



The service of the Society of Jesus in times of disaster

2012/03

TO ALL MAJOR SUPERIORS

Dear Father,

Today, on the 390th anniversary of the canonization of Sts. Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier, I would like to share with you some thoughts on the service the Society of Jesus is called to give in times of natural disasters.

Ignatius, Francis Xavier and the first companions, knowing that “love ought to manifest itself more in deeds than in words” (Spiritual Exercises, No. 230), were committed to serving their neighbors “by the ministry of the word, by spiritual exercises and works of charity” (*Formula of the Institute*). We might recall, for example, that for several months in the winter of 1538-39, the city of Rome experienced an extraordinary series of natural disasters: after a failed harvest, extremely harsh weather forced thousands of impoverished and hungry people from the countryside into the city. Most of those who fled the famine in their villages found little relief in Rome. Their hope for help quickly waned. They were forced to sleep in the streets and many died from starvation and exposure to the cold. With creativity and compassion, Ignatius and the first companions responded to this emergency by commandeering their limited resources in service of the poor. These learned men spent their days begging for bread, vegetables and firewood. At nightfall, they invited the homeless to share the hospitality of their home, where they fed and cared for 400 people at a time. As the winter progressed, the catastrophe grew as well, forcing Ignatius to ask for more support and find another house to accommodate the many refugees whose number had swelled to over 3,000 in a city whose total population was about 40,000.

With the inspiration of the “*opera caritatis*” (*Formula*) of the first companions in mind, we turn to our world today, where many continue to suffer in similar ways from unforeseen disasters. We need only recall some of the tragic events of the last two years: earthquakes in Haiti (January 12, 2010) and Chile (January 3, 2011); the triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown in Japan (March 11, 2011); floods in Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines (2011), and Madagascar (2012); drought and famine in the horn of Africa (2011-2012). These catastrophes have had tremendous effects on the lives of many people, causing death, displacement and enormous loss of property.

These and other disasters have given rise to an impressive movement of compassion and solidarity among many groups, organizations and individuals. Moved by the love of God that we ourselves have experienced, we are invited to collaborate with others in order to contribute what we can to alleviate the sufferings of people affected by these calamities. Already, so many Jesuits and our collaborators are doing this.



Drawing then on the experience of Jesuits and our friends and partners, in this letter, I wish to propose seven guidelines to be followed in places where the Society is present. I hope that these guidelines might help us render service that is both more effective and more evangelical.

1. Be present.

The first and most important guideline for response in emergencies rests with the Jesuit communities and institutions present in a location or country struck by a disaster. Past experience shows that, in responding to disasters, most lives are saved by the local population within the first days following the catastrophe. In our recent history, there have been numerous examples of individual Jesuits, institutions and provinces who have responded to the needs of people whose lives have been shattered by a natural disaster. Local Jesuits have opened their schools and institutions to provide shelter; novices and scholastics have reached out to serve people in the immediate aftermath of a tsunami or earthquake. This quick, compassionate and generous response of Jesuit communities and institutions has, in many instances, made a real difference. In the midst of a disaster, no matter how limited our resources are, our first and most important response must take place at the local level.

2. Serve spiritually and practically.

Our care for disaster victims must be both practical and spiritual. Providing financial help and material support is important, but not enough. Our presence must provide the consolation, healing and hope of the Gospel. Our service must be effective, but it must also give witness to our being disciples of the compassionate Lord, even and perhaps even more so, in multi-religious and multi-cultural contexts, where we must be in dialogue with and respectful of the faith of others. We know that, like the good Samaritan, the most practical and spiritual language is an all-embracing practical love for those in need.

3. Collaborate.

Responses to disasters usually call for the coordinated efforts of many people. Fortunately, disasters often call forth much generosity and even heroism among many sectors and persons. Whether we take the initiative or whether we cooperate with others in their initiatives, Jesuits are called to be open to and, indeed, to build up forms of collaboration.

This collaboration can begin within the Province itself, building networks of partnership and shared service among institutions and communities, between Jesuits and our collaborators. In a special way, we can invite or work with young people in our ministries, whose idealism, energy and generosity are often called forth in a special way during times of calamities. We should be ready to humbly and generously cooperate with others in our immediate surroundings: the local Church, local Caritas organizations, other religious groups, or NGOs, as well as men and women of good will from other faiths. Collaboration also extends to the wider Society of Jesus: to Provinces, Conferences and other international Jesuit networks, such as JRS.

4. Share information.

When a disaster takes place in one place, out of friendship and fraternal concern, Jesuits in other places want to know how their brothers in the stricken area are; how the people, the



country or city is affected; how they can help. Messages of solidarity and concern, and promises of prayers, are often shared among Jesuits within a Province or in different Provinces. These spontaneous exchanges of information are important and valuable signs of our universal brotherhood.

In cases of major disasters, a more formal process of sharing information is important. The Provincial of the affected area or his Delegate should communicate directly with both the President of the Jesuit Conference and with the Superior General (through the Regional Assistant) in Rome, sending up-to-date reports that may include requests for assistance, where needed. In order to raise funds and coordinate efforts, accurate and clear information is crucial.

5. Show and welcome international solidarity.

While recognizing the importance of local action, we must not neglect the universal solidarity of the whole Society of Jesus. Those who suffer from the consequences of disasters receive much encouragement and strength from knowing that they are not alone in their struggles. This solidarity is expressed in many ways: creating networks of international awareness and concern; using social networks to promote international attention; organizing prayer services and movements of advocacy, etc. It often takes the form of contributing financial resources to support immediate emergency relief efforts. It is important to remember that this support is often more needed in the second phase of early recovery or the third phase of rehabilitation, after other agencies have left the disaster area or after international media has lost interest and turned to other issues.

At times, Jesuits from different countries need to be ready to be sent to serve and offer support in calamity-stricken areas. At the same time, it is important that local Jesuits in these places be open to international help, when needed. When Jesuits from different Provinces and lay or religious partners from all over the world work together in such situations, they are confronted with much pain, need, and tension. In these difficult situations, Jesuits and collaborators have to help one another be witnesses of Christ, not allowing our cultural or national differences distract us from working together to serve the needs of the suffering.

6. Be transparent.

Transparency and accountability are professional standards which need to be met in any project that the Society takes responsibility for. We must be mindful of our customary respect for the intentions of donors.

7. Think long term.

As mentioned above, much support is often needed later after the immediate emergency phase, especially when other agencies have left the disaster area, and when media attention has moved on to other concerns. Our compassion and our commitment need to be more enduring, because recovery is often a long and complex process.

Moreover, when the most immediate crisis is over, it is important to reflect on root causes of the destruction, so as to prevent the repetition of these catastrophes. Very often, human decisions, actions, and policies are partially responsible for what appear to be natural calamities; often, for example, climate change, environmental irresponsibility, poor disaster-



preparedness and warning systems, contribute to the suffering and destruction. Thus, it is good that some Jesuits and Jesuit works dedicate themselves to studying long-term measures for reducing or eliminating risks, or in training programs to change behaviors and limit the impact of disasters on people, or in helping craft and advocate sounder, more sustainable environmental policies. These preventive initiatives are an integral and important part of our service.

When we reflect on the lives of Father Ignatius, Francis Xavier and the first companions, we see that they never forgot the poor, and that their ministries always included compassionate service to the suffering, as an essential element of their following of Christ. I share these reflections then, on the anniversary of the canonization of St. Ignatius and St. Francis Xavier, as a way of reminding the Society to remember the poor. I invite Jesuit communities and works to reflect on these guidelines, with a view to action and implementation. I pray that we Jesuits continue to live in the spirit of our founders, especially in the face of the many disasters and dramatic instances of suffering in our world today, offering, with humility and generosity, our compassion, solidarity and service.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Adolfo Nicolás, S.I.
Superior General

Rome, 12 March 2012

(Original: English)