

GC₃₅: EXPERIENCE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICA

Isaac Kiyaka, S.J.
*Rector, Director of Novices
Gonzaga Gonza Novitiate
Njiro, Korona – Arusha, Tanzania*

Introduction

The two months of the 35th General Congregation were marked as Fr. Adolfo Nicolás put it in his letter of promulgation of the decrees by unconditional dedication.¹ Many issues affecting our world and the Society were discussed: Marginalization, Environment, Indigenous populations, Working and supporting of our Theologians, Fidelity with the Church, Evangelization, and Preaching of the word. He said the task now at hand lies with the whole Society. “It is our responsibility to “receive” the decrees and to give them life in our ministries, communities and personal lives”

In the following pages, I have outlined my own experience of the Congregation and what marked me most. I was personally awakened to the universality of the Society and what that means to me and to all Jesuits and indeed to the entire world. The election of Fr. Adolfo was perhaps climax of the experience of GC35. I most resonated with his words in his first address to the Society when he said that he received the election with surprise and shock after considering himself out of bounds because of his age, the long series of his inadequacies and shortcomings.² What is remarkable and inspirational is that he accepted this difficult task as a mission coming from a common and sincere search for the will of God and for the good of the Church. He went on to assure every Jesuit that “he will give all his energy and person to the

work of helping the society move forward, supporting what is good, responding to new challenges, encouraging to face the difficult task of being consistent with credible witnesses of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that we believe in.”

It is for me a step ahead and an encouragement not be scared of the daunting task and challenges of evangelization and being credible witness of Christ’s mission in our world today. Taking humble position in my search for interior growth and making Jesus at the center of every move in community and apostolate. The challenges facing us are many and multifaceted and require to be tackled in a decisive manner.

The Holy Father in his address to the Society on February 21st, in the Sala Clementina encouraged the Society to be the bearers of a torch of hope and a renewed drive and fervour to the challenging situation of our Catholic faith today. He said “the period in which the congregation takes place is of great social, economic and political changes, sharp ethical, cultural and environmental problems, conflicts of all kinds, but also of a more intense communication among peoples, of new possibilities of acquaintance and dialogue, of a deep longing for peace”³ He went on to say “this

is why the church is in urgent need of people of solid and deep faith, of a serious culture and a genuine human and social sensitivity, of religious priests who devote their lives to stand on those frontiers in order to witness and help understand that there is in fact

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a profound harmony between faith and reason, between evangelical spirit, thirst for justice and action for peace.” Thus the task for us Jesuits in Africa and the entire world must be to continue from where our ancestors in the Society have left off. It is the task to face our contemporary challenges with audacity and entering into dialogue with very diverse social and cultural contexts and the different mentalities of today’s world.

This can be a demanding task as noted by the Holy Father. To answer to his request we will need men who are leaders skilled and experienced with quality of solidity in human, spiritual and cultural formation. These

Jesuits are rooted in the Spiritual Exercises and in deep union with Jesus. The Holy Father exhorts us in his address therefore “to follow the footsteps of our predecessors with the same courage and intelligence but also with as profound a motivation of faith and passion to serve the Lord and his Church”.

35th General congregation: A gift to the Society and to the world

There is an African story about leadership and service and it is situated among the Sukuma people who live around Lake Victoria in Tanzania.

Once there lived a warrior in the chiefdom of Bulima Mwanza called Matambo, a name which means “one who is quick on his feet” in Sukuma. He was a favorite of the local chief, Lunyalula, not only because he was fast but also due to his heroic feats as a warrior. There was another person living at the chief’s compound named Jishegena which means “a badly deformed person who can move only with great difficulty by dragging himself or herself along the ground.” The chief was very fond of Jishegena because he was an expert at playing the game of bao. The two used to spend hours together playing this game.

Matambo looked down on Jishegena and used to taunt him saying “Jishegena, you are good for nothing. Why do you sit around here all day long just playing bao?” One day after being told by Matambo that he was a worthless creature, Jishegena became exasperated and challenged Matambo, saying, “Matambo, even though I am crippled and can barely move, I can beat you in a race.” All right, if you beat me, I will give you two cows.” Matambo smiled and said, “all right if you beat me, I will give you four cows.”

“On your marks. Get set. Go!” Before anyone knew what had happened, Matambo was away and gone. With great difficulty Jishegena dragged himself along the ground and lay prostrate at the feet of Chief Lunyalula. Then he turned his head to Matambo running in the distance and yelled at the top of his lungs: “Matambo! Matambo! Where are you going? Why are you running away from our chief? If all of us run away from him who will be his subjects? His chiefdom will come to an end.” Marveling at the wisdom of Jishegena, the people began to clap their hands enthusiastically and praise him for throwing himself at the feet of the chief.

Chief Lunyalula was delighted at the cleverness of Jishegena. He gave him a gift of cows and an important post in his chiefdom.

From this story comes the common Sukuma proverb, *The clever person is not overcome by difficulties.*

Through this story I would like to highlight the following points: We can compare Jeshigena's relationship with the chief with the missionary's relationship with Christ. The heart of mission and the starting point of evangelization is union with Christ. Just as Jeshigena prostrated at the feet of chief Lunyalula, so we have to surrender ourselves to the love of Jesus calling us to intimate relationship. Our entire mission is about the sharing of personal experience of the Risen Christ living in us and vice versa of the Risen Christ sharing our personal experience as we serve him in the Church and in the world.

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The general congregation assembled in Rome for two reasons: the election of a new superior general and to discuss some issues of great importance to the Society of Jesus.

The Election of the Superior General

The first part, *ad electionem*, saw Fr. Adolfo Nicolás elected the new Superior General after the members of the congregation accepted the resignation of Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach. The four days that preceded the election *murmurationes* was an intense search for the suitable man for this important job of leading the Society in this challenging time. It was characterized by prayer and Fasting. It was a one to one consultation, without prior suggestion of names or campaign. It was a respectful exploration of views and search for a new general

On the 19th January 2008, after the Mass of the Holy Spirit, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás was elected as the 29th successor of St. Ignatius. He who thought he was out of bounds because of age became the new Superior General. It was Providential and the Joy was spontaneous. Missionary Spirit was born to guide us- as we go beyond boundaries:

At the first thanksgiving mass, Fr. Adolfo called every Jesuit to go beyond the boundaries "to other nations" beyond to other cultures, provinces if need be, make the poor of the whole world our priority- our mission. Fr. Adolfo first went to Japan as a missionary from Spain. He served in Korea

and most recently in the Philippines. He has not been to Africa but he promised that soon he will visit the continent.

Fr. Nicolás is a man of God, who radiates joy, warmth, energy and a man with whom one feels connected from the first meeting. Fr. Nicolás is wary of missionaries who do not enter the lives of the people, but keep the Culture patterns of their home cultures.

In the first letter to the Society, Fr. Nicolás assures the Society that he will give all his energy and person to the work of helping the Society move forward, supporting what is good, responding to new challenges, encouraging to face the difficult task of being consistent with credible witness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that we believe in.

As the Sukuma proverb says *a clever man is not overcome by difficulties*, the election of Fr. Nicolás has implications for Africa. The goal and the vision and the task for the 220 delegates were to reaffirm those (neuralgic points), to tackle globalization in a committed fashion within the framework of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions. To do these great things, we need men of great vision and clear direction. We need a General to Ignite “A Fire that Kindle other Fires,” A man with Passion and Vision. A man of God and a man for others.

Sentire Cum Ecclesia

On Feb 21st the in *Sala Clementina*, with clarity and firmness the Pope called each one of us for the defense and proclamation of faith. The Holy Father asked us to explore new horizons and reach new Social and Cultural and Religious frontiers. The Pope entrusted to us to build bridges of understanding and Dialogue. He said the Church needs you, counts on you and continues to turn to you with confidence, particularly to reach the geographical and spiritual places where other do not reach or find difficult to reach...

The second part of the GC35 ad Negotia

The call of the Holy Father to explore new horizons and search for new social and cultural and religious approach and Fr. Adolfo's invitation to all Jesuits to venture beyond comfort zones to other cultures, and boundaries conforms to the agenda, aim and goal set by the *Coetus Praevius*

for the second part of the General Congregation *ad Negotia*. The preparatory commission, the *Coetus Praevius*, had received three hundred and fifty postulates and classified them into eleven themes that correspond to important issues that challenge Jesuit life today. Eventually five themes were developed into decrees while the rest were discussed by the Congregation with a view to recommendations and mandates addressed to Fr. General and the ordinary governance of the Society. Africa and China were discussed as two geographic priorities.

Foundational to every Jesuit's mission is an experience that places him, quite simply, with Christ at the heart of the world. Ignatius learned a contemplative way of standing in the world, of contemplating God working in the depths of things. Tasting and seeing God in reality is a process. It enables us see God's presence in the mission of justice, dialogue and inculturation; but also his hiddenness in the reality of things, to discover and to manifest him and his surprises. At the center of it a tension pulling us both to God and to the world at the same time – to a set of polarities: being - doing; contemplation - action; united with Christ-inserted into the world.⁴

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Implications GC35 for the African Assistancy

General Congregation 34 designated Africa as a priority for the Society of Jesus. This was in recognition of the multiple crises confronting the continent and its 800 million people who continue to struggle against pandemic diseases, economic impoverishment, social upheaval, and political instability (d. 3, no. 12).

In 2003, our Most Reverend Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach declared Africa as an apostolic priority for the universal Society.⁵ The declaration evokes the vision of our founder, St. Ignatius: At the birth of the Society, Africa stood firmly in the sight of St. Ignatius as one of the strategic apostolic priorities of the infant Society.⁶ He even volunteered to go to Africa if nobody accepted to go to Ethiopia. Today, the society has taken strong roots on the African Continent. One thousand four hundred and thirty scholastics,

brothers and fathers make up the assistancy and who are deeply committed to bring their contribution in a better future to the people of Africa.

In this age of Globalisation, Africa calls out for true and genuine friends. Today, more than ever before, Jesuits in Africa also call upon the universal Society to make Africa its apostolic concern in deeds more than words.

The society gratefully acknowledges the generous aid received from many provinces of the universal Society in the past decades. Jesuits of the African Assistancy cannot face alone and unaided challenges that have emerged, chief among which are:

1. The apostolate of education to provide training in responsible leadership, appropriate technologies, and competitive skills for the youth of Africa, by applying the best tradition of Jesuit pedagogy, so that they truly can be men and women for and with others;
2. The service of growing, vibrant African church to offer a credible and prophetic voice for millions of Africans disempowered and impoverished by oppressive regimes, predatory economic policies, and violent social realignment;
3. The social apostolate to develop effective tools for analyzing the opportunities, challenges, and needs facing African societies, while proposing just, concrete and durable solutions to the crises engulfing millions of Africans.

Supporting and assisting the Society in Africa to achieve these ideals and goals can be done by adopting and implementing the following key actions:

- a) Long term *collaboration in the training of African Jesuits* to acquire specific, professional competence in diverse fields of human endeavor suited to the needs of the continent, beyond the traditional programme of theology and philosophy;
- b) Carefully planned *exchange of personnel* across various apostolic fields (higher education, social apostolate, pastoral ministry, retreat ministry, etc) to enable African Jesuits to gain particular skills, broaden their experience, and enhance their confidence through inter-provincial and international exposure;

c) Unprejudiced *mutual sharing of ideas* that recognizes the richness of Africa's different cultures and the particular gifts that African Jesuits offer the provinces of the universal Society

Conclusion

In conclusion, my whole experience of having participated in the 35th General Congregation could be likened to this Swahili proverb which states: *A river is enlarged by its tributaries*. Meaning, all people are part of the vast human river that is flowing through out the world. It comprises both the universal human family and the world church. The African peoples and cultures have a special contribution to this movement in history. As with each continent, culture and people, the African contribution is a unique living stream. On the overall journey of life, African human and spiritual values can call people to their roots and give them new meaning and purposes. The same African proverb is also a reminder for the whole Society about the specific values of cooperation, unity and community. Every Jesuit is called upon to rally behind the banner of the Cross.

*at the birth of the Society,
Africa stood firmly in the
sight of St. Ignatius as one of
the strategic apostolic priorities
of the infant Society*

¹ Letter of Promulgation of the Decrees, Adolfo Nicolás, SJ, Superior General, Rome, May 30, 2008

² First Greetings to the whole society, Adolfo Nicolás, SJ, Superior general, Rome, 22nd February 2008

³ Address of His Holiness Benedict the Sixteenth to the 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, February 21, 2008

⁴ General Congregation 35, Decree 2 # 8-9

⁵ Letter of Fr. Peter –Hans Kolvenbach, “Christmas and New Year greetings: Our

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apostolic preferences," 1January, 2003.

⁶ See John O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 54, 327-328.