

THE GENERAL CONGREGATIONS AND THE WORLD AROUND THEM

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The question has been asked: Did the General Congregations of the pre-Suppression Society of Jesus recognize and respond to the problems and the challenges to the Church and the Society posed by the world of that time? Yes and No. The clearest example of a yes answer comes from the most recent four congregations of the contemporary Society. The most complicated answer, one that includes both yes and no, comes from the congregations of the pre-suppression Society. An investigation of the material presently available from those pre-suppression congregations forms the basis for this article which attempts to give a tentative answer to the question posed above.

But in order to situate such responses, it may be good to make several preliminary remarks. Often courageously, even if sometimes complicatedly, the General Congregations during and since Vatican II, from the 31st to the 34th, have responded to the concerns of the church and the world in which the Society of Jesus lives. Since the time span of those recent congregations stretches from 1965 to 1995, a very large proportion of members of the Society has never experienced any other general congregation. As a result, it is probably true that most Jesuits think that a congregation clearly responding to the world external to the Society is a normal, usual phenomenon in the history of the Society. It almost certainly is not.

The main reason for the exceptional nature of responses from Jesuit congregations during the last thirty years was the Second Vatican Council. The 31st congregation started while Vatican II was still in session, with all of the expectations that the council raised, the hopes that it fulfilled and, of great importance, the extraordinarily different circumstances of the council itself from previous general councils. It was not called to condemn errors. It did not issue a long list of disciplinary decrees nor fulminate a comprehensive catalog of theological anathemata. Its decrees were, indeed, in many instances of great theological sophistication and depth, but they were oriented toward presenting the “Good News” rather than condemning the bad news. More importantly, while recognizing and acknowledging the failings and faults of the modern world, the council also vigorously recognized and acknowledged that world’s positive characteristics and said that the church could in many ways learn from that world and put the church at the service of such a world. Never before had general councils acted in that way. In so acting, it freed other groups within the church to act in the same way, including the Society of Jesus and its congregations.

The congregations of the pre-suppression Society of Jesus

But what about the congregations of the pre-suppression Society of Jesus? Clearly the Jesuits of those nineteen meetings, from the first in 1558 to the last in 1758 before the Suppression, did not live a sealed off existence from the world around them. But, and this is very important, they seemingly did not think that the “secular” concerns of that world were the province of legislation in a congregation unless those concerns directly touched the Society. Even then, “touching the Society” usually meant “bringing harm to the Society.”

In the context of Vatican II and its aftermath, it is important to recognize that something else also drove both the recent congregations and the earlier ones. That something else was the “Postulata” sent to the congregations. To understand what that means, it is necessary here to recall briefly what a congregation is, how it is structured, how it functions, what material is available to it, what in great part it deals with. Only then can one attempt specific answers to the question raised at the beginning of this essay.

A general congregation is the ultimate governing body of the Society of Jesus. It is presided over by the superior general but when it is in session,

its authority supersedes the authority of the general himself. He, of course, has great influence in a congregation but the congregation and not the general sets the agenda, determines its own rules, and makes the decisions. It is meant to represent the whole body of the Society of Jesus gathered in deliberative session. The material or subject matter that a general congregation decides to take up is overwhelmingly dictated by the "Postulata" it receives from province congregations. Each province, or specified geographical area in the Society, holds such a meeting to elect a delegate or delegates to accompany the provincial to the general congregation and, if it judges appropriate, to formulate "Postulata" or requests for action by a general congregation on matters dealing with the state of the universal Society. It is such "Postulata" that heavily influences, indeed almost dictates, the agenda of a general congregation. Once a general congregation is in session, any delegate may submit in his own name further "Postulata" for consideration, but they are rare in comparison to the province requests. Committees set up according to the matter of the "Postulata" consider them, amend them if needed and then forward them to the whole body with a recommendation on what to do with them. After discussion, further consideration by a committee, and perhaps amendments, the general congregation finally votes on an agreed-upon text. If the vote is positive, that text officially becomes a decree or enactment that binds the Society's members to its provisions. Such, with some essentially minor modifications, have been the ways in which a congregation carried out its responsibilities. All of this conditions almost any possible congregational response to current challenges.

Another circumstance conditions any such reply. Quite simply, for several reasons no comprehensive, detailed, scholarly history of the general congregations exists in any language. First, such a history would have to consider not only all the decrees of the congregations but also the minutes or official accounts of the day-by-day operations and sessions of a congregation, and not only the official "Postulata" from the provinces but also the ones that provinces have declined to endorse, because they, too, witness to the attitudes of Jesuits around the world who submitted those postulata to their respective province meetings. Secondly, the decrees of all the general congregations exist officially only in Latin.¹ They exist in several vernacular languages for the decrees from the 31st congregation on. But a vernacular translation of the decrees of the first thirty general congregations exists only in English. And a general, brief, more popular history of those

first thirty congregations exists also only in English.² Without a scholarly detailed history, any study such as the present one can only be tentative. Yet even a tentative study is a step forward in helping Jesuits and others to understand the history and significance of the general congregations in the multi-faceted life of the Society, institutional, juridical and spiritual.

External Influences

Several external influences obviously impinge upon a general congregation. The first and most important is the church, and, more specifically the pope and the offices through which he governs the church. Whether that could exactly be called an influence external to the Society is questionable, since it is to the service of church that the members of the Society have pledged themselves. At the same time, the Society of Jesus itself is not the church. Other obvious external influences are organizations or movements in the church, movements of spirituality among the faithful, the governments of the nations in which the Society lived or worked, intellectual/academic questions, and financial circumstances.

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One way to treat the question of influence, and response would be deal with each such area noted above as a separate item. That method has the virtue of specificity of topic and the clarity that could accompany it. Its inconvenience is the artificial, abstract separation of interrelated and intermingling challenges and responses that in real life together impinged upon the Society and its responses to challenges. Another way to treat the subject is chronologically, from one congregation to another over the course of two centuries. Its major disadvantage is the loss of a clear focus on one topic after another. Its major advantages are twofold, because a chronological approach mirrors the ways in which the real world works. First, we all experience the fact that the circumstances of one event or era exert influences on later ones. Secondly, we equally experience sometimes happy, sometimes unfortunate, often messy and often simultaneous, interplays of multiple

influences on a given situation. It is therefore the second chronological approach that this essay will employ as it highlights from one congregation to another influenced them from the outside and how they in turn responded to the problem and challenges that they faced.

Personalities, Politics and Problems

Even before the first general congregation in 1558, the personalities of Pope Paul IV and of King Philip II of Spain and the mutually hostile politics of the papal and Spanish courts influenced what was to happen. Because of the enmities and the war between king and pope, Philip would not allow Spanish delegates to leave the country to meet in Rome. Two years elapsed between the death of Ignatius in 1556 and the start of congregation in 1558. Pope Paul IV, of Neapolitan background, iron-will, volcanic temper, and absolute certainty, hated the Spaniards in general for their domination of Naples and their desire to dominate the church. He at least disliked Ignatius for being Spaniard if not for other reasons, and also disliked his new, innovating religious order. But he genuinely liked Diego Lainez and would have made him a cardinal. The pope wanted to change the Society. He sent a cardinal to count the votes for general, demanded that the Society institute choir, insisted on a three-year term for the superior general. This was the first papal intervention in the workings of a general congregation; it was not to be the last. In such circumstances, it is understandable that while Lainez was clearly on his own merits an excellent choice for general, the congregation was prudent in electing the one Jesuit that clearly could get along with the pope.

When the third general congregation opened in 1573, national rivalries, racial or ethnic prejudices, and royal policies supporting or fostering those prejudices in Spain and Portugal greatly challenged the assembly. The second general, Francis Borgia, a Spaniard, while acknowledged by all as a saintly man, had irritated many Jesuits by imposing many Spanish superiors and Spanish ways of acting on other parts of the Society, notable in Italy. The-to-be-expected reaction followed. At the same time, in the name of "limpieza de sangre," or purity of blood, in Spain and Portugal prejudice against Jews had spilled over into prejudice also against so-called "New Christians," persons whose Jewish ancestors had become Christian converts even generations before. This prejudice infected some Jesuits too. The

Spanish and Portuguese governments made clear to the congregation delegates from those countries that they were to try to prevent the election as general of any candidate of Jewish ancestry. They were even instructed to ask Pope Gregory XIII to intervene to prevent such an election in order to save the Society and the church from the supposed harmful consequences thereof. Juan de Polanco, secretary of the Society since 1547, was of such ancestry.

Pope Gregory XII had been recently elected and in subsequent years became one of the greatest benefactors that the Society has ever had. He was aware of the anti-Spanish animosity and was informed of the anti-Jewish prejudice. As a result, at first he forbade any Spaniard as general. He subsequently rescinded this order and left the congregation free to elect the person it chose, but he made clear that he preferred that it be a non-Spaniard. In the event, the congregation elected Everard Mercurian as the fourth general of the Society. Although not a Spaniard, as a native of Luxemburg he was a subject of the Spanish king. Even if papal influence had not been exercised, it is hard to see how in political terms the congregation could have gone against the expressed wishes of the king of Spain who was the most powerful monarch in Christendom, and on whom the Society depended in Spain and all its possessions, or against the wishes of the king of Portugal, from a royal family that had been among the Society's most consistent and generous benefactors since its foundation.

At the fourth general congregation in 1581, Claudio Aquaviva, at the age of thirty-seven and a first time delegate to a general congregation, was elected general of the Society of Jesus. He served as such through two more congregations until 1615, at almost thirty-five years the longest serving term in the history of the Society. In all those years, he faced religious, political, social and demographic pressures, as did the two congregations held in 1593-94 and 1608. In his generalate the Society grew from five thousand to thirteen thousand members, schools from almost one hundred and fifty to three hundred and seventy, residences from eighty to about one hundred and twenty, provinces from twenty-one to thirty-two. The challenge of rapid expansion was ever-present and the congregation, while not ordering the general to rein it in, strongly urged a slowdown in the acceptance of one new apostolate after another.

In 1593-94, the first general congregation to be held during the lifetime of a general took place. Leading up to it by a few years was the serious challenge that some malcontent Spanish Jesuits exerted, especially

through King Philip II of Spain and the Spanish Inquisition to introduce fundamental changes in the Society. Those members spoke of great discontent in the Society. They wanted to limit the term of office of the general and to enable provincial congregations to appoint provincials. They prevailed upon Pope Sixtus V to appoint a special episcopal visitor to the Society in Spain with instructions to use the secret procedures of the Spanish Inquisition in his visitation. Aquaviva finally persuaded the pope to rescind the order, noting for him among other anomalies that the bishop who as visitor was to assure vigorous religious life had managed to father three bastard children.

When Sixtus V died, the malcontents, to be known in Jesuit history as the “memorialistas,” induced the new pope, Clement VIII, to order Aquaviva to call the fifth general congregation (1593). They sent a long memorandum to Rome alleging misgovernment by Aquaviva and asking for a special commissary to govern the Society in Spain in a sort of semi-independence from the rest of the Society. The pope delivered a somber opening address to the delegates to the congregation. They took it seriously. They also had to take seriously a memorandum from the Spanish King himself asking, among other items, for changes in grades in the Society, in the way profession was conferred, and a limited term of office for the general. The congregation investigated all the allegations, responded to the pope, rebuffed the Spanish government’s memorandum, resisted the pressure put upon them, and confirmed Aquaviva in his governance. In that sense they responded vigorously to papal concerns and political pressure. Then the congregation turned on the “memorialistas” and expelled them from the Society. But then, unfortunately, it went further and, supposedly because twenty-five of the twenty-seven “memorialistas” were of Jewish or Moorish ancestry, forbade future acceptance into the Society of any person of such ancestry, despite the strongly held views and actions of Ignatius himself in refusing to countenance such a prohibition. The pressure of long-time prejudices took over.

A political challenge of another kind had to be dealt with. As Jesuits had become increasingly prominent as confessors of kings and princes, charges of their meddling in politics became ever more frequent. In truth, such confessors often had an almost impossible task, to concern themselves only, “with the personal conscience of the king.” But was not the ruler’s conscience engaged in matters of war and peace, in the designation of candidates for the episcopacy, in the apportionment of church revenues, in

the appointment of officials? Truth to tell, Ignatius himself had started the whole problem, by overruling the objections of very early Portuguese Jesuits when the king there asked for them as confessors. What greater influence, Ignatius reasoned, on the welfare of a kingdom and its citizens than a good king? This congregation ordered Jesuits who were such confessors not to involve themselves in “what is secular and belongs to political affairs and the governing of states,” and “in virtue of holy obedience” forbade any Jesuit to involve himself in public or secular affairs of princes. One after another subsequent congregation passed decrees forbidding any Jesuit confessors’ involvement in politics. Unfortunately they never could clearly describe where the boundary line lay in matters of personal conscience that were not also in some sense political.

In a matter of at least equal if not greater long-term importance, the congregation ruled that not only St. Thomas in theology but also Aristotle in philosophy, including in “natural philosophy” or the physical sciences, be followed faithfully. This was the first step in turning away at least in theory from the scientific developments that were increasingly to dominate the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The sixth congregation (1608) had the distinction of being the only one held as the result of a vote of procurators. Continuing quarrels about the leadership of the general motivated its summoning. It rebuffed the claims of poor leadership by Aquaviva. By establishing the first new assistancy since the first general congregation, it did take account of the growing political power of France and the debt of gratitude that the Society owed to King Henry IV, a protector of the Society after he had become a Catholic at the end of the French wars of religion.

In 1615-16 the seventh congregation elected Muzio Vitelleschi as general. It took place just two years before the outbreak of the Thirty-Years War in 1618, a huge challenge to the church and civil society and the Society of Jesus during all of the years of its long and terrible duration. The congregation again took note of the problem of the confessors of kings and of “political Jesuits” and sternly again forbade any involvement in politics. This was a vain hope when Jesuits were confessors at the major courts of Catholic Europe, with opposing personalities, viewpoints and loyalties. As an additional complication, Vitelleschi for years both supported the war almost as a holy war and yet tried to urge restraint. To take but one example, in his years as general he wrote more than one thousand letters to William

Lamormaini, the confessor of the emperor in Vienna, on every facet of the war.³

Politics of another kind came to the attention of the seventh congregation. Jesuits of the English mission, driven out of England by persecution often lived and studied in Jesuit provinces abroad, and often enough in Spain. They and their Spanish Jesuit confreres faced the politics of trying to live in sometimes difficult-to-achieve harmony, especially when it was not clear who in the policy of the Society was in charge, the English mission superior or the Spanish provincials. Aquaviva had sided with the English regularly. Vitelleschi had to deal with a postulatium successfully proposed by the province of Castile and accepted by the congregation that effectively hobbled the English superior. If implemented it would have been a disaster for the English mission. The general in a gesture worthy of Solomon caused the problem to evanesce by raising the mission to the status of a vice province. Both of the actions of Vitelleschi noted above make the point that while a congregation legislates, it is the general, and the provincials, who put decrees into effect.

Three congregations, the eighth, ninth and tenth, (1645, 1649, 1652) and three generals (Carafa Vincenza, Francesco Piccolomini and Goswin Nickel) in seven years followed the sixty-four years of Aquaviva and Vitelleschi. The major challenge at the eighth was the ruinous financial situation during (and following on) the Thirty-Years War which in itself had devastated one city and Jesuit institution after another in the lands directly touched by the war. But it had been so bad that it brought on similar hard times even in Italy not directly touched by the war itself. As a result, the congregation mandated the closure of nine schools in two provinces in Italy. Congregations had always been notably reluctant to take such an action. Increasingly in these years, expressions of national feelings became ever more strident and Jesuits were involved, even to the extent of soliciting external political pressure to demand new provinces or to prevent the division of existing ones. The congregation decreed punishments for such “perturbatores” or disturbers. The tenth congregation (1652) was too short to be able to respond to any challenges. It elected as general Luigi Gottifreddi, who died seven weeks later while the congregation was still in session. The delegates then elected Goswin Nickel and eight days later made directly for home. In 1661 Giovanni Paolo Oliva was elected vicar general with right of succession to Nickel, too old to govern actively. After three such years, he was general for the following seventeen years. The major challenges to be

faced at the congregation that elected him were continuing imputations, especially on the part of Jansenism, about laxity in the moral teaching of Jesuits and continuing attentions with the Dominicans on matters of theology. It passed decrees on both matters but it is not clear what difference at all they made in subsequent years.

The twelfth congregation (1682) elected Charles Noyelle, a Belgian. He and Ignatius have been the only generals elected with all the votes of the delegates except their own. The congregation had to confront continuing quarrels between Jesuits and Jansenist and heated differences of opinions among Jesuits themselves. It passed a remarkably strong decree against personally injurious writings and comments by Jesuits. But it could do nothing in the political arena to shield the Society from the increasingly nationalistic pretensions of France versus Spain. When Louis XIV

“ . . . if perhaps it should please God . . . to permit us to be tried by adversity . . . ”

conquered Francophone Belgium, he insisted that the Jesuit province there be made part of the French assitancy. Spain countered by insisting with equal force that the Italian provinces of Naples, Sicily and Milan, Spanish possessions, be made part of the Spanish assitancy. Noyelle's four years as general were a continual cross in trying to fend off those competing claims.

Secular politics had been the concern of the twelfth congregation, Ecclesiastical or, more precisely, papal policy was a challenge for the thirteenth (1687) and for several subsequent years. Pope Innocent XI favored the doctrine of “probabiliorism” in moral matters. Most Jesuits at the time favored “probabilism,” with the notable exception of Tirso Gonzalez, a Spanish Jesuit theologian. He had written a book-favoring “probabiliorism” which Jesuit censors had refused to allow to be published. It took three ballots at the congregation but eventually the pope effectively forced the congregation to elect Gonzalez general with a four-vote majority out of eight-six ballots cast. Then followed eighteen years of stress in the Society in a struggle far too complicated to tell here, over Gonzalez's obsessions with getting rid of probabilism in the Society and his assistants trying to stop publication of his book, now that he was general, supposedly anonymously written, etc, etc.

Gonzalez was still general when the fourteenth (1696-97) and fifteenth (1706) congregations were convoked, both in response to the “nine-

year-interval” imposed earlier by Pope Innocent X. The general was still unvarying in his opposition to probabilism. But just about three months before the latter meeting began, he died after eighteen years as general. The congregation elected Michelangelo Tamburini who served for twenty-four years. The major challenge to the Society as seen by the congregation was the unrelenting increase in the attacks on the Society by Jansenists, the French Foreign Mission Society and a group of opponents of the Jesuits in the papal Curia. The congregation would rein in bitter counter attacks by Jesuits but had no success in stopping the vilification of the Society.

The sixteenth congregation (1730-1731) that elected Frantisek Retz inaugurated a period of comparative prosperity for the Society internally and externally even if it was under increasing attacks by the Philosophes. But the congregation made a serious mistake in taking a definitive stance for Aristotle in the contexts of the growing influence and attraction of experimental science, especially in physics. One of the decrees paid lip service to the new science by saying in was in accord with mind of Aristotle but it made another attempt to tie the Jesuit schools and teachers to Aristotelian physics. Historical research in recent decades has made abundantly clear the Jesuit schools de facto often taught according to the experimental method in science. But the congregation decided that because the Society of Jesus had accepted Aristotle’s philosophy as useful for theology and because the Ratio Studiorum and the Constitutions prescribed this type of philosophy, Jesuits were to continue to teach it, including its physics. If “lovers of novelty” were abandoning Aristotle are someone else’s theories (probably Descartes’) they were to be removed from the classroom. The congregation also ordered a list of propositions not to be taught to be drawn up and then had provincials write the general very year on the matter. To what extent the congregation had Newtonian physics in mind cannot be determined from the decrees. But the Ratio was coming to be regarded as an untouchable monument and the inherent adaptability of the Constitutions was disregarded.

The seventeenth general congregation (1751) elected Ignazio Visconti, almost seventy years old, the first of two generals with short-terms of five and two years respectively, an unfortunate circumstance as the Society was being swept ever closer to the storm that would engulf it. The decrees themselves show no direct awareness of danger, but the expulsion of the South American Natives from the Jesuit reductions began in Visconti’s generalate and the heavy hand of politics bore down on him and on the

Society when he ordered the Jesuit missionaries in the Reductions, under obedience and pain of mortal sin, not to resist the expulsion in anyway, actions that they considered totally unjust.

Once again a congregation chooses at its eighteenth meeting (1755-1756) an elderly man of almost seventy-years as general, Luigi Centurione. He would govern the Society for only two years. While storm-clouds gathered in Western Europe, in Eastern Europe the Society had grown so vigorously that the congregation set up a new assistancy, the first in one hundred years, made up of the four flourishing provinces in Poland and Lithuania. There is no indication in the decrees that the congregation took note of the challenges external to the Society and spent most of its efforts on decrees that elaborated in further detail the rules of procedure for congregations, general, provincial and of procurators, and of repeating ways for promoting the spiritual life and encouraging their implementation.

congregations... reacted to problems rather than sought out opportunities

As Centurione lay dying, Pombal in Portugal had taken the first public steps to imprison some and banish most Jesuits from Portugal, Brazil and the possessions of Portugal in Africa.

The nineteenth congregation (1758), the last before the Suppression, at little more than six weeks duration, was one of the shortest in the Society's history and had also produced the fewest number of decrees, only twelve of them. They all dealt with internal life of the Society. It elected Lorenzo Ricci, fifty-five years old, formerly secretary of the Society, a man of intelligence and culture, gracious and generous. He was to bear the storm of the terrible years of one expulsion after another and then the final agony of the Suppression. The members of the congregation could not be unaware of oncoming storm. An indirect indication comes in the words of one of the decrees, ". if perhaps it should please God . . . to permit us to be tried by adversity" Apparently they were informal discussions on the characteristics to be desired in a general who would have to confront that storm, but there is no indication thereof in the decrees themselves. A few weeks after the congregation ended, a new pope, Clement XIII, was elected. For more than a decade he was to be an unvarying support of the Society in the contexts of all of that storm. When he died in 1759, and a new pope, Clement XIV, was elected, the end was near.

The histories of the five congregations held at Polotsk in what is now Belarus between 1782 and 1805 and the eleven held after the Restoration from 1820 to 1957 would provide their own answers to the questions of recognizing and responding to the challenges posed by the world of their times. And then the thirty-first to the thirty-fourth congregations would provide another and very different chapter in that history.

Tentative conclusions

What tentative conclusions might be drawn from this rapid recounting of history from 1558 to 1758? Were there recognition of and response to the challenges to the Church and Society posed by the world of those two centuries? Caution seems to have been an ongoing characteristic of the congregations of the Society in any overt recognition of and response to challenges. And that characteristic is in striking contrast to the change and innovation that characterized the Society as a whole in its work, especially in its first century. Constancy and sometimes seeming immobility strike one in the actions of the congregations.

Understandably, the very first general congregation cautiously structured itself and its ways of acting; everything was new. Most striking there was the ratification of the Constitutions just as Ignatius had left them, even though he had left it open to the congregation to change them as it deemed appropriate. In addition, as time went on, congregations hedged themselves about with rules and procedures that made change on their part difficult. Membership, too, consisted in a large minority of *ex officio* delegates, assistances and provincials already invested in the governing structure of the Society, while the elected members were chosen by province congregations the majority of whose members were by law the oldest members of a province professed of the four vows. As to *postulata*, it is true that any member of the Society could submit them, but they were all subjected to prior screening and a complicated route to adoption by a province congregation. All of those circumstances contributed to the fact that congregations, perhaps unconsciously but in reality, reacted to problems rather than sought out opportunities. They were responsive rather than innovative. At the same time, we must remember that members of a congregation are very unlikely to respond to a situation beyond the limits at which their brethren back in the communities of the Society would respond.

External circumstances, too, contributed to the inherently conservative or preservative cast of a congregation. After all, the Society of Jesus was at the service of a church and a papacy that had undergone the trauma of the Reformation, the wars of religion, the Thirty-Years War, and the increasingly lesser role that the pope as a temporal sovereign would play as nation states rose to prominence in Europe. A congregation was situated between the defensive posture of the papacy and the offensive power of the major countries in which the Society lived and worked, with delegates from all of those countries. In addition, it had to operate within a controlled time frame of a few months for each congregation. It is no wonder, then, that a congregation judged that it had to deal with internal affairs of the Society without rousing the circumambient powers of papacy or neighbors.

What did the congregations deal with most? Overwhelmingly, they dealt with those matters that would preserve, protect and advance the life of the Society, the individual and common religious life of its members and its external apostolates to which they gave themselves. One cannot read the decrees of one congregation after another without being struck forcibly by this. The spiritual life of its individual members as it was lived out in community and apostolate was the center of concern. Challenges from the outside entered the life of the congregation almost only if they troubled community or apostolate, sometimes, it must be admitted, too narrowly conceived. For these two centuries, four matters overwhelmingly occupied the attention of the general congregations: First, preserving and deepening the religious life of members of the Society of Jesus; secondly, preparation or formation of its younger members; third, apostolic activities especially education; fourth, internal structures and activities of congregations themselves, this last dealt with at times to the level of navel gazing. But given the intermittent nature of congregations, with relatively long interval between them and with a large number of delegates always new to the experience, this was almost inevitable.

As to the external world, to a greater or lesser degree of success the congregations dealt with seven major challenges: First, the personalities and policies of the popes; second, involvement, real or supposed, of Jesuits in the policies and politics of secular governments; third, the changes in the intellectual/academic scene with the rise of the natural sciences in the Enlightenment and their challenge in Jesuit schools to Aristotelian natural philosophy; fourth, the growing assertiveness of the nation states and the

consequent opposition to the workings of a universal church and of the Society at the service of such a church; fifth, the theological quarrels. on grace and freewill with the Dominicans, on moral theology and confessional practice with the Jansenists, on the Chinese rites with other orders and with the papal Curia. To each of these challenges the congregations responded, but more defensively than with what today would be called an alternative positive agenda.

All of this being said, one must also say two additional things. First, the evidence is still not all in to make a definitive judgment on the responses of the congregations to the challenges of their times; secondly, the evidence is clear on safeguard the desire and attempts to the fundamental spiritual nature of the Jesuit vocation. As the Constitutions of the Society say, “A congregation has as one of its tasks dealing with “very difficult matters pertaining to the whole body of the Society and its manner of proceeding, for greater service to God our Lord.”⁴ It is not easy to discern what such matters might be nor is it any easier to discern how to deal with them.

¹ The Latin texts of the first twenty-four such congregations can be found in the so-called Florentine edition of the Institute of the Society: Institutum Societatis Jesu. Vol II; “Examen et Constitutiones, Decreta Congregationum Generalium, Formulae Congregationum.” Florentiae: Ex Typographia a SS. Conceptione, 1893. The Latin text for each subsequent congregation can be found in a volume of the Acta Romana published soon after (usually written a year) the closing of a congregation. Acta Romana Societatis Jesu. Romae: Apud curian Praepositi Generalis.

² For this material see John W. Padberg, S.J., Martin D. O’Keefe, S.J. and John L. McCarthy, S.J., For Matters of Greater Moment: The First Thirty General Congregations of the Society of Jesus, A History and a Translation of Their Decrees. St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995.

³ See the marvelously interesting and informative story told by Robert Bireley, S.J. The Jesuits and the Thirty-Years War: Kings, Courts, and Confessors. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁴ Loyola, Ignatius. The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus. Translated from the Latin, with an Introduction and Commentary, by George E. Ganss, S.J., St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970. [680]