A group of Masters trained in and for *disputatio* set out on a deliberation. Each prayerfully spoke his own mind while the rest listened. Everyone spoke in his turn. Then all openly discussed what they had heard, not to prove anything but to reach consensus. Each allowed and even invited the others to shape his thoughts and desires, and each contributed to the thoughts and desires of all the others. Every one helped shape the common decision to be a company, the decision that shaped him personally and for life. Theirs was an extraordinary relationship.

The work of renewal and re-founding, done by all of the ignatian congregations during four decades as modernity was winding down, has left us with a clear appreciation of how extraordinary their relationships were. We worked through the renewal as people imbued with all the modern qualities—individualism, aggressive realism, a slightly rationalistic asceticism, a sense of the absoluteness of universal truths, and a great trust in progress. In our return to roots, we found ourselves challenged precisely in these modern qualities of ours. And in the end, the re-founding brought us to the edge of the extraordinary relationships we found in all of the ignatian congregations' founders.

The creative fidelity of Friends in the Lord. This is the context of "creative fidelity" that Fr Kolvenbach talked about at Loyola, in the seminal discourse printed in this review. A shorthand description of creative fidelity is that we are searching for what Master Ignatius and the First Companions would do were they alive today. The ignatian congregations are asking the same questions about their founders.

If re-founding was going on as modern times were ending, the process of creative fidelity is going on as postmodern times are beginning. And just as the members of the ignatian congregations were marked earlier on with the qualities of modernity, we are quite clearly marked now with the qualities of postmodernity—open sharing of information, flexibly adapting charism and apostolic initiatives, freely collaborating within and without. In such a time, individuals cannot manage creative fidelity on their own. Anyhow, in the ignatian tradition, creative fidelity necessarily brings us to act together. For the historical source of our ignatian spirituality was a dynamic group. It is true that Master Ignatius was the guiding graced spirit. But he guided the Friends in the Lord to create the company as a group. Now the Holy Spirit has led our search in creative fidelity back to one reality about our charism: radically, we are Friends in the Lord. Friends enjoy friendships. And friendships are relationships.

we are asking ourselves to recapture for Christ's sake the first companions' extraordinary relationships

The Holy Spirit that led all of the ignatian congregations in re-founding is leading us now in creative fidelity into some significant new relationships. Take just three that were formed by communal discernment. The option for the poor, first, is not a decision to take up a *social cause*. Rather, it is a choice of a new relationship with poor and marginated persons. Then, second, the enterprise of inculturation is not a shift in *missiology*. Rather, at home, it is the day-to-day living by a counter-cultural standard; abroad, it is the empathetic choice of speaking the language of those to whom we are sent in mission, and of adopting their religious sensibility. Third, the mandate to dialogue across religious divisions does not enlist us in the worldwide interreligious movement. Rather, it calls all of us to a more open and free way of relating with all of those who are "the others."

As if to make sure that no one would misunderstand creative fidelity in the ignatian charism, the last Jesuit congregation defined as a "characteristic of our way of life" that we are "persons *for* others and *with* others." Other ignatian congregations have said much the same. The phrase sounds rather nice; it should sound an alarm.

We are asking ourselves to recapture for Christ's sake the first companions' extraordinary relationships.

A universe of relationships. Picture it this way: Eons ago, our planets and the sun ordered themselves into a universe. The shared force of the universe was greater by far than any individual planet's. And once the planets locked together in orbit around the sun, the universal force among them determined each orbit more strongly by far than each planet's own force. The universe's force still determines how earth and each of the other planets move.

The parallel with a community and its members could be pushed too far, but it can be instructive. At the foundation, a group of friends created

a community. Or, to use the image, the Company of Jesus began as a universe of relationships. Once the Friends in the Lord committed themselves to that community, it shaped their lives. They thought of themselves as Companions of Jesus first of all, and only within that universe as missionary or scholar or preacher. Each remained free, of course, but the choices each one freely made were shaped by the Companionship.

This is practically a universal principle in dedicated life. Take a look at the way the Christian Life Community shaped the life of Vitaliano Nañagas. He tells about it in the interview later in these pages. Look also at how some people in the town of Castres, who did nothing more than make the Exercises in Daily Life together, found their lives affected.

The Company of Jesus, true to its charism, continued all through history as a universe of relationships. Recently, however, we discovered through the processes of re-founding that we had somehow misplaced those first relationships. In the spirit of creative fidelity, we are trying to recover them. Perhaps the most radical recovery has been the genuinely extraordinary one-to-one relationship of director and exercitant in *Spiritual Exercises*. It has affected many individuals' prayer, of course; we all know that. But it has also quietly affected the whole way we relate among ourselves by renewing the manifestation of conscience, for instance, and by moving us toward communal discernment. Relying more and more on this communal discernment as we moved out of modernity and into postmodernity, the universal Company made several choices—the options for the poor, for a culture of dialogue, and for inculturation. These options have altered the universe of our relationships, the ways we relate as Friends in the Lord.

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Each of us has felt strongly pressured by the option for the poor to give new shape to how we relate through our vow of poverty. We have had to pray and wrestle with some strong convictions and feelings about one another's behaviors, challenged by the culture of dialogue. And we have been challenged by inculturation in an odd and unavoidable way. Many of us have lived by an earlier asceticism that had been inculturated into modern individualism—private mental prayer and daily examens, spiritual communion by "culpas" and litanies, private Masses and the common life. That earlier asceticism freed us to attend to our individual spiritual life. But now the culture supporting it is gone, and the asceticism has become an umbrella without a frame. The culture of the world we now live in requires another asceticism—an asceticism of relationships.

Of course, there had been an asceticism of relationships in our constitutions all along. It demanded, among other things, deep mutual respect, yielding to one another, thinking others better than self, giving one another hope and encouragement, and accompanying one another *in articulo mortis*. But the constitutions could not have been written with postmodern relationships in mind, relationships structured by constant sharing of

information, strategic planning, flexibly applying our charism, collaboratively adapting new ministries, and so on. These make demands on relationships that go beyond what the constitutions could help with. It would be optimistic to expect to learn from the constitutions, for instance, how human relationships affect a province's strategic planning.

We are, therefore, being thrown back to the charism of the first Friends in the Lord. We are asking ourselves, How would they respond in the human systems current now? What ascetical practices would help them respond to the demands that relationships now make in consecrated and dedicated life? We will have to think about the systems of human relationships to answer in creative fidelity.

A Community of Extraordinary Relationships. Humankind has learned a good deal in recent decades about human systems—family, extended family, workplace, parish, neighborhood, and so on. It is in these systems that Christ is incarnate. And we have understood how grievously the individualism of modernity had affected all of them. Dedicated people have also understood that individualism had affected religious congregations and ignatian networks as well. In fact, among the issues never adequately addressed during the years of re-founding is how we live in community. Our documents talked about community life, of course, and about ordinary human relations. But we jumped from there to communal spiritual discernment and strategic planning. The truth is that we all feel at times that we live together like apples in a bin. What real creative fidelity requires of us who follow ignatian spirituality is that we come to live together more like a bunch of grapes. (Not merely a simile; check John 15). How are we going to get from ordinary human relationships to the extraordinary relationships of the first Friends in the Lord?

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The congregations have been working away on that question, and so have the ignatian networks. For instance, the Dorotheas' new *Directives* begin with the declaration that the sisters embrace solitude of heart and deepen their self-knowledge for the sake of a growing affective maturity in Christ. "So within the Community we live sisterly relationships in a profound and freeing communion."

The Jesuits' Complementary Norms, to give another instance, take a line from the last general congregation. When the congregation took up the topic of chastity, it noted that the Constitutions' comparison of a man's chastity to the angels' has not thrown a lot of light on postmodern human relationships. So the congregation added a long decree on chastity which is full of talk about relationships. "Through the many forms of their mutual presence to one another and their investment of themselves in one another's lives, Jesuits mediate to each other the presence of that Lord to whom they have offered themselves through their vow of chastity" [248].

Wrapped in the perhaps necessarily abstruse language, declarations such as these are calling for extraordinary relationships in dedicated life.

Begin in ordinary human relationships. Creative fidelity—the process of asking what the Master Ignatius and his Friends in the Lord would do if they were alive today – demands today that communities take a hard look at our human relationships. Whenever we do that, we find out that psychology, sociology, and pastoral theology are correct: *ordinary human relationships* are marred by limitation and failure. Anyone who has lived in community or a network more than a few years will know that dedicated people are not immune to those limitations and failures: keeping one another at arm's length, living in conflict, cutting others off, depending overmuch and being depended on overmuch, and the oddly persistent aberration when everyone talks to everyone about an individual's behavior but no one talks to the individual.

These *ordinary* human relationships—perhaps by definition—have to be acceptable in banks and businesses. But they ought not be acceptable in dedicated life, certainly not in the ignatian tradition. God's gift in this tradition includes the call to grow beyond *ordinary* human relationships. To live as Friends in the Lord is to live extraordinary relations. So it would look as though the asceticism we have to practice in this postmodern time includes work on our ordinary human relationships.

The asceticism we need right now has nothing large or grand about it. The need to think about ordinary human relations is humbling, at times bitterly humbling. Quite a few of us, some would say, still have a good deal of work to do on the grand vices of pride, covetousness, lust, and the rest—to save our souls. But every one of us in the ignatian tradition also has a good deal of work to do on some galling glitches in our relationships, like cutoff, distancing, and conflict—to make us graced Friends in the Lord. These name just three of the dysfunctions in ordinary human relationships; experts could list many more. But a careful look at these three might suggest why we need an asceticism that will transmute ordinary human relationships into the extraordinary relationships that make Friends in the Lord.

First, one called "cutoff". Paradoxically, some people relate to others by cutting them off. A group rejects a member. A member never comes to the group's meetings or prayer. One in community will refuse to talk to another. One will force another off the committee. These kinds of *cutoff* have been going on since Joseph in Egypt and seem to be perpetual in human relationships. But there are specifically postmodern kinds of *cutoff.* They are less frolicsome than ejecting members and often go disguised as apostolic virtue. As vocations diminish and the opportunities for apostolic work escalate, dedicated people find it easy to overcommit to work. Then, naturally, we just do not have time for any "merely internal" business, a situation also common in postmodern families and neighborhoods. We are not at meetings. We work alone. Almost universally, we do not think that cutting others off this way is, itself, a problem. But it is important to note

that cutting others off does not end the relationship. On the contrary, *cutoff* is an intense relationship. The member who cuts the community off not only puts tension in it but also hauls on the community's apostolic freedom like an anchor.

The ignatian tradition began with friends who spent many Thursday afternoons in what we now call *sharing*. And we are now requiring our communities and apostolic teams to listen and pray so that they can plan together. The Sisters of Notre Dame of Coesfeld are conducting an action-reflection project on their charism which involves every member and every community. They hope to plan for formation and for attracting vocations. The sister who cuts herself off from this kind of community project needs to examine that before God. She needs to examine what attitudes, decisions, and habits have led her to cut off the rest. As humble as it all might seem, this is the stuff of ongoing metanoia from ordinary to extraordinary relationships.

The congregations of ignatian charism, following the lead of the Church as a whole, have officially adopted some ascetical principles against cutoff. For instance, The Oblates of the Virgin Mary (whose apostolic work is with the *Spiritual Exercises*) contend against this cutoff in their renewed constitutions: "It would always be better to work as a team" (Ch.5, art. 37). As another instance, the Jesuit Thirty-Fourth Congregation officially made "the culture of dialogue... a distinctive characteristic of our Society" [Complementary Norm 265]. It adopted the fourfold dialogue recommended by the Church, beginning with "the dialogue of life, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations." Unless the congregation was merely making postmodern noises, it precluded the aloneness of cutoff. How can cut-off Jesuits "share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute"? Perhaps the congregation was promoting philosophical discourse on abstract ideas. Probably not.

In the real world, *dialogue* means personally, humbly, and patiently relating with others. It is so rare in ordinary human relationships that it raises hallelujahs and headlines when it happens. So here is a fresh dimension for our new asceticism: the self-oblation of listening humbly and patiently while others tell about their faith and prayer, and allowing their experience of God to illumine our own.

What this leads us to in creative fidelity is clear. We cannot, with any integrity, live cut off from one another to any extent. We cannot any longer simply cut ourselves off from others, whether the others are in another church or religion—or in our own community.

Second, the one called "distancing." People who live in relationships that last a long time are sure to challenge one another to grow and change. Some defend themselves against the challenge, and against the growth and change, by keeping their distance. Here is another ordinary human relationship, unhappily only too common even in dedicated life. Think of the affable religious who lives in the community as though it were a residential

hotel (an old folks' home?). They arrive and remain more as the result of an administrative arrangement than of a choice to live as a member of the community. One province tells about a famously distanced provincial, so remote that members would remark when bad things happened that they would not have happened were the provincial still alive. Serious dedicated people recognize distancing as somehow dysfunctional. And in many cultures, it is a dis-grace in community life, repelling new members instead of attracting them.

an asceticism that will transmute ordinary human relationships into the extraordinary relationships that make Friends in the Lord

The ordinary human relationship of distancing flourishes in silence broken by small talk. Dedicated people admit living together for long periods without any serious conversation—always excepting football and the kitchen. These topics are all right, actually, except when they replace everything else. Then the community gathers in meetings. We too commonly feel that the meetings are burdensome and unproductive. So we call on management sciences to improve "the processes." But the process is not the problem. The final problem is living distanced from one another. Those who live distanced from one another cannot, on the spur of the moment, develop a mutual confidence that gives room to sharing a spiritual hope or an apostolic desire. Those who hold others at arms' length are not going to say suddenly, "I felt how keenly Jesus wanted us to be with the poor, when I was praying this morning." Yet this is precisely the kind of sharing that creative fidelity cries out for.

Keeping a distance from others, it is true, can be a special call or grace in the ascetical life. We cannot tell all of our experiences to everyone. We sensibly measure what we tell about our experience of God to each of those God gives us as companions. Necessarily, we will be intimate with a very few and close to a few more. But extraordinary relations in dedicated life require that we be somehow open and candid with all. That precludes being distant from them. It requires the kind of "mutual presence" and personal investment in one another that the last congregation talked about.

In this time of individualism and mobility, the way of least resistance for any community is to get stuck in a set of distanced relationships. The members may be affable and supportive, but we hold one another at arm's length. Sometimes we might feel the distance among us rather intensely, but that will not happen often as long as distance is softened by superficiality, silence, and simply staying away from one another. We can easily live cheerfully from day to day without the mature human contacts that challenge us to "a life lived in the world and at the heart of humanity," as Fr Kolvenbach puts it later in these pages. The *world* is full of hungry and thirsty people; the *heart of humanity* is breaking with violence and alienation. If we distance ourselves from one another, we will alleviate none of that.

We need today some mundane ascetical practices that militate against distancing, since it is so easy to fall into. We should be embarrassed to have to admit that we still need them. The willingness to simply speak one's mind, for instance. The candor to say out loud how one's spirit moves in the matter at hand. The selflessness to feel genuine interest in what another member thinks and feels on a given point.

the cure is an ascetical practice proper to the postmodern, mobile, anonymous world: transparency

The community member who is always silent during community discussions and apostolic discernment is very probably practicing a form of distancing. The first Companions would not put up with this silence now, as they required of themselves then that each one say what he had in mind before they opened discussion. Creative fidelity in this postmodern world requires the same asceticism.

This asceticism can be tough, because in most of us the roots of distancing can go deep: A fear of having one's gifts or limitations really known. A distrust of the others whom God has given one to love and to be loved by. A man's fierce attachment to personal control over his apostolic work. A woman's ambition to prove for her community that women can succeed in a sexist culture. Fear, distrust, control, and ambition grow into distancing in community and apostolic life, so they are real subjects for spirituality and asceticism. They also grow into a form of distancing that really subverts community and apostolic discernment: deceitfulness.

In its simplest form, dedicated persons deceive themselves and try to deceive the community. There was the famous case of the alcoholic who refused to go for treatment "because then the community will know that I'm an alcoholic." His exasperated provincial explained to him that the entire province already knew he was an alcoholic. But dedicated persons distance themselves for less urgent reasons than alcoholism. Some simply go about their apostolic activities quietly, almost secretly. They say nothing in meetings. Or worse, they say things not consonant with their lives, like the egregiously absent man who said he was felt that community life was fine. The distanced are not necessarily lying; if they keep their distance carefully, they need never lie. But it is the truth that sets us free.

The ordinary human relationship of distancing can be healed. The cure is an ascetical practice proper to the postmodern, mobile, anonymous world: transparency. It is needed by international corporations and governments, authorities claim, merely for the sake of honesty. It is needed in apostolic communities for a much deeper reason: the way God loves. In God, love is the thing done and it always means mutual sharing. If we are to love the way God loves, it is hard to see that we will not share our graced experiences, the insights earned by prayer, and the convictions raised in us by God's Spirit. This is the extraordinary relationship of transparency. It cannot co-exist with distancing.

Third, the tight relationship of "conflict." Dedicated people, in particular, might be inclined to think that conflict is not a relationship, but the absence of it. The truth is that conflict can go on only among those who are relating. It takes two to make a war. Some in the ignatian congregations might remember that, during first decades of re-founding, good dedicated people went through vociferous conflicts, anguishing and blaming. The habit and roman collar were hot items, as were guitars and informal liturgy. *Fights* might not be too strong a word as religious made dicey choices.

Although even the echoes of those battles have died down, conflict has not ended in ignatian congregations and networks. In dedicated life, we live a time of high anxiety, fed by a long list of developments: members leaving, the rest aging, vocations lacking, *cutoffs* and *distancing* rattling around the Church, intransigent global poverty, the fractious struggle against naked neoliberalism, and recurrent violence and injustice. Each of these make us anxious. Taken all together in this postmodern culture, they force us to plan, constantly, which is yet another source of anxiety among us. And anxiety provokes and sharpens conflict.

As did many other chapters and congregations, the last Jesuit congregation demanded that provincials and moderators think large even while they ran their own shops. It called on them to watch "the greater needs of the universal Church" and to set "global and regional priorities" while they "establish their own respective priorities" [461]. So when Father General Kolvenbach called on them at Loyola to think beyond the province to the region and worldwide Company, he was not giving them a task. He was calling on them to an ascetical purification from some of the human sources of conflict.

Jesus' way is to live with God's grace by the standard of extraordinary human relationships

In at least some of these human sources of conflict, Ignatian spirituality will find what the first Annotation calls "inordinate attachments," the stuff of ignatian asceticism. The sources of conflict are not just ideas that we know we have. They are also, and perhaps even more, our culturally ingrained perspectives, perceptions, values, and habits. Anyone who follows ignatian spirituality has to keep in mind that our passions and tendencies can be as inordinate as our ideas and opinions.

This disorder of our passions and tendencies does not lurk in secret. We show it concretely in the many meetings that creative fidelity is calling for, and in varying ways. Some want to escape the authority of the group—of the universe in which we orbit—by trying to control it. One provincial said his men hated meetings because only one could run a meeting and everyone of them wanted to run everything. His province's meetings were rarely tranquil. Others unwittingly try to dominate the group by expressing their convictions so vehemently that the rest can do nothing but fight them off. This is debate, not discourse, and it is not what the First Companions modeled. Here is today's asceticism: blessed are they who say what they think so that others can hear it. And blessed are those who take to heart

what they hear from their Friends in the Lord. This is the asceticism of extraordinary relationships.

Reaching maturity beyond conflict requires a sometimes quite terrible asceticism. It requires the cultivation of spiritual calm and the kind of mellowness that Jesus showed at Cana and Zaccheus' house. It demands that we visit others' opinions and convictions and take good from them. In an age of anxiety and escalating pressures, we cultivate Jesus' calm and mellowness when we live by a standard other than the world's. Certainly, other than the world's standard of power and wealth; just as certainly, other than the standard of ordinary human relationships. Jesus' way, as the Friends in the Lord follow it, is to live with God's grace by the standard of extraordinary human relationships. But until each one finds out how anxiety and pressures show up as conflict in our relationships—anxieties and pressures felt by each one because they are *among* us like the forces in the universe—we will not even see the difference between the standards. And we will never get beyond ordinary human relationships to the extraordinary ones called for by being Friends in the Lord.

The radical postmodern asceticism. The asceticism this demands is not for children and will not be mastered by the young. As we mature, we have to learn how to objectify our own passions and tendencies, how to stand back from them and see them as qualities, habits, or so on, instead of merely as *self.* This means that we get beyond *being* our passions and tendencies. We grow to the point of recognizing that we *have* particular passions and tendencies. We know better than to excuse ourselves by saying, "Well, I'm a conservative." or, "Well, I *am* a six on the enneagram." The mature have done the ascetical work that brings us to the point of saying that "I *have* conservative convictions; I *have* the six's limitations." That is what I have; and what I have, I once did not have. What I now have, I can come to the point of now longer having. Or at least, I hope so, with help, so that I can grow into the extraordinary relationships which our way to God calls me to.

The ignatian charism presses each Friend in the Lord to reach a radical independence. Its first postulate is that the Holy Spirit moves each person, directly and independently. At the same time, the ignatian charism presses for a true *inter*dependence. The same Spirit moves those who follow ignatian spirituality to both. Some kind of holy interdependence shows up among the founders of all of the ignatian congregation, but the first instance is the one most pertinent to creative fidelity. The ten first Friends in the Lord all wanted the same thing—Jerusalem, a year of waiting, Rome, offering themselves to the pope. This rather wild idea did not come from something they ate or drank. It came from a radical asceticism as each one let the shared idea become his own passionate desire and then his free election.

This same radical asceticism enables the interdependence described by the Thirty-Second General Congregation as the "*only way*... our solidarity with the poor will gradually become a reality." Relying "on the unity we enjoy with one another and our opportunity to share in one another's

experience, we must all acquire deeper sensitivity from those Jesuits who have chosen lives of closer approximation to the problems and aspirations of the deprived" [98].

Deliberately gaining from others a deeper sensitivity to anything that leads to the cross suggests an extraordinary relationship.