

The Qualities of the Superior General Today

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Is there any value for Jesuit life today of the famous short chapter in the *Constitutions* on ‘The Kind of Person the Superior General Ought to Be’?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, describes the ‘gifts of great spiritual perfection and of the virtues’ that Fr General ought to have (CN [791]). 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 validity?

The terminology employed by the portrait is that of the virtues, a traditional language that, for many, has lost its original resonance. However, I believe this is precisely where Ignatius’s portrait of Fr General may speak to us powerfully today. When we appoint people to positions of governance in modern institutions, we tend to place primary importance on specialist knowledge and skills. We look for experts in law, finance, languages or administration. There is a danger, then, that the traits of character that fit a person for leadership are eclipsed by a bias towards technical knowledge in specific domains. While Ignatius values the technical excellences that belong to a person through natural gift and long training, he is more interested in character, in the deeper qualities of mind and heart that we call the ‘virtues.’ Ignatius’s text therefore 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

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) Part IX, Chapter 2, [723-735]. Hereafter this source will be abbreviated to *CN*.

is a ‘mirror and model’ for all of us (CN [726]). 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 the Superior General may continue to play at least two 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 select a general is not to choose someone with an impressive *Curriculum Vitae*, but to elect a person after Ignatius’s own heart: someone outstanding in the ‘eulogy’ virtues more than the ‘resumé’ virtues. 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 description of Ignatian leadership. And secondly, 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 formation, and an invaluable companion for anyone 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!’ Ignatius’s concern, however, is not to force us into a pre-determined mould, but rather that we ‘make progress in the Lord’ according to our own capacity. The portrait gives us something by which to guide our aim, a direction in which to strive.

Furthermore, while it is certainly true that Ignatius presents an ideal, 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 humble, for example. These are the kind of qualities that Ignatius names, and indeed exemplifies himself: Pedro de Ribadeneira famously points out that, in the description of the qualities of Fr General, Ignatius ‘without thinking of himself, drew a sketch

of himself and has left us a perfectly finished portrait of himself.² While Ignatius does put forward a demanding ideal, the materials he applies to his portrait are 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. When appropriate, I shall draw upon Pedro de Ribadeneira's *Treatise on the Governance of St Ignatius Loyola*, which offers concrete illustrations of Ignatius's ideal from the saint's own practice as a superior.³ Finally, I shall offer some thoughts on what the portrait may say to the Society of Jesus today, as it approaches the election of a new general.

How to read the portrait

Ignatius offers us a guide to reading the text, in a short paragraph or footnote:

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. (CN [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. The 'spirit' is that by which we relate to God. Under the heading of 'soul' he includes heart, intellect and the 'executive power' – the ability to put into action what one intends. Nor does he neglect the

² Pedro de Ribadeneira, *Life of Ignatius*, Book V, Preface.

³ For the English translation, see Pedro de Ribadeneira, *Treatise on the Governance of St Ignatius Loyola*, trans. Joseph A. Munitiz (Oxford: The Way Books, forthcoming).

body and the external gifts of fortune and status. Ignatius's intention is to indicate the virtues and other qualities that are needed in each of the spheres or dimensions of the human person.

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 not a pure intellect: the affections and motivations of a person are significant for him. Yet he also avoids romanticism by noting the importance of the practical capacity to make and execute good decisions. The body itself has its own importance, even while the spirit remains the deepest and most important 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'.⁴ 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: all have their proper emphasis. Even a rightly ordered concern for the health of the body and physical appearance has its legitimate, if subordinate, 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 the 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, in last place, 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.

⁴ Antonio M. De Aldama, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus: The Superior General*, trans. Ignacio Echaniz (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1999).

The text, then, has been constructed with care, according to an underlying logical structure; it has a depth that may not 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, challenges us to put first things first, beginning with our relationship with God and the qualities of the heart. Having Ignatius's interpretive key in hand, then, let us now turn to the rest of the portrait.

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' (CN [725]). As Ignatius had explained earlier in the *Constitutions*, 'progress in virtue is much aided by the good example' (CN [276]). Fr General, then, will teach the Jesuit way of life primarily by modelling it. Ignatius is consciously appropriating an ancient principle of monastic and religious life, that more than a written *Rule* (or set of *Constitutions*), we benefit from a 'living rule,' a person who lives what such documents are attempting to describe. 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 the Jesuit way of 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 also notable.

Friendship with God

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

The emphasis on spirituality must 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 novice, Francis Borgia, ‘There is no doubt that there 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.’⁵ 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 end in God. As he famously says elsewhere in the *Constitutions*:

For the preservation and growth not only of the body or exterior of the Society but also of its spirit, and for the attainment of the objective it seeks, which is to aid souls to reach their ultimate and supernatural end, the means which unite the human instrument with God and so dispose it that it may be wielded well by his divine hand are more effective than those which equip it in relation to human beings. (CN [813])

The general is to be a spiritual leader, employing spiritual means, for a spiritual purpose.

⁵ 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.

Magnanimity

Ignatius identifies ‘magnanimity’ as especially important for Fr General (*CN* [728]). Traditionally, this virtue is defined as being willing to do things worthy of great glory. Some therefore 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 biblical or Christian. And yet there is a core to this originally Greco-Roman quality, namely, the willingness always to go further in the good, which enabled it to be appropriated by the Christian tradition through a transformative marriage with the biblical virtues of humility and love.

Indeed, this humbler, more other-centred kind of magnanimity, is Ignatius’s signature virtue. His life as a young man was marked by worldly ambition and glory-seeking. His conversion turned him away from narcissism to a search for the greater glory, not of self, but of God. Magnanimity is therefore the most 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.

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 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 dynamic tension between humbly recognising reality and its limitations, and yet magnanimously being open to what the Spirit may be making possible for God’s greater glory.

How might we translate Ignatian magnanimity in today's terms? Pope Francis has given us a helpful contemporary reading of magnanimity, which he describes as the goal of Jesuit character education:

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.⁶

‘A big heart open to God and to others’: an accurate description of the holy and selfless ambition of magnanimity, which, for Ignatius, leads us to ‘initiate great undertakings in the service of God our Lord’.

Practical wisdom

It is not surprising that Ignatius emphasises the need for academic excellence in the superior general, since ‘learning is highly necessary for one who will have so many learned men in his charge’ (CN [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, for Ignatius, is another virtue. 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

⁶ ‘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>.

these virtues.⁷ 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 has dwindled in its meaning over time. Today the 'prudent' person is cautious, self-interested and even expedient. Yet *prudentia*, or *discretio*, in the tradition in which Ignatius was conversant, is the virtue on which all the others depend: 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. This practical wisdom or 'good sense' was recognized to be cultivated by reflection on experience, to depend upon good character, and to possess a kind of *principled flexibility*: relying upon sound rules of action, it applies them with a situational sensitivity. Interestingly, the virtue of practical wisdom is today undergoing something of a renaissance, as a response to the increasing demoralization of the professions in modern life.⁸ The underlying problem is an ethical one: the privileging of the scientific and technical knowledge of the expert over more moral forms of knowledge, an eclipse of important human values other than those of efficiency or profit, and an attempt to solve problems by the multiplication of rules. On this analysis what is required is the remoralization of the professions precisely through a recovery of the virtue of practical wisdom.

If one hoped to single out, in all the Christian tradition, 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 practical wisdom of this little book is one drawn from reflection on his own experience in the light of the spiritual traditions of the Church. 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

⁷ Ignatius Loyola and Luís Gonçalves da Câmara, *St Ignatius' Own Story: As Told to Luis González de Cámara; With a Sampling of His Letters*, trans. William J. Young (Chicago: Regnery Co., 1956), 14.

⁸ Professor Liz Bondi et al., *Towards Professional Wisdom: Practical Deliberation in the People Professions* (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2013).

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 ‘circumstances of times, places and persons’. The mode of proceeding of the Society of Jesus is one that places trust, not so much in the strict application of a rule book, as in the good sense of the formed, discerning Jesuit.

Pedro de Ribadeneira, in his observations on Ignatius’s exercise of his role as superior, continually emphasises the latter’s discretion and prudence. For example, he observes that Ignatius was always prepared to treat different Jesuits differently, according to the rule, not of their liking, but their need, for ‘he felt it showed an unblanced spirit if one wanted to measure with the same yardstick things that were different’.⁹ For Ribadeneira, Ignatius also displayed good sense in getting the best out of different Jesuits, especially those who were gifted in one area, but possessed faults in another: ‘the prudence and wisdom of the Father was so great and so divine that he knew how to make use of the good, without the bad causing harm; he knew how to harvest the wheat without the cockle choking the good seed of the Lord.’¹⁰ Ignatius displayed a similar wisdom in knowing how to wait for the right moment to correct someone gently, in being considerate about a particular novice’s weakness or immaturity, and in knowing how to win different kinds of people over and attract them to God. For, Ribadeneira notes, ‘if prudence is to find the right way, it has to take into account the circumstances of time and place, and even more those of the persons with whom we are dealing and of the matters that are involved’.¹¹

In the little paragraph on the practical wisdom of Fr General, Ignatius recommends a threefold good sense (*CN* [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

⁹ Ribadeneira, *Treatise*, Ch.2, n.10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Ch.4, n.9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Ch.6, n.8.

‘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, a practical and a relational practical wisdom.

Some other qualities

If magnanimity, practical wisdom and friendship with God in all occupations, 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’ (CN [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 repression 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 passion: a detachment within attachment, a freedom within desire.

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’ (CN [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.¹²

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. Ribadeneira notes that in practice, Ignatius would use a ‘very great gentleness’ with novices who were struggling, yet ‘when necessary, he would mix severity with the mildness, and rigour with the gentleness’.¹³ Ignatius was especially strict with ‘those who spoke ill of their fellow Jesuits’.¹⁴ At times, the saint may have gone too far, as when he reduced Nadal to tears, or dealt with Laínez with a ‘harshness’ that left him distressed. Even the admiring Ribadeneira keeps some distance from such examples, commenting that they ‘are more to be admired than imitated’!¹⁵ Yet the ideal remains, even if Ignatius himself sometimes erred on one side or other, and so missed the synthesis: 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 solicitude, constancy and perseverance (*CN* [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

¹² Martin King, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 1st HarperCollins pbk. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

¹³ *Treatise*, Ch.1, n.12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Ch.3, 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Ch.4, 2-4.

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' (*CN* [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 spiritual tradition, with its interior focus, the accent upon the executive virtues is fitting for the leader of a worldwide apostolic body, and characteristically Ignatian.

Finally, while Ignatius values 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' (*CN* [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 the distinctive mode of proceeding it describes. 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 portrait of 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 training, someone exhibiting the qualities necessary to lead the Society of Jesus. This vision of leadership, then, I would say, remains an inspiring ideal today. At the least, it constitutes a reminder to us, as we pray and discern our way to the election of a new general superior to lead the Society of

Jesus, that, important as specialist knowledge and skills are, we should not forget that, for Ignatius, it is the qualities of character, the virtues, that hold primacy of place.

The portrait 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’ (CN [735]). After reflecting on the qualities named in the portrait of Fr General, it may seem that the ideal is so exacting that it we would be hard pressed to find someone who could even approximate to them!

Ignatius seems aware of this problem, and so adds a helpful further criterion, that he must not be without 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, the triptych of a sound character, a deep love for the Society, and good sense with learning, is what is essential.

In summary, then, what kind of person does Ignatius desire to lead the Society of Jesus? What core qualities should he have? In a contemporary gloss, one might put it as follows.

Above all, Fr General is to be a person of *spiritual depth*, friends with God in prayer, action and relationships. With *freedom of heart*, he leads with a *humble, just and courageous love*. He is *proactive*: a person of initiative and perseverance in the good, always displaying *equanimity* in the face of ‘success’ or ‘failure’. He takes care of his health and appearance. Spirit, Soul and Body, he lives the *magis* with ‘a big heart, open to God and to others’. And if no one can live up to all of such ideals, the essentials are these: a sound character, a deep love for the Society of Jesus, and an educated good sense. We all fall short; we trust in God’s grace.