

A MYSTICAL UNION WITH GOD-ACTING

A ROMAN INSTRUCTION AND A JESUIT DECREE *

Joe Tetlow, S.J.
Director
Montserrat Retreat House
Lake Dallas, USA

"The Service of Authority and Obedience,"
Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies
of Apostolic Life (2008).

"Obedience in the Life of the Society of Jesus,"
General Congregation 35, Decree 4 (2008).

In May of 2008, two official documents were promulgated in Rome that are important to Jesuits. The Vatican Instruction¹ and the Jesuit Decree 4 both address obedience in consecrated life in the Church. From distinct viewpoints, each shows how living a life consecrated by obedience forms a mission of itself, giving witnessing to the world that Jesus Christ transforms human life. And in quite different styles, each shows how living obedience fully leads to union with God. Their likenesses and differences illuminate each other and are worth noting briefly.

The two documents

1. The Jesuit Decree on Obedience completes the story of the maturing of Jesuit obedience, rooted in the

* This article has two parts: first, a comparison of the two documents; second, a serious reflection on the Jesuit Decree in the light of the Instruction. The two parts can be read independently.

mystical experiences of our First Companions, during the forty tumultuous years since the Second Vatican Council. The Decree begins its account with General Congregation 31 and traces how Jesuit appreciation of our identity, charism, and mission has matured into the deep conviction that our obedience in faith doing justice is a share in the obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ. Decree 4, “Obedience in the Life of the Society of Jesus,” writes the end of this story by describing the way a mature Jesuit can expect to live his commitment to obedience in deep holiness, just as Part Nine of the *Constitutions*, on the Father General, describes how a fully matured, generous, gifted man will be able to live his obedience even by governing the whole Company of Jesus. The standard we set ourselves – because of “our intimate union with Christ” – is high.²

The story of the Vatican Congregation’s Instruction is not common knowledge, so it might be useful to note briefly how it came to be added to the congregation’s works.³ In 2005, Pope Benedict XVI had asked the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of Vatican Council II’s decree on religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis*. In his letter to the dicastery’s prefect, Cardinal Franc Rodé, C.M., the Pontiff called for a full assembly of its consultants. They were to identify those patterns in religious life that have developed to help consecrated persons to be “*Witnesses of the transfiguring presence of God*.”⁴ This phrase of the Holy Father gave the theme to a plenary assembly in September of that year, 2005. After the discussions, dicastery officials chose *the practice of obedience and authority* as one experience that turns consecrated life in community into an irrefutable witness of the transfiguring presence of God among humankind. Expounding that is the thrust of the subsequent instruction, *The Service of Authority and Obedience, Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram*.

*obedience in faith
doing justice is a share
in the obedience of the
Lord Jesus Christ*

2. Each of these documents proposes to their audience a serious theology of obedience. The Instruction teaches “members of institutes of consecrated life who live a community life” a foundational and ascetical theology for the lifelong experience of authority and obedience within the community.⁵ It adds that consecrated men and women who live outside of

convents or monasteries, as we Jesuits do, “can also cull useful information from it.”⁶ The Instruction asks and responds to the broadest foundational questions: How do obedience and human freedom interact through grace? Where does authority in consecrated life ultimately come from? What contribution does obedience make to human fulfillment and to the Christian vocation? Who presents best practices, in the past and now? How is vowed obedience based on the Word of revelation? Responding to these complex and very consequential questions, the dicastery had to keep in mind many different ways of life, as well as novices and beginners, those in formation, and the mature among them. So its members set themselves a forbiddingly formidable task.

The Jesuit congregation was summoned, of course, to elect a Father General. No one expected a great flood of documents, and the congregation surprised many Jesuits with its succinct, clear, and deeply felt statements. Its Decree 4, “Obedience in the Life of the Society of Jesus,” continues developing earlier congregations’ posing of the ideal of *service*. Its aims to help Jesuits “incarnate the values of the Gospel and of the *Spiritual Exercises*, which it states this way: “availability for being at the service of the Kingdom of God and freedom to be a ‘man for others.’”⁷ The Decree actually transmutes the meaning given to *service* by earlier congregations by presenting the deeply felt experience of members during the congregation that our personal obedience is a share in the obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Before going on, note the importance to Jesuits of understanding the Vatican Instruction. If we do not want to stand apart from the Church, an attitude we have complained about in ourselves in the past, we will want to know what the Vatican Congregation has taught about religious obedience. And it seems clear that the better we understand the Instruction, the more clearly we can see that we do, in fact, accept and enact those points of its message that apply to an active apostolic order. As difficult as the Instruction may be to read, grasping its message with an open heart is deeply consoling to us. We are, by God’s mysterious grace, following our own Master Ignatius’ admonition *sentire cum ecclesia*, urged by the Instruction now as a duty on all consecrated persons.⁸

3. The two documents show some parallels though they differ significantly in tone. The Instruction reads like an instruction, of course, which is what it is; the Decree reads like a spiritual testament, which in a way it is.⁹ Both clarify the fact that God’s will reaches each person through

human *mediation*: by the Church to begin with, by the charism and approved law of the religious group, by community discernment, and by superiors' decisions – all human mediations. Both single out some of the problems that modern life injects into obeying. The Instruction continually returns to the tensions caused by individualism and a tendency to put primary trust in personal development, both of which diminish freedom and cause friction in community life. It stresses problems *ad intra* rather than *ad extra*, to use its distinction. The Jesuit Document lays the opposite stress, summarizing existential challenges, to each alone and all together, succinctly: "subjectivism, moral relativism, hedonism, and practical materialism" that leave people with "an interior emptiness" and the need to search for meaning – none of which even the most obedient Jesuits can ignore in our Exams.¹⁰

God's will reaches each person through human mediation

Both documents frankly deal with obeying proper authorities in a cultural period when spontaneity and the authenticity of self cloud the usefulness of obedience and even its necessity to self-development. Their approaches, however, differ entirely. The Instruction works more in the ascetical tradition of the Church, particularly of the West. It casts obedience as the quest for holiness in the great tradition of self-abandonment, seeing true obedience "as a supreme act of freedom, expressed in total and confident abandoning of oneself to Christ."¹¹ In its turn, the Jesuit Document embraces the asceticism recalled by the more recent congregations and reaches past it to develop the mystical tradition of obedience in the Society. Its announced topic is the "mysticism of service."¹² What it says about Jesuit obedience describes its fulfillment, its "perfection," as we once put it. Looked at as the latest chapter in five congregations' work on obedience, this one confirms the ascetical theology of earlier ones and goes on to uncover what mystical theology might tell us about our obedience in Christ.

The Instruction

4. The Vatican Instruction presents an appreciation of obedience that begins with our being individually created. The ultimate root of obedience is simply accepting life, for "the first act of obedience on the part

of the creature is that of coming into existence in conformity with the divine *fiat* that calls one into being.”¹³ Far from finding human fulfillment by growing out of that dependence, “We reach our fullness only to the extent that we place ourselves within the plan with which He has conceived us with a Father’s love” – a plan that sometimes demands something other than what we would like in our lives.¹⁴ As created beings with whom God has made a Covenant, we must obey the law which God promised to “write on their hearts.”¹⁵ For ultimately, “obedience is the only way human persons, intelligent and free beings, can have the disposition to fulfill themselves.”¹⁶

In these terms, *consecrated life, itself, is a mission in the Church*, or in John Paul II’s words, “fraternal communion, as such, is already an apostolate”¹⁷

*“fraternal communion,
as such, is already
an apostolate”*

This has become an established appreciation of consecrated life in the Church – that it is an irreplaceable witness to the possibility of seeking God with one’s whole mind and heart. It is a witness that can be accomplished only by being “in mission with all one’s being, as [was] Jesus the Lord,” whose “form of life” was obeying the Father.¹⁸

This is “God’s will” for the consecrated person. How do we live it out? We know what the divine will calls for in each moment through our obedience to our own authorities in the Church and congregation. “Thanks to obedience we have the *certitude* of serving the Lord, of being ‘servants of the Lord’ in our acting and suffering.”¹⁹ Following on this conclusion, the Instruction frames even any apostolic work in the community’s mission in terms of the exercise of authority and obedience: “Considering that Christ in his life and work was the perfect *amen* (cf. Rev. 3:14) and the perfect *yes* (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20) spoken to the Father, and that to say *yes* means simply to obey, it is impossible to think about the mission if not in relation to obedience.”²⁰ Just as Jesus Himself “*is* the mission of the Father,” the consecrated person living under obedience is in and of himself or herself, the mission.

5. The Instruction then shows how this mission must be lived by exploring the interior dispositions of both superiors and those who obey. It restricts its discourse to consecrated life within the community, simply because the dicastery intends to make the point enunciated in the title of

the very first paragraphs: "Consecrated Life is a witness of the search for God." So it is in the patterns of obeying in community that consecrated persons become "*Witnesses of the transfiguring presence of God*," to go back to Benedict XVI's words. By obeying charism, rule, and the dispositions of authority, consecrated persons enact our creaturehood, which is nothing less than obedience to God calling us into being. How the consecrated person is to reach holiness in this way makes up the burden of the Instruction.

Asserting and explaining all of this demands a long and complex discourse. Why get into it? Clearly, the dicastery's information about the status of consecrated life all over the world urged this approach. In the more developed world, individualism poses "the danger of reducing the *mission* to a profession to be done in view of one's own fulfillment."²¹ In the emerging nations, the danger differs. There are so many vocations that groups are pressed to find mature consecrated persons to give a proper formation to the young. Jesuits in Africa, for instance, would recognize this problem. Novices and young religious consequently risk focusing on the enlarged possibilities for their own human fulfillment offered in their new state in life – unless they learn to focus on this deeper significance of obedience, and enact it through the practices proven by centuries of consecrated life to lead to knowing God's will.

*the consecrated person
living under obedience
is in and of himself
or herself, the mission*

6. What has the dicastery achieved? Two things stand out: First, it summarizes in concrete detail the best practices of governing and obeying that saints have produced through the centuries. Two of its three parts call on modern social anthropology and the philosophy of John Paul II to detail the day-to-day attitudes and actions of both subjects and authorities. These parts may well seem tediously meticulous to consecrated persons living privileged lives: long formation during which they have read the authors quoted, access to current documents and libraries, financial and manpower resources needed for careful planning and for steady communications, and so on. But the dicastery obviously judged that many in the newer churches and many even in well-established religious groups will be helped by reading

in detail how holy men and women like Benedict and Clare of Assisi lived authority and obedience.

It is necessary in reading the detailed parts of the Instruction to keep in mind the ideal woven through them all of growing throughout life into union with God. The union described must suit the charism of all the orders and congregations; consequently, it must include many modalities of union, some more appropriate to the active life, some to the contemplative. Hence, the holy union adumbrated in the Instruction is a union of mind and heart in the love of community and in the communion of common prayer. This unquestionably and visibly transforms the lives of many older contemplative religious, and of some young, it must be said. Their manifest freedom and joy even in the most ascetically strict ways give the precise *witnessing to the search for God* that the dicastery set out to signalize, and its Instruction urges.

Specifically Jesuit Obedience

7. Rather than build on the *yes* that began each life, the Jesuit General Congregation chose to build on the *yes* that we are invited to say to God who is creating us even in this present moment and who is daily redeeming us out of humanity's destructive sinfulness. Consequently, rather than remaining in the more philosophically satisfying terms of knowing and obeying God as the One whose Presence and Power give us to know His will with certitude, the recent Jesuit General Congregation builds on a full realization of the graces of the *Spiritual Exercises*, which it refers to repeatedly from the first Decree on.²²

Decree 4 comes across almost as an exposition of the graces of the *Contemplatio ad Amorem* – learning to love the way God loves. The Decree reads more like “spiritual reading” than a disquisition of any kind. Its paragraphs actually show that the “mysticism of service” has matured into a mystical union with God-acting.²³

Note right away that Jesuits are surely not the only ones called to this union with God-acting. Think of Mother Theresa, whose life burned with love for Jesus Christ, Whom in her own word, she *saw* in each dying outcast. Her life stands out for two things: first, she spent herself tirelessly, for the most wretched, without recompense, for many years, always humanly warm and joyful and always invoking her love for God; this cannot

be explained in any radically secular terms. Second, she nonetheless had no ecstatic experiences such as the classical mystics have had. She seems to have had one undeniably graced impulse to live with and serve the poorest of the poor – in whom she *saw* Jesus Christ. Then she prayed and worshipped perseveringly the rest of her life in a kind of darkness through which only her graces of love and hope sustained her. She would appear to be modeling a kind of union with God-acting that cannot be thought of as an ordinary response in faith, as it was based on and enacted a conviction that what she did was indeed what God was doing.

8. The most striking thing about the Jesuit Decree is how it asserts that the fullness of Jesuit spirituality leads a man to union with God-acting, and with God acting everywhere in the cosmos. So the Jesuit is prepared to go anywhere at any time and to do anything within his capacity to do, going even to “those physical and spiritual places which others do not reach or have difficulty in reaching,” as Benedict XVI told the Jesuits gathered for the General Congregation.²⁴ This union can come only with constant effort to know Him better, love Him more, and follow Him more closely in the way He announced. Somehow in imitating Him out of our “mystical experience of passionate love for Christ, the one who is sent by the Father and who is obedient to the Father’s will,” we live in a deep conviction that we are doing “God’s will” – that is, what God wants done.²⁵

*the fullness of Jesuit
spirituality leads a man
to union with God-acting*

The Decree even justifies our claiming for our own experience what Jesus said of His: “The Son can do only what He sees the Father doing.” *Sees* the Father doing? How *sees*? It might be argued that His hypostatic union explains how Jesus of Nazareth could *see* what the Father is doing. On the other hand, it was the *human Jesus of Nazareth* who declared that He had “no other food but the will of the Father.”²⁶ The Decree points out that even the impending destruction of His earthy life did not deter Him: “Conquering even his resistance and weakness,” Jesus declared at the end, “Abba, let not my will but your will be done.”²⁷ He still had the unshakeable security of knowing what God is doing, even when it seemed destructive madness. He is the one we are called to imitate.

A MYSTICAL UNION WITH GOD-ACTING

Understanding this makes us able to appreciate the real holiness of an Isaac Jogues and a René Goupil, terrible in their desire to join the One they loved in His suffering. Not grasping it, we have to wonder whether, returning to the sickening tortures they endured, they might not have been slightly deranged. This kind of thought does not come comfortably to a rationalistic world, the one in which we live and have our being.

9. Before turning to the vow of obedience, the General Congregation had already framed what it intended to say about it. It brought to bear in Decree 2 on “Rediscovering Our Charism” the stunning insight that our vows “enable us to be shaped in the Church into the image of Jesus himself.”²⁸ For the Spirit who molded Him is molding us, too, and that is what we are destined for.²⁹

The congregation affirms in extraordinary detail that we experience the Holy Trinity at work in the world, emphasized here by adding italics to its sentences. Thus, the congregation said in Decree 3: “We are sent on

*the Spirit who molded Him
is molding us*

mission *by the Father*, as were Ignatius and the first companions at La Storta, together with Christ, risen and glorified but still carrying the cross, *as he labors in a world yet to experience the fullness of his reconciliation*.”³⁰ When we turn to new human issues such as the

deteriorating world climate, “with passion for environmental justice, *we shall meet once again the Spirit of God seeking to liberate a suffering creation*.”

³¹As long as we live on earth as He lived on earth, “Jesuits know who they are by looking at Him.”³²

This union with God-acting, as does ever other union, comes only with continued prayer over years. We are likely to have to grow into it when we are beginning our formation. Those of us who persevere in prayer and reach this union will have been tried by suffering and, very commonly in my experience, by great failure whether sinful or not. They will have embraced their suffering and failure as the great privilege of sharing Christ’s suffering, yearning “to clothe ourselves with the same garb and uniform of the Lord,” as Inigo de Loyola longed to do and shared with us in explaining the Third Degree of Humility.³³ As one man said, weeping, when he accepted that what he was suffering – even what *he* was suffering – was sharing Jesus’ suffering with Him: “I am so honored. I am *so honored*.”

10. But that was a singular moment of grace in prayer. What about the ordinary busyness of our lives? How do we each personally experience the “intimate union with Christ” that the congregation claims grounds our apostolate?³⁴

The congregation continually refers to the experience of *Spiritual Exercises*. Long contemplations of Jesus’ life on earth instruct our hearts about what God is actually doing: the poor are truly blessed, and we have told ourselves over and over again that we do well to go to them. The meek and gentle are earning the earth as their inheritance and we know that they will rise here, in our flesh, glorified, to be the first then although they are now the last. We intuitively know that the truly satisfied and full people are those who search not just for food and drink, but for righteousness – we know that. Anyone who is persecuted for God’s sake will surely know great joy; look at Miguel Pro. This is how we search for and find God’s will: contemplating the life of Jesus of Nazareth doing God’s will.

The Church – we Jesuits with all the rest – had to discover gradually the full freight and import of Vatican Council’s radical declarations that faith does justice. Benedict XVI could teach from Peter’s throne, as he did for the congregation, what a Leo XIII had been able to say only in an obscure way, that “the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty (cf. 2 Cor 8.9).”³⁵

11. We might find all this – those of us who did not experience the congregation – we might find this a bit airy and thin smoke if the congregation were not so clear that we are sinful men, and quite pointedly say how we sin against our own vow of obedience. The Decree notes succinctly but sharply some failures in our obedience: exaggerated self-sufficiency, individualism, too much autonomy, prizing productivity, and overwork. These would come up even in a distracted annual retreat. Then some of our lacks: of commitment, of availability, of prudence in expressing our opinions, of cooperation with the local church.³⁶ Sometimes the language of discernment cloaks making up our own minds, and at times, “our desire to commit ourselves to the Lord in personal trust is not matched by our desire to commit ourselves to the Church or to the body of the Society.”³⁷

Clear in the story arc of the last five General Congregations is this: Immediately following the ecumenical Council, our Company’s bellwethers in the search of faith doing justice tended often enough to move headlong

A MYSTICAL UNION WITH GOD-ACTING

into secular *progress*, which may or may not have anything to do with the Reign of Christ. General Congregation 32 urged us on, and in a matter of a generation, Jesuits moved out of comfortable high-rise residences in school settings into a huge spread of works in ghettos and worse. Some of us who worked anti-war movements or gave what help we could to people who needed to rebel against repression may have embraced ideologies a bit more than we were aware of. Our last few General Congregations have absorbed all of that. Step by step, they indicate that we have learned that we most properly live our faith in a union with God actually creating moment by moment *all things in existence*. General Congregation 35 mapped how we have grown out of revanchist conservatism on the one hand, and the away from the enthusiasm of ideology on the other, into our fullest tradition of obedience. If its description seems a bit optimistic, keep in mind that it is drawing the portrait of the fullest realization of Jesuit obedience. Is it an ideal? Yes, provided we take the word to mean a measure to tell us how far we have come and where we have to go now.

An Inner Story of Obedience in the Congregations

12. When we read General Congregation 35's documents, we have to wonder how the Society came to develop this richly mystical tone and diction – so different from that, say, of Congregations 31 and 33. What was going on in the inner development of the Jesuits that Congregation 35 could talk this way – men who until very recently were living in constant conflict over our identity as a religious order? We certainly did not reach it in one leap. We have walked a hard and weary way, constantly goaded on by the graced love of Christ. Consider that the membership of General Congregation 35 included many men scared by fierce battles over who we were and what we were to do – and what we ought not be doing that we were in fact doing. The documents allude to all that while building on the achievements of the former congregations. So this one, moved by the mandate given the Company by the new "Vicar of Christ on Earth," picked up the thread in General Congregation 31 that has unfolded into *the mysticism of service*.

General Congregation 31 (May to July, 1965 and September to November, 1966) gave itself the task of incorporating the teachings of Vatican II into “our way of proceeding.” Addressing “The Renewal of Our Laws” in Doc. 2, the congregation pointed out that we apply the “pastoral spirit of the Council” to ourselves “according to the criterion of the greater and more universal service of God in the modern world.”³⁸ It wove this theme of *service* throughout its documents all the way to the last of them. One of the final decrees, “Provincials,” still insists that we “seek always in all things the greater service of Christ’s Church.”³⁹

General Congregation 32 (December 1974 to May 1975) took up this theme of service by turning Jesuit’s attention to the “signs of the times” and the interplay of swift human development and religious life. This congregation moved into the foundational theology behind our service by taking up a theme developed in the Synod of Bishops of 1971, “Justice in the World.” The congregation, instinctive in *sentire cum Ecclesia*, noted in its theme-setting Decree 2, “Jesuits Today,” that the Society was founded “for the rendering of any service in the Church that may be for the glory of God and the common good.”⁴⁰ It deepened Jesuit appreciation of this purpose by pointing out that “the salvation and perfection of souls’...might be called, in contemporary terms, the total and integral liberation of man, leading to the participation in the life of God himself,” filling a human ambition current then with our purpose.⁴¹

13. General Congregation 34 (January to March, 1995) continued shaping “our way of proceeding” in conformity with the theological and pastoral insights of Vatican II and the Bishops’ Synods.⁴² Part of its charge was to finalize the *Complementary Norms* and approve them definitively. To do that, the congregation had to review the work of the recent congregations. It seemed intent at times on putting all their evolutions of our way of proceeding into newer current terms responding to new concerns such as inculturation. The result was a lot of documents.

Participants were not content to leave these sprawling documents without a focus and some clear road signs. So at the end of its work, the congregation accepted a coherent statement – Decree 26, “Conclusion: Characteristics of Our Way of Proceeding” – as a summary of everything that recent congregations were trying to say. One section, “Contemplative in Action,” states succinctly the goal of obeying for love of Jesus Christ. The title, of course, comes from Jerónimo Nadal’s recollection of how Master

Ignatius lived “contemplative even in the midst of action,” which the Decree cited. Hence, it continued, “The God of Ignatius is the God who is at work in all things: laboring for the salvation of all as in the Contemplation to Attain Love.” Then it continued:

“For a Jesuit, therefore, not just any response to the needs of the men and women of today will do. The initiative must come from the Lord laboring in events and people here and now. God invites us to join with him in his labors, on his terms, and in his way. *To discover and join the Lord, laboring to bring everything to its fullness, is central to the Jesuit way of proceeding.*”¹³

This seems an explicit declaration that the Jesuits’ way of proceeding leads to a *mystical union with God at work creating and redeeming*. We *discover and join the Lord laboring*, seeing with the eyes of faith what eyes

*We discover and join
the Lord laboring*

without faith cannot see. We listen to the Word of God in Sacred Scripture, we listen to the Church teaching. We have our mandates from the “one who takes the place of Jesus Christ on earth,” as Master Ignatius liked to call the pope, to go where there is difficulty and trouble, where there are injustices and ignorance of Christ. We discern among ourselves, as communities and as individuals. Finally, each one of us listens to what the voice – or voices – of the authorities whom God has given us command, and then we freely elect to do what we see God doing here and now.

14. When we reflect on Decree 4 of General Congregation 35 now, we realize that we have all believed from the beginning of our novitiate that God and the individual deal with each other directly. Annotation 15 emphasizes that a director, during *Spiritual Exercises*, has to keep mindful that “the Creator and Lord in person communicates Himself to the devout soul in quest of the divine will.” God will not only lead a man – a “devout soul” – to what He wants done, but will also “inflame it with His love and praise, and dispose it for the way in which it could better serve.”

Jesuits who continue praying during long years experience not only in our prayer, but all day long, in all that we do, how “the Creator deals directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord.” Slowly, we have come to see that God our Almighty Creator creates *even our most intimate desires* in us, sharing with us in this way God’s own

passionate divine love. We prayed about that in the fourth point of the *Contemplatio*; if we persist, we experience it in our own selves and days.⁴⁴

We have grown aware that we are enacting the Reign of Christ in our lifeworld and lifetime – imperfectly, sinfully, constantly revising as experience teaches us. But we are enacting the Reign of Christ *here and now*. We cannot anticipate certitude in any philosophical sense that we are doing what God want done; we enact it in passionately hopeful trust that He is guiding and will correct us, through desolations and consolations, through our companions, our superiors, and through the Church. Or, perhaps, through the circumstances around us, in and through which we are confident God is working.

In this way, the formed, matured Jesuit has consciously opened himself to “let this same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”⁴⁵ Jesus chose companions and remained loyal to them to the end. Hence, an integral part of this gift is our Jesuit bond of union “through mutual knowledge and sharing in each other’s lives,” as Decree 4 puts it, reminding us of the depths of the experience that fed into the *Deliberatio priomorum Patrum* of 1539. It is this human communion in Christ that “allows us to become servants of his mission of evangelization.” It must be added, with candor and without discouragement, that not all who pour themselves out in this “mysticism of service” also live in the mystical union with God-acting.⁴⁶ Each one of us lives the graces that the Father gives, and the Father shows Himself content with some of His Son’s men whose generosity shows a startling simplicity in doing the good they are told to do, without much fuss, because that is what the Lord set them to. Theirs is a singular kind of holiness and witness to God’s transforming action in the world.

*we are enacting the Reign of
Christ here and now*

Enjoying the Graces of This “Review of Meditation”

15. Now, however, we are invited to grasp with an “interior knowledge” what the Church’s turn to faith doing justice implies to our Jesuit identity and mission. We insist that we are imitating Jesus of Nazareth,

whose human pattern of life models for us the divine project on earth – that is, establishing a kingdom of justice and peace rooted and grounded in divine love.⁴⁷ Jesuits enact Jesus of Nazareth's work of setting prisoners free, giving sight to the blind, and so on, however we can, to announce Good News.

Following the highest teaching authority of the Church, we affirm that the Kingdom of Christ has already been established, though not yet in its fullness. We choose to be "joined with Christ as his companions in obedience in mission, in poverty and in chastity," and that makes us "witnesses to the Kingdom and its values."⁴⁸ Notice: witnesses of *this* Kingdom and its values.

So we find present in our Jesuit way what the Instruction calls for in every way of consecrated life, following the hopes of the present pope: that our life witness *the transfiguring presence of God*. Here precisely is the transfiguring presence that the Jesuit life of itself offers: the enactment in selfless love of the Reign of Christ on this still severely disordered earth and its severely disordered human civilizations, laboring to end poverty and bring peace, to teach the ignorant and brace the hopeless. By renouncing fortune and fame – both the pursuit and possession of them – "and putting our affections and our entire freedom at the service of the Kingdom, we contribute to making the Kingdom we long for *a reality here and now*."⁴⁹ The truth has been dawning on the Church that the Reign of Christ has already begun – not in theory, not in potency or partially, by in fact, if only we would *see what God is doing* even during our most tumultuous times.

This is the Jesuit participation in the *kenosis* of the Son, which we accept as a gift from the Father though its splendor is often enough hidden by the darkening of our own guilt or the confounding effects of the world's sin.⁵⁰ Though we might give every human evidence of doing so, we do not make ourselves great educators, brilliant preachers, or notably insightful spiritual guides because our human fulfillment lies there. No, we pour our selves out, choosing to do what the Company asks us to do, very often instead of following what our own gifts and yearnings would move us to. Should we become great educators, fine, that is helpful to Christ's young; and the same for growing into brilliant preachers and spiritual guides.

And when we grow into our last years, we can testify to our younger brothers – and to the world around us – that "a personal history of generous response to the grace of obedience allows a Jesuit to serve joyfully and effectively" while he works through his young and middle years, and then

even while he waits in apparent uselessness for the Lord to summon him to Himself.⁵¹

¹ Note at the start that its title indicates the complex task facing this Vatican congregation. It was the *Congregation for Religious* until 1967, when Paul VI added to its responsibilities and named it the *Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes*. Then in 1988, John Paul II changed its purview and name to the present *Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*. These changes alone point to the complexity of finding a core unity among the widely diverse ways of “religious life” in the post-conciliar church. The diversity flourishes, more than anywhere else, in the practice of obedience.

² General Congregation 35, Decree 1, 2.

³ The Congregation has issued a number of larger works: 1978, with the Congregation for Bishops, *Mutuae Relationes*, Directives for the Mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious in the Church; 1983, *Essential Elements in the Church’s Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate*; 1990, *Potissimum institutioni, On Formation in Religious Institutes*; 1994, *Fraternal Life in Community*; 2002, *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium*.

⁴ *Dicastery* is an anglicized Italian word derived from the Greek for court or judge. In Rome, it is applied to 9 congregations, 3 tribunals, 11 pontifical councils, and a few other bodies. Here, it names only the *Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*.

⁵ *Foundational theology* (as Bernard J. F. Lonergan explains it in *Method in Theology*) explores the graced experience of conversion of heart, which the instruction does in some measure by proposing the new horizon of obeying in and for Christ. The *ascetical theology* comes from a narrow selection of *loci classici*, mainly Bernard, Benedict, and Clair of Assisi.

⁶ Instruction, 3.2.

⁷ GC 35, Decree 4, 8. From now on, references to this decree will read *Decree 4* with a paragraph number.

⁸ The Instruction cites St Ignatius twice, taking one a sentence from the challenge given by Jesus in the *Kingdom* and a second sentence from *Constitutions* paragraph 84 on obeying not the one giving the command but the one for whose sake we obey. It seems instructive to see what thoughtful religious in other traditions find good and helpful in Jesuit spirituality.

⁹ The decrees begin by saying that being hosted by and listening to “the Vicar of Christ. . . was a powerful moment and a moving spiritual experience.” Earlier congregations may have felt the same about their beginnings but did not say so and

certainly did not sustain that same tone of voice throughout their documents. Here, it is barely muted even in the administrative detailing of the final documents.

¹⁰ Decree 3, 20.

¹¹ Instruction, number 26, the fifth paragraph. From here on, references will read *Instruction*, 26, 5.

¹² Decree 4, 2.

¹³ Instruction, 7, 1.

¹⁴ Instruction, 5.2.

¹⁵ This cites Hebrews 8:10 and notes the reference to Jeremiah 31:33.

¹⁶ Instruction, 5.2.

¹⁷ John Paul II said this to the Congregation's plenary meeting in 1992. Instruction, 22.3.

¹⁸ Instruction 23, the paragraph title.

¹⁹ Instruction 24.2. Italics added. Philosophical language, in tone like John Paul II's, marks a number of paragraphs in the Instruction.

²⁰ Instruction, 23.3.

²¹ Instruction, 23.3.

²² Decree 1, 3.

²³ Decree 4, 2. This paragraph boldly narrates the feelings and yearnings of the First Companions as they went through the *Spiritual Exercises*. By the clearest implication, it is describing what any devout Jesuit experiences. This is what "witnessing" entails.

²⁴ Decree 1, 6.

²⁵ Decree 4, 17.

²⁶ John 4:34; cited in Decree 4, 10.

²⁷ Mark 14:36; cited in Decree 4, 11.

²⁸ Decree 2, 18. It refers to 2 Corinthians 3:18.

²⁹ Romans 8:29; I Corinthians 15:45-49; and see Philippians 3: 20-21.

³⁰ Decree 3, "Challenges to Our Mission Today: Sent to the Frontiers," 6. Italics added.

³¹ Decree 2, 24. Italics added.

³² Decree 2, 2.

³³ *Spiritual Exercises*, [167].

³⁴ Decree 1, 2.

³⁵ Decree 1, 6, citing the pope's *Allocution*.

³⁶ Decree 2, 18-22.

³⁷ Decree 4, 18.

³⁸ GC 31, doc. 2 [21]. The marginal numbers appear in brackets.

³⁹ GC 31, Decree 46, no. 3 [668].

⁴⁰ GC 32, Decree 2, no. 11, [21].

⁴¹ The expression "total and integral liberation of man, leading to participation in the life of God himself" was not in the document passed by final vote. It had said simply "human liberation." A formal *intercessio*, a kind of parliamentary motion that passed

by a unanimous vote, expanded it into what has to be recognized as a more Christian purpose, or at least one expressly and more emphatically fitting our Jesuit apostolic purposes.

⁴² General Congregation 33 was busy with other matters.

⁴³ General Congregation 34, Decree 26, no.6 [540-42].

⁴⁴ The authors of *The Dynamism of Desire* explore this in terms developed by Bernard J. F. Lonergan. James L. Connor, S.J., and the Fellows of the Woodstock Theological Center, Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis, 2006.

⁴⁵ Philippians 2:5, cited in Decree 2, 9.

⁴⁶ Decree 4, 4.

⁴⁷ The Vatican's Instruction makes this exact point, concentrating on Jesus' obedience to God's will.

⁴⁸ Decree 4, 13, citing *Lumen Gentium* 44.

⁴⁹ Decree 4, 13. Italics added.

⁵⁰ Document 4, 15, which refers to Philippians 2:5-8.

⁵¹ Decree 4, 29.