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HỢP TUYỂN

THẦN HỌC

Số 53

**HOÀ GIẢI
TRONG THẦN HỌC
VÀ THỰC HÀNH**

NĂM XXIX (2022)

NHÀ XUẤT BẢN ĐỒNG NAI

“ROWING INTO THE DEEP”: A CALL TO RECONCILE THROUGH IGNATIAN WAY OF PROCEEDING

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Rowing is neither loud nor flashy. The sport is marked by quiet gracefulness and concerted teamwork. Individuals who commit to rowing share an intense determination to overcome distractions and their own personal preferences, as they work together to row the boat forward. Rowers can testify to the demanding regimen of waking up at terribly early hours of the morning, of their punishing work on the “erg” (rowing machine), of the endless rivulets of sweat, of muscles aching and twitching. In addition to the discipline and dedication of each individual member, their strokes must be coordinated until they become a single crew. Unless all rowers pull in time with each other, fluidly and without hesitation, the boat will stall. In this sense, the sport of rowing offers a beautiful example illustrating how individual commitments can be harmonized into one body moving forward together.

On October 2, 2016, two hundred and fifteen Jesuit delegates from all provinces and regions were gathered as the highest governing body of the Society of Jesus, commonly referred to as the 36th General Congregation. They were joined in spirit by Jesuits, friends and collaborators in the Ignatian family, and partners around the world. Inspired by Pope Francis' earlier exhortation to the Society on the 200th anniversary of its restoration, the Congregation adopted the logo "Rowing into the Deep" to remind itself of the task which had been entrusted to them by the pope, that is, to be "brave and expert rowers.... [to] row, be strong, even against a headwind! [to] row in the service of the Church... [to] row together!" Similar to the demands of rowing, for more than six weeks, members of the Congregation exercised and strengthened their spiritual muscles in mediation, Eucharist, and spiritual conversation engaging themselves in the *aula* [meeting hall], joined together in spirits in their communal prayers and deliberation discerning for the direction where and how the *Compañía de Jesús* is to move into the future.

Entering the *aula* for the first time as a delegate of the US Central South Province, I was surprised by the austerity and empty space in its ambiance and décor. Contrary to my earlier anticipation, neither portraits nor statues of Ignatius or of any of the first companions for that matter were found. No historical events or figures of the Society were exhibited. In the middle of the large and empty hall stood Jesus hung on the cross. On the surrounding walls, four painted panels by the Slovenian

Jesuit Marko Ivan Rupnik were quietly displayed. Untypical of Rupnik's mosaics which often depict various biblical figures or faith symbols in bright and contrasting colors, the four canvasses seen in the aula were rather minimalistic. No detailed figures, only a few, simple brush strokes descended on an opaque background. Yet, each panel carried a subtle message orienting the audience's attention towards a unique way of Ignatian meditation, contemplation, and deliberation.

Within what seemed to be a mysterious space, the first panel encrypted the scriptural passage, "for in this tent, we groan, longing to be further clothed with our heavenly habitation" [2 Cor 5:2]. The encryptions of the second and the third hinted at the manner of how the meeting and deliberation process were to take place in this space. One read "*En todo amar y servir*" [In everything, love and serve] which remained one of the most commonly phrased which Ignatius used to sign after his name. Another contained a verse from the first letter of John (4:8), "whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love." The fourth provided the direction as well as the ultimate goal for the gathering, *a su divina majestad* - "to his divine majesty." In other words, the messages encrypted in these canvasses were meant to serve as gentle reminders instructing and inducing the delegates into the discernment process where the Society is made anew in the Divine spirit. Faithful to the spirit of the *Spiritual Exercises*, these canvasses directed the hearts as well as all of the activities of the congregation towards "allow[ing] the

Creator to deal immediately with the creature and creature with its Creator and Lord” [*Spiritual Exercises (Sp.Ex.)*, 15] because “God our Creator and Lord [alone remains] the one who in his Supreme Wisdom and Goodness preserves, directs, and carry forward in his divine service this least Society of Jesus” [*Constitutions of SJ*, no. 134]. Similar to the process of engaging the Spiritual Exercises, members of the congregation are called to be “courageous and generous” [*Sp. Ex.*, 5] in rowing together to cultivate such a space for the Society of Jesus to be renewed again.

Re-creating and exploring new space, even at times when such a space seems unthinkable or unimaginable, served as the grace encouraged and sought by the Congregation. Starting from its opening homily, Father Bruno Cadoré, Master General of the Order of Preacher, called the Society to dare for “the audacity of the ‘improbable’,” not to reverse to the old ways of doing things, but to explore a new and even unthinkable space where the “voice of the One” speaks “against all odds.”¹ Later, Pope Francis in his address to the Congregation struck the same chord emphasizing the important aspect of Jesuit charism that is “initiating process and leaving spaces.”² More explicitly, the pope stressed the distinctiveness of Ignatian

¹ Opening Homily of Fr. Bruno Cadoré, O.P. Church of Gesù, in Rome on 2 October 2016. https://jesuits.eu/images/docs/GC_36_Documents.pdf accessed on June 16, 2019.

² Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the 36th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, General Curia of the Society of Jesus on Monday,

rule of “thinking with the Church” as a concrete way to “open space in which the Spirit could work in his time.”³

Moved by the spirit, the delegates took to heart the call to be both audacious and faithful to the spirit of Saint Ignatius and his early companions looking ahead into the future. Concretely, instead of composing more decrees, the delegates explored different alternatives to communicate the works of the congregation to all members of the Society. Instead of highlighting moments of successes, the delegates held up the meeting of the first companions in Venice – their frustrated and vulnerable moment – as the point of departure compelling all Jesuits to a more intense discernment, praying and listening attentively to what the Lord is calling the Society to do.⁴ Confronting its current challenges, the Congregation daringly asked all members of the Society to re-examine the fundamental source of their spiritual being and transformation, questioning “Why the [Spiritual] Exercises do not change us as deeply as we would hope?” “What elements in our lives, works, or lifestyles hinder our ability to let God’s gracious mercy transform us?”⁵ Like the first companions in Venice, having openly admitted and owned up to their own failures,

24 October 2016. https://jesuits.eu/images/docs/GC_36_Documents.pdf, accessed on June 16, 2019.

³ Ibid.

⁴ T. Stegman, “Back to Fundamentals” in “The Moments of GC 36 for Its Members” of *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* edited by Hung T Pham, 49/3 (2017) 37 – 40, 38.

⁵ “Companions in a Mission of Reconciliation and Justice,” GC 36, D. 1, no. 18.

members of the Congregation were “deeply convinced that God [was] calling the entire Society to a profound spiritual renewal,”⁶ thus calling all members of the Society back to the fundamentals, the *Spiritual Exercises*. In other words, neither the Vicar of Christ nor the highest governing body of the Society of Jesus introduced or assigned Jesuits to a new frontier. Instead, both have insisted on having all Jesuits to engage all their apostolic commitment and activities as men of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Consequently, the Thirty-Sixth General Congregation responded in renewing and recommitting the Society to the mission of reconciliation conducting it through the specific lens of the *Spiritual Exercises* and communal discernment.

For Ignatius and the early companions, the mission of reconciliation was born of a long process of discernment both individually and communally. In fact, reconciliation was not part of the mission of the original Society whose Formula of Institute was first confirmed by Pope Paul III’s apostolic letter *Regimini militantis Ecclesiae* on September 27, 1540. It took almost ten years for the mission of “reconciling the estranged, compassionately assist and serve those who are in prisons or hospitals” to be formulated, then approved by Pope Julius’ apostolic letter *Exposcit debitum* as part of the Society’s charism on July 21, 1550. Thus, the formulation and approval of the Society’s mission of reconciliation was a culmination

⁶ Ibid.

of the long process of Ignatius' and the early companions' persistent prayers, self-examination, and audacity to extend themselves to the new frontier.

Among the foundational documents of the Society of Jesus, the verb "*reconciliar*" and its derivative noun *reconciliación* first appeared in the entries of Saint Ignatius' *Spiritual Diary* of Saint Ignatius. Together, these terms were recorded eight times in total, four times each. On the first three occasions, which were found on the journal entry dated on February 25, 1544 –Saint Matthias' feast day – Ignatius repeatedly expressed an intense desire to "be reconciled with the three Divine Persons [of the blessed Trinity]" in his prayer and devotion [De 76, 2; 78, 1; 78, 2]. On the fourth occasion, which was written on March 4th of the same year, Ignatius was overwhelmed by the immense love of the Blessed Trinity, who profoundly moved and inspired him to a "greater security" where he "no longer wished to say more masses in order to be further reconciled, but [simply] wanted to fulfill them hoping to find joy in the Divine Majesty" [110, 3]. On the fifth and the sixth occasion which were noted in the journal on the following day, Ignatius confessed that it was Jesus who appeared during one of his customary prayers commending him to the three Divine Persons, then leading him deeper into their life and communion. Having been drawn into the life of the Divine, Ignatius who was healed of "any past disorder or unpleasantness," plunged into a state of consolation, where he felt "fully rested, tranquil, devout, and visited" [115, 2].

This period of grace lasted well into the night for him. On the seventh and the eighth occasion, the grace of being healed and reconciled directed Ignatius to a new devotion to the Blessed Trinity as well as to a renewed sense of freedom, open and ready to be sent by the three Divine Persons [118, 2].

From this mystical experience of Ignatius concerning the mission of reconciliation, we can draw four important spiritual dynamics. First, for Ignatius, the mission of reconciliation is rooted in the divine love of the Blessed Trinity. As indicated in his prayer experience, it was the loving Jesus who reached out to Ignatius first, then the Father. Both slowly drew him deeper into their divine union in the Spirit. As the journey continued to unfold, Ignatius was reconciled, healed, and then fully immersed in their immense love. Second, the mission of reconciliation began with the individual person in need to be reconciled with the Lord, which subsequently led him/her to personal conversion. As Ignatius was immersed deeper into the divine love, he became more aware of his personal discord, or the disharmony within himself, with others, and with the community often called Church. In fact, for Ignatius and contemporary authors of his time, the term “reconciliación” presupposed a condition of “divided soul” within the individual [*los ánimos que estaban disunidos*], or “apostasized faith that separated the individual from the community that was called the Church” [*se habían apartado de su fe apostatando*], or the social “sacred space that has

been violated" [*lugar sagrado ha sido violado*].⁷ Third, although Ignatius remained fervent and faithful in his prayer and devotion, the grace of being reconciled remained a divine gift, unconditionally and freely given. Overwhelmed by the divine love, Ignatius no longer felt the need of "saying more masses" – as if he could generate the grace from celebrating the Eucharist – simply reveled in the state of being graced. Finally, the grace of being loved and reconciled was not meant for Ignatius alone but also for others. Having been drawn into the Divine love and reconciled within himself and with the Divine, Ignatius found himself open and ready to be sent out to the world, to imitate the divine Life which he had encountered. In fact, Ignatius was having this mystical experience in the midst of occupying himself with erecting and maintaining la *Compañía de la Gracia* of Saint Marta Church (Casa Santa Marta) to provide care and shelter for downtrodden women and those who had turned to prostitution to support themselves.⁸

As the Society of Jesus moved into the modern world at the turn of the twentieth century, various general congregations have reemphasized, thus reclaimed, reconciliation as one of the central missions of the Society. Equally important,

⁷ J. C. Coupeau, "Reconciliación" *Diccionarios de Espiritualidad Ignatiana*. Edited by José García de Castro et als. Bilbao: Ediciones Mensajero 2007, 1534 - 1538, 1534.

⁸ R. Garcia-Villoslada, *San Ignacio de Loyola: Nuevo Biografía* Madrid: Biblioteca Autores Cristianos 1986, 531.

these congregations stressed the necessity of conducting or carrying out this mission according to the Ignatian way of proceeding. The twenty-eighth General Congregation, which was convened on March 11, 1938, in its twenty-ninth decree entitled “On Restoring Modern Society to Christ” was made to be fully aware of the “vast numbers of humankind appear to be estranged from God and the Catholic Church, and the entire way of thinking and living espoused by a great many to be withdrawing daily from the Christian faith.”⁹ Thus, to remain faithful to the Society’s charism, as indicated in the *Formula of Institute*, as well as to maintain the its effectiveness in ministry, the congregation declared that the most important task of Jesuits during this time was “to bring out the reconciliation of the whole of public and private life with the teaching of the Gospel and the restoration of the lost sheep to the fold of Christ.”¹⁰ While such a mission was meant for the Church, the congregation insisted that Jesuits to have “special concern for the multitudes of those who for whatever reason have become estranged from the life of religion and the influence of the Church, whether they belong to the class of more educated or to the class of workers and farmers.”¹¹

⁹ *For Matters of Greater Moment: The First Thirty Jesuit General Congregations*. Edited by J. Padberg et als, Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources 1994, D. 1, no. 1.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ D. 1, no. 2.

Thus, concern for the faith must lead Jesuits to care for the faithful.

The connection between promoting the Christian faith and providing care for the faithful was further emphasized by the Thirty-Second General Congregation which was convened on December 1, 1974. In its fourth decree entitled "Our Mission Today: The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice," the congregation emphatically announced that "the mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement. For *reconciliation with God demands the reconciliation of people with one another.*"¹² Consistent with Ignatius' experience, the association between reconciliation with the Divine and reconciliation with other people must be maintained. In such a mission, the role of the *Spiritual Exercises* was indispensable. According to the congregation, "a key pedagogy of the Exercises is that its aim is to remove barriers between God and [the person] so that the Spirit speaks directly with [that individual]."¹³ Thus, God remained the one who directs and moves the person's heart in the mission of reconciliation.

The estrangement, or fragmentation, of the modern world was further expounded at the Thirty-Fourth General

¹² *Jesuit Life & Mission Today: The Decrees and Accompanying Documents of the 31st – 35th General Congregations of the Society of Jesus*. Edited by J. Padberg SJ, Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources 2009, D. 4, no. 2, p. 298. Italics are mine.

¹³ D. 4, no. 57.

Congregation which gathered in Rome on January 5, 1995. The marginalization of Africa, the collapse of totalitarian system in Eastern Europe, discrimination against various indigenous community around the world, number of refugees and displaced persons reaching an alarming rate around the globe, massive number of the unemployed, abandoned children of the streets, victims of drug abuse, etc. presented an urgent situations which were in dire need of being reconciled.¹⁴ Consequently, a new dimension of justice, namely, concern for the environment must be considered and taken into account for the mission of reconciliation.¹⁵ Following up on the urgent situations which the Thirty-Fourth General Congregation had presented, the Thirty-Fifth General Congregation, which began with the opening mass on the morning of January 7, 2008, explicitly spelled out the three dimensions of the Society's mission of reconciliation in the world today. Remaining faithful to the spiritual dynamics and adapting them to the modern time, the general congregation insisted that the comprehensive program for the Society's renewed mission of reconciliation must involve a reconciliation with God, reconciliation with one another, *and* reconciliation with creation.¹⁶ Once again, the *Spiritual Exercises* remained instrumental in facilitating the personal encounter with the Divine, and leading others to "a deeper relationship with

¹⁴ General Congregation Thirty-Four, D. 3, no. 11 – 16.

¹⁵ D. 3, no. 9.

¹⁶ General Congregation Thirty-Five, D. 3, no. 19 – 36.

God in Christ and through that relationship to service of his Kingdom.”¹⁷ Finally, the Universal Apostolic Preferences, which are the fruits of the communal discernment promoted by the Thirty-Sixth General Congregation recently gathered from October 2 to November 12, 2019, reiterated the central role of the *Spiritual Exercises* in the mission of reconciliation. Accordingly, the *Exercises* serve as the preference among all other preferences. In other words, the *Spiritual Exercises* lay the spiritual infrastructure upon which Jesuits open themselves to hear the cry of the poor, the cry of the youth, and the cry of our common home, Mother Earth. As such the spiritual dynamics which originated in Ignatius’ experience, then instilled in the *Spiritual Exercises*, must permeate all dimensions of the Society’s mission of reconciliation.

In conclusion, regarding the mission of reconciliation, to “row into the deep” according to the Ignatian way of proceeding means to beg for the grace of being drawn ever so deeply into the heart of the Blessed Trinity. Immersed by the divine love, the individual person comes to a deeper awareness of how she/he is reconciled with himself in order to be healed from the past disordered. Then, empowered by the divine grace, she/he is moved deeper into the heart of humanity as well as of creation, to get in touch with their gifts and brokenness, joy and division, so to lead them all into the heart of God. In short, to participate in the mission of reconciliation means to

¹⁷ D. 3, no. 19 and 21.

participate in the extended work of the Three Divine Persons who continually labor to reconcile humanity and creation with themselves. As the Three Divine Persons row perfectly with one another into the deep of humanity, we are invited to imitate them in rowing together towards a life of wholeness.

HỢP TUYỂN THẦN HỌC - SỐ 53
Hoà Giải Trong Thần Học và Thực Hành - năm XXIX (2022)

Bùi Quanh Minh, S.J. - Trần Thanh Tân, S.J.

NHÀ XUẤT BẢN ĐỒNG NAI
1953J (số cũ 210) Nguyễn Ái Quốc, Tp. Biên Hòa, Đồng Nai

Chịu trách nhiệm xuất bản: GD - TBT. Bùi Thị Lâm Ngọc

Biên tập : Nguyễn Thị Kim

Thực hiện : Dòng Thánh Phaolô Thiện Bản

Sửa bản in : Nguyễn Thị Kim

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In 1.000 bản, khổ 14,5 x 20,5 cm. In tại Công ty CP in TM Trần Châu Phúc,
509 Tân Hoà Đông, P. Bình Trị Đông, Q. Bình Tân, TP. HCM.

Số xác nhận ĐKXB: 70-2022/CXBIPH/1-03/ĐoN,

Cục Xuất bản, In và Phát hành xác nhận ngày 11/01/2022.

Số QĐXB: 74/QĐB-ĐoN, do NXB Đồng Nai cấp ngày 14/02/2022.

Mã ISBN: 978-604-332-783-0. In xong và nộp lưu chiểu quý I/2022.