

IDENTITY - MISSION - COMMUNITY

SOME HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

Paul Oberholzer S.J. (HEL)

Researcher

Jesuit Historical Archives

Decree two of General Congregation XXXI invites the Society of Jesus as a whole to reform our religious life according to the spirit of Vatican Council II, which appealed for a profound renewal of our way of living and working, our laws and structures. Along with all other religious we are required to refer continuously and in a new way to the essential sources of our fundamental charism. *According to General Congregation XXXV this original identity, which must be permanently sought, is strictly linked to our mission and our way of living in community (GC XXXV D2.19).* Our Ignatian vocation is fulfilled essentially in the perception and implementation of a complex union of three interlinked aspects – identity, mission and community.

Each time we return to our origins to distil our religious identity, we find a historic connotation, since the origins of every institute are found in the past. However, exclusive concentration on the oldest and most original sources can easily end in an unhistorical appropriation if we do not pay attention to the context of the daily religious life of “our fathers” and the development of our institute, going from a circle of friends to a religious order of pontifical right. The book by John O'Malley, S.J., “The first Jesuits” offers an excellent orientation in this respect.

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In studying the founding documents, seeking the original charism, we must recognise that the essential factors which make up Jesuit identity, as in any social collective, are not necessarily to be found in the oldest documents. And this brings us to two essential questions – What does original identity mean? And from what moment onwards can we truly speak of the Society of Jesus as a religious community?

Certainly, no Jesuit will deny the importance of relating to the original sources. Yet this is not a recent outlook, rather it accompanies our entire history. All the General Congregations of the old Society were concerned with fixing an essential and immutable canon – what are the documents and sections of the Institutum, the symbol of Jesuit identity, which all Jesuits must refer to in order to define their religious life and which they can present to ecclesiastical or secular authorities outside the Society? This quest for assurance, which should have protected the Society from any arbitrary interference from outside, ended up leading to subtle debates, which never reached any conclusion and finally impeded any kind of updating process.

According to historical criteria, what are the challenges in the search for our original identity? We enter a domain where we share common questions with lay historians regarding national or cultural identity; a domain that has concerned them and continues to concern them in their intent to update traditional historic awareness - even mythological – faced with new scientific methods, new results, a transformed social mentality and new perspectives which separate intellectuals from the general public. This

question leads to others – when and where did the original period begin and how long did it last? Is it possible to speak of an act of foundation, with a clear date and place? This act becomes a reference point for us in constituting our religious identity. However what importance did this event have for those that lived through this time?

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Which factors form the identity of the original group and which elements of our identity are contained therein? In the scale of values of the first generation what place have the elements we recognise today as essential? Is it possible that at the start there were elements which we consider less relevant today or even eliminate completely – in this case what importance had they for the first generation? We have to take account of identity as perceived within

the environment of that time. Such an image can differ considerably from the identity preserved in the founding documents, but can be often one of the most authentic indicators of “self-awareness” of those concerned compared to the contents of the constitutional canons.

From which view point?

It is inevitable that our questions on our history and identity begin from the horizon of the challenges of everyday life. It will never be possible to describe the original period from the viewpoint of contemporaries. Nevertheless, it is right to ask ourselves which original factors deserve particular attention. For example, do we consider founding acts the vows of the seven companions on 15 August 1534 on the hill of Montmartre in Paris or the approval of the Formula Instituti by Pope Paul III on 27 September 1540 in Rome, or the solemn vows following the election of Ignatius as Superior general on 22 April 1541 in Saint Paul’s outside the Walls? To link the foundation with one or other of these three elements reflects diverse accentuations of the perception of identity. It is known that in the German-speaking provinces the Montmartre vows hold enormous importance, while the international houses in Rome celebrate the official feast of the beginning of the Society of Jesus on 22 April. It would be interesting to establish which original event is privileged, according to the period and the province. In any case, it is important to attentively examine, if the time of the origins has been instrumentalised, since this occurs more implicitly than explicitly, and is not only a temptation for traditionalists. In this case the historic reference and historiographic awareness fade beside the profit of political and circumstantial concerns dictated by the stakes at a give moment.

Overall view of the first nine decades

Rather than seeking out the most probable moment in which our charism in all its originality emerges, I propose an overall vision of the first decades of our Society, subdivided in different periods, well aware that what follows will be of an arbitrary and auxiliary nature.

The first period begins with the earliest mention of the forming of a group of companions, during the time Ignatius lived in Barcelona, between 1524-1526 (autobiography c. 56) and lasts until the approval of the Formula

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Instituti by the bull *Regimini militantis ecclesiae*, on 27 September 1540. The group initially lived without any official commitment or any institutionalised form and ended up with official recognition by the highest external authority. During these 14 or 16 years, the group of companions developed without a stable or determined format. It continues to be an open question as to when this body became institutional and its members recognised themselves as truly linked together. Therefore in this period the group was characterised by being charismatic and non institutional.

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The second period begins on the one hand with the above mentioned pontifical approval and on the other with the unanimous election of Ignatius as the first General in April 1540 and ends with the final editing of the Constitutions and the death of Ignatius, on 31 July 1556. This is a creative and foundational period. The institute existed, but the parameters needed to go from group of friends to being a religious order had still to be put in place. This process was punctuated by various experiments and many ways of proceeding, feeling their way on the basis of intuitions, reflections, often dictated by concrete circumstances.

The third phase was marked by the Generalates of Diego Laínez (1556/58-1656), Francis Borgia (1565-1572) and Everardo Mercuriano (1573-1580). All three of them had known Ignatius personally and were part of an intimate circle of advisers chosen by him. Ignatius himself had entrusted important administrative duties to them which had prepared them in this way to govern the Society. This means that these three Generals still knew the mind and spirit of Ignatius, a knowledge that all later Jesuits have no access to. The task of these three was above all to preserve the elements of the founding Ignatian charism and integrate it institutionally into the order which was growing rapidly and had to develop in different and unpredictable contexts, continuously moving away from the physical presence of Ignatius. The three Generals, creative and capable of managing an institute, were adept at allying rational adaptation and fidelity to the heritage of Ignatius, the decrees of General Congregation I and the promulgation of the Constitutions.

The fourth period corresponds to the Generalate of Claudio Acquaviva (1581-1615). The fact that he was the first General to have not

known Ignatius personally (and the deaths of the last of the first companions Simao Rodrigues 1579, Alfonso Salmerón 1585 and Nicolás Bobadilla 1590), meant that the original phase was about to end. But during the Generalate of Acquaviva the promulgation of the last rules took place and many new creative and foundational elements were introduced, which became constitutional and essential for the Society. This phase is marked by innovation and institutionalisation.

Identity, community and mission in the first phase

The first phase is characterised particularly by the great absence of written sources. The most significant reference points are the *Spiritual Exercises* which Ignatius wrote at that time and which each companion needed to become part of the group, and the *Formula Instituti* which the companions drew up together over the last years of this period. It is clear that both these documents are a source of identification for the first Jesuits and all their successors up to the present day. Nevertheless, the group of friends continues to be difficult to access for us, because their mutual commitment developed gradually. In Paris and despite the vows of Montmartre, they did not practice community life, since they were not religious and it is not clear from what point they really wanted to become religious. After the 1534 vows Ignatius left his companions and only saw them again three years later, in Venice. Meanwhile, the group was enriched by the arrival of two new members. The small community did not have clear or common bearings marking their daily life. Undoubtedly in this early period there were immense spiritual riches but we much recognise that this companionship, still not an institution, can be no more than a relative reference point for our Jesuit identity, since today we belong to an institutionalised Order, at the time unknown.

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There are further nuances with regard to missionary consciousness. At that time the companions vacillated between the ideal of helping the souls in Jerusalem and putting themselves at the disposal of the Pope. The first ideal was inspired by the crusades which were in full fervour with the Spanish Reconquest, and the second impelled them towards a vocation motivated by the perception that recently discovered cultures and peoples were not yet integrated into the network of the universal Church and were outside the responsibility of the, *vicarius Christi*.

However we must ask ourselves if the availability to the Sovereign Pontiff, formulated in the environment of the University of Paris, had not an anti-Protestant character. At that time this university upheld a clear Catholic orientation and the doctrines of Luther were publicly condemned. However the works of the great reformer translated into Latin circulated among the students and undoubtedly many of them sympathised with his thinking. Yet the link unifying all the reform movements was a profound and radical criticism of the Papacy. This vow then would also contain an anti-Protestant element which has identified us over the centuries and which we have eliminated only in the last decades considering it simply accidental and a later addition. It is interesting to note that with regard to our awareness of identity almost all the mentions of historic aspects or events in the decrees of General Congregation XXXV refer to this charismatic and non institutional phase.

Some changes under the Generalate of Ignatius

The second phase sees the development of all that the first companions had defined in the *Formula Instituti*. There are many documents which attest great discussions and consultations among them, but the Formula approved by Paul III and further developed and confirmed on 21 September 1550 by Julius III with the bull "*Exposcit debitum*" explicitly indicate that the Society of Jesus was in statu nascendi. Moreover it is clear that at this time many details were concretised which led to a certain discontinuity with regard to the earlier phase. One of the main points was the editing of the Constitutions to which Ignatius dedicated himself without help from anyone else, while the mutual consultations of the first companions diminished significantly. It must be underlined, furthermore, that the circle of the first companions began to break up, above all as the first school

decision making body of the Society. Francis Xavier ceased to be a point of reference when he moved to Portugal on 15 March 1540 and to India on 7 April 1541. And this despite his maintaining a friendly and intense correspondence with Ignatius and becoming a great authority regarding the missionary identity of the Society. Pierre Fabre died young in 1546 and relations between Ignatius and Bobadilla and Rorigues became more and more conflictual until they no longer accepted the authority of the General. Furthermore the first companions were travelling too frequently to give form to a new Institute, and thus the initial structure in the form of a circle was supplanted by a pyramidal structure, led by the figure and authority of the General.

Meanwhile Ignatius began significantly to name new persons as his advisers, entrusting them with important roles. In 1547 John Polanco was named secretary to the Society and right hand man to Ignatius as attested in the *Constitutions* and the numerous letters which bear the indelible seal of Polanco. A person indispensable to the development of the Society was Francisco Borgia, who entered the Society in secret in 1546, guaranteeing the financing until 1550 and making possible the implementation of many projects. These included the founding of the first school in Gandia in 1546, the publication of the *Spiritual Exercises*, the founding and endowing of the Roman College and the building of the Church of Gesù in Rome, both in 1551. Moreover he was the main reference point between the Spanish nobility and the Society. Thanks to him, the Society was seen as a reputable and well established order. However some criticised the intimate relationship between Ignatius and Francis Borgia. In 1552 Jerónimo Nadal was named commissioner for the promulgation of the *Constitutions*, so that the link between the outlying areas and the centre was strong and essential. We can say that with the *Constitutions* the Order was established, but the "Jesuit" as such was still to emerge in a group of a thousand members with different origins and formation. With this nomination, Nadal became a strong motivating element in the development of Jesuit identity, as important as Lainez was among the first companions, the only one of the first friends to be entrusted with exceptionally important government missions.

Travelling throughout Italy, Lainez, from the forties onwards, entered into contact with the nobility and representatives of local authorities and was recognised as the reformer of many monasteries and convents, as a university professor and a stimulating preacher. For the perception of the Society in Italy Lainez' commitment was more important than the life of

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Ignatius himself and he became an integral part of Jesuit identity as perceived from outside. To this we must add the destruction of Protestant books in Venice in 1542 and his commitment to converting Jews in Rome, which caused a new pontifical policy in the city where the Jews had lived for decades in a relatively serene environment.

Elements of identity for members

Over the last thirty years we have been defining an identity for the years to come, although in different conditions. At that time, the companions formed a small itinerant group dispersed at first throughout Italy and then throughout Europe. Often they travelled alone, putting thus in danger the sense of belonging. Thus direct and mutual interchange was quite infrequent. The first companions began spontaneously to inform each other regularly and reciprocally on the initiative of each one of them, as well as according to the orders of Ignatius sent by letter. On the one hand they wrote letters to Rome, where a companion in charge transcribed the information received and forwarded it to the others who were abroad, on the other the

companions let them know the stages of their itineraries and the addresses they be reached at. There are testimonies too relative to the lack of communication and regret for the lack of brotherly support.

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In the decade of the forties Ignatius and Polanco drew up clear rules for correspondence, valid first of all for itinerant companions and later for provincials and resident

superiors. Such letters originally had an edifying function and nourished awareness of being Jesuit in periods of long absence and the huge distances dividing the brothers. At the same time, the officially informative character of these letters acquired greater importance in the administration of the Society.

In the second half of the forties other elements emerged which became central to Jesuit identity and, above all, its perception – the founding

of the first schools and the building of churches, although still not in the Baroque style. Both elements have transformed into visible factors for the Society of Jesus and given them an image in all Catholic cities of the modern period. Furthermore the Jesuits became increasingly less itinerant preachers, mediators or “ambassadors”, and increasingly more teachers and resident pastors in fixed places.

Development in the third period

The 24 years of the third period were characterised by a notable increase in the numbers of Jesuits, who went from being 1000 in 1556 to 5165 in 1580. Jesuits began to be present in certain Northern European countries and, above all, in the Spanish colonies of America. It is not possible in this brief article to describe the entire period nor to extrapolate the essential elements which confirmed and changed the concept of identity.

First of all it must be underlined that the number of schools increased more slowly than the number of members of the Society. Lainez and Borgia explicitly wanted to reduce the new foundations and increase the number of members per residence, which differed from the policy of Ignatius. The function of the correspondence changed. The friendly and mutual edification nature of the instructions of the Generals diminished and disappeared altogether and was replaced by the informative element in the service of the central administration. Thus the component linking the members

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became increasingly the daily rhythm of life in community and the image of the Jesuits was marked by large communities, made up of at least 12 to 20 and sometimes more. The greatest number of new vocations came, moreover, from these great communities, open and welcoming. The direct testimonial of community life became one of the most efficient factors in vocational pastoral work and in the constitutional factor of the Jesuit mission.

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The edifying nature of the former personal correspondence became absorbed into the "*litterae cuadrimestres*", later "*litterae annuae*". Each residence sent a report according to a fixed scheme regarding the current situation and recent events, at first every three months and later once a year. The texts were collected and copied in the provincial houses and later sent to Rome, where they were edited once more, printed and distributed to all the provinces. These "*litterae annuae*" were read in the refectory of every school. And thus each Jesuit regularly received information about religious life in all the residences of the Society. These letters were meant above all to inspire, problems or calamities were not mentioned, but through these "*litterae annuae*" each Jesuit was fully aware that he formed part of an order present in different cultures and different countries with distinct missions and this is a cornerstone of Jesuit identity.

At the Council of Trent Lainez supported the idea of a strong papacy and opposed the defenders of a more episcopal orientation. At the religious conferences in Poissy he managed to convince the Queen of France to concede a minimum of religious liberty to Protestants. With all this he created a strong image for the Society which determined not only external perception but also the internal identity, even though these components are not present either in the *Constitutions* or in the letters of Ignatius.

The task of these three Generals was thus to make concrete the essential factor identified by Ignatius. Lainez, and above all Borgia, supported the special vow of obedience to the Pope, provoked by bishops and cardinals who attempted to profit from the personal availability the Jesuits had offered to the Sovereign Pontiff. After long study, Borgia clarified with vigour that this vow referred only to policies expressed by the Pope himself, sustained in this interpretation directly by Pope Pius V. Borgia also clarified the questions regarding the choir and the simple and solemn vows, all these components of the heritage of Ignatius which were adapted to the circumstances.

Borgia also introduced creative innovations – the novitiate for two years in a separate house to the professed houses and the schools, a practice preserved up to our own times. Also fixed was the daily one-hour meditation which formed part of our religious life until General Congregation XXXI. Some interpreters see in this decision by Borgia a betrayal of the authentic spirit of Ignatius. Candido de Dalmases sees this, on the contrary, as a creative yet authentic update in the face of changing circumstances. Mercuriano favoured, more than his predecessors, the founding of schools

in regions where Protestantism was expanding. And thus Northern European countries acquired more importance and increasingly strengthened the image of the Jesuits as combatants against the reform movement.

Key points in the Generalate of Acquaviva

The Generalate of Claudio Acquaviva was the longest in the history of the Society and lasted from 1581 to 1615, a period in which new elements were added and seminal developments took place. General Congregations V and VI, in 1593 and 1608 respectively, decided and confirmed the absolute prohibition on admitting neo Christians, which profoundly changed the Society with numerous members of neo Christian origin who enjoyed great influence. Among the first Jesuits many were neo Christian, such as Diego Laínez, Juan Polanco and Jerónimo Nadal and the administration of Ignatius and Francis Borgia was very generous towards candidates of Jewish or Muslim origin. This law was only repealed in 1946!

In 1599 the *Ratio Studiorum* was promulgated. This meant that all schools received a common didactic programme which formed a common link until 1773 and, partially, in the XIX century. The *Ratio Studiorum* became an orientation point for many other Catholic schools and a founding element in European educational and cultural life. General Congregation V, in 1608, prescribed the obligation for each member to do the eight day Exercises once a year. At the same General Congregation the centralised nature of the Society was confirmed, that is the total responsibility of the General as opposed to a federalist concept which would have permitted the delegation of greater competence to the Provinces, and consequently to political authorities in the country who exercised a great influence over religious life. This 'panoptic' government of the General in Rome has always constituted an element of controversy against the Society. During the Generalate of Acquaviva the mission to China officially began, in 1583 with Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci and the first Reduction was founded in Paraguay in 1609.

All these elements were of great importance for Jesuit identity and, except for *Ratio Studiorum*, maintained their importance until the XIX century, giving this generation of Jesuits a dynamic and creative character in a critical and independent reference to the original sources. It is interesting

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to see that the official prescription of the yearly eight day Exercises was “codified” later in the *“Institutum”*. The nucleus of our spirituality developed over a long period, which implies that a fundamental element of our present Jesuit identity, was added relatively late in terms of our history.

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The mission in China contributed to the image of Jesuits as pioneers who go to the frontiers of the world. From the start of, and above all during the XVII century, China and the Reductions caused political and theological controversy. Together with the *Ratio Studiorum* and the way of understanding the Generalate they brought sympathisers reasons to defend and adversaries arguments for criticising the Society which finally led to the suppression. The mission in China and the Reductions have become the most well known historic elements for Jesuits today and determine our identity as no other factor does in our past. Both are mentioned frequently, when we want to extrapolate positive aspects of our history, taking on thus an almost mythological dimension. They truly deserve to be highlighted, if we can open ourselves with decision to critical research which each year leads to new findings of social, economic and political importance, not only regarding our presence in China and in the Reductions, but also more generally all our history. These reflections lead us ultimately to spiritual renewal.

Conclusion

These reflections on our identity and our original charism show us how some essential elements developed in the first 90 years of our history. And certainly there are other aspects which have not been addressed. In what period do we find the original Society which we like to refer to? This question has no answer. Certain conditions in the first period reveal themselves to be incompatible with our Jesuit self consciousness. And other points which today belong to the heart of our identity were added much later. Not only does our identity differ from that of our first fathers, and the first Jesuits – there is also a difference between the identity fixed in legal and founding sources, and the identity perceived through the social and cultural environment. All these aspects made up and still form our identity,

a dynamic component to which we refer ceaselessly with a new and open spirit, aware that the Society of Jesus continues to be historic (geschichtlich – developing continuously through time).

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I dedicate this article to my friend Roger Sablonier (+8.VI.2010), mediaevalist and professor at the University of Zurich who, through his research into the origins of the Swiss Confederation, inspired these reflections.