

THE WAY BACK FROM COMMUNITY LIFE TO MISSION

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1. Introduction

The Society of Jesus is particularly concerned to show convincingly that community life¹ has a significant place in our manner of being and proceeding. I have felt that ever since I became a Jesuit, not only during, but also after, formation. We know how far this determination to stress community has gone: today the conviction is shared that community life has to be bound up with the very heart of our mission. Community is not accidental for the Jesuit, or for the apostolic life in which he is working. It is not there as a practical advantage for the mission, starting from the premise that *Community is not mission in itself*, and that, in any case, *it is useful* for carrying it out. On the contrary: the Society insists that as Jesuits we have to be convinced that community life is good news for this world and belongs with full right to the newness that active religious life seeks to communicate,

It is not a certainty that belongs to us alone. Consecrated life, in general, is rediscovering the potential of the communitarian 'we' for mission. Religious identity is being worked on, along with vocation, and *convocation* – being called together. In this way, little by little, a picture fundamental to the gospel narratives is being recovered: that of *Jesus with his disciples*, as the first public image with which the Master sought to display the reality that God wanted to establish.

It must be recognised that the temptation lurks in us of thinking that there is more mission when there is less community. It is a temptation which has turned, temporarily or permanently, into a habit. Many reasons have combined to justify the inverse relationship between our apostolic and community lives. It is still easy for us to appeal to the fact that Ignatius rejected *office in choir*, and to make that the fundamental reason for our shortcomings in community life. Certainly, the Society never ceases to invite us to take the opposite principle to heart: the more communal, the more mission. That is true, provided that this *more community* does

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not get out of hand and turn into a communalism foreign to the charism, which would bring into question the intensity and volume of the Jesuit's dedication to the apostolate. Or, in other words, we are urged not to let community life exclude apostolic life. To consider them as rivals would be to focus wrongly, and distort the final picture of our active religious life.

Looking at everything in this way, it seems to me that in the Society we find ourselves faced with *a particular way to bring community back to the core of mission*. I shall go on to offer some considerations which seek to outline events, things learned, and also questions to resolve on this way. They do not make up any kind of theory, nor claim to be a summary of the recent doctrine that the Society has worked out about community life. They are simply points taken from the practice of government. I hope they may be of some use to those who read them.

II. A three-fold point of departure

This turning back from community to mission is not a voyage of return to a supposed lost paradise, which we should never have left. I understand that in the Society what is wanted is to gain ground for community life *starting from* three irreversible processes:

a) I don't know if it would be appropriate to extrapolate what is happening in my own province to others in contexts different from our own. However, perhaps in some cases similar symptoms may indeed be

recognisable. I refer to the way in which over recent years, we have been ordered to configure the communities. The tendency seems clear: communities with a majority of Jesuits engaged in the same apostolic activity have diminished, while *communities with a plurality of missions* have proliferated. They are formed by Jesuits of very different apostolic thrusts, without an exclusive dedication to one work, apart from the fact that such communities maintain physical closeness or juridical relationship with it. The effect of this tendency for the near future is that *community life and apostolic life will normally no longer be able to relate with one another according to the 'one community - one mission' model*.

b) I believe sincerely that the high grade of organisation which is applied to mission today and its consequence for the community are no less questionable for the Society at the present time. Mission is more and more complex in its processes of gestation, realisation and ongoing management. It calls for the creation of apostolic sectors, the massive incorporation of laypeople, efficient professionalism, and the courage to take up ways of organisation which are different from those used traditionally. In this framework, community occupies a place of relative significance in demands for planning and decision from the apostolic work. Think of the sophistication to which missions like education, at both school and university level, are subject. The same could be said of the social or the intellectual apostolate. The complexity of the challenges facing them demands places for apostolic discernment that are very well qualified. The local community of the Jesuit involved in such missions can offer him only partial support in this discernment. *The fact is that we are forming communities of Jesuits sent on missions, whose natural places of discernment and experience are outside the community to which they belong.*

c) At the same time newly-formed community environments are appearing, which are responsible directly or indirectly for mission – teams, working groups, commissions, boards. They are not always strictly functional forums, whose task is limited solely to what their statutes lay down. Into them flow personal relationships, spiritual discernments and decision-making processes which have passed through intense common living. In this way a kind of apostolic community experience is produced, without parallel in the local community. The new information- and communication-technologies, an absolutely familiar field for more and more Jesuits and laypeople, create a climate in which these communitarian environments

become more powerful and, above all, come to have a more and more habitual place in daily life.

Without denying the good things in these three processes, it has to be recognised that they can create a difficult scenario for the community. If we do not react in time, it is possible that community life may lose influence on apostolic life and be trapped into a kind of unimportance for what is really decisive, the mission. Put in the opposite way, it is very probable that apostolic life will come to be prayed and lived solely by the one who carries it out, and in this way become autonomous and drawn into the private sphere. The resulting picture would certainly cause surprise: *we might turn ourselves into apostles without community*.

III. Ways for the community to come back to mission

To neutralize this potentially negative effect, the government of the Society has reinstated community life for the Jesuit, and has done it logically, where and as possible. We know of instructions in that direction. They have encouraged communities to take a more leading role in mission, for example, encouraging greater community sharing about missions carried out individually. The apostolic dimension inherent in the local superior's leadership has been stressed. Jesuits have been asked to have more courage about apostolic deliberation in common. We have been warned to saturation-point of the deadly traps which confuse being and doing in active religious life.

But all this comes as a preliminary, always called on to support with a certain foundation any kind of initiative to recover community: *our positive evaluation of community life as having apostolic potential*, even within the restricted margins which the Society imposes on the local community today by accepting the processes described in the previous section. Is it really like that? To reply, we have to open ourselves up very much. As regards my mission: what do my companions assume, those who are most prominent in the everyday reality of the community where I live, each one at a different stage in the Society, involved

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in different apostolic activities? What sustenance do they bring me, without which my apostolic life would decline? It must be admitted that we do not always answer fluently: a strong setback inside and outside the Jesuit.

I shall suggest three ways, taken from experience in government, by which it is possible to go forward in some way in the process of accepting that *we are better apostles precisely thanks to our community*, and not in spite of it.

III.1 *The community re-appropriation of our mission*

The Society's invitation to safeguard community has in it a more than laudable intention: it wants us, as Jesuits, to examine our personal way of *appropriating* the mission received. We have to recover a spiritual vision of our apostolic praxis, whatever its form may be – specific ministry, apostolic work, service within the community. This spiritual vision ought to have the effect that we become clearer not so much about the *what* of our mission as about the *from where* and the *why* of it.

Apostolic zeal does not immunise us against personal or institutional dynamics of self-centredness. It can be very indiscreet. One of the problems from which we Jesuits suffer, in these times of need for members and the low social esteem for active religious life, is that we do not discern our mission with the spiritual rigour that we ought. Immediate need overcomes us, and it is that which dictates our options. Little by little, apostolic life

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without spiritual evaluation brings us into ambivalence: it stuffs us with unilateral visions of the Society's mission, tends to make action an end in itself, make us excessively individualistic and, in the end, withdraws us from the communal

In many cases community helps to reverse this improper appropriation in mission. Community life, and only that, opens spaces and dimensions of religious life, for which there is not opportunity, time or context in the pressurised, 'instant' rhythm in which apostolic life takes place. Here I have three points to make:

· Community reminds its members that they have to take care of their personal journey of faith in the clamour of apostolic life; after all, the Jesuit is one more believer, groping his way into the mystery of God his whole life long. Proclamation of the word does not ensure that the messenger will assimilate the message himself. So community life will be that stubborn insistence from which the call will be heard to safeguard moments of contemplation in daily life. It also represents that insistence which, opportunely or inopportunely, at moments of direct confrontation with diaries full of apostolic appointments, calls the Jesuit to spaces in which he dares to share his own experience of faith.

· *Community helps its members to relativise the pressure and importance of their apostolic tasks.* Through his everyday companions, the Jesuit lives with *other* projects and, for the same reason, with *other* pressures and priorities. The different missions of our companions in community illustrate locally that the transforming action of God in history is *much greater* than the particular segment which constitutes our personal contribution to it. Our community reminds us that, fortunately, the gospel is many people's business, not just mine.

· Those who know us better through everyday life come to discover that our virtues are not so great, nor our words always backed up by consistency; that our abilities do not deserve unanimous applause, nor the demands on us from outside correspond with our daily commitments inside. The reflection that the community depends on us, and on the others, obliges us to recognise, on the one hand, that mission is also carried out from limitedness, fragility and need. And, on the other hand, the lights and shades in which common life unfolds day by day in our very own house, without going further, provides a strong dose of reality as we invite others to build the Kingdom in their own houses, also without going any further.

III.2 The potential of community for enriching mission

Usually our specific companions, those in the community engaged in missions different from our own, are not in the picture about what is happening in our apostolic life. Partly, we believe that, in the end, we all have too much to do to make time to know about things that are not our direct concern. Partly, also, we think that in fact they would not bring anything important to our own apostolic activity. So we have no faith in

what dialogue with our companions about the mission carried out might bring. We are afraid of unwanted interference, fundamental misunderstanding and obvious lack of interest. The result is that, day to day, there is a kind of short-circuit in communication about mission. We keep quiet about what happens in our apostolic life, and the community becomes strangely silent.

There is a version of this short-circuit at province level, also. I am referring to some consequences of the *compartmentalisation* of mission. The creation of apostolic sectors for organising the whole spectrum of apostolic activities in a province has given abundant proof of its effectiveness. Shortage of time demands this kind of organisational plan, as has already been said. However, it is also certain that compartmentalisation can distort the mission being carried on by the excessive professionalism that it provokes and by the corporatism that it may arouse. The dangers are real: we lose opportunities to start initiatives that would complement each other, an inconsistent public image of the Society is created in front of the society in which it is embodied, rivalry is apparent to the very people for whom we work... The invitation to promote *collaboration between sectors* and the relationship of the work of the different apostolic sectors with the local community has the task of recovering the lost community dimension, which is also for the good of the mission which each sector carries out.

Might it bring a call to the simple scale of the community? Might we come to accept that, thanks to my specific companions, my mission really is enriched, and becomes more incisive in the particular field where it takes place, *precisely because my apostolic life is known and shared*. Community life, not other ambiances, can cultivate attitudes that make this enrichment possible. I should like to pick out only one: *Community helps to sensitise our apostolic life to problems, contexts and persons not directly dealt with by our mission, but which shed light on aspects which may indeed increase its scope*.

As Jesuits we know the *world* through the very mission that we carry out. We do not usually allow ourselves to be protected excessively against what is happening today, but our immediate, spontaneous reaction is to *know what is happening*. We build communities in which companions live together who are dedicated to missions from the university to the sacristy, from the chapel in a marginalised district to spirituality. Reality, with its dilemmas, comes to us abundantly. This contact with reality, promoted by our apostolic manner of proceeding, bumps into us in community life –

sometimes formally, sometimes informally –so that through his community, reality makes different impacts on the Jesuit. And with these impacts come questions, those essential questions that apostolic life needs, to know what to say and what to do, if we really want to be effective in helping souls. The angle of reality that each one knows through his apostolic life throws up data which qualify, complement and correct those which we accumulate on our own apostolic patch.

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Putting it in another way: *in community* we learn that today there are no partial solutions to problems, but that they show up on very different levels. In the Society we live what society as a whole is experiencing when it seeks to face up to the challenges threatening humanity. The world and its historical labours are revealing themselves to us in a way that in all sincerity leaves us astounded. It is impossible to put up a boundary wall that separates our private plots – whether personal, institutional or political – from the sound of conflicts and divisions that are happening in other spheres. In this way, problems cannot be broken up or isolated. Nor can the solutions. The consequence is immediate: our mission cannot be *simple*; it is called to greater depth in what it sets out to do. And in this it is precisely our companions in community who can help us.

II.3 A new way of valuing common life

I have seen many Jesuits making an overview of how their apostolic life has come together since they were incorporated into the Society. Each one with his particular modalities, they always came to the same conclusion. Their mission had not been their own work, relying on their own initiative and personal zeal: rather, their mission was essentially the Society's. And to confirm this fundamental belonging, they usually told of two experiences:

- One of these had to do with the places of community through which they had passed over the years. As Jesuits we internalise the Society

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in our personal history through the specific communities in a chain whose links are the individual companions who shared common life with us. These communities were also factors in discernment of apostolic life. Many Jesuits admit that their mission took shape thanks precisely to the human support and help in discernment that these community times supplied. Their impression is that their apostolic life was protected by those who had the responsibility of accompanying them, and the role of sanctioning their discernments. In some way their mission was a corporate discovery.

- At the same time, in this panoramic view of their life-story in the Society many Jesuits stop at another crucial experience, repeated more than once. They tell of occasions when their apostolic life had to be ready to accept new plans, that is, of their particular way of learning apostolic indifference. The Society came to them to propose a different apostolic activity, in view of the mission *that had to be carried out collectively, as Body*. In this way they came to awareness that their apostolic life was not an end in itself, nor could it be separated from a subject greater than them.

Certainly both experiences acquire their own tones in our personal way as Jesuits. But, in general, most of us would admit that the mission in which we are engaged did not originate in a decision born of our own success. This mission is, rather, distilled from a mass of decisions before our participation in it. The apostolate that we carry out ought to be traced back to a 'we' which existed in the first prompting of this mission...

Which was, and which *is*. Because, equally, we have to admit that our apostolic activity will go on in time simply because the Society is behind it. No specific mission is supported by itself alone. The governing structure of a province, with all its organs, is thought out so that the individual initiatives of an apostolic agent are taken up into a coordinated movement in mission with the other apostolic agents in the province. In this way the community becomes a requirement for the apostolate to be possible.

This requirement for possibility is verified, in due measure, in the local community which stands behind the Jesuit. Possibly the challenge in our hands is that this conviction may be a little more palpable, and not sound like pure principle. We must practice that exercise of memory of who we are, as we proposed at the beginning of this article. Let the sense of belonging grow in us. And certainly help us to value in a new way the particular weight that local community has always had in our apostolic life.... to recognise in the present reality that we are living, at least potential in this same direction.

The community has something of daily *sending*, even including what is formed by Jesuits dedicated to distant missions: my companions are eye-witnesses of *how we are affected* by the mission we carry out, take responsibility for *supporting us* in this mission and can bring *keys* to how we ought to carry it out. In the end, our way of carrying out apostolic life is very much influenced by the relationship with community that is in us. For mission not just any moment in community is equally important. *Mutatis mutandis*, for the mission of a province what is decisive is the effective union of hearts which is alive in it. So that means that community is *in* the Jesuit carrying out the mission, not outside him.

IV. Conclusion

Apostles without community? Frankly, I don't think it is possible, even though, certainly, it may be the fact that we agree easily to working as apostles of a local community in that we remain a presence in it in our mission.

Experience confirms that the closeness of community life to the apostolate may be greater than we think. Rescued from its exile, the return of community to mission may be a gift for the Jesuit and for his apostolic life. Thus that paradox essential to our vocation would be fulfilled, that we live belonging, which makes us alive for giving.

¹ To focus the question, from now on, what is said about community life refers to the strictly local level of our life in common: to this specific mark of being companions which for the Jesuit constitutes the daily-life context of his religious life. Other levels, like the provincial or international in which this religious life is also made real, are left aside. Further, by mission is meant the specific apostolic activity which the Jesuit does, and which is described succinctly in our province catalogues.