

JEROME NADAL FIFTH CENTENARY OF HIS BIRTH

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The commemoration of the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of Jerome Nadal on August 11, 1507 in Palma de Majorca in Spain occurs in the midst of our preparations for the 35th General Congregation. Calling to mind the role that Father Nadal played at the origins of the Society and gathering something from his experience and writings can throw light on our preparatory work and on the work of the Congregation itself.

It was thanks to the insistence of Father Nadal that Saint Ignatius agreed to leave us his spiritual testimony in his autobiography. This book is all the more indispensable because, according to Father Nadal, “the whole life of the Society is contained in embryonic form and prefigured in the story of Ignatius.” It is also thanks to Father Nadal that the letter and spirit of the Constitutions were spread among the first generations of Jesuits, often with the help of lapidary expressions like “we are not monks,” “the world is our house,” and “working in our bedroom takes the place of singing in choir stalls for us,” expressions that even today tell us what the Lord expects us, His companions on the road, to do for His Church and for His people.

Father Pedro Arrupe, who was born on November 14 one hundred years ago, rediscovered Father Nadal’s writings, which had been somewhat forgotten, and he quoted them in his last exhortations. When Father Nadal explained the Constitutions and the Spiritual Exercises, he raised questions that still challenge us today as we do our examen of conscience and seek to evaluate the life and impressive apostolic activity of the Society of Jesus.

Therefore, when the question of our identity arises in our prayerful discernment, Father Nadal reminds us that, without a doubt, “nothing of what charity can do to help our neighbor is excluded from our Institute, only on the condition that every service should appear as a spiritual one

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and that it should be clear to us that what is proper to us is what is most perfect, namely spiritual ministries.” Father Nadal himself is recognized as a great spiritual director, but

also as the first organizer of social assistance in Sicily during the five years that spent there proclaiming the word of God. Nevertheless, while committing himself to works of mercy of all kinds, he balanced “in the center, like the needle on a scales” (Sp. Ex. 15) his life choices and his apostolic options, always leaving to the Lord the freedom to intervene for His greater service. In this we see the rejection of both a disembodied spiritualism and a professional secularized activism.

As GC34 (542) says, a companion of Jesus is not satisfied with just any response to the needs of the times. This response must reveal in all things the initiative of God’s love and the Lord’s way of proceeding at work in it. And this response will be authentic if it maintains the threefold pastoral approach that includes the ministry of the word, the ministry of the sacraments, and the ministry of the works of mercy, without unduly emphasizing this or that aspect of the mission of the Lord to the detriment of the others. The Society should live out its fidelity to this threefold pastoral approach in “its care for those for whom no one cares or who are cared for inadequately. It is for them that the Society was founded; there lays its strength; there lays its dignity in the Church.”

Thus, to be a member of the Society of Jesus means to be chosen and to be sent to tasks that were those of the apostles, that is “ayudar a las almas,” to follow the Good Shepherd in search of the “lost sheep.” Thinking similarly to Father Nadal, Pierre Favre, his friend in the Lord, gives this mission of helping souls, which comes from the Lord, its full meaning: “May I also be able to help many, to console, to liberate, to encourage, and to bring light not only to their spirit but also to their bodies, and to bring many other

kinds of assistance to the body and soul of my neighbor, whoever he may be.”

This brief review of the early sources of the Society reminds us of the very reason for which the Spirit wished to use Jesuits for the life of His Church and confirms us in creative fidelity to this divine call. By recognizing themselves in the mission of the apostle Paul—“Paul signifies our ministries for us,” writes Father Nadal—the first Jesuits knew that the search for the lost sheep would lead them to the frontiers of the Church—certainly to the geographical frontiers, but also to the crossroads where the burning demands of humanity confront the Good News of the Lord, which is the true answer to these demands. Pope John Paul II included within this apostolic dynamism a strong commitment “to social work and to the service of the least of humanity,” but he also emphasized that “this dimension should never be separated from the global service of the evangelizing mission of the Church which is responsible for the salvation of every person and of the entire person, because of our supernatural destiny.” (AR XXI, 904).

It is in this action, accomplished in the manner of the apostles, that Father Nadal exhorts us to be contemplatives. Moreover, it is above all thanks to the formula “to be a contemplative in action,” although he uses it only once in his writing, that Father Nadal is known and remains relevant. He did not wish to formulate a principle of spirituality, but he wished to describe a feature of Saint Ignatius, who in all things, actions or conversations, felt and contemplated the active presence of God and the attraction of spiritual things, which he himself usually expressed in the words: it is necessary to find God in all things. Without making use of the expression “contemplative in action,” Father Nadal often returns to that apostolic prayer which ought to characterize the servant of Christ’s mission. Thus he writes in his spiritual journal: “I do not want you to be devout and spiritual only when you celebrate Mass or when you are in prayer; I want you to be spiritual and devout when you devote yourself to an activity, so that in your very works there will radiate a full force of the spirit, of grace, and of devotion.” The real reason for this is that “we do not act of ourselves, but in Christ, with His grace, by His strength, as if one were saying, I act; no, not I, it is Christ who acts in me, and I in Him, in all things feeling what Christ would do or decide.”

For Father Nadal, to be a contemplative in action is neither a simple, practical counsel nor a pious wish. Neither is it a matter of alternating between moments of action and times of prayer. Father Nadal presents the

familiarity with God of a companion of Jesus as a circular movement, which finds its origin in the movement of the Spirit, passes through our heart, and is fulfilled in a concrete apostolic commitment to return to its source in God. In 1561, speaking to the scholastics at Coimbra who were worn down by studies and who had little prayer in their lives, he encourages them to grow, going “as in a circle” from contemplation to action and from action to contemplation, for “if in practice a scholastic approaches studies with fervor and draws his inspiration from prayer for their development, he will forge ahead and the Lord will help him.”

The life of apostolic prayer takes its unique source in the Spirit (spiritu) which speaks to us heart to heart. Desiring that God should be first served in all things, the companion of Jesus examines and discerns what the Lord expects of him by contemplating above all the mysteries of Christ’s life in the school of the Spiritual Exercises, so that not only may the choice of our apostolic action be His, but also the way of accomplishing it, in His Spirit. Having thus welcomed, in the deepest recesses of his heart (corde) what is received as a spiritual movement (spiritu), this movement is incarnated in practice (practice), that is to say in a concrete commitment to “help souls” by putting into action love of neighbor in following the Lord and in accordance with the preferences of the Lord who gives the new commandment.

*“Spiritu,
corde
et practice”*

However, Father Nadal remarks that the circular movement does not stop here, for apostolic vigor can weaken in action, and its orientation toward greater service of God can change direction and go off course. It is necessary then, he notes, to return constantly to contemplation of the life and person of Christ (Sp. Ex 214). Thus, by this circular movement which brings us along “in the Lord” from contemplation to action and back again to contemplation, the “sense of Christ” lives in us and takes hold of us, and what is accomplished is uniquely the assistance the Lord desires for His people. To put it in Father Nadal’s own words, “you should see to it that your faith be not merely speculative, without any effect in your heart. Try hard to make it practical so that your heart is on fire with love for God and for your neighbor.” For “if you are kept busy with your neighbor and with the service of God in your ministry or in any office, then God will help you more effectively in your prayer. And this more effective help from

God will help you in turn to look after your neighbor with more courage and spiritual profit.”

This is robust spirituality, such as Father Nadal read it in the life of Saint Ignatius, requiring a personal commitment (*corde*) through an intense life in the spirit (*spiritu*), totally integrated in a fruitful symbiosis with apostolic activity (*practice*), and relying on long pauses devoted to personal apostolic prayer and to discernment or to community sharing (cf. AR XVII, 577).

This spirituality does not refrain from becoming radical when the mission of Christ requires it: “they are not acquainted with spare time in this Society, because if they are not busy in their churches, they are on the lookout for souls whom they can advance in the spiritual life.” Or else: “they do not lend themselves to any conversation, to any action, which does not finally aim to bring help to souls and to obtain some spiritual fruit.” No more than his master Ignatius, Father Nadal cannot imagine Jesuits who have become inactive and cold. If “the Society is fervor,” according to the expression of Father Nadal, it is indeed because it purses “with fervor the salvation and perfection of the neighbor” in a passionate love for Christ, for “His vicar on earth,” and for His Church.

Father Nadal’s language, which is rather ponderous, abstract, and old fashioned, can be an obstacle. Nevertheless, it communicates to us “great purity of heart, faith in union with Christ, and a great hope in the growth of the glory of God in the Society and in the Church.” He tells us about “the first love” of the first companions, which the Society today, preparing for the 35th General Congregation, does not wish to lose; on the contrary, we wish to renew it. Helping us find the way of proceeding at the time of the General Congregation, Father Nadal reminds us that “it is a singular and divine help to unite to our operations the truth and light that we receive from faith, from that faith which God enlightens by gifts of the Spirit in such a way that there is nothing that we think or deal with that does not come from that higher, supernatural and very gentle truth and light; there is nothing that precedes that light by which the mind is enlightened and God’s action becomes evident.”

Therefore, in this time of preparation for the General Congregation, if we listen to Father Nadal, the most important thing remains “to find Christ in such a way that in all things we feel what Christ would do or decide in this moment, if He were there.” Of course, it will be necessary during the next General Congregation to outline the profile of the new Superior General to be elected and to find a more effective structure for the conferences of

major superiors, which have enriched the government of the Society. Several provincial congregations have asked that our mission be reaffirmed, taking account of globalization and ecology and the problems caused by migration, forced displacement of populations, and discrimination. It will also be necessary to look into the lights and shadows of partnership with non Jesuits at the service of the Society and the Church, and also at the service of the mission of the Society. Without this partnership many of our works would scarcely have a future. A number of postulants ask for the renewal of pastoral work, the social apostolate, and the apostolate of mass communications. In the opinion of the *coetus praevius*, which has organized all these requests from the Society, it will also be necessary to at least open a discussion on the promotion of vocations and on the apostolate with young people.

To help deal in depth with all these challenges to our apostolic activity, preliminary studies are underway. However, what is specific to a General Congregation is that the deliberations are not limited to investigations that lead to decisions: rather, they lead to prayerful discernment examining what the Lord expects of us, His companions, on the journey, servants of His mission. The encouragement that Father Nadal dares to give us for our discussions and our deliberations on all these themes is “to understand by means of His intelligence, to will by means of His will, and remember by means His memory so that everything may be done in Christ.”

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In addition to the themes already mentioned and which the General Congregation should take up, the proposition has made by meetings of major superiors to make provision for a decree on our obedience, as

previous General Congregations have done for poverty and chastity. Because “the Society entirely submits its judgment and will to Christ our Lord and to His Vicar” (Const. 606), the Holy Father has asked the Society that will be gathered in General Congregation, to make a declaration once again on that obedience that the professed specify in their fourth vow, expressing the commitment of the whole universal body of the Society. Father Nadal, who so to speak was present at the birth of this special obedience, emphasizes above all the bond of union with the universal Pastor,

who precisely because of his universal character transcends every bond to a work, to a country, to a particular group, or to a particular Church. Father Nadal writes: "In everything we do, we unite ourselves as much as possible to the Pope, because as the universal superior he has the responsibility for everything that is lacking in particular situations. We put ourselves at his service in a universal and immediate manner. Such is the origin of the special fourth vow made to His Holiness."

Because the universal responsibility of Christ's Vicar on earth makes him the privileged witness and the privileged guarantor of the apostolic orientations and spiritual needs of the Church on behalf of the world, the first Jesuits, from the beginning, bound themselves by obedience, "first to the sovereign pontiff and then to superiors of the Society" (Const. 547). The reason for this is the concern not to go astray from the ways of the Lord (Const. 605) and to be guided in the choice of ministries and the orientations of our apostolates. Whether the relations of the Society with the Vicar of Christ on earth be comforting, as with "Papa Marcello," or turbulent, as with Pope Paul IV, will change in no way the faith vision which we have of the Apostolic See and which the fourth vow expresses. Calmly describing the history of these relations, Father Nadal contented himself by praying, asking for "light and clarity on the Sovereign Pontiff and the College of Cardinals, so that nothing may be considered in them which is not spiritual and perfect."

As Father Nadal was able to enliven the Society in the 16th century with his commentaries on the Constitutions, this letter that commemorates his birth has tried to show how that which he communicated of his experience and familiarity with Saint Ignatius and the first companions can help us in preparation for the next General Congregation. What he wrote in his spiritual journal seems to have been written for our General Congregation: "A renewal of spirit and a new way of living and governing are necessary so that a new departure in all things may be made in the Society. Such is the will of God and of Father Ignatius, but we must start out from humility in the Lord."