

Arturo Sosa, SJ on what Pope Francis and St. Ignatius have in common

[Gerard O'Connell](#) May 20, 2021



Father Arturo Sosa, superior general of the Jesuits, speaks during the presentation of the book, *Walking with Ignatius*, in Rome May 11, 2021. The book is based on an interview journalist Dario Menor conducted with Father Sosa. (CNS photo/courtesy General Curia of the Society of Jesus)

Arturo Sosa, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, granted an interview to **America** in the Jesuit Curia in Rome on the eve of the launch of a new book published to coincide with the Ignatian Year. In it he spoke about how Francis, the first Jesuit pope, is working to reform the church, even though some bishops “are not rowing with him,” and considered whether this opposition could lead to division in the church.

He also addressed the problem of intolerance in the church and the abuse scandal in the Society of Jesus. He spoke about how the society relates to Jesuits who left the order and how he envisages the society in the future. He discussed the possibility of another Latin American or Jesuit pope. He commented on John Paul II’s vision of religious life and his removal of Pedro Arrupe, S.J., from leadership of the society.

Arturo Sosa, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, granted an interview to America on his new book published to coincide with the Ignatian Year.

We spoke on May 10, the eve of the launch of *Walking with Ignatius*, a work based on interviews he conducted with Dario Menor, a Spanish journalist and a married man with children who is not a member of the society. The 270-page book offers deep insights and stimulating material for reflection and discussion during the Ignatian Year that commemorates the 500th anniversary of Ignatius' conversion after he was badly injured by a cannonball at Pamplona, Spain on May 20, 1521. The commemoration begins on May 20 and concludes July 31, 2022, the saint's feast day.

I began with a remark from the book—"I see Ignatius as a great reformer"—and asked if he sees Pope Francis as a reformer too?

Father Sosa explained that he had used the adjective "great" when asked whether Ignatius could be considered "an apostle of the Counter Reformation." He remarked, "Frequently, Ignatius and his companions have been presented as 'counter reformers' but my point is, he was not counter reformation. He was a reformer and a better reformer than Luther." He recalled that Luther advocated a reformation but "ended up with a schism that he did not initially desire," whereas Ignatius, like other reformers in the Catholic Church like Francis of Assisi, "obtained reforms without causing division."

"In that sense," he said, "Francis is one who believes that the church needs to be reformed and he knows that the reform of the church comes from the Second Vatican Council. So, he wants to put in place that kind of reform, the reform that was discerned and decided in the Second Vatican Council."

In his book, Father Sosa highlighted "synodality" as one of the main elements for that reform of the church. He explained, "Synodality is the word we are using now, but the Second Vatican Council used the expression 'People of God.'"

He recalled that in Argentina, Jorge Mario Bergoglio "was one of the promoters of the 'Teologia del pueblo' [theology of the people]." He said today "the main reform is that the church really becomes 'the People of God' and that means that its ministers are servants or pastors. Francis uses the image of pastor often, meaning that everyone is taking care of the other

one. The pastor is not a chief, the others are not sheep. That is a very big, deep reform.”

When he spoke in the Church of the Gesù in Rome, on Sept. 27, 2014, for the 200th anniversary of the restoration of the Society of Jesus, Francis called on his fellow Jesuits to “let us all row together!” I asked if the Jesuits are doing that, Father Sosa replied, “Yes! Yes! I think so. We are trying to row together and to row deeper.”

But, he said, “the danger is that some can row in one direction, others in another direction, so the big challenge is to row together in the same direction. And today Pope Francis is giving a direction to the church to row together.”

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Asked how he interprets the fact that some bishops are not rowing with Francis, the Jesuit leader said this is due to “the diversity in human nature and in the church. Bishops have been appointed in many different moments, with many different criteria. There are bishops for whom the Second Vatican Council, which took place almost 60 years ago, is not part of their normal way of proceeding.” Many still do not accept it as a way to reform the church or the path the church should follow, he said.

“The risk is always there,” he said, of a parallel church emerging, “but I don’t see a near risk of a division of the church.”

In the book when asked if he thinks the Catholic Church in Europe and the Americas is heading toward becoming a church composed of a small, pure minority, Father Sosa warned, “We need to be careful about purity as it can be the seed of religious fundamentalism which is the worst of all kinds of fundamentalism because it kills in the name of God and sows intolerance in his name.” He added, “There is no room for intolerance in the church.”

I asked where he sees such intolerance today? He replied, “I see it in the absence of mercy.” For example, “in the many attitudes surrounding the [phenomenon of] abuses.”

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He said, “For me, the abuses are a very big sin of the church, of the clergy and other members of the church. I am not justifying them and, like the pope said, I too think that one abuse is already a shame for us.” He added, “That is the starting point. I think we have done something about recognizing the errors and the sin, but the intolerance is about the other steps.”

Father Sosa said, “The victims and those who are abusers need to be healed. Abuse is a very deep wound, and we need to heal that. But how do you heal that? With intolerance? No! You heal that with mercy. You heal that by accompanying processes. You heal that by reconciliation and forgiveness.”

In the book, he speaks about the need to find ways to bring healing to the perpetrators as well.

I asked if he was shocked or surprised when he saw abuse cases emerging among the Jesuits? “Yes,” he said. “It was a very painful situation. Very painful. And there was not one case, there were many cases, and in many places including Chile, the United States, Germany, England, Spain and elsewhere. It was really a shock, a shock in the sense that I had not imagined the possibility.”

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He acknowledged that part of the cause is “in our formation, in our accompanying people. But that’s only part of the problem,” he said. “I think we are not outside of the society and it is very important to understand—not to justify ourselves—but to understand the huge nature of this problem because of the culture of the society. We are not coming from another planet. These attitudes are in our societies too.”

Does he think the church is overcoming this problem? Father Sosa said, “I feel that the church has started to do that, but it is not behind us, it is still in front of us, and we have to face it. I think the church has begun to take steps and the big change I have seen is to put the victim in the center.” He recalled, “The first reaction, 30 or more years ago when the first cases came, was the defense of the institution, of the order or of the diocese—putting the institution before the individual.

“But today the victim is put in the first place, to hear the victim, to believe the victim and the suffering of the victim, and that has helped change a lot the behavior of the church and it has helped to put in place the norms and the procedures and so on,” he said. “I think that today there is no case that is not denounced and placed under the civil law and canon law.”

But, he said, “that is not enough. We have also to move as a group in the sense that, yes, the victim is a victim, but there is also a perpetrator that has problems. Moreover, the victim and the perpetrator are part of our community, so there is also an institutional dimension to what is going to happen and there is the cultural dimension.”

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“All this is a big cultural change,” he said, “and if we take seriously what we believe, namely, that finally redemption is a work of forgiveness and reconciliation, then that is the big challenge, how to arrive at this. We have a long way to go.”

Since the numbers of Jesuits decreased in recent decades, I asked how the society relates to those who left. “Very many former Jesuits are working in our apostolates and are working in a good way,” he said, explaining that “normally, most of the Jesuits who left the society concluded in the process that this is not their vocation or the society told them this is not the place for you. For the majority, this is a very well-done process in dialogue and [the decision is made] with an agreement. But there are also cases when it is not like that and they are told you must go or when there is a very big problem.”

“It’s normal that some persons leave during formation,” he said, “the idea of the formation is to test. But if they leave after formation, that raises another question.” He revealed that in some provinces in recent years “an abnormal number of young priests left the society,” and this raises questions regarding “our formation and our accompaniment.”

In the book, Father Sosa said, “Africa is today the place where the apostolic body of the society is seeing the most growth, as much in vocations as in our activities and partnerships.”

Asked in the interview about this development, he said, “Africa is the younger church. The church is growing in Africa, and so too is the Society of Jesus.” The society also has many vocations in Vietnam, Father Sosa said,

“but the circumstances are different there and could even be linked to the wish to be free. But the growth in Africa is bigger and may be like what happened in Latin America over a hundred years ago.”

He revealed in the book that many of the vocations to the society today do not come from Jesuit institutions.

Asked if having a Jesuit pope has increased the number of vocations to the society, Father Sosa said, “It’s impossible to prove that, but I think Pope Francis is a good point of reference for many people.”

He revealed in the book that many of the vocations to the society today do not come from Jesuit institutions. He explained that in “the 1960s or 1970s the main reference point for Jesuit vocations was its schools,” but “this is no longer the case today as there are many other ways to get in touch with the society, including through our work with refugees or in the parishes and through the spiritual exercises.”

Indeed, “young people are quite attracted to the exercises, and we have so many ways of offering the exercises [now] whereas before we had a more rigid model.” He added, “Many women give exercises even to Jesuits, and they are very good. So that’s a whole new development.”

Asked what he envisages the Society of Jesus will be like in 10 to 20 years’ time, Father Sosa said, “I think we will be fewer in terms of numbers, maybe 10,000 to 12,000, but we will be younger. Now we have a big group of elders—and I am one of them—and we will not be here in 20 years.”

Asked what he envisages the Society of Jesus will be like in 10 to 20 years’ time, Father Sosa said, “I think we will be fewer in terms of numbers...but we will be younger.”

“We will be more diverse culturally,” he said. “That’s another amazing phenomenon in the society, the variety of cultures and the variety of social and family backgrounds of the new men joining the society. And there will be more inter-cultural communities.”

He envisages “more collaboration with others, with non-Jesuits, not only more collaboration in our works but also in our working together with others in common projects, with Catholics and non-Catholics.”

“We have a huge group of Jesuits in Asia and in Africa, in countries where Christians are minorities,” he said. “So in addition to being intercultural, I think we will also be interreligious in many places. I envisage a society more in dialogue in all these processes, and very engaged in social work...that is associated with the climate crisis and with poverty—today a great many Jesuits are working with the poor.”

When asked “after a Jesuit and Latin America pope, what can we expect?” Father Sosa pointed upwards, indicating to the Holy Spirit. He said there is little chance that the church will have another Latin American Jesuit pope, but “we could have a pope from another continent.” He added, “It’s very difficult that we will have two Jesuit popes, one after another,” but he admitted before Francis was elected, “I think Jesuits never, ever thought to have a pope, and that was my conviction too,” so regarding the future, “I may be wrong,” he said.

“For me, the advantage is you can talk the same language,” Father Sosa said of his relationship with Pope Francis.

In the book, he said “the fact that the pope is now a Jesuit places us at a disadvantage because he has to be careful not to give the impression that he has a preferential relationship with the society.” I suggested there must be advantages too, so which ones?

“For me, the advantage is you can talk the same language,” he said. “When we say the word ‘discernment’ we are saying the same thing. When we say ‘consultation,’ we know what we are talking about, likewise when we say ‘availability’ (*disponibilitá*). We are talking the same language.”

He recalled that “it was very difficult to talk to St. John Paul II. He spoke another language. He understood religious life in a very different way to Francis. And you can ask the nuns about this too, not just the Jesuits. John Paul II did not understand a religious man who was not ordained; he did not understand a brother. For him religious life was for women, for the not ordained, but in a second place.”

Since he mentioned John Paul II, I asked what he felt when John Paul II removed Father Arrupe from the leadership of the Jesuits in 1981 and appointed Paolo Dezza, S.J., then 80, as his special delegate to the order?

“What removed Arrupe was his brain!” Father Sosa said. At the time he stepped down, Father Arrupe had indeed suffered a debilitating stroke. “The moment was very special because maybe they were in tension, but I think John Paul II really admired Arrupe as a person,” Father Sosa said. “The tension was not with Arrupe; it was with the Jesuits, with the society.

“So, when Arrupe got sick, it was the occasion for John Paul II to say, ‘You cannot elect a new Arrupe; you cannot elect a new general until after I can see inside your room.’ And that was the process; it took two years.... I don’t know [if it was hard] for him, but for the society it was very hard.”

Now, he said, “we have to revindicate the person of Father Paolo Dezza. He was extraordinary.”

“Father Dezza really was very faithful to the church and to the pope,” Father Sosa said, “but also to the society. He never put behind his vocation as a Jesuit, and he really wanted to save the society, and he did it! He was so crazy that he even admitted me into the Society of Jesus. He approved my final vows!”