The Deliberations of Our First Fathers (1539)

Just before Easter in the spring of 1539, Ignatius and his companions gathered to determine whether or not they should continue to informally collaborate with one another, as they had for some five years. Their deliberations took the form of group discernment, consisting of several days of prayer and discussions. Jean Codure or Pierre Favre later recorded the experience, a recollection that appears below. The men concluded that not only would they preserve their association but that they would also request papal approval to form a religious order. In the mid-1960s, Dominic Murca, SJ, first translated these deliberations into English, encouraged by Pope Paul VI’s reminder to a group of religious superiors in Rome on May 23, 1964. The pontiff had stated, “A religious institute retains its vitality and vigor only so long as the spirit of its founder survives intact in the order's discipline and work and in its members' conduct.” Murca, in introducing his translation, noted how “a creative return to an original inspiration is always invigorating. The simplicity and vitality which accompanied the birth of an idea or an organization are like a perennial fountainhead. An individual or a community can go back and draw new strength from its clear waters when the initial spirit has lost its power and freshness.” These deliberations, for Murca, are an invaluable “record of the immediate considerations and discussions which gave rise to our order.”

[1] It was just before the end of Lent. The time was drawing near when we would have to be separated from one another. We were looking forward to this dispersal with great anticipation, recognizing it as a necessary means for attaining more quickly the goal which we had conceived and set as the object of our hearts. We decided to assemble before the day of separation and discuss for a number of days our common calling and the style of life we had adopted. After a number of such sessions, we found ourselves divided. Some of our group were French, others Spaniards, still others Savoyards or Portuguese; our views and opinions were diversified. We were in perfect accord in singleness of purpose and intent; namely, to discover the gracious design of God’s will within the scope of our vocation. But when it came to the question of which means would be more efficacious and more fruitful, both for ourselves and for our neighbor, there was a plurality of views. No one should be astonished that among us, weak and frail men, this difference of opinion should have arisen, since even the princes and apostolic pillars of the most holy Church, and many other holy men with whom we are in no way worthy to be compared, experienced a similar diversity of opinion and, at times, were in open conflict. They even left us a written record of their controversies. Well, then, since we too were of diverse opinion, we were anxious to find some course clearly indicated as the path to follow in offering ourselves as a holocaust to God, to whose praise, honor, and glory all our actions might be dedicated. Finally, we decided and resolved unanimously to devote ourselves to prayer, the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice and meditation, in a manner even more fervent than usual; and after we had diligently expended all human effort, we would then cast all our cares upon the Lord, trusting in Him who is so good and generous. He imparts His good spirit to everyone who petitions Him in humility and simplicity of heart; in fact, He is incredibly lavish in His gifts to everyone, never does He disappoint
anyone. We were confident that He would in no way fail us, but since His kindness is without measure, He would assist us beyond our fondest hopes and expectations.

[2] We began, therefore, to exercise our human energies, setting before the group questions considered worthy of careful consideration and prolonged inquiry. Our procedure was this: all day long we reflected and meditated on the subject; prayer was also enlisted as a source of light. At night each person proposed to the group what he considered the better and more expedient course. In this way we hoped that all of us could embrace as the truer judgment the view which was recommended by the force of stronger arguments and enjoyed a majority of votes.

[3] During the first night’s discussion, the question posed was this: we had offered and dedicated our lives to Christ our Lord and to His true and lawful vicar on earth, so that he might dispose of us and send us wherever he might judge us more capable of producing better results, whether it be to (the Turks), to the Indies, to the heretics, or to any other group of Christians or pagans—would it be more advantageous for us to be so joined and united into one body that no physical separation of our persons, be it ever so great, could divide our hearts? Or, on the contrary, would such an arrangement be not at all desirable? An example is at hand to illustrate the urgency of this question. The Pope is about to send two of our company to the city of Siena. Should we have a mutual understanding so that those who are sent from our midst will still be the object of our affectionate concern as we will be of theirs, or should we have no more concern for them than for others who are strangers to our fraternity? After much discussion we came to a decision in the affirmative. Since our most merciful and affectionate Lord had seen fit to assemble and bind us to one another—we who are so frail and from such diverse national and cultural backgrounds—we ought not to sever what God has united and bound together. Rather, with each passing day we ought to confirm and strengthen the bond of union, forming ourselves into a single body. Each should have a knowledge of and a concern for the others, leading to a richer harvest of souls; for spiritual power, as well as natural, is intensified and strengthened when united in a common arduous enterprise far more than if it remains fragmented in many parts. In all these matters which have been narrated and in those still to be described, we wish it to be understood that absolutely no course of action adopted by us was the fruit merely of our own personal ingenuity and reasoning. Rather, we simply assented to whatever the Lord inspired and the Apostolic See subsequently confirmed and approved.

[4] After this first question had been decided and resolved, another more difficult, worthy of no less deliberate consideration, presented itself. The question was this: all of us had pronounced perpetual vows of chastity and poverty in the presence of the Most Reverend Legate of His Holiness when we were working among the Venetians—would it be expedient for us to pronounce a third vow, namely that of obedience to one of our number, so that we might be able to fulfill the will of the Lord our God in all things with greater integrity and merit and greater glory to God, and at the same time fulfill the wish and directive of His Holiness, to whom we had offered most willingly our entire persons—will, intellect, strength, and so forth?
[5] We devoted many days to personal prayer and reflection in seeking a solution to this question, but could find none which set our minds at peace. We put our trust in God and began to discuss ways to resolve this impasse. Would it be expedient for all of us to withdraw to some secluded place and remain there for thirty or forty days, devoting our time to meditation, fasting and penance, in order that God might heed our pleas and communicate the solution to this question? A second possibility was that just three or four of us, as representatives of the entire group, should retire to such a retreat for the same purpose. Still a third course of action called for no one to go into seclusion; rather, remaining in the city, we would devote half of the day to this principal concern of ours, so that the more suitable and lengthier part of the day would be given to meditation, reflection and prayer, while the remainder of the day would be spent in our usual practice of preaching and hearing confessions.

[6] Two considerations were decisive: first, we feared that we might give rise to gossip and scandal within the city and among the populace; since men are rather prone to form rash judgments, they might conclude that we had either fled from Rome and turned to some new endeavor, or that we lacked constancy and firmness in pursuing tasks undertaken. Secondly, we decided to remain in Rome so that the benefits which we saw resulting from our work in the confessional, our preaching and other apostolic activity might not be lost due to our absence. For even if our number were four times as great as we are, we would be unable to meet all the charitable demands made upon us, just as we are presently unable to meet all requests. Then we determined a mode of procedure for seeking a solution to our problem, prescribing for each and every one the following three steps. First, each should so dispose himself, so devote himself to prayer, the Holy Sacrifice, and meditation, that he make every effort to find peace and joy in the Holy Spirit concerning the vow of obedience. Each must strive, insofar as it depends on his personal efforts, so to dispose himself that he would rather obey than command, whenever glory to God and praise to His Majesty would follow in equal measure. The second preparatory step was that no one of our band should talk over this matter with another or ask his arguments. In this way, no one would be swayed by another’s reasoning or disposed more favorably towards embracing obedience rather than towards rejecting it, or vice versa. Our aim was for each to consider as more desirable what he had derived from his personal prayer and meditation. The third preparatory step was that each should consider himself unrelated to our company, into which he never expected to be received. With such a disposition, no emotional involvement would sway his judgment more one way or the another; rather, as an extern, he might freely advance for discussion his opinion concerning the taking or rejecting of obedience, and thus he could judge and approve that course of action which he believes will promote God’s greater service and most securely assure our Society’s permanence.

[7] With these dispositions of mind and heart as a preparation we were to assemble on the following day. We agreed that each in turn should propose all disadvantages whatsoever against obedience and all the counterarguments which he had derived from his private reflection, meditation and prayer. For example, one said: It seems that this term religious obedience has fallen into disfavor and has been discredited among Christian people, due to our shortcomings and sins. Another remarked: If we wish to live under obedience, perhaps we will be obliged by the Pope to live under some rule which is already formulated and approved. In such a case, it might happen that the rule will not provide ample
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opportunity and scope to labor for the salvation of souls; yet it was to this single end, after our own salvation, that we dedicated ourselves. All our fondest dreams, conceived, as we believe, under God’s inspiration, would come to nought. Still another commented: If we vow obedience to someone, the number of prospects entering our congregation to labor faithfully in the Lord’s vineyard will decrease. Though the harvest is great, only a few genuine workers can be found; such is the weakness and inconstancy of men that many seek their own advantage and the fulfillment of their own will rather than the interests of Christ and their own total self-abnegation. We proceeded in this manner with a fourth, a fifth, etc., each successively bringing forth the disadvantages which accompanied the vow of obedience. Then on the following day our discussion centered on the contrary view, advancing for consideration all the advantages and benefits of the vow of obedience which each had drawn from his prayerful reflection. Thus each in his turn proposed the conclusions at which he had arrived, at times deducing the unrealistic consequence of a hypothetical proposition, or again simply arguing by direct affirmation. For example, one reduced the case to this absurd impossibility: if this congregation of ours should undertake responsibility for a project without the gentle yoke of obedience, no one would have a specific assignment, since each would throw the burden of decision on another, as we have frequently experienced. Likewise, if our congregation does not have the benefit of a vow of obedience, it will not endure and continue steadfast; yet this is contrary to our initial resolution of preserving our Society forever. Therefore, since nothing preserves any congregation more than obedience, this vow seems essential, especially for us who have vowed perpetual poverty and are engaged in arduous and continual labors, both spiritual and temporal, since such enterprises are not in themselves conducive to preserving a society. Another spoke in support of obedience by direct argument: obedience occasions continual acts of heroic virtue; for a person who genuinely lives under obedience is most prompt to do whatever is imposed upon him, even if it be extremely difficult or even likely to expose him to the laughter and ridicule of the world. Suppose, for example, I were commanded to walk through the streets and squares of the town naked or dressed in unusual garb. Now, even though such a command might never be given, as long as a person is perfectly willing to carry it out, by denying his own judgment and personal will, he has an abiding heroic disposition and is making acts which increase his merit. Another remarked: Nothing lays low pride and arrogance as does obedience; for pride makes a point of following one’s own judgment and will, yielding to no one. It is preoccupied with grandiose projects beyond its capacity. Obedience is diametrically opposed to this attitude; for it always follows the judgment and will of another, yields to everyone, is associated as much as possible with humility, the enemy of pride. And although we have professed total obedience, both in general and in particular details, to our supreme Pontiff and Shepherd, nevertheless the Pope would not be able—and even if he could it would be unbecoming for him—to take time to provide for our incidental and personal concerns, which are numberless.

[8] For many days we discussed the various aspects of this question, analyzing and weighing the relative merits and cogency of each argument, always allowing time for our customary practices of prayer, meditation and reflection. Finally, with the help of God, we came to a decision. We concluded, not only by a majority vote but indeed without a single dissenting voice, that it would be more advantageous and even essential for us to vow obedience to one of our number in order to attain three aims: first, that we might better and more exactly pursue our supreme goal of fulfilling the divine will
in all things; second, that the Society might be more securely preserved; and finally, that proper provision might be made for those individual matters, of both spiritual and temporal moment, that will arise.

[9] We continued in these and other deliberations for almost three months—from the latter part of Lent to the feast of John the Baptist—adhering to this same mode of procedure in our analysis and discussion of each issue, always proposing both sides of the question. By the feast of St. John, all our business was pleasantly concluded in a spirit of perfect harmony. But it was only by first engaging in prolonged vigils and prayers, with much expenditure of physical and mental energy that we resolved these problems and brought them to this happy conclusion.

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