

GC 35: ON THE FRONTIER, HUMBLE AND CONSOLED

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The crossroads and the patent humility of the intermediaries

GC35 began at a crossroads. For the first time in the four and a half centuries of the history of the Society a Father General had resigned in full vigor and had remained among the members of the congregation during the process to elect his successor and participated afterwards in the course of the Congregation.

On the 9th of March I found myself at the Rome airport, when **Fr. Kolvenbach** crossed my path with agile steps along with his Provincial, Fr. Fadel Sidarouss, on their way to Lebanon. They were accompanied by Fr. Aldofo Nicolás. Fr. Kolvenbach was returning to his province with the same discretion with which he had always lived. He had in his hand his eternal valise which had traveled with him the past twenty five years throughout all the nations where the Society is established. One hour previous he had been seen leaving the Curia with simplicity. There had been no grandiose, organized farewell, but the fathers and brothers of the community and of the Canisius residence were there to say goodbye to him in a simple farewell which hid their heartfelt gratitude. The day of his resignation Fr. Valentín Menéndez read a letter of thanks that was sober, correct, and warm. The day of his departure Fr. Michael Holman imitated his way of proceeding as Superior General. Then, on our feet, we applauded for several minutes while he kissed the oriental

icon which the CG had given him, small enough that it would fit into his tiny suitcase and in his generous spirit.

At the first Eucharist presided by the new Father General in the Church of the Gesù, when Fr. Kolvenbach entered with his white alb and stole as one more in the line of the 225 members of the congregation, the entire church exploded in warm and sustained applause. Not only were we applauding the service he had rendered to the Society, to religious life and to the Church, but also the

manner of his retiring from the scene without the slightest trace of privilege or of merit earned. His entire life was hidden in the gratuity of God. *We experienced the renunciation of a follower of Jesus poor and humble of the Exercises who moves with the*

a process of discernment which includes information, dialogue and prayer

clarity of the Spirit. He did not choose to remain consuming himself slowly in the center of the Church and the Society, as an icon of pilgrimage, but rather to disappear in the most unobtrusive shores, on the frontier from which he had left, to leave all the room to another Superior General who would face the new challenges with vigor.

Fr. Kolvenbach began the process of his resignation during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II. A step of this magnitude was prepared slowly in dialogue with the Pope, with the Society, and taking into account the opinions of influential persons of the institutional church who considered the moment opportune to intervene in some way with the procedures which in the end would lead the Society "to the right road." Father Kolvenbach was magnificent when he presented his renunciation, patient in awaiting the opportune moment and humble in his manner of moving it forward.

The choice of a Superior General in the Society is a unique experience, of surprising freedom. There are no candidates, no platforms, no promised made to get votes. Politicking is prohibited. No name is excluded. We are aware of the expectations of friends and the pressures of those who do not understand us. And nevertheless, through a process of discernment which includes information, dialogue and prayer, we look for the best candidate to guide the life of the Society in this moment of history. This process is only possible when the members of the congregation have

left behind “self-love, self-will and self-interests” (EE 189) and desire only the greater service of God our Lord.

Preparation for the election begins with the study of the state of the Society and the challenges which the world of the day presents. Gradually the most suitable profile of the new Superior General begins to emerge.

With the election of **Fr. Adolfo Nicolás** the Lord has gifted us with a shared consolation which accompanied us throughout GC35 anointing the entire search for the plan of God for the Society which was being shaped little by little in the slow elaboration of each decree and the recommendations for the ordinary governance. In Fr. Adolfo Nicolás we see a man of the frontier, born in the West and inculturated in the East, the same as Kolvenbach and Arrupe, close to the poor and a pastor in the respectful dialogue with other religions, with a wide range of apostolic experience and with a long path of governance, well formed in theology and with a facility for languages, with a naturalness at ease both in his responsibility as Superior General and in the hallways and with a shared cup of coffee, with the capacity to transform with humor a knotty situation into new possibilities. Only from a deep experience of God that is then transmitted is it possible to synthesize in one’s person traits which complement themselves so harmoniously.

I was surprised by the reaction of the news media to the resignation of Fr. Kolvenbach and the naming of Fr. Adolfo Nicolás. We had access to the coverage in Spain, France and Italy for the most part. The coverage was generous in space and in praise, including in periodicals which normally are critical of the Church. They praised the wisdom, discretion, and freedom of Kolvenbach during those difficult years and the profile of the new Superior General. *By pointing out these traits, perhaps they were transmitting to us what this fragmented and confused world is hoping for of the Society and of the Church, what it is truly searching for because it needs it:* witnesses of God and of the human who are unpretentious, humble, approachable, sincere believers, erudite partners in the midst of the complexity within which we live today in the different frontiers of this world.

Pope **Benedict XVI** was very present among us throughout GC35, but the sense of his presence was being transformed as the days passed. At first we were moved by a sincere desire to live fully the obedience to the Pope for the mission, but at the same time we were paralyzed in some way by a certain fear that perhaps remained in us from the sad experiences

experienced in the pontificate of John Paul II and from some negative commentaries from outside which filtered into the GC from the corridors. We found ourselves passing from a certain timidity to enthusiasm for a renewed mission in the heart of the Church.

The audience of Benedict XVI was, along with the resignation of Fr. Kolvenbach and the election of Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, one of the three high points of the entire Congregation. The Pope appeared with a very friendly smile, almost fragile, and with an expression of great cordiality. His gestures of goodness and his words surprised us and seemed free both of our own mistrust as well as the powerful misunderstandings, the prejudices and pressures which disqualify us today in some manner. His message was a demonstration of confidence in the Society, the humble risk of his hand stretched out to ours, the invitation to enter into a new phase

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After thanking Fr. Adolfo Nicolás for his words and Fr. Kolvenbach “for the precious service he has rendered to your Order for almost a quarter century,” he said:

“I very much hope, therefore, that the entire Society of Jesus, thanks to the results of your Congregation, will be able to live with a renewed drive and fervour the mission for which the Spirit brought it about and has kept it for more than four centuries and a half with an extraordinary abundance of apostolic fruit.”

With much clarity and esteem he sent us again on the mission which we had received in the best spirit of our charism, that of Ignatius and his first companions when they placed themselves at the service of Pope Paul III to be sent to the geographical, religious and cultural frontiers of the 16th century:

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"As my predecessors have often told you, the Church needs you, counts on you, and continues to turn to you with confidence, particularly to reach the geographical and spiritual places where others do not reach or find it difficult to reach. Those words of Paul VI have remained engraved in your hearts: "Wherever in the Church, even in the most difficult and exposed fields, in the crossroads of ideologies, in the social trenches, there has been or is confrontation between the burning exigencies of humanity and the perennial message of the Gospel, there have been and are the Jesuits."

He reminded us that: "the Church is in urgent need of people of solid and deep faith, of a serious culture and a genuine human and social sensitivity... who *devote their lives to stand on those frontiers*." It is not a

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matter of sporadic missions to which one can go for a while and then return to solid ground, but rather of "standing" as witnesses of "being" reconciled persons precisely in situations of fragmentation and lack of direction to dialogue with who are themselves broken frontiers.

For Benedict XVI this is not something new, but rather we have inspiring examples in great Jesuits of the past such as Francis Xavier, Mateo Ricci, Robert de Nobili and admirable enterprises such as the "Reductions" of Latin America. But living on the frontiers also asks to accept "the fundamental duty of the Church, of fully adhering to the word of God, and of the authority of the Magisterium to preserve the truth and the unity of the Catholic doctrine in its totality." The Pope is asking of us not only a cold and repetitive fidelity to laws and doctrines, but a fidelity which is truly creative in dialogue with the world of today which is in dramatic and constant change.

We left the audience with a profound experience of consolation which accompanied us until the end of the GC and gave a new accent to all our work and searching. *We felt ourselves sent to the frontiers of the world from the heart of the Church*. The Society is responding to the invitation of Benedict XVI "with a renewed drive and fervour." The decree which contains our response is rightly named. GC35 is aware that *"the letter and*

the allocution of the Holy Father open us to a new historic moment." (GC35, 1,16)

On the frontiers where the Lord is "newly made flesh" (EE 109)

As the fathers and brothers of GC35, we did not have to stick our heads out the windows of the Congregation to look out at the complexity of the world to which we are sent. Within the aula we found persons from all the continents, from many different ethnic groups, cultures and political systems. A total of 49 different mother tongues were the substrate for the official languages of the GC. There were found in dialogue Jesuits accustomed to moving among the elites of science and of power along with those who bear in their own blood stories of secular contempt such as the *dalits* of India or the decimated tribes of Africa; the poor South where migrations begin in dialogue with the rich North which receives them or rejects them; the East, origin of the great religions of humanity and the secularized West; the countries which contaminate the earth and the poor who suffer from desertification; the well established in the nations of wellbeing and those who live a volatile existence in refugee camps.

Ideological platforms were not as much in evidence in this GC as they were in GC34, where a mere word could ignite fierce debates which would divide the assembly. We were able to *approach the world with a more contemplative vision, with the gaze of God in the incarnation of his Son Jesus (EE 109)*, seeing the contradictions which create death and hells, but receiving also the incarnation of the new life of God offered to all from these agonizing frontiers.

The frontiers are the conflicted expression of our world "run wild" which is experiencing changes so profound that they strain the entire society and that often we are unable to control nor even understand. In such a "fragmented" world the certainties of life which had configured persons and society itself, such as the vision of God, of the family, of sexuality, of the meaning of life, have been broken in pieces dividing persons inside and fracturing fundamental relations. Each and every one of these solid fragments of the past have become "liquid", begin to spread out into the divided world with an unpredictable logic, speaking out and demanding a part in the organization of society. "The obstacles challenging the evangelisers are not so much the seas or the long distances as the frontiers

that, due to a mistaken or superficial vision of God and of man, are raised between faith and human knowledge, faith and modern science, faith and the fight for justice.” (Audience of Benedict XVI to GC35)

It was decisive for the Society to reconfirm the great frontiers of our time already assumed by the previous post-conciliar General Congregations: the service of faith and the promotion of justice in a “choice of the poor [that] is not ideological but is born from the Gospel.” (Audience of Benedict XVI to GC35), the dialogue with the different cultures impacted today by the global culture which puts out without rest innumerable images in all the screens of the world, and the interreligious dialogue in a moment in which war and confrontation are often legitimized with religious creeds.

These great options of the Society are situated today in the new context of globalization which has arrived in all the corners of the planet. To these challenges are added others which are acquiring each morning new and surprising proportions, such as ecology, bioethics, migrations, etc. We remain on these former frontiers and assume new ones.

In this Congregation we have made a key affirmation: we pledge to “stand on these frontiers” (Audience of Benedict XVI to GC35), outside spaces already conquered, delimited, foreseeable and secure. “Frontiers,” Fr. A. Nicolás reminded us, “can be places of conflict which put in danger

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our reputation, tranquillity and security...” (GC25, 1,6) The frontier can be a chair of bioethics in a university, an emarginated barrio permanently unstable with organized bands fighting over control of the territory and drugs, a refugee camp, a television studio where people are searching for language to speak today of God, a community of open doors in a Moslem

neighbourhood where life itself is the only word of faith that can be pronounced, a constant flow of migrants who uproot themselves incessantly like a river to our reception centers, or the accompaniment of so many lives who desire to find someone to help them to clarify the interior distress that is tearing them apart.

The challenge to stand on the frontiers is today extreme. It is impossible to remain on them without being affected by the contradictory dynamisms of the different forces which are in motion there, by the diverse

choices that get us stirred up with their incessant fermentation, that pull us in different directions and can tear us apart. The figure of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah can shed light on this challenge. The servant who “reconciles” helping to re-establish “just relations” with God, with others and with creation (GC35, 3, 12-17,) is formed by the Lord to be “a covenant of the people” and “light for the nations” (Is 42:6) “*Being*” covenant does not mean merely accomplishing a series of external activities in order to unite the people, but rather something much deeper. I mean to say that in his or her prophet’s heart the people are already united, although in reality they are still divided and confronted, just as all people are already united in the heart of God towards which history is already journeying. If his heart is an oven in which the fire of life is

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burning and is transfigured, then the prophet can be “*a light for the people*”. This is not a matter of personal fortitude but rather of openness to life which is truly human which comes from God precisely through our broken lives. It is not the thick rod of iron which allows itself to be transfigured to give off light, but only a fragile filament thin as a caterpillar, when it allows the life that comes from God to flow through itself.

Our spirituality is very appropriate for living on the frontiers. The “*Ignatian polarities*” (GC35, 2, 8-9) help us to live there in an unceasing attitude of “creative fidelity” (GC35, 1,13.) We are fully in the world working with others, but in the same *action* we are *contemplative* because we discover God in the depths of reality creating new and surprising life along with us with an infinite discretion: we act as if everything depended on ourselves, organizing ourselves to be *effective*, but at the same time we look for everything as *grace* from God and we lose ourselves with gusto in gratitude for God’s work in history without overlooking unjust outcomes or recognition, neither in Him, nor in others nor in ourselves; we are able to insert ourselves in very concrete *space* with all the details of daily needs and remain with a heart open to our *universal* mission, to all persons, we trust in the *germinal*, small and miniscule as a mustard seed when we insert ourselves in the human community and at the same time we contemplate in

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this insignificant risk an entire *utopia* of harvest that is already on the way in the small seed.

In this incessant dialogue of polarities we truly become *creators of the newness of God* as Fr. Pedro Arrupe already affirmed, speaking of our charism:

“As one appreciates the evangelical intuition of this charism, one admires more the simplicity of this intuition: the intuition of love, which can unite elements which, lacking this love, would seem irreconcilable or at least leading to dichotomies and tensions which would restrain true apostolic dynamism: action – contemplation, faith – justice, obedience – freedom, liberty, poverty – effectiveness, unity – pluralism, local sense – universal. St. Ignatius, on the contrary, finds admirable solutions which unite what seems to be contrary and so produces the maximum apostolic effectiveness. (Fr. Pedro Arrupe; *The Identity of the Jesuit*; “On his golden anniversary in the Society” (January 15, 1977), ed. Sal Terrae, p. 538)

These polarities are like the two wings of a dove. They must be always in communication and dialogue in order to fly again. Both poles need to remain living and connected in creative tension. No one can fly with only one wing.

Rediscovering Our Charism” (GC35, 2)

Our way of knowing, feeling and tasting the reality of our world has changed. Today we understand and communicate with language that is more narrative, symbolic, bodily, affective, and imaginative. How are we to define our identity in this moment and how ought we to speak of it in such a way that we express ourselves to ourselves, especially to the youngest Jesuits, and at the same time touch the hearts of those who are approaching us with the desire to get to know us and join themselves to our apostolic body, or to collaborate with us in the mission? It is not enough to create a new vocabulary by opening the dictionary and using modern techniques of communication, rather we need to live our charism in our context with such passion that the words, images, and signs arise anew from the fire that dwells within us. Only “a fire lights other fires” (GC35, 2 25).

GC35 has made a great effort to express itself in a new way. When the first draft of the decree on our identity arrived at the aula it produced

many different emotions. Some applauded with enthusiasm its new and distinctive style, while others rejected it because it departed from the transparent wording more proper to a decree, with precision and conceptual exactitude shining in every word.

In our decree we affirm our identity and our mission in words which connect directly with the narrative of the foundational moments of the life of Ignatius (Loyola, Manresa, the Cardoner, Paris, La Storta, and Rome). Our small stories, so diverse one from another, unite and gain strength in the grand retelling of the history of the Society.

Inspired by the wording of the Exercises we contemplate with the gaze of God our fractured world; (EE 102) we see the variety of elements which struggle and lead to suffering, exclusion, death and hells. But in the depth of all of these situations is revealed to us the presence of the incarnate Son of God who becomes a part of history with us (EE 109). As we approach him, newly born in Bethlehem, with all our senses wide open,

we begin to smell and taste “the infinite sweetness and charm of the Divinity, of the soul, of its virtues, and of everything there (EE 124), since everything is being touched by the incarnate love of God. Out of this experience of tasting and of

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feeling we commit ourselves to building the reign of God by following Jesus “poor and humble” of the Gospel; we adopt the joy of creating the future, while we go forward resolved to face the inevitable confrontations which introduce us to the mystery of death and resurrection, the only possibility that the future that God is creating with us may be reborn out of the personal and social sepulchers of our time.

With the Exercises a “new sensibility” is born in us to perceive God, not only in beauty, communion and order, but also on the frontiers, in situations of poverty and pain, even where there are apparently only transgressors and iconoclasts, who threaten with arms or with corrosive images and music our art and our discourse about God and our sense of the meaning of human life. At times people reject structures, words, formulas, and rituals because they experience them now as lifeless branches.

This way of speaking about our identity and mission is not simply a concession to postmodernism, but rather a taking up again of the vocabulary of the Exercises and of the foundational process of the Society, which is also the narrative of a pilgrim, of the affect, of the imagination, and of the senses. It is significant that, in the footnotes of the decrees of GC35, the Constitutions and Complementary Norms together are cited only 33 times, while the Spiritual Exercises are cited 34 times.

Identity and mission are inseparable, because, in the end, we do what we are. We not only intend to make known the incarnate Son, the “image of God” (2 Cor 4,4), but we also desire truly “to be his image” (2 Cor 3:18) in the culture of the virtual image, and that in our communities one might “see” (Jn 1:39) what we announce. For this reason in this decree we also explain our mission, although a later document will also speak of it in more operative language.

It belongs to our identity to realize the mission collaborating with “others” (GC35,5), in a special way with lay people whom the Spirit has introduced into the charism of our Ignatian spirituality and who are united with us by the inestimable gift of friendship and of collaboration in different apostolic works. We are also building the kingdom of God by collaborating with religious women and men, priests, ecclesial movements, believers of other religions and non-believers, who share with us the same attitude of service of the values of the Gospel.

Between identity and mission: the community

Ignatius and his first companions were joined together by the Spirit in a group of “friends in the Lord” which culminated in an itinerant apostolic community capable of moving with agility throughout the geographical and cultural frontiers of its time. The bond among them was so intense that it permitted them to feel themselves as one body in the midst of great movement and dispersion, in an epoch in which a letter could take more than a year to arrive at Ignatius’ office from the frontiers of the mission. GC35 expressed very forcefully the need for an intense community life. One group tried to express this need in a decree, but it did not succeed in transmitting the deep feelings of all. References to the community do appear, however, in several decrees.

The community constitutes a necessary link between identity and mission. We can only announce the kingdom of God that is coming to recreate human relations from the truth of community life. Not only are we a “community for the mission,” but community life “is mission.” It expresses the power of the kingdom which is capable of bringing us together with all our differences and limitations, in the midst of the individualistic and excluding factors in our culture. From an authentic community we can say: “Come and see.” For many, Jesuits are invisible. Community transparency will make us visible as an apostolic body and credible as servants of the Gospel.

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Constructing a community today is difficult. We all breathe in an individualism which offers us technologies to construct our spaces apart from others, to isolate ourselves from persons nearby whom we desire to steer clear of so we can play out our virtual relationships in other scenarios, according to our personal tastes and avoiding off the inevitable trials of daily routine. With a thoughtless “click” on the keyboard we can cut off a living connection with another person. Mobile telephones and the internet let us “be connected” in any moment and with anyone, but not necessarily to be in true warm human relationship with anyone. Even the sheer quantity of these connections can lead us to avoid forming quality relationships.

Without a community, how can we succeed in “remaining on the frontiers?” The disintegrating impacts we experience are very strong and can break down our personal psyches and imperil the quality of apostolic projects which ought to surpass our own plans and skills.

We need to create apostolic communities with the subtleness, dedication and the art of true emotional goldsmiths, dedicating time for deep communication, prayer, shared discernment and relaxation, to developing and sustaining our apostolic plans. An authentic festive spirit celebrates real life and does not wait for the arrival of ideal and impossible situations, nor allows itself be paralyzed by any shortcomings that statistics reveal, nor by the social irrelevance of many of our apostolic activities. It is

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necessary to revitalize the mission of the local superior precisely in this primary function of animating the life of the community.

A universal body for "the universal world" (EE 95)

Throughout GC35 the available computers were constantly occupied so we could communicate by e-mail with the entire Society. Other electors were sitting in the corners with their lap-tops on their knees, microphones and head phones in place to establish a more living connection with their provinces. The different stages of our itinerary were followed by many Jesuits and lay collaborators in the farthest corners of the world, and from these same human groups we received constant responses and prayers. We experienced in a very visible manner the fact that we formed a network allowing the flow of information and assistance of every kind. We were connected in order to develop and implement apostolic projects that surpass the limits of our provinces and regions.

At GC35 we took a new look at a dimension which can be found in the roots of our charism: we are a universal body. The globalized work has helped us realize the importance of living in a more deliberate way this essential feature of our vocation, already present from our origins in Ignatius and his first companions. With astounding apostolic faith he would send people from their homes on journeys that would usually be one way. They were not deterred by knowing that a significant percentage of those who set out would be left on the road; assaulted by pirates, by illnesses or other torments, they would never arrive at their destinations at the most distant regions of the known world. We are the heirs of this charism of openness to the universal that ought to find new expression today.

The governance of the Society, again part of the essence of our charism, ought to be restructured in all its levels with the help of new communications and organizational technologies.: General Congregation, Central Governance, Conferences of Major Superiors, Provinces, Regions, and Local Governance. We can no longer think only in terms of provinces or regions when making apostolic plans and when assigning human and economic resources. The time may be ready for configuring new provinces

for greater service, in order to take better advantage of the possibilities that the Lord has placed into our hands (GC35, 6).

A GC at prayer: receiving a gift

Personal and community prayer permeated all the steps of GC35 in a very explicit way. Each day we would begin the tasks in the aula with 15 minutes of prayer, very well prepared, in reference to the precise moment we had arrived at. As we entered the aula, Jerry Rosario would receive us each morning with a big smile as he distributed personally to each of us a sheet with the prayer written in the different languages, along with a warm “Good morning.” This same prayer would be repeated afterwards in many communities of the Society who would express their solidarity with us in this way. We would constantly be receiving messages from many lay collaborators who were closely following the tasks of the CG and praying for us and with us, with our same words and yearnings.

In the most important moments we celebrated a special Eucharist: at the beginning of the GC at the Gesù; before the election of the new Father General in the church of the Holy Spirit, near the Curia; at the Gesù we celebrated the election of the new Father General; at the church of Saint Ignatius we began Lent; at the Gesù we concluded the GC in order to give thanks to God. The liturgy was always very well prepared.

Every day we would celebrate Eucharists in linguistic groups, in English, French, and Spanish. These were a privileged space to unite the process of the GC we were experiencing with the reality of each province or region. In this shared spiritual experience, we felt like we were weaving the body of the Society, with proper names of places, works and persons, always wider than the limits of our own provinces.

Throughout the week we would usually have ample space to read and pray over the successive editions of the decrees to see them in the Spirit who was offering us his newness in this precise moment of the Society.

With humility we asked to receive this gift of God, the proper and precise collaboration which He was offering us as grace in this moment to collaborate in the construction of his kingdom in our world, within the body of the Church. It may be that this GC does not offer grand visions of reality, nor dazzling affirmations of our apostolic possibilities. I feel that we have

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worked with a very clear awareness of the magnitude of the challenges, the complexity of remaining on the frontiers, the passion to engage ourselves in the mission, but with a more realist humility in respect to our possible “powers” (EE 237), always situated with the inexhaustible gift of God which reaches us “as the rays come down from the sun,” and “the rains from their source” (EE 237).

We have found that explicit prayer in common can open our meetings and deliberations to the receptive dimension of listening to God,

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to reality and to others, which permits us to concentrate no longer on ourselves and to receive the enormous unpredictable gift which comes from the Lord rising up from the center itself of our realities. With common prayer we enter into a different key, much more contemplative and less self-sufficient, in the way we express ourselves and incarnate our

apostolic challenges. *A shared spiritual consolation united us in a deep way throughout these days.*

We still do not appreciate in large part the gift we have received in this General Congregation. It is still nothing more than a bud that we will only come to appreciate fully as it bears fruit in our persons, communities, and institutions. In the dynamic of the King, *the Lord does not give us harvests, but rather small mustard seeds which must be received and cultivated* (cf. Mk 4:31).

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