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Patrick Howell, S.J.

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# THE "NEW" JESUITS

*The Response of the Society of Jesus  
to Vatican II, 1962-2012:  
some alacrity, some resistance*

**By Patrick Howell, S.J.**

**T**he response of the Society of Jesus to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was immediate and, for the most part, enthusiastic. It was characterized by the virtues of "joy, alacrity, and perseverance," which Ignatius described in the Jesuit *Constitutions* as confirming one's mission in life. Some dissidents among both Jesuits and laity were muted at first, but grew more critical later.

By 1965 a certain stagnation had settled into Jesuit life. Jesuit spirituality was rote, loaded with rules, and laden with monasticism. Promising scholarship on the Jesuit *Constitutions*, the *Spiritual Exercises*, and on Jesuit spirituality had been underway, however, for at least half a century. Governance by devoted leaders seemed more intent on filling slots than on imaginative, new initiatives to meet the needs of the Church. There was a lot of growth of institutions, but not much direct engagement with culture nor with addressing the urgent needs of the poor and oppressed.

The Jesuit General Father Jean-Baptiste Janssens had convened the 30<sup>th</sup> General Congregation in 1957 to do some, fairly minimal, updating of the Society, but even this had gotten

waylaid when Pope Pius XII asked the Society to ban smoking among its members. Thereafter, much energy was misdirected to enforcing this healthy, but ill-conceived, mandate.

At the same time, after World War II vocations to the Society had surged. By 1965 the Society numbered 36,038 worldwide. The United States had 8,000 Jesuits, of whom a great number were scholastics in training for ordination.

Externally, the Society was at its peak, but its spirituality was stunted, its vision parochial, and its intellectual life predictably safe—with the exception, as always, of some truly great scholars, such as Walter Ong, John Courtenay Murray, Gustav Weigel, William Lynch, Bernard Lonergan, among the Northern American Jesuits. Theology, rather than addressing contemporary human issues, was still driven by the scholastic manuals, although neo-Scholasticism, scripture studies, and continental philosophy had breathed some fresh air and vibrant insights into the safely traditional Catholic intellectual life.

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*Patrick Howell, S.J., chair of the National Seminar, teaches theology at Seattle University.*

Evidence of the long way that the Society had journeyed and how it has weathered the sometimes stormy relationship with the hierarchical church was the warm affirmation of the Jesuit mission by Benedict XVI:

“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.”

*Benedict XVI to GC 35 Delegates,  
February 21, 2008.*



Many of the *periti*, the advisers to the bishops at the council, were distinguished Jesuits, such as the German theologian Karl Rahner, the French Henri de Lubac, and the American John Courtney Murray. Ironically, they had been under a cloud or even silenced by the Vatican during the previous decade.

Father Janssens (1946-1964) had died during the council. So the worldwide Society prepared to elect a new general. The 224 delegates met in Rome in May 1965 and elected a dynamic, charismatic Spaniard Pedro Arrupe, who had served all his life in Japan. Don Pedro, as he was affectionately called, was an inspired choice. He was short, balding, with a sharp aquiline nose, with extraordinary bright eyes and remarkable energy and enthusiasm. He was the first Basque elected since Ignatius himself.

Arrupe had been novice master in Japan when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. The apocalypse at Hiroshima changed his life. It deepened his sense of dependence on God and opened his eyes to “what is deadly and truly terrible about force and violence.”

After the election, the delegates realized the enormity of the changes needed, as well as that the council itself would not end until December, 1965. So they chose to set up several commissions to study what was needed to align the Society with the mandates of the council. Then they adjourned until the following year.

That fall the council published its decree on religious life and gave a twofold mandate to each religious group: “The adaptation and renewal of the religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time.” (*Perfectae Caritatis* –The Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life). The mandate was elegant in its simplicity and transformational in its effect.

The Jesuit General Congregation 31 (GC 31) met the next year and provided extensive remedies for renewal and renovation of the Society. Immediately after the conclusion of the Congregation, the shedding of a great many externals was the most obvious change. Cassocks gave way to clerical shirts and pants and for some the formality of shirt and tie. Jesuit superiors allowed for increased personal initiative and creativity. Many monastic practices, such as silence during meals, strictures on family visits, tight restrictions on travel gave way to more humane religious practices. The transformation of the Latin liturgy into the vernacular also shook the pillars of tradition. The change in an “unchanging” liturgy led many to assume that almost anything could change.

## *Recapturing the original spirit*

In myriad ways the Jesuits embraced the original charism and vision of its founder St. Ignatius. And by attending to the “signs of the times,” reflecting on culture, and on the causes of war and oppression, they conducted the reforms needed for an *aggiornamento*, that is, a thorough updating. A century of Jesuit scholarship on the history and origins of the Society, most of it published in Latin, Spanish, French, and Italian, greatly helped the re-appropriation of the founding vision of Ignatius.

So the biggest change was at the very core of Jesuit life and spirituality. With the recovery of the original spirituality of Ignatius and companions, Jesuits developed a much keener sense of spiritual discernment and decision making, the daily examen as an “examination of consciousness” grew in practical importance, and the annual eight-day retreat with an individual director was restored to its original form, which was more personal and more attentive to how God loves and labors in each individual person.

This recovery of Ignatian spirituality and then its rather rapid spread to lay colleagues, including the training of lay spiritual directors, inaugurated a great renewal in the Society of Jesus and in all its institutions.

The very person of Arrupe captured the spirit of renewal best. He embodied a view of religious leadership rooted in collegiality, discernment, and service. He led the Society in responding to Vatican II and urgent needs of the world with courage, generosity and remarkable optimism.

All was not well, however, within the Jesuit ranks. Many university Jesuits and, in particular, the Jesuits at the Gregorian University in Rome were highly resistant to the leadership of Pedro Arrupe. In addition, in Spain there was a movement to split the Jesuit order. The “old guard” sought a restoration of the way things had been. Only the intervention of Pope Paul VI, at the urging of Cardinal Tarancón, the primate of Spain who was fearful of a split in the Spanish Catholic Church itself, prevented this division in the Society.

**A**mid all the upheavals in the church, the Society of Jesus, and in civil society, a great exodus of younger Jesuits was taking place, with as many as 800 to 1100 leaving each year during the years 1966-1974. Simultaneously far fewer were entering the Society. From the mid 1960s to the mid 1990s, the median age of Jesuits worldwide rose from 35 to 65.

Another trajectory which was having a major impact on the Jesuits was the increasing clarity of the Church for

a preferential option for the poor. Three papal encyclicals in the 1960s addressing the needs of the world, especially the causes of war and injustice, were crucial: *Mater et Magistra*, *Pacem in Terris*, and *Progressio Populorum*. Then the conference of Latin American bishops at Medellin, Colombia, (1968) and the Synod of Bishops document on Justice in the World (1971) set the Church on a new, more profound path of identifying more closely with the poor and dismantling the cozy relationship that the church hierarchy, including the Society of Jesus, had often had with the wealthy elite. This articulation of the preferential option for the poor by the church culminated for the Jesuits a few years later in GC 32.

The Synod document Justice in the World gave a brief but powerful scriptural analysis of God as liberator of the oppressed in the Old Testament and Jesus as preacher of justice for the poor in the New Testament. This intimate connection between faith and justice, however, was not welded together sufficiently by Jesuit institutions over the next 25 years.

In this context, sometimes turbulent and acrimonious, Pedro Arrupe convened the 32nd General Congregation (1974-1975). It was clear from the beginning how strongly the delegates, with a few minor exceptions, approved the leadership and governance of Arrupe. The 31st Congregation eight years earlier had cleared the debris of centuries. It had swept aside or suspended the mountainous set of rule books. But the result was some loss of identity, some floundering in direction, even in the midst of a great deal of creative innovation.

## *Answering Atheism*

At the outset of the Congregation Pope Paul VI renewed the mandate to the Society to address modern atheism. The Society responded by identifying as its mission today: the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement. For reconciliation with God demands the reconciliation of people with one another. (GC 32, Decree Four, #2)

Practical atheism was partly a result of the sense of the apparent indifference of God to human suffering, especially as transmitted by “church” people, or it was attributable to an image of God as an all-controlling, remote, omnipotent Judge.

So this simple, elegant mission statement by GC 32 offered a vital alternative to the many forms of contemporary atheism, such as that espoused by Karl Marx (religion is the opium of the people) and Sigmund Freud (God is a projection of the father image by fearful, immature people). More importantly, it advanced the

trends already embodied in the papal social encyclicals, the Medellin document, and the Synod of Bishops. The Society committed itself to be “present at the heart of ideological battles and social conflicts, wherever the crying needs of humankind encountered the perennial message of the Gospel.” (GC 32 Decree Four, #19)

For several years some Jesuits in the universities balked. In time most all of this resistance dissolved.

### ***“There will be many martyrs that come from this”***

The more sharply focused Jesuit mission, articulated in 1975, certainly arose out of the founding vision of Ignatius but would not have been possible for the Jesuits without the return to sources and the simultaneous attending to the signs of the times, recommended by the council. Thereafter, the “service of faith and the promotion of justice” became the new mantra for the Society. It affected all Jesuit institutions and transformed the way we taught, and it guided the choices we made for mission.

Often it was misunderstood, even within the Society; sometimes it was violently rejected. When the decree passed, a Brazilian Jesuit reportedly said, “There will be many martyrs that come from this.” More than 50 Jesuits have been martyred precisely because of this unified mission of the faith that does justice. This figure does not include the untold number of Jesuit martyr-witnesses in Eastern European countries and in some Asian countries during the years of Communist occupation and persecution.

**A**rrupe took steps to institutionalize this mission with his landmark address to the Jesuit Alumni in Valencia, Spain, in 1977 when he articulated that Jesuit-educated alumni were to be “men and women for others.” And, in his last year as general, Arrupe addressed the urgent needs for refugees from war and famine, Arrupe founded the Jesuit Refugee Service (1980). He continued to underscore how justice without love, justice without faith in God, could simply be another violent ideology.

But no good deed goes unpunished, the old canard says.

By now there was mounting criticism of the Society in certain sectors, especially by bishops and cardinals of a more traditional bent. When Arrupe had a debilitating stroke in August 1981, Pope John Paul II, removed the temporary successor Vicar General Father Vincent O’Keefe and placed in charge two Jesuits of his own choosing. This painful interregnum lasted for two years.

The pope had been advised that if he did this, he could expect 1/3 of the members of the Society to leave. When no one left over this unprecedented papal inter-

vention, he realized he had been badly advised about the spirit of obedience in the Society. And from then on, his relationships with the Society and especially with the new general Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach (1983-2008) were much more cordial and supportive.

Kolvenbach seemed to have been an ideal choice to mediate the many conflicts. During his term as vice-provincial, Lebanon was engaged in a destructive and bloody civil war and Kolvenbach managed to keep his equilibrium, his altruism, and personal tranquility in the face of opposing factions.

### ***More martyrs***

A further turning point for many Jesuit universities for more deeply embracing the newly defined Jesuit mission was the assassination of the six Jesuits and two companions in November 1989 at the Universidad Central American in El Salvador. They were assassinated, it was clear, precisely because they had so fully embraced the service of faith and the promotion of justice as essential to their Jesuit vocation.

When the Jesuit delegates gathered in Rome for the 34<sup>th</sup> General Congregation in 1995, the leadership of Father Kolvenbach for the previous twelve years had quietly brought forth a deeper commitment to the contemporary Jesuit mission. The GC 34 delegates further nuanced the mission of the service of faith and promotion of justice by including significant documents on faith and culture, faith and interreligious dialogue. Action for justice, engagement with and transformation of culture, and dialogue with other religions were all intimately intertwined and motivated and animated by faith (See GC 34, Decree Two, Servants of Christ’s Mission, #19).

The Congregation also advanced several breakthrough documents, such as “Jesuits and the Situation of Women in Church and Civil Society” and “Cooperation with the Laity in Mission.” Tom Fox, the editor for the *National Catholic Reporter*, called the resulting decrees the “first Catholic documents for the Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”

In his major address five years later to American Jesuit universities at Santa Clara in 2000, Kolvenbach noted how “the promotion of justice has sometimes been separated from its wellspring of faith.” He told the assembly of university educators that “the faith dimension was too often presumed and left implicit, as if our identity as Jesuits were enough. Some rushed headlong towards the promotion of justice without much analysis or reflection and with only occasional reference to the justice of the Gospel.”

This challenge for integration remains today.

As Father Kolvenbach approached 80 years of age, he was able to secure from Benedict XVI permission to

resign. The era of Peter-Hans Kolvenbach (1983-2008) was crucial for mending relationships with the Pope and Vatican officials, and simultaneously he solidified the modern mission of the Society and encouraged brilliant new initiatives.

The General Congregation 35 delegates gathered in Rome in 2008 to accept Father Kolvenbach's resignation, to express its gratitude for his unwavering leadership, and to elect a general—Adolfo Nicolás who had served all his life in Japan— just as Arrupe had. But it was now a very different time.

**F**ather Nicolás, in his short four years as general, has continued the great initiatives of the last 50 years and he has offered a fresh vision to encourage the Society in its dialogue with other religions and its engagement with cultures other than Western. His address in Mexico City (April 2010), to which *Conversations* gave full coverage (Fall 2011) emphasizes the key role that Jesuit universities and colleges play in a globalized and secularized 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In a span of 50 years the Society of Jesus has been re-founded. It is thriving. But it is thriving in a totally new and creative way. Its commitment to scholarship, for instance, is one of the strongest it has ever been, but carried out primarily through lay colleagues within the Jesuit university setting.

None of this would have been possible, certainly not with the breadth and depth of which it has been real-

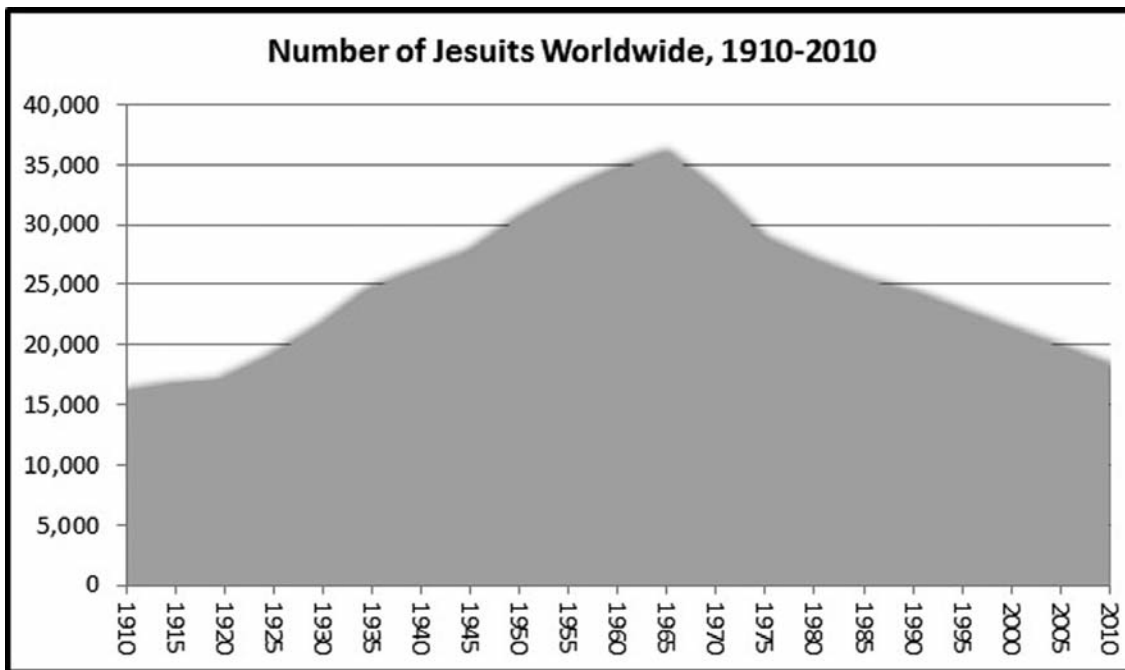
ized, without the vital partnerships formed with lay women and men around the globe. Never before has a religious order partnered with lay people so intimately in mission, so vitally in its spirituality, and so deeply in its committed vision of the Church and the world:

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, 1.

It is our common enterprise.

Over five decades the Society of Jesus has at last incorporated the initial impulse of John XXIII: 1) that the church be united in Christ, truly ecumenical, 2) that the church be engaged with and learn from all the best the world has to offer, and 3) that the church be a church of and for the poor. The Society has clearly aligned itself with the movement of the Spirit so suddenly bursting forth when an aging Pope threw open the windows to announce the calling of the council and to allow the Spirit of God to blow where she will.

Pope John's admonition to the bishops at the opening of the council is also a good one for us to take to heart today: "We must disagree with those prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand." Dispelling the gloom, Jesuits and lay colleagues have helped to bring forth a great light and a great joy to all people. ■



In 1910 there were 16,295 Jesuits worldwide and in 2010 there are 18,266. The number of Jesuits steadily increased year by year from 1910 until it peaked in 1965 at 36,038 Jesuits. Since 1965 there is a steady decline each year resulting in about half the number of Jesuits as there was 45 years ago.

Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University.