



# THE PORTAL TO JESUIT STUDIES

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## On the Means of Preserving the Spirit of the Society and of Our Vocation (1569)

*Francis Borgia, in this letter to the Jesuits in Aquitania, in the southwest of France, provides advice on how best to preserve the spirit of the Society of Jesus. The order's "rapid growth" reminded Borgia of how "the little grain of mustard," once "fixing its roots" and "sending forth its branch and steam," could become "a mighty tree." He worried, though, that the success of the Jesuits might embolden their adversaries. Therefore, Borgia highlighted themes from the Constitutions and other instructions from Ignatius. Borgia came from a noble family, succeeding his father as the duke of Gandía in 1543. Following the death of his wife in 1548, Borgia entered the Society of Jesus. He was elected the third superior general in 1565.*

The arrival of the Fathers Procurators has given me an occasion for very great joy and comfort in our Lord; for their report has forcibly brought home to me the singular providence with which the Divine Majesty guards and multiplies the fruits of His vineyard, which, although only lately planted, has already spread its branches to the sea.

In its rapid growth it reminds one of the little grain of mustard, which, fixing its roots firmly in the ground, and sending forth its branch and stem, becomes in a short time a mighty tree. To the Almighty Father, Who has shown such love and favor towards us His children, we must therefore give unceasing praise and thanksgiving; for by His grace our work thrives beyond our most sanguine expectations; and, what is still more remarkable, our very errors arouse our watchfulness, while our misfortunes become for us a source of gain. Blessed be His holy name, Who in these evil days has set apart this vineyard of the Society for such noble work. Blessed be His holy name, who does not cease to shower upon it His heavenly benefits, that it may increase the marvelous fruitfulness of which we ourselves are witnesses; a fruitfulness which the Divine Mercy seems to assure unto us, since at its very planting He was so prodigal of His blessings.

But there is reason to fear that when the harvests of our vineyard have matured, greater and more deadly will be the envy, more emboldened the malice of that foe, who never rests in his work of destruction. For this reason we must be on our guard. We must not open the smallest avenue to this sower of cockle from whom our harvest has everything to fear.

In order, therefore, to satisfy my official obligations and the duties of charity, in order to preclude the blame which silence would deserve, I have deemed it expedient to advise you of a few things, the necessity of which may not at present appear, though the remembrance of them, I think, will one day be helpful. God's graces are always to be so received, that the measure of their abundance should be the measure also of our fear of ingratitude. Blessed is the man that is always fearful." I wish then to point out to you some of those snares which our most crafty enemy employs in order to circumvent



and ruin us, when we are off our guard and do not oppose him by a vigorous resistance. "He who is forewarned," as the old proverb has it, "is also forearmed." As poisonous weeds may be introduced into the harvest fields in many different ways, so evils can creep into our Society. I think we should fear especially a remissness in the spirit of our Constitutions regarding the admission of postulants. For be assured that, if we proceed herein in any other spirit than that which our Constitutions require, we shall throw open the door to utter ruin. And really, if with entire disregard for the spirit of the vocation with which one presents himself to us, we consider only his learning and other accomplishments, the day will come when the Society will find itself rich indeed in numbers, but sadly destitute of the spirit and virtue that should animate its members. Hence it is, that there arise in the hearts of some among us that ambition and that ungovernable pride which will endure no curb and will brook no interference.

Such members will, indeed, have friends and money in abundance, but if they will only look into themselves, they will see that they are poor and naked and destitute of the truest wealth, which consists in the possession of solid virtues and of other spiritual gifts. Therefore let that be the first counsel, and let it be written in the head of the book, lest on some future day experience teach us (and would that it had not already given us the lesson!) what right reasoning so easily proves.

Since men enter the Society under the impulse of divine grace, it is our duty to help them in their vocation, to secure their perseverance by inculcating submission of intellect, and to apply them seriously to all the exercises of the noviceship. A good novice will make a good scholastic; but if the foundation is neglected his case will be similar to that of the unsettled edifice, which, because it was not solidly founded, will collapse and involve in its ruin the loss of all the labor spent upon it. Such a novice will either leave us at the end of his studies, or, should he remain in the Society, will never edify others, or be of any service to religion.

That ill-advised hastiness of Superiors in removing from the noviceship subjects, who have not yet acquired the necessary maturity is always a cause of positive evil. But let us be persuaded that the enemy of our vineyard is never sleeping, although we ourselves may not be. awake to this serious evil. We must, therefore, consider as most profitably employed that time which is given to the education and formation of a useful laborer in the vineyard of the Lord. This employment is so excellent and so important that in order to signify the perfection which it requires, our Savior was unwilling to begin His preaching before the age of thirty; although His wisdom was not less perfect at the moment of His conception than at His thirtieth year. This example should convince us of the wisdom that inspired the experiments in use in the Society.

Indeed, these experiments furnish everyone with an accurate means of testing his strength to subdue his inordinate passions. Should anyone, however, presume to treat with the men of this world before having brought his passions under control, far from reaping any advantage, he will bring about his own certain ruin. The Lord threatened Moses, as he was about to go into Egypt, because he had not circumcised his children; giving us to understand thereby, that intercourse with the world is more injurious than profitable to an uncircumcised, that is, an unmortified man. If the novice, during his probation, does not take advantage of the summer months, and, like the busy ant, heap up provisions



for winter; if he seeks not his support and safeguard in obedience and humility and patience, but especially, in the fixed purpose of despising self, and, for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, of following Christ crucified even unto death, so surely will he find himself tossed about when the winter of distress and the tempest of temptation break upon him. With reason then do we call the novitiate the novices Bethlehem. For it is there that he receives the bread of the word of God. It is there that he gathers the provisions necessary in traversing the dangerous sea of life, until he arrives in the port of the Land of Promise, which is the heavenly Jerusalem. Therefore the novice who is penetrated with this truth, is pained and in distress when called out of the novitiate; for he recognizes how poorly he has provided himself with virtue, which is the bread and the provision needed to bring him safely to his journey's end.

But as for those who long for the end of their probation, or who rejoice at its close, it is painfully evident that they little reckon how important it is that they be completely provided for their future labors. They show that they have been little solicitous about the result of the combat, who rush into it without preparation and without arms. Of this they may be assured, and would to God that the advice were unnecessary, that they are preparing for themselves many a bitter disappointment, if they do not now provide for the day when they shall be sent forth into the colleges to give themselves to study, and if they have not firmly grounded themselves in religious humility. For "knowledge puffeth up," and it is from this kind of knowledge and its fruits that are born self-esteem, self-will, diversity of opinion, and, what is sadder still, rancor among fellow-students and, consequently, division amongst our Fathers and Brothers. Alas! for him who on entering upon his new career is obliged to notice and correct the faults of others before he is ready and able to detect his own. Alas! for him who through an insatiable desire of learning does not employ part of his time in gathering some spiritual fruit from his studies. How different shall be the career of those, who having placed all their love in Him from Whom alone come knowledge and wisdom, reap from that same labor the richest harvest.

And, indeed, our only aim in studying should be to acquire a clearer, fuller knowledge of the majesty and goodness and wisdom of the Creator, and to bind ourselves to Him by a more ardent and a more active love. If this seems difficult to anyone let him but address himself to the task and he will behold every difficulty disappear. Martha and Mary were sisters although their spheres of life were different; so also study and piety, although their objects are different, ought to go hand in hand. For they are in no wise incompatible when one rightly applies himself to each. A striking example of this, as well as of many other virtues, is furnished us by Father Laynez, of holy memory, who united in the most admirable manner a profound knowledge with the true interior spirit, and especially the spirit of consummate charity and humility.

Most unhappy will be the fate of him who becomes more forgetful of his own nothingness, as he more zealously devotes himself to study; for even among the sages of paganism knowledge and contempt of self were inculcated as the foundation of the philosophy which they cultivated. With all truth, then, can I say that the scholastic who becomes infatuated with his own ideas and with a sense of his own importance instead of humbling and despising himself, does not really grasp what he studies, and unlearns more than he learns. It clearly follows, therefore, from what has been said that it is of the first



importance to lay up an abundant store of virtue. If the house be built on sand, what can be expected but utter ruin when the storm of ambition and vanity breaks violently upon it. And because we have not in our own hearts the peace of the Lord there arises in us a restlessness of spirit which renders us troublesome and disagreeable to others. Hence also arise those complaints, those murmurs, those antipathies of persons of one nation for those of another, those dissensions amongst brethren, and, what is far worse, estrangement from superiors, because we are neglected by them in the distribution of offices and positions of trust. By such conduct we clearly prove that we are wanting in the very knowledge of what religious profession implies; for we turn it from its real end and under a false idea of piety make it the stepping-stone to honors and dignities and repose, and, in a word, to greater privileges. Alas, how sad is this error! Such religious seem to me in the same case with those invalids for whom the physician prescribes a remedy, but who go to sleep without tasting it; forgetting that their condition will be worse on the morrow, no matter how long they hold the dose in their hand, if they do not finally drink it. And so it is with those who do not strive to attain the end of their profession; instead of profiting them it will only prove their ruin. For the aim of the religious is that each one may work zealously in the vineyard of the Lord; that he may be more obedient, more submissive, more humble; that he may become a more fitting instrument for the help of his neighbor and give him an example of more perfect virtue. For to them that follow in His footsteps by a religious profession did Christ say: "You are the light of the world."

Hence it may be easily seen, as I have said before, that no one is fit to follow the course of literature unless he has previously laid a firm foundation of piety and religious observance. Nor can there be any professed, such at least as the spirit of our Institute supposes, unless he be thoroughly grounded in piety as well as in learning. And this with God's assistance will surely be, if we hold fast to those precepts which are laid down in the first part of the Constitutions about admitting new members; if, again, we observe in the noviceship those precepts which are found in the third part; and finally, if we fulfil in the colleges what is prescribed in the fourth part. And since I address the whole Society, I earnestly exhort and implore each one not to be content with a mere perusal of those Constitutions, and a sterile admiration of the divine spirit and order which shine forth from them, but rather faithfully to apply to their observance, since on this alone depend the spiritual profit and advancement to which all of us must aspire. Willingly would I write of these matters at greater length, both because I am led to it by reason of my office, and because I am prevented from visiting the Provinces as I had first intended. But this pleasure also is denied me; for I am so weak from the illness which I contracted shortly after the arrival of the Fathers Procurators that it is only with the greatest difficulty and the most painful effort that I can dictate even these lines. Consequently that I may not protract my letter to too great a length and that I may lessen the fatigue of it, I deem it advisable to reduce to a few heads the counsel which I wish to give you, for fear lest the sower of discord may gain entrance into our field and destroy the good seed which the Holy Spirit has sown therein by the grace of our holy vocation. I beg of you to pray especially that we may not tarry on the way of perfection after we have so well begun, but to run with ardor and with an ever increasing speed until we arrive at our journey's end even "unto the mount of God, Horeb."



The first advice I have to give you I find clearly set forth in the tenth part of the Constitutions where there is question of the means to be employed in preserving and increasing the Society. These are the words: "The means which unite an instrument to God and render it ever ready to the touch of the divine hand are more efficacious than those which dispose it to be of service to man. These means are uprightness, generosity, and, particularly, charity and purity of intention in God's service. To these may be added a familiar intercourse with God in one's spiritual exercises and the purest zeal for the salvation of souls, which seeks nothing else than the glory of Him who created and redeemed them." Words well worthy of our most serious attention, since our Blessed Father wrote them with so much solitude and love for the welfare of his children. And if we seriously reflect on them we shall recognize that from the neglect thereof arise those miserable dissensions which are the destruction of all religious organizations. For just as a drought causes the flower and the fruit to wither, so does neglect of meditation and other exercises of piety destroy in the religious soul the flower and fruit of holiness. And a religious who omits his meditation and renounces the imitation of his crucified Savior, will have no spirit in his work for the glory of that divine Master. He will apply himself reluctantly to it. He will begin to grow satisfied with himself and to despise the labor of others, and for no other reason than this, that he rarely seeks in prayer a true knowledge of himself and a sincere conviction of the utter nothingness of man. The sovereign remedy for this, the remedy which at the same time consoles us in all our difficulties, is to be found only in the cross of our Savior. If the rod of Moses was sufficient to cause the destruction of the Egyptians, how much more efficacious will be the cross of Christ in destroying those worldly and uncurbed passions which strive for the mastery in our souls? That these passions are still so vehement in us is a certain proof that we have not sought refuge in the cross. For what can be lacking him who has his asylum there? What can he need for the peace and happiness of his soul? Do we rejoice in prosperity? We owe it to the Cross. Do we feel the weight of sorrow and anguish? The Cross will sweeten our sorrows. Who would dare measure his strength with those whose strength is drawn from the cross of Christ? "Who then shall separate us from the love of Christ?" If anyone, therefore, succumb to the attacks of the enemy, be they ever so violent, the plain reason is that he has been unwilling to use those means which bind us to God by the most perfect bonds. "Destruction is thy own, O Israel: thy help is only in me." If the counsels given in the tenth part of the Constitutions be faithfully observed, they by themselves will be sufficient to secure for us a life tranquil, indeed, and exempt from all annoyance. Then shall we be united in common thoughts and sentiments. Then shall we hear no more complaints about our food and clothing, or the burdens imposed upon us; for "charity is patient, is kind : charity dealeth not perversely, seeketh not her own."

Though much could be said on the virtue of obedience, that fondest aim, the standard and tower of the Society's strength, yet I refrain from so doing and refer you to that wonderful and helpful and all-embracing letter on this virtue by our blessed Father, St. Ignatius. I commend to you the reading of this letter with the counsel given by our Lord to the seeker after eternal life "This do and thou shalt live" for, by the observance, with God's grace, of the teachings of this letter we can claim the name, nay, the reality of sons of perfect obedience.



When speaking of Poverty, in the sixth part of the Constitutions, St. Ignatius represents it as a firm wall of religion which preserves religious families in their primitive spirit and discipline, and guards them against their many enemies. We must, therefore, look upon it as our greatest mainstay and be very careful that, while we endeavor to support our colleges, or help our houses, we do not allow ourselves to be led away by an immoderate solicitude, or a too anxious zeal, which can very easily be the occasion of scandal to men of the world and the cause, also, of pain and sorrow to ourselves. Since, moreover, the Gospel prohibits all immoderate desire of getting and possessing, let us not allow ourselves the least relaxation where poverty is concerned, under any pretext whatever of zeal or greater good. O let us not suffer a love for temporal things to steal into our hearts! for that love once admitted will work the ruin of every religious congregation. I must not be understood, however, as wishing to forbid the employment of just and moderate means for the maintenance of our needy colleges and houses; but I do assert, and experience has shown it in many instances, that the means we have employed to procure revenues for many of our colleges have rendered us burdensome to our neighbor, whereas our plain duty is to help him. But as often as we have been, on the contrary, moderate and hopeful in our endeavors to preserve the modest resources of our houses, through the goodness of Providence which watches over us, we have in unforeseen and unexpected ways obtained in one year that which we had vainly sought during many. Let it be thoroughly understood, and for this reason do I insist upon it, that our work cannot prosper through this undue solicitude; nay more, our work will be hindered rather than helped by it. If we proceed, however, with moderation in silence and hope, everything will go well with us. Our neighbor will be edified, and we ourselves shall be happier in having realized our title of poor men, and Christ will shower upon us greater favors and more efficacious helps, because as the Psalmist says, in speaking to the Lord: "To thee is the poor man left: thou wilt be a helper to the orphan."

I would also arouse and exhort you, my dearly beloved Fathers and Brothers in Christ, to bear in mind that by the vows we vowed unto God we are no longer alive but dead, and that this life we live is now no longer our own, but His who spared not His own but laid it down for us. We must live our life, then, in Him; for if we think that we can of ourselves preserve it in ourselves, we are greatly deceived. And these are the signs by which we may know that we are dead in Christ: to see nothing, to feel nothing, to answer nothing. If on the contrary we have our eyes always open to judge the doings of others, to retort upon Superiors and contradict the orders which they give, to be sad and to complain of being admonished of our faults, these are very evident signs that we are not dead in Christ, but that we are ruled by our passions, and that we have lost sight of the end we had in view in entering into religion.

I call your attention to this point because I read that the fervor and simplicity which obtained among those of the early Society were such that admonitions and corrections, far from causing grief and bitterness, begot only gratitude and an affectionate remembrance of the benefactor. And why should it be otherwise? If men of the world and courtiers feel indebted to him who discovers to them some stain upon their countenance, or some disorder in their apparel, what, think you, should be his gratitude to whom a friendly admonition makes known some spiritual blemish, and thereby enables him to appear before the King of kings with that spotless sanctity which is necessary? If sadness, vexation, or aversion



crowds out the better feeling which we should have for our admonitor, we put ourselves in the danger of encountering one or the other of two fatal evils. Either our vices will wax stronger, because no one will care to admonish, or correct us (and indeed who is so foolhardy as to persist in administering medicine to a sick man who is violent and unwilling to be cured), or in the second case, supposing the remedy to be applied, we will receive the counsel or reprimand with such vexation and resentment that the whole community will be in pain and distress. Were we deeply penetrated with that spirit of simplicity and humility of which it is said in Proverbs, "his communication is with the simple," far different would our conduct be. And, indeed, how can God dwell with him in whom there is not this holy simplicity?

In the New Law Christ has forbidden the circumcision of the body, but has strongly recommended to him, who wishes to be His disciple, the spiritual circumcision, which is that of the heart. He calls upon His disciple to renounce himself, to take up his cross and to follow Him. And it is in this spirit that for grave reasons our holy institute forbids the use of public mortifications, but attaches so much importance to abnegation of the will and interior mortification, that for one to dispense himself therein would seem almost equivalent to his forfeiting the title of child of the Society. To act after such a fashion is nothing less than to blind oneself to the necessity of chastising and bringing under subjection a rebellious will which fears not to offend its Creator. To act after such a fashion is to follow one's caprice and flatter it in place of combating it and denying it in every possible way. Negligence in this matter may very easily be the cause of serious hurt to the Society. As the vine which is never pruned becomes sterile, and, instead of yielding grapes exhausts itself in a wild growth of branches and useless tendrils, and finally dies, so in the Society, if we seek our ease and neglect the mortification of our passions, in place of doing good we shall waste our energy in various labors which will not have a reward. Another evil begotten of this uncircumcision of the heart and this self-esteem, is that dense cloud, as it were, of imperfections which rises about us and gradually obscures the presence of God so that eventually it hides it altogether. When I recall the gifts and the virtues of our Holy Founder and of the other Fathers also, who were the first fruits of the Society; when I consider that in all their enterprises they worked and planned, as if they were under the very eye of God himself, I begin to dread that those excellent gifts and that perfection of virtue with which the good Lord so bountifully blessed them, may through our own fault be altogether denied ourselves. What then shall be our fate while we traverse the desert of this life, a desert fraught with so many perils, what shall be our fate, I say, if we be deprived of that divine light of God's special providence, seeing that the people of Israel, although guided in their desert-wanderings by a pillar of heavenly fire, had nevertheless to undergo so many trials and such great fatigue? How easily may we be led into error since there is no other light but the light of God alone to lead and guide us in our journeyings. Let us not, then, esteem that as the least important among the counsels which bids us with all our strength to mortify the heart. Let us perform all our actions as if we were in the presence of God our Savior, repeating the while those



words of David: "My heart hath been glad...and my flesh also shall rest in hope." Nor should anyone be surprised if he is deprived of peace and tranquility, when he has taken no pains to keep himself in the presence of God. For such gifts are not conferred on those who make light of them, but only on those who earnestly labor to deserve them.

It is true, as I said before, that our vineyard "stretches forth its branches unto the sea." It is true, also, that it has already put forth leaves and blossoms and flowers, and the fruit thereof is ripening. But this is not enough. It is further expected of it to produce wine in abundance. For no other end, indeed, has the vine been planted. Now in order to get wine from the grapes it is necessary that they be heaped into the wine-press and crushed. Perhaps it is here that our trouble begins. Perhaps we do not relish this severe process. We do not care about being trampled under foot, bruised and crushed even though it be in order that we may yield the desired wine of joy and consolation. But if we keep in mind those words of our Lord: "I have trodden the wine-press alone" and those other words: "I will not drink from henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I shall drink it with you new in the kingdom of my Father;" if we keep these words in mind, I say, we shall see how necessary it is to be trodden under foot and crushed in the wine-press of affliction that Christ may reap from our lives the wine of those virtues which He seeks in His true disciple. Moreover, if we ourselves do not trample under foot the empty pride of honor and self-love that springs up in our heart, we shall be quickly trodden under foot by our enemies and we shall cease to be Christ's disciples.

And now that I may draw this letter to a close, and reduce to one point that which I especially desire of you, I conjure you to have continually before your eyes those words of the apostle: "See your vocation, brethren." Should anyone, therefore, feel the desire of humbling himself, let him frequently ask himself how much he owes to his vocation and what the nature of that vocation requires. Let him watch his words and actions and consider whether they are such as become a member of the Society. Let this be the measure of his actions and he will be modest in the tone of his voice, reserved in his conversation, ever on the alert to give edification, prudent and upright in his deportment, zealous in withdrawing souls from sin, ardent in laboring and suffering for Christ and His Church, in a word, he will be a man according to our Constitutions; a man who knows how to devote himself to his neighbor's salvation while laboring at his own sanctification, a workman in the vineyard of the Lord, of whom it may be said in justice: "The laborer is worthy of his hire." May the Lord deign to send to His vineyard many such workmen that we may be ready to meet the wants, I will not say of Europe alone, but of Africa and Asia and India so that the whole world may be drawn to Christ Jesus, and that there maybe but "one fold and one shepherd." May Jesus Christ the good and true shepherd Who has numbered us amongst His sheep, make us docile to His voice and reveal Himself to us by His grace in this world and by His glory in the world to come.

As the state of my health warns me that the time of my dissolution is near, I pray and conjure you all by the charity you feel for me, to recommend me to God in your prayers and holy Sacrifices, in order that, during the little time that still remains to me, He will give me the grace of appreciating the favor of my vocation, of performing all my actions in His holy spirit, and of preparing myself for the great journey by walking unto the end in the paths of sanctity and in the presence of God. And this I also ask



of Him and shall continue to ask for all the members of our Society, because I feel myself obliged to it by reason of my office and of my deep affection for the Society.

Your Reverence's Servant in Christ,

FRANCIS BORGIA.

Rome,

April, 1569.

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