



The Holy See

***LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO Fr PETER-HANS KOLVENBACH
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 35th GENERAL CONGREGATION
OF THE SOCIETY OF JESUS***

*To Reverend Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J.,
Superior General of the Society of Jesus*

On the occasion of the 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, I fervently wish to offer to you and all who are taking part in the Assembly my most cordial greeting, together with the assurance of my affection and my constant spiritual closeness. I know how important for the life of the Society the event being celebrated is, and furthermore, that it has consequently been prepared with great care. This is a providential opportunity to impress upon the Society of Jesus that renewed ascetic and apostolic thrust which is hoped for by all, so that the Jesuits may fully accomplish their mission and face the challenges of the modern world with that fidelity to Christ and to the Church which marked the prophetic action of St Ignatius of Loyola and his first companions.

The Apostle wrote to the faithful of Thessalonica, recalling that he had proclaimed God's Gospel to them: "we... encouraged you", he explained, "to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory" (I Thes 2: 12), and he added: "We also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers" (I Thes 2: 13). God's Word, therefore, is first "received", that is, listened to, and then, as it penetrates the heart, it is "welcomed", and those who receive it recognize that God speaks through his messenger: in this way his Word acts in believers. As it did then, evangelization today also demands total and faithful adherence to God's Word, adherence to Christ first of all and attentive listening to his Spirit who guides the Church, docile obedience to the Pastors whom God has chosen to guide his people and prudent, frank dialogue with the social, cultural and religious bodies of our time. All this presupposes, as is well known, close communion with the one who calls us to be his friends and disciples, a unity of life and action nourished by listening to his Word, by contemplation and by

prayer, by detachment from the mindset of the world and by ceaseless conversion to his love so that it may be he, Christ, who lives and works in each one of us. Here lies the secret of the authentic success of every Christian's apostolic and missionary commitment, and especially of those who are called to a more direct service of the Gospel.

This awareness is certainly vividly present to those who are taking part in the General Congregation, and I am eager to pay a tribute to the important work carried out by the Preparatory Commission which, in the course of 2007, examined the proposals submitted by the Provinces and pointed out the themes to address. I would like in the first place to address my grateful thoughts to you, dear and venerable Father General, who has guided the Society of Jesus since 1983 with enlightenment, wisdom and prudence, leaving no stone unturned to keep it in the channel of its original charism. For objective reasons, you have asked on several occasions to be relieved of this heavy burden, assumed with a great sense of responsibility during a period in the Order's history that was far from easy. I express my warmest gratitude to you for your service to the Society of Jesus, and more generally, to the Church. I extend my sentiments of gratitude to your closest collaborators, to the participants in the General Congregation and to all the Jesuits scattered in every part of the globe. May the greeting of the Successor of Peter reach each and every one; he follows with affection and esteem the multifaceted and appreciated apostolic work of the Jesuits and encourages them all to continue on the path plotted by the holy Founder and trodden by an innumerable array of brothers dedicated to Christ's cause, many of whom the Church has inscribed in the Roll of Blesseds and Saints. May they, from Heaven, protect and support the Society of Jesus in the mission it is carrying out in our time, marked by many complex social, cultural and religious challenges.

Moreover, precisely in this regard, how can we fail to recognize the valid contribution the Society offers to the Church's action in various fields and in many ways? It is a truly great and praiseworthy contribution which only the Lord will be able to reward as it deserves! Like my venerable Predecessors, the Servants of God Paul VI and John Paul II, I also willingly take the opportunity afforded by the General Congregation to shed light on this contribution, and at the same time to offer for your reflection certain considerations which may be an encouragement and incentive to bring to fruition in an ever better way the ideal of the Society, in total fidelity to the Church's Magisterium, as has been described in the following formula with which you are well acquainted: "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). This is a "particular" fidelity, sanctioned for many of you by a vow of immediate obedience to the Successor of Peter "*perinde ac cadaver*". Today, the Church is still particularly in need of this fidelity of yours which constitutes the badge of your Order, in an age when the urgent need is felt to pass on in its integral form to our contemporaries, who are distracted by so many discordant voices, the one, unchanged message of salvation which is the Gospel; "not as the word of men, but as it truly is, the word of God" which is at work in you believers.

If this is to happen it is indispensable for the life of members of the Society of Jesus and their doctrinal research, as beloved John Paul II formerly reminded the participants in the 34th General Congregation, to be animated by a true spirit of faith and communion, always in "humble fidelity to the teachings of the Magisterium" (*Audience*, 34th General Congregation, 5 January 1995, n. 5; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition [ORE], 11 January, p. 3). I warmly hope that this Congregation will clearly reaffirm the authentic charism of the Founder in order to encourage all Jesuits to promote true, sound Catholic doctrine. As Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, I have had the opportunity to appreciate the effective collaboration of Jesuit Consultors and Experts who, in full fidelity to their charism, have made a considerable contribution to the faithful promotion and reception of the Magisterium. This is not of course a simple task, especially when one is called to proclaim the Gospel in very different social and cultural contexts and is obliged to address different mindsets. Thus, I sincerely appreciate this effort dedicated to serving Christ, an endeavour which is fruitful for the true good of souls to the extent that they allow themselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit and in humble fidelity to the teachings of the Magisterium, referring to those key principles of the Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian outlined in *Donum Veritatis* (24 May 1990).

The Church's evangelizing work therefore relies heavily on the Society's responsibility for formation in the fields of theology, spirituality and mission. And precisely in order to offer the entire Society of Jesus clear guidelines to support its generous and faithful apostolic dedication, it might prove particularly useful for the Congregation to reassert, in the spirit of St Ignatius, its own total adherence to Catholic doctrine, especially to its key points, under severe attack today by the secular culture, such as, for example, the relationship between Christ and religions, certain aspects of liberation theology and the various points of sexual morals, especially those concerning the indissolubility of marriage and the pastoral care of homosexuals. Reverend and dear Father, I am convinced that the Society senses the historic importance of this General Congregation and, guided by the Holy Spirit, desires once again, as beloved John Paul II said in January 1995, to reaffirm "unequivocally and without any hesitation its specific way to God, which St Ignatius sketched out in the *Formula Instituti*: loving fidelity to your charism will be the certain source of renewed effectiveness" (*ORE, ibid.*, n. 3). Furthermore, how timely were my venerable Predecessor Paul VI's words on a similar occasion: "All of us must be vigilant so that the necessary adaptation will not be accompanied to the detriment of the fundamental identity or essential character of the role of the Jesuit as it 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 today to require it. This image must not be altered; it must not be distorted" (3 December 1974; *ORE*, 12 December, p. 5).

The continuity of the teachings of the Successors of Peter demonstrates the great attention and care that they show for the Jesuits, their esteem for you and their desire always to be able to count on the Society's precious contribution 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 the holy Founder and the Saints of the Order and to Mary's maternal protection, so that every spiritual son of St Ignatius may have before his eyes "God, first of all, and then the nature of this his Institute" (*Formula Instituti*, 1). With these sentiments, I assure you of my constant remembrance in prayer and I cordially impart to you, Reverend Father, to the Fathers of the General Congregation and to the entire Society of Jesus a special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 10 January 2008.

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