Landas 38:2 (2026) 129–152

THE FIRST COMPANIONS: FINDING GRACE IN DISPERSION, SICKNESS, AND CONFLICT[1]

Christopher M. Staab, SJ

Abstract. In his letter "Confirmed in the Charism," Father General Arturo Sosa invited the Society of Jesus to understand better how "the first companions were able to read the motions of the good Spirit." This presentation responds to Fr. Sosa's call by examining how Ignatius and the first companions found grace in their experiences of dispersion, illness, and conflict. These difficult human experiences fill their extant texts and, as such, provide us with the opportunity to discover how they lived their quotidian apostolic work. Dispersion, illness, and conflict were not experiences to be overcome, but rather experiences to be lived with God. Such an approach to the first companions seeks a less romantic view of the Society's origins and, for that reason, offers consolation to all of us who experience these same difficult realities in our apostolic lives.

Keywords: grace, dispersion, illness, conflict, first companions

[1] This paper was delivered as the keynote address at the International Conference on Ignatian Spirituality organized by Loyola School of Theology and held on April 22, 2026 at the Henry Lee Irwin Theater, Ateneo de Manila University.

https://publications.lst.edu/

Introduction

I want to thank the organizers of this International Conference on Ignatian Spirituality for the invitation to participate in this gathering. I am delighted to be here, and I am grateful for the opportunity to offer a presentation on how Ignatius and the first companions found grace in difficult experiences like those of dispersion, illness, and conflict. I believe that this topic is not only relevant but important. And it is one that we know first-hand. We have experienced conflict, and we know how hard it is. We have felt the effects of being dispersed in mission – separated from our friends and loved ones. We are also not unfamiliar with illness, the limitations of our bodies, and the difficulty of aging. All of these human realities constitute a part of our journey to God. I would like to explore with you this morning how these experiences formed a part of Ignatius' and the first companions' experience with God. Maybe it was in and through these experiences that they found their way to God. Stated in one of the more famous expressions from the Formula of the Institute of the Society of Jesus, perhaps illness, dispersion, and conflict helped them keep their eyes on their Lord.

In addition to being a relevant topic for us to reflect upon, these categories offer a new hermeneutic with which to view their lives. Much historiography of the early Society is tinged with hagiography or colored by a certain romantic, even nostalgic view of its charismatic beginnings. My intention is not to criticize those perspectives, but rather to complement them by filling in the details of the other human experiences that formed part of their lives.[2] By first companions, I refer to Peter Faber, Francis Xavier, Diego Laínez, Alfonso Salmerón,

[2] A similar approach can be found in Markus Friedrich's history of the Society of Jesus in which he discusses "the dissatisfaction and dejection, the turpitude and abject indecency of some its members and their associates." See Markus Friedrich, *The Jesuits: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 22. See also José García de Castro who argues that "a chapter needs to be written on the conflicts and misunderstandings" amongst and in the early Society. See, Jose García de Castro, "Ignatius of Loyola and His First Companions," in *A Companion to Ignatius of Loyola*, ed. Robert Aleksander Maryks (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 82.

https://publications.lst.edu/

Simon Rodrigues, and Nicolás Bobadilla. I will also refer to important second-generation Jesuits like Juan Alfonso de Polanco and Jerome Nadal. All of them were remarkable human beings; they did the hard work of launching a new apostolic project, and they lived out their faith with uncommon zeal and perseverance. In short, there is much to admire in them. But they were not so different from you and me. They struggled, and some of them struggled a lot.

Their extant texts are voluminous, and for that reason I will limit myself to talking about a few of the companions. I will, however, use their words, attempting to tell how they found grace in the messier moments of their lives. I will begin by speaking of their experience of dispersion, an aspect of their religious lives that was central to them. In the second part, I will move to speak of the way they coped with illness. Finally, I will describe the important place of conflict in Ignatius' spirituality. In each of these three sections, I will try to discern in what ways they found grace, again, using, as much as I can, their own words. My hope is that we will see, following Fr. General Arturo Sosa's letter "Confirmed in the Charism," "how Ignatius and the first companions were able to read the motions of the good Spirit."[3] But primarily I tell the stories of the first companions because they can console us in our Christian journey. Consolation is what they sought to bring people, and I believe that the testimony of their lives – their stories – continues to reveal to us the motions of the good Spirit.

1. Dispersion: "We consider ourselves pilgrims and exiles."

Before their plans to set sail to Jerusalem did not materialize, and before their discernment in 1539, in which they asked themselves how they wanted to maintain their relationships across distances, the evidence of what they did suggests that they understood that following Jesus would mean being separated and sent to different places. For example, in northern Italy, as they awaited passage to Jerusalem, they split up into two groups, five serving in the hospital of St. John and

[3] Arturo Sosa, SJ, "Confirmed in the Charism, Sent on a Mission of Reconciliation and Justice," 3 January 2026.

https://publications.lst.edu/

St. Paul and the other five serving in the hospital of the Incurables.[4] After their trip to Rome in 1537, they came back to Venice and were ordained. Again, they split up, this time into pairs in order to spend time, as Simon Rodrigues put it, in "solitude and reflection on the things of God."[5] In this embryonic stage of their religious life, going to different places was a part of their apostolic identity.

The configuration of their apostolic identity happened in multiple ways – prayer, spiritual conversation, and extended time together as students at the same university. Most importantly, they came to discover their identity in and through the *Spiritual Exercises*. And in that spiritual experience, they met a Jesus who sends apostles into the world. As John O'Malley argued: "the ultimate model for the Jesuits' pastoral engagement was the disciples of Jesus – sent on journey for preaching and healings in body and soul."[6]

---

[4] Nicolás Bobadilla, *Autobiographia*, vol. 46, *Bobadillae Monumenta: Nicolai Alphonsi de Bobadilla, Sacerdotis e Societate Iesu – Gesta et Scripta* (hereafter MBob), ed. Daniel Restrepo, SJ (Madrid: Typis Gabrielis Lopez del Horno, 1913), 615.

[5] Two texts, one in Latin and the other in Portuguese, constitute the critical editions of Rodrigues' account of the Society's origins. For the Latin text, see, Simon Rodrigues, *De origine et progressus Societatis Jesu*, vol. 24, *Epistolae PP. Paschasii Broëti, Claudii Jaji, Joannis Codurii et Simonis Rodericii (MBroët)*, ed. Federico Cervós, SJ (Madrid: Typis Gabrielis Lopez del Horno, 1903), 451–517. For the Portuguese text, see Simon Rodrigues, *Monumentum 3* (document three): *Commentarium de origine et progressu Societatis Iesu*, vol. 85, *Fontes Narrativi de Sancto Ignatio de Loyola et de Societatis Iesu Initiis, Tomus III*, ed. Candido de Dalmases, SJ (Rome: Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu, 1960), 5–136. I am following the English translation by Joseph Conwell, (trans.), *A Brief and Exact Account: The Early Recollections of Simão Rodrigues on the Origin and Progress of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources [IJS], 2004), number 61. Bobadilla and Paschase Bröet went to Verona; Ignatius, Faber, and Laínez went to Vicenza; Claude Jay and Simon Rodrigues were in Bassano; Xavier and Alfonso Salmerón stayed in Monteselice; Jean Codure and Diego Hozes were in Treviso (following Rodrigues, Origins, n. 62).

[6] John O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 372. Also Friedrich: "Apostolic ministry, the proactive effort to promote Christianity among men, had long been a prominent feature of classical Western monasticism, but among the Jesuits – even more so than in the mendicant

https://publications.lst.edu/

If we were to look closely at the *Exercises* and what early generations of Jesuits said about it, we would find that they understood their lives *vis-à-vis* the meditation of the Two Standards. In that meditation, Jesus sends many persons "throughout the whole world, to spread his doctrine among people of every state and condition."[7] Speaking to a group of Jesuit scholastics in Coimbra, Portugal, in 1561, Jerome Nadal declared that the meditation is not simply a spiritual exercise that one does in the second week of the Exercises. For Nadal, the meditation described the Jesuit's daily life. In his words, the meditation on the Two Standards "says what really happens" (in our life). Or, in another phrase of his, "this meditation signals our Institute put into practice."[8]

Putting this meditation into practice meant that the Jesuit is sent out by Jesus, and he returns to Jesus every day to learn from him. Jesus is the true life, the one who inhabits a place that is, according to the text, humble, beautiful, and gracious. From that place, Jesus sends us out to bring that humble, beautiful and gracious good news to all peoples. For this reason, to be sent out, separated from one's companions, is a grace. And this special grace of the Jesuit vocation was a point of pride for them.[9] So much so that they likened themselves, as did other religious groups, to the primitive church, experiencing in their dispersion what the disciples felt in being sent out by Jesus.[10] When Polanco wrote,

---

Dominican and Franciscan orders – it became the overriding purpose of life," Friedrich, *The Jesuits*, 67.

[7] Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola (Spiritual Exercises)*, ed. George Ganss (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), 145.

[8] Jerome Nadal, "*Plática 3ª Meditaciones del Rey y las Banderas,*" in *Las Pláticas del Jerónimo Nadal: La globalización ignaciana*, ed. Miguel Lop (Bilbao-Santander: Mensajero-Sal Terrae, 2011), 170.

[9] In his study of Jerome Nadal, Joseph Conwell points out that Nadal "will increasingly underline the pilgrim nature of the Society, living on the road, in exile." See Joseph Conwell, *Walking in the Spirit: A Reflection on Jerónimo Nadal's Phrase "Contemplative Likewise in Action"* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2003), 85.

[10] See, Conwell, *Walking in the Spirit*, 94. Conwell points out that "it is important to be aware that the young Society, like every new religious order, saw itself blessed

https://publications.lst.edu/

"we consider ourselves pilgrims and exiles in this world where we have no permanent city," he was thanking God for the gift of such a call.[11] Union with Christ was to be like him, sent, a pilgrim in the world, the one who had nowhere to lie his head.

Dispersion not only held an important place in their spirituality, but, as all things do in the Ignatian charism, it was structured into their life. In the 4th vow, a vow in which the Jesuit promised obedience to the pope for missions, Jesuits "sought to take part in this universal and global perspective" of the Church's mission.[12] As the historian Markus Friedrich has pointed out, "we should not overestimate the direct influence of obedience to the pope on the everyday workings of the Society."[13] Nevertheless, we should recall that for Ignatius this vow was made so that "His Holiness might arrange our separation and mission."[14] And in a further gloss on this vow, Ignatius underlined its importance: "such a promise is our first principle and main foundation."[15] Their pastoral principle and foundation, the "cornerstone of their following

with the grace to live in its own time the life of the primitive Church." (Ibid., 95).

[11] Juan Alfonso de Polanco, *Polancus Mariae de Salinas matri suae, 31 decembris 1552* (Letter of Juan Alfonso de Polanco to María de Salinas [his mother], 31 December 1552), vol. 52, *Polanci Complementa. Epistolae et commentaria P. Ioannis Alphonsi de Polanco e Societate Iesu ex autographis, Tomus I*, eds. Daniel Restrepo, SJ, Dionysius Fernández Zapico (Madrid: Typis Gabrielis Lopez del Horno, 1916), 76.

[12] Friedrich, *The Jesuits*, 134.

[13] Friedrich, *The Jesuits*, 134.

[14] "Constitutions Regarding Missions," in *The Primitive Constitutions of 1541 and Other Preparatory Documents for the Jesuit Constitutions*, trans. Joseph Munitiz, *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 53/4 (2021): 39.

[15] "Declaration about the Missions," in *The Primitive Constitutions of 1541 and Other Preparatory Documents for the Jesuit Constitutions*, trans. Joseph Munitiz, *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 53/4 (2021): 42.

https://publications.lst.edu/

of Jesus as religious" was their desire to be dispersed for mission anywhere in the world.[16]

This rhetoric about the Jesuit pastoral style of being pilgrims and exiles bespeaks hopes and dreams.[17] And these dreams were realized: these were men on the move. Consider, for example Nicolás Bobadilla. Over a 10-week period in the summer of 1538, he and Claude Jay travelled from Rome to the northern Italian city of Ferrara. There they worked, giving as Bobadilla recounts, good example of Christian doctrine by their lives, and then they returned to Rome.[18] They travelled 850 km to work for a month at the bequest of the Duke of Ferrara.[19]

A slightly longer journey for a mission that ended up being about the same amount of time was that undertaken by Alfonso Salmerón and Paschase Broët. Pope Paul III sent them to Ireland, a distance of some 2,463km from Rome.[20] Writing to Ignatius in April of 1542, Salmerón recounted that they spent a mere 34 days in Ireland. Both Jesuits found such hostility in and among the people that staying there was not possible. Salmerón admitted that their presence in Scotland was a bit more fruitful, commenting that "a few people were consoled to see us," but overall, the trip seems to have borne little fruit. Yet, this is not how Salmerón saw it; at the end of his letter, he praised God who brought them there to share "in some way with the cross of Christ." He specified what this sharing in the life of Christ felt like: "we had nothing to eat, nothing to drink, nowhere to sleep, and not even a quiet place to say an Our Father." But he declared: "of all of this and

---

[16] Ignacio Iglesias, *"Cuarto voto,"* in *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Ignaciana,* vol. 1, ed. *Grupo de Espiritualidad Ignaciana* (Bilbao-Santander: Mensajero-Sal Terrae, 2007), 517.

[17] Following O'Malley, *The First Jesuits*, 372.

[18] Bobadilla, *Hercules II Extensis, Dux Ferrariae: PP. Nicolao Bobadillae et Claudio Jajo, Ferraria, 29 junii 1538* (Letter of Bobadilla to the Duke of Ferrara [29 June 1538]), MBob, 7-8.

[19] Following letters 3-8, in *Mbob*, 2-11.

[20] According to Google Maps.

https://publications.lst.edu/

the rest we would be happy to stay to do some service to Christ our Lord." Their mission – 2,463km for 34 days – was a grace, and they rejoiced at being able to imitate Christ who came not to be successful or efficient, but to serve and be helpful in small ways.

But the reality of dispersion in the Lord's vineyard was also, unsurprisingly, difficult.[21] Concretely put, it entailed heartache. For example, in the first extant letter we have from Simon Rodrigues, Rodrigues, writing from Lisbon, complained to Ignatius of not receiving letters, letters that in his words he "so desired." In that same letter he recounted the departure of Francis Xavier for the Indies, and he confided that Xavier's absence was hard on him. Similarly poignant is how he interpreted his remaining in Portugal; he reasoned that "I, because of my sins, have been deprived of realizing my great desires, for not being worthy of so much good like Master Francis."[22] He missed his friend, most likely felt alone, and in that emotional state, made what seems like a harsh judgment on himself. In their loneliness, the evil spirit found fertile ground to make the men doubt themselves.

Peter Faber, too, gives ample testimony of both the zeal of being sent out on mission as well as the difficulty of living such an itinerant apostolic life. It is estimated that in six years, from 1540-1546, Faber traveled some 10,000-12,000 miles. His life was, as he himself put it, "wandering and restless to a degree – as I believe God intended it to be, because it was for his sake alone that I have put up in so many lodgings."[23] Faber believed that his peripatetic life made sense in God's vision, but that did not mean that he did not miss the companionship

[21] Important to note too that "many Jesuits at large showed equally great mobility. And yet even shortly after 1540 it was undeniable that an opposite trend had also emerged, becoming more pronounced over time." See, Friedrich, *The Jesuits*, 65.

[22] Rodrigues, *Patribus Ignatio de Loyola et Petro Codacio, 15 maji 1541* (Letter of Simon Rodrigues to Ignatius of Loyola [15 May 1541]), v. 24, *MBroët*, 520 and 523.

[23] See, Pierre Favre, "*Memoriale*," in *The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre,* eds. Edmond Murphy & John Padberg (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), n. 286, 230.

https://publications.lst.edu/

of his friends. In a poignant letter in which he recounts having missed seeing Francis Xavier, who passed through northern Italy on his way to Lisbon, Faber wrote: "these separations only make sense for Jesus Christ."[24] Faber would never see Xavier again…and he could only turn to Jesus to make sense of, if he could, his feelings. In addition, the geographical dispersion created in him a kind internal dispersion. In his personal journal, he wrote that "I had often been negligent during the course of my numerous and varied journeys."[25] Similarly, he noted that he thought that his lectures to people were incoherent and confusing, [26]and that he was, in his words, "achieving nothing of note…I kept thinking I could not help being by far the least successful of all my contemporaries."[27] Moreover, he lamented what he called his "old defect:" he always took on too many things.[28] And when letters from Rome did not arrive, he concluded: "each week I feel new sorrow that I am not worthy to receive your letters."[29]

In sum, the men understood their separation from their friends in the only way they could: looking at Jesus. Jesus was their principal and foundation, and it was for him that they set off on foot, walked thousands of kilometers, and waited for letters that often never arrived. But their being sent and separated founded the Society of Jesus. That

[24] Pierre Favre, *Patri Ignatio de Loyola, 16 aprilis 1540* (Letter of Peter Faber to Ignatius of Loyola [16 April 1540]), vol. 48, Fabri *Monumenta. Beati Petri Fabri primi sacerdotis e Societate Iesu. Epistolae, Memoriale et Processus ex autographis (MFab)*, ed. Francisco Lirola (Madrid: Typis Gabrielis Lopez del Horno, 1914), 30: *"el Señor por su gracia haga de suerte que, si en este mundo no nos veremos, nos podamos alegrar juntamente en el toro de estas separaciones hechas por solo Jesucristo."*

[25] Favre, "*Memoriale*," n. 433, 309.

[26] Favre, "*Memoriale*," n. 192, 182.

[27] Favre, "*Memoriale*," n. 423, 304.

[28] Favre, *Patribus Ignatio de Loyola et Petro Codacio, 20 aprilis 1541* (Peter Faber to Ignatius of Loyola (20 April 1541), MFab, 88. The phrase is: *"pecando siempre en este mi viejo defecto que es abrazar demaisiado."*

[29] Favre, *Patribus Societatis Jesu Romae degentibus*, 30 novembris 1541 (Letter of Peter Faber to members of the Society of Jesus [30 November 1541]), MFab, 138.

https://publications.lst.edu/

foundation continues to produce fruit: I believe that we are here, sisters and brothers, all of us collaborators in the Church, because of them. This gathering is a fruit of a seed that was sown many years ago. Stated in the language of a psalm: "what they sowed in tears, we are reaping in joy." Moreover, this sowing in tears – experiencing the difficulty of dispersion – has not finished with the first companions. Being sent out for mission is at the heart of our life: our union or community life is lived in and for dispersion. Our present pontiff has reminded all of us of this: "the Church needs you at the frontiers…these are places of risk, where familiar maps are no longer sufficient."[30] This is our charism, which, as Hugo Rahner put it, is a "mystical joy in running toward the world."[31] The lives of the first companions encourage us to go to those frontiers, and to trust that such a mission, lived in dispersion and separation, will be fruitful for generations to come.

2. Sickness or Obtaining "half a doctorate in directing and ordering one's life to God"

Given the amount of travelling the men did, it is not surprising to find illness constantly present in their lives and, as such, finding its way in their correspondence. To return briefly to the companions I mentioned earlier: Faber reported serious health issues in early 1546. He wrote that he had fallen ill and that he had lost use of his hand.[32] Salmerón reports that in their journey from Rome to Ireland, they spent some 20 days in the North Sea in late December sailing to Edinburgh – and if we have difficulty imagining how cold it must have been, he tells us. He wrote that the temperature was so harsh that "I do not

[30] Pope Leo XIV, *Address of Pope Leo XIV to the Major Superiors of the Society of Jesus*, Speeches, 24 October 2025, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2025/october/documents/20251024-compagnia-gesu.html.

[31] Hugo Rahner, *The Spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Francis John Smith (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1980), 45.

[32] See, Favre, *Patri Jacobo Lainio, 7 martii 1546* (Letter of Peter Faber to Diego Laínez [7 March 1546]), MFab, 400: *"no estoy tan recio de la mano."*

https://publications.lst.edu/

think that we had one good day of health" the whole time.[33] For his part, Bobadilla does not report that he or Claude Jay became ill during their work in Ferrara, Italy, but he certainly did have health issues. For example, in September of 1538, he headed south to Naples, to the island of Ischia on a special mission entrusted to him by Pope Paul III. Upon arriving, he came down with what he called "a malignant fever called *pecoraria*," which in his words "was some kind of pestilence, a deadly fever." He had to leave the island, return to Naples, where he arrived "staggering and worn out from vomiting." He stayed in a hospital, the hospital of the Annunciation, for two months recovering.[34] Recalling this sickness, he wrote that "he heard the doctor say to the infirmarian: 'That man is on his way to the grave.'"[35] He may have been on his way to the grave, but he recovered, went back to Ischia, completed his mission, and then returned to Rome.

Bobadilla is an interesting case study on this topic of illness because he documented so many of his bodily ailments. In an autobiographical text he wrote in 1589, at the age of 80, one year before he died, he recounted in detail the many occasions when he was ill or almost died. In a section of his story that he titled "Just and Legitimate Cause why Master Nicolaus Bobadilla does not easily believe Doctors, nor always Obeys them while he is Sick," he chronologically detailed the "many things he has experienced in his body."[36] For example, he wrote that "he began to get sick when he was thirteen years old, and has often been sick". He was, in his words, "frequently sick because of his studies" and "was often sick unto danger of death." The specific examples of these near-death experiences are vivid: accidentally ingesting poison,

[33] Alfonso Salmerón, *Patri Ignatio de Loyola, 2 februarii 1542* (Letter of Alfonso Salmerón to Ignatius of Loyola [2 February 1542]), vol. 30, *Epistolae P. Alphonsi Salmeronis Societatis Iesu ex autographis vel originalibus exemplis potissimum depromptae (MSal), Tomus I*, eds. Raimundo Vidaurre, Federico Cervós, SJ (Madrid: Typis Gabrielis Lopez del Horno, 1906), 3.

[34] Bobadilla, *Autobiographia, MBob*, 618, par. 15.

[35] Bobadilla, *Autobiographia, MBob*, 618, par. 15.

[36] Bobadilla, *Autobiographia, MBob*, 630, par. 58.

https://publications.lst.edu/

encountering the plague in Germany, being hit by a kind of spear or javelin while living in an army camp, and suffering for five years from quartan fever, a form of malaria "where an onset of fevers occurs every three to four days."[37] As if this account were not enough, he proceeded to narrate other dangerous incidents he endured. For example, he mentions that he was robbed, menaced by soldiers, and three times thrown off his mule.[38]

For a contemporary reader, Bobadilla's vivid recall of all of his illnesses may make us think he was something of a hypochondriac – obsessed and worried about his health to the very end of his days. Perhaps. But it is worth considering more carefully why he would end his brief autobiography cataloguing the sicknesses, dangers, and accidents he suffered. In other words, what made him enumerate, year by year, all of his illnesses? On a surface level, these experiences constitute his story. They formed him as much as, we might say, apostolic successes achieved in good health. Writing about the spiritual growth that can take place in illness, the author and journalist Liuan Huska asks a compelling question: "What if the vulnerability and the limits we experience in illness tell a truer story about who we are than the invincibility and limit-pushing confidence we feel in good health?"[39] Bobadilla might be inclined to agree with Huska. I am too. After two years of novitiate and another two years of Philosophy studies, I was finally missioned to regency, a period of apostolic work. As I looked towards my regency at a school in northern Perú, I thought: *I am free at last, finally able to do what I wanted. This was why I entered the Society of Jesus.* I spent the first two months of my apostolic life with dengue fever. I learned early on that we have limits. I, we, are not invincible.

---

[37] Bobadilla, *Autobiographia, MBob*, 630, par. 58. Also following the Wikipedia article at "Quartan Fever," *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quartan_fever (Accessed 23 Feb 2026).

[38] Bobadilla, *Autobiographia, MBob*, 633, par. 60.

[39] Liuan Huska, *Hurting yet Whole: Reconciling Body and Spirit in Chronic Pain and Illness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 101.

https://publications.lst.edu/

Bobadilla gives two reasons for recounting his ailments. First, he describes his infirmities to show that he knew his body, so much so that he became, in his words, "the greatest passive doctor of his body."[40] This is an important observation: he is indicating that he could read pain and fear as if they were messages or communications. Pain was something he suffered passively, but he became adept at decoding and learning from it. He intimates as much in his story when he wrote that he "made notes" on his illnesses and treatments.[41] This should not strike us as strange. In contemporary Ignatian idiom, we might put it this way: he learned from his experience, maybe even doing an *examen* during his illnesses to discover what benefit, spiritual or otherwise, they might have held for him.

I use the word "benefit" because that is the same language that Diego Laínez used in one of his talks to Jesuit scholastics in Rome. Laínez, the second general of the Society of Jesus, in his capacity as general, talked to Jesuits about how to live in illness. He said that "when one is sick, one can take great profit from the illness."[42] One of those benefits involved learning how to let another take care of you. Similarly, sickness affords the person the possibility to learn patience. Finally, and most importantly for Laínez, one learns about one's self. Disease, fevers, accidentally ingesting poison: these are great teachers in life. This capacity to learn from one's experience points to an essential aspect of Ignatius' spirituality. For example, writing in 1536, he declared: "it is God's way to bestow understanding."[43] For him, God communicates with the human person pedagogically.[44] As such, one is

[40] Bobadilla, *Autobiographia, MBob*, 630, par. 58.

[41] Bobadilla, *Autobiographia, MBob*, 631, par. 58.

[42] Candido de Dalmases, "Le esortazioni del P. Lainez sull' *'Examen constitutionum,'" Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu XXXV, fasciculum* 69 (1966): 173.

[43] Ignatius of Loyola, "To Jaime Cassador (12 Feb 1536)," in *Ignatius of Loyola: Letters and Instructions*, eds. and trans. Martin E. Palmer, SJ, John W. Padberg, SJ and John L. McCarthy, SJ (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2006), 17.

[44] Paraphrasing José Francisco Ruiz Pérez who wrote: *"La intervención pedagógica de Dios es uno de los temas preferidos de Ignacio."* See, Ruiz Perez, *Teología de Camino*

https://publications.lst.edu/

always learning from history and from one's experiences, even – and most especially – the most uncomfortable ones. Ignatius himself was a particularly adept reader of sickness. As an example, in a letter to Isabel Roser, he put it this way: "I believe that an illness can leave a servant of God with half a doctorate in directing and ordering his life to God's glory and service."[45]

Returning to Bobadilla and his second reason for his laundry list of illnesses: everything points to God. It was God who brought him out of these dangers and willed that he recover. More specifically, it was God's providence. Bobadilla, like the other companions, believed that "nothing stands outside the guiding hand of God."[46] You will recall that Bobadilla was one of the companions Ignatius had in mind to send with Simon Rodrigues to the mission in Portugal which would eventually take them to the Indies. He never made that trip to Portugal because, well, he fell ill. Writing about that moment in his *Autobiography*, he recalled:

He was ill and … in his place Ignatius of Loyola asked Francis Xavier [to go], who by divine providence had dreamt while in Paris of carrying on his back a young Muslim boy and baptizing him. He (Xavier) had great zeal for the conversion of the infidels, and Christ fulfilled his dream… The judgments of God are a great abyss.[47]

> History has proved that Bobadilla was right: it *was* providence that he was sick, not missioned to the Indies, and that Xavier was sent in his place. The fruits of that providence are evident in the world today, especially in a gathering like this one so near to where Xavier evangelized.

(Bilbao-Santander: Mensajero, Sal Terrae, 2000), 160.

[45] Ignatius of Loyola, "To Isabel Roser (10 November 1532)," in *Letters and Instructions*, 9.

[46] Michael Buckley, *What Do You Seek? The Questions of Jesus as Challenge and Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 112.

[47] Bobadilla, *Autobiographia, MBob*, 618-619, par. 16.

https://publications.lst.edu/

I believe that all of us would agree with Bobadilla that the judgments of God are a great abyss. However, that phrase does not mean that God's providence for him was opaque or confusing, rather it points to his sense that God's care runs so deep that it even governs things like bodily health. It is not too much to state that he and all of the companions believed that God's personal providence guided every moment of their lives. According to Ignacio Iparraguirre, divine providence was one of Ignatius' preferred ways to name God. Moreover, that providence had a style for Ignatius: he consistently described God's divine providence with the word "gentle" (*suave*). For example, he expressed this when he wrote "God gently guides," "the providence of our most friendly God," and "the gentlest providence."[48]

I do not believe that I am exaggerating when it comes to Bobadilla's belief in divine providence. Allow me to add to our conversation one more example from a document he authored in 1570. In my estimation, this rather long letter represents one of the more moving documents from the first companions. Titled "A Small Consoling Book," Bobadilla addressed the particular concerns and frustrations of his Jesuit companion Jerome Doménech.[49]

The context of this letter is not sickness, but rather that of men leaving the Society. In 1570, the province of Sicily was hemorrhaging men, and Doménech found himself dismayed, as any one of us would be, at the fact that so many men – so many of his friends – were leaving the Society. Those feelings were compounded by the fact that Francis Borgia, the general at the time, sent a man from Rome to ascertain the situation. This Jesuit, Juan Montoya, Borgia's special envoy, found the Sicilians hard-headed and therefore in need of what he called "an exemplary punishment."[50] This punishment took the form of his expelling more men from the Society. Seeing the situation unfold and

---

[48] Following Ignacio Iparraguirre, *Espíritu de san Ignacio de Loyola: Perspectivas y actitudes ignacianas de espiritualidad* (Bilbao: Mensajero, 1958), 44.

[49] See, *Mario Scaduto, "Il 'Libretto Consolatorio' di Bobadilla a Doménech sulle vocazioni mancate," Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* (1974): 85-102.

[50] Scaduto, *"Il 'Libretto Consolatorio' di Bobadilla a Doménech,"* 86.

https://publications.lst.edu/

noticing how disconsolate Doménech was, Bobadilla did what a friend does – he sought to console him.

He began his letter with a brief and lucid exposition of the difficulty of discernment. He then turned to console his addressee, arguing that divine providence was at work in bringing men to the Society *as well as* in having them leave.[51] Appealing repeatedly to divine providence, Bobadilla encouraged Doménech to let go of his frustration or indignation. Furthermore, in an astounding vision of vocation and religious life, he wrote: "how many that have left, been dismissed and not received in the Society have gone to paradise and how many in it, both the great and the small, will go to hell."[52] And his concluding words were direct: "a superior ought to embrace in all things divine providence… vesting himself with the grace of God and with love for one's neighbor."[53]

Divine providence was, if you like, the principle and foundation of their lives. Even if they did not feel the motions of the good Spirit, they believed in the Spirit's care.

3. Conflict: "A sign that a greater work of God is at hand"

"It should not surprise anyone," the companions wrote in 1539, "that being some of us French, Spanish, Savoyards, and others Cantabrians, we found ourselves divided in viewpoints and opinions regarding our state."[54] In that foundational deliberation, their

[51] Scaduto, "*Il 'Libretto Consolatorio' di Bobadilla a Doménech*," 95, my emphasis.

[52] Scaduto, "*Il 'Libretto Consolatorio' di Bobadilla a Doménech*," 101.

[53] Scaduto, "*Il 'Libretto Consolatorio' di Bobadilla a Doménech*," 101.

[54] For the Deliberation of the First Fathers, see, Jules Toner, "The Deliberation that Started the Jesuits: A Commentary on the *Deliberatio primorum Patrum*, Newly Translated, with a Historical Introduction," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* vol. 6, no. 4 (1974): 185-186. The original Latin text can be found at *Monumenta praevia I: Deliberatio primorum patrorum, 1539*, vol. 63, *Monumenta Ignatiana: Sancti Ignatii de Loyola Constitutiones Societatis Jesu, Tomus I*, ed. Arturo Codina, SJ (Rome: Typis Pontificiae Universitatis Gregorianae, 1934), 2, par. 1.

https://publications.lst.edu/

differences did not break up their bonds; rather, the conflicts they experienced seem to have led them into understanding themselves as a group constituted by plurality and diversity. It is intriguing to consider that, along with the results of that foundational deliberation for them and for us, they learned how to exist as a group with ideas and views that were conflictual. It was their experience, borrowing from Hermann Rodríguez, that "the contradiction of opinions and viewpoints need not be an obstacle in the process of searching for God's will."[55] So strong was their sense that God had brought them together that conflict was not an obstacle to arriving at God's will.[56]

The companions' comments about the discernment process of 1539 suggest that they had a strong stomach for conflict. At least Ignatius seemed to. Conflict is an important theme that runs through the *Autobiography*. That text, known well by all of us, indicates that his earliest experiences of finding God's will involved conflict.

Later texts point to his freedom to engage in debates, no matter the conflict and tension that might ensue. For example, one important issue the early Society faced was the conferral of episcopal dignity on its members. According to André Ravier, "between 1543 and 1546, six of the first Fathers were threatened with being made bishops."[57] Perhaps the document that expresses Ignatius' most vehement opposition to this was the letter he wrote in 1546 to Ferdinand, King of the Romans, who had petitioned that Claude Jay be named bishop of Trieste. Ignatius declared that such a nomination would be "the most effective way

---

[55] Hermann Rodríguez, *"Aportes de San Ignacio para una espiritualidad del conflicto," Manresa* 75 (2003): 297.

[56] Helpful too is Jean-Luc Enyegue who reasons that "…precisely because there were strong differences between them, because their world was also marked by social and political fractures, and finally, because they were aware of being fragile beings, living as a united body became imperative". See, Enyegue, *The Jesuit Ethos: A Social and Spiritual History* (New York: Paulist Press, 2023), 49.

[57] André Ravier, *Ignatius of Loyola and the Founding of the Society of Jesus*, trans. Maura Daly, Joan Daly, and Carson Daly (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 223.

https://publications.lst.edu/

to overthrow and wreck the Society of Jesus."[58] No matter the level of hyperbole that he might have been employing, the clarity of his language to an important, high-ranking political figure demonstrates that he was unafraid of the conflict his stance would cause. Several years later, Francis Borgia was high on the list to become a cardinal, and Ignatius again labored strenuously to avoid it. Describing his prayer, he told Borgia: "I held then and now that there would be no contradiction in its being God's will for me to take this course while others take a different one and the dignity be conferred upon you."[59] In other words, Ignatius found no contradiction in the action of the Spirit that might produce different responses. He believed that the Spirit that was moving him to say "no" was the same Spirit that could move another to say "yes."

Unlike previous sections of my paper where I recounted anecdotes or stories of the companions, in this section I would like to explore more deeply Ignatius' spirituality, especially as it emerges in this idea of the Spirit acting in diverse ways. On the one hand, his belief that the Spirit is leading him to say "no" and could lead others to say "yes" bespeaks his freedom and trust in God. Any one of us would love, I imagine, to live with that freedom, trusting that we have been moved by the Spirit even when others may feel differently or when history goes in another direction. But more than revealing his personal freedom, this belief indicates his ecclesiology. In perhaps one of the more well-known rules for thinking or feeling with the Church, he wrote that "what seems to me to be white, I will believe to be black if the hierarchical Church thus determines it."[60] With this rule in the background, we can see him believing a certain way about Borgia becoming a cardinal, and yet he is willing to allow another to see it differently. This is not, I would argue, only an interesting aspect of his

[58] Ignatius of Loyola, "To Ferdinand of Austria, King of [the] Romans (December 1546)," *Letters and Instructions*, 154.

[59] Ignatius of Loyola, "To Francis Borgia (5 June 1552)," *Letters and Instructions*, 377.

[60] Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 365.

https://publications.lst.edu/

spirituality – it is central. There is a personal dynamic that occurs in our spirituality; for example, we pray and in the process we practice, as much as we can, a docility to the Spirit, feeling and then following movements of the good spirit. And yet, prayer does not reside or remain a strictly personal matter of the individual; it is more than what I feel and determine on my own. Prayer takes its logic from the incarnation, and this means that my personal prayer takes me into history and is specified by the Church.

Ignatius' understanding of how the Spirit acts in him and in others suggests something important about discernment. He trusted that God moved him to this "no," and he was certain about it. As José García de Castro has written, certainty was for him a criterion of the validity of his experience.[61] This certainty was a grace and a grace that he acted upon. But that did not mean in any absolute sense that it was God or God's will. It is as if he could embrace fully what he felt God was communicating to him, *and* he could, in a way, step back from it or not associate it in any facile way with God. There is then in his discernment certainty along with an ongoing surrender or submission to God that is expressed as openness to others. This seems paradoxical: certainty with surrender, conviction with submission. Nevertheless, this is what verifies the motion's origin in God. The motion that moves him makes him humble, and therein lies its Christlike quality and origin.[62]

This element of submission is not absent in that letter to Borgia; he closed it expressing his desire that "he [God] might fulfill his will in all our affairs."[63] God will fulfill his will in all of our affairs, and this can happen in diverse ways. Thus we need, as Philip Endean has written,

---

[61] José Garcia de Castro, "La mística de Ignacio: cultura y costumbre," *Manresa* 76 (2004): 333-353, at 350.

[62] Following José Garcías de Castro who argues that "*toda buena moción encierra un componente crístico que antes o después habrá de afectar a la cualidad de la humildad.*" See, Jose García de Castro, "La estructura interna del discernimiento," *Manresa* 80 (2008): 137.

[63] Ignatius of Loyola, "To Francis Borgia (5 June 1552)," in *Letters and Instructions*, 377.

https://publications.lst.edu/

"the willingness to live with the emotional complexity that proceeds from a vision of the Church as a community of diverse forces."[64]

Ignatius' reflection on the same Spirit manifesting itself in diverse ways suggests that he thought theologically and spiritually about conflict. For example, we know that for him, the divine majesty is "so supremely disposed to *communicate* his goods."[65] This was a profound theological belief of his that we all share: God communicates God's self to us. But remember, God is not the only one on the scene: the enemy of our human nature is also at work. This conflict is written into the rules of discernment: two forces oppose each other and that opposition is felt in the most intimate or interior place of the human person. We feel it, daily, in our hearts. This opposing, conflictual action of the good spirit and evil spirit is how Ignatius understood the spiritual life. Depending upon the movement of the person, the spirits use, as Ignatius wrote in the first two rules of the first week, "contrary methods." Both act in opposing ways in the case of one who is progressing or in the situation of one who is "going from one mortal sin to another."[66] One way to think about discernment is as the grace to separate these opposing, conflictual forces. Or, as Pope Francis put it, "discernment is a struggle, and the struggle is to follow the Lord more closely."[67]

This theological and spiritual view of God's communication with the human person informed his view of history. In the words of Michael Buckley, Ignatius viewed human history as "fundamentally

[64] Philip Endean, "'The Same Spirit in Everything': Towards a Contemporary Theological Reading of Ignatius' Rules for Thinking with the Church," in *Encounters with the Word – Essays to Honour Aloysius Pieris – 2004*, eds. Robert Crusz, Marshal Fernando, Asanga Tilakaratne (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue, 2004), 509-521, at 517.

[65] Ignatius of Loyola, "To the Fathers and Scholastics at Coimbra (Rome, 7 May, 1547)," in *Letters and Instructions*, 166; emphasis mine.

[66] Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 314.

[67] Jorge Mario Bergoglio, "*Dos Banderas*," in *Meditaciones para religiosos* (Bilbao: Mensajero, 2014), 163.

https://publications.lst.edu/

conflictual, continually embodying a radical struggle between the divine influence upon human choice and that of the 'enemy of our human nature,' between the human and diabolical."[68] What one experienced interiorly plays out in the drama of social life. And such a view seems as apropos today as it was in the 16th century: Our history is conflictual; the diabolical presses upon us, all the time, and God too indefatigably works for our salvation.

And if this was his view of history, it also informed his view of the Church. Though of less ecclesiological currency than before, Ignatius employed the image of the Church militant. This was a classic expression, hardly original to him, and with it he expressed how he saw the world. This was one way he expressed his ecclesiology, an ecclesiology which, not surprisingly, maps onto his Christology. To see his Christology, we might turn to the pivotal meditation of the call of the King, where we find Jesus as the one whose "will is to conquer the whole world and all my enemies, and thus to enter into the glory of my Father."[69] Jesus is the one who labors, struggles, and continues to carry his cross for the salvation of all of us. I mention this cognizant of the fact that it is becoming something of a commonplace in Ignatian spirituality to say that the language of the call of the King does not appeal to retreatants today. Our resistance to the language of this meditation is so great that I have even been on retreats where this meditation was passed over. Why? Because no one liked the language. A church militant and a king who wants to conquer do not fit into our religious sensibilities. Our ecclesial moment is much more amenable: we walk, listen, and together follow the lead of the Spirit. And yet, an attentive reading of Ignatius' spirituality (not to mention his ecclesiology, Christology, and history) suggests that it might be important to hold a place, albeit small, for a church called by a King to struggle in the world. Drawing from another image from the *Exercises*, God, as the Contemplation to Obtain Love offers, conducts himself

[68] Michael Buckley, "Ecclesial mysticism in the 'Spiritual Exercises' of Ignatius," *Theological Studies* 56/3 (1995): 445.

[69] Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 95.

https://publications.lst.edu/

as one who works. Let us not romanticize work. Work is, as all of you know, hard. It is a daily struggle with hardship and conflict.

Similar to the presence of diverse movements or "agitations" as that which verified the spiritual experience, social conflict or agitation was a sign of God's action. Another way of stating this is Ignatius saw conflict as a sign disclosing God's presence. Writing in 1554, Ignatius made the following conclusion as he attempted to interpret, what we might anachronistically call, the signs of his times: "As for me, I can say that the more contradictions I see in the world, the more I believe there must be a greater work of God at hand; and the devil, fearing this, does everything in his power to hinder it."[70] Contradictions and tensions alerted him that God was doing some great work in the world and that the evil one, at the level of our humanity, was opposing it. Such is the vision of conflict that comes to us from Ignatius, a vision shared by the first companions. In such a vision, Ignatius invites us to look at the world and interpret it, reading, as it were, God's signs that emerge in the midst of the confusion the evil spirit wants to sow. Similarly, he calls us to be lucid, naming those forces that oppose God's action. A more recent example of how to do this comes from Pope Francis who, for example, warned us that "the temptation in tribulation is to refuse to discern – to ask, *What is the Holy Spirit asking of us? How must we change?*"[71] Following Ignatius, Pope Francis knew that moments of conflict are moments where the Spirit may be most at work.

Conclusion

Pope Francis' questions – "*what is the Holy Spirit asking of us?"* and "*how must we change?"* – are a good place to conclude this presentation

[70] *Benedicto Uguccionio, 28 et 29 septembris 1554* (Letter of Ignatius of Loyola to Benedict Uguccionio [28 and 29 September 1554]), vol. 34, *Monumenta Ignatiana: Sancti Ignatii de Loyola Societatis Jesu fundatoris epistolae et instructiones (Epp. et instruct.), Tomus* VII (Madrid: Typis Gabrielis Lopez del Horno, 1908), 579 (no published English translation).

[71] See, Austen Ivereigh, "Pope Francis: Reform and Resistance," *The Way* 59/4 (2020): 20.

https://publications.lst.edu/

because they bring us back to the Spirit who called us here. The Spirit that called us here is asking something of us. Maybe it is change, openness, newness. Perhaps, on an obvious level, the Spirit has brought us here to listen, to learn, and to form friendships. I hope that this presentation has allowed you to listen and learn from our friends, the first companions. They too were like us, discovering that the Spirit brought them together and that the same Spirit had much to ask of them. And they listened. They listened to the Spirit as they sailed in the frigid waters of the North Sea to Ireland; they listened in hospitals, sick with fevers; they listened too as they struggled to discern the contrary movements that diverse spirits caused in them. And they listened to each other, to their superiors, to the Church, and to the women and men they encountered in historical situations that were both confusing and exhilarating.

If we were to desire to emulate the companions in any way, it might be in this capacity to ask the Spirit to know God's will in all of our human situations. Those situations could include dispersion, both geographical and personal, illness, both in body and mind, and conflict, both internal and external. Hopefully, these days will not be marked by such experiences, but let us turn to the Spirit and listen. And let us ask for the grace to follow those motions that come from the good Spirit.

About the Author. Fr. Christopher M. Staab, SJ is an American Jesuit priest, scholar, and educator from the Midwest Province of the Society of Jesus. After teaching and mission work in the United States and abroad, he studied philosophy in Lima, Peru, and completed advanced theological studies — including a Licentiate and Doctorate in Sacred Theology with a specialization in Ignatian Spirituality — at the Universidad Pontificia Comillas in Madrid. Fr. Staab has taught at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and, as of 2024, serves as Professor of the Practice in Ignatian Spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University in California, where he focuses on Ignatian sources, spiritual diaries, and experiential approaches to Ignatian spirituality. His work emphasizes dialogue between historical

Ignatian texts and contemporary spiritual practice, and he contributes to research and teaching on the Spiritual Exercises, early companions of St. Ignatius, and related devotional traditions.

https://publications.lst.edu/