

A METAMORPHOSIS OF A PERCEPTION: SEEING ARRUIPE ACROSS 30 YEARS

Gianni La Bella

*Professor of Contemporary History
University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy*

The first time I met Fr. Arrupe I was just over twenty years old. There were three of his immediate colleagues, who worked in the Curia in Borgo Santo Spirito, to introduce me to him, though in different ways and circumstances – Fr. Simon Decloux, at that time Fr. General's delegate for international affairs, Fr. Eugen Hillengass, general bursar, and Fr. Louis Laurendeau, general secretary of the Society.

The Community of Sant' Egidio, to which I have belonged since 1971, was taking its first steps in the Rome of the late 1960s, the post-Conciliar period. Various Jesuits who were working in the Curia followed its progress with affection, friendship and interest, attracted by the novelty and originality of the way that this new community represented in the Church. Many began to collaborate and, especially, to offer their help in the celebration of Sunday Mass in the big outer suburbs, in the Rome of the so-called 'shanty-towns'.

Pedro Arrupe, who had come to know of this great sympathy towards the community from various sources, decided to get to know it himself, taking part in the evening service celebrated in the little church of Sant' Egidio as the daily gathering for community prayer.

For my generation, coming to the fore in Church life at the beginning of the 1970s, Pedro Arrupe was one of the great leaders of the conciliar renewal: one of the personalities

who, along with others – I think of Frère Roger of Taizé – enjoyed great popularity. Often interviewed by the mass-media, invited to the most important ecclesiastical events of the time: from the Synod on Justice of 1971 to the Puebla Conference of 1979, selected as man of the year by some of the most prestigious international magazines, like *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Der Spiegel*. A personality whose authoritative interventions created public opinion and, above all, aroused great enthusiasm and consensus.

Some years ago I had already formed the idea of writing a biography of him, although by many hands, along with other collaborators. I was convinced, above all from my own experience and from my personal memories, that this man had stood out, for the Society of Jesus and for the universal Church, as a great charismatic figure, prophet of the conciliar renewal. During the final years of his life I had the grace of being able to visit him often in the

infirmary at the Curia, where he lived for over ten years, helped and cared for by the loving attentions of Brother Rafael Bandera. Paralysed, unable to communicate, dependent on others for everything, he lived this

*Arrupe, like a great western staretz,
not only a friend of God
but through his lovableness
attracted people to God*

condition of solitude and pain, strengthened solely by prayer and by the visits of so many of his brethren. His body, ever smaller and more contracted, and his face, more and more impressively like Ignatius', were for the whole Society a living icon of suffering and a witness to sanctification through prayer, silence, dependence and pain.

I have gone back so often, in the years that followed, with the memories and images imprinted on my eyes, to those visits in which the conversation took place solely through looks and smiles, asking myself why the fortunes of life and, in a sense, of Providence, had kept in store for this man, so active and dynamic, a great traveller, a tireless worker, a man of great relationships, that harsh Calvary of imprisonment, immobility, pain and solitude. I thought there was need to help, and to spur on 'time', as we historians say, to be a gentleman, and give back to Arrupe what had been Arrupe's.

As well as through this interest of mine, fruit of personal memories, I have approached the figure of Pedro Arrupe on the scientific,

historiographical level, convinced that, as his successor, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, wrote in a letter to the whole Society on the tenth anniversary of his death: "Like every other prophetic witness, Fr. Arrupe was a sign of contradiction, misunderstood or semi-understood, in the Society and outside it."

The force of collective effort resulted in the publication of the book, which I edited, *Pedro Arrupe: a Man for Others*.¹ In that work we sought, through a plurality of readings and interpretations, to liberate the story of his generalate from that kind of historical remoteness which has accompanied him since his death. Through his story and his personal human and spiritual destiny, I have tried, as in a kaleidoscope, to reconstruct the many-faceted being and working of a great collective religious movement, which marked the history of post-conciliar Catholicism in a determining and original way

For a long time a stereotype has been created around Arrupe's human, religious and governmental experience, from which often, for so many years, perhaps too many, it has been difficult to distance oneself. What he did has been looked at for too long through the evanescent and a-historical interpretative category of progressivism. His generalate has often been read through the eyes of the news column and in a superficial reading, fruit of prefabricated schemes of interpretation and ideological exclusions.

To write the story of such an important man, head of such a significant order, it has been necessary to read and evaluate a mass of documents kept in various archives, to gather opinions and to reconstruct the testimony of many of those who took part in this human and ecclesiastical experience. All of this actually brought me as it were to live with Fr. Arrupe for over two years, seeking to grasp, over and above his acts of government, his journeys, his operative decisions, his discourses and his letters, his crises and his successes, the human and spiritual breadth of the man, his interiority, the motivations which impelled his being and his actions.

In this extraordinary experience I have come to know, discovered and met another face of Pedro Arrupe, of which I should like to speak on this occasion, taking off my historian's dress and looking at his human and spiritual experience with the eyes of a believer and the understanding of faith: to tell, if I may use the expression, "the story of a soul".

I have discovered that Fr. Arrupe was, above all, a great believer. A man of God. As he himself wrote, on 3rd September 1983, "What I have wanted all my life is to be in the Lord's hands." For Arrupe the true identity

of the Jesuit vocation consists in unconditional availability, in immediate readiness for any mission whatever. This annihilation of self-will is for Arrupe the only way to identify oneself with another will, that of Jesus, and so to be an authentic instrument of his presence among men. I knew Arrupe's opinions and writings on apostolic, educational and social themes, his concern for justice and for the renewal of religious life. At the end of this long journey made in his company, I am convinced that the dominating theme of his whole existence was always the thought that God was the 'all' of his life, and everything else very much relative. Arrupe, like a great western *staretz*, was not only a friend of God but through his loveliness attracted people to God. I came to know a man detached and free from material goods, from success and reputation. I noticed how he had always lived in great simplicity and poverty. He did not make a display of his personal austerity.

"Don Pedro", as his closest collaborators loved to call him, had a sense of friendship as sacred. He was a man gifted with great human qualities, some natural, some built up in the years of strict formation. He was a likeable man, attractive, loyal, incapable of hidden intentions, who, instinctively, gained the trust and respect of many. A generous man, optimistic, capable of being enthusiastic and, above all, of infecting others with his inspiring enthusiasm. A man gifted with a great sense of humour, who knew how to laugh at himself and at his own brethren. Incapable, in the unanimous judgment of so many people, of bearing grudges. A man who impressed and attracted by his ingenuousness and his passionate dreaming. Arrupe trusted those with whom history and life placed him, and this made him from many aspects a man who was weak and vulnerable; he had, finally, no political sense of human relations.

for Arrupe the constant search for God's will, in one's own personal and collective history, is a duty, an obligation for the Christian

St. Ignatius, in his Spiritual Exercises - and one of the greatest merits of Arrupe's generalate was to have rediscovered them and put them at the centre of the spiritual and religious life of Jesuits - made a decisive contribution to sounding, understanding and purifying the ways of the human heart, and has given to the Church a methodology of interior decision-

making, the discipline of discernment, which is the basis of every serious religious journey.

For Arrupe the constant search for God's will, in one's own personal and collective history, is a duty, an obligation for the Christian. This is a dimension on which Fr. Ignacio Iglesias has written enlightening pages. Jesus' dramatic question in the Garden of Olives, "Not my will, but thy will be done" was transformed in Pedro Arrupe, in the light of the teaching of Vatican II, into a great collective question. To what was the Society called, in order to serve God's will in the 'today' of the twentieth century? There are so many things that I should like to go on writing about him, but at the end of this long experience of mine a question has often come to me: is Pedro Arrupe one of so many successors of St. Ignatius, to record in the gallery of official portraits of general superiors of the Society? Does he belong to the distinguished past of the Society? Or is he, on the contrary, our contemporary, who provokes us with his life, his person and his testimony? It is beyond doubt that, after Ignatius, he was the general who was most present and active in the life of the order, but beyond the many things he did and the discourses he has left us, I believe that today Arrupe is a witness to imitate, a universal little brother, who has given the measure of how to be a Christian in the twenty-first century, how to be the leaven that ferments the dough, and who, with his own life, images to us the face of the risen Christ.

¹ Pedro Arrupe: *Un uomo per gli altri*, Società Editrice il Mulino, Bologna, Italy 2007, pp. 1084