

AMBASSADORS OF CONSOLATION

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Introduction

The General Congregation represents all the members of the Society of Jesus. As such, it shares its spirit. At the same time, the General Congregation is the supreme governing organ of that body. It also illustrates the characteristics that define the real Society in that precise moment of history in which it is held. It would suffice to remember the very first Congregation that put an end to the crisis after Ignatius's death or the one that interrupted the succession of Spanish Generals opening a parenthesis before making a turn to the Italian style (GC 3); we could also recall the first Congregation after the Restoration (GC 20), or the exceptional one held at Loyola at the end of a century of persecutions (GC 24, 1892) or, finally, the one that resonated with Vatican Council II and the 1971 Synod (GC 32).¹ More important than its representative, governing, or historical-descriptive value, is the fact that the Congregation *brings about* the Society itself in a given moment of history.

What does it mean that the Congregation *brings about* the Society of Jesus? The present article claims that its Ignatian spirituality is an important condition of possibility. This spirituality can facilitate a common interpretation to delegates from various cultures, races, and tongues. It states that the experience the delegates will have in 2008 and, through their testimony, the Society will benefit in greater or lesser degree in the coming years. The congregation of its representatives today takes the place of the meeting and deliberations of *all* the first companions of Ignatius in the beginnings. The text of Part VIII of the *Constitutions* is witness to the transition

between a Society composed of a handful (“the professed” who can come conveniently) and a numerous Society (“those elected”). Convoking everyone was possible only at the beginning, when the professed Society was still small (some 20 professed in 1550 and twice as many in 1556). Since then, those congregated are but a minimal representation, a few more than 1%.

It is usually recalled that Ignatius considered the time spent in a congregation as “work and distraction” from the apostolic activity proper to the Order; that this is why he wanted it to finish “as soon as possible” and that “such a congregation should not be held very frequently.” However, nowadays it is easier to hold the meetings, and they serve to foster a special manner of communion. This communion gave birth to the Society and should demonstrate the mutual solicitude of its members (*ad intra*, let us think, for instance, of the echo that the decrees of GGCC 31, 32 and 34 had in the entire Society). In addition, the fact of meeting activates the ecclesial and social presence of the Society (*ad extra*, as demonstrated by the presence those decrees had in the media).

Unfortunately, few Jesuits will ever take part in such a rich and complex experience. Not at least directly; they will be fed with the reports that will reach them, especially through their provincials and delegates. It might be argued that the Provincial Congregations also *bring about* the Society in the measure that they, too, prepare the General Congregation. But this type of congregation appears linked up with territories too small for the global period that started with GC 32 and is distinctive of our historic moment of concern for justice, dialogue and communion. In fact, the reflections that follow originate in a chance finding: when going through the list of the Fathers congregated in GC 32, I realized that several of them had left a deep mark in my training.² The present reflections are meant as a tribute to them and an invitation to those who will meet next not to underestimate their paschal witness. They will unfold in three sections: (a) as a conclusion to an itinerary to Rome, (b) as an *upgrade* of a relationship in Rome, (c) as an oblation of “greater moment” from Rome.

And so we reached Rome

How to reach. The expression “and so we reached” introduces the topic of the Congregation starting with its preparation. How does one reach

for a General Congregation? The immediate answer is: we reach. That is, we reach along with the Society. Those who reach are the General and his Curia, the Major Superiors, but also the electors. They reach inasmuch as they are our representatives, and those represented reach analogously and in a way protracted in time.

The reader will find the expression “And so we reached” in the concluding summary of the *Acts of the Apostles* (28:14). He might also recall the context of this verse. “So” reminds us that Luke’s twin works are patterned on an itinerary. The concision of the adverb contrasts with the immediate end of the book of *Acts* as well as with the 27 chapters preparing it and even with Luke’s gospel preceding it. By its place at the end, this verse is a bridge between the New Testament and our own days; it joins the apostolates of Paul and Luke with the apostolate of the postapostolic Church and our own apostolate since the 16th century. The Gospel with its roots in Jerusalem extended its branches up to Rome. “And so we reached Rome” suggests that the stage in which we find ourselves has an immediate past and will conclude with the next Congregation.

Previous Preparation. The ending of *Acts* envisages the dynamism typical of the charismatic expansion that led the Apostles to the heart of the Roman Empire. At the end of the 25-year generalate of Fr Kolvenbach, “so we reached Rome” may also acknowledge the assistance that the Lord has given the Society in these years. His grace has helped him to persevere in the way he started. For the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, Rome was the place “where it was easiest to communicate with all places.” And even though things have changed in part from the 16th century, Rome continues to be identified to this day with “the curia of the sovereign pontiff” (*Const.* 690).

Due to historical reasons that have not lost all their validity, Rome has hosted all the General Congregations, with the sole exception we have recalled and in which the Pope was informed by wire of the name of the new General. The adjective “eternal” given to this city makes me wish this service to the Society through history. The continuity of the service contrasts with the discontinuity of the leaders who make it possible in the Church. Over and above each Pope and the 29 Generals is the service that is prolonged since the Ignatian inspiration at La Storta: I shall be propitious to you in Rome. Ever since the time of Paul III, Generals and Vicar Generals have tried to foster a special relationship with the Bishop of Rome and with the Vatican Curia; it has not always been easy: on one occasion, a Pope

went as far as submitting three postulates to the Congregation, another one decreed that a Congregation should be convoked every nine years, a third, going over the Vicar General and the prescriptions of the *Constitutions*, appointed his own delegate for the summoning, etc.). Some Major Superiors and electors will visit Rome for the first time, but many will revisit it, as did Ignatius, Favre and Lainez in the fall of 1537, when they stopped at La Storta. The curia of John Paul II, who has marked a great part of our lives in the Society, is now that of Benedict XVI; the discontinuity between one curia and another is balanced by the service maintained by the spirituality proper to the Society of Jesus. Our service, Ignatius reminds us, does not consider the person, “but rather who he is for whose sake they obey and whom they obey in all, who is Christ our Lord” (*Const.* 286).

Ignatius made provision for that “least Society” to hold a congregation on counted occasions, in particular on the death of a Superior General, in order to elect a successor *for life*. An example of economy was GC 10, which elected two Generals after the death of the recently elected Fr. Gottifredi. When they felt very frail, Nickel, González de Santalla, Roothaan and Becks convoked Congregations to elect Vicar Generals with the right of succession more or less acknowledged. With General Ledóchowski, however, this formula did not seem adequate. In such a context, the summoning and preparation of the coming Congregation are not so exceptional. It is convoked, and will probably be presided over at the beginning, by Fr. Kolvenbach. The General is still in possession of his faculties and embodies a memory, the memory of the service that the Society has willed to render to the Church since September 1983.

Repeating the gesture that Ignatius made ten years after receiving his charge (1541-1551), Fr. Kolvenbach will be able to submit his resignation to the Society 25 years after receiving his. It seems he will do so at the beginning of the Congregation, as it is suggested in his letter of February 2 of this year. In fact, the *Constitutions* foresee the election as its first important decision, but they do not envisage the present case and hence it is not unthinkable that the General should submit his resignation later or even after discussing the “very difficult matters pertaining to the whole body” referred to in his letter. In either case, the Fathers might reply that they do not accept his resignation. This was the answer given to Ignatius by the first companions. And Ignatius, who selflessly continued in his post, added in his own hand in the manuscript of the *Constitutions* that “the person elected will not be able to refuse” (cfr. (701) and (CCNN 362, 5). It may seem to us

extraordinary that the General might postpone his resignation and the Society not accept it. The development of the Congregation might justify such a step. In the past, the Congregations have preferred to elect a Vicar General with the right of succession; people today consider retirement natural. We hardly speak of the situation that would arise with the coexistence of a retired General with experience and an inexperienced man appointed General. Nor do we speak of the maturity that would be required in the members to avoid certain dynamics that might find an echo in the Vatican Curia.

Therefore, the postponement of the resignation to the end of the Congregation would not lack foundation. Not only does Fr. General symbolize the communion of the body, but he eminently contributes to making it a reality. Communion is a presupposition for any preservation, government and apostolate of the Society. The authority and experience of the present General can help a Congregation marked by diversity to work

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for communion. The very value that the *Constitutions* acknowledge in “union and conformity” indicates that the opposite is always a danger. Ignatius feared it and the crisis after his death proved him right. Nadal contributed to save the

situation offering his resignation since he had been appointed Vicar General by Ignatius.

Shortly afterwards, when GC 3 assembled to elect Francis Borgia's successor, an influential group of Jesuits agreed with the King and the Cardinal-Prince of Portugal to bring pressure on the Pope. They were trying to obstruct that a descendant from Jews (a so-called *new Christian*) be appointed General. One of the most likely candidates had such an origin. He was seemingly the target. He had served as Secretary of the Society during the first three generalates and still held the post of Vicar General: Juan A. de Polanco. Due to these pressures, Gregory XIII imposed an indiscriminate restriction: the Congregation was not allowed to elect “a Spaniard” (Polanco was one). Polanco applied for an audience and, knowing the prejudices of the detractors, he prayed that the measure be applied only to his person so that the Congregation might have greater liberty. In such a situation, Polanco was only pursuing the good of the Society.

The *Constitutions* call “pestilence” those who seeking their own interests threaten to divide and destroy the Society (*Const.* 664, 709). They envisage the reaction against the one they call “a schismatic and wrecker of the Society.” We may think that the *Constitution* refer to single individuals, but I think that it is not unreasonable to see an “author of division” in any faction that does not care for communion.

I shall be propitious to you in Rome

What testimony? The immediate context of the verse in *Acts* prompts me to repeat “and so we reached.” The history of the Congregations leads us to GC 35 as to a pneumatic experience. The book of *Acts* gave witness to successive generations of the action of the Holy Spirit. Before reporting the prowess of a handful of adventurers and more importantly than the tribute to the ministry of the first superapostles, *Acts* interprets God’s liberating work for his Church. Only a contemplative look discovers this loving deed of God and, vice versa, only God’s love can be the main bond of union (*Const.* 671).

Quite far from the frenzy of our time, the starting witness of the first Jesuits was the confession of God’s provident action for men and for the Church in particular. Jerome Nadal, for instance, referred to the *grace of our vocation* as the starting point for his explanations of the Institute of the Society. Nadal frames his presentation of the Society in the context of a *Dialogue* between three wayfarers, one of whom offers a providentialist view of reality, whereas this same reality saddens his two companions (a protestant and a catholic, the latter disillusioned with the religious life and the papacy). The picture, in fact, was suggested by the episode of Emmaus.

In the coming year we shall celebrate the fifth centenary of the birth of Nadal, the herald of the *Constitutions*. With his life, Nadal illustrated our vocation “to travel about in various parts of the world.” He placed the dialogue between his three characters on the road going from Mains to Augsburg. That way he adapted for his contemporaries the discovery of Emmaus: “Were not our hearts on fire?”

Where is consolation? The essence of the preparation for the Congregation should lie in finding the presence and loving action of the Lord: the fervor. To use the image offered by the *Constitutions*, the apostle is a docile “instrument” in God’s hand. The more purely he labors for God’s

glory and in his service, the more effective is the apostle. The invitation to preach “to all peoples” and “to the ends of the world” is justified only by the new sensitivity that the disciples acquire on the road. God acts through the mediation of concrete persons and Paul was the model apostle for the first Jesuits. The very title of the *Acts of the Apostles* emphasizes the main fact: those “acts” followed the mission. It was only later that the text takes up what followed that mission and the deeds of apostles like Paul.

In the first person. The “we” passages, to which our verse of the *Acts* belongs, have fascinated me since the days when we studied Theology. Among pages and pages where the narrative goes on in the third person, the professor called our attention to some passages in which the narrator enters his text. Something like a navigation binnacle that registers the most outstanding moments and concludes when the narrator reaches his destination. The mysterious person of the plural “we” left the mark of authenticity in this “binnacle” of his voyage to Rome. Independently from the origin of these passages in a common source, all of them convey the power of the witness of his personal experience.

In fact, the “we” passages serve me to link the coming of the Provincials and delegates for the General Congregation with the case of Paul and Luke. The *Constitutions of the Society* differ from those of other religious congregations, among other things, in that their author never used the first person singular and preferred to use “we.”

To know. . . and understand. Just as the Society is spirit and body, so too this “we” is more than the sum total of the members. An elementary way to make up this new plural subject is communication. It was to foster it that Ignatius instituted the Congregations and an intense exchange of correspondence (“communication by letter”). Its setting afoot, the organization of a chancellery, and its fast and disciplined growth in the four continents, constitute one of the wonders of the Middle Age. The vertical exchange between the head and the members had to be complemented with a horizontal one: “so that each region can learn from the others.” Significantly, Ignatius distinguishes between “knowing” about one another and “understanding” the news and the information. This distinction touches the marrow of the corporate subject as body and spirit. We realize this when we notice the contents suggested for this correspondence: Ignatius and his curia asked that “whatever mutual consolation and edification in our Lord” be given preference (*Const.673*).

Similarly, in a General Congregation information must be something more than an exchange of news; it must lead to understanding. That is, communication must be confession and affective witness of God's action. The passages in the first person draw us into the history as the members of a body inhabited by the same Spirit. We read: "And so we reached Rome" and interpret it as partaking that memory and that apostolic preaching. In the *Constitutions* we read "we are convinced," "it moves us," "it has seemed to us," and so on, and feel involved in the dynamism of the deliberations of the first companions: "endeavor to proceed in a spirit of love and not as men troubled by fear. Hence all of us should be eager to miss no point of perfection which we can with God's grace attain" (*Const.*547).

Paul's travel to Rome was not easy and would not have taken place unless many helped that grain of wheat to ripen for harvesting. Long voyages and hard marches, chains, etc., prepared his spirit. In the midst of so many difficulties he was sustained by the Spirit of consolation: "there we found fellow-Christians. . . When Paul saw them – Luke writes – he gave thanks to God and took courage." Luke, too, was a cause of consolation for Paul. Luke, who thought of Jesus appearing to Paul on the road. Luke, the evangelist of the Gentiles, who closes his narrative with consolation.

The same consoling Spirit helped Ignatius to ripen like a grain of wheat. He was coming on the road to Rome when he had the vision at La Storta. The contents of this vision responded basically to his prayers. He had been praying for months through Mary's intercession for himself and his companions and saw at La Storta that God the Father asked his Son to take him into his company. Both through their vows and through their priestly ordination, all the companions were beginning a priestly life consecrated to God's service as a body. They feared martyrdom and at the same time they desired it. During the months in which the persecution was raging in Venice and Rome, that consoling vision on the road confirmed and strengthened Ignatius and his companions.

***Novelty and astonishment:
The transformation of the many disciples into an Apostle***

In Rome, Paul – and Ignatius, too – rendered witness through their lives. Ignatius, who saw all windows shut before entering Rome, would hardly leave the city thereafter. His stability has been interpreted as a sign

of constant service to the Holy See and his companions dispersed throughout the world. Surely, the Congregations do not gather to render a witness like that of Paul or Ignatius. The witness of GC 32, however, moves me to “commend much to God our Lord” that the Fathers be ready to render the highest testimony. I have said it before: among so many formators who have accompanied me in the Society, I discovered that a selected group had witnessed the happenings of GC 32. The vow of silence regarding the sessions in the aula made the witness of their lives all the more eloquent.

Like them, others too left Rome to make a profound mark through their ministry. When I think of them and of their mark in my training, I remember an analogy with the way to give the Exercises recalled by Luis de la Palma on one occasion. De la Palma did not refer to the long retreat that relatively few have made through history. Nor did he speak of the “light” Exercises gone through by many more. He referred to the exercises (with lower case letter) that one who has assimilated the experience of the Ignatian Exercises succeeds in proposing in his conversations. De la Palma was speaking of “that very beneficial way to give the Exercises.” He meant the wisdom and understanding of the core of our spirituality for each period of history and which is born from experience. So beneficial a way – he states – “that those who receive them feel the benefit without noticing or knowing that they are making them.”³

Without understanding how, the Fathers attending the Congregation will be able to appropriate the testimony of the Spirit in action the same way that my formators appropriated that profound experience. Those formators have known how to pass on to me a love of the Society that, as I now understand, was refined through hard labor and humiliation. Years later they became my superiors, my directors, my spiritual guides, one the corrector of my thesis. They became my friends and they are still reference points for my vocation. They shared the same experience and have managed to draw me into it. When they spoke of their General, they were inviting me to speak of mine with unction. The General Congregation was an important event in the forging of that group. They were able to contrast the prostration of the Society they represented and the fragility of the human word with the power of the Spirit that fused them into the apostle of the Church. Rome had made them deepen and purify the source of their motivation.

The Congregation should not limit itself to its duration in Rome. It would be better if it became a paschal event, a *kairos*. No one wishes that events like those in 1975 be repeated, but it would be a mistake to ignore

the opportunities that may come our way to “divest oneself of self-love and self-will” (SpEx 189)). In that sense, the old Congregations used to start with an act of humility and acknowledgement: the *detrimenta*.

Being. Never was a Congregation as diversified in its composition as GC 35. Trusting that under so many languages, races, cultures and other factors, all its members will share the same spirituality will already be an exercise of this “coming out.” The five great topics recommended by the Major Superiors in 2005 can be grouped in three main areas: (a) being (identity and training), (b) living (governing and common life), and (c) acting (collaboration with the laity. We can place at the center of being our common Ignatian spiritual patrimony. For instance, five hundred years after the birth of Francis Xavier, the numeric strength of the Society in Asia, and particularly in India, is indicative of a coming take-over. The vitality with which the Society took roots in the Iberian peninsula, France or the United States, etc., can now be succeeded by the missionary and apostolic vigor that has already dawned in the East. However, the Ignatian “solid virtues” count more than statistics and demographic trends, and the self-denial that is at the base of corporate cohesion is more important than numbers. If they value that the Spirit makes all things new, the Fathers of the Congregation will mistrust that excluding reasoning.

Living. On the other hand, any discussion on community life will be relativized by the capacity to *transform* such an aggregate group of Jesuits into a Con-gregation and the latter into *one* communion in our Lord. Here, too, they will be helped by the spirituality that seeks the union of minds in the listening and the more perfect mod of obedience: that of the understanding. Attention, because the international Society is not an invariable “substance”, but a project. Like any human project, the Society’s life turns around discreet and limited experiences like the Congregation. The Society takes advantage of these moments through discernment. When we reflect about the origins of the concept of the Jesuit community, we find a great difference with our own situation. If the whole preceded each one of the parts at the beginning, the experience a Jesuit now has of the part in which he joined the Society precedes the understanding of the Society as a whole.⁴ In fact, the friendship that led to the international community of ten *friends in the Lord* preceded their dispersion in diverse parts of the world (in local communities). Very soon, however, most Jesuits would only be able to capture the supranational characteristic identity through the partial realizations they would have within reach (novitiates, provinces, with the

same language, engaged in specific ministries in one region, etc.) In that sense, a great challenge for training today is to discover and come to love the gift of this identity to our world. And also to understand that the Society is not substantially international but that *it must not cease to fight* for continuing to be so.

*The Congregation experience
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Acting. As the sun was setting in the evening of the Sunday of Resurrection, the disciples of Emmaus looked for their companions. They were eager to share their experience of the Crucified and Risen one. Then they met more disciples and their encounter marked the beginning of a transformation that was unpredictable just a few hours earlier. They rose from table and retraced their steps. They went away from Emmaus to meet the others and to return later on. Between the going and the returning, the way was transformed by that one Spirit into many. They entered the cenacle as disciples and came out as apostles; the experience of communion confirmed them. The experience of communion transformed the way of the following into astonishment before becoming apostolic way and mission.

I believe that all this is valid also for the Congregation. *Kairos* is opposed to *stress*. It is a qualitatively different time because our passivity is more characteristic of this time than it is of the ordinary one. It may seem a side issue, but the way time will be spent will reveal the maturity of the Fathers in the appropriation of the paschal experience. Many of them will not have an equal opportunity again to feel and personalize the universal Society. I wish they will find a way that is not too “executive” to administer their time, would that their time be spent for God’s greater glory and to give him witness. After all, God may show himself propitious.

That beneficial manner of giving...

The Congregation experience can transform the delegates into witnesses. Luke and the other evangelists struggled to revive what they remembered of the community. Nadal at the end of his life, Polanco at the end of his, retired to do likewise. The *Dialogues* of the former or the *Chronicon* of the latter are narratives that express their understanding of

how God acted in and through the community. They help us to relive Emmaus on our way to the Congregation.

Ordered affections. Like the scribe who drew from his trunk “the old” and “the new,” it is the turn of the Fathers of the Congregation to live and witness this privileged moment of discernment. I would prefer not to stress the common thought. At times the documents established by consensus transmit only ideas. Ignatian spirituality teaches us that feeling is more important than thinking and writing. The secret of the fruit lies in the right feeling. In these pages I have tried to call attention to the need to re-know how God has acted and still acts in, through, and thanks to, the Society as an instrument. “Knowing” is not enough, it is necessary to “understand” how this moment is a qualitatively different time. From such an experience of welcoming the gift of God there follows that every decree is, first of all, an exhortation made in the first person. Forty years after the Council, the exhortation of GC 35 could be of the vocational type, something like the Ignatian call to follow that starts “Whoever wants...”

Ambassadors of consolation. Would that the Congregation be a time of deliberation and listening, of beseeching and accepting, *in order to* “preserve and increase” the whole Society. In the Exercises, the consolation of the Fourth Week is not a gift to obtain love only for ourselves. That is to say, it is gift that makes us apostles, impelling us for others, too, to feel the acting and consoling presence of the Spirit. In this sense, would that the Fathers of the Congregation may become ambassadors and mystagogues of their own experience: one same Spirit in many.⁵ In my opinion this is where lies the secret of the “preserving and increasing” that the *Constitutions* pursue and which is commended to the Congregation.

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¹ Many of the data that follow are taken from *Diccionario Histórico de la Compañía de Jesús*, Charles E. O'Neill and Joaquín M^a Domínguez, eds., 4 vols., Rome and Madrid: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu – Universidad Pontificia Comillas, 2001, 2:1595-1706.

² The reader may find this list in *Acta Romana Societatis Iesu* XVI (1974) 463-471.

³ Luis de la Palma, *Camino espiritual* 5.9.2 in *Obras del Padre Luis de la Palma*, Francisco X. Rodríguez ed., Madrid BAC, 1967, 812-813.

⁴ Not all might agree with this. The reader may wish to check this position with that

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of Maurizio Costa, "Note intorno a 'Comunità Apostolica' in Compagnia di Gesù." *Appunti di Spiritualità* 9 (1977): 3-25.

⁵ Josep M^a Rambla, "El hombre de las *Constituciones* como prolongación del hombre de los Ejercicios," *Manresa* 70 (1997), 370-371.