

STUDIES

in the Spirituality of Jesuits



Some Questions about
the Purpose and Scope of the General Congregation

Ladislav Orsy, S.J.

Published by the American Assistancy Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality,
especially for American Jesuits working out their *aggiornamento*
in the spirit of Vatican Council II

THE AMERICAN ASSISTANCY SEMINAR ON JESUIT SPIRITUALITY

consists of a group of Jesuits from various provinces who are listed below. The members were appointed by the Fathers Provincial of the United States in their meeting of October 3-9, 1968. The purpose of the Seminar is to study topics pertaining to the spiritual doctrine and practice of Jesuits, especially American Jesuits, and to communicate the results to the members of the Assistancy. The hope is that this will lead to further discussion among all American Jesuits -- in private, or in small groups, or in community meetings. All this is done in the spirit of Vatican Council II's recommendation to religious institutes to recapture the original charismatic inspiration of their founders and to adapt it to the changed circumstances of modern times. The members of the Seminar welcome reactions or comments in regard to the topics they publish.

To achieve these purposes, especially amid today's pluralistic cultures, the Seminar must focus its direct attention sharply, frankly, and specifically on the problems, interests, and opportunities of the Jesuits of the United States. However, many of these interests are common also to Jesuits of other regions, or to other priests, religious men or women, or lay men or women. Hence the studies of the Seminar, while meant especially for American Jesuits, are not exclusively for them. Others who may find them helpful are cordially welcome to read them.

THE MEMBERS OF THE SEMINAR ARE:

William J. Burke, S.J., Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts 02167

Thomas E. Clarke, S.J., Woodstock College, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, New York 10027

James J. Doyle, S.J., Bellarmine School of Theology, 5430 University Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60615

John C. Futrell, S.J., School of Divinity, St. Louis University, 220 North Spring Avenue, St. Louis, Missouri 63108

George E. Ganss, S.J., School of Divinity, St. Louis University. His address is: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, Fusz Memorial, 3700 West Pine, St. Louis, Missouri 63108. (Chairman of the Assistancy Seminar and Editor of its Studies)

Hugo J. Gerleman, S.J., The Institute of Jesuit Sources, Fusz Memorial 3700 West Pine, St. Louis, Missouri 63108. (Secretary of the Assistancy Seminar)

John C. Haughey, S.J., America Staff, 106 W. 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10019

David B. Knight, S.J., Loyola University, New Orleans, La. 70118

Vincent J. O'Flaherty, S.J., Rockhurst College, Kansas City, Missouri 64110

John R. Sheets, S.J., Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53233

John H. Wright, S.J., Jesuit School of Theology, 1735 Le Roy Street, Berkeley, California 94709

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Fusz Memorial, St. Louis University
3700 West Pine Boulevard
St. Louis, Missouri 63108

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Editor's Foreword

The paper presented in this issue is once again the product of an associate member of the Assistancy Seminar, Father Ladislav Orsy, S.J., Professor of Pastoral Theology at Fordham University. He was born in Hungary, where he entered the Society of Jesus in 1943. He received his doctorate in Canon Law from the Gregorian University, Rome, in 1957, and degrees of Bachelor and Master in Civil Law from Oxford University, England, in 1960 and 1963. Subsequently he taught Canon Law in the Gregorian University, 1963-1966, and in the Catholic University, Washington, D.C., 1966-67. Since then he has been at Fordham University. He was elected as the representative of the New York Province in the Congregation of Procurators held in Rome in September, 1970.

He was invited by the Assistancy Seminar to compose the present study because of his interest in the topic and his competence to handle it. At the meeting of the Seminar on April 8, 1972, he presented his first draft of this paper and received the discussion, criticisms, and suggestions of the members. Thereupon he revised the study into its present form.

He is already known to many of our readers from his writings, such as his books Open to the Spirit: Religious Life after Vatican II (Corpus Books, 1968); The Lord of Confusion (Dimension Books, 1970); and from his numerous articles in periodicals in Europe and the United States, such as The Way or The Jurist.

Author's Preface

To Our Friends, Jesuits and Non-Jesuits

In this issue we offer a study that is not directly on Ignatian spirituality but on Ignatian structures.

If the reader finds this against his expectation, he should recall the warning of the Lord: new wine should not be put into old wineskins.

There is much new wine among Jesuits. Time has come to ask if some of our wineskins are not too old for it. Spiritual movements in religious communities lead naturally to the examination of structures.

If there is any thesis in this study, it is the primacy of the spiritual. In recent times our general congregations have grown in importance, probably well beyond the intent of Ignatius. Hence our question: How can they be made simpler again without destroying their main purpose? That purpose is to be a good instrument of change and development.

Admittedly, the issue is a domestic one for the Society of Jesus. But we trust that our non-Jesuit friends will bear with us. The principles we apply to this one problem have a wider scope. They are valid for most cases where new wine is to be stored for future enjoyment. Structures are valuable instruments to protect and uphold a spiritual inspiration through the vicissitudes of history. For this reason, our struggling with domestic problems may be of some utility to our friends. They might even give us some good suggestions.

SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT
THE PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE GENERAL CONGREGATION

by

Ladislas Orsy, S.J.
Department of Theology
Fordham University
Bronx, New York 10458

Introduction

Only rarely does the author of an essay on spirituality or constitutionality begin by calling attention to the literary form of his work. Usually that is something unnecessary or, at any rate, more profitably left to the reader to discover. Yet there is room for an exception. We think that, for clarity of our purpose in this present endeavor, the peculiar character of this study should be stated at its start. It is an inquiry.

Our primary aim is to raise questions, and make sure that they are the right questions. Our secondary aim is to propose answers--not with any air of finality around them, but as working hypotheses which may be confirmed or rejected as the search progresses and the emerging evidence warrants.

Jesuit communities all over the world are about to enter into a long search that eventually will culminate in General Congregation XXXII. Our study is an initial step in this search. Its purpose is one that is temporary: to raise questions. After the questions are answered, the attention of all concerned should turn to the issues, which are more important.

A. The Issues Deemed Most Important in the Questionnaires

About a year ago, the members of the Society throughout the world received questionnaires by which they were to express their opinions about the rank in importance of many matters which the forthcoming General Congregation might do well to treat. In reporting the results of that inquiry, the Preparatory Commission for General Congregation XXXII

stated to the whole Society:

The order of importance given to the topics or areas of concern is quite clear . . .

Right at the top of the list is a grouping that embraces our vocation, the Jesuit identity and mission within the Church, relevant forms of apostolic service, the more important aspects of our religious and common life . . .

Much lower in rank come questions regarding the members of the Society . . . ; and then, about our structures, congregations, government at the center, and in the provinces.

B. Is Our General Congregation, as Now Structured, An Instrument Truly Fit to Handle These Issues?

Our present study raises some fundamental question which it seems wise to ask before the Jesuit communities turn their attention to those topics or areas of concern.

Can the problems which were selected as having the greatest importance be solved without an instrument of the highest efficiency?

If not, is our general congregation¹ in its present form such an instrument? Is it an assembly which is sensitive, wise, and capable of leading the Society into a new world?

And if the general congregation in its present structure is found wanting, how should it be reconstructed to make it into a good instrument of change and development?

Behind all these questions is lurking one more radical still: How far is any general congregation at all, whether in a reconstructed form or not, able to shed new light on the issues that are uppermost today in the minds of our Jesuits?

1 Editor's note: Throughout this study, the term general congregation is left in lower case when it refers to any such assembly, and it is capitalized (General Congregation) when it means a particular one, for example, General Congregation XXXII. When the terms Spiritual Exercises and Constitutions of the Society mean the published books, or at least include them within their comprehension, they are underlined: Spiritual Exercises, Constitutions.

Our principal aim in this study is to show that these questions are good questions, and that they ought to be answered in one way or another before the discussion and discernment begin on the more substantial issues. Of course, our study cannot be an accumulation of question marks only. We do offer some answers. But they are tentative, because they are proposed without the benefit of community discussions and discernment.

Our suggestion is this. As the preparations for the next General Congregation get under way, in all community discussions and discernments the first priority ought to be given to a critical examination of the general purpose and scope of a general congregation in the life of the Society; and after that, to the particular issues or topics on which General Congregation XXXII can offer help.

The priority thus suggested is both logical and practical. It is logical, because anyone who wants to produce something must be thoroughly acquainted with the nature and capabilities of his instrument of production. This principle is valid in any field of human endeavor. If someone wants to produce a good car, he must have good machines at his disposal. If someone wants to play a beautiful sonata, he must have a fine violin and know it intimately. If Jesuits want the general congregation to shape their future, the congregation should be well organized and all should know how to use such an assembly for the purpose intended. Likewise, the suggested priority is practical, because in the long run it will save much time and expense. St. Ignatius was eager to prevent his Society from prolonged introspection at the expense of its apostolic activity. There is no better way to live up to this idea than by taking a hard look at the general congregation as presently structured, decide first how much can be expected from it, and then work with a certain economy of energy toward the obtainable goal.

C. Possible Purposes and Scopes of Any General Congregation

Once we are well acquainted with the capacity of any general congregation to contribute according to St. Ignatius' Constitutions to the development of the Society, it will be proper and necessary to determine

the specific purpose of the coming Thirty-second General Congregation.

There are several alternatives. This purpose can be doctrinal (to give definitions or explanations, to make statements about our beliefs, our goals, and the like); or pastoral (to exhort, encourage, and so on); or practical (to reform structures, to legislate procedures, and the like). It can also be any combination of these purposes in varying measures.

The clarification of the purpose or purposes of our next Congregation ought to be settled before discussion starts on the merits of the other issues. We should set realistic goals and bring good order into the proceedings. We all know how much Pope John XXIII influenced and clarified the work of Vatican Council II by clearly determining from the beginning that it was to be a pastoral council. Without such an initial orientation, the Council could easily have ended in a bad confusion. If the purpose of the General Congregation is not defined from the start and the definition is not appropriated by all who prepare it, that is, by the whole Society, there will be confusion all along the road. Moreover, the final result is likely to be the expression of good intentions which move in diverse directions; which are all found in an unsatisfactory mixture of statements and decrees, none of which are wholesome and completed.

D. The Long Way from Good Questions to Finalized Answers

There should be no wonder that this study is stronger in raising questions than in answering them. The Society is at a stage where many problems can be pinpointed with a certain ease, but where their solutions are not so easily forthcoming. The progress from good questions to good answers requires specialized studies in history, the reading of our Constitutions, wise interpretation of the needs of the Church, and a knowledge of the world. The way from questions to finalized answers is a long one. It certainly includes both a broad exchange of information throughout the whole Society and community discussions at the local level.

There are dangerous pitfalls. On the one side there is the temptation to uncritical enthusiasm with romantic expectations. On the other side there can be a lack of courage and determination to face the less pleasant

methodological and institutional issues, instead of the bright spiritual and apostolic ones.

A myth can be built around the general congregation and expectations can be raised which the assembly of some elected and selected members of our least Society can hardly fulfill--even with the help of the Holy Spirit. The fascination of such a myth can keep us unduly away from our apostolic work. It can promote preoccupation with our own problems to an unhealthy degree. When the expectations are not fulfilled, communities and individuals are hurt by disillusionment and discouragement.

The Spirit needs a good instrument to work with. If we do not make an effort to create it, our expectation of divine help is really an empty presumption. Of course, God can create out of stones new sons of Abraham; but this is not his ordinary way of doing it. Hence we should not get impatient with the institutional or the juridical aspects of our community. Granted, excessive legalism is the enemy of freedom of the spirit. But there is no freedom of the spirit, or even of the body, unless there is good order in the community, good order that liberates every member for achieving his own maximum capacity. To be the slave of structures and laws is bad; but to be the slave of chaos and anarchy is not better.

E. A Possible Objection

Since we are dealing with ground rules, at this point a possible objection should be faced--precisely to clear the ground for progress.

At first sight our study may seem to run counter to the desire of the Society's members about the priority of the issues for the coming General Congregation. The majority gave the highest importance to spiritual and doctrinal questions, and a low rating to structural reforms; and our study attempts to reverse this vote.

Not exactly. We agree wholeheartedly that the really great questions for our Society are spiritual and doctrinal. We simply state that if the solution has to come through a general congregation, the congregation must be well structured for that purpose.

Moreover, to find the right meaning of those votes requires great

skill in hermeneutics. There are some basic questions which need to be answered:

First, what was the voters' reason for giving top priority to an issue? Was it their conviction that the problem is vitally important for the Society and for them personally? Or was it a critical judgment that the problem can be solved best by the general congregation? The two are not identical.

Second, even if the voters thought that the problem is one of the kind that can be best solved by a general congregation, were they confident, after reflection, that the next General Congregation will be sufficiently well-structured to solve them? Did they give much thought to the working procedures and capacity of the next Congregation? Good results will depend on the quality of the instrument.

As yet, no one has given an answer to these questions.

At any rate, the vote should not be interpreted as prohibiting a thorough examination of the structure and procedure of the general congregation. Rather, such a prohibition would be a hasty interpretation of the voters' intention. Instead, the rightly high interest in great doctrinal issues should prompt us to inquire whether we have the right instrument to deal with them.

PART I. Spirit and Structures

A. A General Congregation as It Exists in Our Present Law

The role of a general congregation in the Society of Jesus can be understood only in the spiritual context of our Constitutions. Structures are present not so much to bind the community as to free it and channel it for an intense cooperation with the Spirit.

St. Ignatius states in the Preamble of the Constitutions that the birth of the Society and its continued existence are gifts of the supreme wisdom and goodness of God our Creator and Lord. Our response to His initiative ought to be inspired by the interior law of charity and love

that the Holy Spirit writes and engraves upon our hearts. Nevertheless, St. Ignatius says, structures are necessary to assure human cooperation in a divine plan, and to help us all to proceed better in God's service.

No structure in our Constitutions is a source of life for us as the Exercises are. Nor is any structure the goal of our existence and work; the proclamation of the Gospel is that goal. It follows that all our external laws and institutions have a relative importance in the hierarchy of values; they are means to achieve our goals. They must be continuously adapted and re-adapted to a higher end. There are no inflexible structures in our Constitutions.

B. A General Congregation as a Center of Unity for the Whole Society

Since a general congregation is an assembly of the representatives from the whole community, it is an instrument of unity for the whole social body. To it many of the inspirations and aspirations of the members converge. Out of the multitude of ideas and intentions, the congregation must create a unity of vision and purpose that all can accept. Every act of the congregation must have the aim of bringing the dispersed members of the Society closer together--so that all may be one as the Son and the Father are one.

In this unending process of building unity and preserving it, the general congregation is inspired by the whole Society; and in turn the congregation must inspire the whole Society. The universal Society, with its gifts of grace and nature, with its human limitations and failures, is the main source that feeds the congregation. All strengths and weaknesses existing in the Society are bound to be reflected in a general congregation.

No wonder, therefore, that the sessions of the general congregation can be manifestations of internal strength or of radical weakness. To assure success, it is not enough simply to trust in spiritual gifts. It is necessary to bring all the human wisdom that we can muster to bear on the organization and procedure of the meetings. The fact that our Society has survived so many storms is due, after God's grace, to

St. Ignatius' organizing genius, which enabled him to build a strong structure to hold the heavy wine of the Spirit.

Eventually the impact of the general congregation must reach the whole Society. Such an impact can be on the level of new insights that bring a new vision, or it can be on the level of decisions for action. At any rate, strength in the congregation will beget strength in the whole community. Weakness in the congregation will affect the whole social body to its last cell. The results of the next Congregation will reverberate throughout the Society. We may grow spiritually stronger or we may become weaker for it. In our present system of laws, a general congregation is a center to which forces of life converge, become united, recreated, and hopefully flow out into the whole body again.

C. A General Congregation and the Superior General

A general congregation is a center of unity for the Society, but not the only one. There is another center, the superior general. In ordinary circumstances, the inspirations and aspirations of the members converge on him; he too must continuously create a unity of vision and action out of a multiplicity. But he does so on a lesser scale than the congregation. A comparison between the power of the congregation and of the general will help us to gain a better understanding of the role of each.

The Constitutions are clear about the power of the general congregation:

1. . . . on some occasions, a general congregation will be necessary, for example, for the election of a general . . . (Constitutions, [677]).

2. The second occasion arises when it is necessary to deal with long-lasting and important matters, as would be the suppression or transference of houses or colleges, or with other very difficult matters pertaining to the whole body of the Society or its manner of proceeding, for greater service to God our Lord (ibid., [680]).

Clearly, therefore, in addition to its role of electing a new superior general, the congregation has power which extends over "long-lasting and important matters," and "other very difficult matters pertaining to the whole body of the Society or its manner of proceeding, for greater service

to God." In the original Spanish,

. . . cosas perpetuas y de importancia . . . muy difficiles tocantes todo el cuerpo de la Compañía o el modo de proceder della, para más servicio de Dios (ibid., [680]).

The Constitutions also offer some help toward finding the meaning of "long-lasting and important" matters. For example, the suppression or the transfer of a house or a college would be such.

We have now a positive affirmation of the power of a general congregation, and also a negative circumscription of the power of the superior general. His power does not extend to long-lasting and important matters, or to difficult matters touching the whole body of the Society or its manner of proceeding, for the greater service of the Lord.

This division of power between the two centers of unity, the general congregation and the superior general, is healthy. It brings a good balance into the government of the Society. It gives priority to collective wisdom; it assures that one man will not bring about significant changes. It is also a distinction between extraordinary and ordinary government.

The general congregation holds the key to historical stability and continuity, and also to legitimate changes. The superior general takes care of the day-to-day administration and the undertaking of apostolic works according to certain fundamental principles and structures that he is not authorized to touch.

A positive description of the power of the superior general can be best given through analogies.

The analogy of a bishop presiding over his presbyterium is not too farfetched, but it is not adequate either. It is not farfetched because there is a genuine communion between the superior general and all the members of the Society; it is not adequate because he is not a bishop nor are all the members priests. The communion becomes particularly intense at the time of a general congregation, which the superior general has the right to convoke, preside over, and guide. Like the bishop, he leads; but unlike the bishop, he is bound by the decisions of the congregation.

The analogy of modern constitutional structures can help too. While the congregation is the only legislator, the superior general is mainly in possession of executive power. His task is to give missions to the members of the Society; that is, to commission them for a work and to see that the mandate is carried through. At times he does not do so in his own name but in the name of the vicar of Christ.

D. Limitations on the Power of a General Congregation

Yet it does not follow that a general congregation has a power to bind and to loose, to build and to destroy as it wishes. It must not obliterate old things and create new ones with no guiding principles.

First, the power of the general congregation is limited by the original inspirations and spiritual foundations of the Society. They are found in the Spiritual Exercises. A general congregation which broke away from the best that is in the Exercises would destroy historical continuity, it would institute a new community with no past to inspire it. However good such a new start might be, it would not be the fruit of the old tree.

Second, the power of the general congregation is limited by the superior jurisdiction of the Holy See. It alone can approve of new religious orders, or ratify a change in their Constitutions which runs counter to the original approbation, or suppress them. The spiritual content of this seemingly legal rule is that we can, after all, exist only in full communion with the Church. Otherwise there is no life for us.

Third, the Constitutions limit the power of the general congregation. It must function in harmony with other structures, within the context of the whole edifice built by St. Ignatius. Our predecessors always felt that the general congregation was bound to preserve the essential features of the original construction. While steadily stating this principle, for some three centuries general congregations wisely resisted the temptation to define in concreto the essential structures, the "substantialia Instituti." Not until the twentieth century did a congregation succumb to the temptation

and name with precision the "substantialia primi et secundi ordinis" (see Epitome Instituti, no. 22). The definition has been quietly relaxed by the last General Congregation.

We conclude that the seemingly unlimited power of a general congregation to deal with issues of great importance is limited by a duty of fidelity to the spirit of the Exercises, by an obligation to respect the terms of approval given by the Holy See, and finally, by the duty to preserve the essential points of the Institute even if it is difficult to define what they are.

E. A General Congregation as an Instrument of Change

The general congregation emerges as the instrument of change in the Society.

There is no other instrument of change because no one else has the power to introduce a significant change. Not the Holy See, because it has a subsidiary, not a creative, function in the life of religious communities. Not the universal membership of the Society, because they need a constitutional organ to bring the change about, which organ is precisely the general congregation. Not the superior general, because his competence does not extend to issues of great importance. If they arise, he must convoke a general congregation.

To say the general congregation is the instrument of change is to attribute to it a singular role among all the structural resources of the Society. It may be merely a structure, a means to an end; but if it does not function well, the forces of life and growth cannot be properly channelled. Stagnation and paralysis may infect the whole body, with disastrous consequences.

F. St. Ignatius' Guiding Principle for Holding General Congregations

The guiding principle for holding general congregations springs from its relative position in the Constitutions. It is not a goal in itself, but a means to an end. It should be held to the extent that important issues require it, neither more nor less. Any fixed and unchangeable rule would be legalism; it would put the law above reason. It would either

compel the Society to hold unproductive meetings for the sake of a rule or it would deprive the Society of its only instrument of change when great issues postulate it.

No wonder, therefore, that in the course of history a change may be necessary in the frequency, procedure, and structure of the general congregation itself. A community embedded in history, as we are, may experience times of stability with steady expectations. It may also experience rapid changes and a need to respond with equal speed.

The Society of Jesus is not an immovable rock around which human history flows. It must be a living body sensitive to a changing world. It cannot choose or even influence the rhythm of change that originates elsewhere.

The general congregation is the only organ competent to deal with changes that are also great challenges. The need to convoke it cannot depend on any abstract, or legal, or traditional principle. It must depend on the need that arises from the changes that take place in the world, in the Church, or in the Society itself.

PART II. Questions about the Next General Congregation

The expectations of the Society for General Congregation XXXII are certainly high. The goals have been set. As the Preparatory commission informed us on March 5, 1972,

Right at the top of the list is a grouping that embraces our vocation, the Jesuit identity and mission within the Church, relevant forms of apostolic service, the more important aspects of our religious and common life, including poverty.

Truly, the task proposed for Congregation XXXII is immense.

A. What Can We Reasonably Expect from General Congregation XXXII?

But how much can we really expect from it, with all the help of grace and the use of human wisdom?

To form a realistic idea, let us take some of these principal

issues, by way of examples, and see how much the General Congregation can contribute towards solving them.

1. On Jesuit Identity

Most certainly some statements by the Congregation about our identity are necessary; some exhortations to preserve it are useful. Yet, restraint is advisable.

Our Jesuit identity cannot be squeezed into any definition or decree, even in this brave new age. It is a living, growing, expanding reality, nourished by continuous return to the Exercises, to the Constitutions, to the great personalities of our order in the past, in the context of our inspirations in the present. Because these sources are so rich and deep, it is doubtful that a general congregation can add much to them.

We wonder if the lack of success attributed to some recent general congregations is not due to the fact that the Fathers tried to say in many words what St. Ignatius stated in a few. Jesuit identity took some thirty years to develop in Ignatius and in the group that joined him. How much can a short congregation add to it?

2. On Our Mission within the Church

Our mission within the Church brings up two questions. First, what, if any, is our specific relationship to the pope? Second, what, if any, is our specific Jesuit apostolic mission?

In answer to the first question: For St. Ignatius, total dedication to Christ implied the practical service of the Church as requested by the pope, the vicar of Christ. In text a, his first draft of the Constitutions, Ignatius gives a vivid and somewhat pragmatic description of the origins of the Society's obedience to the pope:

Since we came from different countries and provinces, and we did not know to where to go or remain [to preach the Gospel], among believers or unbelievers . . . ; and since we were not sure at what place we could best serve and praise God our Lord with the help of his divine grace, we made this promise and vow, so that His Holiness should take care of distributing or missioning us to the greater glory of God our Lord, in accordance with our intention to be pilgrims over the whole world (ConsMHSJ, II, 210).

This pragmatic and Ignatian approach made the Society singularly committed to the pope and left us supremely free. The members vowed to go wherever there was a need, according to the judgment of the pope, but did not promise to preach anything else than the universal Catholic doctrine, and did not promise other loyalty than to work for the greater glory of God at the place assigned to them. Can this absolute dedication, blended with wise moderation, be improved on by the General Congregation?

Be this as it may, one thing is certain: A legislative body such as our Congregation should not go into subtle questions of ecclesiology, especially today when there are so many working hypotheses around.

In answer to the second question: We are not committed to any specific work but we are committed to the greatest need. Ignatius set down the rule of openness without limit. He wanted his companions to go wherever their presence was most useful or necessary, whether among believers or unbelievers. He did not want them to serve any particular interest that would distract them from greater needs. God's greater glory had to be their ideal. The General Congregation could certainly reaffirm this openness, but to set any limit to it would be a serious departure from the best of our traditions. In the future, in a rapidly changing society, we shall need the freedom that this openness brings even more than we did in the past.

3. On Poverty

Several general congregations in recent times made an attempt to define the meaning of our religious poverty. They were hardly successful. Are there reasons to think that the next one will fare any better? Or should we say that, after all, a general congregation can only change certain legal rules about poverty, but the real answer must come on a practical level, from an unrelenting quest by the whole community for a better balance in using or not using material things for the sake of the Kingdom. Granted, our Society needs a few new legal definitions in the matter of the ownership, possession, and use of worldly goods. What we need more is an ongoing, honest, and communal examination of our

consciences. The ideals are not lacking, they are plainly stated in the Exercises and Constitutions. If we have failed, the failure was in the practical order. We have to correct our deeds with as little speech as possible.

All these examples point towards exercising caution in our expectations. The next General Congregation may be a good instrument of change, but its power is limited. Most of the major issues bothering the Society today are in the practical, not in the legislative, order. The Congregation can reaffirm our vision, certainly; and here and there it can make a partial contribution toward solutions. But if we are not aware of its intrinsic limitations, we can become victims of a romantic expectation first, and victims of the shock of a rude awakening thereafter.

This last statement, however, should not be construed as suggesting that the Congregation is useless. Quite the contrary, the Congregation is useful and necessary provided we ask it to be an adequate instrument of change in an ongoing process--and no more. No congregation can fulfil the messianic hopes of the Society, but it can help a messianic community remain united more closely.

B. What Can Be the Most Important Achievement of General Congregation XXXII?

We have already strongly indicated that the next General Congregation may not be the best instrument to decide the doctrinal issues of our spirituality or of our service of the Church. We suggested also that the fundamental problems of the Society today are rather practical and structural.

We have plenty of historical and present-day inspirational resources to refresh our vision and to enlarge our horizons, but we need a better organizational machinery to put into common possession what is being discovered in our heritage or what is new inspiration. The main task of General Congregation XXXII may be, not to feed the mind of the Society with ideas, but rather to provide for good structures which will help the unity of our communities and allow for healthy diversity--structures which will give an opportunity to everyone to communicate his discovery

and inspiration without destroying our apostolic effectiveness.

This may seem to be a request for something which is simple. This practical approach is, however, exacting to an extreme. To construe doctrinal decrees and exhortations is no more difficult than to write a good chapter in spirituality; but to create new structures for new needs without losing the spiritual values which the older structures protected--this is a gigantic task. Many religious have written good spiritual books; only a handful succeeded in giving lasting structures to communities. St. Ignatius was one of them.

We could take a more personalistic approach to the same problem. Let us suppose that the main problem of the Society is a lack of vision in its members. If this is true, what is the remedy? How can a person with blurred vision be healed? How can his horizon be expanded to embrace new ideas and to produce new initiatives? The answer is that the vision can be repaired, or the horizon expanded, only from the inside of each person through his own personal development. The ideological decrees of a general congregation, given once for all, can play only a small part in such personal and internal transformation or growth. But the general congregation can create good structures to facilitate the steady and continuous exchange of inspirations among members that can contribute so much to each one's maturation.

St. Ignatius gave us little by way of elaborate doctrine, but he left behind excellent instruments to foster freedom and creativity in the service of God and the Church, namely, the Exercises and the Constitutions. His pedagogy consisted in setting up and keeping alive a dynamic movement in individual persons and in the communities through these Exercises and Constitutions. He did not like to give definitions.

What the General Congregation can best do is to place itself into the stream of the Ignatian tradition and also, while exercising Ignatian restraint in ideas and exhortation, to foster a dynamic movement which began with Ignatius and has an even greater scope today.

C. What Is the Purpose of the Next General Congregation?

To this simple question, differing answers can be given. But each

answer, when put into practice, requires a different process of preparation.

If there is any doubt that top priority should be given to this question before our preparations and discussions start, we merely have to recall the decision made in good time by Pope John XXIII on the purpose of Vatican Council II and the doubt will dissipate. From the moment he opted for a pastoral approach to all problems, he gave a new direction to the preparatory work and to the Council itself. From the beginning we need a clear direction if the Congregation is to be successful.

We may take it for granted that some doctrinal statements concerning the Society and our vocation are necessary; that some pastoral exhortations are useful. Yet we submit that the main purpose of the coming General Congregation should be eminently practical.

First, it should make itself into an effective instrument of change; then it should provide the whole Society with good structures that are needed at local, provincial, assistancy-wide, and worldwide levels.

On local and provincial levels, new structures have grown up, probably too many of them. Community councils, advisory councils, province assemblies, and congresses have been set up and function with varying success. Should we look into these developments, in order to select the best ones for more universal use and discard the ones that only distract us from our more important apostolic work? Often we hear that the overall government of the Society follows an archaic pattern. If this contention is true, there is a great deal of work to be done to adapt our structures to the needs of a new age. But this adaptation will require the evaluation of present experiments and then prolonged and expert planning. More than one general congregation will be necessary to do the work. After all, the redaction of our Constitutions took more than fifteen years!

The determination of the main purpose of the next Congregation is necessary from the beginning of the preparatory work. The appointed committees should be clearly aware of what they will be required to do. Will they draft doctrinal and pastoral decrees, mainly on the model of General Congregation XXX or XXXI? Or will they draft new structures with just a little (but very substantial) doctrinal and pastoral text added to them,

mainly according to the model in Ignatius' Constitutions?

At present, many individual Jesuits and their communities do not have a clear idea of the purpose of the next General Congregation. A clarification is an urgent necessity. Unless we have a common goal the preparatory process is bound to become chaotic.

In some communities, the interest in the process begun last year of assigning priorities to the topics to be treated in General Congregation XXXII has been relatively low. Perhaps the reason for this is precisely the fact that few Jesuits have reflected seriously on the purpose of the next Congregation. Since they have no clear idea of a sharply focused goal for it, they are little interested in the topics to be discussed there.

Moreover, a general discussion of the purpose of the Congregation by all our communities would help the Society in many ways. Some advantages can be listed here.

It would give a realistic appreciation to each and all of what can reasonably be expected. An intelligent appraisal of the role of the General Congregation would nip illusions in the bud, and consequently reduce casualties due to disillusionment afterwards.

It would bring forward ideas as to how the general congregation, as it is now structured according to our present law, should be reformed--because the congregation needs to be reformed.

It would prepare the provinces to accept those structural reforms which some may adamantly oppose today. For example, every province has a right to send three representatives, but how many provinces are prepared to see this number reduced so as to have a more manageable general congregation?

Once the role of the congregation was considered intelligently and critically by the whole Society, the members would be far more open to accept its decisions.

If we really expect good results from our general congregations, care should be taken that the congregation is a good instrument. Therefore, we should give more thought to the nature and purpose of the

instrument before we start to use it in the hope of producing fruit. The goodness of the fruit will be in proportion to the excellence of the instrument.

D. Ideally, What Ought the Power and Structure of Future General Congregations to Be?

The Ignatian balance between the extraordinary power of the general congregation to introduce significant changes and the ordinary power of the superior general to preserve and uphold our Constitutions should be carefully preserved. There is a great deal of wisdom in that balance. It assures wide-spread consultation and reasonable participation for changes of importance; and they are within the competence of the general congregation alone. It assures efficient government and speedy action in our apostolic work; and they are within the competence of the superior general. Serious changes can come only through the wisdom of the community; no one person has the power to bring them about. For ordinary decisions the Society trusts the superior general; there is no need to absorb apostolic energies in endless discussions and consultations.

1. Their Frequency

The frequency of general congregations should not be measured by a rule conceived in response to the needs of the 16th century, but rather in a rule conceived according to our present needs. It is a fact that the rhythm of life or the pace of development is much faster than it was during earlier centuries. Therefore we need a different measuring rod today. The general congregation ought to meet more frequently than in the past. Because the speed of development all around us will rather accelerate than slow down in the future, the frequency must increase to a point where the meetings will be held at regular intervals.

Such convocations at stated intervals will bring another advantage. They will put an end to the crisis atmosphere in which our congregations presently meet. There will be no long debates whether or not a congregation is necessary. Problems can be met methodically; and solutions can be prepared and presented to the next assembly. The execution of

the decrees can be paced and controlled--an element so important for successful experiment. As the steadiness of regularity asserts itself in the Society, it will be easier to turn our attention to apostolic tasks. We shall not expect our renewal from prolonged and dramatic introspection, but rather from the new procedures and means we develop in our service to God's people.

No general congregation can be successful unless the members have sufficient time at their disposal to study all the questions, develop new insights through mutual help, and reach wise decisions. Such a process never develops under pressure; wisdom does not prosper without some leisure. If St. Ignatius, with all the spiritual inspiration that was given to him and with the creative genius for organization that he developed through his life, needed so many years to write our Constitutions, how much more do we need time (years, not months!) to adapt them to the needs of the twentieth century.

2. Not a Distraction to Our Apostolic Work

We shall do well also to recall St. Ignatius' principle that a general congregation should not become a major distraction for the whole Society (Constitutions, [677]). The apostolic work is our first task. If the congregation is convoked regularly, and perhaps for repeated sessions, the membership should be neither so large as to hamper seriously the apostolic activity nor so small as to exclude adequate representation. The aim should be to have enough participants for genuine representation and mutual inspiration but not to let the congregation become unwieldy and all too prone to colorless compromise. As the numbers increase above a happy medium, the depth in deliberations and resolutions is bound to decrease.

E. In Reality, How Does a General Congregation, as Now Constituted, Measure Up to the Ideal?

The ideal described above is obviously a hypothesis. Even so, it gives a good basis for the critical evaluation of the present structure and procedures of the general congregation. Naturally, our judgment has

a tentative character. But there is nothing tentative in affirming that a critical examination is needed, nor much of a hypothesis in saying that, in general, serious reform is warranted.

1. The Irregularity of Congregations is Now a Weakness

The fact that general congregations meet only at unpredictable and unpredictable intervals is now a standing weakness. We are all aware that in today's world issues important for the Society emerge with greater frequency today than ever before. Yet, at present we do not have an instrument to respond with a healthy regularity to significant changes and challenges among ourselves, in the Church, and all around the world. It is not surprising, therefore, that a climate of crisis and upheaval develops around every general congregation; and that many are tempted to expect magic solutions through the occasional gathering of over 250 representatives. Irregularity in convoking a congregation favors delay in facing up to many issues and abets the tendency to resolve some important ones by unconstitutional means.

At times well meaning persons, not familiar either with the fundamental distinction in our Constitutions between "long-lasting and important matters" pertaining to the whole body of the Society (Constitutions, [677]) and ordinary matters, or with the distinction in jurisdiction between the general congregation and the superior general, may request Father General (often unfairly, we think) to decide issues that are not within his competence. Today we realize that St. Francis Borgia or Father Aquaviva had an all too great influence over the development of the Society. For the future we can keep the balance through a well functioning general congregation.

Further, when a general congregation as presently structured finally gathers, its members have to work under pressure. They all have apostolic work to do at home and a mood of eagerness to return there soon grows. Answers are expected in the course of one or two sessions. Often the problems raised by the "postulata" do not have time to mature; and poorly formulated questions rarely lead to good answers which will last.

In the fifty years just passed, the rule of irregular and infrequent meetings by the general congregation (Constitutions, [677]) has been a serious shortcoming in modern circumstances.

2. Insufficient Time for Depth

The general congregation, as it is now conceived, has little time for study in depth. The type of issues presented to a general congregation today requires much more time for in depth study for good decisions than ever before. One or two short sessions are not enough. Thought should be given to the possibility of every congregation having the right to set up standing committees (as has happened in isolated cases in the past), to study important problems and then to report to Father General or, preferably, to the next Congregation. We wonder if those members of the Society who suggested important revisions in our Constitutions were aware how much time St. Ignatius and the first Fathers spent on the redaction of the first Constitutions, and how such revision requires literally years of reflection.

3. Too Many Persons Involved

The membership of the general congregation as now structured is too large. This large membership has decided disadvantages. Many are taken away from their apostolic work; and the large representation does not make the assembly more efficient. Over 250 voting members are expected for the next Congregation, with further experts, observers, and clerical staff not counted. Are such numbers really required for good decisions? Are the investments of money, time, and energy justified?

Even this brief and summary evaluation leads to inescapable conclusions: Our Society does not have an adequate instrument of change and of development for the modern world, certainly not in the general congregation as we know it at present. Since great issues cannot be well tackled, and still less solved, with an inadequate instrument, reform of the general congregation is imperative and should have priority over all other issues.

PART III: Practical Suggestions for Reform

A. Renewal and General Congregation Are Not Identical

The first step toward reform of our general congregations should be more in our minds than in any structural change. The process of renewal now taking place in the Society should not be too closely identified with the process of holding a general congregation. Granted that a congregation can make a good contribution towards renewal, its contribution is nevertheless limited and partial. The forces of the Spirit and also of human creativity in the Society operate on a much broader field than a congregation can cover.

Perhaps the best way of conceiving the role of the general congregation is to look at it as an opportunity for the whole Society to hold an examination of conscience. Also, it is a means to put challenging questions to our communities. Legally and fundamentally, the congregation must remain the instrument of change and development. Through it all, it should stay in the line of Ignatian pedagogy. It should inspire us and liberate our energies for apostolic enterprises by giving simple and healthy structures for our operations.

B. The General Congregation Should Be Convoked at Regular Intervals

The principle that important issues touching the whole Society are reserved by our Constitutions to the general congregation should be clearly reaffirmed. With the same stroke the principle of collegiality, of participation, would be upheld. Also, our traditional attitude of trust in Father General would be restated. His work should not be hampered by endless consultations and committee meetings; he should be free as St. Ignatius was to inspire and guide the apostolic work.

The advantage of meetings at regular intervals would be manifold.

We would be spared the repeated, long-lasting, and expensive discussions every three years, when the Congregation of Procurators meets after preceding provincial congregations, merely to decide whether or not we should have a general congregation.

Father General would not be unfairly asked to take positions on important issues without the benefit of his brothers in congregation.

The climate of crisis before and after a general congregation could be avoided.

Experiments could be better controlled and evaluated.

There would be more stability in the Society.

It is right to mention here that, to our knowledge, no other religious order or congregation follows the present Jesuit practice of irregular general chapters. Are we so different from them: Or have they something to teach us?

We can even ask: Is a more or less permanent congregation acceptable? A large measure of stability and continuity is necessary to give steady responses to steady changes and challenges. More study than we can do is required to find out how to achieve such continuity. Perhaps through a permanent general congregation with rotating membership? We are unable to comment on this question except by saying that all possible answers should be explored; no suggestion should be discarded without a good critical look at it. We may be skirting the limits of structures suitable for an apostolic group that does not want to get too involved with self-organization. At any rate, if we discard something we should know why.

C. The Membership of General Congregations Should Be Reduced

The type of general congregation for which we opt could not have a large membership. To have a congregation of 250 or more members which would meet regularly and work liesurely would be an excessive demand on the Society. Therefore its membership must be reduced. There are not, of course, ideal members. But some estimates are feasible. Anything over 100 seems too many for reasonable exchange and dialogue. Anything under 50 appears too few for broad representation of differences. Again, before any precise proposal is made, much thinking and calculations will be necessary. Meanwhile, let us illustrate the complexity of the composition of the membership by the following observations.

There are delicate balances inside the general congregation as it is now composed. Nearly two-thirds of the members are elected; a little more than one-third enters it ex officio. There is a sensible proportion between those who are elected delegates from the provincial congregations and those who ultimately are appointees of Father General. Since the elected representatives have a broad majority, they have the legal power to enrich the Society with new ideas and with new initiatives, perhaps not advocated by those in government. In other words, our present system favors the infusion of new blood. Such balances are precious and should be kept since mankind, Jesuits not excepted, advances dialectically.

St. Ignatius built the foundation for life-giving dialectic right into the heart of the general congregation by the simple system of having two elected members from each province and letting the provincial join them ex officio. How can this good balance be preserved if the numbers are reduced? We have not come to any fully satisfactory answer, but we want to list some possible options and comment on them.

Each province could elect one delegate, who may or may not be the provincial. In this way, the overall numbers would certainly be reduced. But the provincial, who is the person most knowledgeable about the province, may or may not be present at the congregation. Besides, what will happen to the dialectical structure?

The provincial could go with one elected delegate. But in this, the balance of the assembly would be disturbed.

Elections could be held, not in the provinces, but in the assistancies. In some places this may be feasible; in some others, such a system must be out of the question.

The general congregation as it is now constituted could be retained, but with the members electing a smaller body to do all the work, so that the scope of the large general congregation would be only to approve or disapprove. But how can a group vote wisely on something which its members are not supposed to discuss in depth?

In examining all the options, we should not be afraid to ask if a bicameral assembly could help us most. Maybe not, but let us discard the

idea only for good reasons. The system is not so strange as it looks. In our ordinary government we now operate more and more on two principles of organization, territorial and functional. For example, in several places there are regional provincials and provincials in charge of some works such as higher education, ministerial apostolates, international apostolates, and the like. Could such works elect delegates as well as regions? If this ever happened, what would be the relation between the two groups? There are no easy and swift answers. At present these ideas are topics for study and not propositions for decision.

D. Top Priority Should Be Given To the Reform of the General Congregation

In the next General Congregation, it would seem that the reform of the structure of the general congregation should be considered before the doctrinal and spiritual issues, for the simple reason that the Society must satisfy itself that it has a good instrument to deal with the real issues. To act otherwise would be unreasonable.

Granted, the next General Congregation must be called according to the present rules. Yet the delegates, before starting their work, must in conscience satisfy themselves that their assembly is a good instrument to fulfil the expectations.

They may well come to the conclusion that the greatest benefit which the next General Congregation can produce is to reform its own structure and leave the more substantial work to the following one. If this happens, it must not interfere with the forces of spiritual renewal that must continue on all, and chiefly deeper, levels--inspired by the Exercises and sustained by the living communities.

PART IV. Would This Proposed Reform Grow Out of the Ignatian Spirit?

At this point several objections to the considerations we have been advancing may occur.

A. Would the Regularity Be Genuinely Ignatian?

First of all, St. Ignatius did not want the general congregation to be convoked at regular intervals; and therefore the reform proposed here does not seem to be genuine growth from within our Constitutions.

However, this can be said in reply. Ignatius wrote in the Constitutions, [677]: "for the present it does not seem good in our Lord that such a congregation should be held at definite intervals" (no parece en el Señor nuestro por ahora convenir que se haga en tiempos determinados). That is, he did not judge it convenient or suitable or necessary for the present, namely, in his era of slow travel. He does not raise any objection of principle. It is legitimate to think that if he saw the amount of cosas de importancia today, he would opt for regular meetings. The principle of greater importance for St. Ignatius, I think, was that no one but the general congregation should judge and decide important issues. He did not even want a college to be transferred or closed without the consent of a general congregation.

B. Would Regularity Bring Greater Distraction to the Whole Society?

Ignatius considered the general congregation a "distraction for the whole Society" (distracción a la universal Compañía); therefore he wanted it to take place as rarely as possible (Constitutions, [677]).

Answer: It is true that Ignatius considered the general congregation a distraction from the apostolic work. But times have changed; and the rare meetings are now a cause of universal distraction. How many hours shall we spend in discussions in preparation for the next General Congregation--hours taken away from apostolic work? If the general congregation met regularly there could be a quiet and regular input from the Society without the upheaval we experience now. Besides, answers given to questions in good time can save many hours of expectation and tension.

Further, if the number of participants were reduced, there would be fewer persons who are distracted.

Furthermore, St. Ignatius must have thought of the length of time

to be spent in journeying. To cross the Alps was certainly distracting for any delegate; at times he was happy simply to survive. Air travel has solved this problem.

C. An Approach to Capitular Government?

Meetings by general congregations held at regular intervals, and especially a more or less permanent general congregation, would introduce capitular government; and this is against the fundamental principles of our Institute.

Answer: Firstly, as we have mentioned, St. Ignatius did not consider regular general congregations to be against any principle; he just stated pragmatically that presently (por ahora) they do not appear convenient (convenir).

Secondly, capitular government is something vastly different from a general congregation that meets regularly, even different from a general congregation that meets permanently. Capitular government means that ordinary executive decisions are reserved to the chapter, that is, the proper competency of the chapter is not restricted to major issues of policy and general legislation. Also, capitular government means executive government by the chapter at all levels: general, provincial, and local.

Such a radical transformation is not suggested by this study. Far from it. We should preserve the strong executive function of the superior general.

D. Such Reform Is Unnecessary at Present?

The next General Congregation will be unique in the history of the Society; there never was one so well prepared for as General Congregation XXXII will be. This Congregation, in fact, can even be said to be taking place now; the universal Society is participating in it. The reforms suggested in this study are of little use, since the final assembly will play a lesser role than before but will have at its disposal many propositions which have been carefully thought out and prayed out.

Answer: Yes, the next General Congregation in a way will be unique.

Still, the final decisions will be taken by that particular body and no one else. Hence, we should do what we can to make that body humanly as good an instrument of change as we can. It was always characteristic of our Society to use human resources to the full extent possible and at the same time to hope for the gift of grace. The harmony of the divine and human is our aim--not one-sidedness in any direction.

Conclusion

Even if the Society succeeds in reforming the general congregation, there will be need for reforming a mentality, all too common among Jesuits, that expects too much from a general congregation. There should be a purifying movement from romantic illusions to reasonable foresight. The pedagogy of St. Ignatius was not to leave behind detailed definitions about our identity, mission, and the like, but to provide us with good spiritual resources and good structures. The resources should feed us, the structures should give us good order for efficient operation.

In a way it is true that the general congregation should not do too much. Its role should be to reaffirm our belief in certain ideals; to issue a kind of creed in certain values; to explain our ideals in contemporary terms; to legislate about structures; to initiate new movements and works; and to encourage us all. It alone should approve of necessary changes.

By holding it regularly, by reducing its membership, we would make it more ordinary, more modest--and more Ignatian, we believe. Its scope is not so much to be the supreme teaching body of the Society; rather, it is to be our practical communal conscience. It should play an important role in promoting the healthy growth of the whole body by recalling us to our ideals and leaving the road open for development and progress.

The main reason why the general congregation, whether the next one or any one, should exercise restraint in pronouncements or in legislation is that St. Ignatius left everything so open. In this perspective, new words and new laws are likely to narrow our scope, which is to work for God's greater glory through giving help in the Spirit to our fellow men.

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