

# COORDINATION AND ANIMATION OF JESUIT PARISH MINISTRY IN LATIN AMERICA

## THE LIVED PROCESS AND ITS CHALLENGES

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I will try to present my experience in its principal characteristics, concerning coordination and animation of Jesuit Parish Ministry in Latin America, which I lived from July 2001 until September 9, 2007 when I handed it over to Father Alvaro Quiroz Magaña, a Mexican Jesuit. In narrative form I will only highlight some of the themes and experiences lived during these years which I consider more significant.

### *Situation of this apostolic service in the Society of Jesus*

All those who joined the Society before GC 31 (1965-66), were told that to take up Parishes was not the thought of Ignatius because it was not in conformity to our way of proceeding in mission. One of the reasons given was that, frequently, the appointment as Parish priest was for life and that this would weaken, very much, the agility of 'light cavalry' as conceived by our Founder.

In addition to the profound social changes of the modern age, the renewal urged and desired by Vatican II influenced strongly the GC 31 in its determination to re-interpret the Constitutions of the Society in reference to Parish Ministry. This could be accepted if Father General considered that the circumstances were in conformity to the apostolic priorities and our way of proceeding in mission.

In discerning obedience to GC 31, Father Arrupe accepted a good number of Parishes and in 1979 he offered the directives for this mission, according to our charism. Father Kolvenbach confirmed those orientations and continued to enlarge the Jesuit service in parish apostolate.

As we know, GC 34 (1995) was the first one to write a decree precisely on Jesuit parish apostolate. In decree 19 it is affirmed that, under certain circumstances, the Parish ministry is proper of the Society. Some orientations on aspects that have to be stressed in our service are offered. Besides, we must offer a 'relevant contribution' in this service and that an adequate formation for this apostolate was needed.

It is opportune to recall, that from its origin, the mission of the Society has been lived in a great and rich variety of services, which, nevertheless, can be systematized in three principal means: to nourish our faith and Christian life with Ignatian spirituality, to contribute to Christian education especially of young people and direct evangelization. In these works and means we find the rich and broad Jesuit missionary and evangelizing tradition, represented by Xavier, Ricci, Kino, Roque González, etc. Given the new socio-ecclesial circumstances, this apostolic thrust has taken an unexpected turn, proper of the freedom and surprises the Spirit inspires us. Today, this mission is continued preferably, by those 3000 Jesuit missionaries or more who render service to so many different peoples and local Churches in Jesuit Parishes.

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Beginning with Vatican II and GC 31, the growth of the Jesuit presence in parishes, preferably in popular milieus and the challenges which this new form of Jesuit missionary service in direct evangelization implied for the Society of Jesus in Latin America, motivated the Latin American Provincials, in 1998, to ask coordinators or Provincial delegates of parish apostolate to draw up a profile of what a Jesuit Parish in Latin America should be. Each of the two assistencies of LA drew up guidelines regarding the characteristics of Jesuit parish ministry. The following year, already supported by the newly formed CPAI (Conference of Provincials of Latin America), the delegates of both Assistances met and drew up a very good working document, for Jesuit Parishes, systematized by Jorge Villalpando, SJ.

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### ***What does the Lord desire of Jesuit Missionary Work in parishes entrusted to the Society in Latin America?***

In the first Latin American encounter of Provincial representatives of parish apostolate held in Cochabamba, Bolivia, a working document to be put into practice for parishes was produced. Years after in July 2001 in Mexico the experience held was evaluated. The profile of the Jesuit Parish Ministry in LA was thus revised and enriched.

From the very first meetings with Father Francisco Ivern, SJ, the first President of CPAL, and in the meetings of the core-team of service, confirmed and encouraged me to center my efforts in re-elaborating and polishing the profile or project of the Jesuit Parish in Latin America. That is: what type of Parish should we have in the respective places and cultures? Good communication with the President, with the Provincials and the central team of CPAL, proved to be fundamental for my work.

When I arrived to Rio de Janeiro, I began to work on the re-elaboration of the profile of a Jesuit Parish in Latin America, in the light of the indications discussed in Mexico, the enlightenment given by the central team of CPAL for this work and the accurate and wise orientations of the Society for this ministry which, given the novelty of the theme, are not too numerous.

Our team of the CPAL thought, from the very beginning, that it could be a very valuable contribution if we could succeed to draw up a project of a Jesuit Parish which would clarify and respond to what the Lord and the Church are asking of us today in Latin America, regarding this apostolate.

To the natural doubts and concrete questions as to what was implied in being the first Latin American Coordinator of Parish apostolate and which would be my work, I experienced that the Lord, by his Spirit, took me by the hand and directed me, making me taste what he wanted from me, in the midst of the ordinary difficulties of this type of service.

### ***In obedience to the Spirit and to his Church***

Given the nature and the extent which the document being drawn up since 1998 could have, it seemed obvious that active participation and discernment of all companions in parish work should be encouraged and

facilitated. Through e-mail by the end of 2001, I sent to all involved a first draft of the definitive profile of a Jesuit Parish, which already included the critical indications offered in Mexico, those of the team of the CPAL, particularly, those of Father Ivern, and those which resulted from my own pastoral and theological experience. This work also helped build up a fraternal and apostolic relationship between us. We gradually grew as an apostolic team.

I began to receive reactions and suggestions to the written draft, from a good part of the Provinces of the region, and this was a consolation for me, since it represented the Latin American spirit which would characterize it. On very few occasions, some observations contradicted one another. The majority of them offered good observations, to the themes of the possible document, or rather to more literary aspects.

Helped by those observations I re-elaborated the draft of the possible document and by April 2002 I sent it back, first to the Coordinators or Provincial Delegates and to the newly established net-work of Latin American Parishes. The result of that study and the observations made, would be collected and worked on in the third meeting of the Sector, which would be held in Recife, Brazil, in July 2002, according to what had been programmed in the previous encounter held in Mexico.

The study and observations in the diverse Provinces and Regions of LA was producing another very good result: that all would feel appreciated and taken into account with the consequent union in the mission of the Society in this Apostolate. In practice and without intending it, this responded to the concern which some felt that Parish work was not duly considered and valued by Jesuit companions who worked in other ministries.

Those of us who participated in the encounter in Recife recall it as characterized by clear motions of desolation and consolation which helped to purify our work. With reference to some traits or characteristics of our Ignatian spirituality and of ecclesiology in the document, we were helped by Father Pedro Trigo, S.J., an experienced theologian. An intense moment of confirmation in this encounter was the Eucharist which we celebrated around the tomb of Dom Helder Camera.

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Having incorporated the suggestions received in the encounter of Recife, I reworked on the draft of the document and again I circulated it, first to the Provincial and Regional Coordinators, and then to the whole net of Jesuit Parishes in Latin America. In Recife, that net-work was baptized with the name RELAPAJ (Latin American Net-work of Jesuit Parishes). Father Luis Fernando Klein, Secretary of CPAL, supported by Father Ivern, suggested that the booklet or document should follow the recent tradition of other apostolic sectors and thus be entitled: "Characteristics of the Jesuit Parish today in Latin America". Publication of the booklet as part of the CPAL collection followed.

During all the discerning process we were enlightened by the options and orientations of the recent General Congregations, as well as by the directives indicated for this apostolate by Father Arrupe and Father Kolvenbach. In a special way we were inspired by the experience and witness of Jesuit companions in this apostolate. It suffices to name as an example, Father Rutilo Grande, S.J.

In the same way, it continues to give us great joy and consolation that in this project we tried to include the generous acceptance of Vatican II and the valuable experience, pastoral and spiritual "Magisterium" of the Latin American Church, especially as it was expressed in the Conferences of Medellin and Puebla. We consider that the search and renewal of Jesuit Parish Ministry is a clear and firm YES to the Spirit and to the Church through the LA Episcopal Conferences,

With the publication of the document "The Characteristics of the Jesuit Parish in LA" we responded to the wise concern of our Provincials to help them discern what model of ecclesial parish community the Lord is inviting Jesuits to collaborate with. These lines of action will give more continuity in our way of proceeding when changes in personnel take place. There remains the challenge of diffusing and forming Jesuits to put into practice this model of Jesuit Parish Ministry. How can we animate and coordinate this project?

### *To take and share that good news*

The document "The Characteristics of Jesuit Parish Ministry in LA" was rapidly diffused in the Provinces. The provincials in their 6<sup>th</sup> Assembly

of CPAL, accepted it very favourably and supported the project. Nevertheless, the challenge to reach all parochial teams in order study and put into practice this ideal remained.

In the first meeting of the core-team of the CPAL – March 2003 – I presented a plan to carry out workshops in each of the Jesuit provinces and regions in LA regarding the assimilation and implementation of the Jesuit Parish Ministry new orientations. Several circumstances made this unviable and the plan was rejected. I felt the situation similar to a farmer who got a good harvest of watermelons, but could not sell them.

Nevertheless, another guideline aimed at favouring a space or time of formation for Jesuits of the sector at a LA level, where they could deepen and socialize their experience as pastors found support. I commended this small affair to holy Don Arnulfo Romero and Rutilo Grande. On arriving to San Salvador, Brazil, for the 7<sup>th</sup>.CPAL assembly, the local Provincial, Chepe Idiáquez, S.J., gave me a very festive and fraternal welcome, a manifestation and sign that the new step which I would suggest for parochial apostolate would be well received. In the time dedicated to listen to the coordinators of the sector in the Assembly of CPAL, I presented in outline form the advantages the course/workshop would have to for the formation of Jesuits who would be destined to work or who are already working in a parish context. It is proper that the Society, also in this apostolate, should offer a 'learned' and 'relevant' contribution. This was a novelty since there were no organised formation courses for Jesuit Parish Ministry. Things were taken full granted.

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Two alternatives presented themselves: an intensive three week course or a more extensive one of four months. Given the circumstances of our Provinces in Latin America, it is not difficult to imagine that the space of three weeks was preferred. Some provinces committed themselves to send candidates. When the meeting ended in San Salvador, I thanked the Lord that a space for a proper and adequate formation on the lines of our project

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of a Jesuit Parish and being Church had been approved. The design and organization of a three week course followed.

### *In the Emerald of America*

In the permanent team of CPAL we considered that Bogota, Colombia was the most convenient place for this workshop, not only because of its geographical centrality in Latin America but also and very especially because of the important group of experts and advisers or consultants in several fields, on whom we would be able to count to support the ideal quality which this workshop should have. At that moment, the Provincial of Colombia was Father Horacio Arango, who with his good taste and efficiency supported the project and made available the means for the infrastructure of the Province, which was continued, for some time afterwards, by his successor Father Gabriel Ignacio Rodriguez.

The following months were dedicated to put together and to polish the outline of the workshop: from the general objective, the objective for each day, to the schedule according to the working rhythms of Colombians. In this time of putting together and polishing the project I was being helped by the Delegates or by provincial and regional Coordinators. Very rapidly, it was agreed that the workshop should have three moments, according to the ordinary pastoral method in Latin America: to be aware and study our reality, personal as well as that of our projects in a particular country and local Church; to present, to enlighten and discern the Jesuit Parish ministry in the light of today's Latin America reality and perspectives; and to reflect and systematize the previous moments in view of putting into practice priorities and orientations according to the concrete situation of each one of the participants.

The fourth Latin American Encounter of the coordinators of the parochial apostolate was held in Honduras. Valuable observations and suggestions were made and integrated to the draft of the workshop of formation which would be held soon. In February 2004, 14 participants, coming from eight Provinces and 2 Regions, and myself, lived the first workshop of formation on Jesuit Parish pastoral work.

The result of the workshop was more successful than expected so that the principal communicators of the usefulness of the workshop were

and have been those who participated in it. The excellent contributions and witness of the invited experts was decisive. It was pointed out, nevertheless, that more time should be given for personal assimilation in a more relaxed way.

The joy and consolation at the end of the workshop was greatly felt. The participants, coming from different countries and background, having different ages and apostolic processes – experienced and enjoyed the fact that the Society is a universal apostolic body which transcends frontiers of Provinces and Regions. The unique mission of the Society has rich aspects and wonderful companions, as we could see in the works and persons of the Colombian Province. Participants were clear and enthusiastic about putting into practice the Parish project of the Society in Latin America. They became more aware that the mission in the Jesuit Parish is not that of a superficial relevance or one of mere substitution of others, in the Post-Vatican Society of Jesus. It is something proper and has its origin and continuity today related to direct evangelisation, principally, among the poor and the marginalized, an apostolic priority appreciated by Ignatius, as it appears in the Formula of the Institute. It is what Xavier lived for and what gave him great joy.

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In the beautiful “Emerald of America”, - as Colombia is called – annually this workshop has been held with quite positive results. More than 70 companions have participated in the experience. They are now helping to form a solid nucleus of pastoral agents in our Parish Sector. The Latin American encounters have become intense moments of fraternal and missionary life. In Latin America, 70% of Jesuit communities inserted in popular milieus are in the context of Parish Ministry. Besides the formation of Jesuits sent to work in parish settings there remains the challenge of sharing the richness of these workshops with other pastoral agents who desired to participate in them.



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### *At the service of ecclesial renewal*

This three week workshop held in Bogotá, Colombia, began in 2005 with 24 companions coming from 12 Provinces. There we have the support of the Centre of Spirituality, the Centre of Social Studies, the House of Youth, the Parishes and the Houses of Formation and also that of the Javeriana University. This synergy of fraternity and wisdom help us participants to experience that we are an Apostolic Body with its diverse works where “learned ministry” is practiced by fellow Jesuits.

Given the geographic extension of Latin America and the need to continue facilitating our communication and pastoral nourishment we saw that it was convenient to have a web page of parochial apostolate in Latin America. It began to operate in 2005, within the recently formed portal of CPAL.

The concern of how to help extend formation for the parish apostolate to other priests, religious and laity, found a possible channel in uniting our small efforts to those of the Javeriana University and to other universities which the Society has in different countries of Latin America. The dean of Theology, Father Victor Martínez, SJ, showed interest and decidedly supported this idea. The Javeriana University would offer a graduate course in Latin American Parish pastoral work. The first graduate course coordinated by Father Alejandro Londoño, S.J. was offered in its “extensive” form during the second semester of the year 2006. It was followed by the “intensive” form in the classical three week duration which permitted better articulation with CEB (Base Communities), interested to send candidates for the experience.

In agreement with and in conformity with the norms of the Javeriana University in October 2006, the course was offered and carried out, during which I offered my services as coordinator. In this “intensive” form, the participants were 24. Curiously and without intending it, 6 were diocesan priests, 6 religious sisters, 6 laymen and 6 lay women, a good gender and ecclesial equity. The diploma offered inspired in great part, in our work with Jesuits, was very fruitful and appreciated by participants.

These positive experiences and the availability of the Latin American Jesuit Universities opened a good channel to help the service of ecclesial renewal according to the spirit of Vatican Council II. At the end of 2006 we considered not convenient for the time being to go on with the diploma, since in May 2007, the V Conference of the Latin American Bishops would

be celebrated in Aparecida, Brazil and soon after that, the GC 35 of the Society of Jesus would take place.

Almost all the members of the permanent team of CPAL were present in the Conference of Aparecida. My participation had a special flavour and contribution due to the rich spiritual and pastoral experience of the process of ecclesial renewal which we were promoting and living in the Parishes entrusted to the Society. This experience filled me with peace and firmness, in the midst of difficulties and fright which are frequently lived in these ecclesial events.

In general, the Conference of Aparecida confirmed and launched again the path which the Society had taken up in Parish ministry. In the fifth chapter of its central document on Parish work, it is indicated that the parish is called to be a community of communities; soon after that the theological and pastoral richness of the CEB's, (Base Ecclesial Communities) is recovered. The whole thrust of the V Conference impels the missionary dimension of every Christian life. Finally, in chapter eight, the solidarity dimension is emphasised.

The great options and characteristics of the project of Jesuit Parishes in Latin America at this level of Latin American teaching has been a great consolation to me. In the same way, a significant group of companions of the RELAPAJ has expressed its satisfaction with what was said at the Conference of Aparecida regarding the parish. Very justly so since we felt that our effort helped to obtain that good result and cooperated in this way to ecclesial renewal, so that our Church may get closer to the Church desired by Jesus.

### ***In the hands of the Lord Jesus in the Society***

Since in July 2007, I had already served for six years as Latin American coordinator of Jesuit Parish Ministry, Father Cavassa, invited me, very fraternally, to consider if it would not be convenient to end my service.

The motions which I felt from the Lord during those months were very clear that I should conclude my service in the ordinary time indicated by the Statutes, and which are very wise: to favour continuity and to invite to fresh and young creativity. In the following meeting in April 2007 Father Alvaro Quiroz was appointed to take over the Latin American coordination of parochial apostolate, as from the month of September of that same year.

Given the spiritual, human and pastoral quality of Alvaro, I felt very happy to leave in better hands this beautiful service of solidarity to the Lord and the poor.

And without any previous motion, the year 2007 began with an unexpected and very consoling surprise. I received by E-Mail the convocation to participate in Rome, to the first world encounter of the representatives or coordinators of parochial apostolate of our Assistancies. Father Mercieca convoked and organized this meeting, with the approval of Father General. Besides the richness from the sharing of our processes in Jesuit parochial pastoral work, suggestions were offered which could help the participants of the GC 35 concerning our field of work. Three places were assigned for Latin America. The group of Provincial Coordinators thought that Jorge Crovara from Uruguay, Latin American assistant coordinator and Larry Searles, from the Region of Puerto Rico should participate in this meeting.

During this past year, and as it had been done since 2004, through E-Mail I continued to have good communication with all the Parishes of the RELAPAJ, as well as through the Web Page. In this way I continued to share the significant actions and events of the sector. I received very encouraging

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reactions in response to those communications. If I compared the beginning of the service with the present, it was easy for me to perceive that important steps had been taken in fraternal and apostolic inter-relation among the 181 Jesuit Parishes in Latin America. And considering our way of being a missionary today

we were well related and working fervently, based on a good project of the Jesuit Parish.

The preparation of the material which we would share with others in Rome, from the 8 to the 15 of September, 2007, caused some concern. Still what dominated was the very special grace of the appreciation and encouragement which this encounter in Rome signified for Jesuit missionaries sent to the Parishes entrusted to the Society throughout the face of the earth.

The encounter in Rome was truly of great benefit and consolation. The first days, besides the joy of meeting one another, was to become aware of the magnitude of parochial apostolate of the Society in all continents. The loving and committed presence WITH the poor exists principally in Jesuit Parishes, since the majority of them are located in popular environments. Besides, the missionary spirit which the Society continues to exercise in the Jesuit Parishes, particularly in Asia was a graced experience.

Toward the end of this stage of our exchange of considerations on how we could live better the parochial apostolate in the Society, we had the presence of Father Kolvenbach, our General and received his message. During these days, Father Eddie Mercieca shared with Father General our suggestions, which he received with great interest. Even if during that week, we were invited, by Assistancies, to share a meal with Father General, the principal moment was listening to the words which he addressed to us. He stressed how the Spirit has guided this way of service of approximately 3000 Jesuits in Parishes, and at the same time, he indicated the challenges which we have to face in this, so that this apostolate can be in conformity to our charism and spirituality.

In the midst of some minor inconveniences of the trip back to America, such as having to sleep in the waiting rooms of the airport, during those hours I was dominated by the happiness and joy because of the beautiful and solid achievements of these years in the parochial apostolate in Latin America, which have been so greatly appreciated and confirmed in the encounter in Rome. At the same time, the helplessness of not knowing how to express, in a convenient way, an act of thanksgiving to all the Jesuit companions who work in parochial ministry in our dear Latin America and the Caribbean and, as it is obvious, in a very special way to the Lord and to Mary for so much help received.

In the flight back at the end of this stage, I entered into the beautiful sky of Mexico, our passionate land. It was the beginning of a new mission in the popular Parish located in Plátano and Cacao, Tabasco. I was joyfully waiting for it... and also curious: which way would the Lord guide me, together with my companions of mission, in the next years?