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# IGNATIAN DISCERNMENT AND COLLECTIVE DECISION MAKING

## *Thoughts from the Heartland*

By Nicholas Creary

The ideas for this article came from reflections on discussions at the May 2004 Heartland-Delta IV conference of Jesuit colleges held at Marquette University in Milwaukee. In several fora, people suggested applying Jesuit discernment practices and methods to varying situations of academic life. Focusing on two themes: Ignatian discernment and collective decision-making, and Ignatian discernment and inclusive participation in university governance I argue that Jesuit institutional structures are more open to democratic governance than American Jesuit university structures. I make this claim based on my experiences of two years in the Jesuit New York Province's novitiate, one year teaching at Georgetown University, and the past four years at Marquette University. I have recently taken a position in the History department at Ohio University to join an African Studies program with almost 40 faculty members and the opportunities to work with graduate students in African Studies from across the university as well as to train graduate students with major fields in African history, something which is not possible at any of the Jesuit or Catholic colleges or universities in the United States. I should state at the outset that I am not suggesting a point by point correlation between governance systems in the Society of Jesus and Jesuit universities, rather highlighting general principles of governance.

### **Ignatian Discernment and Collective Decision-Making**

The Jesuit tradition of obedience is ideally suited for strategic planning deliberations. The fathers of the Jesuits' 31st General Congregation (GC 31) described obedience as the ordinary means by which God's will is made clear to the members of the Society. Thus, rather than being merely a question of

issuing and following commands, Jesuit obedience is dialogic. It is at once a discussion between two individuals concerning a specific Jesuit's apostolic appointment and a very sophisticated method of gathering and sharing information that can be used to establish priorities and develop plans.

GC 31 Decree 17, "The Life of Obedience," highlighted the dialogic element of Jesuit obedience as a discussion between an individual Jesuit and his superior in determining God's will for that Jesuit concerning apostolic appointments.

This truly spiritual government, whereby Jesuits are directed by superiors with discerning love...supposes communication between the two which is as far as possible plain and open. The superior should endeavor to make his mind clearly known to his confreres and understood by them; and he should take care that they, according to the nature and importance of the matter and as their talents and duties require, share more fully in his knowledge and concern both for the personal and community life of Jesuits and for their apostolic labors. The religious, for his part, should try to make himself known, with his gifts and limitations, his desires, difficulties, and ideas, through a confiding, familiar, and candid colloquy, about which the superior is held to strict secrecy.

Jesuit obedience is based on open and frank conversation between superior and subject, and such conversations should be rooted in love and charity. Further, the "subject" Jesuit has not only the right but the responsibility to represent his "gifts and limitations, desires, difficulties, and ideas" to the superior, who must take those candid and confidential representations into account when attempting to determine the best assignment

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for a given Jesuit under his charge while also considering the needs of the greater Society of Jesus.

Additionally, GC 31 fathers called on superiors to share information with their charges as necessary and appropriate for the success of individual and collective apostolic endeavors. Representation, the practice of an individual Jesuit expressing his concerns and interests to his superior, was not contrary to the idea of obedience, rather, by its very nature and perfection, presumed the obligation of personal responsibility and the spirit of ever seeking what is better on the part of the subject Jesuit.

Consequently, the subject can, and sometimes should, set forth his own reasons and proposals to the superior. Such a way of acting is not opposed to perfect obedience, but is reasonably required by it, in order that by an effort common to both superior and subject the divine will may more easily and surely be found. For obedience of judgment does not mean that our intellect is bereft of its proper role, and that one should assent to the superior's will against reason, rejecting the evidence of truth.

If a Jesuit were torn between his conscience and a superior's order, Decree 17 advised the Jesuit to sincerely ponder the matter before the Lord, and present his reasons to his immediate or higher superior. The superior then had to weigh these reasons with an open mind, review the case, and finally urge or withdraw the command. If the Jesuit were still unable to accept with a good conscience the decision of the superior, he may request that the whole question be referred to the judgment of certain persons, even non-Jesuits, to be chosen by common consent.

Jesuit obedience, therefore, is not blind; rather it requires all parties involved to enter the process with their eyes wide open. It requires a trust that is often absent between academics, department chairs, and deans. How, then, can Jesuit obedience be a model for collective decision-making at Jesuit institutions bound by the American canons of academic freedom and "us-them" labor relations vis-à-vis faculty and administration?

Shortly after Heartland-Delta IV, my department chair announced that he had taken a position at another institution. Within a week, the dean of our college asked to meet with every member of the department individually so that he could have our perspectives and input on a variety of issues. He also met with the department's executive committee to discuss the transition to an interim chair and preparations to elect a new chair.

The dean did not give us specific, respective commands as would a Jesuit superior. But by meeting with each of us individually the dean, like a Jesuit superior, gathered far more information about the department than had he met with us as a group. And he respected the confidentiality of those one-on-one meetings, using the information he gathered to help the department discern the best person to serve as chair.

More than making us feel that we provided some input

into the choice of a new department chair, or making us feel that we were invested in the process, meeting with us individually actually vested us in the process. The dean gave us an opportunity to voice our gifts and limitations, our desires, difficulties, and ideas, while simultaneously sharing with us his knowledge and concern both for the personal and departmental life and for our apostolic labors.

## **Ignatian Discernment and Inclusive Participation in University Governance**

If providing voice to individuals who are subject to a superior is a central element of Jesuit obedience, how can it inform governance practices at Jesuit universities where power and authority concentrate at the apex of a hierarchy? Here I compare the Jesuit institution of the general congregation and a university board of trustees.

Ultimate authority in the Jesuit order rests with the general congregation, a periodic meeting of solemnly professed Jesuits that includes the leadership in Rome and represents Jesuit provinces around the world.

General congregations meet very infrequently: in 466 years there have been only 34 general congregations, and most of those convened to elect a new superior general of the order. When not electing a new general, the congregation addresses issues of great importance facing the Society: e.g., GC 32 (1974) met to discuss changes resulting from Vatican II, and GC 34 (1995) convened to revise the Jesuits' constitutions in line with the 1983 Code of Canon Law. Thus, the Jesuit general congregation is an extraordinary governmental form.

**T**he Jesuits vest regular authority in a superior general who has power to govern the Society between meetings of general congregations, and holds office for life. He appoints provincial superiors and the superiors of individual Jesuit communities. Although the general consults assistants appointed by the general congregation, and receives input from members of the Society, he is the ultimate authority for the day-to-day administration of Jesuits.

This is similar to the structure of most American Jesuit colleges and universities: a self-perpetuating corporate board of trustees composed of Jesuits and lay people appoints or elects a president (usually a Jesuit) who serves at the board's pleasures and receives counsel from various officers and administrators that the board chooses. Granted, most boards of trustees meet several times per year rather than once every several decades, but daily affairs are left to the president and his administration.

The preparation process for a general congregation provides a collaborative model for discerning God's presence and will that can be applied to Jesuit educational institutions and yield greater participation in their governance. I take GC 34, the most recent congregation, and Marquette University,



A statue of St. Ignatius looks toward the buildings of Regis University.

the institution with which I am most familiar as a faculty member, as examples. Other Jesuit schools more than likely have different ways of proceeding, and thus, it may be useful to begin a broader discussion concerning Ignatian discernment and governance at American Jesuit colleges and universities.

Although GC 34 convened from January 5 to March 22, 1995, its preparations began as early as February 1992 when Father General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach announced his intention to call the congregation. A general congregation is at once the culmination of a process that is a model for collaborative input and “a moment of real discernment”: Kolvenbach sent out seven proposals for discussion at GC 34, which was followed by a series of provincial congregations: each Jesuit province held a meeting in which official delegates discussed and debated Kolvenbach’s proposals, elected delegates to represent the provinces, and submitted agenda, or *postulata*, for discussion at the general congregation.

By February 1994 all the provincial congregations concluded and the Jesuit curia received 637 postulata from province congregations and 142 from individual Jesuits. The curia established a preparatory commission to screen the postulata. When GC 34 opened in January 1995, the whole congregation identified 46 themes for discussion: 16 from the preparatory commission’s preliminary report, 29 from congregation delegates meeting in geographically regional groups called assistantcies, and one from an individual delegate proposed orally. A second list had 29 topics relating to the revision of Jesuit law: 13 from the preparatory commission and 16 from the assistantcies. Ultimately, the congregation established 16 commissions to discuss one theme respectively and develop draft decrees for presentation to and discussion at the congregation’s plenary sessions. Each commission had 12 to 15 members, chosen in terms of competence, preference, and diversity.

All Jesuits from every part of the world, including brothers and those studying for priesthood but not ordained, had an opportunity to submit postulata for consideration and forwarding at the province congregation or to send it directly to the curia in Rome for consideration by the preparatory commission. Delegates chosen to represent provinces had further opportunity to raise issues of concern for discussion once the general congregation began. The entire membership of the congregation had a hand in shaping the agenda for discussion, and consequently the formal decrees and legislation that the congregation produced. The committee that established the commissions considered the expressed preferences of the congregation members and intentionally incorporated geographic and cultural diversity as integral components of each commission.

With this in mind, it might be good to examine the structure and procedures of Jesuit university boards of trustees. Are the meetings publicized? Can the community contribute to the agenda? How can a faculty or staff member approach the board? Does the membership resemble in some way the diverse membership of the university community or are they primarily white, male corporate executives? Just as Jesuit schools cannot afford to sacrifice their Jesuit, Catholic character, neither can they afford to allow the business model to become entrenched at the top of their hierarchies, and preclude the possibility of incorporating or adapting a very useful Jesuit model of collaborative leadership. If the trustees at Detroit-Mercy and Georgetown can appoint as presidents respectively a Dominican sister and a lay man, then perhaps the boards of all the AJCU member institutions can reflect on and adapt to their specific circumstances some of the many participatory elements of governance found in Ignatian traditions. ■