Cum ex plurium (1539)

“The founding of the Society of Jesus,” Jesuit historian Joseph Conwell has argued, “begins with a discernment process.” The fruits of that process of discernment appear in the following document, Cum ex plurium, written by Ignatius and his companions in 1539. The document articulates the founders’ vision for what became the Jesuit order. Indeed, five paragraphs [2–6] became the Formula of the Institute, formally approved in 1540 by Pope Paul III in his bull Regimini militantis Ecclesiae. For the following document, Cum ex plurium is the title preferred by Conwell, the first to translate it into English, rather than the one more commonly known, The First Sketch of the Institute of the Society of Jesus. For more on the history and importance of the document, please consult Conwell’s book, Impelling Spirit: Revisiting a Founding Experience: 1539, Ignatius of Loyola and His Companions.

[1] To his beloved sons, Ignatius de Loyola, Pierre Favre, Diego Laynez, Claude Jay, Paschase Broët, Francisco Xavier, Alfonso Salmerón, Simão Rodrigues, Jean Codure, Nicolás de Bobadilla, Masters of Paris, from the dioceses respectively of Pamplona, Geneva, Siguenza, Toledo, Vizeu, Embrun, and Palencia. Since from the words of many we have often gathered that you, of your own free choice poor priests of Christ from various parts of the world have joined together into one body and with the Holy Spirit, as we believe, impelling you, have conspired together in this one desire, that, having abandoned the snares of this world, you would dedicate your lives to the perpetual service of our Lord Jesus Christ and of his vicar on earth; since also men of proven faith have frequently testified to us, that for many years now you have worked commendably in the Lord's vineyard, by publicly preaching the word of God, by privately exhorting, by hearing confessions, by directing people in holy meditations, by serving in hospitals, by pilgrimaging, by teaching children and the uninitiated what is necessary for the instruction of a Christian, and finally by performing every work of charity, wherever you have been, not only without any sign of heresy or avarice or immoral conduct of any sort, but even with great praise: since, I say, we kept hearing these reports about you, we began to rejoice, as is only right, and fervently to desire, that many people, even all, if possible, and especially the clergy, would renew the models of the ancient Christian way of living (as you are doing); and while we were considering giving some sign, by which we would make clear that your loving and zealous way of living was pleasing to us, our beloved son, Cardinal Contarini informed us that your manner of life was praised by many and so welcomed by some, that they would also like to follow it, and that all of you profoundly desire for preserving and bringing to perfection the union of your Society in Christ, that all that you have found by experience conducive to the end proposed to you, you now solidify in writing and by the bond of obedience; and therefore you were requesting, that in the midst of our almost incessant and burdensome occupations it be considered through someone delegated by us whether your form of living is conformed to the evangelical counsels and the normative teachings of the fathers, and after it has been found to be congruent with the purity of the Christian religion, according to custom it be blessed by us and approved; since this petition of yours had found our heart feeling well-disposed
toward you for a long time already, we immediately delegated this matter to our beloved son, Tommaso Badia, the Master of the Sacred Palace; who, after carefully considering the matter, reported to us that the whole intent of your Society seemed to him to be good and holy, and that the summary of the rule, that you desire to follow, is contained in the five decrees written below.


[8] Since we have read this way of life of yours, contained in the above five decrees, and have judged that it would be suitable for the spiritual growth of your Society and of the rest of the Christian flock, whose care falls upon us, by the power of these presents we declare it to be worthy of praise, and by our apostolic authority we approve it, we bless it, we validate it, and we receive it under the protection of this Holy See and confirm it, granting you the faculties to establish particular constitutions for yourselves, that you judge to be in accordance with the end of your Society and the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ and the help of the neighbor. Press on, therefore, beloved sons in Christ, follow your call, whithersoever the Holy Spirit leads you, and in the vineyard of the Lord from now on, under the protection of this Holy See, work with all your heart like good vinedressers, with our Lord Jesus Christ on your side, who lives and reigns with the Holy Spirit God forever and ever. Amen.

[9] I, G. Cardinal Contarini, attest that at Tivoli I read the above five decrees to our Holy Father, leaving out the introduction and final conclusion. His Holiness understood them and approved them, and authorized that a bull or brief should be drawn up, whichever seemed better, in accordance with the report of the Master of the Sacred Palace, whom His Holiness had instructed through me to report what he thought after due reflection on the matter. I have written this with my own hand and signed it.