The Society of Jesus, Constitution, 1540

The Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, as members became known, was a group founded by the Basque noble Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556). Officially sanctioned by the pope, Jesuits were intent on reforming Catholicism from within in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. The Jesuits grew rapidly, traveling around the world in service to the church. As missionaries in places like Latin America and Asia, they converted nonbelievers with their fiery rhetoric. Historians also attribute the success of the Catholic Reformation in places like Austria and Bavaria to their influence.


He who desires to fight for God under the banner of the cross in our society—which we wish to distinguish by the name of Jesus—and to serve God alone and the Roman pontiff, his vicar on earth, after a solemn vow of perpetual chastity, shall set this thought before his mind, that he is a part of a society founded for the especial purpose of providing for the advancement of souls in Christian life and doctrine and for the propagation of faith through public preaching and the ministry of the word of God, spiritual exercises and deeds of charity, and in particular through the training of the young and ignorant in Christianity and through the spiritual consolation of the faithful of Christ in hearing confessions; and he shall take care to keep first God and next the purpose of this organization always before his eyes….

All members of the society shall realize, and shall recall daily, as long as they live, that this society as a whole and in every part is fighting for God under faithful obedience to one most holy lord, the pope, and to other Roman pontiffs who succeed him.
And although we are taught in the gospel and through the orthodox faith to recognize and steadfastly profess that all the faith of Christ are subject to the Roman Pontiff as their head and as the vicar of Jesus Christ, yet we have adjudged that, for the special promotion of greater humility in our society and the perfect mortification of every individual and the sacrifice of our own wills, we should each be bound by a peculiar vow, in addition to the general obligation, that whatever the present Roman pontiff, or any future one, may from time to time decree regarding the welfare of souls and the propagation of the faith, we are pledged to obey without evasion or excuse, instantly, so far as in us lies, whether he send us to the Turks or any other infidels, even to those who inhabit the regions men call the Indies; whether to heretics or schismatics, or, on the other hand, to certain of the faithful.

QUESTIONS

1. According to the Constitution, what is the Jesuits’ special mission and how might it differ from those of other religious orders?

2. According to the Jesuits, what is the role of the pope?

3. Where do you see evidence of a Catholic Reformation in the Jesuit Constitution?