

## Consolation, Compassion and the Church: Challenges of the Pope

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**L**istening to the address of Pope Francis at the General Congregation was a very moving experience for all the 220 delegates of the General Congregation. It was truly a historic moment! A moment of change in our personal lives and collective understanding of ourselves as Jesuits.

One of the best summaries and reflections of the Pope's address, with which I fully resonate, is given by Antonio Spadaro, a participant of the General Congregation and the editor of the prestigious Italian Journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*, which has published a long and now most famous interview of the Pope. The following section is adapted from an article written by him and translated by Reyanna Rice.

### **The Society of Jesus: A “Blurred” Portrait**

The Pope began his talk to the General Congregation by painting a blurred portrait of the Society of Jesus, as opposed to a “still shot”. He described the Society of Jesus in terms of multifaceted framework and in motion. The Society itself—he said—is “in progress”, in becoming. This makes it flexible, freely elastic. He framed it in terms of journey of free and obedient people, reports Spadaro.

The Society cannot look at reality from a balcony, study it, analyze it and, still more condemn it. We must get out of it, walk down and stay at the crossroads of history, at the social front lines. And when we really walk we get down on the street. It is here that we experience the “confrontation between the deepest desires of the human person and the perennial message of the Gospel”, as Pope Paul VI said. In this walking and encounter, reflection, contemplation and action go hand in hand if we do not want to be ideological.

### **The Way: Not Fixed Objectives but Mobile Horizons**

It is not enough to walk. We must ask: Where must you go? In his discourse to the Congregation, Pope Francis implicitly warned us about holding too many clear and distinct objectives as in business planning. The horizon that orients the journey of the Society of Jesus is the Glory of God who is always greater, that we can ever imagine. In other words, the Society of Jesus is called to walk into a horizon that changes continually and enlarges. Thus the portrait of the Society painted by the Pope is then dynamic, “incomplete” in itself and “open”.

So the Jesuits are called not to “reach objectives” like in a shooting gallery, but to walk on, in the spirit of the Gospel, accompanying the processes in which human beings are involved, keeping in mind the horizon as the greater glory of God. They must recognise the horizons as horizons as accompanying our very journey and not as conquering spaces. In other words, we are called to walk with the Lord Jesus. We are challenged to accompany him and to go where he goes. And at times we may not even know where he is going. We discover it by our actual walking, being ready to change direction, moves and methods with him, something which I personally experienced during the days together at the General Congregation.

Only if the Society walks with Jesus towards this ever widening horizon is it able to understand itself. Thus the Society of Jesus

is mobile. This is why a Jesuit feels at home anywhere in the world. Thus he does not become rigid functionaries. He does not become entangled with himself and his plans. He does not revolve around his own plans and ambitions in a never-ending maze. Accompanied by the Spirit he moves on and he discovers himself on the way, together with the fellow pilgrims.

### **The Only “Priority”: Discernment**

This walking however is a journey which is neither comfortable nor solitary. It is not a journey to find oneself, not even for one’s own personal salvation, the Pope reminds us. He tells us that to walk in Ignatius’ words means first of all “to labour strenuously in giving aid toward the salvation and perfection of the souls of their neighbours”. Therefore, the Pope doesn’t entrust to the Society objectives or preferences. He does not provide us with specific lists of works to be carried out or objectives to reach or territories to “conquer”.

Rather he simply says that the Society “is where it needs to be”. Precisely therein lies the prophetic and diplomatic audacity that the Pope has wished the Jesuits.

The Pope implies that the content of the mission is the fruit of a continuous discernment and always in a process of development. The center of the Society’s Mission remains the “Formula of the Institute”: the rest belongs to history, to becoming, to the circumstances. Thus the Society lives and must live tensions, it is restless, notes Spadaro.

In this way Pope Francis wants to touch the vibrating heart, the hot and powerful core of the Society’s charism, the “Formula” exactly: he removes the layers that protect it and he shows the Jesuits the essentials to remember. The Pope urges them to return to the heart, or rather of a “fire”. So he recalled one of first Jesuits, Fr. Jeronimo Nadal, who said: “The Society is zealous”, that is, fervently boiling from within with the fire of love.

### **Our Strength: The Ways of Proceeding**

Though the Pope does not provide us with any specific projects, he does provide us with three “ways of proceeding”

for the mission that he summarizes in three words: “consolation”, “compassion” and “feeling with the Church”, through discernment.

The expression used by Francis is remarkable: He says that “we can take a step forward”. It is not the invitation to take the “long jump”, but to take a step at a time, one after the other. There is a progress to which we are always called, and that is to do with humility and decision. Here’s the three ways:

**Consolation:** The Pope notes that we live in a wounded world and the Jesuit is also a wounded man. In fact, the world is often moved by fear and reacts lending an ear to the desolations and fears. Only if we experience the restoring strength of consolation in the heart of our wounds—both as people and as the Society—can we wake ourselves up from our torpor, walking with and helping others, according to the Pope. Then we must ask for consolation “insistently”. The Pope is emphatic that the usual state of the Jesuit must be one of consolation. This is the experience Francis invites us experience: to let ourselves be consoled by God and to live our ministry as a minister of consolation bringing into the world reconciliation, justice, mercy. Here we are called to be open to God’s grace. The Pope add: “the nearest human attitude to God’s grace is humor”.

**Compassion:** The Pope asks us to let ourselves be moved by the crucified Lord. Standing at the foot of the cross, we are to feel ourselves loved by him. This is the experience that leads us to be sensitive to the pain of humanity, to experience compassion. “Where there is pain, there the Society is” said Father Arrupe, our former Superior General of the Society of Jesus. Only if we experience the healing strength of the compassion of Jesus crucified can we be healed and heal others. This pushes us to commitment for justice and to be with the poor and for their part, notes Spadaro.

**Discernment or “Feeling” with the Church:** The Pope asks us discern and to “feel with the Church”, our Mother. He notes

that there are many ways to reform the Church, but some of these ways are anti-ecclesial, fruit of the “bad spirit”. Instead, Francis says that it is not enough to reform the Church because it may be an ideological operation and therefore “clerical”. We need to do it with the “good spirit”, through fruit of discernment, in an “ecclesial” manner. The Jesuit must live within the Church in its concrete history, and not in their own utopias and our desires, reports Spadaro. And at times that may involve carrying our cross and experiencing humiliation, he warns. We also need to listen to all the criticisms, even those that are malicious, in a spirit of discernment. We must never close doors to others and their criticism. This is not to justify questionable positions, but to leave the space open to listen to what the Spirit is doing or telling us. The Jesuit acts within the Church trusting the action of the Spirit within it.

### **Companions in a Common Journey**

At the end of this discourse, Francis turns to Mary, “Our Lady of the Street”. The Society is not only a group of men with the same ideals, but a group of friends who are on the street with Mary and Jesus, one step at a time. With blurred portraits, blurred horizons and always listening to the Spirit, when we are journeying together That will give us genuine consolation and the capacity to the compassionate and to be truly and humbling feeling with the Church.

### **Bibliography**

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