

On the Apostolic Character of the Society of Jesus

by Fr. Jacques Servais, S.J.*

In its recent declarations the Society of Jesus characterizes itself as an apostolic body, as a religious order with a purpose essentially apostolic and therefore as a community which is ordered and strives to a life and activity that is apostolic in many ways. In the various characterizations given in the General Congregations 31 (1965) and 32 (1974-75), the adjective “apostolic” is applied to institutions or works, such as universities, colleges, retreat houses, reviews, etc., but also to the community of members — priests as well as scholastics and brothers — inasmuch as they are joined in the one mission which encompasses all their religious life: indeed, not only their community life, but also their religious vows are considered as apostolic. We are not offered a technical definition of the term, but “apostolic” intends to articulate the general end the Society seeks: “the perfection and aid of others for the glory of God” (C 765). The Society, indeed, is “directed to greater divine service and greater universal good and spiritual progress of souls” (C 258). The term expresses the spirit of service — both of God and of neighbor — its members are supposed to have for their principle of unity. In the words of the Complementary Norms: the “prophetic” dimension of the consecration to God must mark out the proper character of the present-day Jesuit mission which aims at “what might be called, in contemporary terms, the total and integral liberation of man, leading to participation in the life of God” (CN 223; cf. 253), or again “the realization of the Kingdom of God in the whole of human society, not only in the life to come but also in this life” — thus not only as an eschatological hope but as “the establishment” of this Kingdom already begun (CN 245-246), “the evangelical possibility of a certain communion among men and women” (CN 143).

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The way the term “apostolic” has been used in these declarations is somewhat new compared with the text of the Constitutions where it always comes up in direct relationship to the Pope and the Holy See. According to the traditional doctrine of St. Thomas, the Apostles are the foundation of the Church: they received the fullness of grace and wisdom in order to reveal the divine mysteries; they received plentiful eloquence in order to announce the Gospel; they were given finally the prerogative of full authority in order to take the responsibility for the flock of the Lord (In Ep. ad Eph. 4, 4, n. 211). In the Constitutions, “apostolic” describes the dignity and office of the Roman Pontiff as the Vicar of Christ, Head of the universal Church, Father and Teacher of all Christians with the whole power of the Shepherd and Leader. It indicates, from the standpoint of the Church’s structure, the nature of the supreme authority to which the special bond of love and service of the Society refers, not the Society’s missionary charism itself. This acknowledgment of the Pope’s “grace of apostleship, to bring about the obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5) is made explicit in the fourth vow through which the order presents itself as an particular instrument in his hand.

Nevertheless we ought not reduce the apostolic dimension of the Society to this “positive” aspect. The charism of Ignatius of Loyola was from the very beginning, before he and his companions decided to submit their yearning and quest to the Pope, clearly missionary. For that reason we can assert that the apostolic dimension does not only pertain to the relationship with the hierarchical office and its practical organization. Surely, in the outward countenance of the Church and her visible foundation they sought and found the vital support they had looked for. The encounter with the Pope, when they presented themselves to him in November 1538, betokened a critical step: they expressively recognized the Pope as the quasi-sacrament of

Christ who demands from his elected “companions” an unconditional commitment for the concrete establishment of the Reign of God in the world, as a service to the Church. But this step would not have been made had they not first understood that they had to let themselves be transformed into an instrument of God’s redemptive design, first unreservedly surrendering themselves to Him, then offering themselves to others and “making themselves all things to all men” (1 Cor 9:22). In that sense, the explicitly apostolic dimension is the irradiation of the burning love, rooted in the death and resurrection of Christ, they had experienced in Paris and on the way to Rome. The apostolic tasks that are carried out “at the order of the supreme vicar of Christ our Lord or of the superior of the Society” (C 308), have their lasting origin in the experience of the Spiritual Exercises which Father Ignatius and his companions went through: “They had heard the invitation of Christ the King and had followed it; for that reason they not only dedicated themselves entirely to labor, but desiring to become outstanding in every service of their King, they made offerings of greater worth and importance; so they would be sent under the banner of Christ by him into the entire world, spreading his teachings among all degrees and conditions of men” (GC 31, 1 § 4).

So then, the call to the apostolate does not arise in the first instance from the hierarchy. The call to the apostolate intended in relationship to the first companions of Jesus and those who, after them, will go through the Spiritual Exercises, is the event in which God personally turns to his spiritual creature, speaking his word internally within him. To this “holy calling” (2 Tim 1:9) that God utters from the depths of his own freedom, the creature is asked to respond with a decisive and unlimited yes which is nevertheless nothing but the acceptance of God’s first elective utterances. His response is the acknowledgment of the choice God has made of him. What he feels as a call to the apostolate is the result of an event which indistinctly includes two originally separate, unequal elements: God’s word and man’s answer. Now this single act of

election with its both divine and human components, demands the whole creature. Ignatius understood this when he spontaneously interpreted the answer to be given as a decisive choice for poverty — not simply spiritual but actual poverty — and thus a consecrated state of life. The relationship is analogous to the one between the “holy priesthood” of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood of bishops and priests. In order to become a priest, in a specific sense, you have to be ordained. One becomes an apostle, in a specific sense, if you have been called to the corresponding mission and choose the condign form of life. In fact, to be an apostle after the manner of the apostles of Christ in the Gospel means to leave behind all things and observe the evangelical counsels.

To the mind of St. Thomas, “the apostles are understood to have vowed things pertaining to the state of perfection when ‘they left all things and followed’ Christ” (S. Th. II-II, 88, 4, 3). This primitive radicalism of literal following unfolded in the history of the Church into consecrated life, but only with the Dominicans and the Franciscans did it develop into an itinerant preaching order. The foundation of the Society of Jesus, regarded from the beginning as an apostolic order, was a step in the same direction. From the very beginning Ignatius and his companions conceived of themselves as “pilgrims”, as “apostles,” who like the disciples in the Gospel moved from place to place under the urgency of announcing the Kingdom of God. “Their intention [was] to travel throughout the world and, when they could not find the desired spiritual fruit in one place, to pass on to another and another, ever seeking the greater glory of God our Lord and the greater aid of souls” (C 605). It is characteristic of Ignatius’ thinking that human “perfection” is not a theme in itself. He does not understand the sacrificial offering (the “holocaust”) as directed mainly to our own personal sanctification. He states, indeed: “The end of this Society is to devote itself with God’s grace not only to the salvation and perfection of the members’ own souls, but also with that same grace to labor strenuously in giving aid

towards the salvation and perfection of the souls of others” (C 3). He knows and takes into account that perfection is tied into the mastery and practice of Christian virtues. One does not become perfect at the moment of giving oneself fully. For Ignatius, however, it is important above all that the vows mark the way towards full incorporation into the apostolic body of the Society: from that day the consideration of God’s glory will lead the scholastic or the brother to all the solid virtues and interior gifts which give the other exterior gifts their efficacy. The Lord, the Saint is convinced, has called the companions of Jesus to an order “in which His glory and the salvation of the neighbor are set before [them] not as a general end but one toward which all [their] life and its various activities must be made into a continuous sacrifice” (Epp I, 499). The criterion with which to weigh the qualities of those who are incorporated is that, through their own progress in knowledge and love of God together with greater humility and abnegation, “they can better help others to progress for the glory of God” (C 516). Only by becoming “instruments united with God and so disposed that they let themselves be wielded well by his divine hand” (C 813), they may hope to “aid the work of redemption” (Epp, V, 257).

The redemption is not, strictly speaking, something we should work for, since it has already been accomplished; nevertheless while cultivating “the pure love of Jesus Christ, the desire for His honor and for the salvation of souls whom he has redeemed” (Epp I, 501), the Jesuit may, according to the teaching of saint Paul (cf. Col 1,24; Fil 2,17), “do” something “and suffer for him” (E 197). From here springs the “apostolic” character of a life offered in holocaust to God for the sake of the perfection and aid of its neighbors. The background against which Ignatius understands the aid we may hope to give Christ is the vision of the Church as the “Spouse of Christ” (FI, 1; Epp VIII, 462): the service the Christian may render the Lord in his salvific work does not result from identification with him — which is impossible, since he is unique as a divine Person ; it is rather a humble response, with “an exclamation of wonder” (E 60), to the

experience of redemption: an expression of the Cross's fruitfulness, an attempt at bridal love from within "our Holy Mother Church" (E 365). The Jesuit makes his entire existence an instrument of the apostolate. His vocation is not to substitute for the Lord as if he could be crucified with him. His identity as a companion of Jesus is given by the program of the 2nd Week of the Exercises: "that I may love him more intensely and follow him more closely" (E 104) — a love that maintains reverential distance but also trusts its promise of fecundity. The "disposition" this following demands from him is that of perfectly laying down what he has and is: his possessions (poverty), his body (virginity) and his soul (obedience). The source of this total offering of oneself is an adoring indifference in regard to the ever greater will of God, an unconditional love which is shown as service to the salvific work of the crucified Lord. The distinguishing quality of the Society, then, is that this order, taking as its basis the teaching and example of Christ, is at one and the same time a form of *consecrated life*, understood as total self-dispossession out of love for Christ in the service of God's Kingdom as he wants to bring it into this world, and a form of *apostolic life*, insofar as it is dedicated not only to contemplation but also to apostleship as belonging to its very nature. So the apostolate, the "being sent far away" (from "apostellein"), becomes a state that informs the whole life.

In the history of the Church there have been many institutes, clerical and lay, engaged in apostleship. Now, in contrast with the mendicant orders who combine the ancient monastic observances and the apostolic life, the Jesuits are regular clerics, i. e. members of an institute in which religious profession and priestly ministry are strictly matched together. Among the tasks the Constitutions considers for the members, we find in the first place the aid that can be given "by saying masses and [offering] other divine services" (C 640), by administering the sacraments, "especially the hearing of confession" (C 642), and by "constantly proposing to the people the Word of God, by means of sermons, lectures, and the teaching of Christian doctrine"

(C 645). And not only this: unlike the practice of other orders, in the Society of Jesus ordination is formally required for all professed members. The service typical for the Jesuit is, in a strict sense, a priestly ministry. The special purpose of his order is the sanctification of men through the Word and the sacraments. Still its priestly nature has a specificity we do not find for instance in the societies of apostolic life, even when these lead a common life and profess the evangelical counsels. To distinguish the priestly nature of the Society it is not enough to describe the mission and list the works fitting with the initial institution and the resolutions of the later general congregations. We have to go back to its founding charism. A charism is a “manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). This gift, as *gratis data*, goes beyond the natural and is offered without regard to personal merit. It is granted to a person for the justification and sanctification of others (S. Th. I-II 111, 1) — in the case of a founder and his companions, for the needs and requirements of the world. A charism sets in motion the process of a call and decision to follow Christ. It is a lightning-flash of that deepest mystery of theological love which marks the Church poor, immaculate, and obedient as Christ’s Spouse. It disposes the person to let himself be led by the Holy Spirit in his prayer and apostolic action, and thus to partake in Christ’s *munus* of announcing and bringing salvation within the missionary communion of all the faithful.

In the case of the Society, the distinctive feature of its charism is obedience. The Jesuit regards obedience as a gift God has bestowed upon him through his Society's founder. Obedience consists in doing the will of another person who administers authority that proceeds from God. It originates in the very nature of the faith lived out in the Church by free and responsible persons. In contrast with non-Christian forms of obedience, ecclesial obedience is not a mere subjection of the will: it is animated by an interior movement of comprehension. It is an obedience of the intellect, i.e. an obedience that understands on the basis of the dynamism of

faith and the free offering of vows. This obedience, always ready to renounce private judgment, is exercised as a free act of love, which unites the subject more surely and constantly with God's salvific will (CN 149). As a man of the Church, the Jesuit is not only obedient, says de Lubac, he likes obedience. He "knows that the Church only commands because of the fact that she first obeys God. He wants to be a 'free man', but recoils from being among those who 'make use of freedom as a pretext for evil' (1 Peter 2:16). Obedience is for him the price of freedom" (Paul VI). For him the true freedom is to correspond to the *semper major* of the Divine Call which is beyond every merely rational measure.

Now, a charism does not directly originate a specific mission or particular works. However, the obedience that is, with disponibility and indifference, the core of the Society's charism, gives its priestly apostleship a specific dimension. The Jesuit is a man who "desires to serve the Lord alone, and the Church, his spouse, under the Roman pontiff, the vicar of Christ on earth" (FI 1). He wants to implement his apostolate not only as a participation in the (Marian) disponibility of the Spousal Church but also in the (Johannine) self-effacement of the Ministerial Church in front of the Eternal King. On one hand, this apostolate needs to be always accomplished anew in an "active indifference and readiness for any service" (CN 162), understood as unconditional docility to God's will as manifested to him in his religious condition. On the other hand, the way Jesuit share in the activity of the Mystical Body to spread the Kingdom of Christ over all the earth consists in keeping constantly in mind the *raison d'être* of their mission: they are convinced that "there is greater security in going under obedience to their superiors rather than on their own initiative, even supposing they could act in this way and not as sent by the one charged with directing them in the place of Christ our Lord, as the interpreter of his divine will" (C 619).

Let us add, by way of elucidation, a final word. There is a profound reason for Ignatius's strong opposition to his sons' becoming bishops and so ruling a portion of the universal Church. The bishops are granted "the Divine fullness after the apostolic fashion" (Ignatius of Antioch). With episcopal consecration they are given in plenitude the apostolic mission, because in them rests the lasting presence of the Apostles and therefore of Christ in the unique event of his Incarnation and Pascal Mystery. They are not vicars of the Pope: the power they exercise personally in the name of Christ, is, according to the Council, "proper, ordinary, and immediate". Like diocesan or religious priests, however, the Jesuit exercises his ministry according to the second degree of the sacrament of Holy Orders, but for him this subordinate participation in the priesthood of Christ is not subjectively open to a higher one. Indeed, when he makes his solemn profession, he renounces by specific vow the possibility of becoming a bishop: "I promise that I will never... consent to my election [to this dignity] insofar as is in my power, unless compelled by obedience to him who has power to command me under pain of sin" (CN 134). He perceives the exercise of his priestly apostleship as something performed or endured by him under the authority of another: first of all Christ our Lord, but always also the "ambassadors" for him (2 Cor 5:20), the representatives of the hierarchical Church. In his case, this representative is the supreme vicar of Christ on earth, the successor of Peter who embodies the official ministry of the Church. Ignatius had a strong awareness that the Pope is the one who administrates "the good of the universal Church" (C 136) and must therefore demand obedience. As such, the Pope is inserted, more than the other bishops, in the intimate relationship between the Bridegroom and his Spouse (E 365), and has thus the widest overview of the mission conveyed to the Church. Better than anyone else, he is in a position to judge the needs present in the today's world.

The apostolic character of the Society of Jesus finds its basis in this special relationship. The special vow its members make is “to go anywhere His Holiness will order [...], without pleading an excuse and without requesting any expenses for the journey, for the sake of matters pertaining to the worship of God [*ad divinum cultum*] and the good of the Christian religion” (C 7). In his Coïmbra discourse about the charism of the founder, Nadal explains: “In everything that we do we should unite ourselves as much as possible to the Pope because he, as universal superior, has the responsibility for all that which is lacking in particular situations. We place ourselves at his service in a fashion both universal and immediate. Such is the origin of the special fourth vow made to His Holiness”. The Jesuit understands that the apostolic Church is where the successor of Peter stands, and that his own apostolic fecundity is tied to his free and joyful dependency on him. He exercises his ministry in the permanent awareness that his apostolic mandate originates from that particular Church which “presides in charity” over all (Ignatius of Antioch).