



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE FATHERS OF THE GENERAL CONGREGATION
OF THE SOCIETY OF JESUS**

*Clementine Hall
Thursday, 21 February 2008*

Dear Fathers of the General Congregation of the Society of Jesus,

I am pleased to welcome you today as your demanding work is reaching its conclusion. I thank the new Superior General, Fr Adolfo Nicolás, for expressing your sentiments and your commitment to respond to the expectations that the Church has of you. I spoke to you of this in the [Message I addressed to Rev. Fr Kolvenbach](#) and - through him - to the entire Congregation at the beginning of its work. I once again thank Fr Peter-Hans Kolvenbach for the valuable service he has rendered to your Order in governing it for almost a quarter of a century. I also greet the members of the new General Council and the Assistants who will help the Superior General in his most delicate task as the religious and apostolic guide of your entire Society.

Your Congregation is being held during a period of great social, economic and political change; of conspicuous ethical, cultural and environmental problems, of conflicts of all kinds; yet also of more intense communication between peoples, of new possibilities for knowledge and dialogue, of profound aspirations for peace. These are situations that deeply challenge the Catholic Church and her capacity for proclaiming to our contemporaries the word of hope and salvation. I therefore ardently hope that thanks to the results of your Congregation the entire Society of Jesus will be able to live out with renewed dynamism and fervour the mission for which the Spirit willed it in the Church and has preserved it for more than four and a half centuries with extraordinary apostolic fruitfulness. Today, in the ecclesial and social context that marks the beginning of this millennium, I would like to encourage you and your confreres to continue on the path of this mission in full fidelity to your original charism. As my Predecessors have said to you on various occasions, the Church needs you, relies on you and continues to turn to you with trust, particularly to reach those

physical and spiritual places which others do not reach or have difficulty in reaching. Paul VI's words remain engraved on your hearts: "Wherever in the Church, even in the most difficult and extreme fields, at the crossroads of ideologies, in the social trenches, there has been and there is confrontation between the burning exigencies of man and the perennial message of the Gospel, here also there have been, and there are, Jesuits" (*Address to the 32nd General Congregation of the Jesuits*, 3 December 1974; *ORE*, 12 December, n. 2, p. 4.).

As the Formula of your Institute says, the Society of Jesus was founded in the first place "for the defence and propagation of the faith". In an age when new geographical horizons were unfolding, Ignatius' first companions placed themselves at the Pope's disposal so that "he might use them wherever he deemed it would be for the greater glory of God and the benefit of souls" (*Autobiography*, n. 85). Thus, they were sent to proclaim the Lord to peoples and cultures that did not yet know him. They did so with a courage and zeal that have lived on to our day as an exemplary inspiration. The name of Francis Xavier is the most famous of all, but how many others one could give! The new peoples, who do not know the Lord or who do not know him well so that they cannot recognize him as the Saviour, are distant today not so much from the geographical as rather from the cultural viewpoint. It is not oceans or immense distances that challenge the heralds of the Gospel but the boundaries resulting from an erroneous or superficial vision of God and man that stand between faith and human knowledge, faith and modern science, faith and the commitment to justice.

The Church thus urgently needs people with a deep and sound faith, a well-grounded culture and genuine human and social sensitivity, of Religious and priests who dedicate their lives to being on these very frontiers to bear witness and to help people understand that on the contrary there is profound harmony between faith and reason, between the Gospel spirit, the thirst for justice and initiatives for peace. Only in this way will it be possible to make the Lord's true Face known to the many for whom he is still concealed or unrecognizable. The Society of Jesus should therefore give preferential attention to this. Faithful to its best tradition, it must persevere in taking great pains to form its members in knowledge and virtue and not to be content with mediocrity, since confrontation and dialogue with the very different social and cultural contexts and the diverse mentalities of today's world is one of the most difficult and demanding tasks. This quest for quality and for human, spiritual and cultural validity must also characterize the whole of the Jesuits' many-faceted formative and educative activities as they come into contact with people of every sort wherever they may happen to be.

In its history, the Society of Jesus has lived extraordinary experiences of proclamation and encounter between the Gospel and world cultures - it suffices to think of Matteo Ricci in China, Roberto De Nobili in India or of the "Reductions" in Latin America. And you are rightly proud of them. I feel it is my duty today to urge you to set out once again in the tracks of your predecessors with the same courage and intelligence, but also with an equally profound motivation of faith and enthusiasm to serve the Lord and his Church. However, while you seek to recognize the signs of

God's presence and work in every corner of the world, even beyond the bounds of the visible Church, while you strive to build bridges of understanding and dialogue with those who do not belong to the Church or have difficulty in accepting her outlook or messages, at the same time you must loyally take on the Church's fundamental duty to remain faithful to her mandate and to adhere totally to the Word of God and to the Magisterium's task of preserving the integral truth and unity of Catholic doctrine. This not only applies to the personal commitment of individual Jesuits: since you are working as members of an apostolic body, you must also take care that your work and institutions always maintain a clear and explicit identity, so that the goal of your apostolic activity is neither ambiguous nor obscure and that many others may share in your ideals and join you effectively and enthusiastically, collaborating in your commitment to serve God and man.

As you are well aware, since in the Spiritual Exercises you have often undertaken meditation on "the two flags" under St Ignatius' guidance, our world is the theatre of a battle between good and evil where powerful negative forces are at work. These are what cause the dramatic situations of spiritual and material enslavement of our contemporaries which you have several times declared you wished to combat, committing yourselves to the service of faith and the promotion of justice. These forces are manifest today in many ways but are especially evident in such overriding cultural trends as subjectivism, relativism, hedonism and practical materialism. This is the reason why I asked you for a renewed commitment to promoting and defending Catholic doctrine, "especially... its key points, under severe attack today by the secular culture" (*Letter to Fr Kolvenbach*, 10 January 2008), of which I gave some examples in my Letter. The themes, continuously discussed and called into question today, of the salvation of all humanity in Christ, of sexual morality, of marriage and the family, must be explored and illumined in the context of contemporary reality but preserving that harmony with the Magisterium which avoids causing confusion and dismay among the People of God.

I know and understand well that this is a particularly sensitive and demanding point for you and for some of your confreres, especially those involved in theological research, interreligious dialogue and dialogue with contemporary cultures. For this very reason I have invited you and also invite you today to reflect in order to rediscover the fullest meaning of your characteristic "fourth vow" of obedience to the Successor of Peter, which does not only involve the readiness to be sent on mission to distant lands but also - in the most genuine Ignatian spirit of "feeling with the Church and in the Church" - "to love and serve" the Vicar of Christ on earth with that "effective and affective devotion" which must make you his invaluable and irreplaceable collaborators in his service for the universal Church.

At the same time, I encourage you to continue and to renew your mission among the poor and with the poor. Unfortunately, new causes of poverty and marginalization are not absent in a world marked by grave financial and environmental imbalances, from globalization processes prompted by selfishness rather than solidarity and by devastating and senseless armed conflicts. As I was able to reaffirm to the Latin American Bishops gathered at the Shrine of Aparecida, "the

preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty (cf. II Cor 8: 9)". It is therefore natural that those who truly want to be a companion of Jesus really share in his love for the poor. For us, the option for the poor is not ideological but is born from the Gospel. Situations of injustice and poverty in today's world are numerous and tragic, and if it is necessary to seek to understand them and fight their structural causes, it is also necessary to penetrate to the very heart of man, to extirpate the deep roots of evil and sin that cut him off from God, without forgetting to meet people's most urgent needs in the spirit of Christ's charity. Gathering and developing one of Fr Arrupe's last far-sighted intuitions, your Society continues to do praiseworthy work in the service for refugees, who are often the poorest of the poor and in need not only of material aid but also of the deeper spiritual, human and psychological closeness that is very much a part of your service.

Lastly, I ask you to focus special attention on that ministry of Spiritual Exercises which has been a characteristic feature of your Society from the outset. The Exercises are not only the source of your spirituality and the matrix of your Constitutions but also a gift which the Spirit of the Lord has made to the entire Church. It is your task to continue to make them a valuable and effective means for the spiritual growth of souls, for their initiation to prayer, to meditation in this secularized world where God seems to be absent. Only last week I myself benefited from the [Spiritual Exercises](#), together with my closest collaborators of the Roman Curia, under the guidance of a distinguished confrere of yours, Cardinal Albert Vanhoye. In a time like ours when the confusion and multiplicity of messages and the speed of changes and situations makes it particularly difficult for our contemporaries to put order into their lives and respond with determination and joy to the call the Lord addresses to each one of us, the Spiritual Exercises are a particularly precious means and method with which to seek God, within us, around us and in all things, to know his will and to put it into practice.

In this spirit of obedience to God's will, to Jesus Christ, which also becomes humble obedience to the Church, I ask you to continue carrying out your Congregation's work and I join you in the prayer St Ignatius taught us at the end of the Exercises - a prayer which to me always seems too sublime in the sense that I hardly dare to say it, yet we must always be able to return to it: "Lord Jesus Christ, take all my freedom. My memory, my understanding and my will. All that I have and cherish you have given me. I surrender it all to be guided by your will. Your grace and your love are wealth enough for me. Give me these, Lord Jesus, and I ask for nothing more" (n. 234).