

The New Jesuit General Part Two: *Has spirituality been replaced by ideology?*

Adolfo Nicolás SJ

In an exclusive interview given recently to the editors of Jesuit journals, Father Adolfo Nicolás, the new Superior General of the Society of Jesus, is questioned about the challenges now facing the Church, the Society and him personally. In this second of three parts, Fr Nicolás talks about the quest for justice, its connection with faith and spirituality, and the difference between the Western and the Eastern understanding of these issues.

The way in which the last General Congregations (from GC 32 to GC 34) formulated the commitment of the Society to “faith and justice”, “faith and culture”, “faith and inter-religious dialogue” has been perceived by some people more as ideological language than as an expression of deep spiritual conversion. Do you agree with this analysis?

No, I would not agree. With GC 32, particularly, the Society entered the territory of systems, ideologies, and sociological analysis and all these things. For many Jesuits that was unknown territory. And when you enter unknown territory, for a while you have to move *à tâtons*, you have to try. Indeed, we made mistakes and sometimes we were unilateral or criticized people who were doing more traditional ministries. Those were difficult years, but difficult years of searching in the dark and exploring new areas of work. Although I was not fully in the social apostolate – I was teaching theology – I had very good friends in social ministry. I have seen them trying very hard to live as Jesuits, a hundred percent, and I’ve seen a number of them rediscovering Jesuit spirituality within their social work.

If the heart is right, you can throw a person into the dark, and sooner or later they will find their way. And I think the Society is finding its way. Maybe sometimes Jesuits or outsiders have been too



impatient. We wanted from the very beginning to find the way without mistakes, and that’s not possible. Every time you have to make a big decision in the life of a group or a community there is going to be a period of uncertainties that will be more or less long or short. Sometimes we have lost some very good Jesuits because their superiors didn’t know how to handle the new challenge and put them in dilemmas that made sense twenty years earlier, but not in the new situations those people were in.

Now superiors have seen the goodness of those who have remained, realising that they are not just working in the social apostolate because they want to be stars but because they are really concerned with the poor. They want to live the gospel in fullness and at the same time they keep, as I mentioned before, the search for spirituality within that work. I have seen people who were totally immersed in their apostolic work in those years, and then created spaces of spirituality, even in non-Christian countries, realising that what many NGOs and many social activists need is spirituality, a place of rest, a place where they can stop and take hold of their heart and something deeper, precisely to keep their work a human and open work. I think we have gone through a difficult time but I will not accept this analysis that we Jesuits have become an

NGO. I think people are searching; and sometimes we are too active but that can happen even in a parish, not only in social work.

But in the past Jesuits used to have instruments for spiritual life, classical instruments that were thrown away in the sixties, when there was a need for change. Many of the traditional forms of piety and devotion were left aside and maybe sometimes nothing came in their place. Jesuits could go into the world and commit themselves to peace and justice and environmental things, but they lacked instruments to keep them spiritually awake.

What you are saying is very correct. We put aside whole sets of practices, and we didn't provide an alternative. For a while we moved in a vacuum. It was the time when people were shaken, and then some people who got scared wanted us to go back to the old set. The old had become unusable, but we didn't have an alternative to substitute it for. We needed a period of creativity.

The new spirituality that emerges out of this change is much more demanding because it always relates us to the poor, to people who are down to earth, touching suffering in life day by day. That new spirituality that is emerging now is much more demanding, and it requires that a person be consistent with the totality of himself. You cannot hide behind a habit or behind a practice.

We have to realise that real integration happens inside. Real integration is not inside in terms of, again, particular devotion, but in terms of putting together what is happening around us and bringing it inside us into our hearts. I think, when we today go through a number of crises, we end up realising again that the real process of integration is interior. And I think this is where St. Ignatius had tremendous experience and that's what he left to us. In the present times, now that people are disappointed with institutions and moving away from churches and religions, especially established religions – that is happening to Buddhism the same as in Christianity – people move from the established traditional religions to sects, to movements for whatever reason, and it's happening

everywhere (the Muslim world might be different). But it's all because we have lost the inner experience, and then people have to come back. People forget about the richness of human experience that is part of organized religion and how much they can learn from the experience that others have had that are part of the Church's tradition.

Since the seventies, the promotion of justice and the service of the faith have been in the core of the Society's mission. The understanding of the term "justice" has evolved. How does it seem from the perspective of your Asian experience?

In Asia this has been a big problem. After GC 32 we had a lot of discussion and a lot of arguing in the East, particularly in Japan. Decree IV of GC 32 was a heavily European document, and justice is a concept that has developed through centuries of social transformation and there's a lot of struggle in it. The idea of social justice comes after a lot of confrontation. There is a struggle for justice, and that goes against the grain of Japanese society. In Japanese traditional values and society the basic value is harmony, community, peaceful relationships where everybody has their role and their place. When you bring in the concept of justice, it looks like it threatens this basic harmony.

Of course, through a process of evangelisation, harmony can be evangelised, like justice has to be evangelised. Because sometimes harmony is taken as 'harmony before the crisis' or harmony at the price of avoiding crisis, which means: I avoid problems, and when I have a problem, I withdraw, which is not very developmental, even though it is very human and understandable. If Christianity can help to make harmony 'harmony after the crisis' – when in spite of the crisis we can put things together and still build up a new community – that would be a very good contribution. But if instead of following this process you bring in a concept that has developed in Europe, like the concept of justice, this creates a lot of tensions, a lot of problems. It needed time. Now the concept of justice is more accepted because people understand how and why the Bible also speaks of justice.

But people are very compassionate: Like Christianity, Buddhism has spread compassion as a basic virtue. If there is anything clear in Buddhism it is the suffering, the reality of suffering. That is the starting point: ‘what do you do with that?’ Everybody suffers, you can see it outside, but you yourself also suffer and then comes the whole process of how to avoid suffering and how to respond to suffering. How to avoid suffering is detachment; how to respond to suffering is compassion. And compassion is a wonderful virtue. It is a virtue that comes from the heart whereas justice was perceived as something purely mental. I saw in Japan a tremendous resistance from many towards this concept because it came as something alien. That is why I think it had to be purified, and it has been purified. Thank God, it is purified more and more. Particularly when GC 34 put it in the context of culture and dialogue, justice did not look so threatening any more, we could see it as a dimension of faith. We grew into an attitude that takes into account poverty and suffering and the like, but also takes into account the reality of the other in cultural terms or religious terms. It is less threatening, it is contextualised. If now we add ecology, so much the better. The Japanese would have a very deep feeling for it.

Faith is open to all these wider realities and in that context you can put justice. Of course, in these last thirty years, society has taken on more and more the language of justice because of political and social changes, and young people are getting used to that. Herbert Marcuse and other authors of the sixties and seventies promoted the analysis of social structures in the search for justice. At the beginning, the concept of social justice was taken over as a slogan, but later on it became more and more part of the thinking. Nowadays we would have less resistance, but, as I said, this has been a big issue. Some Asian intellectuals say, “Asian justice is not European justice. We have to learn from Confucianism” – but in Confucianism there is no concept of justice; it is justice that comes from harmony, which is different.

Do you think that the Society of Jesus in the West can learn something from these oriental concepts, for

example harmony, for its way of thinking justice?

Yes, we can learn from these Asian cultures through religious concepts, but maybe not directly. Because if we did it directly we would start with conclusions or definitions about justice and harmony without understanding where those conclusions come from. We could always point out how justice is manipulated for the sake of vengeance, for instance, and we could also point out how harmony is manipulated so that the oppressor controls the little people, so that they don’t break the harmony but remain submissive. Both concepts can be manipulated. But if we take Buddhist compassion as a bridge, that can help – because compassion we feel; compassion is also deeply Christian; and compassion is deeply Confucian; and compassion is the Buddhist virtue. With such a bridge we can realise that harmony is actually at the service of compassion, so that you don’t make people suffer. And harmony means: you keep your place, you accept a certain order in society and then you allow others to live in peace and to perform their own duty, their own service. Similarly, if in true Confucianism you allow some spirituality to enter, then your place is a place of service and a place of dignity, not in terms of honour but in terms of responsibility – for the good of the whole community. Seen in this way, it is more obvious that the meaning of harmony comes close to justice. The question is: can we integrate new factors enriching development from the inside? Maybe after GC 32 in the West and the East we jumped to this concept of justice right away in contrast to what we had before; and that doesn’t work. We forced things from the outside, imposing concepts from outside experience. We didn’t allow for the new insight to come *from inside*, which would have been much more enriching and much more acceptable. But we were in a hurry; also we were young, and the promoters of justice were very young. In a genuinely Ignatian process we would be invited to help people discover ‘justice’ out of their encounter with Christ.

But in the western idea of justice you have this desire to act, to do something, to change the world. Maybe in the eastern world with the idea of compassion it is more about acceptance of reality, not acting, not

changing, but more accepting what happens. Isn't there a difference in attitude?

Maybe from the point of view of the West it looks like this. It looks like the idea of justice is linked with change, with changing society as a whole because the problem is structural and not individual. Therefore we have to change the structures. But Confucianism is mostly concerned about society and therefore a society that is not just should not even exist. There is a basic presupposition that the aim is a just society; the aim is a harmony of society. The problem, of course, is that – and this is where the question of ideologies comes in – ideologies can easily manipulate the concept of harmony; or I would say, maybe the concept of harmony is more vulnerable to manipulation than the concept of justice. And in that sense there are politicians, even Asian politicians, who are very clever and who manipulate the Confucian tradition into not changing things, things that should really be changed because they are full of corruption and injustice. And while people were suffering, some wanted to keep their positions of power and maybe manipulate the system. But the concept of harmony itself is open to social change; we see that in young groups in Japan and everywhere else: they go deep into their roots to re-express what we express in terms of justice, to re-express this in terms of their own desire for a different kind of society that is more than Japanese society has ever been. What we say about ourselves they also say. But it is true that in the short term or on the near horizon, justice is much more, let's say, "action-inducing" than harmony. But harmony basically is the *shalom* of the Bible. And *shalom* implies a total change of the world; it is a utopia, a revolutionary concept, because it is utopian. Even so *shalom* is basically harmony, even with the animals and creation – it reaches far beyond human society.

The promotion of right relationships requires an engagement at the social and political level. At a time of globalisation we often feel ourselves powerless in front of vast and complex questions. How can personal responsibility for justice be preserved without being inefficient? Can oriental wisdom teach us something in this matter? Is there any role or mission

for Europe in the world where the political and economical powers seem to be out of it?

I don't think there is a wisdom that has everything. Every tradition, every wisdom is imperfect, is always in process, *in fieri*. Therefore we cannot say all the solutions are there in the East. Only a dialogue of civilizations, dialogue of cultures, dialogue of people, is going to produce something richer than what we have now.

But what can we learn from the East? I would say: a basic humility that acknowledges our limits. When I arrived in Japan, one thing that I found very striking was to discover that Japanese people are much more humble than all the Spanish or other Europeans that I had met. They have convictions, they think a lot, they are very reflective people; but they speak with humility and they know that a human person is a mystery. They realize that they don't know much about themselves, about others and they are surprised that we speak with such assurance about God. This is something that you encounter in Buddhist monks, the humility of saying: "When it comes to mystery we know very little. We are searching, we are moving in that search, we are learning". This attitude contrasts with the aggressive assurance with which many missionaries preached the "truth".

Another point that has made me and some of my Jesuit companions think is the resistance they have to messiah-figures. We have a messianic tradition in the West. You might say we have a longing for somebody like Jesus who comes and brings answers, some new perspectives that eventually express our salvation. But we see the damage that messianic people have done to their environment, even religious people in their communities, people who are bent on being the saviours of the world. Japanese dislike that – sorely, viscerally. "Messianism" is particularly centred on us and our work. That is something more again that we can learn: not only the humility of knowing that we are dealing with mystery after all, but also the sense that if I can do something it will be *with* other people and it will be serving, not imposition, because I don't have all the answers.

Now the third thing I have learnt from the East: the Japanese would do their utmost – and I am confident this applies to other Asians too – never to break the unity of the community. These are values that I think are very good for us. Even if I am right, I don't have the right to break the community. I have to serve the community because together we are somebody, alone I am nothing. These are cultures of groups or communities. There are aphorisms like this: "The nail that sticks up will be hammered down" or "Let yourself be wrapped by that which is longer than you", "let yourself be swallowed by the bigger fish". We fight against the big fish; they say: let yourself be swallowed. Why? Because in the big fish there is the whole community embracing you, and you are there to help the community. This community can be the nation, in Japan it can be the company you are working in. Today they are losing that sense, and they are totally disoriented, because they had something once that united them and now they don't have it any more. And then you have terrible problems of generation gaps, of criminality within the family, even killings of parents. People are wondering 'what is happening here?', and some Japanese bishops are saying these are all indicators of a sick society. What has made it sick? They have

lost their cohesion because they don't have, let's say, a solid religious cohesion. Because Buddhism centred them in a sense of religious feelings more than in a sense of belonging to a religious group, they are disoriented. Also for us this respect for the unity of the community is a very important value. Really, even if we are right, to wreck the community in the long run does a tremendous amount of damage. We have to keep that in mind.

And then the fourth thing I have learnt in Asia: not to articulate things in a rigidly dogmatic way, regardless of the people you are speaking to. You have to articulate things so that people are helped and can grow. It requires an ability to change, to move and not to make absolute your own limited understanding.

*This is the second part of an interview with Fr Nicolás conducted by Tomasz Kot SJ and Jan Koenot SJ in Rome on 7 March 2008, two days after the end of the 35th General Congregation. The questions were prepared by editors of European Jesuit journals: Carlo Casalone SJ (**Aggiornamenti Sociali**), Jan Koenot SJ (**Streven**), Tomasz Kot SJ (**Przegląd Powszechny**) and Albert Longchamp SJ (**Choir**).*