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*What Magis Really Means and Why It Matters*

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**Abstract**

Many definitions of the *magis* are proffered in Jesuit circles, not all of which are clear or helpful. The best definition, in terms of practicality, fidelity to the sources, and correspondence to other Ignatian themes, is “the more universal good.” It is closely linked to the unofficial motto of the Society of Jesus, “For the Greater Glory of God.”

**I. The Problem**

No term appears more popular in the parlance of Jesuit institutions today than the *magis*. Originally a Latin adverb that meant “more” or “to a greater degree,” it is now commonly used as a proper noun to denote a key element of Ignatian spirituality. Especially in Jesuit schools, “*Magis* Student Groups,” “*Magis* Classes,” “*Magis* Retreats,” “*Magis* Scholarships,” “*Magis* Auctions,” “*Magis* Institutes” and “*Magis* Committees” are ubiquitous. The term appears in official decrees of General Congregations of the Society of Jesus, and also in the writings and allocutions of Jesuit Superiors General. Dictionaries and introductions to Ignatian and/or Jesuit spirituality endeavor to explain the *magis* at greater or lesser length.1

For all its popularity, however, the *magis* has a problem. No one seems quite sure what it means. Some say “excellence,” others “generosity.” These are two quite different ideas, both of which appear harmless enough at first glance. Others say “the more universal good,” that is, discerning choices based on what will make the widest positive impact on people (a criterion that St. Ignatius Loyola identified in the Jesuit Constitutions as characteristic of the Society’s way of proceeding).2 Other definitions include “magnanimity,” “greater efficiency,” “creative fidelity,” “choosing the harder option,” and even “choosing that which no one else will do.”

One might argue that multiple definitions are a benefit. If the definitions are not synonymous, neither do they appear irreconcilable, and therefore, all should be allowed to illuminate the dynamic character of the Ignatian “more.” In the same vein, if a wide variety of texts are cited to explain the *magis* -- everything from the tales of chivalry that Ignatius read as a youth to the *Ratio Studiorum*, a manual for Jesuit schools written forty years after the saint’s death -- it only shows how deeply the *magis* permeated Ignatius’ spirituality.

Unfortunately, however, the variety of definitions cannot be justified so easily, for at least four reasons. First, if anecdotal evidence is any indication, ambiguity about the *magis* can breed confusion and guilt among Jesuits and their colleagues.3 In 2011, for example, I was speaking to the faculty of a high school about Ignatian spirituality when a teacher raised his hand. “I want to serve the *magis*, I really do,” he said. “But I have small kids at home. I can’t give any more without burning out.” Clearly the poor man thought he was supposed to be working harder than he already was.

On another occasion, administrators at a university in the eastern U.S. were citing the *magis* in an effort to persuade the faculty to take on new projects. Not surprisingly, some of the faculty grew resentful, since, by implication, their resistance to the requests meant that they did not understand or embrace the Jesuit mission.

Some years ago, the president of a university in the western U.S. informed a department that it would not receive increased funding the following year. In response, a professor pointed angrily at the president and said, “I thought this place was supposed to be about the *magis*!” His response might seem amusingly unsophisticated. But was it? What if he had been told that the *magis* means “excellence” or “greater efficiency”?

A second problem is that “reconcilable in theory” is insufficient when the definitions are put into practice. That a teacher labors “generously” does not necessarily mean that he labors “excellently”; and that difference is important to administrators when it comes time to write professional evaluations. That a social worker does “what no one else will do” is no guarantee that her project serves “the greater good” compared to her other legitimate options; a point not lost on charities that want to make the most of their limited resources. A Jesuit, for his part, might show “creative fidelity” in his obedience to his superiors, but this does not assure that he chooses the “more efficient” or “more generous” course. Creative adaptations can fail as easily as succeed, be naïve as easily as be perspicacious, and serve personal interests as easily as the greater good.

A third difficulty concerns applicability. If we wish the *magis* to denote a core value of Jesuit institutions, it follows that the value should be comprehensible and applicable to all or most people working there, regardless of their religion, “state of life” in the church, or degree of spiritual advancement. Consider, for example, the famous prayer known as the *Suscipe*, in which Ignatius expresses a desire for utter surrender to God, even to the point of being relieved of his freedom, memory, intellect and will.4 This is an extraordinary prayer, to put it mildly; and if it is true, as is sometimes said, that even many Jesuits are not prepared to make it, all the more should it not be pressed into service to explain the *magis*.

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A final difficulty is the obscure origin of the expression “the *magis*”. Ignatius and the early Jesuits never used it to denote an element of their spirituality. The earliest appearances of that particular turn of phrase (of which I am aware) are in two writings by the theologian Fr. Karl Rahner, S.J., both of which date to the early 1960s. He was followed by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J., who frequently referred to the *magis* after he was elected Superior General of the Jesuits in 1965. Ten years later, it appeared in an official decree of General Congregation 32 (1974-1975), a worldwide meeting of Jesuit superiors. Initial evidence suggests, therefore, that the expression originated sometime in the 1950s.

Most of these early references are curiously brief and vague. In a letter to the entire Society dated January 2, 1967 (written in Latin), Arrupe referred to “that *magis*” [*illud* «*magis*»] as a great theme of the Exercises. He did not elaborate, except to affirm that it “excludes any form of mediocrity.”7 In later letters and talks, Arrupe called it “a supernatural strategy” that “continually seeks a more effective manner of service,”8 a principle of discernment by which one seeks “the greatest possible service to God,”9 a magnanimity that seeks “the greater glory of God,”10 and following Christ with “radicality.”11 On many occasions, he declined to explain the term at all.12

With equal brevity, the Fathers of G.C. 32 defined the *magis* as “the ever more and more giving” spirit of Ignatius,13 a phrase suggesting an interior attitude of generosity. But thirty years later, G.C. 35 defined it as attention to “the more universal good,”14 which implies an objective criterion for choosing ministries. In a subsequent decree, G.C. 35 cited the *magis* again, but this time as “creative fidelity” by means of which Jesuits obey superiors and discern options in light of the unique circumstances in which they find themselves.15

Fr. Rahner, in a short treatise published in 1965, explained “the more” and “indifference” as two sides of the same coin.16 Every Christian, when faced with a choice between two or more good options—whether to marry or enter religious life, to become a teacher or an administrator, to major in music or finance—should choose that which is more conducive to the end for which she was created: the praise, reverence, and service of God. “Indifference,” continues Rahner, is the interior freedom required to be able to choose that *magis* in the first place. If a man is so taken with Susan’s beauty that he cannot see—or will not admit—that marrying Joan better serves his holiness and hers, or if fear prevents him from even considering options like the priesthood, then he does not possess the indifference necessary to choose the *magis*.

Rahner’s explanation is straightforward enough, but it does not offer much specific guidance for a person making an important decision. What does it mean to choose that which is more conducive to one’s end? …

In summary, then, what definition of the *magis* is needed? It should be accessible and relevant to most people serving in Jesuit institutions. It must not lend itself readily to harmful misinterpretations or trite generalities. It should be authentically rooted in the early sources, lest by calling something “Ignatian spirituality” we lend an air of saintly authority to that which, in reality, is our own idea. Finally, the *magis* must be specific enough to provide real guidance and/or existential challenge in actual practice, both to individuals and to institutions. Happily, there is a definition that fits all these criteria.

**II. The Meaning of the Magis**

The unofficial motto of the Society of Jesus is *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*, which means “For the Greater Glory of God.” It appears hundreds of times, in slightly different forms, in the writings of Ignatius. Jesuits have placed it on the cornerstones of their buildings, at the end of their letters, and on the official seals of their institutions. Students in Jesuit schools often are encouraged to write *A.M.D.G.* at the end of their essays and exams, a reminder that studies are meant for the greater service and praise of God.

What does *A.M.D.G.* mean? It is not simply an inspirational saying like “Go and set the world on fire!” Rather, Ignatius intended it to be the distinguishing characteristic of the Jesuit way of proceeding. He explained this clearly in Part VII of the Jesuit Constitutions.19 *A.M.D.G.* is a specific criterion for making decisions in the service of God. We can phrase it like this: “When discerning between two or more good options, all else being equal, choose that which serves the more universal good, i.e., that which makes the widest impact.”

A familiar proverb goes “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” This well captures what Ignatius had in mind by the more universal good. No one questions that giving a poor man a fish is a holy and noble act. It is also first in the order of execution, meaning that no one can teach the man if he is starving in the meantime. Nevertheless, equally obvious is that teaching the man reaps wider benefits. He is now empowered to feed his own family without relying on charity, and so he realizes more fully the dignity of being a husband and father. His teacher is free to move on and help someone else, while the man, for his part, can return to his village and teach others to fish. In theory, then, teaching the man has the potential to transform his whole society. For that reason—the more universal good—Ignatius would have called this the *magis*.

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**IV. Modern Applications of the Magis Jesuit-Lay Collaboration**

In the 1970s and 1980s the number of men in the Society of Jesus declined dramatically. As a result, heated debate arose among Jesuits: should they consolidate their manpower in fewer schools, and thereby ensure the Jesuit character of those works, or should they spread themselves more thinly, trusting that lay colleagues could assist in the preservation and promotion of the mission? Jesuits opted for the latter, in the slowly-growing conviction that this would serve the more universal good. And the results, by almost all accounts, have been clear. It may fairly be said that Jesuit institutions are better capable of articulating the Jesuit mission now—and they are certainly more deliberate about it—than they ever were in the past.40

**Education**

Schools were not on the agenda of Ignatius and his companions when the Society was first founded in 1540. Their goal was a peripatetic ministry, going wherever the needs of the church were greatest. In 1546, however, Ignatius made a command decision to start a school for the education of young Jesuits and local boys. The school became an instant success, and the Society was soon building more schools throughout Europe, Asia, and the Americas.

Ironically, these schools required many Jesuits to remain in one place, in order to serve as teachers and administrators. But this did not mean that they lost a commitment to the *magis*. On the contrary, education was a perfect fit, as it was making an extraordinary impact on youth that would last for generations. Indeed, one could argue that the Society of Jesus, through its schools, has been one the principal influences on the history of western intellectual life.41

**Social Justice**

Ignatius never used the term “social justice” as we do today, but the basic commitment to making a wider impact is the same. In simple terms, social justice means going beyond immediate aid to the poor toward addressing the social and political conditions that give rise to poverty and oppression in the first place. With reference to our fishing analogy, it means teaching the man to fish and thus transforming his village. In this sense, Jesuit dedication to social justice is a clear manifestation of the *magis* in action.42

That being said, two clarifications are important, in light of what we have seen about Ignatius’ approach. First, to be authentically Jesuit, social justice must be considered means to a higher end, namely the service of faith. The ultimate goal cannot be creating a just society for its own sake (secular humanists seek as much), but rather bringing people to faith in a personal God who loves them.43 The Fathers of G.C. 32 had this in mind when they made a careful distinction that “the mission of the Society of Jesus is the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement.”44 For Christians, an eternity with God and the blessed in heaven is the greatest, most universal good that any human being can possess. Thus the *magis* by definition always points Jesuits and colleagues toward that ultimate goal.45

Second, many students are engaged in service projects. But what happens if their grades suffer as a result? Are the projects an end in themselves, or are they a means for students to grow in dedication to social justice? If the first, then students will feel pressure, no matter how slight or unintended, to continue working; if the second, they will feel more at liberty to disengage if necessary. This tension is more than theoretical. Teachers are sometimes heard to lament that “we are just using the poor” by sending our students to live and work among them, which seems to be a way of saying that charitable works that are not ends in themselves are ultimately unjust.

To address this tension, we find guidance in Ignatius’ aforementioned letter to the young Jesuits in Portugal. For them, as for today’s students in Jesuit schools, the goal of formation is well-educated persons committed to faith and justice. But formation takes time, and priorities during the formation process are not the same as priorities afterward. Ignatius required young Jesuits to serve the poor in temporary assignments (called “experiments”) in order to test their skills and generosity and to instill in them a deeper humility and love of service.

Does this mean Ignatius was “using the poor” to form his men? One could phrase it that way, one supposes, and it would not be inaccurate, strictly speaking. But it is a bit like saying that “students are just using their teachers.” Such a way of speaking does not take into account the goal of the formation process, or the motivations and love that prompt the process, or the richness of the relationships in the process. Ignatius would have called this way of thinking “zeal not according to knowledge” (*zelo non secundum scientiam*), which meant well-intentioned but short-sighted.46 Rather, Ignatius repeatedly urged “discreet charity” (*discreta caritas*), a chestnut of medieval spirituality which meant that one should pace oneself to serve God in the most effective way possible over the course of time.

**V. What Magis Doesn’t (or Shouldn’t) Mean**

Many definitions of the *magis* currently in circulation at Jesuit institutions are not without problems. They either have little or no foundation in the historical sources, or they are too vague to have significant implications for Jesuit works, or they are easily misinterpreted in ways that are harmful. But to be clear, these values are not necessarily absent when the *magis* is rightly understood and applied. Even though “generosity” and “excellence” are poor definitions of the *magis*, authentic applications of the *magis* often include acts that are generous and excellent.

**Generosity / Giving More**

One of the more prevalent—and dangerous—misconceptions about the *magis* is that it means working harder or being more generous. Many choose to work in Jesuit institutions, with lesser pay, because they are already generous people dedicated to service. And generous people, by their nature, are often susceptible to doubts about their own motivations or the value of their contributions.47 Add to this reality the frenetic pace of U.S. culture, where many are obliged to hold two jobs to make ends meet, and it becomes clear that “giving more” is not the message that Jesuits and colleagues should be sending.48

I was explaining this to a class of undergraduates, when one responded, “So *magis* means working smarter, not harder!” She had it exactly right. By “smarter” we should think of careful and courageous discernment of where lies the more universal good.

**Excellence / Quality**

At first glance, the assertion that “excellence” is a poor interpretation of the *magis* might be startling. Who can argue with excellence?

That’s the problem. No one does. Probably there is not a school or business on earth that does not claim excellence in its mission statement. One thing is certain: for five centuries, the Jesuits have not garnered so many passionate supporters, and vociferous critics, by claiming something as safe as “excellence”! The *magis* is a powerful idea. Above all, we must not reduce it to a predictable advertising jingle.

There is a second hitch as well. Since the opposite of excellence is implied to be mediocrity or complacency (both of which are negative by definition), choosing the *magis* becomes a matter of choosing good over bad. But, as Ignatius explained, our concern is how to choose between two goods, since it goes without saying that, if we already know that one option is bad, we should not be choosing it.49 (Hence the motto is not “for the glory of God” but “for the greater glory of God.”) Discernment is often needed to find the *magis* precisely because the inherent goodness of both options means that the greater good is not always obvious.

**The Harder Option / The Riskier Option**

Ignatius was explicit in the Constitutions that the more universal good is often served by choosing the easier or safer option. If the harder or more dangerous promises greater rewards, so be it, but choosing it for its own sake would be another case of “zeal not according to knowledge.”

But a careful distinction is necessary. The “harder option” is not a good definition of the *magis*, but those options that serve the *magis* are often de facto harder. Why? If greater numbers are aided by the project in question, so too greater numbers are apt to question it or feel threatened by it. That is why the virtue of magnanimity, which Ignatius considered so important for Jesuits, is closely linked to the *magis*. It comes from the Latin magna anima, and means literally “greatness of spirit.” For Ignatius (who follows the thinking of St. Thomas Aquinas on this point), magnanimity is a readiness to “think big,” to embrace projects of grand scope. But it also includes, of necessity, a willingness to endure the additional conflicts that come with having that greatness of spirit.50…

**Good Things That We’re Already Doing**

Well-intentioned people sometimes suggest that any noble or loving deed can properly be called the *magis*: when a teacher gives her time outside of class, or a Jesuit listens to confessions for long hours, or an administrator is especially attentive to the personal needs of faculty and staff. To be sure, such works of love lie at the heart of the Christian gospel. They should be praised where found and held up as examples for inspiration.

So what is the problem? For Ignatius, it is quite possible for one to labor generously, prayerfully, and even heroically for God . . . but not in a course of action that will make the more universal impact, compared to other legitimate options. That someone is doing something noble does not ipso facto mean that she serves the *magis*. We have already seen that Ignatius removed Fr. Galvanello from a mission where he was working with great dedication and success, for the sake of putting him where the greater good was served.

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**Notes**

1 E.g., George W. Traub, S.J., *Do You Speak Ignatian? A Glossary of Terms Used in Ignatian and Jesuit Circles* (Cincinnati: Xavier University, 2008), 9; Charles J. Healey, S.J., *The Ignatian Way: Key Aspects of Jesuit Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 104; José Garcia de Castro, S.J., ed., *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Ignaciana*, 2 vols. (Bilbao and Santander: Mensajero and Sal Terrae, 2007), II:1155-1168, s.v. “Magis/Más”; James Martin, S.J., *The Jesuit Guide to Almost Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 369-371; Kevin F. Burke and Eileen Burke-Sullivan, *The Ignatian Tradition: Spirituality in History*, Spirituality in History Series, ed. Phyllis Zagano (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), xlii-xliii.

2 Constitutions of the Society of Jesus (henceforth abbreviated “Cons.”), §§258, 466, 623a; trans. George Ganss, S.J., *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), 157, 159, 275. Presently the official translation of the Constitutions in English is *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms*, ed. John Padberg, S.J. (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996). The Ganss edition is preferable for study of Ignatius’ understanding of the more universal good, as it contains extensive notes and cross-references. The Padberg edition serves to connect the Constitutions to revisions and clarifications of later General Congregations.

3 See Trudelle Thomas, “Rethinking Magis,” in *Teaching to the Mission: A Compendium of the Ignatian Mentoring Program* (Cincinnati: Xavier University, 2010), 228-231. 4 The “Spiritual Exercises” of St. Ignatius Loyola (henceforth abbreviated “Ex.”), §234; trans. Joseph A. Munitiz, S.J., and Philip Endean, S.J., *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 339. The Munitiz edition contains helpful notes and commentary, as does that of George Ganss, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius Loyola* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992). Since the former includes Ignatius’ “Autobiography” and prominent letters in the same volume (all of which are referenced in this essay), it will be cited here for convenience.

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7 *Acta Romana Societatis Iesu* XV (Rome: 1968), 29. Henceforth abbreviated ARSI.

8 Pedro Arrupe, S.J., “Missionary Vocation and Apostolate” (22 March 1972), in *Challenge to Religious Life Today*, ed. Jerome Aixala, S.J., Second Edition (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1979), 66 [French original in ARSI XV, 859-878].

9 Some Far-Reaching Vistas of Decree 4 of GC 32” (26 March 1976), in *Justice With Faith Today*, ed. Jerome Aixala, S.J., Second Edition (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1980), 154, 156.

10 Pedro Arrupe, S.J., “Trinitarian Inspiration of the Ignatian Charism,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 33/3 (2001), 24.

11 Pedro Arrupe, S.J., “Our Way of Proceeding,” §22.

12 E.g., Pedro Arrupe, S.J., “The Jesuit Mission in the University Apostolate” (5 August 1975), in *Other Apostolates Today*, ed. Jerome Aixala, S.J., Second Edition (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1981), 90-91; “Final Address of Father General to the Congregation of Procurators,” §§18.5, 28; “Our Way of Proceeding,” §25.

13 G.C. 32, Dec. 2, §27. See *Jesuit Life & Mission Today: The Decrees and Accompanying Documents of the 31st-35th General Congregations of the Society of Jesus*, ed. John W. Padberg, S.J. (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2009), 295.

14 G.C. 35, Dec. 2, §§16, 22 (Padberg, *Jesuit Life*, 739, 742).

15 G.C. 35, Dec. 4, §§8, 27 (Padberg, *Jesuit Life*, 757, 761).

16 Karl Rahner, S.J., *Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Kenneth Baker, S.J. (New York: Herder & Herder, 1965), 23-27. Rahner’s reflections originated in a retreat that he gave to seminarians in 1955; they were extensively edited by others before going to print ten years later.

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19 See Karl Rahner, S.J., “Being Open to God Ever Greater: On the Significance of the Aphorism ‘Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam,’” *Theological Investigations* VII (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971), 25-46; Santi-ago Arzubialde, S.J., “El significado de la fórmula ‘a mayor gloria de Dios’ en el texto de las Constituciones de la Compañía de Jesús,” *Estudios Eclesiásticos* 76 (2001), 593-630.

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40 See Dec. 13 of G.C. 34, “Cooperation with the Laity in Mission” (Padberg, *Jesuit Life*, 608-615) .

41 For a general overview, see John W. O’Malley, “How the First Jesuits Became Involved in Education,” in *The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum: 400th Anniversary Perspectives*, ed. Vincent J. Duminuco, S.J. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 56-74.

42 See Dec. 4 of G.C. 32, “Our Mission Today: The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice” (Padberg, *Jesuit Life*, 298-316); Dec. 3 of G.C. 34, “Our Mission and Justice” (Padberg, *Jesuit Life*, 530-535).

43 See Cons. §623b (Ganss, *Constitutions*, 275-276). 44 G.C. 32, Dec. 4, §2 (Padberg, *Jesuit Life*, 298). 45 Ignatius made this ultimate end a point of meditation in “The First Principle and Foundation,” found in the *Spiritual Exercises* (§23).

46 A common phrase in the theological jargon of the sixteenth century, inspired by a passage in St. Paul’s letter to the Romans (10:2).

47 Ignatius is occasionally misquoted as having written in the Spiritual Exercises §53: “What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? *What more* can I do for Christ?” In point of fact, his third question was: “What *ought* I do for Christ?” [*lo que debo hacer por Cristo*]. Similarly, Ignatius is commonly credited with the famous “Prayer for Generosity”: *Lord, teach me to be generous, and to serve you as you deserve, to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to labor and not to seek for rest*… In fact, its true author is unknown. And the prayer, while romantic in its own way, is inconsistent with the spirituality of the mature Ignatius, who was quite concerned about the potential cost and reward of any proposed endeavor.

48 See Diane Dreher, “What To Do About It: Cura Personalis and the Challenge of Life-Work Balance,” *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 41, Article 19 (2012), 30-33.

49 Ex. §§169-174 (Munitiz, *Saint Ignatius*, 316-317).

50 Brazilian archbishop Hélder Câmara expressed this same truth ironically when he said, “I feed the poor and people call me a saint. I ask why they’re poor and they call me a Communist!”

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