

IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, MISSION

REFLECTIONS AROUND “A KIND OF TRIPTYCH”

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Decree 2¹ of GC 35, without doubt the most vibrant and, from a literary point of view, the most beautiful, piece of writing in the whole history of the General Congregations, states in paragraph 19: “A Jesuit’s identity and mission are bound together by community; in effect identity, community and mission are a kind of triptych shedding light which helps us deepen our understanding of the fact that we are companions.” The paragraph seems to be saying two things: first, in a general way, that in the Society there is a connection between identity, community and mission, as the first two are “bound together” by the third; secondly, it states in a more specific and expressive way, that this link is very like that of a triptych, which helps in understanding the nature of the link between its three components and consequently enables the essence of a Jesuit to be seen as a whole. In this reflection I would hope to use this metaphor of the triptych to explore further this close connection between identity, mission and community in the life and essence of a Jesuit and outline some of the practical consequences arising from this².

“A kind of triptych”

The word triptych, in its different recognised meanings³, refers to a set of three elements united to each other, often in such a way that they can be folded one on top of the other. These elements also have a certain reciprocity

in that they form a unity that cannot be fully understood unless all three parts are present; nor can the individual parts be fully understood separately. In this context the word triptych is evidently used in a metaphorical sense and we need to discover its full significance. What does it really mean to say that the identity and mission of a Jesuit are “bound together by community”, forming “a kind of triptych” that sheds light on the fact that we are companions?

Decree 2, and also decree 3 on Mission, offer help in answering this question. However, in both cases, but especially in the first, it would appear that in dealing with this issue, Community seems to be more closely connected with Mission and at its service, rather than with identity. This is what decree 2 states in no. 27:

a Jesuit's identity and mission are bound together by community

“In order to live out this mission (that of an ‘apostolic body consecrated to Christ’s mission’) in our broken world, we need fraternal, joyful communities where we nurture and express with great intensity the only passion that is capable of uniting our differences and of bringing our creativity to life. This passion grows with every new experience of the Lord; and His dreams and love for our world are boundless.”

Here Community appears clearly linked to Mission on a functional level in so far as the former is necessary if the latter is to work well. There is no problem with this assertion: it is evident that if the Mission is to be lived out as it should be, the kind of communities alluded to are necessary. But the explanation offered gives rise to two questions: the first would be whether we are talking about a purely functional connection between Community and Mission or whether there is a deeper, more intense relationship between them. The second question, thinking about the ‘triptych’ referred to earlier, would be, what about the relationship between community and identity and mission, which would indicate the *reciprocal* relation between the *three*, as parts or elements of a whole? Unless the expression, “the only passion that is capable both of uniting our differences and of bringing our creativity to life” includes the reference to identity, and this needs to be clarified, the triple reciprocal relationship - almost a Trinitarian relationship? - suggested by the metaphor of a triptych in no. 19 of the decree, is not clearly explained.

On the other hand no. 41 of decree 3 states:

“Mission is not limited to work. Our personal and communal relationship with the Lord, our mutual relationships as friends in the Lord, solidarity with the poor and marginalised, and a sustainable lifestyle, are all important aspects of our life as Jesuits. They witness both to what we preach and to what we do as we live out our mission. The privileged place of this collective witness is our life in community, therefore community in the Society is not only *for* mission, it *is* mission.”

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In referring to “important aspects of our life” this text seems to contain a certain reference, albeit partial and descriptive, to our identity and to its connection with both mission and community, by expressing more clearly the idea of triptych as an icon, though without seeming to go beyond the merely functional character of the relationship that links these three important elements of our life.

This functional relationship of community with identity and mission, which formerly was present only as a vague awareness in the Society, was clarified by CG 31 (d. 19). It did this by going back to our beginnings, to the way the Society came into being and organised itself as a united apostolic body through the union of hearts, and obedience “to one of ourselves”, and by making clear what our original sources sought to express in this double relationship⁴. The main value and the truly novel contribution of that CG was to reclaim the original meaning and importance of Community life in the Society⁵ from the shell of observances and regulations that, with the initial intention of fostering and nurturing it⁶, only succeeded, over the years, in obscuring it before finally encasing and almost suffocating it. Living in community meant above all, and almost exclusively, living together according to an external rule which had to be obeyed in daily life⁷. In redefining the true meaning of community life in the Society and showing it to be at the service of a Jesuit’s identity and the development of his mission, CG 31 went against the current of a deep-seated practice to the contrary. Community life, from being thought of as a life in common regulated by multiple disciplines, became a life in common knit together and energised by deep inter-personal relationships on all levels, - human, spiritual, apostolic, - among members of a community sharing a common identity and mission. This was the greatest re-discovery of CG 31, which CG32 (d. 11) deepened and enriched, a rediscovery we have been trying to live up to

ever since, though it would seem that as far as its acceptance goes, we are still, without doubt, in a period of learning and have been for far too long! To-day, forty five years later, it's worth reading the opening numbers (1-3) of d. 19 of that CG to understand the revolutionary change it brought about in relation to Community life in the Society. Based on what is expressed there, the contribution made by good community life to the identity and mission of a Jesuit is set down as follows:

“When community life flourishes the whole of religious life is strengthened. Indeed, obedience, the most apt expression of our shared desire to achieve common aims, is improved in direct relation to the strength of the ties of confidence and service between Superiors and companions. Chastity is better safeguarded ‘when brotherly love exists among the brethren in community life’⁸. Finally, in many ways and varied circumstances, community life specially favours and safeguards poverty, whereby in a spirit of true detachment, we hand over our possessions and our very self to all in order to follow the Lord. When religious life is strengthened in this way, union and availability, universality and complete dedication, and the evangelical freedom needed to help souls in every possible way, is also strengthened, - which was the intention of the first Jesuits.

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In addition community life itself appears to the outside world as a corporate witness to the people around us; above all, in so far as it fosters that brotherly love and unity by which everyone can recognise us as Christ's disciples”.⁹

In this aspect, therefore, in regard to the functional contribution of community life to the Society's identity and mission, the recent texts of CG 35 have neither discovered, nor said, anything which had not been discovered or said before. On the other hand, the earlier texts do add something else of real importance and significance which the ‘icon’ of the triptych, as described above, could be indicating, as an implicit suggestion, made by CG 35 - and this could be perhaps its “new word”¹⁰ - on something much deeper and far beyond the merely functional contribution of community life to the identity and mission of the Society.

Beyond the merely functional or instrumental

Following the trend of this suggestion, I would like to try and discover what is at the bottom of all this and see how far the significant (not only the functional) interconnection between “identity-community-mission” reaches in the Jesuit vocation, together with the consequences that stem from it. This is what I am going to attempt in what follows: not an exegesis on what the texts say, but a personal reflection triggered by the symbolic power of the icon of the “triptych”.

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A feeling that has accompanied me throughout all this is the suspicion that, in spite of everything that is said about them, as long as we fail to grasp that the three mutually overlap and are inseparable, as the triptych suggests, and so pass from the merely functional relationship of service - or support - by which community improves the living out of identity and mission, which does happen, to perceiving the really significant link present among them in our Jesuit vocation, we will not fully understand the true relationship linking identity, community and mission in the Society. This would mean that identity and mission in the Society are fundamentally communitarian and that community are the obligatory method and channel by which they are presented and developed. In this sense, the fact that in the end CG 35 did not produce a specific decree on Community Life, simply putting it next to those on identity and mission, while it might have deprived us of new aids to improve the way we live in community, could, nevertheless, have a positive result, if we take it as an invitation, or even a challenge, to change the usual record, already well worn, of considering community simply as a necessary aid to live out our identity and mission, and instead begin to try and discover their essentially communitarian character in the Society and the deep, fundamentally distinguishing impression they make on community life¹¹. In fact, anticipating the result of my thesis, identity and mission are communitarian in the Society and community is shaped and determined by them. Community, therefore, is one of the contributing factors to the shape and form which, by their very nature, belongs to them. None of them could exist or be understood independently from the others or if they were simply set next to one another.

Identity “by belonging”

On asking, “What does it mean to be a Jesuit”, decree 2 of CG 32 begins to give an answer by looking at everyone affected by the question and replies: “The recognition of oneself as a sinner and, in spite of this, called to be a companion of Jesus, as was Ignatius (...)”. And so the issue comes back to the individual, understood and recognised as a companion of Jesus. It is clear that if each one recognises himself as a companion of Jesus, he is also implicitly recognising himself as a companion of all the other ‘companions of Jesus’; but this is something which remains in the shadow, almost in the background, in the above statement, as something not directly evident in itself, but rather something which needs to be brought into the light. This is possibly the most frequent view in the existential sphere as we each question ourselves, in the secret recesses of our heart, about our own identity as a Jesuit. Furthermore, it is possible in our post-modern times that this view could be the one that is best in tune with the great sensitivity that favours what is nearest and most personal over the wider and self-transcendent. Nevertheless, there are other ways of looking at the Jesuit identity, which should at least be made known and taken into account when it comes to “choosing the best” or the most appropriate for our purpose, because they could easily be just that. One of these ways - and not just any one - is the one used at the beginning of the Formula of the Institute, where it states:

“Whoever in our Society wishes to fight for God under the standard of the Cross, and to serve no-one but the Lord and the Church, his Spouse, under the Supreme Pontiff, Vicar of Christ on earth, should understand that once solemn vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are made, he *belongs to the Society*....”.

“Being a Jesuit” then according to the Formula of the Institute, means “being part of the Society”. I have to admit that, although this may sound strange and may not be an opinion shared by many others, this way of expressing Jesuit identity is the one I feel most at home with. Jesuit identity cannot be adequately defined nor understood by a closed conception of one-self, even when referring to a close personal relationship, one-on one, with the Lord Himself, as our companion. Being a Jesuit is more than being just one-self; it is being one-self but also forming part of something which goes beyond one’s own individuality; it is “being-part-of” or “being-with”, in other words, being essentially part of a community. That is what CG 35

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meant in stating that “the Jesuit identity is relational¹²”, that is, essentially linked to others, even if the element of community was not explicitly stated. This is not something that appeared at a later date, to complete and qualify our identity; it has been deeply embedded at its heart from our very origins. Jesuit identity is by its very nature linked to community; therefore a definition of identity separated from or deprived of the element of community would fall short and be false. Apart from our human weakness, our lethargy and slowness to understand, would it not be true to say that it is actually our imperfect understanding of Jesuit identity, as not including community as a basic element, that is at the root of the poverty of our community life and of our delay in embracing and assimilating the multitude of “exhortations” we have received but which have never brought about any deep or meaningful change? I believe that from a theoretical as well as a practical point of view, the subject calls for detailed reflection¹³.

“ *[the Society] instituted for. . . .* ”

A Jesuit takes his identity from “being part of the Society and the reason, the only reason, for the existence of the Society is its mission. This is clear from reading the Formula of the Institute: to “exist-for-mission” constitutes the Society’s identity and this makes it impossible to consider identity and mission as two separate entities: its identity is precisely to “exist-for-mission”. Consequently when it is said, so appropriately, that “a Jesuit is essentially a man with a mission”¹⁴, the emphasis is not so much on that he should be, but that he is “essentially” so. Mission is not something which simply happens to a Jesuit (as a result of which he becomes a man with a mission) nor is it principally an ideal or an obligation, however important, that he has to fulfil, but something which is an integral part of him, makes him what he is, defines his life, and this takes place simply by his “being part of the Society whose identity is to “exist-for-mission”.

In our attempt to understand the reality - and then be able to express what we have understood - we need to distinguish all the aspects separately even when they are closely linked, in the same way as we need to take an appliance apart to see how it has been put together. But once we have seen this, we need to put the appliance back together again so that it will work and, what is more important, put back together what was mentally and artificially taken apart, so that we understand its true essence. Something

like this could have happened to us with regard to such important issues as our identity and our mission. Because we have reflected on them separately, and produced different documents for one and the other, we have come to think of them, and understand them, as different realities, projecting on to the reality what is nothing more than a mental exercise. And it is not like that. Identity and mission in the Society and in the individual Jesuit are not two different things, nor are they connected in a haphazard way, they are so closely connected that one defines the other, identity defines mission, and vice versa: each permeates the other.

The essentially communitarian character of a Jesuit's mission also stems from this. No matter what activities the Society has entrusted to him in the carrying out of his mission and no matter how he carries them out - alone or as part of a team, in a small community or living apart from a community, - his mission is the mission of the whole body of the Society and therefore it is a community mission.

Each Jesuit's mission is shared by all, because each Jesuit is a Jesuit by "being part of the Society" and that is how he has to live. What the Formula of the Institute says on this subject is clear and becomes even more obvious in the specific examples set out in the seventh part of the Constitutions (all receive their mission from the same source - the Pope or the

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Superiors of the Society - to be realised at all times in communion with the Society which gives the appropriate guide lines or "instructions" for its realisation and to whom continual reports have to be given with regard to its development). CG 32 puts it well in the same place¹⁵: "the Jesuit is essentially a man with a mission: a mission he receives directly from the Holy Father and his Religious Superiors, but radically from Christ Himself, Sent by the Father", mission itself is the same for all even though it is fulfilled in different works and activities. That is why the same CG makes a salient point elsewhere by saying: "Whether he works with others or works alone,¹⁶ it is important that each Jesuit feels he has been "sent" as the bearer of a mission that belongs to the whole Society."

"In effect, identity, community and mission are a kind of triptych - [and even more than this] - shedding light that enables us to understand in

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the best possible way our condition of Companions¹⁷” and draw the corresponding conclusions.

“Repaying this huge debt” (FI,4)

I could be mistaken in suspecting that in the subconscious of not a few Jesuits the idea still persists that “community life” continues to be something added to, or superimposed on, our identity and mission. Perhaps some could go so far as to think this addition wrong or that it was imposed simply for convenience, or because it was a fashion of the time, and that perhaps it could even be a drawback to identity and mission, especially the latter, and so was something that could be disregarded without major consequences. For this reason it has been necessary to record again and again -the last time was in the texts of decree 2 of CG 35 quoted at the beginning, - the importance of community for the success and development of both. The above reflections would be of little use unless they succeeded in neutralising or at least shaking up and questioning this way of thinking. If anything comes out of these reflections it is that the identity and mission of the Society are essentially shared, that is they are to be lived in community.¹⁸

If this is so, “this great debt” that those who “have enlisted in this army of Jesus Christ, have to be prepared, night and day, their belts tightened, to pay”, it directly includes, without any superpositions or additions, the element of community which is itself essentially included in this radical commitment. There is no escape or subterfuge that could justify reluctance, reservations or negligence in denying or minimising the contribution we must all make, in virtue of such commitment, to the development of a rich and substantial community life in which “each can find the nourishment necessary: for prayer, brotherly relationships, celebration of the Eucharist, and in the same way the community should also be the place for discernment which is so necessary.”¹⁹

Given all this, I repeat that there is no need to regret the fact that CG 35 did not produce any document dealing specifically with Community Life at the present time in the Society. We have more than enough “manuals” to enable us to establish and develop it adequately and fruitfully²⁰, and it would be surprising if the CG could have come up with anything that had not already been said. What remains for us to do now is to set our shoulders to

the wheel sincerely, with determination and without hesitation; this is our responsibility, not the CG's. It is as if the CG said to us: "now, after everything that has been said about Community Life in the Society it is up to you to act; so get started without delay."

Conclusion

In this context what is written in chapter 8 of the Constitutions comes to mind, even though it could appear too obvious: "with regard to the union of hearts, some help will come from the subjects, some from the Superiors and others from the two working together" (655). But, if we read this carefully and meditate on it with attention, perhaps this seemingly innocent idea might turn out to be a very demanding one: all of us, without exception, have to take our own share of the responsibility in this undertaking, and no-one can escape it. Addressing the Superiors directly, both local and major, each at his own level, the following important statement is made: "government of the communities and of each one of their members, must be given the highest priority"²¹; and of the local Superior in particular, "that he is responsible for the spiritual animation of the community".²² Only if these two statements are fulfilled will the "triptych" truly be applicable in our lives. On the other hand the following is addressed to "each and every one" of us, and it is no less important and demanding: "The communities cannot be witnesses of Charity *if each one does not dedicate sufficient time and energy to making a contribution*"²³ to the up-building of community life so that communication is possible and no-one is left out or marginalised".²⁴

If the above is true, it would mean that in the measure that some of us or "any of us", were to evade our quota of responsibility in this matter, however good the reasons put forward for justifying and explaining it, in that same measure we would be evading the fulfilment of the radical commitment we made when we gave our name to the Society of Jesus, thus failing "to pay this huge debt" with regard to our identity and mission.

This then is my modest - and debatable - contribution towards "going deeper into what has been called the triptych '*Identity-Community-Mission*'" in order to implement CG 35".

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¹ Whether or not it actually is a decree is questionable, since it is difficult to see what it ‘decrees’, as in ordaining or establishing something, in the way a General Congregation normally does. According to the explanation given, this is not what ‘GC35 wished’, rather it wanted to be an inspirational decree (see B. Gonzalez Buelta in his introduction to the Spanish version of the decree, “Congregacion General 35 de la Compania de Jesus”, Mensajero-Sal Terrae, Bilbao-Santander 2009, p. 73

² Father General Adolfo Nicolas’ letter written to the Major Superiors on October 27th 2009 encourages me in this; he writes: “Many Jesuits share the desire to go deeper into what has been called the triptych of ‘Identity-Mission-Community’ in order to implement GC 35”. This could be my modest contribution to this aim. I realize that an ‘academic’ interpretation, (as this could turn out to be) of a text of a different nature, is not perhaps the most appropriate. I hope that at least I don’t deform it and at best, that it might be seen as a complement.

³ The Dictionary of the Spanish Language gives three meanings of the word ‘triptych’ (from the Greek): 1. A writing board divided into three panels with the two side panels able to fold over the central one.

⁴ Recourse to the “Deliberations of the Founding Fathers” (CG31 d.19 no. 1) and repeated references to the first chapter (“aids for the union of hearts”) of the eighth part of the Constitutions, throughout the whole decree, in order to recuperate the true meaning of community in the Society, are a clear indication of this.

⁵ Why, for example, in the table of contents of the *Acta Romana Societatis Iesu* (AR) does the expression “community life” (or “*vita communitatis*”) not appear until the summary of references to this decree of CG 31? It was an expression that was entirely absent from the official documents of the Society until that moment.

⁶ Think about the “Communal Rules”, applicable to all Jesuits and possibly still remembered by some. Designed to regulate multiple and very detailed aspects of daily life, which had come down to us from the times of Ignatius, they were officially in force until CG 32 (1975). Think about the numerous sets of rules concerning the different offices in community life from the Superior and Minister through the counsellors, bursar, spiritual director, librarian to the sacristan, nurse, cook and storekeeper, the person in charge of the refectory, of the wardrobe, of the morning wake-up call, among others. Simply listing these sets of rules shows us how highly structured and regulated community life was. Also some of these rules come from the times of Ignatius and some of the offices are mentioned in the Constitutions. In addition there are repeated references in the Constitutions to the ideal of order in the practical details of daily life (see, for example, Cons. [294, 295, 321, 366, 435, 453, 455, 463, 547, 602, 700]). While it is true that their application is tempered by the flexibility given to the Superior of taking into account the special circumstances of people, times and places, even so the letter of the law gradually gained ground over the Ignatian flexibility of our beginnings, to the detriment of the true ideal of Community Life proper to the Society.

⁷ It's significantly symptomatic that the numerous propositions sent to the CG on this subject focused directly on diverse disciplinary aspects relating to community life rather than to community life as such. The CG, as can be seen from the Acts themselves, had to make great efforts not to confuse one with the other and as a result structured the decree in two main parts: "Community life" and "Religious discipline", thus making a visible distinction between the two.

⁸ CG 34 d.8 n. 21 emphasises this point, [author's note].

⁹ CG31 d.19n.4.

¹⁰ Cf. Fr. General's letter quoted in note 2.

¹¹ It looks as if this is beginning to happen as Fr. General put forward in his letter of October 27th 2009, quoted above, when he says: "There appears in them (letters 'ex officio' of 2009) a new awareness of community life among us, a new awareness that community life is fundamental to our Jesuit way of life. Alongside this new awareness, there is a real effort to grow in something which was previously taken for granted without ever occupying a central position in our spirituality".

¹² CG 35 d.2 n. 19. While it is true that I do not feel that this statement goes as deep as I would like it to, since this relational character appears more superficial in this CG text, immediately adding that it "grows in and through our diversity of cultures, nationalities and languages, enriching and challenging us". This is true; but even if it weren't - and it very well might not have been - this relational character is inscribed at the very root of our identity and we have to get to this root if we are to fully understand our identity.

¹³ Beware, of the bad spirit coming in a sinister manner at this precise moment, to whisper that "this community (that of the Society) is the whole body of the Society itself, no matter how widespread it may be across the world. The local community, to which a Jesuit may belong at any given moment, is for him simply the concrete expression - even though a privileged one - of this brotherhood extended throughout the world, which is the Society" (CG 32 d.2 n.16), and so weaken the idea that community, including the local community, is radically embedded in our identity. This same text when read in its entirety dissipates all doubts and ambiguity on this point.

¹⁴ CG32d.2n. 14.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Never to the extent, however, that he fails to maintain a stable and fluent relationship with a designated Superior and a specified community: "The more a Jesuit is committed to situations and structures alien to the faith, the more he must re-enforce his religious identity and his union with the whole body of the Society by means of the local community through which he is inserted in it. Therefore, even though some, because of the demands of their mission or other just cause, need to live outside the local community, all should play an active part, whenever possible, in some community." (NC 317 which repeats CG 32 d. 11 n. 44). [Author's note].

¹⁷ CG 35 d.2 n. 5

¹⁸ Note, once again, the convenient temptation to think that this only refers to the great “brotherhood of the Society extended throughout the world” and not, or at least only in a limited way, to the “local community” in which one lives. It is imperative that we show no hesitation in erasing this “subtle and fallacious argument” with which “the enemy” under the appearance of “an angel of light” craftily wishes to deprive us of an important truth. (Spiritual Exercise 329).

¹⁹CG32d.4n.63.

²⁰ We only need to mention decree 19 of CG 31, decrees 2, 4 (nn. 62-68), 11 (nn. 14-26, 37, 41, 44, 47-53), essentially resumed in the Complementary Norms 311-330; CG 34 d.8 nn. 21-23, and the excellent letter written by Fr. General P-H Kolvenbach to the whole Society on March 12th 1998. To all of these could be added the benefits to be found in the Directives for Provincials and similar ones for local Superiors, without forgetting, especially in the current circumstances, the Orientations for relationships between the Superior and the director of the work.

²¹ NC 351, which is reproduced in CG 31d.l4 n.4.

²²CG 32d.lln.41

²³ Author's italics.

²⁴ CG 32 d.l 1 n.49, and taken up in NC 325 §1.