

THINKING WITH THE CHURCH: THE SPIRIT OF ST IGNATIUS'S RULES

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THE CHIEF AIM of this paper will be to make, as far as space allows, an accurate study of the meaning, and especially of the spirit, which St Ignatius put into his eighteen Rules for Thinking with the Church. Present-day applications will be left to a later paper.¹

I. *Introductory observations*

The wording 'Rules for Thinking with the Church' is not from Ignatius. It is, however, sound abbreviation, now consecrated by four centuries of usage within and without the Society of Jesus, which quite accurately compresses the lengthier titles² which he wrote or approved. These severally illumine one another by their very differences of phraseology. The formulation which is most basic, and perhaps best reveals his mind, is the one he wrote in the autograph: *Para el sentido verdadero que en la Yglesia militante debemos tener, se guarden las reglas siguientes*: 'Towards acquiring the genuine attitude which we ought to maintain in the Church militant, the following directives should be observed'. *Sentido*, here translated 'attitude', is one of the words which Ignatius used with nuances of his own. By it he denotes that cognition which is basically intellectual; but it is also a cognition savoured so repeatedly that it has taken on emotional overtones and become a frame of reference instinctively used to guide one's life. The word *reglas* (or *regulae*) cannot here mean a rule imposing an obligation, since an exercitant has no obligation even to make the Exercises. Rather, Ignatius is conveying other meanings such as directives, suggestions, guides, patterns or models – somewhat as he did when he wrote that Christ is *dechado y regla nuestra*, 'our model and rule'.

¹ Cf Fr James Hennessey's paper, 'Fidelity to Rome', *infra*, pp 83–93.

² They are found in parallel columns in *Exercitia spiritualia: Textus* (Rome, 1969), in vol 100 of the *Monumenta historica Societatis Iesu* (MHSI).

His other formulations can now be compared. The *Versio prima*, which was completed by 1541 and was perhaps made by Ignatius himself, has: 'Towards thinking (*ad sentiendum*) certainly and truly in the Church, as we are obliged, the following directives should be observed'. The *Vulgata versio* of Frusius, approved by Paul III in 1548 along with the *Versio prima* and used by Ignatius, reads: 'Some directives to be observed, that we may think truly with the orthodox Church'. The very differences of formulation indicate the founder's hope that his exercitant would think both *with* the Church, by obediential acceptance of her pronouncements, and rightly *in* the Church, by speaking and acting habitually in a manner likely to increase his own and the Church's spiritual vitality.

Ignatius placed these rules as an appendix at the very end of his book, the *Spiritual Exercises*. They were to be given only to those retreatants who would probably find them helpful. As the ancient Directories point out, they were meant especially for an exercitant who for nearly thirty days had been gazing with love on Christ and his Kingdom and had heard a call to help in spreading it, perhaps even among heretics or weak Catholics. For example, Polanco, Ignatius' secretary, states that in these rules:

recommendation is given to those things which the heretics of our time, or those showing affinity to their doctrine, are prone to attack or scorn in their books, or sermons, or conversations. Consequently, these rules are to be recommended as antidotes, especially to those who live in places or among persons where there is suspicion of heresy. Moreover, they serve not only to keep such an exercitant from erring by speaking privately or writing publicly in a manner other than proper, but they also help him to discern whether the statements and writings of others are departing from the Catholic Church's manner of thinking and speaking, and to advise others to be on their guard.³

II. *General background*

The general background necessary to understand these rules lies in Ignatius's world view – one that is marvellously dynamic both for total dedication of self to God and for apostolic fruitfulness. By means natural and supernatural God led him to an intense desire to associate intimately with Christ and to co-operate with him in achieving God's unfolding plan of redemption. The Christ of his love was

³ *Directorium Polanci*, no 112, in *Directoria Exercitiorum Spiritualium* (Rome, 1955); also pp 248, 281, 292, 403-404, 529, 550, 561, 743.

indeed he who had walked in Judaea, but also the glorified Christ seen at La Storta, who is still living and acting in his Church, and particularly in the sovereign pontiff. That view is the well-spring and spirit underlying all Ignatius did or wrote. It readily explains why he and his companions, from the vow of 1534 onwards, loyally thought of putting themselves at the pope's disposal.

The world view is also the well-spring of Ignatius's ecclesiology. He explicitly viewed the Church as Christ's Kingdom to be spread,⁴ and as his mystical body governed on earth by his vicar,⁵ from whom all authority descends through hierarchically ordered superiors.⁶ To discover and carry out the will of Christ, especially as manifested through these lawfully constituted officials, was a ruling passion of Ignatius' life.⁷

Ignatius also viewed the Church as the Spouse of Christ and our Mother.⁸ Moreover, in Christ as the Bridegroom and in the Church as his Spouse the one same holy Spirit holds sway, who governs for the salvation of souls.⁹ This concept of the Church as the Spouse of Christ and our Mother is the one on which he focuses most in these eighteen rules. In them, too, he is thinking, not of the glorified Church as perfected after the Parousia, nor of the abstract, idealized Church of some theologian's dream, but of the Church militant in the concrete, with all the human defects found in many of her popes, bishops, priests, and members – defects which Ignatius knew very very well at first hand.

III. *Background more specific for the rules*

Naturally, Ignatius's rules reflect the environment in which he lived: in Spain (1491–1527), Paris (1528–1534), and Rome (1538–1556). Those who did not think with the Church or rightly within her in his day can be divided (as also in other eras, our own included) into three groups. First, there were those who practised a mysticism which ignores dogmatic accuracy and scorns scholastic theology with its precisions. Such were many *alumbrados* in Spain. Secondly, there were those openly heretical, such as Luther, Melancthon and the *Lutherizantes* at the University of Paris. Claiming that they were restoring the pure gospel and the fathers, they ridiculed scholastic

⁴ Cf Exx 91–8.

⁵ Cf *S. Ignatii . . . Epistolae et Instructiones* (ed M. Lacina etc., Madrid, 1903–1911), VIII, pp 460–67; *Letters of St. Ignatius* (trans W. Young, Chicago, 1959), pp 367–72.

⁶ Cf Ganss, *Constitutions*, nos 7, 603, 666, 736.

⁷ Cf e.g. Exx 91, 135.

⁸ Exx 353.

⁹ Exx 365.

theology. Thirdly, somewhere between the first two groups were the critical or disgruntled catholics, such as many of the humanists or Lefèvre d'Étaples. A few examples will make this background more concrete.

Many of the pseudo-mystic *alumbrados* in sixteenth-century Spain showed disdain for exterior devotions, ceremonies, fasting, vocal prayer, the religious state and matrimony; disregard of ecclesiastical authorities and their precepts; and quietistic abandonment by which they deemed themselves impeccable and without need of the sacraments.¹⁰

The *Lutherizantes* were active at the University of Paris. When Luther's errors were condemned by its theological faculty in 1521, Melancthon sprang to his defence:

A year ago the sophists of Cologne and Louvain condemned the Gospel. But those ['theologasters' of Paris] who now condemn Martin Luther go farther in folly . . . In Paris this pagan scholasticism has broken out which . . . will make all healing of the Church impossible . . . Luther has brought back the Bible and the holy Fathers. But you, what else do you do except entice the sons of christians to the formalities of Scotus and the glosses of Occam, instead of carrying them to the doctrines of Christ?¹¹

Probably, however, the blatant attacks of the openly heretical were less dangerous to spiritual progress than the procedures of some catholics who gave reason for doubt about the genuinity of their faith. They were critical of the Church, often lacked charity, sometimes used open attack and sometimes satire, lampoon, or insinuating and ambiguous statements. Erasmus is an example in point when he wrote: 'The consent of the whole christian people is what I call the Church'.¹² The purport of such statements was hard to discern. This chief of the humanists remained a catholic but also the mortal enemy of scholasticism, which he strove to replace by the gospel and fathers as interpreted and proclaimed by himself. His professed aim was to reform the abuses in the Church – and they were many. But the means he used were satire as captivating as it was biting, exaggerations, caricature, unwarranted generalizations,

¹⁰ On the *alumbrados*, see, e.g., Granero, J. M., S.J.: *San Ignacio de Loyola: Panoramas de su vida* (Madrid, 1967), pp 217–223, esp. p 220.

¹¹ On the Lutherans at Paris, see G. Schurhammer, *Franz Xaver: sein Leben und seine Zeit* (Freiburg-im-Breisgau, 1951), I, pp 110–115; also, Granero, *op. cit.*, pp 232–235.

¹² Cited in P. Leturia, 'Sentido verdadero en la Iglesia militante', in *Estudios Ignacianos* (Rome, 1957), II, 152, from P.S. Allen, *Opus epistolarum D. Erasmi Roterdami* (Oxford, 1906–1958), VII, 216.

scandalous stories – often his own fiction, and continual mocking of the pope, bishops, priests, monks, nuns, and various practices or even doctrines of the Church. In those early days of printing his works had enormous vogue. He issued his New Testament in Greek with a translation in classical Latin in 1516; by 1526, 100,000 copies had been sold. Within months, 20,000 copies of his *Praise of Folly* were exhausted. His *Enchiridion militis Christiani* had its fiftieth edition in 1525.

In May, 1526, the Sorbonne petitioned Parlement to condemn Erasmus's *Colloquia* (composed to be used somewhat as textbooks for teaching Latin), stating that, 'in these dialogues Erasmus perniciously abuses his eloquence to insinuate into the boys, their teachers, and all readers heresies already condemned . . . From such books the readers would draw in the aforementioned poison and be weaned completely away from the true religion'. The Sorbonne further listed these complaints, among others: He mocked the vow of pilgrimage to Jerusalem; spoke with shameful irreverence of sacramental confession; denied that transgression of precepts of the Church is grave sin, thus making confession of sin unnecessary, on the ground that it was ordered by the Church, not God; condemned the ornamentation of churches as mortal sin; compared Reuclin to St Jerome and placed him among the saints without the authority of the Church; claimed that marriage is preferable to virginity and conjugal chastity better than that of priests and religious. Erasmus rose quickly to his own defence by new pamphlets and *Colloquies* which were eagerly bought at Paris, such as *The Assembly of the Grammarians*, published in the year of Ignatius's arrival at the great french university. Throughout his stay there (1528–1534), Erasmus's works remained a centre of stormy controversy.¹³

This was the atmosphere in which Ignatius composed the substance of his 'Rules for Thinking with the Church'. To a loyal lover of the Church such as he was, many of the elements floating in that atmosphere seemed to be pollution. He reacted, not by public attack against his opponents, but by a far more positive step, the devising of his rules as guides to spiritual renewal for individuals. They were an instrument which would be slow-working but long-lasting through their profound effect on many a person who would later do much to leaven the social order with the spirit of Christ. Very

¹³ On Erasmus, see Schurhammer, *op. cit.*, I, pp 116–134, esp. pp 122–124; Granero, *op. cit.*, pp 239–241.

probably, rules one to twelve had substantially their present form when Ignatius left Paris in 1534, and rules fourteen to eighteen were composed in Italy before 1541.¹⁴ The latter group seems to reflect the theological currents which Ignatius encountered in his early years there.

IV. *The spirit and structure of the rules*

As mentioned above, these rules were meant especially for a serious retreatant nearing the end of the thirty-day Exercises, who is now far advanced in love of Christ and eager to help in spreading his Kingdom; who also, perhaps, will soon be working among heretics or weak and disgruntled catholics. Ignatius's aim was to help such a one to establish a general attitude (*sentido*) both for guiding his own life and for dealing with them, a strategy within which he could vary his tactics as best he could to meet the emerging situations which might surprise him. Many have thought that in the long run Ignatius accomplished more toward true reform in the Church through these suggestions to open-minded individuals for their interior life than Erasmus did by his best-seller satires.

At first reading, his rules may appear to be a haphazard assembly of counsels, without much order or logical sequence, as even some competent commentators have thought. But the division, structure, and exposition which Leturia has published seem magisterial to the present writer and he follows it here.¹⁵

Ignatius states his fundamental principle in rule 1:

1. We ought to keep our minds disposed and ready, with all judgment of our own put aside, to be obedient in everything to the true Spouse of Christ our Lord, which is our holy Mother the hierarchical Church.

Then he develops this basic guideline by three groups of directives. Group 1 (rules 2-9) gives suggestions for establishing an attitude about the devotions and way of life of loyal catholics:

2. We should praise confession to a priest, reception of the most blessed Sacrament once a year, and much more once a month, and still more every week, with the required and proper conditions.
3. We should praise frequent attendance at Mass; also, chants, psalmody, and long prayers inside and outside the church; and furthermore, the

¹⁴ On the intricacies of dating the Rules, see Leturia, op. cit., II, 149-186, esp. pp 149, 171, 175, 181; also, Granero, op. cit., pp 250-252; and Pinard de la Boullaye, *Les étapes de rédaction des Exercices de S. Ignace* (Paris, 1950), pp 22-24.

¹⁵ Leturia, op. cit., pp 175-186. The translation of the Rules here given is my own.

hours ordained at an appointed time for the whole divine office, for every kind of prayer, and for all the canonical hours.

4. We should strongly praise religious institutes, virginity and continence, and not marriage as highly as any of these.
5. We should praise the vows of religion, obedience, poverty, chastity, and other works of supererogation which conduce to perfection. We should remember, too, that just as a vow is made in regard to matters which lead towards evangelical perfection, so one ought not to be made with respect to matters which withdraw one from it, such as to enter business, to get married, and the like.
6. We should value relics of saints, by venerating the relics and praying to the saints; we should extol devotional visits, pilgrimages, indulgences, including those for jubilees and crusades, and the lighting of candles in churches.
7. We should praise precepts of fast and abstinence, for example, in Lent, on ember days, vigils, Fridays, and Saturday; also penances, not only interior but also exterior.
8. We ought to praise the ornamentations and structures of churches; also images, and their veneration according to what they represent.
9. Lastly, we should praise all the precepts of the Church, while keeping our mind ready to look for reasons for defending them and not for attacking them in any way.

Group 2 (rules 10–12) builds up a mental outlook with respect to three classes of superiors in the Church, respectively in matters of jurisdiction, learning, and sanctity:

10. We ought to be inclined and ready to approve and praise the decrees, recommendations, and conduct of our superiors; for although some of these acts are not or were not praiseworthy, to speak against them either by preaching in public or by conversing among the ordinary people would cause more murmuring and scandal than profit. And thus the people would become angry at their superiors, whether secular or spiritual. However, just as it does harm to speak evil of superiors among the ordinary people while they are absent, so it can be profitable to speak of their bad conduct to persons who can bring about a remedy.
11. We ought to praise both positive theology and scholastic theology. For just as it is more characteristic of the positive doctors, such as St Jerome, St Augustine, St Gregory and the rest, to stir up our affections toward loving and serving God our Lord in all things, so it is more characteristic of the scholastic teachers, such as St Thomas, St Bonaventure, the Master of the Sentences, and so on, to define and explain for our times the matters necessary for salvation, and also to refute and explain all the errors and fallacies. For the scholastic

teachers, being more recent, can profit from a correct understanding of sacred scripture and the holy positive doctors. Furthermore, they are enlightened by clarifications through divine influence and profit from the councils, canons, and decrees of our holy Mother Church.

12. We ought to be on our guard against comparing those of us who are still living and the blessed of the past. For no small error is made in this, for example, when one says, 'He knows more than St Augustine', or 'He is another St Francis, or even more', or 'He is another St Paul in goodness, holiness', and so forth.

Group 3 (rules 13–18) treats of complex doctrinal truths, controverted (often passionately) in his day and not yet fully solved in our own, and a manner of expounding them prudently in the troubled, questioning sixteenth century.

13. To keep ourselves right in all things, we ought to hold fast to this principle: What I see as white, I would believe to be black if the hierarchical Church would thus determine it. We believe that between Christ our Lord, the Bridegroom, and the Church, his Spouse, there is the one same Spirit who governs and guides us for the salvation of our souls. For the Spirit, our Lord, who gave the ten commandments, is also the same one by whom our holy Mother the Church is governed and guided.
14. It is granted that there is much truth in the statement that no one can be saved without being predestined, and without having faith and grace. Yet there is much to be cautious about in regard to the manner of speaking and teaching about all these matters.
15. We ought not to make a habit of speaking much about predestination. But if somehow it is spoken about sometimes, it should be treated in such a way that the ordinary people do not fall into an error, as sometimes happens when they say: 'It is already determined whether I shall be saved or damned, and this cannot now be changed by my doing good or evil'. Through this they grow listless and neglect the works which lead to the salvation and spiritual advancement of their souls.
16. In the same way we should notice with caution that by speaking much and emphatically of faith, without a distinction and explanation, we may give the people an occasion for growing listless and lazy in their works, either before or after these persons have been informed with charity.
17. Similarly, we ought not to speak so lengthily and emphatically about grace that we generate a poison harmful to liberty. Hence one may speak about faith and grace, as far as possible with God's help, for the greater praise of his divine majesty, but not in such ways or manners,

especially in times as dangerous as our own, that works and free will are impaired or thought valueless.

18. Granted that we should value above everything else the great service which is given to God of pure love, we should strongly praise fear of his divine majesty. For not only is filial fear something pious and very holy, but so also is servile fear. When it brings the man nothing better or more useful, it helps him much to rise from mortal sin; and once he has risen, he easily attains to filial fear, which is wholly acceptable and pleasing to God our Lord, since it remains along with love of him.

Detailed comment on each one of the rules is impossible within the limits of present space. Hence we shall confine our treatment to several highlights which seem most helpful towards capturing the spirit of these rules.

Ignatius began his rules with a first principle and foundation underlying all the rest: The hierarchical Church is the true Spouse of Christ and our Mother, and we should be habitually disposed to give obedience, even of judgment, to her pronouncements. This connotes, of course, Ignatius's whole concept of obedience; and that concept includes prayerful reflection on a command and constructive representation when occasion demands. But neither here nor later in these rules is Ignatius entering into precise theological argumentation about their respective content, either with manifest heretics or cantankerous catholics. He is writing the language, not of apologetics or of theology (though he draws from it) but of love. Any true man may well see human defects in his mother. But he loves her still and endeavours to help her, both by trying tactfully and respectfully to remedy the defects if possible and by defending her against unreasonable, over-hasty or captious criticism. So is it also in regard to the Church. She has indeed many human defects. But only one who, in spite of them, still views her with love as his Mother and the Spouse of Christ, is likely to grasp the tenor of thought running through all these rules.

Based on that foundation, the rules of the first group suggest attitudes about various devotional practices of catholics genuinely loyal, but which in the 1600's were being questioned, satirized or attacked: for example, confession, frequent mass and communion, the divine office, virginity and the other vows of religious life, veneration of the saints, penances, and decoration of churches.

Rule 9 directs the retreatant to be alert to find reasons to defend precepts which emanate from the Church's officials. This is at once a

conclusion to Group 1 and a fitting transition to Group 2, which offers advice with respect to three classes of our superiors (*mayores*) in the Church. The fundamental principle is in rule 10: We should be more inclined to approve and praise the orders, recommendations, and way of acting of our superiors than to find fault with them. Some of these orders or actions may be blameworthy. But even so, to criticize them vehemently and unnecessarily in public among those who cannot remedy the abuses, something towards which human nature too often feels inclined, may cause scandal, undermine the authority itself, and create evils greater than those already existent. When possible, however, it is wise to deal with those who can apply a remedy. This was, in fact, Ignatius's customary procedure.

The reformers and humanists contemned the scholastic teachers such as St Thomas, and acclaimed the fathers. In this way they set the two groups in opposition. In rule 11 Ignatius presented them as complementary. The fathers do indeed stimulate our affections toward love of God, and the scholastic teachers can keep those affections on a sound foundation, since they are so systematic and precise. They can profit, too, from more recent discoveries in scriptural exegesis and from decisions or definitions of our Mother the Church.

In rule 12 Ignatius gives a caution against premature admiration which exalts some living person for his holiness even above canonized saints. Remarks to that effect were rather frequent in his day. But all too often in his experience, the living persons were highly esteemed for a while but in time fell into unsound practices or doctrines, or even heresy, and dragged their admirers with them. Instances are Juan de Texeda, Valdes, Bernardino Ochino, and Agostino Mainardi.

In the third group, rules 13-18, Ignatius suggests an attitude for his exercitant-lover of the Church to take in regard to her doctrines and the manner of preaching them. Here again the fundamental principle is found at the beginning of the group, in rule 13, which in reality is a rephrasing of rule 1, with a new emphasis but no substantial change in content. If the hierarchial Church should define something to be black which the exercitant privately and perhaps too hastily sees (*que yo veo*) as white, as a lover he would be disposed to admit humbly that the error might lie in his own deficient perception and still believe with the Church. For 'between Christ . . . the Bridegroom and the Church, his Spouse, there is the one same Spirit who governs and guides us for the salvation of our souls'.

From that foundation Ignatius moves on to suggestions about caution in speaking or preaching, with respect to four areas of subtle theological and spiritual danger in his day: (1) stressing divine predestination so much that men may underestimate or neglect their own need to co-operate by good works; (2) emphasizing faith so much that men become slothful in works; (3) so exalting grace that liberty and good deeds are impaired; (4) praising love of God so much that fear of him comes to be neglected or even despised.

In these four antitheses we find, not new or subtle argumentation to clarify the profound problems or to refute complicated errors, but Ignatius's diagnosis pointing out four important roots from which many of the doctrinal catastrophes of his day were springing. The specific sources of danger such as these will vary from age to age. But his procedure is an example and a challenge to retreatants of every age to try to diagnose the chief ills of their era, and then prayerfully to devise habitual attitudes and practical procedures for living among them.

What, then, can we say is the spirit of St Ignatius's eighteen 'Rules for thinking with the Church'? Perhaps we can sum up our present study in the following way. The trend of his thought is not that of giving theological or apologetic arguments to refute the *alumbrados* or heretics or doubtfully loyal catholics of his day. Rather, he is offering directives or suggestions whereby his exercitant, a lover of Christ and the Church, will prayerfully think out for himself a strategy for the days and years ahead. That is, with the help of God's grace he will establish an habitual attitude, by which he can guide himself and others to live and work in loving loyalty to the Church, Christ's Spouse and our Mother, even amid the undesirable examples or doctrinal obscurities and errors which are stumbling blocks in his own day.