Ignatius on Writing (1542)

In the following letter, Ignatius enjoins that greater order and care be used when Jesuits write to him. Their regular letters, Ignatius explains, might be shown to the Society’s friends and benefactors. Recently, Ignatius wished to show some of the letters to “a couple of cardinals,” whom Ignatius believed could help the situations raised in the correspondence. “Since the letters contained irrelevant, disorganized matter that was not suitable to be shown,” Ignatius complains, “I was hard put to it to let them see some parts and cover up the rest.” The policy explained here demonstrates how the reports filed by Jesuit missionaries were used by Ignatius and his companions in Rome as ways of promoting the missionaries’ successes in preaching, giving the Spiritual Exercises, and converting locals. The letters, therefore, were forms of promotion, and care was needed when writing them. “Writing is permanent and gives lasting witness;” Ignatius notes, “we cannot mend or reinterpret it as easily as we can our speech.” Meanwhile, any private matters could be written on separate sheets and might require less care. Ignatius sent this letter not only to Pierre Favre but to the other far-flung members of the Society.

I recall telling you frequently face to face as well as writing you frequently when we were apart that any member of the Society intending to write us here ought to write out a main letter that can be shown to anybody; for there are many persons who are well disposed towards us and who want to see our letters, but to whom we dare not show them because they are disorganized and full of inappropriate matter; and since these people find out when we have received letters from this or that person, we incur considerable resentment and give more disedification than edification. Just recently I found it necessary, or at least quite useful, to show letters from two members of the Society to a couple of cardinals who would have to take care of what they had written me; but since the letters contained irrelevant, disorganized matter that was not suitable to be shown, I was hard put to it to let them see some parts and cover up the rest.

And so I will now repeat once more what I said previously, so that we will all fully understand one another. I beg, therefore, by the love and reverence of God our Lord, that we handle our correspondence in a way that will be for the greater service of his divine goodness and the greater advantage of our neighbor. In the main letter we should write what each man is doing by way of preaching, hearing confessions, [giving the] Exercises, and other spiritual works which God works through each man, in a way that will give the greatest edification to the hearers or readers. If the soil is barren and there is nothing to report, there should be a few words about health matters, a conversation with so-and-so, or the like. But extraneous matters should not be mixed with this; these should be left for the separate sheets, which can contain the dates of letters received, the spiritual joy or sentiments occasioned by them, anything about illnesses, news, business, and lengthier exhortations.
I will describe what I myself do and, I trust in the Lord, will continue doing in this regard so as to avoid mistakes when writing to members of the Society. I make a first draft of the main letter, reporting things that will be edifying; then, after reading it over and correcting it, keeping in mind that it is going to be read by everybody, I write or have someone write it out a second time. For we must give even more thought to what we write than to what we say. Writing is permanent and gives lasting witness; we cannot mend or reinterpret it as easily as we can our speech. And even with all this I am sure I make many mistakes, and fear doing so in the future. I leave for the separate pages other details that are inappropriate for the main letter or lacking in edification. These pages each one can write hastily "out of the overflow of the heart," with or without careful organization. But this may not be tolerated in the main letter: it must be composed carefully and edifyingly, so that it can be shown around and give edification. Since I see everyone falling short on this score, I am sending everyone a copy of this letter, with a plea in our Lord that you always compose the main letter as I have indicated above, revise it, and then recopy it or have it recopied. If people will write two drafts like this, the way I do, I am sure the letters we get will be better thought through and organized.

And so, unless I see you doing this from now on for the greater unity, charity, and edification of all, I myself, unwilling to have to answer to God our Lord for negligence in matters of such importance, will be forced to write and command you under obedience to revise and, after correction, recopy or have recopied any main letter that you send me. Having thereby done all that is in my power, I will rest easy, though I would much rather you did not give me cause to write you this way. I urge you, then, as I am obliged to do for the greater glory of God our Lord, and I beg you, for his love and reverence alone, to correct your faults in writing, making it a point of pride and having a real desire to edify your brethren and others through your letters. Let the time you waste on this be upon my head; it will be time well wasted in the Lord. I make the effort to write two drafts of any main letter so that it will have some order; I even do the same with many of the separate pages. Even this one I have written out twice in my own hand. All the more reason why each member of the Society should do the same. After all, you only have to write to a single person, while I have to write to all of you. I can honestly say that the other night we calculated that the letters we are presently sending out to various places run to two hundred and fifty. Busy as some members of the Society may be, I am sure that I am, if not overly so, at least no less busy than anybody else—and with poorer physical health. So far there is none of you I can commend in this matter, though I say this not to point blame but in a general way.

If the copies of others’ letters that I send you appear to have some order and be free of useless matter, the reason is that with enormous loss of my own time, I extract the edifying parts, rearrange the wording, and edit out the irrelevant matter, so as to give some pleasure in our Lord to all of you and edification to those who hear them for the first time. And I once more beg you to work at this for love and reverence of his Divine Majesty, and with a wholehearted and serious effort; it is of no little importance for the spiritual progress and consolation of souls. It will be all right to compose a main letter, revised and corrected, every second week; together, this amounts to two letters’ worth of work. You may go on as much as you like in the separate pages and when writing only to a single person. With God’s help I myself shall write to all of you every month without fail, however briefly, and every three months at greater length, sending you all the news and copies of all the letters from throughout
the Society. And so, for love of God our Lord, let us all assist one another. And give me your help by carrying and lightening somewhat the heavy burden which you placed on my back, along with other activities not lacking here by way of pious works and spiritual gains. If I could do the work of ten, or if all of us were here together in Rome, there would be more than enough for us to do.

If your memory fails you, as mine often does, keep this letter or some equivalent reminder in front of you when writing your main letters.

Rome, December 10, 1542

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