

Interview with Fr. Adolfo Nicolás

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■ **Father, what is your state of soul at the end of your service as our Superior General?**

The usual one at the end of a mission. I have finished being useful in this capacity and, completely at peace, I can begin to look at what else I can do.

■ **What were the most significant moments for the Society during the years of your Generalate**

The Synods. The resignation of Benedict XVI. The election of Pope Francis. As always, there are no such things as “our” moments: the most important moments are those of the Church.

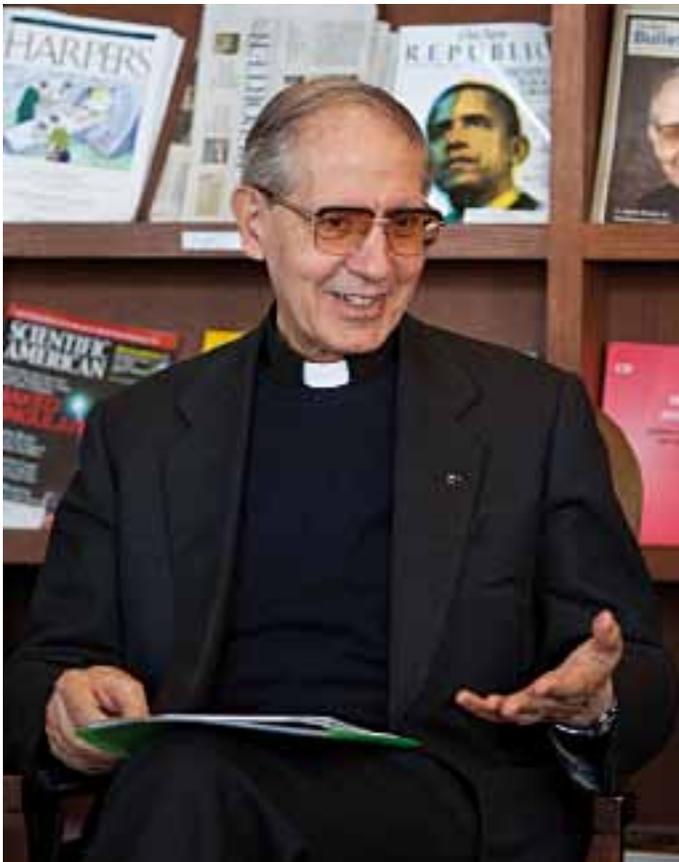
■ **In your experience as Superior General, you may perhaps have “taken the temperature” of religious life today. What do you think that “temperature” is right now? Are**

you aware of a change with respect to when you were elected? Do you perceive tiredness, tepidity – or do you see clear signs of hope?

I haven't perceived change. Religious life goes along well; there is a great desire to serve the Church and to respond generously to the challenges of our time. I also see a new hope generated by Pope Francis, who knows us very well and understands the place and mission of religious life in the Church.

■ **Pope Francis has defined Religious as sinners and prophets. How do you interpret these words of his? Is it important for Religious to see themselves as sinners? And what does it mean today to be a prophet? The Pope says that the prophet “makes a mess”. What does that mean?**

For a Religious it is important to feel oneself a “sinner”. We are no better or worse than other Christians; for that reason we cannot judge others. In the past, perhaps, every time we thought we were better, we discovered hidden sins, or sins that had been hidden -- which humiliated us. With the Pope we think that a Church which judges others shows little wisdom and usurps the place of God, the only One who looks into hearts. Regarding prophecy, I humbly hazard a distinction: there is a prophetic service coming from within the Church and reaches those who have faith. Everything that Pope Francis says about prophecy refers to that: it “makes a mess”, it creates a certain confusion, it makes people think. There is another service rendered to those who do not have faith. For them, prophecy makes little sense. What reaches them instead is the witness of another wisdom, humanistic, evangelical, capable itself of stimulating reflection and provoking remorse in the soul: “can this be true? Is it more human, more authentic? This is the function of Religious in many situations that are at, or beyond, frontiers in a world that doesn't share our point of view.



■ **But what is the prophetic language of today?**

I've always been struck by the fact that prophecy in Israel came to an end. In the Book of Daniel, the accusation is made that there is no more prophecy in Israel. When reasons for this are sought, the only plausible one is that the exiled people lost the faith: there is no longer any faith in Israel. Only a tiny remnant retains it. Prophecy can exist only within a community of faith. And many Religious today live in a frontier situation or in places where faith is not professed. What is the correct language for such places? It's interesting to note that, when prophecy disappears, wisdom emerges as the new language of God. Perhaps that's the language for a Europe which has lost the faith – wisdom. Maybe we need a new language, which can take either the wisdom of sages or the wisdom of ordinary people in order to speak in a language which the world is able to understand.

■ **Does this wisdom enable standing at the periphery, in the frontiers?**

Yes, and we have to learn a new way of looking at the world, of seeing things, and only then speaking. Sometimes it can be very taxing to go to the frontiers and see how the others, the ones beyond the frontiers, live. But it is also very interesting and attractive, because there is always a lot of good in other persons, other cultures, other religions. To do this, to go to the frontiers, there is need of people with a very profound faith, deeply rooted and carefully cultivated. People capable of speaking with wisdom, of making themselves heard.

■ **You've traveled a lot and have a broad vision of the world. In your opinion, what are the greatest challenges in the world of today?**

Trying to respond to the question as to why so few Japanese became Christian, a Japanese bishop used to say: "Jesus said: I am the way the Truth and the Life. Most Asiatic religions are religions or spiritualities of the Way: Shintoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Kendo, Aikido, etc., but the majority of western missionaries have come to preach and speak of the Truth." In that sense, there hasn't been a true encounter with Japan. The more I travel around the world, the more I think that bishop was right: Asia is the Way; Europe and the United States are preoccupied with the Truth;



Africa and Latin America are Life – they keep alive values (friendship, family, children, etc.) which we've forgotten in other parts of the world. It's significant for us Jesuits that – if I understand rightly – St. Ignatius was more interested in the Way, that is, in how to grow and be transformed into Christ, than in other things. The challenge for us Christians is that we stand in need of everything, of all the sensibilities of all the continents, to come to the fullness of Christ – which is also the fullness of our humanity. This vision is present behind all the appeals of Pope Francis in favor of migrants and refugees.

■ **In your opinion, has the Society made its own the challenges of our time? How would you evaluate the actual state of the Society in its apostolic tension?**

I believe that we Jesuits – who, as everyone knows, are not without defects – are operating in a key apostolic moment. We are concerned with important realities like poverty, exclusion, a decent education for everyone.

■ **You love Japan a lot. What can mission in that large country, that culture, teach us today?**

Musical sensitivity. The Japanese are the most musical people in the world. Religion

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is much closer to a musical sense than it is to a rational system of teachings and explanations. The Japanese – thanks also to the roots of Buddhism – live out a profound sensitivity, an openness to the dimensions of transcendence, of gratuity, of beauty, which underlie our human experience. But of course this is a sensitivity which today is menaced by a mentality purely economic or materialistic, which impedes our reaching deeper dimensions of reality. Our mission today in Japan and in Asia can help us discover, or rediscover, religious sensitivity as a musical sense, as a grasp and appreciation of dimensions of reality more profound than utilitarian reasoning or materialistic conceptions of life.

■ **But this also has to do with education. You educate a musical sense and thus educate a religious sense. Do the Society's educational institutions play a role in this?**

It would be tragic if our educational institutions were to limit themselves to retrace the rationality and self-understanding of the human being with regard to this secular and materialistic world of ours. In fact, the reasons for undertaking a process of education-

formation are completely different. We do not busy ourselves with teaching for purposes of proselytization, but of transformation. We want to form a new type of humanity that is, if I may put it this way, radically musical, that maintains that sensitivity to beauty, to goodness, to the suffering of others, to compassion. We offer a Christian education because we are convinced that Christ offers horizons beyond the limited interests of economy or material productivity; that Christ offers a vision of a fuller humanity, one which takes one beyond oneself in the name of care and concern for the other; that Christ offers, not only information of which the world is already too full, but a profound wisdom. The university – and we Jesuits have so many of them throughout the world – is a social institution with a specific function in society. Through our universities, we want to be of use to society in terms of its values, its vision and its ideals.

■ **You are European, but you have spent your life in Asia and will return there at the end of your Generalate. What does Asia represent for the Church today, but also for the world?**

A source of hope. Asia is diverse, and it has humanity's most ancient fonts of wisdom. If God has been present in every part of the world, if He has been active, "at work" in the world, as St. Ignatius says, certainly that has happened with particular effectiveness in Asia. We saw the fruits of that at the moment of the great earthquake, with the tsunami and the atomic threat north of Tokyo. The world has never witnessed such self-control, discipline, solidarity and selfless detachment as at that moment. And the most wonderful aspect of it all was that this was not the result of a politically orchestrated effort; it was rather the spontaneous reaction of a people educated, generation after generation, to the values which Japan demonstrated to the world. If Asia said something to the world on that occasion, I have no difficulty discerning a prophecy in that message.



■ **Let us turn to Europe. How do you see the situation of the Church in Europe? What are the challenges and the most severe tensions being experienced on this continent? What risks do we need to avoid?**

I am not an expert on European questions; the part of the world Europe occupies, though important, is very small. So it's hard for me to respond to this question. People who know more about it speak of secularization, of the crises of sense and of hope, of the lack of joy – along with the same problems that unfortunately beset other places, like poverty, unemployment, violence and so on.

■ **The problem of migration is emerging forcefully. What is the correct perspective from which to view this phenomenon?**

The Pope's perspective. There is a situation of suffering and exclusion; but we are humans, thus capable of solidarity and compassion and consequently we feel this situation to be ours and together we are looking for a future solution, which really helps all people. Facing partial solutions, we want anyway to share what we have. Until we find a complete and definitive solution, we can share, even though these responses are not easy.

We ought always to remember that communications between various civilizations happens precisely through refugees and migrants. The world we know developed that way. It was never a case only of joining culture to culture: what happened was a true and particular exchange. Religions were also diffused in this way. Migrant peoples have given us the world. Without them, we would be closed inside our own culture, living together with our prejudices and our limitations. Every country runs the risk of closing itself off within horizons very limited, very small, while thanks to migrants, hearts can open up, and a country can open itself to new dynamics.

■ **But doesn't this imply looking at the world in a different way?**

The moment has come when we must think of humanity as a unity, not as an ensemble of so many countries separate from each other, with their traditions, their cultures, and their prejudices. It's necessary to conceive of a human race in need of God and in need of a kind of depth that can come only from a union of all people.

■ **With the encyclical "Laudato si' ", the**



theme of ecology has become an integral part of the social doctrine of the Church. In these last years the Society has taken this theme very much to heart. What was your personal reaction to this encyclical?

I think the Pope's intervention was timely and the theme could not wait any more. It was truly urgent. We all need a new awareness to give a positive acceptance to the initiatives for safeguarding creation, which are appearing everywhere. I am struck, in particular, by the link the Pope sees between nature and the problems of poor people who are the first to suffer the consequences of our heedlessness.

■ **During your time as Superior General the first Jesuit Pope in history was elected. What did you experience when you got this news? What does it mean for the Society to have a Jesuit as Pope? If the General Congregation will accept your resignation, don't you see the election of a General of the Society as an interesting and very special situation, with a Jesuit Pope? In just what sense?**

First of all, we Jesuits believed that to have one of us elected as Pope -- just two hundred years after the Suppression and thirty-five years after the papal intervention into the

“Laudato si'”

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Society's governance-- was impossible. Once the improbable happened, the election of a Superior General under Pope Francis does assume a special significance. He is a Jesuit too, and as such knows many Jesuits. I have to say that, right from the beginning, he has shown himself always very respectful of the Constitutions and very much connected to the Way of Proceeding of the Society of Jesus – which is really his own.

■ **During the interview I had with Pope Francis in 2013 he told me that “a Jesuit ought to be a person of incomplete thought, of open thought”. What does this mean for you?**

It means something of great and profound importance. At base is the awareness – at times forgotten or fuzzy – that God is a mystery, and even more “the mystery of mysteries”. Evidently, if we believe that, we cannot consider ourselves in possession of the last word on God and on all the mysteries we debate: the human person, history, woman, freedom, evil, etc. Our thought is always “incomplete” – open to new data, new understandings, new judgments about truth, and so on. We have much to learn from the silence of humility, from simple discretion. A Jesuit, as I said one

time in Africa, has to have three smells: of sheep, that is, of the lives of his people and their communities; of the library, that is, of his own deep reflection; and of the future, that is, of a radical opening to the surprise of God. I believe that this is what can make a Jesuit a man of open thought.

■ **What is the place of the Eucharist and the other sacraments in Jesuit life?**

About the Eucharist, we have insisted so much and for so long on the Real Presence that we have forgotten many other aspects of it which touch and regard our daily life. The Eucharist is an exchange of gifts: we receive bread as our daily nourishment; we take a portion of this bread and offer it to God. The Lord transforms this bread and gives it back to us. So the Eucharist is an exchange of gifts which never ceases and which can change our life. The Eucharist helps us be generous, open. St. Ignatius lived this reality; he took his most important decisions as he celebrated the Eucharist. I'm struck by the way Pope Francis celebrates the Eucharist: with pauses, dignity, in a rhythm which invites to meditation and interiorization. Jesuits celebrate this way.

■ **In his homily at the church of the Gesù on January 3, 2014, Pope Francis said: “It is only possible to go to the limits of the world if we are centered on God!” What in your judgment are these peripheries today?**

I have always been convinced that the challenges of the Society of Jesus are simply those of humanity: poverty, discrimination, a lack of common sense, violence, the absence of joy. Our question is: how are we to address these challenges? And here comes into play the key factor, that is the religious factor, which includes this preference for “the other” and that kind of detachment which permits someone to shift toward where we lose the safeness and security to which we're accustomed.

■ **Pope Francis is much attached to the motto: “Not to be daunted by the greatest**



enterprise, yet to invest oneself in the smallest one, this is divine.” In your judgment, what does this celebrated burial epitaph of St. Ignatius mean?

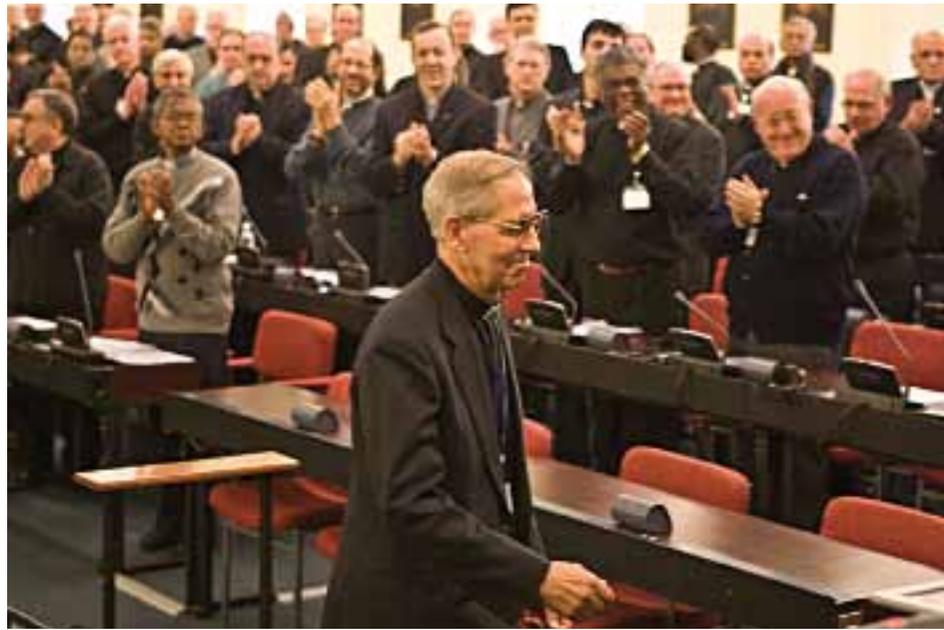
There are various theories regarding the text and its interpretation; for me, it’s an elegy to interior freedom – something St. Ignatius surely had in abundance. It’s not the work we do, neither its size nor its social impact. Nothing else matters except God’s will, and people are more than capable of joining themselves to that and finding contentment in knowing it and carrying it out. No one can pretend to know the will of God with certainty. We are all searchers and we are asked always to discern just what God’s will really is.

■ **What are you yourself expecting from the General Congregation? What are your personal desires?**

First of all, that a good Superior General will be elected – not too much to expect, given that the Society has survived me! I’m expecting the Congregation to discern how to better our religious life and our service to the Church and the Gospel in “helping souls” as St. Ignatius wished. So I hope the fruit of the Congregation will be a better religious life in the spirit of the Gospel, and a renewed capacity of imagination. Times have changed with respect to the last Congregation. We need audacity, fantasy and courage to face our mission as part of the larger mission of God for our world. Finally, I hope that the Pope will turn to the Congregation to present his feelings and his concerns.

■ **You are leaving your post, as Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach did. Should the rule of “General for life” change, then, considering that even Pope Benedict XVI decided to resign from the Petrine ministry?**

I thought that too, but Pope Francis has made me think that by now there is sufficient provision in the Society’s legislation to conclude our service the way our last three Generals have. The Pope also suggested that it



would be enough if the four Assistants chosen for this were to take a more active role in suggesting to the General that it was time for his resignation. In today’s world with medicine’s progress in prolonging life, it’s not possible that a group desirous of serving, and which must bring agility to that service, should be subject to the last three or five years of weakness of its Superior General.

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I thank Fr. Nicolás, because it’s time for dinner. We linger at the doorway. I see that there is something that continues to draw his attention: the question about prophecy and wisdom. He tells me that this theme has been very much on his mind even during prayer. Today, in a world that has lost its faith, God remains active and at work. But how talk about Him? The language of mission is that of a wisdom which is the fruit of an open and incomplete thought and of a faith which knows how to recognize the Lord where he makes himself found, not where we habitually look for him. In this challenge I’m aware of a deep common chord shared by the Pope and the General. Perhaps it will be precisely on this level that the handover of witness between Fathers General will occur.

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