

A NEW CONFIGURATION FOR THE SOCIETY OF JESUS?

OUR INSTITUTE IN THE FACE OF SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGES


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Setting out to tackle the subject proposed above implies that the Society of Jesus is not immune from the transformations that have happened to society in the course of history. We might confirm this affirmation by looking at our past and bringing out certain characteristics which have disappeared from the life of the Jesuit today. This fact implies, first of all, that the Society has succeeded in preserving its identity throughout its history, despite the changes experienced within it. But, above all, it implies that St. Ignatius' order, like any other human reality, cannot continue unchanged in face of the successive transformations that are part of human society, given that it not only forms part of this same society but also needs elements of it to survive, make itself understood, radiate its charism, recruit its members, in fact influence society and achieve its purpose.

Accepting this fact means affirming that the constitutive elements of the order, even if they are theoretically clear and well-defined, will only be lived realities in history if they take on a configuration suited to their time. This configuration, as we shall see, is created at different levels. At the highest level there is the task of reflecting and discerning

on the challenges that have arisen, a task which has been performed by successive General Congregations, and also in the important pronouncements of Fathers General. We know the part played by the experience of our communities in the drawing up of the Constitutions. We also know that our holy founder considered the text of the Constitutions as an uncompleted text. These are facts which indicate how Ignatius already envisaged possible changes and new challenges in the contexts where Ours would have to live.

Our objective is more modest. Here we understand the word *configuration* simply as the *image* that the Society conveys to its contemporaries. Naturally this way of knowing and acting in the Society depends closely on the fundamental characteristics of our Institute, our Constitutions and the decisions of successive General Congregations. This fact will be duly considered. But here we are interested directly in confronting the question: what appearance will our order have in future, as a result of the changes demanded by society? How shall we be seen by the future generations from which our vocations will have to come?

The subject proposed to us first of all places the identity, community and mission of the Society of Jesus against the socio-cultural changes experienced in our day. The key word here is, undoubtedly, *mission*, since that qualifies both the *identity* of the Jesuit and the way of living it in *community*. We shall discuss our theme in three stages. First we shall see how institutional transformation is a constant, always necessary since the objectives and aims of an institution cannot be imprisoned by space and time. What has happened to the Catholic Church in the course of its existence confirms what we are saying. Then we shall look at how in recent years the Society of Jesus has brought about institutional renewal, perhaps more consciously than in the past. In a third and last part we shall deal with some of the serious challenges which are pressing at the present time, which will call for changes in the configuration and practices of the Society.

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1. The imperative of institutional transformation

Any institution created with a view to definite ends which go beyond the historical context in which it came into being, will constantly have to suffer changes, since the original context no longer exists and it will constantly see itself faced with new challenges. This imperative is valid for universities, hospitals, for the norms and structures of the law, politics, social organisation, the commercial field, to give some examples. Even though directed to wide objectives, such institutions were built from *disposable* material, that is, with elements suited to the socio-cultural context in which they originated. At the moment when these elements become outdated, partially or completely, unusable, unintelligible for other generations, thanks to strong socio-cultural changes, whether economic or political, such institutions should change themselves, using afresh the cultural and organisational material available and offered by the new context. If not, they lose their meaning or disappear, as living entities, surviving with difficulty as museum-pieces.

Depending on the institutions, the changes may refer either to the living context, in its social, political or economic dimension, or to the *human community* reached by such changes, which experiences in its turn transformations in its culture, practices, social organisation. Naturally the two fields concerned are related to each other and modify each other.

To understand this dialectic better, we shall present the Catholic Church as an example. It was formed from the confession of faith in Jesus of Nazareth as Son of God, in response to the previous proclamation (kerygma) of the person and the life of this Jesus Christ, dead and resurrected, this response being brought about by the action of the Holy Spirit, sent by the Risen Christ. All those who are incorporated into the person of Jesus Christ and his message of the Kingdom of God come to constitute in this way a human community of a particular kind, the ecclesial community, which celebrates its faith by means of the sacraments, especially by baptism and the Eucharist, and which is led by ordained ministers. So we have the *theological components* which characterise the Church: the person of Jesus Christ, the action of the Holy Spirit, the proclamation of the Word, reception through faith, the formation of the community of the faithful, the sacraments and the ordained ministry.

Meanwhile these components which do not depend on a determined historical context, but on God's revelation, are in fact inevitably understood,

expressed and lived within a socio-cultural context. So the community of the faithful, as a human community, understands itself, organises itself and lives its identity with the elements offered by its own context, with a cultural or social stamp. Only in this way can the theological components be living realities, understood and lived in a fitting way by a generation. Only in this way can its expressions and practices make intelligible for its contemporaries what this human community believes, lives, proclaims, what it is: in a word its specific identity. We note already in the New Testament that the communities which originated from Paul's apostolic activity, in the gentile environment, lived and proclaimed their faith and organised themselves differently from the communities in Palestine. The fundamental reason for this change was the socio-cultural context met by Paul the apostle. Even though different in form, both are authentic churches of Jesus Christ. We know that Paul's initiative was decisive for the diffusion of Christianity outside the Palestinian world.

We can characterise the complex of such changes as a *historical configuration* of the Church, distinguishing its configuration from its theological components which do not change. In this way we can note in the history of the Catholic Church a series of different configurations in the course of the centuries. The Church in the time of the catacombs was not the same as that of the Renaissance; the Church of the patristic period was different from the Church of our own day. The ultimate reason for these changes was always the same: the Church ought to be, for a determined period, for a determined socio-cultural context, in a real way *sacrament* of salvation in Jesus Christ, the proclaimer of his message, a living space for Christian practices. And as we reach the heart of the Church only through its external reality, this latter cannot be an obstacle to reaching what it really is. The Church changes so as to continue being Church!

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2. The Society of Jesus and the imperative of institutional transformation

The Society of Jesus has its proper identity, expressed in the Formulas of the Institute approved and confirmed by Paul III (1540) and

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Julius III (1550). In the text of the Apostolic Letter *Exposcit debitum* of Julius III it was 'founded chiefly for this purpose: to strive especially for the defence and propagation of the faith and for the progress of souls in Christian life and doctrine, by means of public preaching, lectures and any other ministration whatsoever of the word of God, and further by means of the Spiritual Exercises, the education of children and unlettered persons in Christianity, and the spiritual consolation of Christ's faithful through hearing confessions and ministering the other sacraments. Moreover, he [the Jesuit] should show himself ready to reconcile the estranged, compassionately assist and serve those who are in prisons or hospitals, and indeed to perform any other works of charity, according to what will seem expedient for the glory of God and the common good.'

Even if the points quoted in this text add to and make more concrete what was already expressed in the Apostolic Letter *Regimini militantis Ecclesiae* of Paul III, all the same they present an ample programme of activities as the *purpose* of the new order. The Constitutions represent a first step to enable the realisation of such a project, whether in what concerns the Jesuit's formation, the government of the order or, above all, the mission proper to it, as appears particularly in Part VII. We have already mentioned the extent to which the 'experience' factor was important in St. Ignatius' final editing of them. Even if we are not experts in the material we can recognise how the history of the Society of Jesus, especially through the successive General Congregations and the important pronouncements of Superiors General, continued the task of preserving and actualising its identity and mission throughout the centuries. Only in this way could the religious order be understood, act effectively, gather new members, confront unprecedented challenges and, in fact, achieve its purpose.

Recently, on the lines of the Second Vatican Council in its decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Society experienced a real and substantial renewal in its Particular Law, with the aim of adapting its life and apostolate to new times, in fidelity to the original charism. This task was performed by General Congregations XXXI and XXXII. There was need, meanwhile, to give a normative structure to the multiple decrees which defined this renovation. Entrusted by General Congregation XXXIII with the task of effecting a complete revision of the Society's Law, Fr. General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach brought it to conclusion with the participation and help of many Jesuits, superiors and experts. Finally his text, worked on again on the occasion of

General Congregation XXXIV, was approved and came to be known as *Complementary Norms of the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (1995).

In its first number these Norms already affirm that the Society should adapt its life and activities 'to the exigencies of the Church and the needs of men and women of our times, according to its proper character and charism.' (CN 1.) The purpose of the order, characterised by its specific mission already expressed in the Apostolic Letters of its approbation, already mentioned above, receives a more contemporary formulation, 'service of faith and promotion of justice' (GC XXXII), which includes 'the inculturated proclamation of the Gospel and dialogue with members of other religions' (GC XXXIV; CN 4.) This present-day expression of the Society should always be seen with reference to the original image contained in the Formula of the Institute and in the Constitutions. (CN 5.)

Note, however, that the *fundamental criterion* for the adaptation of the Institute must have as its objective 'whatever seems to contribute most, all things considered, to the knowledge, love, praise and service of God and to the salvation of souls' according to the mind of St. Ignatius. (CN 23). This is what explains the presence of discreet charity in various points of the Constitutions, or the freedom allowed to the superior in urging obedience, or the consideration due to persons in their individuality, to places, times and other circumstances (CN 15) The practice of discernment carried out both by the superior and also by those who obey, shows the founder's preoccupation with maintaining due consideration for the human and socio-cultural context in which the mission takes place, so that it may bear fruit.

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As the identity of the Society of Jesus appears in the Formula of the Institute, its substantial points cannot be changed (CN 21§1) and the substantial points not included in the Formula itself can only be changed

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under strict conditions (CN 21§2) Non-substantial points can be changed 'for weighty reasons' by a General Congregation (CN 21§3), given that decrees and regulations of General Congregations or rulings and ordinances of General Superiors not only can be changed but, still more, ought to be adapted continually to the needs of each period. (CN 21§4)

The well-known expression '*our manner of proceeding*' connects closely with our theme. Fr. Arrupe observed in a conference on our manner of proceeding in 1979 (NMP) that a person's *identity* is bound to engender attitudes, and expresses a spiritual and human *profile* which constitutes his or her characteristic manner of proceeding. This, in turn, takes on *expressions* adapted to different circumstances and periods. The Society's manner of proceeding goes beyond these three levels. From this come the errors both of wanting to leave it completely immutable and of expecting global change (NMP 2) But the same text points to external signs of the image of Jesuits who change (NMP 25-29) next to other characteristics which have remained and ought to remain. (NMP 30) The text mentions nevertheless that the new type of candidate for the Society reinforces the 'change of forms'. (NMP 33)

On this point we gain greater clarity on our theme. I express it in a question: 'how will the Society shape itself in the near future? Since the socio-cultural changes call us to rethink our mission, that fact must necessarily have repercussions on how we live our identity and how we constitute our communities. Many characteristics were already pointed out by the way of governing the order in recent years. Let us try to see them as a whole, limiting ourselves to their phenomenological level, which will, however, enable us to foresee the face of the same Society for the coming years.

3. Some challenges at the present time and the corresponding changes

Naturally we do not claim to catalogue all the challenges coming from contemporary society, whether because of their number or because of their diversity. For that we should have to take into account all the regions, contexts and cultures of our planet. The particular selection of some of those challenges and the corresponding reaction of the Society is partial, not only because it reflects a determined context (in this case the western context), but still more because it does not consider the greater or lesser

incidence of the socio-cultural challenges in the different regions of the world. A defining characteristic of present-day culture may have a devastating effect in one region at the same time as it is weakened or as it were neutralised in another, thanks to its cultural patrimony or its social organisation. Consequently, what follows has as its objective to *stimulate reflection* rather than to offer quick and certain solutions. We shall not distinguish in our approach what has repercussions on the identity, the community and the mission of the Society, but we are aware of the intimate connection of these three realities among themselves, which will be tested out in the unfolding of our exposition.

A) The emergence of subjectivity and cultural individualism

The emergence of the individual, as someone to be respected for being unique and different from others in his or her reality, is a late conquest by humanity, engendered slowly in the course of recent centuries. It is a matter of a cultural trait which calls for greater attention and respect for what the person presents as his own, like formation, family, nature, qualities, projects, human maturity. This fact prevents a transmission imposed by the cultural patrimony of previous generations. On the other hand, there is another fact here of great importance. The process which resulted in the rise of subjectivity was engendered along with the process which brought forth the *pluralist society*. In this the homogeneity proper to traditional societies gives place to a plural diversity of understandings of reality, endowed with rationality and proper norms. The different spheres of society with their particular readings come to agree between themselves and to be mutually relativised. In this situation the individual enjoys a possibility unknown until now: the power to choose from what the pluralist society offers him as, for example, the elements which he desires for the construction of his personality. It is now the individual who imposes himself on the totality of everything inherited.

The passage from the emergence of subjectivity to the reign of individualism, as we experience it today, is explained by the present crisis of substantive values, the consequence of what we saw before. Today society offers chiefly points of reference which revolve around one's own personal happiness, with the weakening of everything which would give respect to the other person or to the common good. What is important is self-realization,

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personal satisfaction, human relationships which are affectively gratifying, or also a more material egocentrism which seeks personal wealth as a greater opportunity to acquire consumer goods. Naturally this characteristic of our contemporary culture explains the lack of interest in great humanitarian projects, in politics in a general sense, in the common good, as it explains also the ethical crisis present in the various sectors of society.

We can affirm that the challenge of the re-birth of subjectivity was not a great problem for the Society, thanks to various factors typically ours: our mode of government, the account of conscience, the importance of spiritual and apostolic discernment, the multiple fields of work, availability and universality as characteristic of our mission. Nevertheless, we Jesuits breathe the same contaminated air as our contemporaries, and we can also succumb to the present individualistic culture. When this happens our own identity is contaminated, then the common mission for which we are sent (even though completely determined by superiors) is prejudiced by parallel personal projects with slight prospects of continuity in the future.

Meanwhile, it seems to us that to correct this fault it is not enough to blame the reigning individualism. Are there no other factors that also contribute to this failing? Do we not experience today greater difficulties than in the past in creating specific common projects in our provinces and houses? The reasons are many: a smaller number of active members, the complexity of the present-day world, new challenges and battle-fronts, the human fragility of the new generations that makes the relationship between them difficult, to quote some cases. The enormous effort expended to work out 'apostolic plans' in the different provinces and regions succeeds in channelling our activities for the Kingdom of God for concrete ends. We could ask ourselves if this achieves its objective. Certainly the answer is yes, though maybe to a different extent in different countries. Would it not be much more effective if there were a greater effort to present the Society as an *apostolic body* from the first years of formation onwards? Can it be that young Jesuits have the idea that they are being sent to traditional works, principally to stop them from dying out? Shouldn't our communities dialogue more about the common mission? Couldn't we get to know each other better and so help each other more?

The present-day pluralist society makes it imperative for us to know how to live together, to accept and dialogue with those who are different. Our perception of reality is always partial and incomplete, since it is impossible for us to master all social sectors and fields of learning. To come

to consensus through dialogue is an imperative in our day. And what does this modify in our attitudes? Also because we are grappling with a secularised society in some parts of the world, where language about God has become a problem, our service of the faith will necessarily suffer modifications in the search for a new language and for signs not yet known of the divine presence always at work.

B) Dominance of the economic factor in present-day culture

The fragmentation of the single homogeneous view of the cosmos in traditional societies gave origin to different cultural sectors in the modern pluralist society. Each one of them, whether religion, politics, the sciences, family or the economy enjoys its own intelligibility and individual norms, making dialogue between them exceedingly difficult because of the lack of a common language. The theological expression for this phenomenon is that of secularised society. Meanwhile, in spite of this cultural pluralism, we experience today how the economic sector dominates the rest, imposing on them its own rationality, of a functional and utilitarian stamp. In reality, in all sectors of life the imperative of efficiency and productivity proves decisive. Everything has to converge on profits and results. There is no question any more of what is a reality, but only of its usefulness in achieving success. Substantial values give place to functional criteria. This economic logic invades and weakens many other sectors such as politics, education family and even religion itself.

Modern industrial society has an unstable balance: it must produce continuously to keep itself alive. Thence comes the labour-market, the production of capital, new investments. The growing accumulation of goods produced, which have to be bought so that new goods may be produced, engenders the consumer society, strengthened by sophisticated advertising in the communications media. Today we consider necessary, and we buy, what was superfluous yesterday. Or maybe we are afraid of not going with the dominant tendency and of making ourselves strangers in today's world.

Another cultural sign of our times is the acceleration of time. Life becomes more complex, more technical, more automated, more cybernetic, obliging us to use all this paraphernalia if we want to survive. As well as that, we are constantly bombarded with new and multiple stimuli which

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demand our attention, bring us to a superficial knowledge of everything, preventing us from deeper reflection on the reality which surrounds us, and occupy us and distract us with unimportant things. We are always racing against time, and even our well-deserved leisure is almost seen as functional, so that we can produce more, know more, consume more. We have difficulty in creating spaces in our day for the gratuitous, for what could make us really happy, for what cannot be reduced to the category of means, such as the simplest things in life.

It is impossible to deny the impact of this culture on our communities. Without noticing we surrender to the logic of efficiency, confusing the promotion of God's Kingdom with tangible results. Because of the complexity of any kind of pastoral activity in our days, and because of the growing demand for greater competence, and greater urgency about

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using the most suitable means, we can become less sensitive to a sober and modest lifestyle. Perhaps we can even come to think that we shall only be able to have good results in the service of faith and promotion of justice in the world by having power and social recognition. Besides that, contact with middle-class or rich people may lead us to copy them

by giving way to consumerism. It is vitally important, whatever it costs, to preserve freedom in the use of 'means', and to know how to resist the general tendency.

Ought we not to devote more time to community life in an agitated and stressful period which makes authentic human relationships so difficult? Is community life today the fruit of conscious choice, and not rather something natural, provided by the house timetable? Isn't it the absence of true human relationships which turns our Eucharistic celebrations into mere rituals to be observed by participants who are not interested?

Society at present is highly complex, its challenges demand to be confronted from different points of view, questioning the figure of the individual genius and urging collaboration in working –groups or networks. And, above all, in a Church that needs the laity and a society which demands participation from everyone, ought we not to know how to accept lay men

and lay women as our co-workers, recognising their contributions and taking their words and decisions seriously?

C) The phenomenon of globalisation

The progress that has taken place in transport and in the social communications media has brought our countries very close together. So there has been a reduction in space and time. This has brought about a new awareness, the awareness of the world as a community of human beings who have the same destiny. This fact prevents us from thinking of problems as simply local. Today everyone is aware of the mutual dependence of countries and regions when confronted by new challenges like the conservation of the planet, social inequalities, the internationalisation of law, economic interdependence, the threat of planetary war.

Paradoxically this phenomenon is arising at a time when peoples with their respective cultures, partly as a reaction against the phenomenon of globalisation, are insisting on the importance of respecting and emphasizing their own cultural characteristics as a decisive factor in their own identity. In fact, today an unprecedented emphasis can be observed on the conservation and development of native cultures, with serious social and political repercussions. The Church itself in recent years has developed reflection on the necessity for the inculturation of faith, though with modest results. However, it is the human being's own culture which enables him or her to become aware and to develop his own identity. And the faith will only be fully received when it is expressed in the culture in which it is proclaimed.

Globalisation and inculturation are not opposed to one another, as it might seem at first sight, but influence and need each other, given that globalisation will need to go through transformations to make itself accepted in a local culture. This, in its turn, cannot understand itself if it cuts itself off from global culture. So there is complementarity. For the Church, a thorny question remains: how to evangelize, in a plurality of cultures? How to bring about the inculturation of faith in a local culture contaminated by global culture? Does the Church need a new institutional configuration? We know that the catholicity (universality) of the Church does not imply the destruction of local cultures (uniformity) but that in respect for them the Church itself is enriched (unity in diversity). Naturally the Local Churches, which form the

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Universal Church, ought to be united in the same faith, keeping themselves open to each other, practising dialogue with one another, questioning and helping one another.

The Society of Jesus is also strongly challenged by the imperatives of inculturation and globalisation. Knowing well, and knowing how to use native cultures in its missionary activity was always a tradition in the Society. Today we have a greater awareness of the complexity of the process of inculturation of the faith and of the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the other cultural and religious traditions. Naturally an excessive Roman centralisation, in former times, also had repercussions within the order, and prevented the carrying out of new experiments in this sector, as would have been hoped. But the imperative of promoting the Kingdom of God realistically, starting from the local reality, remained alive in the Society.

Certainly the phenomenon of globalisation presents a certain novelty. We must recognise on the one hand that the apostolic purpose of the Society, from its beginning, did not allow itself to be taken over by one country or one culture, but showed the characteristic of universality in sending companions to different regions of the world. And we ought to recognise, on the other hand, that the present situation is unprecedented. Thanks to globalisation, perhaps never have Jesuits felt so close to one another, never have local successes and difficulties had such impact on the whole body of the Society. Never have experiments carried out in other regions and cultures been so well-known as today. The importance of the social communications media and the opportunities opened up by the internet call for a formation sufficient to ensure us a greater and more specialised presence in the cyber-world.

The reality of the Society as a single apostolic body, weakened in the past by a certain provincial autonomy and the mentality that came from it, continues to gain emphasis in our days. Jesuits concern themselves more with what is happening beyond the frontiers of their country, show a greater clarity on the interdependence of all peoples and feel stimulated to help in those regions where the needs are greater. The diminution of members in the order helped the interchange of persons and resources, reinforcing the reality of an apostolic body. If General Congregation XXXIV stressed the importance of inculturation, the recent General Congregation XXXV alerted to the challenges of a new global context, in its third Decree.

At the end of this reflection we may ask the question: Will the characteristics mentioned really mould the *configuration of the Society* in the coming years? We have been able to show how our *mission* ought to be made specific in a different way, how our *communities* ought to behave, faced with the new challenges of society, and nevertheless, how the awareness that we are Jesuits (*identity*) will continue to be the same in a new historical context. If our response is positive, through having had the courage to introduce changes, we shall be in continuity with the generations before us.