

Sent to the Frontiers

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In his recent encounter with the delegates of the 36th General Congregation of the Jesuits, Pope Francis reiterated the hopes his predecessors had placed in the Society, when he told his Jesuit companions: “the Church needs you, counts on you and continues to turn to you with confidence, particularly to reach the geographical and spiritual places where others do not reach, or find it difficult to reach.”

Where exactly may these places be, “where others do not reach”? Where are these frontier mission areas which are difficult to reach? It is clear from the Pope’s words that these frontiers are not merely geographical but also spiritual. In fact, these frontiers involve three primary aspects of human life: the intellectual, affective and spiritual. I will focus on three such frontiers where Jesuits have been present, continue to be present, and need to be present: the frontiers of the mind, the heart and the spirit.

Frontiers of the mind: Jesuits have been on the frontiers of intellectual investigation, discovery and innovation from the inception of the Society. There have been numerous Jesuit mathematicians, astronomers and scientists in different fields much before the suppression of the Society in 1773. After the Restoration in 1814, Jesuits have attempted to re-establish their primary apostolic priorities, and now run some of the best institutions of higher education and research in the Catholic

world. Jesuits have also been at the forefront of ecclesiastical sciences right from the time of the Council of Trent. In recent times, Karl Rahner in Theology and Bernard Lonergan in Philosophy stand out as two examples of Jesuits who have been pioneers in their respective fields. In India too, there are numerous Jesuit theologians who have inspired the Church to ground its religious experience and public proclamation in the local context, and sensitive to local needs.

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Frontiers of the heart: With the “option for the poor” stemming from Vatican II and then GC 32 (the 32nd General Congregation of the Jesuits), Jesuits have been challenging both the Church and the world to take the peripheries of humankind into consideration, and not just the centres of power, wealth and knowledge. This represents a necessary presence at the “frontiers of the heart,” in which humans are invited to transcend narrow horizons in order to

encounter others—especially the economic and politically vulnerable—in empathetic and socially productive ways. The Pope reminded the Jesuits at the GC not only to study and work at the centre—places which are economically and politically powerful—but also to have contact with the peripheries of our societies, and to be present and contribute apostolically at the borders of these peripheries. Among these many peripheries is the world of nature, from which we have been alienated on account of a narrow and misapplied rationalistic and scientific spirit.

Frontiers of the spirit: Another frontier at which Jesuits have manifested their presence is the “frontier of the spirit.” In his dialogue with the Jesuits at GC 36, Pope Francis points out to the examples of Matteo Ricci and Roberto de Nobili as persons who were able to recognize the worth and value of indigenous customs, and attempted to incorporate them within the Christian worldview and sacramental experience. In recent times, Jesuits have placed the Vatican II call for interreligious dialogue at the heart of their mission, attempting to develop and articulate interreligious and intercultural wisdom as a necessary ground for wholesome and collective human development.

These three frontiers are not discrete or separate, but in fact intertwined with one another. For example, we need intellectual acumen to challenge the presuppositions of our prevailing economic order—which has caused a widening gap between the rich and the poor—so that at the social level the poor do not need to continue to suffer. We need to employ a wise social analysis to explore the connections between globalization and religious terror. We need to recognize that economic and political forces are often the main reasons for interreligious suspicion and disharmony. Another example of the interrelationship of these three frontiers is the misperception of *Laudato Si'* as a “green encyclical” rather than something larger. In his dialogue with the Jesuits, the Pope points out instead that this encyclical is not only about environmental concern, but is in fact more deeply a social encyclical, indicating how the common good and especially the lives of the poor have been adversely affected by environmental negligence. In other words, the Pope is challenging the Jesuits to have an integrated sense of mission. Whatever work one is engaged in—whether intellectual, psychological, social or spiritual—it is imperative to see how a particular apostolate is mutually related to other dimensions of apostolic life.

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While responding to questions after his address to the Jesuits at the GC, the Holy Father emphasized the apostolic disposition of prophetic boldness: “today, more than ever, we need courage and prophetic audacity. We need a *parresia* for today, the prophetic

audacity of having no fear.” This prophetic audacity needs to be based on and coupled with ongoing discernment, so that what results is apostolic action that is wise, prudent and effective. The Pope challenged the Jesuits present to resist the temptation of cultivating a “restorationist” mentality, in which both Jesuits and others would want the Society to “go back to the glorious past” and go about as if the world around us has not changed over the years.

Perhaps the best contribution of the Society of Jesus to the Church and to the world is living out our vocation of being “frontier men,” charting new pathways in unfamiliar territories, so that people who follow may find newer and more relevant ways of relating with a world that is constantly in flux. This was the vocation of Ignatius and the early Jesuits who also lived in volatile times, in the wake of the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, and the breaking down of a traditional mentality in favour of a new scientific temper that was soon to possess Europe by way of the Enlightenment. The Holy Father is inviting and challenging Jesuits to be true to their fundamental vocation, motivated by a spirit of prophetic audacity, apostolic boldness, and ongoing creativity. Beneath all of these dispositions and drives is the instrument of methodical and careful spiritual discernment, which by itself is another significant contribution of the Jesuits to the Church and to the larger world.