

THE RULES FOR THINKING, JUDGING, FEELING IN THE POST-CONCILIAR CHURCH

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The Spiritual Exercises are not meant to be read but to be done. The text is the fruit of one experience, that of Ignatius, offered as one way of many to enter into communication with God. They lead to a personal encounter in the liberty of the Spirit, showing the right way to follow and indicating the obstacles and dead-ends that lead nowhere. The Exercises help to attain true freedom in God through a text well-organized in weeks and days, preludes and points, examens and repetitions. To this text are added a number of diverse rules, on discernment, on distribution of alms, on how to deal with scruples, and on thinking, judging and feeling with the Church.

Are these rules integral to the text or are they meant to be used at the discretion of the director? There is no doubt about the rules for discernment. There is less certainty about the rules on scruples or on almsgiving, less generally applicable although still important. There is even less accord on the rules on thinking with the Church. Specialists agree that they are of a later date, written by Ignatius partly in Paris and partly in Rome. Their context seems to be rather outdated. Ignatius is clearly referring to the sixteenth-century Church threatened by humanism and Protestantism. He is seeking to help people immersed in this humiliating and discouraging situation.

Yet the phrase itself, *sentire cum ecclesia*, is the most widely known of any in the Exercises. In this talk, I intend to argue that these rules are relevant to the life of the Church of the Second Vatican Council, as they were to the life of the Church of the Council of Trent. The rules are part and parcel of the movement of the Exercises.

God “became a human being in order to save the human race” [102], so our following of God, our spirituality, must be incarnated in that particular “state or way of life he may call us to in his service” [135, 6] and it must be lived in union with the spouse of his Son, the Church, by which “he governs and guides us for the salvation of our souls” [365, 2]. Ignatius, who defines spirituality as service “a greater service” uses the image of spouse to describe the relationship between Christ and the Church. We on our part must be “disposed and ready to be obedient in everything to this true Spouse of Christ our Lord, which is our holy Mother, the hierarchical Church” [353]. Love of Christ goes with love for the Church and must be expressed in concrete acts. “Loving union with God”: these are the last words of the rules for thinking with the Church and the final words of the Exercises themselves. This union cannot be lived independently of the Church.

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Like all other gifts, the Church descends from heaven, from above [237] and it is essentially linked to the incarnation mystery of Christ's total self-giving. This is Ignatius' belief. In his description of God's people in these rules, Ignatius does not see the people as perfect and faultless. He refers to murmuring and speaking evil against superiors and officials [362], bad conduct, neglect of good works and other helps to salvation, loss of zeal, and a fatalistic outlook on life which expresses itself in the statement that it makes no difference whether I conduct myself well or badly [367].

Ignatius' view of humanity is not idealistic. His Church is made up of people who are strong and weak, saints and sinners. They are God's chosen people gathered in the Church given from above and offered as spouse to his Son [365]. Everything comes from above, but after the Incarnation, everything is lived here below. This Church gratefully received from above and fully present in this world is, in Ignatius' words, "our holy Mother the hierarchical Church" [353]. Translators add the words "orthodox and catholic," which are not in the text called "Autograph," but may be in the text you are using.

We must take care to avoid misinterpreting Ignatius when he speaks of "the hierarchical Church." He does not take it to mean the world of popes and bishops, ecclesiastics and clergy. It would seem that Ignatius was among the earliest to appreciate the hierarchical Church as a church of *mediation*. The divine grace that is given to the world is *mediated* by each believer, of high and low estate, according to his or her life and place [189]. Each person, as a member of the Church, exercises a responsibility in the work of salvation. Thus Ignatius' perception of the Church is that of a body with a head and limbs, each part fulfilling its proper role as God wills. The head cannot say to the feet, "I do not need you." Is a part of the body suffering? The other parts suffer along with it. Is one person honored? All the others share the joy [cf 1 Cor 12: 18-26]. Ignatius looks on the Church as a whole of which nothing can be ignored: neither its ecclesial hierarchy nor the rest of its members, neither its charismatic expression nor its canonical discipline, neither its holiness nor its sinfulness.

Our holy Mother the Church is the source of life. Our attitude toward it is that of faith which enables us to see beyond the immediate with a heart-centered sensitivity to what is true and right. In the meditation on the Two Standards, Ignatius presents the Church as a gathering of persons: apostles, disciples, servants, and friends sent by the Lord throughout the whole world to spread his doctrine [145].

Without ever having developed a full and proper ecclesiology, Ignatius proposes some guidelines for living the spiritual adventure of the Exercises in full freedom within the Church, militant and hierarchical. He invites us to a seemingly impossible living out freely of a personal call to embrace the Creator's will out of love as he shows us the way which will enable us to serve him better in the future [15].

Rules: Thinking, Judging, Feeling with the Church

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Now, to turn to the text of the rules themselves at the end of the Exercises, Ignatius proposes these rules for developing a genuine attitude to the Church militant by inviting us to look with respect on all sorts of liturgical and pious practices, and to a rather radical acceptance of doctrinal and disciplinary precepts. Ignatius is aware of the seeming opposition between the spiritual freedom that the Exercises help us to attain and the obedience appropriate in the Church. He himself had experienced the difficulty of reconciling these two, but he does not see any insurmountable obstacle to reconciling them, for “between Christ our Lord, the Bridegroom, and the Church, his Spouse, there is the one same Spirit who governs and guides us for the salvation of our souls” [365,2].

In this context, Ignatius states that we must praise not only God human beings are created for that purpose but also Church practices, some of which were the subject of much controversy. Eight of the rules begin with the word “praise” [354-361]. One rule [356] invites us to praise consecrated life strongly and less so, marriage. Another states that we should praise chant, psalmody, and long prayers inside and outside the church [355]. In the last of these eight rules, Ignatius states that we should be ready to look for reasons to defend the precepts of the Church [361].

Let me say here that “praise” does not necessarily mean that we should adopt the practices he mentions. Ignatius, as we know, placed firm limitations in the Society of Jesus on practices such as these. What he deplors is a tendency to attack and ridicule them. A representative of this tendency was Desiderius Erasmus, who died in 1536. He and his disciples were not heretics. They shared with Ignatius a firm faith in Christ and a contemplative approach to the Gospels. But a reading of the *Enchiridion* of Erasmus brings out a negative and critical attitude, one contrary to the way of thinking that Ignatius developed from experience. In the sixth Annotation, Ignatius expresses concern about the retreatant “who is not experiencing any spiritual motions or is not being moved one way or another by different spirits” [6,1]. This describes Erasmus, a man not truly pious, never undergoing any deep spiritual crisis, never traveling along the road to Emmaus. The reason was that he conceived typical Christian life as a matter of the intellect, spiritually so elevated that there was no need for liturgy, pious practices, and the consecrated life. The Church is accepted in so far as it lives at the level of the Spirit. It is criticized for many of its human expressions, especially the weaknesses and failings of its leaders.

The Ignatian View: Optimistic, Realistic

Ignatius' view of the Church is “diametrically opposed” [325, 6] to that of Erasmus, which explains why he forbade the reading of his books. Ignatius sought “to keep himself right in all things” [365,1]. In his rules, he encourages praise for relics and penances [359], church buildings [360], and all that is prescribed by the Church [361].

Praise is more than beautiful chant or well-phrased speech. What is essential is an inner disposition of selflessness. The biblical image of praise is the dance of David before the

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Ark of the Covenant. David sets aside his regal dignity and vestments. Praise is reverence for God and for godly things in the Church, in a spirit of thanksgiving for grace received.

It is not enough for Ignatius that the person who gives the Exercises is a person of the Church, or that the one who does them is simply in harmony with “our Holy Mother the hierarchical Church” [353]. There must be fervour in our adhesion to the Church, for how can we love the Lord more intensely and distinguish ourselves in total service to him if we are lukewarm and sceptical toward his spouse?

It might be objected that this passion of Ignatius for all that is churchly, above all, for unquestioned support of the Vicar of Christ on earth, is like averting one's eyes from an often less-than-glorious reality that causes discouragement and even despair among those who are ready to suffer for the Church, but unwilling to accept the suffering it causes them and who therefore distance themselves from it. Some suffer because they feel that the Church does not make as much progress as they wish, in the liturgy, or in who may minister, or in opting for the poor. Others suffer because they feel that the Church has abandoned many precious gifts and graces. Are not many of these ardent adherents to the Church in fact dreamers insisting on a perfectly reformed Church according to their passionate desires, or seeking to restore at all costs a church of the past that is irretrievable?

Ignatius is not among these. He is a realist. The Church that he refers to in his rules includes within its ranks people holding high office whose “acts are not or were not praiseworthy” and who are guilty of “bad conduct” [362, 2, 4]. His ecclesial faith does not focus on these negative aspects. He believes in a future in which he who is coming continues to bring salvation. A true prayerful quest for a positive attitude to the Church does not dwell on the supposed perfection of the past. It is expressed in a trust in new beginnings, often small and fragile, yet not illusory. Thus we have liturgical renewal, new scripture discoveries, new ecclesial movements, ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, options for the poor, the Exercises in daily life, the promotion of the laity, synods, and a council. It may be that these modest beginnings do not draw as much attention as other headline-making happenings in the Church. Yet they promise “delicate, gentle, delightful” growth, “like a drop of water penetrating a sponge” [335]. It is not a question of being falsely or artificially optimistic about the Church. There is so much to praise and rejoice over, provided we open our eyes to the paschal reality, to the whole mystery of our Mother, the Church militant.

The Critical Balance of Faithful Love

After having given seven rules about praising God's presence in the real life of the Church, Ignatius offers at least four others that suggest how we should talk about matters of doctrine with reserve and caution in our affirmations on certain delicate points like faith and grace [366-369]. For “by speaking much and emphatically about faith, without any distinction or explanation, we may give occasion to ordinary people to grow listless and

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lazy in their works” [368]. The caution is that our speech, even critical, is to be informed by faithful love for what God has done and is doing at the heart of the Church. Then we are more likely to present balanced and impartial teaching. This does not prevent us from speaking the truth, the whole truth. Ignatius lived in a time when emphasis was on certain aspects of doctrine, whether grace, the Scriptures, works, tradition. Throughout the Exercises, Ignatius tries to avoid overstressing or exaggerating things, and tries rather to integrate the three aspects of Creator, creation, and created human beings [23] where there is exchange and communication [230-231] and a union of love [370]. In the Exercises, he leads us through the history of sin, of which we are all guilty, to the paschal history of the suffering and resurrected Lord and finally to the spousal mystery of Christ and his Church, our Holy Mother, the Catholic Church, the Church which approved the *Exercises*.

The one who guides the retreatant witnesses to his encounter with Christ and accompanies him throughout the election, ensuring that all is done according to the mind of our Mother the Church [170]. Following on his experience of the Exercises, which of themselves are meant to prepare him for it at the deepest level, the retreatant is called to live in relationship with the body of Christ, the Church, sometimes harmonious, sometimes contentious. Keeping a balanced approach is not always easy. Ignatius gives us examples that were particularly debated in his own time: though already chosen, we are expected to cooperate in our spiritual development [367]; it is not enough to believe, the Lord expects actions which are expressions of that faith [368]; all is grace and yet the Lord has granted us free will [369]. It would not be difficult to give examples in our time of unilateral stances and proclamations of the Word that tend to lead away from union with the Church that the Lord desires. We are called to respect others' consciences, called to live in a pluralistic religious world, confronted with complex problems variously interpreted by theologians. It is enough to reduce us to silence. But for Ignatius, a genuine attitude toward the Church militant requires us not only to praise what God is doing in his Church but to speak out as the occasion demands as members of that Church. As Saint Paul says, without the Spirit our speech is vain, but without us the Spirit has no voice.

The Exercises are not intended to develop a disincarnated and passive spirituality. Rather they dispose the retreatant to serve in the Church militant by rendering praise to God for the gift of that Church and to proclaim the Good News which fosters love for that Church. It is not a question of turning a blind eye to situations of crisis in the Church. True, when faced with the scandals of his time, Ignatius preferred to keep silent (he was always afraid that in attacking the authorities we could destroy authority, on which all society rests), yet he thought it “profitable to speak of bad conduct to persons who can bring about a remedy” [362].

In our day, this can mean that it is appropriate to make a scandalous situation public if there is no other way to correct it. Ignatius believed that if our love for Christ, inseparable from love and solidarity for the Church, his Spouse, prompts us, after a prayerful discernment, to speak out, the result will always be constructive. We must take care that the denouncing of bad conduct, whether social or political, is always done with reference to the salvific act of the Incarnation. In the third point of the meditation on

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the Incarnation, [108], Ignatius invites us to look at the destructive action of humanity in conjunction with the salvific act willed by the Trinity. Criticism should be done with reference to the mystery of the saving Church and marked with respect and real love for the person or persons concerned. Also we must take into account the ordinary people of God [362] who, being ill-prepared and insufficiently formed, may be drawn into error by our criticism [367]. The temptation is always strong to emphasize one aspect of ecclesial life to the point that it becomes an absolute. Thus, Ignatius says about one controversy in his own day that by placing too much stress on grace “we generate a poison harmful to freedom of the will” [369]. In the same way, a proclamation of faith can undermine ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and the promotion of justice can affect inculturation. We should heed Ignatius' recommendation in the rules that “great caution is necessary in our manner of speaking and teaching about all these matters” by striving to present balanced views and to avoid taking Church teaching out of context [366]. As we saw, Ignatius is convinced that by placing too much emphasis on grace we can produce the undesirable result of weakening the faith of the people.

For this reason, at the end of the Exercises, Ignatius says that “we should value above everything else the great service which is given to God out of pure love” lived with the Son of God in an incarnate spirituality of a servant who recognizes his sinfulness and yet knows that he is called to be son with the Son. This state lived in the Spirit helps us to keep in balance contradictory realities like love and fear, just and sinner, son and servant, the lights and shadows of the Church. We believe that “between Christ our Lord, the Bridegroom, and the Church, his Spouse, there is the one same Spirit who governs and guides us for the salvation of our souls” [365]. This Spirit that unites in love the Bridegroom and the Spouse is the Holy Spirit that leads us through the Exercises and through the process of discernment. And that makes us spiritual people and people of the Church. Ignatius gives the startling example of the situation where, inspired by what seems the angel of light we are convinced that something is white, because of our faith in the Spirit working in the Church we will accept to see it as black because the hierarchical Church says so [365]. This well-known statement shocks many in this time of reason and science, but when we celebrate the Eucharist, this greatest sign of God's love [289, 5], we see the bread and wine but we believe with the Church that it is the body and blood of Christ. Is it not the “good” Spirit that throughout the whole experience of the Exercises has deepened my faith in the union of my sensient and rational being, my whole person, with the body of Christ that is the Church?

I have tried to suggest that the rules “*sentire cum Ecclesia*” are as relevant to the life of the Church of the Second Vatican Council as they were to the life of the Church in Ignatius' day, the day of the Council of Trent. They are a help to live the mystery of reconciliation that is every disciple's ministry. During the fourth week, the Lord introduces us to the office of consoler towards our brothers and sisters in the world. The Exercises do not leave us “looking up to the sky” [312, 4], but invite us to continue on the road of praying discernment. With open and generous hearts, we give unto God all our liberty, memory, understanding, and will so that he may dispose all I have according to his will.

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We accept to put aside our own judgment [353] so as to “keep ourselves right in all things” [365] in the service of the true Spouse of Christ, our Lord, our holy Mother the hierarchical Church, in the one and same Spirit of love [365].

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