

OBEDIENCE IN THE SOCIETY OF JESUS AND DIVERSITY OF CULTURES.

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*A spiritual exercise together
particularly for international communities.*

In Decree 4 on 'Obedience in the Life of the Society of Jesus' the 35th General Congregation has given us a clear and specific updating of the understanding and practice of obedience in our order. Precisely because we are an international community, the diversity of ethnic, cultural and social origins among our members presents a great challenge, since in each culture there are different customs and forms of expression that shape the way authority is practised and communication takes place between superior and subjects.

In this respect there is a challenge, and also a danger, for a worldwide gathering like the General Congregation. More than 200 delegates from quite different cultures come together and from the first day onwards use our typical and characteristic vocabulary. Words like 'superior', 'Exercises', 'manifestation of conscience' or 'obedience to the Pope' are taken as common spiritual heritage and are important elements in a global understanding of our foundations. It usually takes about 4–6 weeks at an international conference for the participants to realise that they are using the same words, but that they can have quite different meanings in different cultures. This sameness of words at the same time as diversity of meaning or of real practice could be described

as 'global Nominalism'. We as the Society of Jesus could easily run aground on this problem, had we not embarked in faith that God's Spirit is at work in this Society, which means in also in its very various cultural and social characteristics.

The great differences in socio-cultural understanding of obedience express themselves particularly in international communities and provinces. The Japanese Province, for example, consists to a large extent of 'missionaries' from various lands and cultures. The large international houses in Rome are a colourful ethnic and cultural mixture. In that respect the challenges in them to the practice of obedience as instrument for the common mission and for inner unity are particularly great.

So I should like to offer a reflection, and a practical spiritual exercise in common, that seem to me to be useful, particularly for international communities. I think that a great deal has already been gained when all the members in a house become aware of the differences in understanding authority and obedience that are represented in their community. However, the problem appears in a similar way when members of the same province have completely different social or ethnic backgrounds. Even the different moulding of a classic middle-class culture among us in Europe and of today's youth-culture might make it appropriate for a community with different generations to do such an exercise with one another.

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Short instructions for this exercise

A community needs to allow 2-3 hours for such an exercise. It would be very helpful if all the participants had re-read Decree 4 of GC 35 carefully beforehand. The exercise begins with prayer for the grace that the Lord may help us to live the common mission of the Society of Jesus and its inner unity through obedience to our superiors, and to grow in it more and more.

Then someone (preferably not the superior) gives an introduction, setting out clearly how differently obedience is understood and practised in various cultures and ethnic groups. It could be pointed out how much

OBEDIENCE AND DIVERSITY OF CULTURES

the participant is determined in his understanding of obedience and in his dealings with the superior or with his subjects through the cultural conditioning that has formed him since childhood in his native country. Hence it is to be expected that his interpretation and practice of Ignatian obedience is strongly coloured by these influences.

To discover this more precisely, each one should first spend an hour in personal reflection and prayer. This should take place in three steps:

- *State and civil authority in my native culture*: Each one might put the following questions to himself: What form do the office and the role of an authority-figure take in my culture? What attitudes and behaviour does this authority-figure need, to be able to carry out his office? What attitudes and behaviour are expected from subordinates towards this person? What are the relationship and the communication between the superior and the subordinate like? What changes have there been in my culture on these points during my lifetime? (In Europe, we have only to think of 1968 and 1989).

- *Authority in religious and Church life in my native culture*: How do people in my native country see 'spiritual authority', and how are people supposed to behave towards this 'spiritual authority'? What rights and powers does this 'spiritual authority' have – and what are the subject's rights? How far, and in what way can the 'spiritual authority' require obedience from its subjects? How does communication go between the 'spiritual authority' and 'the faithful'? Have I myself experienced changes in these respects (e.g. through the Second Vatican Council)?

- *The effects of this cultural conditioning on my and our understanding of obedience in the Society of Jesus*: If I compare the conditioning by authority and obedience in the civil and religious cultures of my native country with the concept of authority and obedience found in the documents of the Society of Jesus, where are there similarities and where differences? In view of Ignatian obedience, where do I see the strengths in my culture? Where do I see the weaknesses?

After this hour the community gathers again for sharing. If the community is large, it should divide into small groups of 6-8 persons for the sharing. In the groups each one can report what has struck him during the

personal reflection. If an open and constructive atmosphere builds up in the group, the differences in cultural conditioning can be discussed and commented on with one another. In the best case, the individual's style might be matter for discussion, as he asks the others for feedback on how they have they have experienced him in his life of obedience.

It will be helpful, with a view to 'gathering fruit' (*fructum capere*), to evaluate the exercise with one another at the end, and so to formulate some results that it has brought. The meeting should close with a prayer, thanking for the variety of cultures in the community, and asking for the unity which is so necessary for the Society's mission.

It is to be expected that such an exercise in a community will improve mutual understanding of fellow-members, of their understanding of obedience, and especially that it will help superior and subjects to understand each other better.

Authority and obedience in different cultures

What was only indicated briefly in the questions for the above exercise needs to be explained here in more detail. Each culture has among its many characteristics also a quite distinct 'leadership culture'. It expresses the socio-cultural development which has unfolded through particular forms of leadership hierarchy, of the legitimisation and stabilisation of relationships of power, as well as through their crises and reversals. So, for example, in the western world the Enlightenment and the French Revolution of 1789 marked and to a great extent determined the entire leadership culture of the following two centuries.

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Independent of how an authority legitimises itself, and what forms it has developed for exercising power and leading its subjects, in every leadership culture particular rules and mechanisms build up by which superiors and subjects are to relate to each other. First of all, every leadership hierarchy has its special rituals through which the leader's authority is to be secured, and through which the subjects express respect and obedience to authority. This begins with certain status symbols for the leader (insignia of

office, the way the seat of office is equipped, subordinate levels of the hierarchy), continues with the rituals of approach (Who is allowed contact with the superior, when and how? What protocol is to be observed?) and the authority figure's liberty to sanction the subject's behaviour, to praise or to punish it.

Authority and obedience are expressed in a particular way in mutual communication. That concerns on the one hand communication among the subjects about their superior. How may he be spoken about? Above all, may anything critical be said about him? What kind of words are chosen, when someone speaks about the superior? Does this take place in open communication or in a veiled manner ('backstage')? I remember that as children we were never allowed to say anything critical about the parish priest. We would be punished for it by our parents then and there.

The difference in authority is clearest in direct communication between superior and subordinate. What is the correct form of address? Are there prescribed courteous formulae? What 'protocol' is to be observed? For example: in the North American culture a university-student can address his professor by his first name and 'you', which would be unthinkable in

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other cultures. There are also great differences on the side of authority in the manner in which decisions are prepared, made and carried out. Does the superior define his powers in such a way that he has full sovereignty and can make his decisions alone? Or must he appoint and listen to particular counsellors? By whom is he himself controlled? Is a subordinate listened to over decisions that concern him? Can he really express his opinion? The carrying out of decisions reveals most clearly how obedience is really defined in a culture. Must the subordinate accept the decisions silently and without comment? May he ask questions? May he raise objections?

A very delicate and difficult chapter in leadership hierarchies is dealing with mistakes. On the one hand this concerns the leader himself.

Who is allowed to point out his mistakes to him? Who is allowed to voice criticism of him? In the last resort, this question goes as far as: Who can remove from office a person in authority who is obviously misusing his power? Ignatius seems to have learnt a great deal on this question from the murky history of religious orders in the Middle Ages, and from the beginning writes in the Constitutions that the members of the order can remove their general superior in case of grave faults. [774]

Error-management also has to do with the way the person in authority deals with the mistakes of subordinates. Is there a 'corporate culture' in which mistakes are noted objectively, and a learning-process for everyone emerges from them, so that such mistakes can be avoided in future? This means: does a community learn from the mistakes made in it? Or does the superior's leadership-style function in such a way that mistakes must be systematically hidden? There are certain leadership-styles in which each subordinate can reveal only his good side and his successes, if he wants to avoid punishment.

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Fundamentally, a great difference is to be observed in the variety of cultures as to whether a strong leadership authority is wished for, or rather refused. The emancipation movement of the last 50 years in the western world has led in many places to a situation where superiors scarcely dare really to exercise their authority. In many secular and Church organisations that has led to difficulty in finding anyone at all who is qualified and willing to take on a leadership role. If a superior is not able and willing really to lead, if no directives or standards come from him, or if he cannot or will not make necessary decisions, the consequence is helplessness and disorientation among the subordinates. On the other hand, it can be observed in many organisations or cultures that people in leadership positions can seize power for themselves in a completely uncontrolled way, and thereby diminish subordinates in their rights and human dignity.

Some special questions concerning obedience in the Society of Jesus
Search for God's will

The power of an authority often serves to promote very definite interests. These can be the interests of fewer people (for example, the interests of those holding power) or the interests of many subordinates. A democratic constitution is at least the attempt by those in power to promote the interests of the majority of citizens. In spiritual obedience, however, the main point is not the promotion of the interests of particular persons or groups, but the question of God's will is central. In understanding our obedience this is probably the central point, in distinction from all civil and secular concepts of authority, power and obedience. Obedience in the Society of Jesus is primarily prayerful listening to the signs of the times, the search for God's will in following his Son, and spiritual discernment with the superior, the brethren and co-workers over what is to be done.

Obedience to the Pope and obedience to superiors in the Society

Obedience in the Society of Jesus presupposes Catholic ecclesiology, which is that in the person of the Pope, whom Ignatius often describes as 'vicarius Christi', God's will 'circa missiones', that is, concerning the Society's mission, is most clearly communicated. Obedience to superiors in the order follows its own rules, but is always bound by obedience to the Pope. The modern culture of the freedom and autonomy of the subject can usually bring only little understanding of the fact that anyone believes, and lives accordingly, that God's will can be found in obedience to spiritual superiors more easily than in one's own thinking and judgement. In this respect our spiritual obedience really is a kind of creed amidst the variety of worldly cultures. Yet precisely when it is accepted in faith that the superior can speak in God's name, he has to use this authority with great wisdom and prudence. Too often spiritual power has been misused or even become tyranny.

Strongly personalised practice of obedience for mission

Many people understand obedience as an attitude which holds on to valid prescriptions, laws and norms. For them, obedience means doing what applies to everyone. Naturally this is one aspect of our religious obedience. But the goal of Ignatian obedience is directed to the 'mission' of the community and of the individual. The central question for the individual is: For what purpose am I called and sent? The religious superior is to know the person whom he is sending very well, his history, his characteristics and habits, his gifts and weaknesses, so as to be able to place each one more accurately

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where more spiritual fruit is to be expected in the Lord's vineyard. This distinctive feature of our obedience will take the skills and limitations of the individual seriously, and put the resources available to the best use. In many societies and leadership-cultures there is less desire to take the qualities of the individual so seriously. So, for example, for a long time in the training of civil servants it was a high priority that all officials should carry out their duties in accordance with exactly the same standards. In this respect the civil servant is often taken as a model of regulated behaviour. Accordingly there was a regulated structure of leadership and command. The modern service-culture, on the other hand, values more highly that the individual should relate to customers with his personal qualities.

Indifference and disponibility

As has been mentioned, in civil life dealings with persons in authority and leadership-hierarchies are often marked by skilful promotion of one's own interests. This struggle to further one's own interests, ideas and plans is diametrically opposed to what Ignatius expects of religious obedience. Any one who is really seeking God's will has to put his personal wishes and interests behind him (SpEx 189:10) and make himself indifferent and disponible, in order to be able receive and carry out a mission from the

superior. While 20-30 years ago in discussions on religious vows many questions were asked about the vow of chastity, the emphasis of questioning in the last decade has moved more clearly to obedience. The freedom and autonomy of the individual is taken so seriously in modern society that it is unthinkable for most people to make oneself available for the sake of a greater task, for example in the following questions: Where do I live? What work am I going for? Who am I going to live with?

Manifestation of conscience

This is really a specific of obedience in the Society of Jesus. It is a skilled dialogue, aimed at discovering what is better in the missioning of an individual. It is at the same time a highly sensitive tool for leadership, which calls for very great maturity from superior and subject. Misuse of it can lead to traumatic strain. Probably for that reason also it is not allowed in the leadership hierarchy of the Church as a compulsory practice with the superior, but is accepted and recommended as voluntary sharing. For that reason it is really a privilege of the Society. Its highly explosive nature lies – in contrast to almost all civil leadership hierarchies – in the fact that the subject, in a spiritual act of trust in the superior, also shares his weakness and shadow-side. For a modern professional career such a procedure would seem like suicide. Instead, what counts there is: show your superior your strengths and successes, and hide your mistakes, weaknesses and misdemeanours. Nevertheless, it is part of the shrewdness and professionalism of modern managers to evaluate exactly the unavoidable weaknesses and failures that come to light in their subordinates and to make the best use of the workers concerned, ‘with their faults.’ Naturally, obvious weaknesses can always be misused to blackmail and exploit subordinates.

Discernment in common

On this point strong differences appear between the many cultures in which we live. How strongly are subjects involved in the process of coming to decisions? In some cultures it is an ‘offence to dignity’ if a subject makes a suggestion to a superior and brings his professional skill to the solution of a problem. In other cultures, on the contrary, this is really wanted, and

many forms of discussions and conferences are cultivated, to make the best use of the potential available in problem-solving in common.

But in Ignatius' thinking, common spiritual discernment in the practice of mission and obedience is more than a form of optimal participation in decision-making and problem-solving by all those concerned. 'Discernment in common' proceeds from the ecclesiological principle that God's Spirit is at work in superiors and subjects. A process of common spiritual discernment – whether in dialogue between superior and subject or in a common deliberation by a community or a team – calls for the above-mentioned principles, that all those involved are really seeking God's will, ready to set aside their own preferences and interests, and to make themselves available to carry out the decision to be made.

Representation

In this point also the differences between the various civilisations and cultures are very great. There are many leadership systems – also in the Church – in which in the ideal case the superior's word is accepted and fulfilled without any comment. Ignatius, on the contrary, allows the members of the Society of Jesus in certain situations and keeping certain rules to share their doubts and reservations face to face with the superior. This also calls for great maturity on both sides. This possibility of 'representation' can help to prevent wrong decisions, avoid damage, and protect people from pointless waste of energy, when for example they are asked to do something they are really not able for. In cultures where 'representation' is really not wanted, other forms of criticism and resistance to the decisions of superiors build up all the same. The most effective method, which can sometimes make superiors completely helpless, is what is called 'passive resistance'.

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Inculturation of Ignatian Obedience

Obedience in the Society of Jesus is no abstract ideal of religious life which has to be inculturated subsequently into various languages and civilisations. Rather, this understanding of obedience grew up through Ignatius' life-experience in the first half of the 16th century. Ignatius was nobly-born, and brought up in the courts of the rising Spanish world-power. He had experience of the Church hierarchy and its Inquisition. With his first companions, he wanted to prepare himself to be sent to any place in this world. In drawing up the Constitutions he set himself to study carefully the Rules of the old orders. So Ignatius' life-experience and charism led to a new concept of religious obedience in the Church. A sound hermeneutic of Ignatian obedience can only succeed by recourse to the historical and socio-cultural context of the foundation years. The history of interpretation and the concrete practice of this obedience in the course of centuries enlarge our present-day view of this vow.

Ignatian obedience does not exist 'pure', but always and only inculturated – from the beginning. Its basic principles have proved their worth in the course of the last five hundred years, and GC 35 unfolds them once more for the whole Society in greater clarity in Decree 4. As the exercise above should make clear, the assimilation of Ignatian obedience into existing cultures can lead to essential aspects becoming obscured, or even completely forgotten, while others are emphasized excessively. Each culture has its biases and its blind spots. Inculturation of Ignatian obedience means, while safeguarding the fundamental principles of our obedience, finding specific forms of behaviour which are acceptable in that culture, while at the same time not obscuring spiritual disponibility for the sake of Christ's mission.

People who have grown up and live within the same culture naturally have a blinkered attitude towards their biased interpretation of obedience. Therefore our international communities have a very important role in making all their members more aware of the biases in their Jesuit life. When in a province or a house various interpretations of Ignatian obedience collide with each other, it is a great opportunity for everyone to keep reflecting anew on the basic principles of Ignatian obedience. Often people will not get much further than establishing that here there are very various understandings of obedience. And much has already been gained when the members of a community develop a certain sensitivity to the peculiarities of other cultures. The exercise above should be particularly useful to this end.