

# IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, MISSION

## THEIR LINKS WITHIN THE SOCIETY OF JESUS

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**I** dentity, community, and mission: these three significant terms evoke the deep reality of our lives, the reality of our common calling and commitment. Together these terms call to mind a particular way of inscribing ourselves and inscribing our actions and our lives in the world and in the vineyard of the Lord.

### *Identity*

Identity permits us to designate someone by using the name that is their very own. It is this name, proper to each individual, which represents our “identity card” and allows us to be “identified”. However, if we Jesuits have to inscribe our names when we write our signature, thus declaring who we are, beside our name, considered our “civil status”, we add two letters – S.J. As we acknowledge who we are, beside the name which designates us since the very start of our existence, denoting – at least in Western civilisation – our family origin, beside our first name which, for everyone else, evokes our personal reality, and also beside the name of the patron saint bestowed on us, there is for us another belonging - to Him whom we have learned to recognise as

our guide and the inspiration for our lives – recognising ourselves as « companions of Jesus ».

We know the origin and history of this designation. It has been transmitted to us by those who, since the time of Ignatius of Loyola, have been called to choose and share a certain style of life, a way of being and serving in the Church and in human society. It was on their way to Italy and Rome that our “first Fathers”, not yet fully aware of what God would finally lead them to experience for His glory and in His service, decided to reply, to those who asked, that they were “companions of Jesus”.

The spirit of the Spiritual Exercises inspired them to give this response, expressing in this way what each one of them, and all of them together as a group, had discovered as the inspiration of the Spirit. The Lord, already active in their lives, had brought them together, not round a programme which they would establish together, but through the experience which each one of them, in prayer and in practising the Spiritual Exercises, had recognised as the will of the Lord for himself and hence for them all.

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Our identity is defined first of all in reference to Jesus, our Lord. We have met him and contemplated with insistence to discover in Him and through Him what our lives should be, what nuances mark us in an indelible way. In discovering Him, looking at Him and listening to Him at length, in practising the Spiritual Exercises, we allow ourselves to be encountered by Him and be impressed and instructed by His life and His choices. As Ignatius was! He led us to experience the spirit of poverty, spiritual and effective poverty, as a requirement, contrary to the spirit of the world. Contrary too, to everything which flatters the vanity of men, permeated by the love of power, “success” and all forms of false glory.

However, while addressing to us His call to follow Him, at the same time Jesus has generated in us not only the desire to resemble Him, but two further desires – to share by living with others this impetus aroused in us by Him, and work together with Him in his Vineyard. Our spiritual identity as Jesuits is by now inseparable from these two dimensions equally constituent in our lives – community and mission. Let us develop them briefly.

### *Community*

Jesuit life, is certainly much less marked by the existence of community than, for example, monastic life. Surely it is so, if we identify community as a place where we gather and are called to live the remainder of our days with those who have chosen the same house to share daily prayer and commitment, having made a vow of stability. Nevertheless this is not exactly the way Jesuits inscribe their personal lives in a community.

The first community Jesuits belong to is not in fact their local community, but the whole Society spread throughout the world and then their Province, which brings together a certain number of local communities within a determined area where travel and contact are more frequent.

Yet, the primary belonging to a community encompassing the whole body of the Society, cannot be a living concrete reality if it is not built on the insertion of each individual Jesuit in a local community. Here, he shares prayer, work, interests and efforts, as well as apostolic commitments, even though these may be of different types. Frequently it is here that genuine exchange concerning common work and interests could be experienced, where the necessary support for perseverance and growth are first proffered and where each individual commitment to the service of Christ takes concrete form.

The « Complementary Norms », together with the Constitutions of the Society, through the reflections of the last General Congregations state that, “Our members fulfil their mission in companionship with others, for they belong to a community of friends in the Lord who have desired to be received under the standard of Christ the King” (n.311,§1). And also - “It is our community-life ideal that we should be not only fellow workers in the apostolate but truly brothers and friends in Christ” (ibid. §2).

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What is recommended in this reflection on community in a Jesuit context is therefore the organisation of brotherly life shared with companions, not as an idea or an ideal, but as a true sharing among us which requires a common belonging to the Society of Jesus. Thus Decree

12 of General Congregation 32 and Complementary Norm no 315 clearly describe life shared by companions gathered in community to live together, supporting each other in a generous response to their common vocation. "A local Jesuit community is an apostolic community, whose focus of concern is the service that Ours are bound, in virtue of their vocation, to give to people. It is a community *ad dispersionem*, since its members are ready to go wherever they are sent; but it is also a *koinonia*, a close sharing of life and goods, with the Eucharist at its centre, and a community of discernment with superiors, to whom belong the final steps in making decisions about undertaking and accomplishing missions".

Certainly, belonging to Ignatian spirituality can already create links among us in virtue of a common embracing of the call of the Lord as perceived by Ignatius and transmitted by him in the "Spiritual Exercises" and in our Constitutions. Yet our lives in community celebrate our embracing of the Ignatian spirit in a special way.

The first companions had no problem in perceiving the demands of community reality to which our entry into the Society commits us. Asking themselves, once in Rome, what would become of the group they were forming, they would have had no difficulty in affirming that, since each one was wholly available for mission, dissolving the links that bound them was impossible. Even dispersed in view of the diversity of their missions received from the Pope, God was asking them – they were sure of this – to maintain their unity in which the grace received by each one of them contained the requirement. Yet they needed to take a further step in order that the Society of Jesus becomes the reality it still is today. What made less immediate their response to the question whether, by making a vow of obedience to one of their number, they were adding a new style of religious life to the already existing Church approved forms of religious life, was precisely – in those times of "reform" when religious life was being questioned – the need to see clearly that God, nevertheless, was inspiring them to propose another "Religious Institution" within the Church.

General Congregation 31 – taking place at the time of the Second Vatican Council – wished to emphasise the distinctive form of community life specific to the Society, different to all forms of monastic-style religious life or even the mendicant orders, and naturally to all forms of secular life (see GC 31 Decree 19.7c and « Complementary Norms » no 322). What is specific, in the outline thus described, to Jesuit community life, is the grouping in our communities of men called to an essentially apostolic life.

Developing further our specific community tradition, Decree 12 of General Congregation 32 continued this theme, in a text taken up again by the « Complementary Norms » in no 323 - "Since our communities are apostolic, they should be oriented to the service of others, particularly the poor, and to cooperation with those seeking God or working for greater justice in the world. For this reason, under the leadership of superiors, communities should periodically examine whether their way of living supports their apostolic mission sufficiently and encourages hospitality. They should also consider whether their style of life testifies to simplicity, justice, and poverty".

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Every reflection in any way attentive to our lives as Jesuits cannot but witness the frequent and even constant interweaving, in our legislative texts, of these three key elements which underpin our way of being, our spiritual identity, our community life and the missionary reality of our lives.

### ***Mission***

Here we touch on a particularly significant point in Jesuit life. Since the very beginning, Ignatius and the first companions discovered through the meditation on the Kingdom, the interior momentum which, commencing with Jesus was to mobilise them to participate in the work of salvation. Unable, due to circumstances, to reach the Holy Land, where they would have extended, in a really geographical sense, the mission of Jesus, the determination of their missions could only be given them by the « Vicar of Christ on earth ». This first foundation of the missions entrusted to Jesuits is still preserved today in the fourth vow pronounced by new members of the Society. It constitutes, according to Pierre Favre, the principle and foundation of this mission. Starting with this first source, our obedience, given to us today to receive a determined mission and expressed at different levels is accepted in the end from God himself.

I do not intend to revisit the orientation of our mission as identified in the last General Congregations – these are certainly present to our spirit.

However, since the goal of this article is to illustrate how our identity as companions of Jesus, our sharing of community life and the mission we take up together within the great diversity which characterises us are interconnected in our lives as Jesuits, I propose now to return to at least some links which unite these three dimensions of “being Jesuit”.

It seems clear, first of all, that to be assigned a determined mission together is a spontaneous call to live genuine community relations and also provides the necessary reference framework to establish solidarity in the lives of each one and within the community in the presence of the Lord and his inspirations. Of course it is possible that, in certain cases, commitment to the same mission and within the same community may seem far from encouraging personal and common growth in the Lord. But this is often because tensions and misunderstandings can arise among persons gathered in the same community or because sharing the same mission can be experienced in terms of rivalry, in mutual divergence or without the desirable accent on the relationship with God which links us as companions of Jesus.

There are undoubtedly communities where members are not committed to a common mission and where, instead of building a community-based fraternity founded on exchange and shared lives, instead of finding in collective prayer and Eucharistic celebration a source of authentic communion, the diversity of missions assigned can transform into possible confrontation both in brotherly life and in prayer. But communities do exist, where diversity of mission is infused by true and genuine communion and collective prayer unites different places of evangelisation and service where members work.

With regards to our identity as Jesuits, our community insertion, the requirements of our mission, obviously, we can commit ourselves with more or less conviction, or more or less truth. The aim of this reflection is neither to assert nor deny this. However, in evoking the links between these elements for each of us - our identity received from the Lord who has called us to Him, our belonging to a community of companions and the accomplishment of the mission received - what is proposed is renewed awareness of the possible repercussions in other decisive sectors of our lives ensuing from the way in which we experience our received vocation and our fidelity to the Ignatian spirit which infuses it; our belonging to a community and our way of experiencing this, as well as our commitment to the mission received, whether this is actually carried forward by all members

of the community together or realised in a multiplicity of commitment and service.

These three dimensions which form our Jesuit life are therefore expected to support and, to a certain extent, sustain each other reciprocally. It is not enough, for instance, that Jesuits be brought together to join forces in a common work if there exists among them either incompatibility of temperament, incapacity to communicate or deep-seated opposing conceptions regarding the goals to be achieved or the means employed to reach this goal. It is not enough either that persons endowed with indisputable capacities be brought together in the same community to undertake a collective work if there exists among them radical differences of opinion regarding, for example, important aspects of Jesuit life.

Undoubtedly it can be said – and in a certain sense with reason – would it not be desirable for all Jesuits to acquire, at the end of their formation, not only the tangible capacities to make them men capable of accomplishing “great things”, but also the characteristic qualities of companions destined to live and work in unison, shoulder to shoulder, and the spiritual depth to enable them to face any difficulties encountered in a positive way, as well as the virtues of self sacrifice and selflessness so much part of our call to be, throughout everything, in moments of trial and in moments of particular grace, faithful disciples of Jesus. It would be right to expect this of all companions, but it must be recognised that reality does not always correspond to what we desire. It is undoubtedly the wear and tear of time, past unresolved negative experiences and particular behaviour patterns originating in character predisposition which create difficulties for some, without themselves being even fully aware of it, in adapting to other temperaments... So the fine dream, previously cherished, seems to transform into a sort of nightmare!

What else can be added to these lines if not perhaps that true balance and harmony must frequently be sought for, with faith and patience, by superiors if they want to assemble and motivate groups of Jesuits in an efficient way? What must be kept in mind is surely the complete range of qualities in possession of those persons expected to take up the same apostolate together, innate qualities as well as those acquired through study, experience or even application or determined effort. Also needed is the specific capacity to create a concrete team and fully enter a community of mutual sharing and support. Finally – last but not least – to be deeply infused by the spirit of the Society, and henceforth have at our disposal the innate

virtues and qualities that correspond fundamentally to our vocation; to be anchored consequently in prayer and attention to the inspirations of the Spirit. Accordingly companions will be supported in their commitment to serve a common mission in companionship and in the shared effort of corresponding to the Spirit.

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However, this humble reflection is not directed only to superiors, it also seeks to illuminate the commitment and lives of every companion of Jesus. Called to the Society, each of us is inhabited first by the discovery of Christ, whom the Spiritual

Exercises have taught us to encounter in truth, desirous to share in all His Spirit, and to allow ourselves be led and educated constantly by this Spirit. Our availability to the Lord, experienced in an Ignatian manner, is the source and development in us of the increasingly deepening desire to allow ourselves be fashioned by Christ and be brought to everywhere He wants us to be. Whatever form our work and commitments take, whatever our encounters and whatever our brotherly links, what is most important of all is that we continue to deepen further our relationship with the Lord, the love we bring to him and the increasingly ardent desire to abandon to Him the management of our lives, and to offer Him our cares and our work.

Our identity is centred unceasingly in Jesus; and it could not be any other way since we identify ourselves as his companions, accepting from Him what he brings to us every day and offering our daily commitment to Him in return. To seek an identity other than “companions of Jesus”, to define ourselves in some way in reference to what we could draw, in the usual way persons live, or from the activity which defines our place in today’s (secularised) society, would this not risk relegating to second place the total consecration of our lives to God in response to His call? And is it not natural that our being-together, our belonging to a brotherly community renders each of us visibly what we have chosen to be and remain as companions of Jesus? Is it not equally true that commitment to one or other apostolic service gives us in turn our place beside the Lord, who does ceaselessly present himself to us “in a humble place, beautiful and gracious” (Sp Ex 144)?