

A rough and unofficial translation of the address given by Pope Benedict XVI, to the 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, Rome, February 21, 2008. An official translation in English will be available soon.

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

I am pleased to welcome you today as your demanding jobs are entering the final stages. I thank the new Superior General, Father Adolfo Nicolas, for having interpreted your sentiments and your commitment to respond to the expectations that the Church places in you. As I mentioned in the message addressed to the Rev. Father Kolvenbach, and - through him - to all of your congregation at the beginning of your work. I once again thank Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach for his valuable service to the Governance of the Society for nearly a quarter century. I also greet the members of the new Council and the General Assistants who help the Superior General in his delicate task of guiding religious and apostolic work of your company.

Your congregation is taking place at a time of great social changes, economic, political problems accentuated by ethical, cultural and environmental conflicts of every kind, but also more intense communications between peoples, new possibilities for understanding and dialogue, and deep yearning for peace. These situations rise from the depth of the Catholic Church and its ability to announce to our contemporaries a word of hope and salvation. I therefore hope very much that all the Society of Jesus, thanks to the results of your congregation, can live with renewed zeal and fervor the mission which the Spirit has aroused in the Church for more than four and a half centuries, and which has been preserved with extraordinary richness of apostolic fruits. Today I want to encourage you and your brothers to continue on the road of this mission, in full fidelity to your original charism, in the Church and society that characterizes the beginning of this millennium. How many times have my predecessors told you, "the Church needs you, it counts on you and continues to trust in you to reach those physical and spiritual places where others fail to or have difficulty in reaching?" The words of Pope Paul VI remain engraved in your heart: "Wherever in the Church, even in the most difficult and extreme fields, in the crossroads of ideologies, in the front line between the deepest desires of man and the perennial message of the Gospel, there also there have been, and there are, Jesuits." (December 3 1974, the 32nd General Congregation).

As the Formula of your Institute says, the Society of Jesus is established primarily for "the defense and propagation of the faith." At a time which opened new horizons geographically, the first companions of Ignatius were made available to the Pope that "they might give themselves what he

considered to be for the greater glory of God and service of souls" (Autobiography, n. 85). So they were sent to proclaim the Lord to peoples and cultures that did not yet know him. They responded with courage and zeal that remain an example and inspiration to the present day: the name of St. Francis Xavier is the most famous of all, but how many other examples there could be! Today the new people who do not know the Lord, or who know evil, so as not knowing how to recognize the Savior, are not far away geographically. The obstacles challenging those who announce the Gospel are no longer seas and vast distances, rather they are the boundaries of a superficial vision of God and of man, which place obstacles in the way of faith and human knowledge, faith and science, faith and the commitment to justice.

Therefore, the Church is in urgent need of people of strong faith and deep cultural and genuine sensitivity to human and social needs – in urgent need of religious and priests who devote their lives to serve at these borders to testify and help to understand that there is a profound harmony between faith and reason, between the spirit of the gospel, thirst for justice and work for peace. Only then will it become possible to know the true face of the Lord in many who today remain hidden or unrecognizable. To these the Society of Jesus must be devoted to preferentially. Faithful to its best traditions, your Society must continue to train its members with great care in science, no less than in virtue, never content with mediocrity. The task of confrontation and dialogue with the social and cultural contexts of very different mentalities and different worlds today are among the most difficult and tiring. And this quest for quality and soundness - human, spiritual and cultural - must characterize the whole manifold training and education of Jesuits, for all types of people wherever they are.

In its history, the Society of Jesus has an extraordinary lived experience of the meeting between the Gospel and the cultures of the world - just think of Matteo Ricci in China, Robert De Nobili in India, or the "reductions" in Latin America. We are rightly proud. Now I feel a duty to urge you to follow the steps of your predecessors with the same courage and intelligence, but also an equally profound motivation of faith and passion to serve the Lord and his Church. However, while striving to recognize the signs of the times and the work of God in every place of the world, even beyond the confines of the Church visible - as you strive to build bridges of understanding and dialogue with those who do not belong to the Church or have difficulty in accepting its positions and messages - at the same time you bear the fundamental duty of the Church to remain true to its mandate to adhere fully to the Word of God, and the task of teaching to preserve the truth and unity of Catholic doctrine in his completeness. This applies not only for the personal commitment of individual Jesuits: Because you serve as members of an apostolic body, you must also be careful that your works and institutions always have a clear and explicit

identity, that the end of your apostolic activity does not remain ambiguous or obscure, so that many other people can share your ideals and join you effectively and with enthusiasm, joining in your commitment to the service of God and man.

As you well know from having made the meditation on the Two Standards under the direction of St. Ignatius, our world is the scene of a battle between good and evil, and there are powerful negative forces at work, causing those tragic situations of material and spiritual enslavement of our contemporaries, a situation against which you repeatedly declared your intention to fight, striving for the service of faith and promotion of justice. These forces occur today in many ways, but particularly clearly through cultural trends that often become dominant, such as subjectivism, relativism, hedonism, materialism utilitarianism. That is why I have asked your renewed commitment to promote and defend Catholic doctrine "particularly on the focal points today strongly attacked by secular culture, some of which I have exemplified in my letter. The issues today continually discussed and questioned, the salvation of all people in Christ, sexual morality, marriage and the family, must be deepened and illuminated in the context of contemporary reality, but keeping in harmony with the Magisterium, in a way which avoids causing confusion and doubt among the People of God.

I know and understand that this is particularly sensitive and challenging for you and several of your brothers, especially those engaged in theological research, in inter-religious dialogue and dialogue with the contemporary culture. Precisely for this reason, I have asked and I invite you to reflect again today, to find the fullest sense of what your characteristic fourth vow of obedience to the Successor of Peter, which does not only imply readiness to be sent on mission to far off lands, but also in true Ignatian spirit – to feel themselves “with the Church and in the Church” – to love and serve the Christ’s Vicar as precious and irreplaceable collaborators at the service of the Universal Church.

At the same time, I encourage you to continue and to renew your mission for the poor and with the poor. There are unfortunately new causes of poverty and marginalization in a world marked by serious economic imbalances and environmental processes of globalization driven by selfishness rather than solidarity, from armed conflicts both devastating and absurd. As I had the opportunity to reiterate 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 for us became poor, to enrich us with his poverty (2 Cor 8.9). It is therefore natural that whoever would really be a Companion of Jesus, would really share the love for the poor. Our choice to serve the poor is not an ideological one, but it comes from the Gospel. There are numerous

dramatic situations of injustice and poverty in the world today, and if there is a need to fight against the structural causes of such situations, then there is also the need to fight the very roots of such evil found in the hearts of man, that sin which separates him from God, without forgetting to come to the aid of those who are in urgent need of help in the spirit of Christ's Charity. By collecting and developing one of the last enlightened insights of Father Arrupe, your company continues to engage in meritorious service for refugees, who are often the poorest of the poor and who are in need not only of material relief, but also that deeper spiritual closeness, human and psychological, that it is more of your own service.

Specific recognition is reserved for the Ministry of the Spiritual Exercises that from the beginning has been characteristic of your company. The Exercises are the source of your spirituality and the foundation of your Constitutions, but also are a gift of the Spirit of the Lord for the entire Church. It is up to you to continue to make them a valuable and effective tool for the spiritual growth of souls, their initiation into prayer, meditation, in this secularized world in which God appears to be absent. Just in the last week I took advantage of the Spiritual Exercises, together with my closest collaborators in the Roman Curia, under the guidance of your esteemed brother, Cardinal. Albert Vanhoye. At a time like today, when the confusion and the multiplicity of messages, rapid changes and situations, makes it particularly difficult for our contemporaries to put their lives in order and respond with determination and with joy to the call that the Lord addresses to each of us. The Spiritual Exercises are a way and a method especially valuable to try and find God in us, around us and in everything, to know his will and to put it into practice.

In this spirit of obedience to the will of God, in Jesus Christ, who also is humble obedience to the Church, I invite you to continue and to complete the work of your congregation, and I join you in a prayer taught by St. Ignatius at the end Exercises – a prayer I always pray, which seems too big, almost to the point that I dare put it in words, however, we should always repeat it again: "Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my intellect and all my will, everything that I have and hold, you have given them to me. O Lord, I return them to you as yours, to be governed by your will. Give me your love and your grace, and that is enough for me."(Sp. Ex. 234).

Benedict XVI – February 21, 2008