

FOLLOWING THE WAY OF IGNATIUS, FRANCIS XAVIER AND PETER FABER, SERVANTS OF CHRIST'S MISSION*

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The theme of this meeting places us in the perspective of the jubilee year, which recalls to us the early beginnings of the Society of Jesus. What is the aim of this jubilee year? It is not a question simply of visiting the past as one does in a museum but of finding again at the origin of our history, **that Divine strength** which seized some men – those of yesterday and us today – to make them apostles. It is not even a question of stopping over our beginnings in Paris, in 1529, when Ignatius lodged in the same room with Peter Faber and Francis-Xavier: it is about **contemplating and considering this unforeseeable and unexpected meeting** where this group of companions, who became so bonded together by the love of Christ and for "the sake of souls", was born by the grace of God. And finally it is not a question of reliving this period as if we were impelled solely by an intellectual curiosity, or by a concern to give an account of our history; it is about rediscovering through Ignatius, Francis-Xavier and Peter Faber **this single yet multiple face of the Society**, those paths that are so vibrantly personal and their common, resolute desire to become "companions of Jesus", to be considered "servants" of The One who said, "I no longer call you servants.. I call you friends" (Jn. 15,15)

Let us look at these three men so very different in temperament that everything about them should have kept them apart one from another – but also so motivated by the same desire to "search and find God". The personality traits

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of each one, their life-story, what they have left us of themselves in their writings carry the distinctive mark of persons who were and will remain each one in his own way, **unique**. It is not the similarities and uniformity that characterize the beginnings of this group of men seized by the absolute of God – yes, seized by the absolute of God who reveals himself and surrenders himself in Christ. For them as for us, the paths of God in our history and the singular character of each vocation show how much **each “Yes” in response to the call of God has been profoundly personal**. It is what we have heard and understood through witnesses who have been given to us. And it is what we can see, hear, understand and, in some way, contemplate when we share one with another something of who we are, what has been given to us and what moves us. This sharing is apparent at moments of “visitation” when we can say, as did Elizabeth to Mary: **“Happy are you who have believed: what was told to you by the Lord will be accomplished”** (cf. Lk. 1:45). It is important that this word “happy” resounds profoundly for us, because what would the face of a religious be if happiness were absent? It is in listening to each one’s “yes” to Christ, in “this permanent experience of Christ crucified and risen, who invites and unites us to Him to prepare the world to become the Fulness of the Kingdom of God” (34th GC, D.2, no.31); that we are united in saying “yes” to the mission of Christ who is able to lead us there where we would not have gone by ourselves. **Each “yes” is unique and each one’s “yes” constitutes the apostolic body that we form**. So, each “yes” is important to the vitality of the Society. We understand now why and how the Jesuit identity responds less to norms which would make us into some identical format and rather to that **mysterious alchemy which operates there where a unique person responds to the unique call of God to live a mission which is never predetermined**.

Let us look at our three companions: Ignatius recalls to us how to find at the heart of our vocation the desire that God is existentially the first to be served in our manner of being, of living and of acting. Ignatius **does not cease to be a mystic even when the apostolic task obliges him to be realistic**. Ignatius shows us that religious life is not a utopia, a place removed from the real: religious life necessitates realism drawn from an incarnate faith. Francis-Xavier shows us horizons where we perceive frontiers to cross, unknown lands to discover, foreign people to meet..not by an attraction for the far-away or exotic, but because **there is an urgency to bring the Good News to all, everywhere**: it is humanity waiting for the Lord which draws him to the gates of China, where he lets himself be carried and led.

Peter Faber witnesses, through his own life how spiritual accompaniment enables people searching for God **to be attentive to what is happening in the interior of their heart**; for if one does not have a concern for one's interior life and does not undergo a personal conversion such a one lacks those roots which, with the grace of God, allow that person to confront whatever may arise. He wrote in 1542: "Consecrate yourself entirely to what you can with the help of the smallest grace of God, and the Lord will make up what is lacking so you will be able to accomplish the superhuman." For each of them, it was a question of going to the limits of himself – not by desire or to seek personal fulfilment – but because we are being led constantly to that point by the Lord, like pilgrims of God, like seekers of what the Lord promises, like the people of the Exodus because of our historic situation. As has been so well expressed in the 34th General Congregation: "We carry today this gift of Christ, as we go out to meet the culture in a world which is being seduced by human egocentric achievements, luxury and the comfortable life, a world which applauds prestige, power and self-sufficiency. To preach Christ, poor and humble, in such a world with fidelity and courage, is to expect humiliations, persecutions and even death. We have been witnesses to this story of our brothers in these recent years." (D.26 no.539)

How can we become "servants of the mission of Christ" and not put ourselves at the service of our own ideas and spiritual images, whether religious or ecclesial? It seems to me that the response is in the way we **look at the world** – that is to say at humanity: "the Church, whose mission we share, exists not for itself but for humanity" (34th GC, D.2, no.24). The modern person wants to lay hold of the world and to manipulate it, whereas the companion of Jesus looks upon the world differently: he does so with the eyes of Jesus who looked on the crowd without a shepherd, with that look which does not judge to condemn; he does not yield to self-satisfaction but relates to people with kindness, with the eyes that search to see the "Lord who is at work here and now, in events and in the people"...(34th G.C., D.26, no.542), with a look full of hope, ready to labour and to shape. We know that there are looks that give you hope and looks that leave you in despair...

To consider this world would be useless without our disposing ourselves to be **ready and available**. We must have a fundamental attitude: an interior readiness of heart upon which our capacity to become servants of the mission for another depends: the mission of Christ. "Readiness and

discernment – P. Arrupe used to say – are mutually demanding”. This readiness makes of us men who are constantly letting themselves be displaced to allow the fruit of their interior life to grow and mature in them; their desire is to be sent there where the need is greatest to work with Christ at the service of the Kingdom of God. “The spirit of the Society – wrote Ignatius, December of 1546 – is to go in all simplicity and humility from city to city, from one country to another without attaching ourselves to any particular place”. Yes, readiness depends on the availability and mobility of each one. Certainly, it is not a question of being a perpetual traveller, a vagabond on the highway or in airports..It is rather **knowing how to live** anywhere, because, as P. Arrupe put it so well: “deep, religious experience consists precisely in commitment and proximity”; **knowing how to accept to leave a place** to serve elsewhere because the Jesuit is a man who goes to the limit to announce the Gospel as an apostle. He is also a man who dares to transgress and cross over social, cultural and geographic frontiers to show what unites is stronger than what divides.

Wanting and willing to be available to be sent at any moment of one’s life – because the root of our apostolic readiness is in our daily docility to the Spirit of God – helps us to live with tensions. *Our apostolic fruitfulness depends on our capacity to accept tensions and to live with them:*

- *tension between the “here and now” of the present task and openness to the unexpected call of God.* It is throughout our whole life-long that Christ repeats, “Follow me”, but the ways to take are unforeseeable and disconcerting. The servant of Christ’s mission knows that **there is no such thing as a Jesuit career.**

- *tension between the interior and the apostolic life.* There is this desire for God which requires an interior, unencumbered space to be able to expect the Lord; and there are those urgencies to which we must respond..And, at times, welcoming an unexpected demand, we discover that angel of the Lord who reminds us that God is to be recognized in all and in everyone. Taking into account this tension, the masters of the spiritual life exhort us to have an interior life heightened to equal one’s apostolic activity. Servants of Christ’s mission **are nourished by the spiritual experience of those who have preceded them.**

- *tension between what we perceive as tasks to be undertaken and followed through and what we have as means to carry them through.*

And then there is the realistic view which selects what is possible to do; it ought not to extinguish or dampen the desire for more expansive projects, nor to curtail the ambition for a more creative design. Servants of the mission of Christ **set their sights on what is more universal and such a vision presupposes a spirit and a heart that are wide open.**

- *tension between our desire to serve with humility and the necessity at certain times, to exercise authority and responsibility in these heavy missions. How can we live these charges which do not allow us to be in the last place while keeping our heart poor and our attitude humble? Servants of Christ's mission cannot live this tension except with **interior freedom which preserves them from every preoccupation with self and every disordered attachment***

- *tension between our capacity to make use of powerful and efficient means – organized institutions, fund-raising, appeals to the many networks – and our vocation to exercise radically the critical function of religious life. **Servants of the mission of Christ are not seeking personal recognition or social consideration.***

- *tension between our refusal to be content with less than what our work of seeking justice, announcing the faith and offering hope exact of us..and a task which is not our personal work and which evolves over time. Servants of the mission of Christ know that **they will never be the judges of the fruitfulness of the work entrusted to them.***

The 34th General Congregation tells us: "as companions of Jesus our identity is inseparable from our mission" (D.2, no.26). Our identity is also in some way, never truly definable because it is the "magis" which is at work in us and it is the Spirit of God who stirs us.

So, how can we live the call to become servants of the mission of Christ?

- **with confidence:** not the confidence in ourselves which would be sheer vanity, but the confidence in God who is faithful; then we will be servants who have no fear;

- **with freedom:** "it is so that we can be truly free that Christ has liberated us" (Ga.5:1). It is in freedom that we want others to live; it is also freedom which detaches us from images and misrepresentations that society has of the priest, religious, the Jesuit;

- **with a strong, ardent and vigorous apostolic desire**, rising up where our relationship with God and with the world intersect and become bound together: it will be the measure of a generosity expected of one committed to the Spiritual Exercises and of a dynamism characteristic of our way of proceeding;
- **with a disposition to act**, that is to undertake and risk, to innovate and advance: it means acting and **not acting alone** because the action of someone alone is almost always likely to be violent. It means never to act without having others participate;
- **with the aptitude to go towards others and towards the world** without waiting for people to come to us. Saint Gregory the Great used to say: "Remember that the gift you have received, you owe to those to whom you are sent."
- **keeping the taste of the things of God** enables you to awaken this taste in others. Alberto Hurtado used to say: "The world does not need people who prove but people who witness." And the quality of the witness is, like John the Baptist, to witness to what he knows and to move aside to let Christ become present to each one;
- **with the courage to desire to live this poverty** which we have chosen, of saying "no" to whatever is degrading, wounding, excluding and destroying, to refuse to struggle against that kind of seemingly inescapable logic and to struggle against it so that a world of justice may arise.

It seems to me that in this way we will become even more the servants of the mission of Christ because we will be focusing on letting the Lord lead us there where he wants us and because the call of humanity in us will have led us to Christ. It is thus that we will discover this way of proceeding which is our way and which P. Arrupe expresses so well in the prayer: "Teach me your way of proceeding that it may become today our way and that we may be able to accomplish the ideal of Ignatius: that we may be your companions, that we may collaborate in your work of redemption."

