Five Chapters (1539)

The following text was first orally approved by Pope Paul III in 1539. More commonly known as the Five Chapters, the document serves the first foundational document of what became the Society of Jesus, stating the key purposes of the proposed religious order. The document was later revised in 1540 (approved in the papal bull Regimini militanis Ecclesiae) and then again in 1550 (approved in the papal bull Exposcit Debitum). For more on the history, content, and differences of the formulae, please consult Antonio de Aldama’s The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus: The Formula of the Institute, Notes for a Commentary.

Chapter 1
Whoever desires to serve as a soldier of God beneath the banner of the cross in our Society, which we desire to be designated by the name of Jesus, and to serve the Lord alone and His Vicar on earth, should, after a solemn vow of perpetual chastity, keep what follows in mind.

He is a member of a community founded chiefly for this purpose: to strive especially for the progress of souls in Christian life and doctrine and for the propagation of the faith by the ministry of the word, by Spiritual Exercises, by works of charity and expressly by the education of children and unlettered persons in Christianity.

Still further, let any such person take care to keep always before his eyes first God, and then the nature of this Institute which is, so to speak, a pathway to God; and then let him strive with all his effort to achieve this end set before him by God—each one, however, according to the grace which the Holy Spirit has given to him and according to the particular grade of his own vocation, lest anyone should perhaps show zeal, but a zeal which is not according to knowledge.

The decision about each one’s grade and the selection and entire distribution of employments shall be in the power of the superior general or ordinary who is to be elected by us, in order that the proper order necessary in every well-organized community may be preserved.

This superior general, with the advice of the brethren, shall possess the authority, in council (a majority of votes always having the right to decide), to draw up constitutions leading to the achievement of this end which has been proposed to us.

In matters that are more serious and lasting, the council should be understood to be the greater part of the whole Society which can conveniently be summoned by the superior general; in lighter and more temporary matters it will be all those who happen to be present in the place where our superior resides. All right to execute and command, however, will be in the power of the superior.
Chapter 2
All the companions should know and daily bear in mind, not only when they first make their profession but as long as they live, that this entire Society and each one individually are campaigning for God under faithful obedience to His Holiness Paul III and are thus under the command of the vicar of Christ and his divine power not only because we are bound by the obligation common to all clerics, but also by the vow we make to carry out without subterfuge or excuse and at once (as far as in us lies) whatever His Holiness may order pertaining to the progress of souls and the propagation of the faith, whether he decides to send us among the Turks, or to the New World, or to the Lutherans, or to any others whether infidels or faithful.

Therefore, before those who will come to us take this burden upon their shoulders, they should ponder long and seriously, as the Lord has counseled, whether they possess among their resources enough spiritual capital to complete this tower; that is, whether the Holy Spirit who moves them is offering them so much grace that with His aid they have hope of bearing the weight of this vocation. Then, after they have enlisted through the inspiration of the Lord in this militia of Christ, they ought to be prompt in carrying out this obligation which is so great, being clad for battle day and night.

However, to forestall among us any ambition for such missions or provinces, or any refusal of them, let each one promise never to carry on negotiations with the Roman pontiff about such missions directly or indirectly, but leave all this care to God and to His vicar and to the superior of the Society. This superior, too, just like the rest, shall also promise not to approach the pontiff at all either one way or another concerning a mission of his own, except with the advice of the Society.

Chapter 3
All should likewise vow that in all matters that concern the observance of this Rule they will be obedient to the one put in charge of the Society. The latter, however, should issue the commands which he knows to be opportune for achieving the end set before him by God and the Society.

In his superiorship he should be ever mindful of the kindness, meekness, and charity of Christ and of the pattern set by Peter and Paul, a norm which both he and the council should keep constantly in view. Particularly let them hold esteemed the instruction of children and the unlettered in the Christian doctrine of the Ten Commandments and other similar rudiments, whatever will seem suitable to them in accordance with the circumstances of persons, places, and times. For it is very necessary that the superior and the council give this matter the most diligent attention since the edifice of faith cannot arise among our fellowmen without a foundation, and since there is the danger that as one becomes more learned he may disregard this occupation, less prestigious at first glance, when none in fact is more fruitful either for the neighbor to be edified or for Ours to discharge occupations that combine both humility and charity. Assuredly, too, the subjects, both because of the great value of good order and for the sake of the constant practice of humility, never sufficiently praised, should always be
obliged to obey the general in all matters pertaining to the Society’s Institute and to recognize and properly venerate Christ as present in him.

Chapter 4
From experience we have learned that a life removed as far as possible from all contagion of avarice and as like as possible to evangelical poverty is more gratifying, more undefiled, and more suitable for the edification of our fellowmen. We likewise know that our Lord Jesus Christ will supply to His servants who are seeking only the kingdom of God what is necessary for food and clothing. Therefore our members, one and all, should vow perpetual poverty, declaring that they cannot, either individually or in common, acquire any civil right to any stable goods or any produce or fixed income for the maintenance or use of the Society. Rather let them be content to enjoy only the use of necessary things, with the owners permitting, and to receive the money and the value of things given them in order to buy necessities for themselves.

They may, however, acquire the civil right to stable goods and to fixed income in order to bring together some talented students and instruct them, especially in sacred letters, in the universities, that is, for the support of those students who desire to advance in the spirit and in letters and at length to be received into our Society after probation when the period of their studies has been finished.

Chapter 5
All the members who are in holy orders, even though they can acquire no right to benefices and revenues, should nonetheless be obliged to recite the office according to the rite of the Church, but not in choir lest they be diverted from the works of charity to which we have fully dedicated ourselves. Hence too they should use neither organs nor singing in their Masses and other religious ceremonies; for these laudably enhance the divine worship of other clerics and religious and have been found to arouse and move souls by bringing them into harmony with the hymn and rites, but we have experienced them to be a considerable hindrance to us, since according to the nature of our vocation, besides the other necessary duties, we must frequently be engaged a great part of the day and even of the night in comforting the sick both in body and in spirit.

Conclusion
These are the matters which we have been able to explain about our profession in a kind of sketch which we now do in order to give brief information both to those who ask us about our plan of life and also to those who will later on follow us if, God willing, we shall ever have imitators along this path.

By experience we have learned that the path has many and great difficulties connected with it. Consequently we have judged it opportune to admonish those not to fall, under the appearance of
good, into these two things we have avoided. One is not to impose on the companions under pain of mortal sin any fasts, disciplines, baring of feet or head, color of dress, type of food, penances, hairshirts, and other torments of the flesh. These, however, we do not prohibit because we condemn them, for we greatly praise and approve them in those who observe them; but only because we do not wish Ours either to be crushed by so many burdens together or to allege any excuse for not carrying out what we have set before ourselves. But everyone can exercise himself devoutly in the practices he deems to be necessary or useful for himself, provided the superior does not forbid him. The other is that no one be received into the Society unless he has first been tested for a long time and very diligently; and only when he appears prudent in Christ and conspicuous either in learning or in holiness of life may he be admitted into the militia of Jesus Christ.

May Christ deign to be favorable to these our tender beginnings, to the glory of God the Father, to whom alone be glory and honor forever.

Amen.

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