

# COOPERATION WITH THE LAITY IN MISSION \*

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**T**he Church of the future will be “the Church of the Laity”, declared the Society’s 34<sup>th</sup> General Congregation in Decree 13.

My purpose here is to examine forms of cooperation that have developed between the Jesuits and our lay partners in carrying out the works of the Society (see Complementary Norms, Part VII, Chapter 5, “Our Cooperation with the Laity in Mission”, §307, see also 284, 292.). The lens I offer is the experience of the Australian Province in the course of the eleven years since GC 34.

## *Brief history*

The Society of Jesus began its life as a cooperative project between a group of lay people and a priest. Thereafter, Ignatius’ own apostolic ventures relied for their effectiveness on the advice and support of lay people. Forming associations with lay persons who agree to support Jesuits in ministry and who become participants in our mission has, in fact, been “our way of proceeding” from the beginning.

Today, the Australian Province, like so many others, is not simply ‘open to’ collaboration. *We see partnerships with lay people as essential if our ministries are to be apostolically effective - and even truly Jesuit.*

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The growing complexity of society at large, together with the increasing requirement for high professional standards, make it essential that we seek others' cooperation at many levels if we are to achieve our mission. Moreover, once we unite with others in a common enterprise, respect for the principle of subsidiarity requires that we hand over to lay people roles they "are prepared to assume, whether these are in teaching, in academic and financial administration, or even on the board of directors" (See NC 284).

The chief difference between now and earlier times involves *a shift in power relationships*. Nowadays lay people are rightly invited to assume mission leadership within Jesuit ministries. This level of collaboration requires flexibility of attitude and openness on the part of Jesuits and lay persons alike. It also necessitates structural changes in our patterns of governance at both province and ministry levels.

In the Australian Province, as elsewhere, collaboration began with lay people being recruited for supporting roles in our ministries, for instance as teachers. A later step was their recruitment into positions of responsibility. At first these appointments were occasional and exceptional. Today they are expected, even in the ministry of the Spiritual Exercises.

Over the last decade, governing councils or boards have been established in most ministries within the Australian Province, and lay directors appointed in more than half the Province's works. *The Province now numbers around 150 Jesuits, but now when we say "Province" we include under this banner the 2000 lay persons and other religious who are our partners in implementing the Province's mission.*

Those who enter partnerships with us in a mutual commitment, and who agree to share significantly in the mission of the Province, are known as "companions". Theirs is a faith based vocation activated in apostolic roles within our ministries. In turn, we Jesuits undertake to provide them with appropriate formation and spiritual support, offering opportunities to enter personally into Ignatian spirituality through making the Exercises.

Most of our Province ministries hire people. Among our employees some choose to identify closely with our mission and so become "companions", while others are committed to their work but do not experience their involvement with us as a faith-based vocation. Nonetheless we would expect as a minimum condition that these persons also be open to the mission of the organisation and its faith basis, and ready to own its

operative values. Currently we have no formal induction process into the status of “companion”, though key appointments, such as ministry or program directors, do involve contractual requirements that call for a high degree of identification with the Province mission. A document entitled “Call to Mission” is our Province Mission document. It is an inspirational invitation addressed to all who work alongside us, one that invites growing levels of commitment.

To summarise: *While ministry ownership and ultimate decision-making responsibility remain with the Australian Province and the Provincial, significant authority to conduct our mission is now delegated to companions. It can truly be said that we share the ministry with them and that we are co-responsible. “Ours “ is no longer an exclusive term but an inclusive one.*

### ***Benefits and blessings brought on by this development***

Benefits to a ministry and to the Province’s mission: A Province that follows the course I am outlining may experience growth in a time of apparent diminishment. Even as the number of Jesuits available for mission declines, new growth in the Province’s institutional apostolic activities becomes possible. And at the same time, with gifted companions available for mission, many ministries are able to remain “Jesuit”. As long as motivated people with the required range of skills can be recruited, the functioning of the Province’s more complex institutions and its overall mission can be assured.

Benefits to the Jesuits: With dedicated lay people partnering us - *companions, employees and volunteers* committed to our mission - it is possible for the services offered by the Society to be properly resourced. The Jesuits themselves are enabled to work in ministries for which they are best fitted, while others take roles for which their gifts are most appropriate. Second, the experience of working side-by-side with others, especially the experience of working under lay direction, increases the realisation among Jesuits that high levels of professionalism are now required. Besides, Jesuits seem to behave more responsibly when working in a partnership. Many find the generosity of lay people uplifting. And at the same time the service dimension of our shared apostolic activity becomes more ‘real’, as people

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living different vocations respond in their own way to one and the same mission. The ancillary role of the Society in service of the Kingdom is brought home to us all.

Benefits to the development of Ignatian spirituality: *Translating the language of Jesuit and Ignatian spirituality into terms accessible to lay people encourages us to reach new understandings of the key Ignatian insights.* We come to see the Exercises freshly through the eyes of those with whom we work.

Benefits to our partners: The Province is able to offer to lay persons opportunities for ministry they might not have enjoyed otherwise.

Benefits to the Catholic community: Lay appointments to ministry are rarely permanent, since employees, for understandable professional and family reasons, move on to other positions. Nonetheless, while this may be a loss for Jesuit ministry, the formation they have received, especially our “companions”, means that they carry beyond the Jesuit ethos spiritual resources and other skills to enrich their new areas of activity. They bring the fruits of their experience as partners in Jesuit ministry to service of the wider Church.

### *Models of cooperation*

Instances of cooperation between Jesuits and lay persons are numerous in the Society’s history, and experience has shown that variety of ways this has occurred need not lead to fragmentation. *What unites us is the mission we share.* The Jesuit Refugee Service is, in reality, a most unlikely collection of people drawn together simply by the desire to serve refugees, and united in a common purpose. Over time, many have become friends.

Our Jesuit documents list a number of possible forms of partnership: I have focused thus far on one, namely cooperation with the laity in works of the Society, i.e. in Jesuit ministries (NC 307). The Society has long experience of partnerships in works under the leadership of the local Church, of other religious, or of lay persons. While underlying values and attitudes to such partnership may echo what is said in this paper, these arrangements would need separate treatment.

### *Cooperation with other religious*

Religious of different congregations have often become friends out of a shared vision for society and a concern for needy people. Such bonds frequently lead to a search for new ways to work together. The Society has distinctive resources to bring to partnerships with other religious, particularly *the Spiritual Exercises, our spirituality and discernment methodology*. Because of our local and international networks, we can often offer to religious opportunities for ministry to which they might not otherwise have access.

*a faith based vocation activated  
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Partnerships with religious are also possible at the institutional level, for instance when two congregations agree to share resources in order to guarantee the viability or renewed effectiveness of an apostolic enterprise. Their agreement may involve jointly committing personnel, goodwill, financial resources and other assets to make effective an institution that neither religious family could resource on their own.

We are also see instances in which, for apostolic reasons, Jesuits share with other religious aspects of community life, for example, meals, the Eucharist, or common buildings.

### *Difficulties and challenges*

Partnerships always involve a risk that the mission of the Province, or that of a particular work, will become diluted. *So it is essential that the mission of the particular work and the mission of the Province both be clearly enunciated.* As time goes by, what is learnt from experience allows those involved to refocus and refine the mission statement of a ministry by ongoing discernment. The main role of the Province leadership is to focus the call to mission and to communicate it clearly. This can be done by traditional means including visitations, review times and discernment, so that the focus of our apostolic works is progressively sharpened.

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The Society's "way of proceeding" seeks to combine cura personalis with cura apostolica. Jesuits expect to be accountable to the Provincial, and expect to be cared for personally and apostolically. In the case of our lay companions, the Provincial cannot demand an account of conscience. Yet transparency and readiness to speak with the Provincial at some depth should be understood as requirements in the case of those exercising leadership positions. Otherwise the Province's mission cannot be assured.

Lay persons are able share as equals with Jesuits in certain levels of governance, for example in leading individual ministries, or even in sectoral leadership at Province level. They are eligible for appointment as one of the Provincial's delegates, charged with oversight of the province's education sector, or its communications, or social ministries. As members of the province ministries commission - a structure recommended by GC 31 - they are in a position to offer major assistance to the Provincial and to help shape province policy.

Whenever a new project is being initiated or traditional ministries are being re-focused, it is essential that Jesuits and formed lay companions together instil operative Jesuit procedures and values into that ministry. For Jesuit values to find their proper expression, both in processes and in relationships, a great deal of attention is required. If the underlying vision is not shared by those involved, cooperation in mission is potentially fruitless and less than satisfying, and presumably less effective. *Ministry leaders and the Province leadership must together clarify and focus the mission, values and goals of each particular apostolic work.*

Second, all who are newly engaged must receive sound orientation regarding the mission of their own particular institution in the light of the Province's mission. As noted earlier, some come to us simply to seek employment. Others come as volunteers. Justice demands that in both cases the terms of agreement for cooperation in mission are clearly developed. In the absence of clear "hiring for mission" procedures, confusion and disillusionment can result.

Third, mutual support and openness must be promoted among all who are engaged in ministry, Jesuits and lay persons alike. Some Jesuits are not prepared for partnership, and certainly not for the subsidiarity it implies. They may still believe there should be a Jesuit director in each work. They may consider it necessary for the Society to 'control' the operation of a work - for example through a Jesuit director - without appreciating *that there can be a partnership at the level of owning the mission, and thus co-*

*responsibility*. Patient efforts to communicate the Society's new vision are vital.

It is important, of course, to recognise that employing lay partners adds new financial burdens to Provinces. Sustainable practices need to be introduced if the benefits that partnerships can offer are to continue for the long term.

***Impact on our lay partners and companions:  
feedback from lay partners***

Those who become partners with us in implementing the Province's mission are manifestly joyful when they feel trusted. Their commitment and loyalty to a particular ministry is then easily enlarged into a commitment to the Province's and the Society's mission.

True, some express understandable suspicion that they are working for a "family business" and won't ever really be trusted with full responsibility.

*It is important that people be allowed to find their own lay vocation within their partnerships with us.* Lay people do not necessarily have a collective identity. Occasions need to be provided to celebrate with them their own vocation as they experience it and for us enter into solidarity with them. Formal induction processes useful in this respect, providing (as they do) symbols of belonging.

Lay people require support and formation, especially those who desire to enter fully into partnership with us. Seeing formation for mission as a serious need, the Australian Province founded the Loyola Institute - which quickly became a resource at the service of the wider Church, one available to help other religious congregations to offer leadership and theological formation to their lay partners.

***Implications for Jesuits and for provinces***

*Entering partnerships with others and working in a cooperative fashion requires us to clarify the specifics of our own Jesuit identity and vocation.* It also places new demands on Jesuit community life and highlights the need to develop high quality relationships with one another - a community life that is fraternal, spiritual and practical.

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New levels of cooperation with our lay partners place special demands on younger Jesuits, many of whom have few contemporaries in the Society with whom to share ministry. Moreover, since some leadership roles may not properly be filled by lay people, and few candidates are available, greater expectations fall upon a small number of Jesuits.

One Australian Jesuit took to reminiscing about his experience of being at a certain school in three periods of his life: first as a student, at a time when most teachers were Jesuits, later as a teacher when half were lay and half were Jesuits, and finally when most of the faculty and administration, including the principal, are lay. He is sure that the greater glory of God is being realised best through the third model.

**Concluding Reflection:** A decade after Decree 13 of GC 34, can we still say that the Church of the future will be the “Church of the Laity”? At the level of mission this surely remains a commendable ideal. Lay leadership in mission has become essential to the works of the Australian Province. I believe preparing lay people for mission is a timely role for religious today, and an appropriate response to the signs of our times.