

TO FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES OF THE SOCIETY OF JESUS

Précis: This letter of 27 September 1991 came at the end of the ignatian year. It came as a surprise: a Jesuit superior general writing to laity, expounding ignatian spirituality for a secular life. The letter first thanks friends and colleagues and then notes the pluralism of “the ignatian network” and how the members are linked. In a series of paragraphs, it explores how ignatian spirituality responds to the specific challenges in modern life. Fr Kolvenbach’s dual purpose (he told the Jesuits) was to help our friends to serve the Reign of God better and to tighten our bonds with them. The past ten years have fulfilled its hopes: people want deeper ignatian spirituality and closer relationships with the Company. The letter’s impact on General Congregation Thirty-Four might be measured by its vigorous document thirteen. Its impact on at least some partners and colleagues might be savored in the responses following the letter.

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Dear Friends,
The Peace of Christ!

Introduction

1. The anniversary of the approval of the Society of Jesus, which occurs one year after the beginning of the Ignatian Year, is a good opportunity for me to greet all of you—men and women, friends and fellow-workers—who are generously involved in the Society's varied, world-wide apostolate.

2. My first word to you is thanks, heartfelt thanks. For without you, without your cooperation, Jesuit apostolates could not offer effective service to the Church, to the people of God. Gratitude is a virtue which the Jesuits were taught to practice by their first superior general, St. Ignatius of Loyola. From the very beginning of his long pilgrimage toward God—from Pamplona to Manresa to Jerusalem to Salamanca to Paris and, finally, to Rome—Ignatius was vividly aware of how much he owed to the goodness of the men and women who helped him along the way. He never ceased thanking them. He prayed for them without fail. Throughout his life he did everything he could to help them.

3. And when he wrote the *Constitutions*, which govern the order that he founded, Ignatius noted in more than a dozen places the responsibility which its members have to pray for their co-workers and benefactors. In

the part of the *Constitutions* that deals with the educational works of the Society, the very first chapter is entitled: "The Remembrance of the Founders and Benefactors of the Colleges." There he gives instructions that every year, on the anniversary of the institution's founding, a solemn Mass should be celebrated for the founder and benefactors, and a wax candle should be presented to the founder, "decorated with their coat of arms." That was a different moment of history. The gesture may seem quaint today. But the intent and spirit are clear. Ignatius wanted his sons to be grateful—grateful to their friends. And he wanted them to pray for their friends faithfully—as indeed they do.

Purpose of this letter

4. During the course of the Ignatian Year many lay people have told me that Ignatian spirituality is an important part of their lives. Some have told me that this year provided their first occasion to know Ignatius, his spirit and spirituality. Many have asked that we continue to share the Ignatian heritage together beyond the end of the special events of this year. In response, as a beginning of what I hope will be a continuing dialogue between yourselves and my brother Jesuits in all of your countries, I wish to offer you a number of reflections, drawn from Saint Ignatius, which can help us to grow as persons and as believers. Shared reflection of this kind can help us also to strengthen the bonds between us, and open prospects for even closer cooperation. For this is one moment in a movement of the spirit of God Who urges us to greater union of minds and hearts in our service of others.

Who Are We?

5. We are a widespread network of lay and religious people with varied relationships all sharing the same gift, the heritage of Ignatius Loyola. The Society's field of activity is large, and the Jesuits who work in it differ in their tasks and their talents. In this diversity you have your part: some of you are our former students, our families, our friends who share in many ways in our ignatian spirituality; others share in the apostolate at different levels, supporting us by your spiritual life and your reflection as well as by your labours, your financial help for our apostolic works, and in many other ways. In many and diverse ways you are present: in universities and schools, in centres of social action and culture, in missions, parishes and retreat-houses in publishing houses and editorial work, in refugee camps and even in provincial curias! In these undertakings some of you are in major positions of policy making together with Jesuits, whilst others teach or carry out research, or are responsible for administration and office-work. In some cases, it is you who have invited us to cooperate with you in enterprises that you have begun. And there are cases in which we have asked you to take major responsibilities in Jesuit works.

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It is wonderful to see how you have assumed this stewardship with generosity and success.

6. Our unity respects both freedom of conscience and the amazing spectrum of gifts the Lord has given to each of you. Thus among you are people from every walk in life, every profession; among you too we discover the richness and variety of ways in which you relate to God. Some of you have made the Spiritual Exercises in their entirety and are able, in consequence, to give them to others with profit. Others, as is provided for in the Exercises, have had experience of only one or other aspect of Ignatius' spiritual journey. There are others again who have never had the opportunity to make the Exercises, and still others whose spirituality is not Ignatian. All of this is entirely legitimate and, indeed, bears witness to the wealth and variety of the Church's spiritual heritage. Nor is it rare that others who do not share our faith and practice, nevertheless take part in our works on the basis of the values we share in common. In several countries, Christians of other denominations give us their valuable support. In Asia and Africa, in particular, there are many examples of our working alongside non-Christians, either in their institutions, or in our own.

7. Many Jesuits and lay people have been mutually enriched by their working together in freedom and maturity in such a way that they have been able to share their experience of God, very often thanks to the inspiration of the Exercises. In fact, the four hundred and fifty years of the Society's history have been a record of fruitful association with the laity, in which the Ignatian spirit has manifested itself in the church in many forms, and it continues to do so with vigour today. At the present time, in fact, the Universal Church has devoted special attention to the laity in a Synod of Bishops. The Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles laici*, urges that the participation of the lay faithful in the salvific mission of the Church be "more rich, complete and harmonious" (n.52).

8. Growing interest in the Exercises and Ignatian writings has prompted many lay people to seek in them the strength to live a Christlike life, and this has given rise to many and varied apostolic enterprises. More and more people wish to take part in the society's mission and in its ongoing process of evaluation and apostolic planning. And so it is that Ignatian spirituality—a gift that belongs to the whole Church—is taking root and spreading among you, the laity, with excellent results for all concerned.

9. In a situation of such wide variety, is it possible to say something, in the name of Ignatius, that would be useful for you? In spite of the obvious difficulty raised by the great variety of cultural and spiritual backgrounds of those involved, there is good reason to believe that the answer is "Yes". Ignatius *has* a message today for all who seek truth and justice. To Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants, to Christians and believers of other religions, Ignatius can be a source of inspiration and spiritual vitality. In his own time, he saw that what he had learned from his own experience was useful also for others, and the same is true today.

Ignatius' Words To Lay People

10. *Human life has meaning.* This is the first and fundamental reality for Ignatius. We are not aimless beings, without a goal or purpose. We have been created by a God Who loves us. We are called to build the Kingdom of God by knowing, loving and serving God and other people and thus entering life everlasting. The values, priorities and fundamental commitments that really steer us at the level of our hearts as well as our minds flow from such a purpose; they make all the difference in life between happiness and hopelessness. Ignatius raised this question of meaning by citing Scripture, "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world but suffers the loss of his immortal soul?"

11. While some people view "the world" as a religious desert, Ignatius was convinced that *the world is filled with the Spirit of God*, and that the Risen One has conquered the world which was hostile to God. If only we seek, we will find God present. If we watch carefully through the darkness of the night, we can discover the dawn, as light reveals God always at work for us as Creator and as Savior. From this comes the desire of Ignatius to discern, to distinguish light from darkness, to discover the goodness of God working even in the midst of human evil.

12. *God calls each and every one of us to share in a great enterprise.* Ignatius tells us that no one is left out of God's invitation; young and old, lay, priest, religious, women and men—all are called to share in God's plan. The lay person has a vocation, just as the religious and the priest has. The one thing that matters is to recognize our calling and respond to it faithfully. This is not something theoretical. It means rather that our lives should be centered on a person—the person of Christ: Christ sought, loved and followed in the profound conversion of one's heart and in attentive listening to his word; Christ the Friend with whom one has a vital, personal relationship; Christ the Lord and eternal King, who, with the whole world before Him, calls each individual to live with Him and work with Him, so that following Him in suffering we may be joined with Him also in glory (*Sp.Ex.*, 95). This is the theological basis of community and cooperation between Jesuits and laity. It is this which gives us the courage to commit ourselves, the joy to work for a common cause, and the humility to give, and at the same time to receive, so that no one dominates others.

13. *The call of Jesus extends* also to the way we use the gifts God has given us. For just as Jesus used all that the Father gave Him for the service of others, even unto death, he reminds us that *our gifts too are for others*. In Scripture all gifts, talents, wealth, move in a circle. First there is the openness to see that the gift is from God; then it is received and appropriated;

next, one grows through the gift by sharing it with others; and finally the gift is returned to God through praise and thanksgiving. But at the moment when sharing should take place, there can come the great temptation to hold on to the gift and turn it into a means of accruing personal power. And so the desire to seek more and more power through wealth become insatiable.

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ble. Thus the seeds of injustice are sown. The example and testimony of Jesus teaches us an alternative to such destructive attitudes and practice. In following Jesus we are reminded that “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.” This grounds Ignatius’ understanding of the great venture of life which is building the Kingdom of God.

14. In our service of others Ignatius urges us to go beyond superficial impressions to understand the drama in the human situation. He reminds us that we can easily be influenced by the networks of false assumptions, warped values, and class or cultural mythologies which distort our perception of reality. Ignatius would have us illuminate the contradictions and ambiguities within these networks, and thus free ourselves from distorted perceptions of reality engendered by many of these values. Subtleties abound, real life choices are rarely clearly cut, but where do they lead? What really motivates me under the surface? “A man cannot serve two masters.” The struggle is real, the drama decisive. In the drama of life, are we, in the privacy of our consciences, with Christ or against Him? We should not be surprised if we find ourselves in a position that counters the prevailing values when we oppose all that is inhuman in the trends of our day. This might well not be a popular position.

15. *The Christ of Ignatian spirituality is Christ in action*, the one who went preaching through synagogues, towns and hamlets, healing and doing good (*Sp.Ex.*, 91). In our day Christ sends us into the turmoil of the world and tells us to seek God as we work for the good of human beings. Thus we too learn that, along with contemplative mysticism, there is also *a mysticism of action in the world*. This spirituality contains a message that is specially important for those many men and women today who are tempted to seek escape from painful pressures of hard reality.

16. This reminds us that our faith must have practical consequences in our lives—our world of work and civic relationships. As with God’s help our faith deepens, we hear the call to strive even at the cost of sacrifice to *promote justice and work for peace*, to work for the innumerable poor people in our neighborhoods and across this beautiful, tragic world—striving to decide, to act for that justice in love which is, at one and the same time, the dream of God for us and our own responsibility.

17. For Ignatius, *the use of human means* is necessary and important, so long as we do not put in them the trust that we owe to God alone. Ignatius looks for persons who are well-versed in secular learning and in a variety of expressions of human culture as well as in doctrinal and spiritual matters. Between the two he sees no conflict, but rather harmony, because “all of created reality has God as its creator and end.” The great and urgent challenges facing the world and Church today require persons in whom these means are thoroughly inte-

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grated. Otherwise there is danger of imprecise thought and ineffective action, as well as of being at the mercy of ideologies.

18. And in this effort we should recall that *mediocrity has no place in Ignatius' world view*; he demands leaders in service to others in building the Kingdom of God in the market place of business and ideas, of service, of law and justice, of economics, theology and all areas of human life. He urges us to work for the *greater* glory of God because the world desperately needs men and women of competence and conscience who generously give of themselves for others.

19. For Ignatius *the test of effective love is to be found in deeds, not words*. Real love involves self-sacrifice. Thus what we *do* becomes the litmus test of our verbal assertions of love. Ignatius frames questions of love concretely: "What have I *done* for Christ? What am I *doing* for Christ? What *should I do* for Christ?"

20. In his desire to "help souls", the solitary pilgrim from Loyola sought companions. This eventually led to the foundation of the Society of Jesus. But Ignatius also encouraged many other men and women *to come together the better to live and to serve*. That he should do so is not surprising, for the experience of God and his saving power and of intimacy with Jesus Christ leads naturally to the desire to share the experience with others and to bear fruit in real life. The example of Ignatius invites us to reflect on the usefulness that more structured forms of lay association may have for the achievement of our aims. I do not think that we have thought about it sufficiently. It is true that not every layperson is called to live as a member of a permanent group and to work apostolically in association with others. On the other hand, association with others is a natural expression of the social dimension of the human person and one which makes possible operations of greater magnitude, effectiveness and durability. This is especially the case when the problems to be faced are very complex and difficult. On the theological plane, associations are living signs of communion in Christ and of the Church's missionary vitality. In a pluralistic world, they are for their members a help—sometimes a very necessary one—to live the faith in accordance with the Gospel.

21. Finally, I remind you that *Ignatius Loyola was a man of the Church* first and foremost. He himself had suffered from the Inquisition and from misunderstandings with churchmen; but he insisted on loyalty in word and action to "the Spouse of Christ Our Lord, our Holy Mother, the hierarchical Church," because it is the Holy Spirit sent by Christ Who guides and governs the Church. Ignatius thus calls us too, in an era of secularization and skepticism to be men and women of the Church, with abiding faith in the Spirit of God, the Soul of the Church, Who guides all things unto good.

The Spiritual Exercises

22. *The Spiritual Exercises* are for Saint Ignatius "the best means I could think of in this life for one's own spiritual progress and for the help of others" (Letter to Manuel Miona, from Venice, 16 November 1536). They have transformed many hearts and many lives, and have been the source

of important social and cultural changes. They are not a rigid closed system; on the contrary, they are flexible and can be adapted to people at different stages in their spiritual journey, and to different schedules people follow in life today. Experience has shown that non-Catholic Christians can make them with profit, and that they can be adapted so as to help non-Christians. I am personally convinced that we could not have anything better to offer. I invite you to you to make more use of them, and hope that more of you will learn to use them to help others, as some have already done. I also urge you to require of my brother Jesuits, that as they work side-by-side with you, they share with you the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola, and especially the Spiritual Exercises.

Conclusion

23. I have set out a number of important ideas in the message that Ignatius has for us today. They are meant to be an invitation that could help us all. They are so many challenges that we must face with that same wise pedagogy, of going forward step by step, which Ignatius learned in his own life and recorded for us in his Exercises. As in all great undertakings, this is a hard road, but it is one that leads to life for us and for others. Perhaps some of you will feel moved to look more deeply into these themes, bringing them to prayer and discussing together steps you are taking, their results and their difficulties.

24. I hope that the end of the Ignatian Year in which so much has been said of Ignatian spirituality can mark a new beginning in our quest to grow together with greater understanding and sensitivity to God's action in our lives under the guidance of St. Ignatius. Together we can continue to learn from him how best in all things we can love and serve *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*.

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