

# “Wisdom Language for the Frontiers”

Address of Father General, Adolfo Nicolás SJ  
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## 1. The need of the present moment

Today, I want to share something that has been on my mind for a while. Let me start with June 25 which is barely a month ago. That morning I was visited by two Religious. Towards the end of the visit they asked me “What do you think are the most urgent needs of the Church today? What should be our priorities? That’s a surprising question when you feel that the conversation is coming to an end, because it starts all over again. This is a question that we ponder over very much in our hearts, in our minds.

That same afternoon I had an appointment with Pope Francis, and we both arrived at the same question “*How can the Society of Jesus best help and serve the Church?*”

The answer to these questions had in a way already been given three days earlier when the Pope had met Fr. Dumortier, the Rector of the Gregorian University. The Pope had conveyed to the Rector that he expected Jesuits to take the Intellectual Apostolate very seriously. He affirmed his desire that priests should go out to the periphery because it is from there that one gets a better view of the Church and how it is functioning. He continued by saying that the experience of the periphery is very important but it needs to be complemented by reflection at the centre. Without reflection at the centre, the experience of the periphery does not bear the fruits of the gospel that the Lord wants. So this was the Pope’s reflection.

On the other hand, we had a meeting of Jesuit Universities in 2010 in Mexico. A slogan that caught the imagination of those present was ‘*The biggest danger today is the Globalization of Superficiality*’. The message that came through in Mexico is that we Jesuits have to aim and direct our

efforts at Depth – depth in our reflections, in our understanding of reality, in our spirituality, etc. This same message had been given to me often by the previous Pope, Benedict XVI. Every time I met him, he would hold my hands and say, “*The Church expects depth from the Society of Jesus - depth in study and depth in spirituality*”.

So I think there is a concurrence that this is the need of the present moment. In today’s world, we are flooded with information. Just Google a particular topic and you will find thousands of pages telling you something on that topic. But nobody tells you what the truth is, nobody. And Google can’t. There is no sense of the truth, no criteria for finding out how true the facts are. We risk making judgements with mere information and therefore make wrong judgements.

During my flight coming here, I was reading on my Kindle a book “*Difficult Conversations*”. The book is about the fact that all of us have difficult conversations whether it be in the family, in religious life, in management etc. People have difficult conversations because they disagree on something important. The book goes on to say that there are actually three conversations which keep criss-crossing. The first is the conversation of facts “*What is really happening?*” The second is the conversation of feelings “*Do I feel hurt, neglected, taken for granted?*” Finally, there is the conversation of identity which touches on my value and self worth “*Who does he think I am?*” The book helps us to be aware of these three levels in order to handle the conversations better.

All of this points to the fact that we need depth. We need “*to know*” with a certain amount of reflection and a certain amount of wisdom.

## **2. Is this different from what we said at Fatima?**

Those of you who were present at Fatima will recall that we spoke about the prophetic mission, the dimensions of prophecy and how to be prophetic. But now, is this something different? Are we faced with a different need? In order to put things in perspective, let me share a Biblical reflection. I have checked this with the professors at the Biblical

Institute so as not to be very much off the track. That is the advantage of being in Rome – you can consult the experts!

It struck me that in the Bible we have three very different languages. These are clearly different languages that correspond to the experience of a people in their relationship with the Lord.

The first language is naturally the language of building a people. Israel did not have any identity at first. The people were slaves and migrants who were being exploited and had just come out of Egypt. The process of building an identity is recorded in the first books of the Bible. And here we have the language of history. It speaks about the great things God did for them. They mix history and mythology and glorify some facts and events so that the people can feel proud of belonging to this community. This is historical language which appears in the historical books of the Bible. It gives a sense of belonging and a sense of pride in being a people who can truly say “*God is with us*”.

Once the identity is established, the prophets appear and now we have prophetic language. The people’s faith is linked very much with their national identity, and this faith gets contaminated due to manipulation, political narrowness and exclusion. So the prophets appear to challenge the faith and purify the faith. They challenge the pilgrimages and festivals because these neglect the people. The core of religion is compassion, and when Israel forgets about compassion, the prophets appear. They remind people that God is not interested in offerings and sacrifices if the most important part of the covenant is neglected. So prophecy always arises within the community of faith and tries to purify that faith.

Then the Exile happened and the people felt betrayed and abandoned. Then most of Israel – and we should not soften the blow – yes, most of Israel lost their faith. Only a few, the remnant, kept their faith. Their faith was based on God acting in their history and when they lost the temple and were exiled to other countries, they wondered where God was. And many lost their faith. And then, the prophets disappear. When there is no faith, prophetic language does not make sense. Their challenges fall flat and there are no hearts to be moved. At this point, a new language

emerges i.e. the language of wisdom. This is the wisdom of finding God in everything... now you see the connection to the topic. It is the language of God working in the family, in the children, in culture, in everything. This leads the people into a new relationship with God, a relationship of depth and wisdom. This is a language that makes sense to believers and unbelievers alike. Maybe it is the emerging language for the frontiers in today's world.

### 3. Where are we in the world?

Europe and the West – the so called Christian West – is going through a tremendous crisis of faith. Prophetic language is no longer relevant because there is no faith to purify. A new language is needed, and the Bible gives us the key to this. It is interesting that for a long time I had thought (because that was the rhetoric for several years) that wisdom belongs to Asia. We would say that Asian religiosity is based on wisdom while prophetic religion belongs to the Christian West. Now we hear that we need wisdom in education, in social work, in pastoral work and so on. So the quest for wisdom is not any more a monopoly of Asian communities. It is universal.

It is interesting to see how Pope Benedict would speak the language of wisdom each time he went to the frontiers. And people were amazed. He went to France and spoke of secularity in a very positive way. He went to London and spoke in a language that everybody could follow... and so too, in Germany. Then Pope Francis came along with a further emphasis on the language of the common man. It is the language of being poor, of being compassionate, of telling everybody 'good evening' and 'have a good meal' and '*have a good rest*' etc. This has a lesson for us since it demonstrates an ability to change, an ability to adapt.

In this Assembly, you are discussing the processes "*from the roots to the frontiers*". We may discover that we have the same processes as the people of Israel. We need the time of building up history, a period of

purification of that identity and now, in the world we are in today, we need much more the language of wisdom.

It is interesting to hear Pope Benedict say that an agnostic who searches is better than a Christian who does not search. A person who thinks he has all the answers is dangerous, because nobody can have all the answers. I remember seeing a poster at the Asian Pastoral Institute at Manila. It was a poster of an orang-utan lying on the floor and looking up. The caption read “*Just when I knew all the answers, they changed the questions*”. It conveyed a sense of giving up, which is the attitude of many priests. You come out of the Seminary knowing all the answers and then realize that the questions have changed. And you feel like that orang-utan... What has happened? We need to take this seriously because this is not only a western problem. Now, all our cultures are becoming more pluralistic. This kind of secular thinking and the desire for wisdom is becoming a general trait in all cultures. In some places this is advancing slowly, but it is coming. We must look at the life of the youth because they are the key to understand what is happening. Young people are on the internet all the time. They are like native residents in this new world (unlike us old people who are mere passengers!).

So we need three languages. For new Christians and new CLC members, we need the language of history to build up the identity. We need the language of prophesy within the community of faith, to challenge those who believe. And now we need the language of wisdom for the frontiers. In this Assembly, you will dedicate a lot of time to discussing the frontiers with their challenges and perspectives. I think that the language of wisdom is important here because it brings in depth and counteracts the superficial tendencies of today.

#### **4. How do we go about it?**

At this point, I recall Fr. Arrupe who used to speak very strongly about the option for the poor. He came up with a triple response which – consciously or unconsciously – used the Biblical terms of the many and

the few. The idea is that God cares for the many, but he chooses the few to be his co-operators to care for the many. Arrupe put it this way

- All Jesuits have to work for the poor
- Many Jesuits have to work with the poor.
- A few Jesuits (called by God and Obedience) have to live like the poor.

This is how we started out with some communities in the middle of a poor neighbourhood, sharing the life of the poor and being totally at the mercy of life in the neighbourhood. I am reminded too of Cardinal Bergoglio who, as Archbishop of Buenos Aires refused to live in the Episcopal palace. He lived in a little room above his office and shared meals with the common people. He is following the same line now as Pope. You saw him at the World Youth Day at Rio. He had to change cars twice. He had a wonderful car given to him by the German government with all the luxuries of a Head of State. He never used this car. Then they gave him a little humbler car, but still a good one. And he still said no. Finally they got a utility car, one that any ordinary employee can have. And he used that one. Of course, this can have its difficulties in Rio, because the people surrounded his car, but he seemed to enjoy it fully. He feels that his vocation and the vocation of every priest is to be not only with the poor but also very much like the poor. He says that the shepherd must smell of the sheep. (I wonder, what is the smell of a Jesuit?).

To get back to our topic, we can apply the classification of Fr. Arrupe in our terms, beginning with the few:

- A few CLC members, who have the talent and capability and opportunity, are called to intellectual work such as research, investigation, writing etc.
- Many CLC members are called to become excellent, qualified professionals.
- All CLC members are called to fill our world with Wisdom through reflection, meditation and thought.

## 5. The relevance of Ignatian Spirituality

It is at this point that we see the enormous relevance that Ignatian Spirituality and Ignatian Laity have for the church and the world. The Church needs a spirituality that fosters wisdom and depth in order to respond to the need of today. Ignatian spirituality trains us for reflection and meditation, for sorting out what is superficial and banal from what is deep and real. This is what Ignatian spirituality does for us – it trains us to be sensitive, to discern. Not everything that happens is the will of God, not everything that we have around is good for humanity. Who is going to discern? We need people trained precisely to discern.

Again, it is the Pope himself who gives us a hint. He celebrates daily Mass at the chapel in St. Martha in the Vatican, and the chapel is filled with people who want to hear his homilies. This has become a new trend, and even people who have left the Church now take his homilies and read them at home to the children to learn something for their lives. He gave a particular homily about Our Lady, and as usual he had three points. (People say this shows he is a Jesuit. So on purpose, sometimes I give four points, sometimes two – numbers do not define a person). Anyway, the Pope said there are three key words to understand Mary – Listening, Discernment and Action. Later on, Fr. Spadaro, the director of *Civiltà Cattolica*, said that this homily helps us to understand the Pope because it defines the way he thinks. He is listening now during Spring. He will be discerning during the summer, and he will act and take decisions in Autumn. So look forward to many important decisions that will come out soon!

This is all very Ignatian. We start with Listening which is crucial and I would also add Seeing (after being in Japan for many years). Listening is very European while Seeing is very Asian. Hence we Europeans have eyes which seem different and when we look at things, the eyes go like arrows. Asian faces are more contemplative; there is harmony in the face and there is a contemplative way of looking at the other. I believe that St. Paul – if he were a Japanese – would have said faith comes from listening

and seeing. Anyway, this brings in the ears and the eyes. Then we have discernment, which is where the heart comes in. And then Action brings in the hands and feet. So the whole body is involved.

## 6. Application of this Spirituality

Ignatian spirituality continues to be extremely modern and relevant for today. It has an amazing flexibility and creativity, because it depends very much on how the Spirit of God is leading us. We sometimes have too many rules, but Ignatius asks us to go beyond these and see how the Spirit is guiding us. Each time he wrote to Jesuits in different parts of the world, he told them to submit everything to discernment. He gives tremendous freedom to the superiors to discern, based on the present reality. Ignatian spirituality trains us for discernment and trains us for action. Discernment must lead to action, because discernment that ends in itself is futile.

You have surely heard of Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, the Peruvian theologian known as the father of liberation theology. He is now a Dominican priest. In an interview he was asked “*What has happened to liberation theology?*” He replied, “*As long as there is poverty in the world, liberation theology will have something to say. But it has moved in the direction of spirituality. We need to train people to have a perspective on the world*”. The journalist then asked him which spirituality was the best for the development of lay persons in the Church. Without hesitation he replied “*Ignatian Spirituality*”.

Ignatian spirituality continues to be relevant because it is rooted in reality .... And it is reality that helps us change, much more than exhortations and letters from the General. This spirituality starts from reality and leads us towards what God wants. The big question is “*What does God want from humanity?*” At a seminar on religious life two years ago, a theme that came up prominently was that “mission is always the mission of God”. So we now speak about ‘*Missio Dei*’ and that must become the focus of our attention.

A book I would highly recommend is ‘*The Great Transformation*’ by Karen Armstrong. It studies the development of spirituality and religion, with attention to what Karl Jaspers calls ‘*the Axial Age*’. The book examines this pivotal age during which the spiritual foundations of humanity were developed in China, India, Israel and Greece. In all these four different cultures, they realized that the only thing that can change society is a change in the human person. It is the inner change, the inner journey that matters the most. We have seen that communism without a change in people leads to inhumanity, and capitalism without change in people leads to selfishness. Unless we have a change from within, there is no way forward. Ignatian spirituality aims specifically at this change of the person.

There is an Asian story of a disciple who went to a monastery. His friends asked him why and he explained that he was going there because he wanted to contribute to changing the world. After a year, he met those same friends who asked him why he was continuing there. He replied that he was learning something – now he only wished to change a few people around him. One year later they asked him what he was learning. He replied that he had learned that the most important thing was to change himself. This is indeed the insight that the great sages of world religions have had. St. Ignatius too saw this clearly. And that is why the Inquisition thought him to be dangerous. They interrogated him eight times! Not once, but eight times. And each time they could find nothing wrong because he was very careful not to waste his time on formulations or doctrines. He went straight to the heart. The Inquisition felt that this was dangerous, because this man had a freedom and openness to the Spirit that could not be controlled. And when things get out of control, the authorities get nervous.

## **7. Who are the carriers of this Spirituality?**

We come finally to the question of who could carry this spirituality forward. Who are the ones who have this power to transform? I think it is anyone who is open to reality and to the Spirit of God. Anyone who is alert to the process of discernment could be a carrier of this wisdom. Persons in

the Ignatian tradition are able to do this because they are trained to discern and go deep down to the truth. This is the meaning of “*going to the roots*”. It is not restricted to going back 50 years or 450 years, but back to Christ, and the sages of Asia and Europe and Israel, and finally back to the heart of God. When we go to the roots in this manner, then we get the freedom which allows us to go to the frontiers without fear. At the frontiers, we will encounter good people, people like the doctor I spoke about in the homily yesterday. He was a person with a ‘*Jubilee heart*’, a person full of compassion. Religion and Compassion are closely linked. When we forget compassion we forget God, because God is a God of compassion. Why are the poor so important? Because they bring out the compassion in us. They bring out our ability to respond and this indicates how deep we really are. The present Pope has great appeal because he is calling people to be compassionate.

Ignatian spirituality seeks to accompany people from the heart. One of the questions that came up yesterday in the meeting with EAs was how to train Jesuits for accompaniment. We need to train Jesuits not to be leaders of the community, but to accompany the community from the heart. The mind is necessary of course, otherwise the heart could run wild, but the mind is only a help. The driving force must come from the spirit and we must have this sensitivity to the spirit. In the Ignatian view, what matters is reality, the people and what God wants from these people. And our question will always be a humble one – how can we help? How can we accompany? How can we discern? Our language about God must always be humble, because we know so little about God. God is the mystery of mysteries.

I finish by saying that Ignatian spirituality and Ignatian laity are extremely relevant at the present moment since they give a response to a real need. The challenge would be to make CLC more part of the life of the Church so that more people can discover this way of life. This is a challenge that you can discuss as a group. I believe that Ignatian spirituality can help us at this particular moment in the life of the Church to go deep into the life of the spirit and find out how God works in our reality. Thank you very much.