

WHAT HAS THE “PRIESTLY CHARACTER” OF THE SOCIETY MEANT, AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN, TO ME AS A SCHOLASTIC?

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As a deacon, and now a few weeks from my ordination to the priesthood, the question could not come at a more meaningful moment for me. This is the best vantage point in my Jesuit life, now in my tenth year, where I can look at the formation that has led me progressively towards ordained priestly ministry, yet at a point when I am not yet a priest.

Looking back at these years, I can certainly see myself as rooted in the Society, sharing in its life and ministry, yet still on the road to ordination. Each vocation has its own story to tell; mine certainly has always seen the call the priesthood deeply rooted down, but then progressively called to be lived out in this way of life, which the Society gives flesh to. And it is this process, where my own calling has received some more clarity that can outline what the “priestly character” of the Society means to me.

I need to go down to the roots of my vocation, to what, with the wisdom of hindsight, helped draw me to the Society. Now I realise that a strong factor was the witness of life of some Jesuits, in whom I could see something specific, not that they were more learned, more holy, or more dedicated to their ministry than other priests I knew, but somehow a

very personal relationship that they had with Jesus Christ, a relationship which transpired in the way they spoke about the Lord, celebrated the Eucharist, and in the sacrament of reconciliation.

A vocation rooted in the Spiritual Exercises

It does not surprise me. The vocation of each Jesuit, if in its own unique way, is rooted in the experience of the Exercises, in the contemplation of the life, ministry, passion, death and risen glory of our Lord, in the desire to know the Lord, to love more and follow him more closely [EE 104]. Those many conversations, “as a friend speaks to a friend or a servant to his Master” [EE 54], forge our relationship. Of course, the Exercises are meant not only for Jesuits or priests, but the Jesuit priest cannot be if not a man moulded by the Exercises. Those who have radically met the Lord in the Exercises cannot keep him to themselves.

Ignatius himself, and the first companions, rooted in the experience of the Exercises, also found themselves called to the priesthood, as the means *to help souls*. A hallmark of Jesuit priestly life, this desire to help souls has manifested itself, since our foundation, in the pluriform ministries (1 Cor. 13, 27-31). Our ministries – although called to be at one with the ordained ministry of the Church – are less focused on the more immediately cultic, and more towards the teaching, instruction and spiritual consolation through reconciliation. If we manage to see through the language of the 16th century, the Formula of our Institute still expresses itself with amazing clarity the character of our priestly ministry: spreading our faith through the ministries of the Word, and the consolation of the faithful through confession and other sacraments, the work for reconciliation and the compassionate care for the least of society. Today, the wording may have changed, but the fundamental call remains the same: our commitment to a learned ministry at the service of the Word, our spirituality grounded in the Exercises, our desire for social justice.

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Extensive formation

Formation itself, of course, has been the major aspect in my Jesuit life so far. The novitiate was immediately focused on religious formation and our Institute: with its foundation in the Spiritual Exercises, expressing through the various experiments the ministries of the Society, and providing a parable of our life in the Pilgrimage, as we are called to entrust our lives in the Lord. If the first two years are characterised as intensive, our studies are extensive. Six years have already been spent primarily at furthering university studies: philosophy and theology, and now Scripture. Returning to studies after the two very active years of regency was not easy. But it reminds me of the choice and experience of Ignatius, in choosing to go to Paris, to have a better preparation, so as to be able to better serve God's people.

The Society's desire to develop and make best use of God-given talents and interests, including openness to 'secular' disciplines and sciences, is an aspect that has attracted me to it. The rich heritage of the Society in the studies of mathematics, natural sciences, history, languages and cultures, has strengthened our ministry, and provided a contribution to the whole Church. There certainly is a risk banking on one's knowledge. But if the motivations are healthy, our formation and studies reflects an understanding that priesthood is not merely qualified by *what* someone does, the immediacy of pastoral work, but by *who* a person is. As ministers of God, serving the Church, yet being able to integrate within our own person a personal relationship with Christ, a careful articulation of our faith, and a deepening of human knowledge and science, gives our ministry more credibility. Not that the Gospel needs to be proclaimed with additions, but that such formation can help us discover further the roots of the Gospel (that always is proclaimed *in* and *to* a culture), and be able to retransmit that the Good News to a culture that shifts and changes. It also provides the Church with means to continue developing its reflection, without which fundamentalist and obscurantist attitudes prevail. The Church's heritage would be all the poorer without our Matteo Riccis, Teilhard de Chardins,

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Karl Rahners and many others, who beckon us on even centuries on, as did the Augustines and Thomas Aquinases before them.

*Our Mission as participation
In the charism of the Society*

The calling to the Society, and to the priesthood, also reminds me that our mission is not an individual one, but one in the shared charism of the Society, and at one with the wider mission of Church. Personal experience, especially during Regency, made this reflection a real and present one. Many of the conversations, much of the work I could do, were not due to myself, but to my being a Jesuit, being seen somewhat more visibly partaking in the ministry of the Church, even if still not ordained. Needless to say, my personality, attitude and formation of the individual can help or hinder our ministry, but deep down those who put their trust in me and in us as Jesuits, did so because of the common mission we share, and the mission entrusted to us, ultimately, as part of a wider Church. Ministry within the Society progressively helped shift the focus from me to the ministry itself.

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One particular experience has deeply marked my vocation, and underlies my understanding of our priestly character: a spiritual conversation, one evening, with one of my students, during my Regency at College. It was a very frank and open conversation, one where I could see God's reconciling presence clearly at work, so radically that I realised that the conversation itself was not only bringing God's love and reconciliation to that person, but to me as well. The experience of the Exercises had thought me to recognise the hand of God at work, and formation so far helped me articulate what to say and understand where to keep silent. Yet the deepest aspect of that experience was realising that ultimately, at that moment, even through my own work and words I was being called simply to be an honest broker, and to contemplate God at work in the other person and in me, accompanied by a profound consolation in realising God's love, which shed

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new light on the call to become a priest and a minister of reconciliation, expressed even through the sacraments.

Undoubtedly it should all be marked, as for Ignatius, with the ability to see God at work in peoples' lives, which should makes us contemplate in awe, and take off our sandals as we tread on hallowed ground.