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Pope Francis' discourse at the 36th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus

At 9 a.m. this morning the Holy Father Francis visited the Jesuit General Curia where he took part in the meeting of the 36th General Congregation and the prayer with all the participants. After a brief greeting from the Prepositor General, Fr. Arturo Sosa Abascal, the Pope addressed those present. The following is an extensive summary of his discourse.

“Dear brothers and friends in the Lord: while praying over what I would like to say, I remembered with particular affection the words of Pope Paul VI to us as we came to the end of the 32nd General Congregation: ‘This is the way, this is the way, Brothers and Sons. Forward, in nomine Domini. Let us walk together, free, obedient, united to each other in the love of Christ, for the greater glory of God’. St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI also encouraged us to walk in a manner worthy of the vocation to which we have been called, and to continue on the path of this mission in full fidelity to our original charism, in the ecclesial and social context that marks the beginning of this millennium”. He reminded Jesuits that their mission is to walk together with the Pope, “free and obedient – going to the peripheries where others do not reach, under Jesus’ gaze and looking to the horizon which is the ever greater glory of God, Who ceaselessly surprises us”. He noted that the vocation of a Jesuit is “to travel through the world and to live in any part of it where there is hope of greater service to God and of help of souls”, and recalled that one of the early Jesuits, Jerome Nadal, used to say, “For the Society the whole world is our home”.

“Ignatius Loyola wrote to Borgia with regard to a criticism of the so-called “angelic” Jesuits, as they said that the Society was not well founded and that there was a need to institute it more in the spirit. ‘The spirit that guides them disregards the state of things of the Society, which are *in fieri*, except the necessary [and] substantial’. I like this way in which Ignatius sees things in their becoming, in their making, except for the substantial. It frees the Society from all paralyses and liberates it from many ambitions. The Formula of the Institute is the ‘necessary and substantial’ that we must keep every day before our eyes, after turning our gaze to God, our Lord: the way of being of the Institute, which is the journey to Him. ... In this way, both poverty and obedience or the fact of not being obliged to do certain things such as praying in unison, are neither needs nor privileges, but a help in the mobility of the Society, its willingness to run on the path of Christ our Lord, and with, due to the vote of obedience to the Pope, the surer direction of the Holy Spirit. In the Formula there is the intuition of Ignatius, and his essentiality is what enables the Constitutions to insist on taking into account the places, times and people, and that all the rules are of assistance in a concrete way”.

Francis explained that “journeying, for Ignatius, was not simply to wander, but may be translated into something qualitative: it is profit and progress, it means going ahead, doing something for others. This is how it is expressed by the two Formulas of the Institute approved by Paul III (1540) and Julius III (1550) when they focus the occupation of the Society on faith – its defence and propagation – and on the life and the doctrine of people. ... The benefit is not individualistic, it is common. The aim of the Society is not only that of occupying itself with the salvation and the perfection of the souls of its members through divine grace, but with the same grace to help intensively the salvation and perfect of the souls of our neighbours. ... The benefit it thus in everything. Ignatius’ formula expresses a tension: ‘not only ... but ...’; it is this mental framework of uniting tensions – one’s own salvation and perfection and the salvation and perfection of one’s neighbour – starting from the higher scope of grace is typical of the society. The harmonisation of this and all tensions (contemplation and action, faith and justice, charism and institution, community and mission) is not given through abstract formulations, but is obtained over time through what Faber called ‘our way of proceeding’”.

“The benefit is not elitist”, he emphasised. In the Formula, Ignatius proceeds by describing the means for a more universal benefit, which are typically priestly. However, we note that the works of mercy are taken for granted. Works of mercy – caring for the sick in hospitals, begging for alms, sharing, teaching catechism to children, and the patient suffering of insults... are the daily bread of Ignatius and his first companions. They took care that nothing else became an obstacle”. The Pope noted, “The Jubilee of Mercy is an appropriate time to reflect about the works of mercy. I am saying it in plural, because mercy is not an abstract word, but a lifestyle that places concrete gestures before the word. These gestures touch the flesh of the neighbour and become institutionalised in works of mercy.”

Finally, such benefit is “that which does us most good. It is the *magis*, that *plus* which led Ignatius to being processes to accompany them and evaluate their real effects on the life of people in matters of faith, justice or mercy and charity. The *magis* is the flame, the fervour of action, that rouses the somnolent. Our saints have always incarnated this. ... And it counters that temptation that Paul VI called the “*spiritus vertiginis*” and De Lubac, “spiritual worldliness”. A temptation that is not first of all moral but spiritual, and distracts us from the essential: that is being of benefit, leaving an imprint, and having an impact on history, especially in the lives of the least among us”.

Nadal affirmed that the Society is ardour and, the Pope continued, “to revive the ardour of the mission of bringing benefit to the people in their life and in doctrine, I wish to express these reflections in three concrete points that ... are associated with joy, with the Cross, and with the Church, our Mother, and have the aim of taking a step ahead, removing the obstacles that the enemy of human nature places before us when, in the service of God, we endeavour to rise from good to better”.

1. Insistently ask for consolation

“A step ahead can always be made in insistently seeking consolation. ... It is the task of the Society to console the faithful and to help with discernment so that the enemy of human nature does not rob us of joy: the joy of evangelising, the joy of the family, the joy of the Church, the joy of creation. That it does not rob from us, neither in discouragement when faced with the greatness of the ills of the world and the misunderstandings between those who presume to do good, nor fill us with fatuous joys that are always to hand in any shop. This ‘service of joy and spiritual consolation’ is rooted in prayer. It consists of encouraging us and encouraging all to insistently ask for God’s consolation. ... Practising and teaching this prayer of asking and begging for consolation is the principle service to joy. ... Joy is not a decorative ‘plus’, but rather a clear indication of grace: it indicates that love is active, operative and present ... and it is sought in its existential index which is permanence. In the Exercises, progress in spiritual life is given in consolation. ... This service of joy was what led the first companions to decide not to disband but to constitute the society they offered and they shared spontaneously, and whose characteristic was the joy that they received from praying together, going out in mission together and returning to reunite, in imitation of the life the Lord led with His Apostles. This joy of the explicit proclamation of the Gospel – through the preaching of faith and the practice of justice and mercy – is what led the Society to go out towards all the peripheries. The Jesuit is a servant of the joy of the Gospel”.

2. Let ourselves be moved by the Lord on the Cross

“A further step can always be made in letting ourselves be moved by the Lord on the Cross, by Him in person and present in so many of our brothers who suffer – the great majority of humanity! Father Arrupe used to say that where there was suffering, there was the Society. The Jubilee of Mercy is an appropriate time to reflect on the works of mercy. ... The way in which Ignatius lived and formulated his experience of mercy is of great personal and apostolic benefit, and requires an acute and elevated experience of discernment. ... Ignatius therefore lived the pure mercy of God even in the smallest aspects of life and his person. He felt that the greater the obstacle before him, the greater was the goodness the Lord treated him with. ... In formulating his experience of mercy in these comparative terms – the more he felt he wronged the Lord, the more abundant was the grace the Lord offered him – he freed the life-giving force of mercy that very often we dilute with abstract formations and legalistic conditions. The Lord, Who looks on us with mercy and chooses us, sends us to take the same mercy ... to the poorest, sinners, the excluded and the crucified of the current world, who suffer injustice and violence”.

3. Do good with good humour, in harmony with the Church

“A step ahead can always be taken in doing good with good humour, in harmony with the Church. The service of discernment in the way in which we do things is also proper to the Society. ... This grace of discerning that it is not enough to think, do and organise good, but that it is necessary to do so with a good spirit, is what roots us in the Church, in which the Spirit acts and distributes the diversity of His charisms for the common good. ... It is proper of the Society to do things in feeling with the Church. To do this without losing peace and with joy, considering the sins we see both in ourselves as people and in the structures we have created, implies carrying the Cross, experiencing poverty and humiliation, in which Ignatius encourages us to choose between bearing them patiently and desiring them. ... We do not read the rules for harmony with the Church as precise instructions on controversial points (some could prove to be extemporaneous) but rather as examples in which Ignatius urged, in his time, action against the anti-clerical spirit, totally and decisively taking the side of our Mother, the Church, not to justify a debatable position, but to open up a space in which the Spirit would have been able to act in his time”.

“Service in good spirit and discernment make us men of the Church – not clerical but ecclesial – men ‘for others’, without anything specific that isolates but putting in communion and service all that we have. We walk neither alone nor comfortably, but we walk with ‘a heart that does not rest, that does not close in on itself but beats to the rhythm of a journey undertaken together with all the people faithful to God’. We walk doing all we can in order to help people. This stripping away ensures that the Society has and may always have the face, the accent and the way of being of all peoples, in every culture, integrating in all, in the specific heart of every people, to make the Church there with every one of them, inculturating the Gospel and evangelising every culture”.

The Holy Father concluded by invoking “the Madonna of the Way ... to guide and accompany every Jesuit along with the group of the population faithful to God to whom he has been sent, on these roads of consolation, compassion and discernment”.
