

**To the Reverend Father**  
**PETER-HANS KOLVENBACH, S.J.**  
**Superior General of the Society of Jesus**

On the occasion of the 35<sup>th</sup> General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, it is my fervent desire to extend to you and to all those taking part in the Assembly my most cordial greetings, together with an assurance of my affection and of my constant spiritual nearness to you. I know how important for the life of the Society is this event which you are celebrating, and I further know that, consequently, it has been prepared with great care. This is a providential occasion for impressing upon the Society of Jesus that renewed ascetic and apostolic impulse which is wished by all, so that Jesuits might fulfill completely their mission and confront the challenges of the modern world with that faith to Christ and to the Church which distinguished the prophetic action of Saint Ignatius of Loyola and his first companions.

The Apostle writes to the faithful of Thessalonica of having announced to them the gospel of God, “encouraging you and imploring you” — Paul specifies — “to comport yourselves in a manner worthy of God who calls you to his kingdom and to his glory” (1 Th. 2:12), and he adds: “Indeed on account of this we continually thank God because, having received the divine word preached by us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it truly is, as the word of God, which works in you who believe” (1 Th. 2:13). The word of God therefore is first “received”, i.e., heard, and then — penetrating all the way to the heart — it is “welcomed”, and who receives it recognizes that God speaks through the agent sent to deliver it: in this way the word acts in believers. As then, so even today evangelization demands a total and faithful adhesion to the word of God: adhesion first of all to Christ and to attentive listening to his Spirit which guides the Church; humble obedience to the Pastors whom God has placed to guide his people; and prudent and frank dialogue with the social, cultural, and religious appeals of our time. All this presupposes, as we know, an intimate communion with Him who calls us to be friends and disciples, a unity of life and of action which is fed by listening to his word, by contemplation and by prayer, by detachment from the mentality of the world and by unceasing conversion toward his love so that it may be He, the Christ, who lives and works in each of us. Here is the secret of authentic success for the apostolic and missionary commitment of every Christian, and even more of all those called to a more direct service of the Gospel.

Such an awareness is certainly well present among those taking part in the General Congregation, and I am eager to honor the great work already completed by the preparatory commission which in the course of 2007 has examined the postulates sent by Provinces and indicated the themes to be faced. I would like to direct my thoughts of gratitude in the first place to you, dear and venerated Father Superior General, who since 1983 has guided the Society of Jesus in an enlightened, wise, and prudent manner, seeking in every way to maintain it in the channel of its founding charism. For objective reasons, you have at various times asked to be relieved of so heavy a post, assumed with a great sense of responsibility at a moment in your Order's history which was not easy. I express to you my most heartfelt gratitude for the service you have rendered to the Society of Jesus and, more generally, to the Church. My sentiments of gratitude extend to your closest collaborators, to the participants of the General Congregation, and to all Jesuits scattered in every part of the world. To all and to each should arrive this greeting from the Successor of Peter, who follows with affection and esteem the multiple and appreciated apostolic works of the Jesuits, and who encourages all to continue in the path opened by your holy Founder and walked by innumerable hosts of your brothers dedicated to the cause of Christ, many of whom are inscribed by the Church among its saints and blessed. From heaven, may they protect and sustain the Society of Jesus in the mission which it carries out in this our current age, marked by numerous and complex social, cultural, and religious challenges.

Indeed regarding this theme, how can one not recognize the valid contribution which the Society offers to the Church's activity in various fields and in many ways? Truly a great and meritorious contribution, one which only the Lord will be able to rightly reward! As did my venerated Predecessors, the Servants of God Paul VI and John Paul II, I too gladly wish to take this opportunity of a General Congregation to bring such a contribution to light and, at the same time, to offer for your common reflection some considerations which might be of encouragement for you and a stimulus to implement ever better the ideal of the Society, in full fidelity to the Magisterium of the Church, such as described in the following formula which is well familiar to you: "To serve as a soldier of God beneath the banner of the Cross and to serve the Lord alone and the Church, his spouse, under the Roman Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ on earth" (Apostolic Letter *Exposcit debitum*, 21 July 1550). One treats here of a "peculiar" fidelity confirmed also, by not a few among you, in a vow of immediate obedience to the Successor of

Peter “*perinde ac cadaver*”. The Church has even more need today of this fidelity of yours, which constitutes a distinctive sign of your Order, in this era which warns of the urgency of transmitting in an integral manner to our contemporaries — distracted by many discordant voices — the unique and immutable message of salvation which is the Gospel, “not as the word of men, but as it truly is, as the word of God”, which works in those who believe.

That this might come to pass, it is indispensable — as earlier the beloved John Paul II reminded participants of the 34<sup>th</sup> General Congregation — that the life of the members of the Society of Jesus, as also their doctrinal research, be always animated by a true spirit of faith and communion in “humble fidelity to the teachings of the Magisterium” (*Insegnamenti*, vol. I, pp. 25-32). I heartily hope that the present Congregation affirms with clarity the authentic charism of the Founder so as to encourage all Jesuits to promote true and healthy Catholic doctrine. As Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, I had the opportunity to appreciate the valid collaboration of Jesuit Consultors and experts, who, in full fidelity to their charism, contributed in a considerable way to the faithful promotion and reception of the Magisterium. Certainly this is not a simple undertaking, especially when called to announce the Gospel in very different social and cultural contexts and when having to deal with different mentalities. I therefore sincerely appreciate such labor placed at the service of Christ, labor which is fruitful for the true good of souls in the measure in which one lets oneself be guided by the Spirit, remaining humble as regard the teachings of the Magisterium, having reference to those key principles of the ecclesial vocation of the theologian which are delineated in the Instruction *Donum veritatis*.

The evangelizing work of the Church very much counts on the formative responsibility which the Society has in the areas of theology, of spirituality, and of mission. And, really so as to offer the entire Society of Jesus a clear orientation which might be a support for generous and faithful apostolic dedication, it could prove extremely useful that the General Congregation reaffirm, in the spirit of Saint Ignatius, its own total adhesion to Catholic doctrine, in particular on those neuralgic points which today are strongly attacked by secular culture, as for example the relationship between Christ and religions; some aspects of the theology of liberation; and various points of sexual morality, especially as regards the indissolubility of marriage and the pastoral care of homosexual persons.

Reverend and dear Father, I am convinced that the Society senses the historic importance of this General Congregation and, guided by the Holy Spirit, wants once again — as the beloved John Paul II said in January 1995 — to reaffirm “unequivocally and without any hesitation its specific way to God, which St. Ignatius sketched in the *Formula Instituti*: loving fidelity to your charism will be the certain source of renewed effectiveness” (Insegnamenti, vol. XVIII/1, 1995, p. 26). Furthermore, the words my venerated Predecessor Paul VI directed to the Society in another analogous circumstance appear so very current: “All of us must be vigilant so that the necessary adaptation will not be accomplished to the detriment of the fundamental identity or essential character of the role of the Jesuit as is described in the *Formula Instituti* as the history and particular spirituality of the Order propose it, and as the authentic interpretation of the very needs of the times seem still to require it. This image must not be altered; it must not be distorted.” (Insegnamenti, vol. XII, 1974, pp. 1181-1182)

The continuity of the teachings of the Successors of Peter stands to demonstrate the great attention and care which they show toward the Jesuits, their esteem for you, and the desire to be able to count always on the precious contribution of the Society to the life of the Church and to the evangelization of the world. I entrust the General Congregation and the entire Society of Jesus to the intercession of your holy Founder and the saints of your Order, and to the maternal protection of Mary, so that every spiritual son of Saint Ignatius might be able to keep before his eyes “first of all God and then the nature of this his Institute” (*Formula Instituti*, 1). With such sentiments, I assure you of a constant remembrance in prayer and in a heartfelt way I impart to you, Reverend Father, and to the Fathers of the General Congregation and to the entire Society of Jesus, a special Apostolic Blessing.

Vatican, 10 January 2008

**Benedict PP XVI**

(Original: Italian)