
OBEDIENCE FOR MISSION, MISSION IN OBEDIENCE: A JESUIT CONTEMPLATIVE-ACTIVE WAY OF PROCEEDING

为了宣教使命的服从，服从中的使命：
耶稣会士既默观又积极努力的行事方式

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ABSTRACT

Obedience and mission are two essential elements which determine the particular Jesuit way of proceeding. The first characterizes Jesuits' identity; the latter is the goal of their existence. For Jesuits, obedience is more of an interior disposition corresponding to the original meaning of obedience - "listen to": vertically, Jesuits listen to God, that is, to discern and to do His will; horizontally, they listen to or try to understand the people they serve. This interior disposition or capability of listening implies a process of discernment which can only be acquired by contemplation. As the will of God is nothing other than His love for the world, the Jesuits' mission consists in showing this love of God to the world. That is why Jesuits are "contemplatives in action". Based on analysis of the foundational documents of the Society of Jesus, the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, this paper will show how Jesuits obey and carry out their mission in a contemplative-active way, and how their obedience correlates with their mission.

THE SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION OF JESUIT MISSION AND OBEDIENCE

According to the *Documents of the 35th General Congregation*, "the practice of obedience in the Society has its roots in the spiritual experience of Ignatius and his first companions" (d. 4, n. 23). The same thing holds true for Jesuit mission. The *Spiritual Exercises* and their *Deliberations* in 1539 are worthy of particular notice, because the first is the spiritual foundation of their apostolic service (cf., GC 35, d. 4, n. 2), and the second, which precisely dealt with the issue of mission and of obedience, historically paved the way for the beginning of the Society of Jesus as a religious order.

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, what we should consider first, is the *Principle and Foundation*, because it is "the framework... containing the key ideas that are to run through all the meditations" (Rahner, 1965, p. 15). It defines the end of man as praising, reverencing and serving God or as "glorifying God"

(cf., SE, 152, 167, 179, 180, 185, 189, 339). From this primary end follows the second: to “save souls”. It is important to notice that “the salvation of souls, in fact, is not numbered in the order of ends with God’s glory. It is interior to it” (Courel, 1958, p. 40). It is unpacked in the meditations of the second week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, starting with contemplation on the decision of the Trinity to send the Son into the world “in order to save the human race” (SE, 102). Just as Christ accepted the decision of the Trinity to send him for saving the world, so too are the retreatants called to follow him to better glorify God by sharing in his mission (SE, 93, 102, 109, 139, 145, 152).

Since Christ’s will is to save souls, the purpose of Jesuit obedience is mission. In his rules for thinking with the Church, Ignatius concretized obedience to Christ into obedience to the Church, because he believes “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” (SE, 365).

The *Deliberations of the First Fathers* were the first concrete implementation of their spiritual experience of mission and obedience. After deciding to put themselves at the disposal of the Pope, they confronted a serious question: as the Pope wanted to send them in various places, they had to consider whether they should be bound in one apostolic body. The reason why they decided to bind themselves together in a religious society is related to an apostolic purpose: union enables them to have “sights aimed at the greater profit of souls” and prepares them to deal with difficult undertakings when they carry out mission (cf., *Monumenta Ignatiana*, I, 3).

They had the same concern regarding their obedience to one of them as superior: on the one hand, without obedience, they might lack cohesion in their work, and their congregation “could not long endure and persevere” (*Monumenta Ignatiana*, I, 6); on the other hand, they believed that “the man who truly lives under obedience is most ready to carry out whatever is enjoined” (*Monumenta Ignatiana*, I, 6). Their fourth vow of obedience to the Roman Pontiff then was just a surer way of sharing the Church’s

mission. Consequently, Jesuit obedience may be understood “as availability for apostolic mission” (Alphonse, 1993, p. 78). We will see further on how Jesuits concretely live out this vow of obedience.

OBEDIENCE AS CONTEMPLATIVE AVAILABILITY FOR MISSION

The question of obedience is specifically treated in the third (*Constitutions*, 284-286) and sixth (*Constitutions*, 547-552) parts of the *Constitutions*. The third part is aimed at the spiritual formation of those in probation; the sixth, at the religious life of those already incorporated into the Society. In addition, the first chapter of the eighth part, which gives “aids toward the union of heart” (*Constitutions*, 655-676), is also indispensable for understanding the Jesuit spirit of obedience.

The most important thing in Jesuit obedience is its spiritual principle. Ignatius mentioned it in the first and the last phrase of number 284: to obey is to “conform [ourselves] more completely to the first and supreme rule of all good will and judgment, which is the Eternal Goodness and Wisdom.” Although this conformity to God’s will and judgment is realized through obedience to superiors,¹ for Ignatius, it is not so much about the person whom the Jesuits obey, but rather “for whose sake [they] obey and whom [they] obey in all, who is Christ” (*Constitutions*, 286). There is a triple consistency in Ignatius’ idea of obedience: the consistency between one’s own and God’s will guarantees the consistency between one’s interior disposition (will and understanding) and the superior’s will and understanding; the latter consistency is a prerequisite for another consistency of one’s own interior attitude and the exterior execution of obedience.

In the first chapter of the eighth part of the *Constitutions* (655-676), this triple consistency of obedience is explained in a deeper way from

¹ The following are designated as Jesuit superiors: the general - head of whole Society, the provincials, and the superiors of specific communities. Every Jesuit belongs to a community, the community superior is the direct superior of all members of this community, but it is the provincial who assigns the mission to each member of his province.

two other considerations: union of hearts and the superiors' qualities. Ignatius considers union of hearts among Jesuits as a preliminary condition for maintaining the Society and achieving its mission (*cf. Constitutions*, 659). He insists that either subjects or superiors should all root their union with one another in their union with and love for God (*cf. Constitutions*, 671), for only if one unites himself to God, can he unite with others "through the same love which will descend from the Divine Goodness" (*Constitutions*, 671); only if both superior and subject unite themselves to God, could the subject conform his will and understanding to that of the superior which ultimately should emanate from God.

That is why the first quality required for a superior general is his spiritual quality: "He should be closely united with God our Lord and have familiarity with him in prayer and in all his operations, so that from him, the fountain of all good, he may so much the better obtain for the whole body of the Society a large share of his gifts and graces, as well as great power and effectiveness for all the means to be employed for the help of souls" (*Constitutions*, 723). In other words, the quality that the superior general needs for governing the Society is acquired from his close relationship with God especially through prayer. The same thing holds true for other superiors as well.

In order to make sure that subjects' obedience and the superiors' command lead to the fulfillment of God's will, Ignatius also gives five concrete means of communal discernment. The yearly *manifestation of conscience* provides "the superior with the information that he will need for seeing the Society's goal achieved in his subject" (O'Gorman, 1971, p. 64). The *suggestion* is a form of communication made by the subject prior to the decision of the superior proposing what is better for the subject to carry out God's will. It presupposes an attitude of indifference on the part of the subject (*cf. Constitutions*, 292, 552). The same attitude is also required for the representation which would follow upon a decision already made by the superior (*cf. Constitutions*, 627-628), and which could take place when a subject thinks that his representation

might lead to a better decision. Another ordinary means is to offer information about oneself to superiors through letters (*cf. Constitutions*, 673-676). The last means of communication is consultation which superiors seek from others to help them to discern and make a decision (*cf. Constitutions*, 618, 667). The last four means can also be applied to a community or to a province as a "communal subject," that is, when a community has to make a decision with the provincial or a province has to make a decision with the general.

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All of these means are there for helping subjects and superiors to discern together God's will. "The superior may stand in the place of Christ when commanding his subjects, but for Ignatius the superior does not thereby become a spiritual despot. Before he uses his voice of obedience he should have used all means at his disposal to assure himself as far as possible that he has rightly interpreted the divine will" (O'Gorman, 1971, p. 67).

Despite these means of discernment and daily prayer, as Karl Rahner pointed out, "the fact remains that there can be commands the subject must obey...which in the objective order are wrong, and in given circumstances have been issued with real culpability on the part of the superior. In cases of this kind it is not easy to say why and in what sense the fulfillment of such an order could be the will of God" (Rahner, 1966, pp. 168-169). Rahner tries to address this difficulty:

Whoever enters into a religious community, whoever chooses for himself an unforeseeable destiny. For the consequences of such an election

and dedication to the community and its rationale of action cannot be foreseen in detail. All these consequences can be difficult and painful. But this gamble is involved in every human obligation whereby another person with his own proper will becomes an inseparable part of one's own life.... If the religious community and its basic ideals are justified and meaningful, so too is the obligation toward all its consequences which cannot be seen in advance. A human mode of life which consists in the free subordination to something higher than itself cannot exist without this element of risk. And without such surrender the individual will remain in his own egotism behind the defenses of his own existential anxiety, which is the surest way to destruction. But the man who gives himself to what is higher and nobler, who takes the gamble, knows that he is only doing what Christ himself did in his obedience. (Rahner, 1966, pp. 175-176)

Here, Rahner considers the imitation of Christ as the ultimate reason of obedience: just as Christ who, by trusting in the will of the Father, had to assume cruel worldly conditions in order to fulfil his mission, so too do those who have chosen a religious congregation for carrying out their vocation or mission. If it would be better to attain "the meaningful end" in and through the congregation than to do it individually, as *The Documents of the 35th General Congregation* pointed out, it is because "by freeing us from our own 'affection, desires and interests', obedience lets us dedicate ourselves totally to what God loves and to those who are the object of God's special concern" (GC 35, d. 4, n. 12). This surrender of one's own will might be painful, that is why, speaking of obedience, the same document says that "some degree of participation in Jesus' kenosis will never be absent from our lives. Like Jesus, we spend ourselves day after day, trustfully handing ourselves over to the will of God" (GC 35, d. 4, n. 15).

MISSION AS APOSTOLIC ACTION IN OBEDIENCE

In the presentation above, we have showed the relationship between Jesuit mission and obedience from the perspective of the latter; in order to have a fuller and balanced view on this relationship, we also should demonstrate it from the perspective of mission. *The Documents of the 31st General Congregation* define Jesuit mission in these words: "Ignatius and his companions saw this as their unique call, their charism: to choose to be with Christ as servants of his mission, to be with people where they dwell and work and struggle, to bring the Gospel into their lives and labours" (GC 31, d. 1, n. 7). This definition includes two aspects of Jesuit mission: vertically, Jesuits are men who are "with Christ"; and horizontally, they are with the people in their situation and bring them the Gospel. These two distinct yet inseparable aspects of Jesuit mission are explained concretely in the seventh part of the *Constitutions*.

In this part of the *Constitutions*, the vertical aspect of Jesuit mission is embodied in obedience to superiors who represent the Church in assigning subjects to their mission. If Ignatius insists on the importance of obedience to the Church regarding mission, it is because Jesuits "are called to share the mission of the Church itself" (GC 32, d. 4, n. 13; GC 34, d. 2, n. 3) which was entrusted to the Church by Christ. Regarding the horizontal aspect of Jesuit mission, Ignatius says that Jesuit missionaries should observe the situation where they work in order to seize all opportunities and to use all suitable means for better glorifying God and saving souls (*cf. Constitutions*, 616, 622, 633, 636, 645, 646, 647). This way of carrying out mission can be characterized by flexibility and inculturation, inculturation in the sense that Jesuits take the historical, social, cultural, religious and personal context into account (*cf. GC 35, d. 4, n. 15*), so that they may figure out what is beneficial for the spread of the Gospel and what are the needs of the people to whom they bring the Gospel.

That is why, motivated by "a desire to find

the best way to collaborate in the Lord's mission, the best way to serve the Church at this time, the best contribution Jesuits can make with what they are and have, seeking to do what is for the greater divine service and the more universal good" (Sosa, 2019), Father General Arturo Sosa promulgated four universal apostolic preferences of the Society for the next ten years: (1) to show the way to God through the *Spiritual Exercises* and discernment; (2) to promote reconciliation and justice by walking with the poor; (3) to accompany young people; and (4) to collaborate in the care of our Common Home.

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(Karl Rahner, S.J.)

As results of two years of communal discernment within the whole Jesuit Society, these preferences not only reflect an obedience to the Church—Pope Francis said that they "are in agreement with the current priorities of the Church"—but also reflect an "obedience" to or a listening attitude towards the world, since all of them respond to the actual needs of the world. Also worthy of note, these four universal preferences strike a balance between contemplation (the first preference) and action (the last three preferences). With regard to this balance, in his letter addressed to the Society, Pope Francis emphasized the vertical aspect of Jesuit mission: "The first preference is crucial because it presupposes as a basic condition the Jesuit's relationship with the Lord in a personal

and communal life of prayer and discernment... Without this prayerful attitude the other preferences will not bear fruit" (Sosa, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Pope Francis' observation shows again the spiritual foundation of Jesuit mission and obedience. For Jesuits, to obey is finally to conform themselves to God's will, just as Christ did (*Constitutions*, 284). Prayer is thus of first importance in a Jesuit's life. And the will of God is nothing other than His love for the world. The Jesuit mission consists precisely in showing God's love for the world by discerning its present situation and needs, and by coming to the aid of those in need, especially through the value, the force and the hope of the Gospel. By obeying for the sake of mission and doing mission in obedience, Jesuits mark their life with a contemplative-active way of proceeding: "Being and doing; contemplation and action; prayer and prophetic living; being completely united with Christ and completely inserted into the world with him as an apostolic body: all of these polarities mark deeply the life of a Jesuit and express both its essence and its possibilities" (GC 35, d. 2, n. 9).



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