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The Qualities of Fr General Today

What, if any, is the value of the famous short chapter in the *Constitutions*, on the qualities of a Superior General, for Jesuit life today?¹ The question is certainly a topical one, as the Society of Jesus approaches the 36th General Congregation. The text, or ‘the portrait’ as I shall call it, was intended by Ignatius to provide a set of criteria for the election of someone to lead the Society. Does the portrait, however, have any contemporary value or application?

The language of the chapter is that of old-style virtues, a traditional jargon that, for many, has lost much of its original resonance. However, I believe this is precisely where Ignatius’s portrait of Fr General may speak to us very powerfully today. In modern society we are more likely to see specialist knowledge and skills as necessary for positions governance. There is a danger, then, that the traits of character that fit a person for leadership are eclipsed by a modern emphasis upon expertise in specific domains, such as those of law, finance, languages or administration. While Ignatius values the technical excellences that belong to a person through natural gift and long training, he is much more interested in the deeper qualities of character: the virtues. It is as though, through this text, Ignatius still speaks to us across the centuries: what he wants to lead the Society of Jesus is not a mere expert, but a particular kind of person, someone who is a ‘mirror and model’ for all of us. What he wants is someone who can lead by example. What he wants, above all, is a good Jesuit.

I am convinced, therefore, that the portrait of Fr General can continue to play at least three important and interrelated roles today. The first is that it can, according to Ignatius’s original intention, still provide criteria by which to elect a new general of the Society of Jesus. To choose a general is not to choose someone with an impressive *Curriculum Vitae*, but to elect a certain kind of person, a person after Ignatius’s own heart. Secondly, this text can offer a concise theory of Ignatian leadership. To be a good leader means being a certain kind of person. But what qualities are most essential? Is it intelligence, or effectiveness, or decisiveness, or integrity, or management skill, that matters most? Ignatius provides an

¹ *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms: A Complete English Translation of the Official Latin Texts* (Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996) Bk IX, Chapter 2.

answer, based on his understanding of what it means to be a companion of Jesus in a company devoted to the spiritual good of all. Contemporary theories of leadership increasingly recognize the need to cultivate character at a deep level; the portrait offers us, in distilled form, a character-based theory of Ignatian leadership. And finally, the portrait offers a model of Jesuit formation. The text is a picture of a good Jesuit, sketched by Ignatius himself. It is therefore a guiding principle for any programme of Jesuit formation, and an invaluable companion for any Jesuit seeking to grow according to the ‘pathway to God’ that Ignatius and the early Jesuits discerned.

There is, of course, a danger that the portrait is seen as unrealistic: ‘I don’t, and never could, measure up to that!’ It is certainly true that Ignatius presents an ideal, but I would not describe the portrait as *idealistic*. A simple way of recognising this is to think, for a moment, of a Jesuit you love and admire, and then reflect on what it is about that person that you treasure so much. For the most part, the answer will be a list of qualities: this person is wise, compassionate and free, for example. These are the kind of qualities that Ignatius names. Indeed, Ribadeneira recognized that, in them, Ignatius ‘without thinking of himself, drew a sketch of himself and has left us a perfectly finished portrait of himself.’ While he does put forward a demanding ideal, he is talking, not only of what we should strive towards, but about real qualities of real people.

I shall begin by looking at how we might approach this intriguing chapter of the *Constitutions* today, and then comment on some of the qualities that Ignatius singles out as most important. I shall also offer some comments on the role the portrait might play in electing a General today. Finally, I shall offer a paraphrase in contemporary idiom, a version that can be read alongside the original. I attach a translation of the original text as an appendix.

How to read the portrait

The second paragraph of the portrait is intended as a guide to the text:

The six qualities treated in this chapter are the most important, the rest being reduced to them. For they comprise the general’s perfection in relation to God, together with what perfects his heart, understanding, and execution; and also the corporal and external gifts helpful to him. Moreover, the order of their listing indicates the importance at which they are rated. [724]

The six qualities therefore have a very deliberate order. Ignatius is employing the scriptural and scholastic understanding of the human person as spirit, soul and body. Under the heading of ‘soul’ he includes heart, intellect and the ‘executive power’ – the ability to put into action what one intends. His intention is to indicate the virtues that are needed in each of these spheres of spirit, soul and body.

Two things are particularly noteworthy. The first is that the schema provides a remarkably holistic vision of the human person. For Ignatius, the human person is neither a pure intellect nor a mere animal. The affections and motivations of a person are significant for him; yet he also avoids a romanticism by noting the importance of capacity to make and execute good decisions. The body itself has its own importance, even while the spirit remains the deepest and most real of all the genuinely human realities. The human person, therefore, is not spirit or heart or head or hands or body alone; all these dimensions together form a ‘synergistic whole’.² The significance of this holistic anthropology for Jesuit formation should be evident: it should not emphasise one element at the expense of any other, since all are important: the education of intellect, affections, execution, spirituality; even rightly ordered concern for the health of the body and physical appearance has its place. The norm that flows from this vision is one balance, of integral human and spiritual development.

Secondly, the schema reflects an underlying hierarchy, or ‘value system’ as some would say today: ‘the importance of these six qualities is indicated by the order in which they are placed’. The ordering is striking. The world tends to value exterior goods (wealth, honour) in the first place, and then health and beauty of the body; next come achievements, then intelligence, then perhaps the motivations of the heart, and in the last place, sometimes at least, some kind of acknowledgement of the spiritual. For Ignatius, in stark contrast, spirituality, or relatedness with God, comes first; then the inner motivations of the heart; then intelligence, learning and wisdom; then action; and finally the bodily and external gifts. The progress is from the ‘inner’ to the ‘outer man’, rather than vice versa, and from the ‘higher’ to the ‘lower’. In the portrait, Ignatius turns the values of the world upside down and inside out.

The text, then, has a carefully thought out underlying logical structure, and a depth that may not initially be apparent to cursory inspection. Its holistic vision of the human person can guide formation, as a person becomes aware of being underdeveloped or neglectful in regard to one or other aspect of the overall picture. Its value system, which accords more with the gospel than the world, can challenge us to put first things first, and may even call us to a kind of conversion. Having the interpretive key in hand, let us now turn to the rest of the portrait.

² Antonio M. De Aldama, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus: The Superior General*, trans. Ignacio Echaniz (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1999).

The Six Qualities

Ignatius gives us six qualities, or, more accurately, six *sets* of qualities. They correspond to what I call Spirit, Heart ('affections'), Head ('understanding'), Hands ('executive power'), Body and Externals. Without dwelling on each, I shall try to single out what I consider most distinctive about Ignatius's vision of Jesuit leadership.

To begin, it is worth noting a basic principle: the general should 'be a person whose example in all the virtues will be a help to the other members of the Society' [725]. As Ignatius had explained earlier in the *Constitutions*, 'progress in virtue is much aided by the good example' [276]. Fr General, then, will teach the Jesuit way of life primarily by modelling it. The implication for the process of electing a new general is that the Society, first and foremost, needs someone who is a good exemplar of Jesuit life.

There are three qualities that are particularly striking in the portrait: friendship with God, magnanimity, and practical wisdom. I shall dwell mostly on these, and briefly mention a few others that are notable.

Friendship with God

In the first quality, regarding Spirit, Ignatius wants someone who is 'closely united with God our Lord and have familiarity with him in prayer and in all his operations' [723]. The spiritual qualities of a potential future Fr General are the most important.

The emphasis on spirituality has to be interpreted through the lens of an authentically Ignatian, integral humanism. Ignatius does not want a recluse who spends long hours in prayer every day. He wants someone who is friends with God in prayer and in all his 'operations', i.e. thoughts, affections and actions. In other words, we have here the characteristic emphasis on finding God in all things. As Ignatius once had occasion to remind an overly pious Francis Borgia, 'There is no doubt that is a greater virtue in the soul, and a greater grace, for it to be able to relish its Lord in a variety of duties and in a variety of places, rather than simply in one.'³ It is important that Fr General is a person of prayer; it is also important that he has the spirituality of a contemplative in action.

Why is the spirituality of the general so important? There is a consonance here between *who the general is* and *what the Society is for*: to 'help souls' on their journey to their ultimate

³ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings: Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters Including the Text of the Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 205.

end in God. As he famously says elsewhere in the *Constitutions*, ‘For the Society was not instituted by human means, neither is it through them that it can be preserved and developed, but through the omnipotent hand of Christ and God our Lord.’ [812; cf. 813] The general is to be a spiritual leader, employing spiritual means, for a spiritual purpose.

Magnanimity

Ignatius identifies ‘magnanimity’ as especially important for Fr General [728]. This is traditionally the virtue that desires and does great things, worthy of glory. Magnanimity was Ignatius’s signature virtue. His life as a young man was marked by worldly ambition and glory-seeking. His conversion turned away from narcissism to a search for the greater glory, not of self, but of God. Magnanimity is a characteristic Ignatian virtue, because it is the virtue of the *magis*: not being content with enough, but always seeking what is more for God’s praise and honour. Those close to Ignatius recognized in him this virtue above all.

How might we translate magnanimity in today’s terms? Pope Francis has talked of cultivating magnanimity as the goal of Jesuit character education: having ‘a big heart, open to God and to others’.⁴ Pedro Arrupe referred to ‘a certain kind of apostolic aggressivity’ as characteristic of the Jesuit way of proceeding. These are contemporary glosses on the good ambition of magnanimity, which, for Ignatius, is a virtue of initiative, since it leads us to ‘initiate great undertakings in the service of God our Lord’.

Some bristle at the mention of magnanimity today, because it tends to connote a self-importance and insufferable pride. One need only consult Aristotle’s famous portrait of the magnanimous man to be aware that the Greek ideal of the great-souled man, who is self-sufficient, looks down on his inferiors, and seeks honour for himself, is hardly a Christian ideal. And yet there is a core to magnanimity, the willingness always to go further in the good, that enabled it to be transmitted and transformed in the Christian tradition. What is characteristic, and perhaps original in Ignatius’s reading of magnanimity, is its God-directedness. Magnanimity initiates projects precisely ‘in the service of God our Lord’. The attitude with which one should begin the *Spiritual Exercises* is a ‘magnanimous generosity’ [Exx 5]: a spirit that strives to give everything to God. The ‘great’ in Ignatian magnanimity is a gospel, not a

⁴ ‘Thanks to magnanimity, we can always look at the horizon from the position where we are. That means being able to do the little things of every day with a big heart open to God and to others. That means being able to appreciate the small things inside large horizons, those of the kingdom of God.’ ‘A Big Heart Open to God’, *Thinking Faith* (19th September, 2013), <http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20130919_1.htm>. See also *Address of Pope Francis to the Students of the Jesuit Schools of Italy and Albania*, (7 June 2013), <https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco_20130607_scuole-gesuiti.html>.

worldly greatness, and Ignatius explicitly warns here against becoming inflated by success. What Ignatius hopes for in Fr General is someone who is able to live in the tension between recognising reality and its limitations, and yet being open to what may nevertheless be possible, what is more for the glory of God.

Practical wisdom

It is not surprising that Ignatius emphasises the need for learning in the superior general, since ‘learning is highly necessary for one who will have so many learned men in his charge’ [729]. Today we are conscious of the importance of learning for the contribution the Society can offer the Church, as Pope Benedict XVI reminded us at GC 35.

Yet even more important than intellectual accomplishments is, for Ignatius, a virtue that is especially prized by Ignatius. It is variously named ‘prudence’, ‘discretion’, or ‘discernment’. Looking back on the period immediately following his Loyola conversion, Ignatius recognizes his own spiritual immaturity at this stage in his journey: ‘He never took a spiritual view of anything, nor even knew the meaning of humility, or charity, or patience, or discretion as a rule and measure of these virtues.’⁵ This is just one text that shows both the close connection between Ignatius’s understanding of the spiritual life and the virtues, and also his characteristically high estimation of ‘discretion’ or prudence.

‘Prudence’ is a virtue word that dwindled in its meaning over time. Today the ‘prudent’ person is cautious, self-interested and even expedient. Yet *prudentia*, or *discretio*, in the tradition, was the virtue on which all the others depended: the practical wisdom to know how to direct my life, desires and actions here and now, in the light of my orientation towards my ultimate end. Today, ‘good sense’ may be the best translation for this virtue.⁶

If we wanted, in all the Christian tradition, to single out an exemplar of this virtue, we would be hard pressed to find a better one than Ignatius. The author of the *Spiritual Exercises* exhibited a particular gift in educating others in discernment and the ability to make a wise election concerning the disposition of one’s life as a whole. The giver of the *Exercises* of course must employ discretion, by applying the norms laid down by Ignatius in a way that is sensitive to the particularities of a person’s temperament and spiritual needs. In the *Constitutions* themselves, a prudential and discerning logic is inscribed into almost every chapter, as we are continually exhorted to make decisions according to ‘times, places and

⁵ Ignatius Loyola and Luís Gonçalves da Câmara, *St Ignatius’ Own Story: As Told to Luis González de Câmara; With a Sampling of His Letters*, trans. William J. Young (Chicago: Regnery Co., 1956), 14.

⁶ Herbert McCabe, “Aquinas on Good Sense,” in *Thomas Aquinas: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 339–51.

circumstances'. The mode of proceeding of the Society of Jesus is one that places trust in the good sense of the formed Jesuit.

In this little paragraph in the portrait, Ignatius recommends a threefold prudence [729]. The general should have 'prudence along with experience in spiritual and interior matters, so that he may be able to discern the various spirits and to give counsel and remedies to so many who will have spiritual necessities.' He should also have 'discretion in exterior matters and a manner of handling such diverse affairs'. And finally, he should have a manner of 'conversing with such various person from within and without the Society.' The general, then, should have a spiritual, practical and relational good sense.

Some other qualities

If friendship with God, magnanimity and practical wisdom are the most striking emphases of Ignatius, there are also some other qualities that are worthy of mention: freedom, a kindness that is just, proactivity and indifference to 'success'.

Ignatius says that Fr General must be 'free from all inordinate affections, having them tamed and mortified' [726]. This paragraph reflects a traditional cluster of virtues especially important to Ignatius, temperance, decorum, modesty, which he understands as the manifestation of the indifference the *Principle and Foundation* at the level of affectivity. To be 'free of inordinate affections' is certainly not to be free of affections: no one today, reading his *Autobiography* or *Spiritual Diary* or experiencing the *Spiritual Exercises*, could accuse Ignatius of a suppression of emotion. Yet the radical freedom and availability to do God's will that one hopes for from the *Exercises* is discernible even at the deep level of desire and passion.

Ignatius continues with some qualities that should be especially characteristic of someone in charge of others: 'he should know how to mingle the required rectitude and severity with kindness and gentleness'[727]. How to explain this challenging, even apparently off-putting, idea?

Sometimes a particular sphere of life is governed, not by a single virtue, but by a combination of apparent opposites. Martin Luther King, Jr, once observed:

life at its best is a creative synthesis of opposites in fruitful harmony. [...] It is pretty difficult to imagine a single person having, simultaneously, the characteristics of the serpent and the dove, but this is what Jesus expects. We must combine the toughness of the serpent and the softness of the dove, a tough mind and a tender heart.⁷

⁷ Martin King, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 1st HarperCollins pbk. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

Ignatius seems to be making a similar point here. In a superior, a soft heart without fairness and justice can degenerate into a kind of indulgence. Similarly, a justice that is not tempered by compassion and love can be cold and hard. Just as a good parent shows love through kindness and also by setting reasonable limits, so with a superior. Ignatius proposes a gentleness and kindness that is also just and right.

It is worth mentioning that Ignatius places emphasis upon the pragmatic virtues of the ‘executive power’, such as constancy and perseverance [728]. For the general must not merely initiate great projects, but ‘persevere in them with the needed constancy, neither losing courage in the face of the contradictions, even from persons of high rank and power, nor allowing himself to be deflected by their entreaties or threats from what reason and the divine service require.’ He repeats this later by identifying the virtue of being ‘vigilant and solicitous in undertaking enterprises and vigorous in carrying them through to their completion and perfection, rather than careless and remiss about leaving them begun but unfinished’ [730]. Ignatius wished to underline that the general needs to be someone who is proactive in beginning projects, but also steady in ensuring they are brought to fruition. Compared to the preceding tradition, with its interior focus, the accent upon the executive virtues is, I would say, distinctively Ignatian.

Finally, while Ignatius emphasises the virtues of execution, he cannot justly be accused of a worldly attachment to success. For he also recommends the kind of equanimity of soul that is the fruit of discernment of spirits and freedom from disordered attachments. ‘He should be superior to all eventualities, not letting himself be exalted by success or cast down by adversity’[728]. This equanimity can of course only come from a profound spiritual indifference, an indifference even to ‘success’ and ‘failure’. Even at his most pragmatic, Ignatius does not forget the underlying spiritual qualities required in the general.

The portrait’s role in electing a General

The *Constitutions*, for Jesuits, have a perennial value in guiding the Society of Jesus, and inspiring us to find new ways, in contexts different from Ignatius’s, to live out its distinctive mode of proceeding. Given the contemporary renewal of virtue and character in moral theology, philosophy and psychology, and in recent secular approaches to leadership and the professions, Ignatius’s text on the qualities of Fr General is especially timely today. In this important text, we have a distinctively Ignatian vision of the character of someone formed by

the *Spiritual Exercises* and the long process of Jesuit formation, and having the qualities of leadership necessary to lead the Society of Jesus.

However, the portrait he provides is undeniably challenging. Ignatius says that General ‘ought to be one of those who are most outstanding in every virtue, most deserving in the Society, and known as such for the longest time’ [735]. After reflecting on the qualities named in the portrait of Fr General, it may seem that the ideal is so demanding that it would be difficult to hope to find someone who could even approximate to them all!

Ignatius seems aware of this problem, and so adds a helpful further criterion: at least he must not be without the essentials, three necessary qualities: ‘he should at least not lack great probity and love for the Society, nor good judgement accompanied by sound learning.’ In other words: a sound character, a deep love for the Society, good sense. With God’s grace, that will be enough.

A contemporary paraphrase: The Ignatian Leader

What are the core qualities of the ideal leader of the Society of Jesus?

The Ignatian leader is:

Above all, someone of *spiritual depth*,
friends with God in prayer, action and relationships.

With *inner freedom* of heart,
he leads with a *humble, just* and *strong love*.

He is *proactive*: a starter and a finisher.
He takes care of his *health* and *appearance*.

Spirit, Soul and Body,
he lives the *magis*.

The essentials:

A sound character

A deep love for the Society of Jesus

Good sense

We all fall short; we trust in God's grace.

AMDG

The Kind of Person the Superior General Ought to Be
Part IX, Chapter 2

[723] In regard to the qualities which are desirable in the superior general, the first is that 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.

[724] *The six qualities treated in this chapter are the most important, the rest being reduced to them. For they comprise the general's perfection in relation to God, together with what perfects his heart, understanding, and execution; and also the corporal and external gifts helpful to him. Moreover, the order of their listing indicates the importance at which they are rated.*

[725] The second quality is that he be a person whose example in all the virtues will be a help to the other members of the Society. Charity towards all his neighbours should particularly shine forth in him, and in a special way toward the members of the Society; likewise a genuine humility which will make him highly beloved of God our Lord and of human beings.

[726] He ought also to be free from all inordinate affections, having them tamed and mortified so that interiorly they will not disturb the judgment of his intellect, and so that exteriorly he will be so composed and, in particular, so circumspect in speaking that none, either members of the Society (who should regard him as a mirror and model) or externs, will observe any thing or word in him that is not edifying.

[727] However, he should know how to mingle the required rectitude and severity with kindness and gentleness in such a way that he neither lets himself be deflected from what he judges to be more pleasing to God our Lord nor fails to have proper sympathy for his sons. Thus even those who are reprimanded or punished will recognize that he proceeds rightly in our Lord and with charity in what he does, even if it is against their liking according to the lower man.

[728] Magnanimity and fortitude of soul are likewise highly necessary for him, so that he may bear the weaknesses of many, initiate great undertakings in the service of God our Lord, and persevere in them with the needed constancy, neither losing courage in the face of the contradictions, even from persons of high rank and power, nor allowing himself to be deflected by their entreaties or threats from what reason and the divine service require. He should be superior to all eventualities, not letting himself be exalted by success or cast down by adversity, and being quite ready to accept death, when necessary, for the good of the Society in the service of Jesus Christ our God and Lord.

[729] The third quality is that he ought to be endowed with great intelligence and judgment, so that he is not lacking in this talent in either speculative or practical matters which may arise. And although learning is highly necessary for one who will have so many learned men in his charge, still more necessary is prudence along with experience in spiritual and interior matters, so that he may be able to discern the various spirits and to give counsel and remedies to so many who will have spiritual necessities. He also needs discretion in exterior matters and a manner of handling such diverse affairs as well as of conversing with such various persons from within and without the Society.

[730] The fourth quality, one highly necessary for the execution of business, is that he should be vigilant and solicitous in undertaking enterprises and vigorous in carrying them through to their completion and perfection, rather than careless and remiss about leaving them begun but unfinished.

[731] The fifth quality concerns the body. As regards health, appearance, and age, account should be taken on the one hand of dignity and authority, and on the other of the physical strength demanded by his charge, so as to be able therewith to fulfil his office to the glory of God our Lord.

[732] Thus it seems that he ought to be neither of very advanced age, which is generally unsuited for the labours and cares of such a charge, nor of great youth, which generally is not accompanied by the proper authority and experience.

[733] The sixth quality regards external things. Among these preference should be given to those which help more toward edification and the service of God our Lord in such a charge. Such are normally esteem, a good reputation, and whatever else contributes toward authority among those within and without.

[734] Nobility, wealth which was possessed in the world, honour, and the like are external endowments. Other things being equal, these are worthy of some consideration; but even if they are lacking, there are other things more important which could suffice for election.

[735] Finally, he ought to be one of those who are most outstanding in every virtue, most deserving in the Society, and known as such for the longest time. If any of the aforementioned qualities should be wanting, he should at least not lack great probity and love for the Society,

nor good judgment accompanied by sound learning. In other matters, the aids which he will have (and which will be treated below) will be able through God's help and favour to supply for much.