

## **Conversation with Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, Superior General of the Society of Jesus**

*This is a transcription of a conversation which Father General had with Tom Rochford, Pierre Bélanger, and Dani Villanueva, of the communication team for the 35th General Congregation on Sunday, February 10, 2008.*

Father General, thank you for meeting with us today.

Father Adolfo Nicolás: Before having any interview with the press, I would like to speak in a more personal manner with all the Jesuits spread out through the world and to our friends of the whole Ignatian family. So as I am speaking to you three, I am imagining the universal Society and all the people with whom we work. I hope that this conversation will bring me a little bit closer to all of you.

*Tell us about your family, so that we can understand who you are and how your vocation came.*

I think my childhood has a lot to do with the person I am. I was born in April 1936, immediately before the Civil War in Spain. There was a lot of turmoil and confusion in the country for three years before the war; there were threats, even killings. Soon after I was born, people from a neighboring town threatened to kill my father, because he was a leader in his village and he took very strong Catholic positions against the next town where people were siding with the communists. Fortunately, his brother was working in that town and he heard about the plot. He informed my father: “Tonight, they’re coming for you.” So my father had to flee, and the only place you could escape to at the time was the army. Then we started moving.

So, my childhood was made up of “moving”--from our village to another one when my father was in the North, then to the North, where my younger brother was born (in Santander), then to Barcelona where I lived from the age of 4 to 13. That is where I grew up. In my life, I can find influences from Barcelona, but also influences from this moving around. One interesting fact is that from the beginning of schooling to the end of high school, I went to seven different schools. For a child, that is a painful experience. You make friends and then you leave them, and you make new friends and you leave them again.

Later on, I saw that this had been a blessing. When I went to Japan, I would be in a different community every six months, from the language school on. I was used to being with new people and making new contacts, from the time of my childhood so that helped me very much for my missionary life as well. I had to travel throughout South East Asia, going to different countries, different places, different communities. My past experience certainly made it easier, so the pain of my childhood later became a blessing for my future.

The fact that I was born in a working family in a village has given me a great admiration for simplicity, not that I always lived it so well. Simple relationships, simple life, not very sophisticated people: all this I like. Even though I later lived in cities like Barcelona and Madrid, this simplicity of the village has been important for me.

There is something about Castilla and its open skies, its wide horizons. My elder brother wrote a poem about Castilla which said: « Castilla, where the roads go up, all up. » In Castilla mystics flourished; it might come from the open skies, the wide horizons. Let me tell you an anecdote. I was very surprised at the cover page that was printed for a book I wrote in Japan about religious life. The title was “Horizon of Hope.” For me the horizon was the one from my childhood: wide, where you see far away. In Japan it became quite narrow; the horizon there is just in front of your eyes. Because that’s the way they see it in Japan. There is no room; you don’t see wide horizons there. I realized the difference of perspectives.

I would also add that Castilla not only has wide horizons, but also what I would call “open talk.” So I don’t like hiding things or half-talk; I prefer straightforward language. Japan has made me gentle, and not wanting to be blunt; but I am open. I don’t like to hide issues or to beat around the bush.

*You mentioned the Catholic character of your family; is that also something that contributed to make you the way you are?*

Yes, certainly; and there are two sides to mention here. The Catholicity of my parents was a form of “village Catholicism,” a Castilian village Catholicity which is strong, constant, traditional. But, the fact that we had to move around made my parents, especially my mother, extremely flexible. So, she could find a way to adjust to different situations so much that at the end of her life, she was a kind of counselor. She never studied beyond primary school, but she was the counselor for practically all the neighbors who would come to ask for advice. She was always very flexible and open in her way of dealing with the people.

If you asked her or my father how they thought, their answers would have been very much in the line of traditional Catholic thinking. But if people came to them with problems, they had the ability to open possibilities, not just to give answers. They knew the theoretical answers, the orthodox answers, but they had this sense of adaptation. I think this has influenced me, especially when you move to other cultures and you realize that people go through experiences that are totally different than the one you had gone through. Then, you are more ready to listen and to hear the music, not just the words--the music of the experience of others. So that certainly had an influence.

Very often when I react to things and ask myself why I react like this, I can go back to these elements of background I just mentioned.

And I could add something about the influence of my brothers. We are four brothers and no sisters. And we are quite close to one another although all very different. The first one is an intellectual, a philosopher, in the USA. The second one is an employee in a bank, very down to earth, a man of common sense, straightforward, a very good, honest man. Then I am the third, and the last one is a maverick of ideas and imagination; he's a psychologist, a teacher and more.

That context of brotherhood also had a lot of influence on me. My eldest brother, the one who is more of an intellectual, has often been of real help, giving me directions when I started teaching theology for instance. He gave me the opening to symbolism, to the symbolic language, to Paul Ricoeur, etc. And he was certainly a big help when I started teaching eschatology. How can you speak of eschatology if not in a symbolic way?

In other stages of my life my brothers kept me down to earth. My second brother and his children know real life; they sometimes had to go through difficult times in Spain. That is very meaningful to me even now. For instance, I am very reluctant to speak too spiritually about religious life, as if spiritual talk could make up for a lack of reality. No, no. When we speak about poverty, or about our way of life, my family pulls me down to earth and says, "What do you really mean?"

So I cannot just spiritualize something that has to start first with the body, the concrete reality. I am very grateful for this kind of background that comes from my family. It brings me back to reality; sometimes I can "fly" for five minutes, but I must come down or else I feel awkward.

*All this led you to the Society of Jesus. How was your Jesuit vocation and your Jesuit missionary vocation defined within the Society?*

Well, one thing that I'm convinced of more and more is that history and reality are stronger than ideas. History forces us to change, to open, to develop. And in my case, in Christian terms, you would say providential things happened. I didn't know the Jesuits at all when I was growing up in Barcelona, but my eldest brother joined the order in the Tarraconensis Province. He went to India and had a break down while he was studying philosophy; and he left the Jesuits.

But that was the point of contact for me to get to know the Jesuits. In fact I was thinking of becoming a brother because I was going to the LaSalle Brothers schools and I liked education, I liked what they were doing with us, their friendliness and so on. But then my brother got in touch with the Jesuits and that distracted me from the Brothers. Since the Jesuits were also in education and I had an inclination for that, I contacted them. When my parents moved to Madrid, I was able

to go to a Jesuit school there. My attention shifted to the Jesuits. So at the end of high school, during a retreat, I decided that entering the Jesuits might be the best way for my life.

About Japan then--Providence and history again. I never volunteered for Japan and I didn't know much about that country. When I was in the Juniorate, Father General Janssens wrote a letter--by the way, I think it was a good idea, and now that I am the General maybe I could write one in the same line. So the General wrote a letter to the whole Society asking for volunteers for many places. He wrote: "We have requests for people to help in different parts of the world, so those of you who feel the call, please come forward."

So I thought: they need help and I am a Jesuit. I took for granted that being a Jesuit was a universal vocation, that I was a Jesuit not only for Spain but someone who could go anywhere. So I volunteered, saying: "You need people, I am 'people', so if I can be of help anywhere, I will go."

I wrote him at the beginning of my philosophy studies; one month later the provincial called me and said, « You wrote to Father General, offering yourself for the missions, but you still can say no." He wasn't very happy because he had other plans. He had already appointed me to study philosophy for two years and then study mathematics to teach in an engineering school in Madrid.

"I volunteered so I will go," I answered.

So he asked me "What about Japan?"

And I said: "OK, Fine."

It was a challenge, because after I left his room I thought "Japan, that means that I have to keep studying for the rest of my life." I had an image of Japan as a high culture, difficult language, and so forth. And I think I was right--I had to study all my life. So, then everything changed; I finished philosophy and oriented the rest of my formation towards Japan.

I think it was not accidental. It was one of these things that happen historically, but, on second thought, I can say that maybe it was the best choice. If I had had to choose the territory where I could be missionary, I might have chosen Latin America, Africa, or other places where I saw more visible needs. After reflection, Japan was the best choice because since the very beginning I felt Japan and I: we were a perfect fit. I felt very much at home with Japanese people and the Japanese way of being. I'm not the kind of wild Spaniard who is spontaneous and explosive; I am more of a quiet person. And that way, in Japan, went well; and I felt very comfortable all along.

*You do not like to talk about spirituality as such but prefer to talk in relatively concrete terms how to help people understand better who they are. Could you identify for us a few passages of the Holy Scripture or of the Gospels that have been and are especially meaningful for you?*

I could say that I am very moved every time I find Bible texts that touch three areas or subjects. First, service. For instance, when the servant at the end of the day doesn't expect the Lord to come and serve him but he just says "I did what I was supposed to do; that's it." The idea is that there is no need to make much fuss about being in a life of service. That's normal in our vocation. So all the parables leading to the meaning of service--the call to service, the simplicity of service--have always touched me.

I don't want to judge others but I don't like when religious, Jesuits or non Jesuits, speak of religious life as a cross, something difficult that you have to carry. I think it is nonsense most of the time because married people have many problems and difficulties. People struggling to make a living have quite a cross at times. I have seen people struggling all their life, the migrants for instance. So dramatizing the difficulties of religious life doesn't make much sense. Therefore, I believe in service and in my vocation as a vocation of service. I enjoy serving and I think it is our spirituality. If we come to enjoy just being a servant, then we have a life of joy forever. Who is going to make it difficult? For those who really want to give themselves to service, there is no competition there. So I am always touched by the Scripture when it speaks about service.

The second area: texts that speak of the life in the spirit. I think Asia has helped me very much to discover that. Asian spirituality, Hindu as well as Buddhist, insists on this peace that comes from inside, that is overflowing, that surrounds you. My image of the Spirit is not as someone speaking in your ear, but something about the Spirit of God that fills you, inspires you, supports you. I like songs about the Spirit in which he is understood as consoler, relief, rest. I really feel that the Spirit is inspiring, for me, for all of us.

And the third area are the Scripture texts on detachment. That is where you can identify the Ignatian influence, although it is also present within the Buddhist background with which I have lived for so many years. Those texts have inspired me from the novitiate: "If you win your life you will lose it" or, "What is everything worth if you lose yourself?" There I have seen a total confluence with Buddhism.

The core of Buddhist spirituality is detachment from the results of your efforts. And this is very meaningful; it is something that is very helpful to understand. It is not just detachment from things: I am attached, I like people, and I like working and many other things. But, you are detached from whatever happens. It could be close to this famous saying that is attributed to Saint Ignatius: "Do everything as if it would depend on you, knowing that it depends on God, and then relax." (There are different versions.) It is about detachment: you do your best and you are only a

servant, so let the fruits take their own course, let God work. So when I see verses about this in the Gospel, it always touches something inside me; probably it is the Spirit.

*The main aspect of your curriculum vitae that was mentioned when you were elected was the fact that you had spent so many years in Asia. Can you tell us if you feel more as an Asian or as a European?*

This is a question that I have asked myself sometimes and that people have asked me too. My honest answer would be, "I am not an Asian and I am not a European." In Asia, I am convinced that I am not an Asian and I can never claim to be an Asian. To be anything means going really deep into it. In Asia I am aware that I am a European, but in Europe I am aware that I am not a European. Not only because I have been away for so long, or because I have not been a very keen observer of how things have been going in Europe, but also in my way of feeling, I think I have changed.

I told the press a few weeks ago--and this is a very honest thing to say--that I am in process. And so, who am I? I am becoming; I hope I continue to grow and I feel that I am always learning. In Japan I learnt from Japan, in Korea I learnt from Korea, in the Philippines from the Philippines and so on. I feel that my identity is being free, that I am a free being.

I have seen others in Asia, other Europeans for instance having difficulty with their identity. It's never been a problem for me. Because I don't care whether I am Spaniard, or French, or Japanese. I am who I am. If you like me, we will be friends; if you don't like me, look for somebody else. The identity of who I am is my communication with people, with situations. So I am quite comfortable in coming back to Rome, like I was comfortable in the Philippines, and I was comfortable in Japan. I know that I will not be Roman. No matter how long you are there, there are depths that you never reach. So, therefore, I feel comfortable about just being in flux, in a process. And I hope I continue my learning and growing.

*One of the characteristics that we have heard about you is that you are happy, joyful, easy to deal with, and give an impression of serenity. Do you see yourself like this or have there been some moments in your life when it was not so easy to feel serenity?*

Yes, there have been difficult moments, certainly--personal moments and also institutional moments. But basically, I think what has helped me very much is to go back to these three points I mentioned from the Bible. You have to live detachment. A couple of times I have had a crisis because of the feeling of not being accepted or not understood in a big way. Then I realized that these were great opportunities to become more free. In these moments, I realized that my real goal in life was not to please others. I don't have to please anybody; then I can be free.

When something goes well, OK, that is no problem; it is easy. But when something does not go well, there is some suffering, some challenge, some difficulty. You realize this is an opportunity to become a little more free.

This gaining space for freedom is always a blessing. You feel in a position in which you don't have anything to lose. Last Sunday, during the final vow mass for two Jesuits here at the curia, I mentioned that the Society of Jesus insists on a few key points. For example, when I became General, I was brought to Saint Ignatius' room and was reminded of the third degree of humility and so forth. These are wonderful things, at the core of what we are. There you have total serenity. Who can take your joy away when your joy does not depend on success, or what people think of you? But this freedom you gain through difficulties, you never get it easy. But I must add honestly at the same time that I never had "extraordinary difficulties" -- I cannot claim heroic deeds.

## **PART II: A Jesuit in Asia**

*The second part of the interview focuses on you as a Jesuit in Asia. You were a professor of theology: what was your interest in that field, and how has your interest grown over the years because you were living in Asia?*

Again here, history determined a number of things. In my case I started from the end: I had to teach eschatology, but that was my beginning. Later on, I taught Revelation which I found extremely exciting. In Revelation you have all the basic issues and problems of how we get God's Revelation. Not only questions of how we understand Revelation, but how we experience it. So it goes basically to religious experience and to the spirituality of theology. I found that extremely challenging in terms of opening to new depths. You need a multi-disciplinary approach, so you have to enter into inter-disciplinary thinking. You need to learn about linguistics, the psychology and sociology of religious experience; it opens to new areas that I found very challenging. So I enjoyed very much those years of teaching.

I felt that perhaps what was needed in Asia before a systematic speculative theology would be a pastoral theology. Just to get in touch with how people experience their faith, and how people experience community and how people experience the encounter with God, prayer. So I became very interested in pastoral theology.

History once again played its role: I was sent to the Philippines, to the Pastoral Institute. To my surprise I realized that they were not teaching the sacraments. And I said: most of the students spend 80% of their efforts in sacramental life, priest and catechists. Since I had been working on symbolism, I began teaching sacraments. I found that very exciting, both for me and for the students because I realized that the sacraments had been reduced, through historical factors, to rituals. While in fact the sacraments are the spirituality of Christian life.

At key points in the life of the community or of the person, we have strong, solid interventions of the Church--the sacraments--expressing what God is doing with that person at that particular time. So it is very rich when you integrate life and sacraments. They are related to everything in human life: the individual and society, human relationships, hope, the struggles of people, even humor. All of the sacraments are very open to human reality. That has been a source of inspiration for me and very challenging and interesting area of teaching. In fact, this coming year I was supposed to teach a course in sacraments in the Pastoral Institute.

I think pastoral theology and good sacramental theology put life and faith together; they are very important, particularly for minority Churches. Then Christology and Ecclesiology come as a fulfillment. When the provincial told me to study theology, I tried to “represent” (in the Ignatian tradition, that is to bring an argument against the proposition of the Superior). I told him: “I think I am more interested in pastoral work than in theology.”

He was clever enough to tell me, “Exactly, we need professors of theology who are interested in pastoral work.” So I couldn’t run away from it; I was caught.

*Because of what you have been living in Japan and in the Philippines, your interest in interreligious dialogue developed. Can you tell us how you discovered this field?*

Well, in my case, let’s say that daily contacts have been much more important and more influential than formal contacts. I have not been very active in formal academic encounters with different Buddhist groups. But I have always been living with non-Christians and working and cooperating with them. And I see there a challenge: maybe we Jesuits have not responded enough. When I was provincial, I tried to communicate that to our school communities. For instance, in the schools only 20% of the teachers were Catholic--very few students would be--so my question was: how do we relate to the non-Christian teachers? Not in terms of proselytism or in terms of trying to conquer them, but in terms of a dialogue in depth. What do they live for and what is the source of their inspiration in life? We didn’t have that kind of dialogue, and that’s what I am most interested in. Dialogue with people that I encounter.

If I look for significant encounters on a more official level, for me the most inspiring was an encounter in the Philippines. I was invited to go to a meeting in Marawi, in Mindanao, one of the southern islands of the Philippines. As you enter the city, you see a sign saying, “The Islamic City of Marawi”. But they had a bishop at the time there who was very dialogical and very much in touch with the Muslim community. He organized a symposium of Muslim scholars with Catholics and Protestants. We had a Muslim professor from Egypt, another from Indonesia, and others from the Philippines. Then we had an Irish Columban professor of theology and myself on the Catholic side, and some Protestants. That was very significant because we were all looking for the anthropological roots of our faiths and we saw a lot of confluence. As long as you do not

get into the Blessed Trinity, there is a lot of confluence. And I found it very interesting that the greatest difficulty in dialogue didn't come from the Muslims, it came from our brothers, other Christians, who felt that to approach the Muslims was dangerous. I found the Egyptian and the Indonesian professors very close to me in religious feeling, in thinking, and so forth.

*Tell us about your experience with migrant people. When you finished your term as provincial in Japan you decided to do something relatively different from what you had been doing, to enter into this spirit of the social aspect of our vocations as Jesuits.*

I have always been concerned with some kind of social work. In my second year as provincial in Japan, our house needed some repair work so I had the chance to move out of the center of Tokyo. I went to live with the Jesuit director of the Social Centre in Tokyo. He was living in a little house in one of the poor neighborhoods of Tokyo where most of the migrants live. He was alone so I went to live with him. For four years I commuted to the office every day; I found the experience very good.

On Sunday, when I was free, I also helped in the parish. So I became interested in getting in touch with these migrants and learning the difficulties they faced. I thought that we Jesuits should open a centre to take care of them. And while I was thinking about this, I was reaching the end of my provincial's term. The diocese of Tokyo opened a pastoral centre and they asked me to help. So then I told my successor, the new provincial, "You decide my future but the diocese is asking me to help in the centre for migrants. I am very interested personally; I think that we should do something about that. Since the diocese does it, why would we have to open another place?"

The Provincial agreed and I enjoyed my four years working there. My first love was pastoral work and that's what I was doing with these people. Yes, those years were magnificent: in helping people in different ways, but also in helping the centre to get organized and to plan its pastoral outreach.

*More broadly, it also gave you a direct relationship with this aspect of the Jesuit life that we have been focused on since Father Arrupe.*

I realized that Father Arrupe had a wonderful intuition. We can learn a lot in these areas, and we can become better religious because the people we get involved with give us a taste of reality. So whatever we say or claim has to be tested with reality. These people are the living reality--people with faith, of whatever faith it is. It is sometimes a popular faith not very much educated, other times a very deep faith; other times more sophisticated. But this is the reality test for us, for our spirituality, and even for our faith at times.

Now and then you see that without any theological training, without any formal education, some people have a depth of contact with God; it can be surprising, really surprising. I would say to myself: I wish I had this familiarity, this ease in relating to God. This is something that the Japanese Catholic community always finds challenging: when a Japanese coming from a tradition of Buddhism or Confucianism goes to the sacred space, he becomes formal. You try to be clean and pure. You come there with a certain seriousness. In fact, the Japanese Church has a very serious face.

Then you see Filipinos coming to church. They enter the building as if it was an extension of their homes. They talk with each other and they are happy before God. They sing and dance; little children dance and run around. It is a shock for many Japanese; but then they begin to reflect. They see that these people who have so many difficulties find in church a moment of joy, a moment of hope. So this is really an eye-opener for them. And I think it is not only for the ordinary Japanese, but for all of us. Where do we find our joys? Sometimes we have very expensive joys, while these people find very simple joys and get new energy. This is always a reality test that is very helpful for our spirituality of prayer, to make it more real, more concrete, more down to earth.

*Did you have opportunities, over the years, for contacts with Jesuits of various age groups, with the men of the younger generations?*

I have always been with young Jesuits, because I have been teaching theology to our scholastics. I am very comfortable with young people--not only comfortable but I enjoy the vitality and the ideas, the imagination, all the creativity that you see in them. When I was working with the migrants, we had regular visits from young people who were interested in them. Some scholastics even asked to live in our house, which was a very good thing. It was an opportunity for them to know the environment and, for some of them, it was an eye-opener. I remember a Japanese scholastic who came there: it was a world that he really didn't know. In this popular neighborhood, everybody knows everybody. During the evaluation at the end of his stay, he said, "The thing that surprised me most is that in the streets people were looking at me." Because he was an outsider. So Japanese were surprised at one Japanese environment that was different from their usual one. That was very helpful for him.

Then, in the last three years, as a moderator in Manila, my office was next to the scholasticate. I dealt with the scholastics quite often and would have lunch with them every week. They would also come quite often to consult and talk. So I have been very close to the young.

*How has the job of moderator of the Conference of Jesuit Provincials in East Asia and Oceania prepared you for your new responsibilities as Superior general?*

One thing I have learned is that if you have good provincials, the work goes very well. I think I've been blessed there; the present group of provincials and major superiors is excellent-- cooperative, open, feeling a lot of solidarity with each other, helping each other. Anytime we had a problem, I would just inform them. Once I wrote a letter saying one region was in financial difficulties: can you help? In less than two weeks, I had all the money. They were willing to help.

In Timor we needed a large amount of money to buy a piece of land. Immediately two provinces offered to help, not as a loan but as a gift. The same in Vietnam that is beginning to function as a province: immediately three provinces helped. When you work with people like this, your work is very easy. I think that this is a challenge for me here; part of my job is to make sure as far as possible that we have the right people as provincials or major superiors, because that makes a real difference.

Another thing that I found very helpful and I hope it can be applied to the whole Society is the desire in our assistancy for more transparency across the provinces. Traditionally, the provinces have high walls; each one is an independent unit. Those who are outside the province don't know anything about their neighbor province. Now we want to make these walls porous and transparent. For instance, we are now sharing the accounts of all the provinces in our region, so all the provinces know where the money is which makes everybody vulnerable. I think that kind of sharing would create an openness that can help the Society to become more universal. In a globalized world, information is a key point. Therefore, the more we know about each other, the more we can cooperate, discern together and help each other.

### **PART III: The new Superior General**

*That brings us to your new life as Superior General of the Society of Jesus. The question of your age has come up when you were elected. What are the advantages and disadvantages, in your opinion, of taking this responsibility of leading the Society of Jesus at this moment of your life?*

During the murmurations, the electors were talking with one another to look for the person who would be the best as our next general. I became really concerned when, on the third day, many people asked me about my health. I have never been in any community where Jesuits were so concerned with it. When I saw so many people asking "how is your health," I began to worry about what could happen. Of course, the question had to do with age; they were concerned.

What are the advantages and disadvantages? The disadvantages are clear: with age comes less energy. For instance, if now I still feel quite comfortable in traveling, I don't know how much

traveling I will be able to do in the coming years. Whether extensive travels to visit all the houses will be possible, I don't know. My ability to be imaginative and creative probably would not be as fresh as for a younger man. These are obvious disadvantages.

But there are advantages. First you have more experience, you are more realistic, less utopian, and you know a little more what you can expect and what you cannot expect. I will still continue to expect a lot of things from the Jesuits, but at my age you are more aware of human weaknesses. You might know not to demand too much, not to expect too much so that you won't be disappointed too often. You can see this as advantages.

Then, also, you know a little more how to go about things; it's not a question of demanding, it's a question of facilitating communication and letting people be more aware. Everything comes from awareness: without awareness, we go nowhere. Take all that is happening with ecology; without awareness nothing is possible. Doing things just out of duty, because we are Christians, or because we are religious, doesn't go very far. But if we become aware of the new dimensions of our world, we can get involved. But we will see: it depends also how my health and my energy level go. The Congregation is taking a risk with me.

*What is your image of the first General of the Society of Jesus, what do you especially appreciate in Saint Ignatius?*

Of Ignatius, what I have always admired and found very attractive is his depth. This is something that I hope also for the Society. In whatever issue we are, theological or pastoral, personal or administrative, I think that we have a vocation for depth. Ignatius really went very deep into his discernment, very deep into his personality, very deep into spirituality, very deep into helping people and finding when help is help and when help is not help. And at the same time his vision was very wide. Deep and wide. Both are related; the deeper you go, the more free of your immediate limits you become, and you are able to see wider.

These things I find very challenging and very attractive. I would add another quality of Ignatius: the courage to start. So I like and admire Ignatius very much. I know that he was limited and that he probably made mistakes sometimes in his way of proceeding, in little things. But there is no way you can go as deep as he did. And this is always challenging.

*And as someone who left Spain and went to Asia, how strongly have you been influenced by Saint Francis Xavier?*

Certainly I have been influenced by Francis Xavier, but my relationship with him has not been so constant. When I was young, of course, Francis Xavier was the hero, the model: his enthusiasm,

his fire, his openness to go anywhere in the world, his dreams. I remember that as a young man I liked very much a drama by Jose María Pemán, “The Divine Impatient.”

But then, being in Japan, I realized that he is not a universal, popular saint. And he made some mistakes in India. People who are aware of those mistakes have a tendency to put him down, in terms of a model for missions, especially in Asia, maybe especially in Japan, where people are very sensitive to dialogue, to respect for conscience.

I began to look at Francis Xavier with a critical eye. But then, I think he showed me his greatness when I looked at who he became in Japan. In India he still was the son of his theology and of a particular school. But when he went to Japan, he met people. That is something I see as extremely important. He met people and in these meetings he realized that he was not totally right. He began to listen, and to respect, and to admire. As a missionary he changed; he opened a style that was later taken by Matteo Ricci and others. But Francis Xavier was the one who could make the change; and I think that he showed a greatness that continues to inspire me. So, it’s not so much the man on fire, but the man who had the ability to change his presuppositions. You have to learn.

In Japan, for instance, we were preparing a congress on Saint Francis Xavier, and we had a meeting with bishops of the south where Xavier had lived. The bishop of Fukuoka wasn’t very happy. He said, “I don’t know whether we should be part of the celebration because Francis Xavier only passed through Fukuoka and the only thing he did there was to quarrel with the local Buddhist monk.”

But that quarrel is extremely interesting. Xavier went to the monk to scold him because he was not giving good example to his Buddhist faithful. Xavier did not go there to convince him to become a Christian; he went there to tell him: “Look, you are there to help people and you are not helping them, because your life is not good. You have to help your people to become better.” And that’s a tremendous insight into how God works in other people, even in a Buddhist monk, for instance in helping his disciples to become more faithful.

*With your experience in Asia, would you have in mind some concrete ways of bringing closer together the East and the West within the Society of Jesus? Is it one of your tasks or of your projects?*

Well, I wouldn’t put it like that, saying “my task is to bring together East and West.” But I think that what changes us in any line is encounters. You meet people with a certain depth, people who are different; then you begin to change. So, my hope is that I can help--and this starts with the Jesuits at the General Congregation—in meeting each other without barriers, without prejudice, to get to know each other. Then it will be possible to appreciate what the others have to offer.

And that's the way East and West can best meet. Academic things can help to get the words; but it is personal encounters that make the difference in everything: in social apostolate, in inter-cultural encounters, in spirituality.

*Although you are waiting for the General Congregation to indicate the priorities of the Society, are there some geographical areas of the world that you plan to visit in the not too far future, as the new Superior General?*

Someone might say about me: "This fellow's ignorance is encyclopedic." Well, I feel that there are so many things I don't know about the Society and about the world. If you ask me which areas I would like to visit first, I think Africa comes first to my mind. I've never been there. It is not just a region of the world, it's a whole world in itself. So I think I should know much more about Africa and I intend to visit it at the first opportunity.

And then Latin America. I've been there for short visits, but I just went to Lima, Bogota, Mexico, Buenos Aires. You don't see Latin America like this. Therefore Latin America is on my list. And then Eastern Europe. These are the three parts of the world that I know the least. After that, of course, I would have to visit India a little more. I have been there three times, but India is immense. And let me add that, maybe because of the distance I took over the years, I should learn a little more about Spain.

Anywhere you look there is a lot to learn. And now I cannot just say "I have a general idea." I must go deeper into the reality of things, at least to avoid making big mistakes out of ignorance.

More than that, about my future as a general; I don't know yet. I feel very limited for the job, ignorant about many things, and I feel that my first task is to learn, to learn much more. Which is OK. That was the first experience I had when I was sent to the Pastoral Institute. I was in Japan and then all of a sudden, I was sent to Manila, to be the director of that institute at the service of all Asia.

I felt very inadequate, but then I realized that that was my strong point. Because I did not know, I could listen. When you are for very long in one place, you might know too much and then stop listening. Because you know the words and because the words are the same, you think you already know. But you have to realize that the music is different: the words are the same but the music is different. Listening to the music is as important as listening to the words.

*That could be a very good conclusion, but is there anything else you would like to tell, at the beginning of your service as Superior General of the Jesuits?*

I think I have said practically what I wanted to say. If I were to add something, it would be that for everything--whether it is spirituality or social apostolate, whatever it might be--there is no shortcut. There is always a long way; real change and real insights come through a long process. The first step in all of them is contact--contact with persons, contact with situations.

Father Arrupe insisted very much on insertion, contact with people. Even at the Roman Curia, they had these "Arrupe hours," time the members of the staff were supposed to go out to meet people, not to stay within the walls. I think this is essential. Without meeting people, we can be very theoretical. We can spend a lot of energy and time discussing theoretically; and it is very often in these contexts that we fight with each other, right?

But, reality is not there. Reality is in how people struggle for life, for making a living, for keeping love and deepening love, raising and keeping a family, the relationships. So this is something I would like to keep in mind all along in my new responsibilities. Theory is good in order to put together experience, but if there is no experience, then theory becomes very weak.

*Thank you very much, Father Nicolás.*