

The Body of the Society of Jesus

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The 'collective' dimension of the Jesuits' experience emerged clearly while reading the writings of Ignatius of Loyola in the light of Chiara's contributions on the "spirituality of communion". The following are mere cues for a dialogue between the 'exterior castle' of the Work of Mary and the 'body' of the Society of Jesus.

The body of the Society of Jesus needs to be seen and understood in the light of "Christ as a sun" according to the account in the *Autobiography* and the Roman visions (1553-1555).

The vision, which eventually accompanied Ignatius throughout his life, contains in itself the 'mystic' reality of the Society, its being body/light; it was indeed chosen as the symbol of the Society of Jesus: "... he could find God any moment he wished. Even at present he had many visions, especially of the type mentioned above, in which he saw Christ as a sun" (Aut. 99).

The body of the Society of Jesus has its roots in 'heaven' according to the Manresa visions (1522).

The body is rooted in the Trinity:

"First. He had a profound devotion towards the most holy Trinity... One day, while reciting the Office of Our Lady on the steps of the convent, his mind started to be enraptured: it was as if he saw the Holy Trinity under the guise of three organ keys; this was accompanied by a flood of tears and uncontrollable sobbing... This experience impressed so much that he remembered it throughout his whole life, and this increased his devotion every time he prayed the Holy Trinity".

The body is a light that creates:

"Second. At one point he understood the way God had created the world, and this provoked in him an intense spiritual joy. He seemed to be seeing a white thing which emanated rays of light, and it was God who was irradiating light from that thing".

The body in the Body of Jesus:

"Third... One day at Manresa, while hearing Mass in the convent chapel, and precisely during the elevation of the Body of the Lord, he saw with the interior eyes like white rays coming from above. After many years he could not reconstruct well this phenomenon; what he did understand clearly at that time was the presence of Jesus Christ our Lord in the most Blessed Sacrament".

The body is 'one' with the humanity of Christ and Mary:

"Fourth. It happened that many times, and for long periods, while praying, he could see, with the interior eyes, Christ's humanity, and what he saw was a sort of a white body, not too big nor too small, having no distinction of body parts. He had this interior experience many times at Manresa; if he says twenty or forty times he would not be lying. He had another such vision in Jerusalem and again while walking near Padova. In a similar manner he saw our Lady too, again having no distinctive body parts".

The body has the wisdom of discernment:

“Fifth. One day, out of devotion, he went to a church that was distant a little more than a mile from Manresa: I believe it was St. Paul’s. The road ran parallel to a river. Fully absorbed in his prayers, he sat for a while looking at the river flowing below. While sitting there the eyes of his intellect opened: he saw no vision, but he saw and understood many principles of interior life, together with human and divine realities; after that illumination, all things appeared new. It is not possible to repeat clearly the many particular truths that he understood then; all we can say is that his intellect was illuminated by special light.

He remained in that state for some time; then he went to kneel in front of a cross close by to thank God. It was there that he saw that figure whom he had already contemplated many times, but could never understand: that is, the one described above, which seemed to him very beautiful and with many eyes. Now, however, in front of the cross, he saw clearly that that thing did not have the usual luminosity. He had a most clear understanding, and he adhered to it with all his will, that that was the devil. Even later, for a long period of time, he appeared to him frequently. As a sign of mockery, he used to chase him away with the stick he always carried with him” (Aut. 28-31).

The body of the Society of Jesus traces its earthly existence to the first group made up of Ignatius of Loyola, Peter Favre, and Francis Xavier: the ‘companions of Jesus’ (Paris, 1528).

After the Rouen experience with the Spanish youth, Ignatius left ‘his’ companions to join the companions ‘of Jesus’:

“At that time he kept in contact with masters Peter Favre and Francis Xavier, whom he later conquered for the service of God through the Exercises” (Aut. 82).

Many years later Favre remembers:

“We were all the time together, sharing our room, our meals and our money; he was my master of spiritual life, giving me the possibility to discern God’s will and mine. That is how we came to have the same desires, and adamant to choose the life we now all lead, that is, to be part of the Society of Jesus, of which I am not worthy”.

The group increased from three to ten. At Montmartre, on August 15, 1534, feast of the Assumption:

“At the time they had already decided, all together, what they wanted to do: they were going to Venice, then Jerusalem, and they would have spent the rest of their lives for the good of the souls. If they were refused permission to stay in Jerusalem, they would return to Rome and ask the Vicar of Christ to use their services wherever he thought that the greatest glory of God, and the good of the souls, required them. They also decided to wait in Venice up to a year for the boarding of a ship; if, during that year, they were unable to find a ship to the East, they would consider themselves absolved from the vow of going to Jerusalem, and they would go straight to the Pope, etc.” (Aut. 85).

The body of the Society of Jesus, in the image and likeness of the Son, was received by the Father who confirmed the name: the La Storta vision (Rome, 1537).

Through the intercession of Mary and Christ, and by the very will of the Father, Ignatius, all the companions and the Society of Jesus were “placed with the son”.

The body of the Society of Jesus is united to the Son, is ‘wedded’ with the Son:

“He had decided that, once ordained, he would refrain from celebrating Mass for a year in order to prepare himself properly, and also to pray our Lady to place him near her Son. One day, while praying in a church just outside Rome, he felt moved internally: he saw that God the Father

was placing him near his Son; the vision was so clear that he could not doubt that God the Father was in fact placing him near his Son” (Aut. 96).

Layne, a member of the first group of Jesuits, in recalling the la Storta vision highlights the communitarian dimension of Ignatius’ personal experience:

“The first one to give the name was our Father himself, and this is how it happened. We were on our way to Rome via Siena. Our Father was full of spiritual devotions, especially towards the Blessed Eucharist. He used to receive the Eucharist every day, either from Peter Fabro or myself: we said Mass every day, but he did not. He told me that it seemed to him the God the Father had impressed these words in his heart: ‘Ego ero vobis Romae propitius’. Not knowing what these words really meant, he said: ‘I do not know what will happen to us, perhaps we will be crucified in Rome’. On another occasion he said that he seemed to have seen Jesus carrying the cross on his shoulders, and God the Father, who was close by, saying: ‘I want you to take this as your instrument’. Jesus took the cross, and said: ‘I want you to use this’. It was then that, feeling a great devotion to the most holy name, he chose to name the Congregation: ‘the Society of Jesus’”.

The body of the Society of Jesus took up an institutional form in the communitarian discernment of the first group of Jesuits in Rome in 1539.

God’s plan, foreseen in the Manresa visions, became incarnate as an Institute/Order:

“At the end we decided in favour of the first option: since the Lord, in his generous goodness wanted to gather and unite us, even though we were so weak and coming from different countries and cultural backgrounds, we should not break this union and this community wanted by God. On the contrary, we should keep it strong and make it even stronger, striving to become one body, and by being sensitive and attentive to each other, for the greater good of the souls. The courage of many who are united among themselves is surely greater and even difficult goals can be achieved, whereas if we are separated... At the end, with the help of the Lord, we reached unanimously this conclusion: for us it is more appropriate, nay necessary, to vow obedience to one of us...”.

The body of the Society of Jesus is ‘a community’ in the body of the Church, as borne by the approval of the first Rule, Rome, September 27, 1540:

“He who desires to fight for God under the banner of the Cross in our Society – which we wish to distinguish with the name of Jesus - and to serve God alone and the Roman Pontiff, his vicar on earth, after a solemn vow of perpetual chastity, shall set this thought before his mind, that he is a part of a society founded for the specific purpose of providing for the advancement of souls in Christian life and doctrine and for the propagation of faith”.

The body of the Society of Jesus in the Body of Jesus Eucharist: this finds its roots in the solemn profession of the first Jesuits which took place at the Altar of the Virgin Mary in St. Paul-Outside-the-Walls basilica (Rome) on April 22, 1541.

Ignatius was elected General on April 8, 1541 and confirmed five days later. Jesus Eucharist makes the ‘companions’ of Jesus, united ‘in the name of Jesus’, one with Him. The ‘body of Christ and Mary’, as seen in the Manresa ‘paradise’, becomes a reality in the Society of Jesus.

“On the Friday following Easter, the six Jesuits went to St. Paul’s Basilica. There they reconciled themselves with one another. It was then decided that Ignatius would celebrate Mass and that the others would receive the Blessed Sacrament from his hands. They would then pronounce their vows in the following manner. During Mass, just before receiving communion, Ignatius held the Body of our Lord Jesus above the paten, and with the other he held a paper on which there was written the formula of his vow. Addressing his companions who were kneeling in front of him, he loudly proclaimed the following words... After receiving communion, he placed five consecrated hosts on the paten; he turned towards his companions who, after a general confession

and the proclamation of 'Domine, non sum dignus...'; each one in turn took the paper with the formula and said loudly the following words... After Mass and prayers at the privileged altars, they gathered around the main altar. Each one then went up to Ignatius to be embraced and given the kiss of peace. It was a moment filled with devotion, affection, and tears. Each one experienced an ever increasing serenity and an urge to praise our Lord Jesus Christ".

The body of the Society of Jesus can be seen in the *Constitutions* (Rome, 1541-1556). In these, the individual Jesuit is incorporated in the body of the Society.

In the *Proemio* we find mutual love and unity as the premise of the *Constitutions*:

"Since it has been the Wisdom and the Goodness of God, our Creator and Lord, to keep and to lead above all this little Society of Jesus in his holy service, in the same way it was started, on our part we must give more importance to the intimate law of charity and love that the Holy Spirit impresses in our hearts than to any external Constitution..."

In our vision the most important thing for the whole body of the Society is to seek harmony and good governance for the greater glory of God. Nevertheless since this body is made up of different members, it is the welfare of these that needs to be looked after, from their acceptance and throughout their formation and ministry in the vineyard of Christ our Lord. For this reason we pray for the help that the eternal Light deigns to give us for his honour and glory" (Const. 134-135).

The body of the Society of Jesus exists if each one is united through obedient love:

"... the Society cannot keep going, and therefore is unable to reach its goal for the greater glory of God, if its members are not united among themselves and with their head" (Const. 655).

"Whatever helps to promote harmony between the members and also with their head, is very useful to the maintenance of the good state of the Society. This is especially true for the bond of the will, that is, of charity and of mutual love... Above all, a great contribution is given by the bond of obedience, which unites the individual members with their superiors, and the latter between themselves and the Provincial, and the Provincials among themselves and with the General: thus mutual subordination needs to be diligently observed by all" (Const. 821).

The body of the Society as a means to irradiate God's Love:

"The main reciprocal bond of unity among the members and with their head is the love of God our Lord. In fact, if the superiors and the subjects are united in his divine Goodness, they live together with great ease thanks to the one love which comes down and spreads among them, and in a special way throughout the body of the Society. Thus love, and generally speaking every goodness and virtue which help us move forward in the ways of the Spirit, helps us to have mutual harmony. It helps us also to disdain material things that often lead our ego to disorders and become the main enemy of harmony and of the common good. Uniformity can also be a great help; internal uniformity includes that of doctrine, of judgement and of the will, whereas external conformity includes the dress, the liturgy of the Mass, etc. taking into consideration the differences between persons, places, etc." (Const. 671).

The body of the Society has an external and an internal dimension:

"To preserve and develop not only the body (i.e. that which is external to the Society) but also its spirit in order to fulfil its goal (i.e. that to help the souls reach their ultimate supernatural aim), the means that join the instrument to God and make it docile to be guided by His divine hand, are more efficacious than those that incline it towards humans... Thus, all together, we need to see that every member of the Society is doing his best to pursue solid and perfect virtues and spiritual things; these are to be given more importance than study and other human and natural gifts. In fact, it is the internal virtues that render efficacious the external ones in view of the end that we pursue" (Const. 813).

The body of the Society of Jesus has Jesus as its head: the *Diary* vision is similar and confirms the La Storta one (Rome, February 23, 1544):

“... Jesus comes to my mind; I feel the drive to follow him because for me it was clear that since He was the head of the Society, this in itself, more than any other human motive, was the strongest argument in favour choosing the most complete poverty...”

It seemed to me, in some way, that the fact that Jesus showed himself and I could feel him was the (work) of the Holy Trinity; this made me remember that time when the Father placed me with the Son. (Jesus’ confirmation)”.

The body of the Society is a ‘spiritual body’ that lives ‘so that all may be one’: the reality of the Society of Jesus in the *Epistolary*.

“... in those who have already achieved a better control of their selfishness I appreciate more, as I have written, if they keep a measure of discretion without evading obedience, a virtue that I recommend with much insistence, together with the other virtue which contains all others and which Jesus highly recommends and calls his own: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15, 12). You need not only to keep harmony and continuous mutual love among you, but also to extend them to everyone else, by harbouring in your heart the good of the others and by considering that each person has the same value as the blood of Jesus Christ, indeed his own life. Thus, by studying and also by increasing fraternal love, you will become perfect instruments of divine grace and collaborators in the sublime endeavour of leading back all creatures towards God, the supreme goal”. (Letter to the Coimbra community, May 7, 1547).

“To you, my dearest brothers in Jesus Christ, our Lord and God, I ask in his name that you be worthy of his visit and his spiritual treasures by having a pure heart, a true humility and by having all the same feelings and the same will, together with the external and interior peace that welcomes and allows to reign in the heart he who calls himself ‘the prince of peace’ (Is 6, 9). In short, may you become one thing in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Letter to the Coimbra community, January 1, 1548).

“My dear brother be assured that even though you are separated from the body, the bond of charity on our part and, I believe, on your part too, makes us intimately bound together. Be convinced that apart from this bond, you are also linked by holy obedience, that binds the members of the Society in a spiritual body of which you form part wherever you are”. (Letter to Francesco Mancini, S.J., April 7, 1554).