

## IGNATIAN LAITY: DISCIPLESHIP, IN COMMUNITY, FOR MISSION<sup>1</sup>

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**T**he Second Vatican Council dealt with the Church primarily from the perspective of what unites all Christians. From this common point of view, it addressed the specifics of each vocation (lay, religious, priestly.) Inspired by the Council, the Church strives, in its comings and goings, in the task of giving birth historically to a Church that is the *People of God*, which is the theological category used by the Council. This also has been seen in what can be called the “Ignatian world,” that is, in the realm, not closed but rather open, of those who live out Christianity along the spiritual path opened by St. Ignatius of Loyola. One expression of this fact is that, in the last two General Congregations of the Society of Jesus, the theme of collaboration has given rise to two Decrees: Decree 13 of GC 34 and Decree 6 of GC 35. In Chile, collaboration is already producing fruit through service, for example, in education, in the renewal of the experience of the Spiritual Exercises, in social promotion, in the evangelization of culture, in the service of those in any need.

In this context, I propose to try to respond to two questions. The first is: How ought we to think about the theme of collaboration between Jesuits – religious and or priests –

and laypeople? The second question is: What would be the essential elements that a lay Ignatian would have to possess to be considered as such? In order to avoid having to repeat each time “lay men and women” I will speak of “laypersons” or sometimes “laymen.” But I always mean to be speaking of both women and men.

### *Collaboration*

The Conference of Aparecida [The General Conference of the Episcopacy of Latin America and the Caribbean, Aparecida, Brazil May 30, 2007] highlights three fundamental aspects of the Christian life. First, it is a life whose principle and foundation is a *personal encounter with Jesus Christ*, one that opens up a life of discipleship. This encounter, although being personal, possesses an intrinsic communitarian dimension; the meeting with the Lord occurs in the heart of the *community* of the disciples. Finally, the following of Christ and community are both oriented towards participation in the work of Christ: Christian life is *missionary* in its very essence.. This involves loving and giving witness.

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In insisting on these elements, Aparecida follows faithfully the line opened by the Second Vatican Council. Above all, Christians are brothers in baptism – in their need for pardon and salvation, in the joy of the gratuitous love of God for each one. Baptism, in effect, constitutes the first personal encounter with Jesus Christ, a real meeting which is discovered as such with the eyes of faith. This meeting has taken place in the Church, which since the earliest times communicates baptism to its new children. This baptism is the fundamental seal of the Christian. In it are found the root of the common vocation, the common mission, the common responsibility. All are equal in baptism, first and foremost. Afterwards they are diverse in their ways and modes of life, in concrete services rendered. Baptism makes all of them a light for the world. In this way, by emphasizing the personal encounter with Jesus Christ, the community and the shared mission,

Aparecida clearly affirms the idea of a servant Church, in communion and participation, an idea much beloved and longed for by many Latin American Christians.

Christian life in the Ignatian way, then, must be seen as one path among others, in the heart of this common and more ample Christian life in the world. It has, therefore, these three above-highlighted characteristics, actualized in their own way, but not separated from other forms in the Church. It is a matter of one good and approved version of Christianity—approved, above all, for the fruits of holiness that it has produced.

The personal encounter with Christ is fundamental. In the Ignatian case, the Spiritual Exercises are the privileged place for this experience. By Spiritual Exercises is intended all ways of praying, contemplating, reflecting, applying the senses, meditating on the Word of God, reforming one's way of life, etc. in order to love and serve more, according to Ignatius' experience. The Christian life must not be founded on a doctrine, but rather upon an experience of meeting which has an enduring, emotional impact. In the Spiritual Exercises, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit come to the Ignatian Christian, who is called upon to respond.

This personal encounter with Christ, in the way of Ignatius, is verified in the heart of a larger community, that which we can call the "Ignatian world" or the "Ignatian community" a type of organ of the ecclesial body. It is an organ with cells more and less complex: the Jesuit order, other congregations based on Ignatian spirituality, lay associations (CVX/CLC, Association of Former Students), movements (Eucharist Youth Movement, Apostleship of Prayer,) volunteers (ETAS,) groups (a great diversity in distinct circumstances,) apostolic works (foundations, institutions, centers of diverse services), individuals. The Society of Jesus has performed and continues to perform here a very vital function of service: animating, evangelizing, conserving and communicating traditions, leading the renewal of organizations, etc. from its very beginnings, it has done this with a very fruitful style of relationships, which including formation, companionship, discernment, and common enterprises.

For its part, the common mission of the life of the baptized also has its specific manifestation in this "Ignatian world." By this I mean the service of faith and the promotion of justice. These are not two options, one along side of the other, but rather one option with two edges. Because, in contemplating today's reality, one becomes more and more convinced that

serving the faith – the Gospel of love to the end – absolutely requires promoting justice.

I think that in this way one may now enter into the theme of the collaboration between Jesuits and lay people, highlighting these three elements (discipleship, in community, for the mission,) pointing out its baptismal roots, indicating its Ignatian modalities (Spiritual Exercises, in an Ignatian community, for the service of faith and the promotion of justice.) This permits a sufficiently broad gaze, avoiding focusing the issue of collaboration from only particular perspectives. I understand by particular perspectives the point of view of the Society of Jesus, of this or that lay association, of the volunteers, of such and such a Jesuit or lay person. Naturally, these particular points of view are legitimate in themselves. And not only this: in thinking about mutual collaboration, both individually and collectively, one must make the effort to put oneself in the place of the others. The Ignatian world and each particular cell of it, is also a concern of all, although respecting the different responsibilities involved.

In the course of the years after Vatican II, Ignatians have little by little come to recognize several singular graces that the Spirit is bestowing in them for the world and the Church. They have also been gradually responding. Consider, for example, the renewal of Ignatian spirituality, especially the experience of the Spiritual Exercises, which has blossomed with such energy among so many [priests, religious, lay, including believers of other faiths.] Consider also the grace of the apostolic impulse evident in Jesuits and lay alike. And, finally, consider the grace of collaboration, of working side by side.

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Because collaboration is before all else a grace that is being bestowed, one must ask insistently to be capable of receiving it. This is not easy. Receiving the grace is a gift, but a gift which places high demands. And that has many, many facets. In its recent General Congregation 35, Jesuits, before the decree on collaboration, put forward the decree on their identity. I

think that this is very important. In confronting the theme of collaboration, lay people must do the same, that is, think about and renew their lay identity, and, as is required in the case of lay associates, their associative identity.

After this, the theme of collaboration can be viewed with greater clarity. The way of proceeding of lay people, in respect to their union with God, of community life and apostolic service, is Ignatian, but not Jesuit.

It seems to me that this is an appropriate way of approaching the problem of Ignatian collaboration in the heart of the mission. This form of thinking of the matter, implies theological choices, requires intimate union with God, calls for changes of attitudes and mentalities, demands expression in procedures and practices, rooted in a social and ecclesial lifestyle characterized by simplicity, dialogue, openness to the signs of the times and the action of the Spirit. This without forgetting that collaboration among lay, religious and priests, "ignatianly," lived is for mission, that it, to collaborate, in an ultimate sense, with the mission of Jesus Christ, at the service of others and in the heart of the Church.

### ***The Ignatian lay person***

Having laid these foundations, we can ask ourselves now what basic characteristics should characterize the Ignatian layman. In the light of Aparecida, the answer is simple. He is a disciple in community and mission: a baptized person. He is someone who has met Christ in the Spiritual Exercises, who possesses some sense of community in the Ignatian world and who orients his life apostolically, in the sense of faith-justice, He is a baptized Ignatian.

But the enumeration of these traits only serves to open a series of problems: What type of experience regarding the Spiritual Exercises? Has it to include a formal belonging to a community? Is it the apostolic orientation of work and family life, or is apostolic life beyond these daily limits?

I think that these questions need to be responded to in the diverse contexts, according to times, places and persons. What can be said is that it is not enough, to be an Ignatian layperson, for example, to have studied in an Ignatian educational institution, or to be good friends of an Ignatian. On the other hand, one is not necessarily a better Ignatian layperson by collaborating or working in a work of the Society of Jesus.

I think that several aspects of these three basic characteristics of the Ignatian lay person are particularly relevant today and for the immediate future.

*The Ignatian layperson meets Christ in the Spiritual Exercises.* The layperson's awareness of the process seems very relevant to me. In some way the person experiences growth, of increasing depth. The goal is to come to feel oneself grasped and led in an attitude of discernment. Thus is actualized the profound grace of following. I tend to think that this awareness of process is a good indicator of the Ignatian spiritual experience. In his *Autobiography* Ignatius reveals that he felt led by God, as a child by his teacher. And he felt this as a lay person: the foundation of the Society of Jesus came later. The following can be experienced in different levels, including in the very beginnings of the process. It is essential however to supply the means to accompany the processes of laypeople, and to offer sufficient opportunities for them to advance.

*The Ignatian layperson meets Christ in community.* He must, therefore belong in some way to a community which goes beyond his individual experience. It is good to remember that, for married lay people, the family is the first community. This Ignatian way of living family life must be sometimes insisted on a bit more: the Ignatian way of living family life (mystical, communitarian and apostolic families.) Nevertheless, I think that it must not remain only in the family, the domestic Church. I feel a broader reference is indispensable.

At this point, I think that it would be very appropriate to focus our attention on all that is signified by the growth of institutional consciousness and the establishment of lay institutions. There is an individualistic force in the culture, which has its effect without sometimes our being very aware of it. This enters also into the mentalities and conduct of Jesuits and laypeople. Besides this, some of the difficulties in closer collaboration between laypeople and Jesuits have their roots in the profound differences in the degree of institutionalization of these two forms of Ignatian life. Lay associations, even if there has been much growth, still have a long way to go in this regard. In this sense, for example, I was very glad to see that Decree 6 of the recent General Congregation 35 recommends that Jesuit Major Superiors support the CVX and other lay associations. The model can no longer be one Jesuit with a group of laypeople behind him, in isolation. Spiritual and apostolic processes need to endure, be communicable to others and multiply their fruit. On the other hand, although there exist many urgent needs, it seems to me necessary to resist the indiscrete enthusiasm for immediate results. Here is another characteristic of these times, which expresses itself very well in the advent of the credit card and the decline of

the bank book. Fomenting, inspiring, maintaining, fostering growth, renewing institutional ways takes time and demands energy, but this is how history is made.

*The lay Ignatian lives an apostolic life in community.* At times one faces the disjunction between daily lay life as mission, and the commitment to apostolic service above and beyond daily life. It seems to me that the issue is a very profound one. All of life is called to be apostolic. In the ultimate sense, it is the will of

God, understood through discernment that must be pointed out, that each one needs to do. Even though I look at family and work life, recreation and rest, in the apostolic sense, a lay Ignatian ought to have the impulse to go beyond, addressing himself/herself to the

needs of others. I like to think that the desire of going to the frontiers is precisely characteristic of the Ignatian lay person. These frontiers, in the first place, are one's own children and their new mentality, one's co-workers. But go further beyond these. In this regard, brother Jesuits also need lay people and many of them yearn to work and be with them.

It seems to me also very necessary that Jesuits not fail in the generous effort to promote lay identity and mission in the world and in the Church. May they help the lay people grow more, serve more, express themselves more, learn more. They should be called upon to point out to the layperson when he appears to abdicate his more specific responsibilities: the family, work, society, culture, Church. With gusto and gratefulness, many lay people collaborate in their works. They let them feel them to be theirs also. They are their collaborators. And, in this collaboration, the same lay people receive much. They renew their own lay vocation and can live it more deeply. I think that it is very good for Jesuits to consider as one of their objectives in their works, the promotion of lay identity and mission. This can help them not give into the temptation of serving the lay people in the function of their works. In any case, undoubtedly, those who are first responsible for renewing the lay identity are lay people themselves.

This theme of identity, in my opinion, is very much at the center of this issue of collaboration. The identity of the lay person, depicted so stimulatingly by Vatican II, challenges secular and massive mentalities and

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practices. It is not easy for lay people to assume their faith life in an adult manner, the processes are slow. But Jesuit, religious and priest identity has also been questioned. Consider the example of the difficulty some relatively young Jesuits seem to have collaborating with lay people, many times because they see their identity as Jesuits too much linked with taking charge of works and in action.

The “Ignatian world,” a living cell of the ecclesial organism, is making its contribution in the historical project of a Church of communion and participation. This is a grace. Collaboration is a fire that lights other fires. In fact, in diverse tasks relating to justice and promotion, the collaboration extends also to include agnostics and non-believers. For collaboration is evangelizing, in first place, in respect to the missionary. I believe that much needs to be asked for to respond with wisdom to the grace of collaboration. As I see it, a precise gift needs to be asked for: the grace of feeling the nuances in Ignatian language, this is discernment: knowing how to distinguish, to nuance, to continue advancing on the road behind the Lord, who, with his machete, is opening paths in the wilderness.

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<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this text was presented at the Second Meeting of the Lay Sector of the Conference of Latin American Provincials (CPAL) which took place in Quito, Ecuador, from June 17 to 20, 2008. I am very thankful to several lay and Jesuit friends for their comments on that first version.