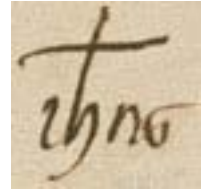


General Congregation 35



S.J. Press Office, Rome, Italy, Tel. +39-06-68977.289, infosj@sjcuria.org

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Address of His Holiness Benedict the Sixteenth to the 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus

Dear Fathers of the General Congregation
of the Society of Jesus,

I am happy to welcome you today as your demanding work is coming to an end. I thank the new Superior General Father Adolfo Nicolás, for having conveyed your feelings and your effort to respond to the expectations that the Church places in you. I referred to them in the message addressed to Reverend Father Kolvenbach and – through him – to your Congregation at the beginning of your labours. I thank Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach once again for the precious service he has rendered to your Order for almost a quarter century. I also greet the members of the new General Counsel and the Assistants who will help the Superior in his delicate task of religious and apostolic guidance of your Society.

Your Congregation takes place in a period of great social, economic and political changes, sharp ethical, cultural and environmental problems, conflicts of all kinds, but also of a more intense communication among peoples, of new possibilities of acquaintance and dialogue, of a deep longing for peace. All these are situations that challenge the Catholic Church and its ability to announce to our contemporaries the Word of hope and salvation. I very much hope, therefore, that the entire Society of Jesus, thanks to the results of your Congregation, will be able to live with a renewed drive and fervour the mission for which the Spirit brought it about and has kept it for more than four centuries and a half with an extraordinary abundance of apostolic fruit. Today I should like to encourage you and your confreres to go on in the fulfilment of your mission, in full fidelity to your original charism, in the ecclesial and social context that characterizes this beginning of the millennium. As my predecessors have often told you, the Church needs you, counts on you, and continues to turn to you with confidence, particularly to reach the geographical and spiritual places where others do not reach or find it difficult to reach. Those words of Paul 6th have remained engraved in your hearts: “Wherever in the Church, even in the most difficult and exposed fields, in the crossroads of ideologies, in the social trenches, there has been or is confrontation between the burning exigencies of humanity and the perennial message of the Gospel, there have been and are the Jesuits” (3 December 1974, to the 32nd General Congregation).

As the Formula of your Institute states, the Society of Jesus was founded chiefly “for the defence and propagation of the faith”. At a time when new geographical horizons were being opened, Ignatius’ first companions placed themselves at the Pope’s disposal “so that he might use them where he judged it would be for God’s greater glory and the good of souls” (Autobiography, n. 85). They were thus sent to announce the Lord to peoples and cultures that did not know him as yet. They did so with a courage and zeal that still remain as an example and inspiration: the name of St. Francis Xavier is the most famous of all, but how many others could be mentioned! Nowadays the new peoples who do not know the Lord or know him badly, so that they do not recognize him as the Saviour, are far away not so much from the geographical point of view as from the cultural one. The obstacles challenging the evangelisers are not so much the seas or the long distances as the frontiers that, due to a mistaken or superficial vision of God and of man, are raised between faith and human knowledge, faith and modern science, faith and the fight for justice.

This is why the Church is in urgent need of people of solid and deep faith, of a serious culture and a genuine human and social sensitivity, of religious priests who devote their lives to stand on those frontiers in order to witness and help to understand that there is in fact a profound harmony between faith and reason, between evangelical spirit, thirst for justice and action for peace. Only thus will it be possible to make the face of the Lord known to so many for whom it remains hidden or unrecognisable. This must therefore be the preferential task of the Society of Jesus. Faithful to its best tradition, it must continue to form its members with great care in science and virtue, not satisfied with mediocrity, because the task of facing and entering into a dialogue with very diverse social and cultural contexts and the different mentalities of today’s world is one of the most difficult and demanding. This search of quality and human solidity, spiritual and cultural, must also characterize all the many activities of formation and education of the Jesuits, as it meets the most diverse kinds of persons wherever they are.

In its history the Society of Jesus has lived extraordinary experiences of proclamation and encounter between the Gospel and the cultures of the world – suffice it to think of Matteo Ricci in China, Roberto de Nobili in India, or the “Reductions” in Latin America – of which you are justly proud. Today I feel I have the duty to exhort you to follow in the footsteps of your predecessors with the same courage and intelligence, but also with as profound a motivation of faith and passion to serve the Lord and his Church. All the same, while you try to recognize the signs of the presence and work of God in every part of the world, even beyond the confines of the visible Church, while you endeavour to build bridges of understanding and dialogue with those who do not belong to the Church or who have difficulty accepting its position and message, you must at the same time loyally fulfil the fundamental duty of the Church, of fully adhering to the word of God, and of the authority of the Magisterium to preserve the truth and the unity of the Catholic doctrine in its totality. This does not apply solely to the personal task of each Jesuit; since you work as members of one apostolic body, you must be attentive so that your works and institutions always maintain a clear and explicit identity, so that the purpose of your apostolic work does not become ambiguous or obscure, and many other persons may share your ideals and join you effectively and enthusiastically, collaborating in your task of serving God and humanity.

As you well know because you have so often made the meditation “of the Two Standards” in the Spiritual Exercises under the guidance of St Ignatius, our world is the stage of a battle between good and evil, with powerful negative forces at work, which cause those dramatic situations of spiritual and material subjection of our contemporaries against which you have repeatedly declared your wish to combat, working for the service of the faith and the promotion of justice. These forces show themselves today in many forms, but with particular evidence through cultural tendencies that often become dominating, such as subjectivism, relativism, hedonism, practical materialism. This is why I have asked you to renew your interest in the promotion and

defence of the Catholic doctrine “particularly in the neuralgic points strongly attacked today by secular culture”, some of which I have mentioned in my letter. The issues, constantly discussed and questioned today, of the salvation in Christ of all human beings, of sexual morale, the marriage and the family, must be deepened and illumined in the context of contemporary reality, but keeping the harmony with the Magisterium, which avoids creating confusion and bewilderment among the People of God.

I know and understand well that this is a particularly sensitive and demanding point for you and not a few of your confreres, especially those engaged in theological research, interreligious dialogue and dialogue with contemporary culture. Precisely for this reason I have invited you. and am inviting you today, to further reflect so as to find again the fullest sense of your characteristic “fourth vow” of obedience to the Successor of Peter, which not only implies readiness to being sent in mission to far away lands, but also – in the most genuine Ignatian sense of “feeling with the Church and in the Church – to “love and serve” the Vicar of Christ on earth with that “effective and affective” devotion that must make of you his precious and irreplaceable collaborators in his service of the universal Church.

At the same time I encourage you to continue and renew your mission among the poor and for the poor. Unfortunately new causes of poverty and exclusion are not lacking in a world marked by grave economic and environmental imbalances, processes of globalization, caused by selfishness rather than by solidarity, by devastating and absurd armed conflicts. As I had the opportunity to repeat to the Latin American Bishops gathered in the Shrine of Aparecida, “the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the christological faith in a God that has made himself poor for us, so as to make us rich by his poverty” (2 Cor 8,9). It is therefore natural that whoever wishes to make himself a companion of Jesus, really share the love of the poor. For us the choice of the poor is not ideological but is born from the Gospel. The situations of injustice and poverty in the world of today are countless and dramatic and it is necessary to try to understand and combat in the heart of man the deeper causes of the evil that separates him from God, without forgetting to meet the more urgent needs in the spirit of the charity of Christ. Taking up one of the latest intuitions of Father Arrupe, your Society continues to engage in a meritorious way in the service of the refugees, who are often the poorest among the poor and need not only material help but also the deeper spiritual, human and psychological proximity especially proper to your service.

Finally I invite you to reserve a specific attention to the ministry of the Spiritual Exercises that has been characteristic of your Society from its origins. The Exercises are the fountain of your spirituality and the matrix of your Constitutions, but they are also a gift that the Spirit of the Lord has made to the entire Church: it is for you to continue to make it a precious and efficacious instrument for the spiritual growth of souls, for their initiation to prayer, to meditation, in this secularised world in which God seems to be absent. Just in the last week I have myself profited of the Spiritual Exercises together with my closest collaborators of the Roman Curia under the guidance of your outstanding confrere Cardinal Albert Vanhoye. In a time such as today’s, in which the confusion and multiplicity of messages, the speed of changes and situations, make particularly difficult for our contemporaries to put their lives in order and respond with joy to the call that the Lord makes to everyone of us, the Spiritual Exercises represent a particularly precious method to seek and find God in us, around us and in everything, to know his will and put it into practice.

In this spirit of obedience to the will of God, to Jesus Christ, that becomes humble obedience to the Church, I invite you to continue and bring to conclusion the work of your Congregation, and I join you in the prayer that St Ignatius taught us in the Exercises – a prayer that seems to me too great to the point that I almost dare not say, but which all the same we must always propose to ourselves anew: “Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding

and my entire will, all I have and possess; you gave it to me, I now give it back to you, O Lord; all is yours, dispose of it according to your will; give me your love and your grace; that is enough for me” (Ex 234).

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