

Jesuit Notes

Notes on the 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus

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Jesuits around the world met in Rome in January of 2008 for a meeting called a *general congregation*. Well, not all the Jesuits, but their representatives who were elected to go to this meeting totaled some 200 plus strong. So what is a general congregation?

Let's look at it this way. Religious orders have regular meetings to conduct business proper to their orders. So when Ignatius founded the Society of Jesus – the Jesuits, he had a long tradition before him. There were the Benedictines, the Dominicans, and the Franciscans, to name just the major groups. These orders meet regularly – every six years for most – in what are called general chapters. At these meetings, the matters pertaining to the general government of the order are discussed and plans are made. Also, the major superior for most of these orders holds office for a limited time, often for six years also, so a major piece of general chapter business is to find a new superior for the order.

Ignatius knew this procedure all too well but did not want his men to follow this pattern. He wanted his men working, not attending meetings. He felt that every six years was too often to have such a meeting because it would mean his men would have to travel to Rome as often. Rather, he said, let the general congregation meet only when absolutely necessary. And when would that be? Certainly, they would

have to meet when the Superior General of the order died and a new superior had to be elected. So he had the Jesuit superior elected for life¹ and this was approved by the Pope Paul III. Thus, in the 450 years of Jesuit history, there have only been thirty-five general congregations. On the average, it is something like every thirteen years. I think Ignatius would be pleased with that.

Why did the Jesuits meet in 2008?

As you may suppose, the main purpose was to elect a new Superior General. Strictly speaking, this election was not needed because the former general was still very much alive. Thus, the 35th congregation was making history. For the first time since its founding, the Jesuits were electing a new Superior General without the previous general being dead. Therein lies a story.

Being already in his eighties, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, SJ, Superior General from 1983 up until early 2008, was feeling his age. So much did he feel it was time for him to retire that he asked the then Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, for permission to retire. The Holy Father did not grant the petition. Thus upon the election of a new pope, Fr. Kolvenbach approached Pope Benedict XVI to try again. This time, his petition fell upon favoring ears and he was granted permission to retire from his office. Hence, in January 2008, a general congregation was needed to elect a new superior.

But given the mind of St. Ignatius about his men going to meetings, the congregation decided to also take this opportunity to look at the Society of Jesus around the world and discuss what should be done so as to further the mission of the Jesuits at this time. Thus, the meeting extended from the election of a new general – the first order of business – to the discernment of practical matters of concern to the Jesuit apostolic work around the world. For this purpose, the delegates, numbering some 200 plus Jesuits coming from all corners of the world, stayed on in Rome after electing Fr. Adolfo Nicolas, SJ as the new Superior General.

A word about Fr. Nicolas.

He is well acquainted with the Philippines as he has spent many years living in the country. He first came to Asia as a Spanish missionary to Japan in 1960. In the course of these years, he also spent a great time as the Superior of the East Asian Pastoral Institute (EAPI) on the campus of the Ateneo de Manila University (ADMU). He eventually became the Provincial Superior of the Japanese Province of Jesuits. After that, he

was again assigned to the Philippines, this time as the Superior of the East Asian Jesuits and their many works in Asia. Now at the 35th General Congregation (GC 35), he was named as the new general of all the Jesuits of the world. This event itself can tell us much about Fr. Nicolas, so let me quote him speaking of the events surrounding his election:

“I went to GC 35 with great peace of mind. I was convinced that I was out of danger, if only for my age and the many shortcomings and inadequacies I have... But then the GC began and [the time for discussions on possible candidates]. The first day I had to speak with many people who were asking information about “others.” I was delighted to inform on how good the other fellows were; after all, I was supposed to know more people than most. The second day was basically the same with slight changes in some [events]. The third day, things changed even more and people started to ask me about my health. I have never seen so many Jesuits concerned about my health...”

So there you can have some idea about the very human side of this lifelong Jesuit missionary.

The work of the congregation continued after the election and was finally codified in several documents, the major ones of which are called decrees. However, there are really no new themes in these decrees as the delegates felt that there are already well stated treatments of the major concerns of the worldwide Jesuits coming from the earlier general congregations.

Let’s quickly review these themes already treated by previous congregations. We will start with the 32nd General Congregation which was held from 02 December 1974 until 07 March 1975 where what I might call the “modern thematic” of the Society of Jesus was born. Up until that time, a common understanding of the Jesuit apostolic work was to think in terms of building up or forming “good Christians,” especially in the schools where the paradigm was the “good Christian gentleman” as the fruit of a Jesuit education. By the 1970s, however, the world had changed and while the goal was the same, the way to articulate it called for more emphasis. All around the world, the call for equal rights for all classes of society was being heard, but many a “good Christian” was not hearing that call and was even standing in the way of realizing it in his own country. A new vision was needed to articulate just what it meant to be a “good Christian.” Thus, in GC 32 was born the phrase a “faith that does justice.” The Society of Jesus meeting as a world body wanted to emphasize that the “good” faith life meant a living faith – one that embodied in acts the

faith that motivated the Christian. The vision of a living faith, a faith that does justice, was then later coined as the phrase used by the then Superior General Fr. Pedro Arrupe, SJ: "Men for others."

This quintessential thematic was then to be spelled out in the subsequent general congregations. So was born the call for Jesuits and those of like minds to enter into their cultures and make the Gospel message alive for that particular culture and peoples. Further experience and reflection soon enough gave rise to later GCs decreeing that what was needed was dialogue so as to make the inculturation meaningful and fruitful. This was particularly important in regions where various religious groups were involved.

We thus arrive at GC 35 and its relevance to Mindanao: GC 35 in our day and place. The call for interreligious dialogue would seem to be the major emphasis for us. So, a word about the meaning of "dialogue."

When persons enter into dialogue, they are not entering into a debate. A debate situation exists when one or both parties believe they hold the truth and the aim of the debate is to convince the other of their truth. "I am right and you are wrong" is the backdrop for the meeting. The background is different in a dialogue. Both parties respect the other and enter into the dialogue with the attitude that "I know something of the truth and I respect that you, too, have encountered the truth. Let us each share our experience and learn from each other."

Thus, a dialogue is a search for more truth than I have experienced, respecting the good faith of the other as a searcher for the truth also. As partners in the search, we dialogue with each other.

Feeling that these are still very relevant for our times, GC 35 reiterated these themes and approaches for the Jesuit mission in this century. It did, however, sum these up by issuing as its first decree a document entitled *A fire that kindles other fires: Rediscovering our charism*. To me, this recalls the scriptural scene where Our Lord speaks out about his mission in the words: "I have come to light a fire on the earth. How I wish the blaze were ignited!" (Lk 12:49).

Note

¹ The Jesuit Constitution states that the Superior General holds office until death.