

‘Circa missiones’: on the Jesuit Fourth Vow

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On September 27th, 1540, the Society of Jesus began to exist as an officially recognized entity within the Catholic Church. The instrument of this recognition was a papal bull entitled *Regimini militantis ecclesiae*, issued on that day by Paul III from Palazzo S. Marco, not far from the site of the future Pontifical Gregorian University.

Paul III was a member of the ancient Farnese family and, indeed, commissioned the construction of the Palazzo Farnese, still one of the most magnificent palaces in Rome. He was a career churchman, owing at least his initial promotion in that capacity to his sister Giulia, who was Pope Alexander VI’s mistress. But, although he indulged in many of the vices typical of high-ranking clerics in his day—he was waist-deep, for instance, in the practice of nepotism—Paul III is considered a “reforming pope.”

The reason he approved the Society was that he believed it could help him to restore the reputation of the clergy, badly tarnished by decades of corruption. In *Regimini militantis ecclesiae*, he cites in an approving manner the nascent Society’s statement that “we have learned from experience that a life as far removed as possible from every contagion of avarice and as similar as possible to evangelical poverty is more pleasing, more pure, and more suitable for the edification of one’s neighbor.” Concomitant with his giving approval to the Society, Paul III

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undertook a reform of the Roman Curia and inaugurated the Council of Trent, one of whose main thrusts was the reformation of the clergy. He also set up the Roman Inquisition, later called the Holy Office (which included the Congregation of the Inquisition and the Congregation of the Index), and yet later again called the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Mention of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith raises the issue of the relationship between the Holy See and the Society of Jesus. As one would expect, the exact nature of the relationship is not uncontroversial.

The debate has primarily to do with the “fourth vow of obedience to the Pope,” and, as we shall see, much of the controversy stems from focusing too exclusively upon what that vow *says* rather than upon what it implies for those who make it—although, of course, it is important to have a clear understanding of what the vow says in order to understand what it implies. The fourth vow is required of every “fully professed” member of the Society. If you were taught in high school by Jesuit scholastics, they almost certainly would not yet have taken the fourth vow. Even some Jesuit priests you now know might not yet have taken the fourth vow since it is normally taken only after ordination *and* after completion of a third, delayed “year” of novitiate, known as tertianship. In any case, having completed tertianship and having been invited to request final vows by one’s superiors, the General of the Society may or may not decide to call a Jesuit to final vows, which today usually includes the fourth vow of obedience to the Pope. In the early Society, the number of those who took the fourth vow was much more restricted.

What does this vow say? Here begins the controversy. If a Jesuit makes his vows in English, he will very likely use the formulation found in the *Constitutions* of the Society, as translated by the late Fr. George Ganss, S.J. The Jesuit will begin by pronouncing the same vows he took years previously, having completed two years of novitiate; that is to say, he will vow perpetual poverty, chastity and obedience, “according to the manner of living contained in the apostolic letters of the Society of Jesus and in its Constitutions.” The “apostolic letters mentioned here

include Paul III's *Regimini militantis ecclesiae*. But then the Jesuit will add: "I further promise a special obedience to the sovereign pontiff in regard to the missions, according to the same apostolic letters and the Constitutions."

Now the expression, "the missions," in modern English typically refers to the Eurocentrically understood "foreign missions," such as India, Africa, and so on. It makes no difference to the meaning of the expression that many of those territories are no longer considered mission territories—in fact, many parishes in the United States and in Europe are staffed today by African and Indian priests. Despite changes in the ecclesial situation, the expression "the missions" retains its meaning as indicating the remote places, to which missionaries are sent. (This was not an issue in the Spanish used by Ignatius: see *Diario espiritual* n.161.) The problem is that the Latin expression, which was in all likelihood composed by Ignatius himself, does not speak of *the* missions but simply of missions. It runs: "Insuper, promitto specialem obedientiam Summo Pontifici circa missiones." As many of you will recall from the first week of freshman Latin class, that language contains no articles, so the phrase "circa missiones" can be translated either as "in regard to *the* missions" or as "in regard to missions," depending on the context supplied by the original author. And it is clear that Ignatius did not mean for the fourth vow to apply just on those occasions when a Jesuit was sent to "the missions." It was rather, as he put it—this time in Spanish, not Latin—"nuestro principio y principal fundamento": "our starting point and principal foundation," the starting point and principal foundation of the *Society of Jesus* itself. Once the Society was up and running, Ignatius never left Rome—in fact, he spent most of his time a stone's throw from Palazzo S. Marco, writing the *Constitutions*—but he certainly regarded himself, and the whole Society (but especially its fully professed members), to be bound and motivated by the fourth vow of obedience to the Pope.

Fortunately, this mistranslation does not affect the validity of the fourth vow for those Jesuits who have taken it after vows began to be taken in the vernacular English rather than in Latin.

The reason for this is twofold: first, because the phrase “in regard to the missions” can (with effort) be construed as referring generally to any missions that the Pope gives to the Society, which include the whole work of the Society itself, conducted in the Pope’s name by the Society’s General Superior; second, because after the vow, the *vovens* says the words, “according to the same apostolic letters and the Constitutions.” In those apostolic letters, the popes who approved the Society—Paul III and Julius III—indicate clearly what they mean by the missions referred to in the vow.

In Paul III’s bull we read:

Whoever desires to fight as a soldier of God beneath the banner of the cross in our Society, which we desire to be designated by the name of Jesus, and to serve the Lord alone and the Roman pontiff, his vicar on earth, should, after a solemn vow of perpetual chastity, bear in mind that he is part of a Society founded chiefly for this purpose: to direct its efforts primarily at the progress of souls in Christian life and doctrine and at the propagation of the Faith by means of public preaching and the ministry of the word of God...

A second bull, entitled *Exposcit debitum*, promulgated in 1550 by Julius III, incorporates these words of Paul III’s (which originate with Ignatius and his original Jesuit companions), but changes some things. First, it specifies that the Society is to serve the *Church* under the Roman pontiff (and not to serve the Roman pontiff); secondly, by a change in word order, it makes more prominent the mission of propagating of the Faith and adds the words *et defensionem*, so that purpose of the Society is the propagation *and defense* of the Faith (and so on); thirdly, it adds to the means by which the Society might help souls to make progress in Christian doctrine, *lectiones*, “lessons,” so that the work envisaged is less linked to the liturgy; and, finally, it adds

vows of poverty and obedience, which put the Society into the canonical category of a religious order.

A few more paragraphs into his document, where Julius III is giving the Society's understanding of itself, we read as follows:

In addition to that ordinary bond of the three vows, we [i.e., the fully professed Jesuits] are to be obliged by a special vow to carry out whatever the present and future Roman pontiffs may order which pertains to the progress of souls and the propagation of the faith; and to go without subterfuge or excuse, as far as in us lies, to whatsoever provinces they may choose to send [*mittere*] us—whether they are pleased to send us among the Turks or any other infidels, even those who live in the region called the Indies, or among any heretics whatever, or schismatics, or any of the faithful.

We find substantially the same words in *Regimini militantis ecclesiae* (Paul III's bull).

What does all this amount to? We might take note of two things. First, both popes understand the mission of the Society—and, by implication, the smaller missions falling under that larger one—to be connected with doctrine: the propagation and (in Julius III's formulation) the defense of the Faith. Second, the missions upon which a pope might send a Jesuit include not only missions “among the Turks or any other infidels”—political correctness was not yet an issue for these clerics—but among heretics or schismatics or “any of the faithful.” In the *Constitutions* themselves it becomes clear that such missions might also become permanent so that Jesuits “may carry on their labor, not by traveling but by residing steadily and continually in certain places where much fruit of glory and service to God is expected.” Obviously, then, the phrase *circa missiones* in the fourth vow refers not just to “the missions”, and these *missiones* do involve defense of Christian doctrine.

I am personally unaware of any Jesuit who has argued that the fourth vow refers solely to orders by a pope to go to the missions. I attribute this to the instruction that every Jesuit receives in the novitiate, where the Society's *Constitutions* are studied attentively and it becomes obvious that the fourth vow is not so limited. Even in more recent writings about the fourth vow, the *explanation*—if not the *formulation*—of the vow is in terms of “missions,” not “the missions.” The former Secretary of the Society Johannes Gerhardt writes that the fourth vow “concerns all missions without exception: the *ministeria spiritualia*, spiritual ministries which the Society of Jesus, in accordance with its purpose and its institute, offers to all people, believers and non-believers. To this extent *circa missiones* includes the whole work of the Society of Jesus.” The explanation of the fourth vow offered by historian John O'Malley, S.J., is also entirely in terms of “missions,” not “the missions.”

So, why does it make a difference that the current English formulation of the fourth vow has “the missions” and not “missions”? Because the faulty translation may suggest that the fourth vow is solely about the assigned task, to the *exclusion* of doctrine. Now I too maintain that the fourth vow is about missions the pope might give to the Society and not *about* doctrine. This indeed is the thesis argued for very convincingly by O'Malley. The fourth vow, says O'Malley,

is the “guarantor of that mobility ‘for the greater good of souls’ for which the order was founded. It is symbol of the universal mission of the Society, which extends, like the papal aura itself and under its inspiration, ‘to the ends of the earth.’” And he goes on: “From the explicit statements in the *Fontes narrativi* and in the *Constitutions* themselves, it is clear that the vow pertains to ‘missions’ and is to be understood precisely as promoting mobility and availability ‘for the greater good.’”

O'Malley takes issue with another Jesuit, Burkhard Schneider, who, while acknowledging that the vow, strictly speaking, regards missions, argues that its scope should be considered broadly as a “‘complete dedication’ or ‘complete surrender’ (*Totalübergabe*) to the visible Church.” O'Malley worries that “the introduction of this *carte-blanche* language” opens the way to an interpretation of the fourth vow “as relating directly to doctrine.” As O'Malley explains elsewhere, to interpret the vow as a “generic expression of ‘loyalty to the pope,’” is to forfeit its specificity: it “eventually leads to rendering the restriction *circa missiones* superfluous by in effect eviscerating it of any restrictive meaning.” Or, as I would be inclined to put the point, to say that the fourth vow is *about* anything other than missions is to miss its plain and simple sense, which is contained in the words *circa missiones*.

That said, the phrase *implies* a good deal about doctrine, especially given the words that follow it about understanding the vow according to the same apostolic letters of Paul III and Julius III, and given too the contents of those letters, as I have quoted them. This is a simple truth of logic. Many things not made explicit in the strict meaning of terms and their corresponding propositions are implied by them in such a way that to deny the implicit things is to deny the propositions (containing the terms) themselves. If I acknowledge that you are my natural brother, I do not say explicitly that you are not my father, but if I deny that you are not my father—that is, if I assert that you *are* my father—I in effect contradict my previous statement that you are my brother. Similarly, since the reference to missions in the fourth vow of Jesuits implies in this way the understanding of mission set out in the papal bulls referred to in the vow—implies, that is, in a way that is essential to its meaning, that the missions involve the propagation and defense of the Faith by men fighting “beneath the banner of the cross” and “under the Roman pontiff”—to act or to teach in a way that is incompatible with doctrines of the Faith is to act in a way that is incompatible with the vow itself. So, although the fourth vow is not *about* doctrine, it does bind a Jesuit with respect to doctrine—and specifically to doctrine as proposed by the “hierarchical Church.”

It makes no difference that the specific doctrines contested in the times of Ignatius were different from the “difficult doctrines” of today; it makes no difference, that is, that in the sixteenth century popes and bishops in Council were more concerned with justification by Faith than with women's ordination and sexual morality. Where the hierarchical Church has pronounced on a question in order to resolve it, that is, where she has issued a teaching to be held definitively (a *sententia definitiva tenenda*), a fully professed Jesuit must firmly accept and hold that doctrine in conformity to his vow of obedience to the Roman pontiff *circa missiones*. Even where the teaching is not one to be held definitively, a Jesuit owes it submission of will and intellect.

Is this to forfeit the specificity of the fourth vow? Well, in a sense it is, but not in any sense that Ignatius would have resisted. We have already seen that Ignatius called the fourth vow “nuestro principio y principal fundamento” -- words penned in 1545, a mere five years after *Regimini militantis ecclesiae*. The fact that the phrase does not occur in the final version of the *Constitutions* is of little weight; Ignatius may well have considered use of the phrase superfluous, given the mention of the vow in the two bulls introducing the *Constitutions* and its presence at the very point at which the members of the Society—strictly considered—make their solemn profession. Of course, the fourth vow retains its specificity in so far as it—unlike the other three vows, for instance—is about missions.

The *Constitutions* strike exactly the right balance:

The entire meaning of this fourth vow of obedience to the Pope was and is in regard to missions [*circa missiones*]. In this manner too should be understood the bulls in which this obedience is treated: *in everything which the sovereign pontiff commands* and wheresoever he sends one, and the like.

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Does unswerving obedience imply uncritical acceptance? Here we must make a distinction. Especially in his scholarly work, when a Jesuit considers the doctrine put forward in, for example, a papal encyclical, he must do so “critically”: not in the sense that he is *critical* of what comes out of the Holy See, but in the sense that he brings to bear upon it all the tools of scholarly criticism, “pulling and tugging” at the text to see how well it coheres with other aspects of Christian doctrine, as found in the Scriptures, the Church Fathers, and other respected theologians such as Saints Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

One must also acknowledge that, in a sense, since the Second Vatican Council, another player has entered the game: besides needing to cohere with Scripture, the Fathers, and the theological tradition, the statements of councils and popes must be confronted with what “the modern world” itself has come to know in its own capacity as secular. Of course, this is not to say that the modern world has the same *type* of authority as Scripture, the Fathers, and the theological tradition; but, the truths of the Faith cannot contradict what is known to be true by independent means, so the Church is obliged to attend also to knowledge that is not directly linked to God’s revelation in Christ. Actually, this “player” has been in the game a long time—one need only think of Aquinas’s use of Aristotle—but it is true that, since the Council the Church has put new emphasis upon what she has to learn from “the world.”

But the *defining* “direction” of a Jesuit’s vocation, his mission, cannot be one in which he conceives of himself as teaching the Church what she ought to know. This is inherent in the very term “mission,” as understood within the context of the Society’s *Constitutions* and the apostolic letters that created the Society. A mission is given by one person to another. This is why the current practice of organizations’ writing their own “mission statements” is self-contradictory. Strictly speaking, if an organization needs a mission statement, it should go to the authority to which it answers and ask what its mission is. For the Society of Jesus the person who gives the mission is the Pope. He is the “missioner,” certainly, not only because he is (as both *Regimini*

militantis ecclesiae and *Exposcit debitum* say) “the vicar of Christ on earth,” so that obedience to him is obedience to Christ, but it is the Pope who is identified in the *Constitutions*—and, in particular in the fourth vow—as the sole formulator and promulgator of all the Society’s missions in and from Christ.

I conclude with a quotation from Vatican II’s *Lumen gentium*. The words *lumen gentium* (“light of the nations”) refer not to a light that the nations *have* and give to the Church but of Christ, who gives light to the nations. Appropriately, then, near the beginning of *Lumen gentium*, we come across the word ‘mission’::

From this source [sc., the Spirit of Christ] the Church, equipped with the gifts of her Founder and faithfully guarding His precepts of charity, humility and self-sacrifice, receives the mission to proclaim and to spread among all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and of God and to be, on earth, the initial budding forth of that kingdom. While she slowly grows, the Church strains toward the completed Kingdom and, with all its strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with her King.

The charge given the Church to proclaim the light is not a mission she elects but a mission she receives. No one takes a vow to choose what he chooses. The Jesuit’s fourth vow *circa missiones* binds him to obey Christ -- every Christian’s duty -- by obeying Christ’s vicar in that which is chosen for him.