

INTRODUCTION

THE PRIESTLY CHARACTER OF THE SOCIETY OF JESUS FROM THE HEART OF CHRIST TO THE FRONTIERS

Edward Mercieca, S.J.
*Secretariat for
Ignatian Spirituality*

A deeper understanding of the historical evolution, spirituality and self image of the Society of Jesus, both in the past and the present with regard to its essential priestly character as an apostolic body [*GC 32, D.1, 5; D.2, 22*], has been a grace from the Lord for all of us, throughout this ‘Year of the Priest: Fidelity of Christ, Fidelity of Priesthood’, announced by Pope Benedict XVI in June 2009, for the entire Church. The response to the invitation from Father General Adolfo Nicolás, S.J. to dedicate time to reflection, prayer and sharing, creating collective memory and rediscovering this gift (letter of 19 June 2009) has been great and sustained.

The dominant note in these personal and communal pathways to understanding has been the dialogue among us, profound and honest spiritual conversation at local and provincial level. Starting from our experience as Jesuits – priests, brothers and scholastics, all participant in the Jesuit religious identity of this priestly apostolic charism – we have reread and reflected on the priestly character made flesh in our “way of proceeding”. In turn, dialogue with the universal Society will follow in the person of Father General who has called us to it. We should continue discerning the profound

INTRODUCTION

reason behind this quest and towards what new challenges will bring us. In this sense we must mention the fact that the theme of ‘priesthood’ has been explored in all the General Congregations since Vatican II, from the XXXI

to the XXXV. There has been a significant evolution in the vision and comprehension of the intrinsic priestly nature of the entire apostolic body of the Society over the last 45 years.

*the priestly charism
made flesh in our “way
of proceeding”*

We have rediscovered and delved deep into the “typical” ministries of the Society, which go beyond those required by the ordained priesthood. From the

ministries of the early fathers up to the present day, much of the apostolic service within the priestly approach given by the Jesuits, whether they be priests, brothers or scholastics, goes in the direction of the ministry of the Word – spiritual accompaniment in its many versions and expressions according to persons, groups and situations. These include teaching ways of praying which seek to encounter God in all things; education, especially for children and young people, the Spiritual Exercises in all their variants and applications; preaching; formation works and action for reconciliation, justice and peace favouring the most poor and so on. Jesuit priests, particularly through the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist, enrich the entirety of the ministries and incorporate us more deeply into the dynamics of the sacramental Church.

The present issue:

The article by Father Jesús García de Castro, S.J. helps us to name the forms, apostolic styles and options in our ministries deeply rooted in our charism as a priestly apostolic body, since the start of our history as Society of Jesus. Likewise it invites us to reflect on what characterises our

INTRODUCTION

position regarding our options to serve and our way of proceeding. The article urges us to active reading, seeing where there is identification with the author and where it may be necessary to clarify or complement.

In the personal narratives section Father José A. García-Monge, S.J. illustrates, by describing the distinct stages in his own life, how each Jesuit grows, searches and discovers himself over the years, in his deep priestly apostolic vocation, in this case as an ordained priest. The selfsame events, formation, surrounding cultural contexts, mission made service through strengths and weaknesses and so on, interweave a Jesuit priestly ministerial life in the originality of each person within the apostolic tradition of the Society of Jesus.

Jesuit priests, enrich the entirety of the ministries and incorporate us more deeply into the dynamics of the sacramental Church

There is no doubt that one of the challenges, fruit of this year of reflection and prayer, vis-à-vis the priestly nature of the apostolic body of the Society of Jesus, is rediscovering in a new light the originality of the vocation of the brother, a Jesuit not ordained priest. Brother William Rehg S.J., from the Missouri province, USA, currently professor of philosophy at the University of St Louis, remarks, from the viewpoint of his own mission and reflection, that the Jesuit brother is not defined by his practical function in the apostolic body of the Society but by his consecrated life, forming part of the priestly apostolic body as eschatological presence. The apostolic visibility of the brother is not merely the type of action or service but his own self, if he devotes himself to following Christ. For this life to be valued, there is no need for a particular profession or ministry – however noble or useful it is. It is the mystic nature of apostolic service in the Society as a religious and not a priest, which is sourced in the founding experience of the love of God beyond power, appearance, status and control. Are we not in a new time, in which we must dare to invite many others to this style of life and priestly-apostolic vocation not as priests? Will we Jesuits ourselves not be invited to a deep change of perception and appraisal of this rich devotion of the Jesuit brother, as a religious and apostle in the Society?

The two Jesuit Scholastics, Luis Arturo Macías Medina (Mexico) and Josep Mario Briffa (Malta), writing in this issue, reflect distinct countries and

INTRODUCTION

cultures. Yet, drinking from the same charism and tradition of the Society, they share trajectories, different of course although proceeding towards being Jesuits as ordained priests in this priestly apostolic body. And let us not forget that Jesuit students themselves throughout their formation already participate, as such, in the priestly grace of this apostolic body.