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## **Universal Vocation of the Jesuit**

**2009/04**

### **TO THE WHOLE SOCIETY**

Dear Fathers and Brothers,

The peace of Christ.

As we near the first anniversary of the successful conclusion of the 35<sup>th</sup> General Congregation, I would like to develop some implications of one of the central points of the Congregation: the Universality of our Vocation.

#### **Renewed awareness of our universal vocation**

Throughout the deliberations of the Congregation, this sense of our universal vocation emerged as a fundamental element of our Jesuit identity. The decree on our charism and identity (GC35. D.2, §§ 16, 20-24) expressed it very clearly. This was the mature fruit of almost four decades of a concerted effort on the part of the Society to respond to the invitation of Vatican II to re-appropriate our original charism through a return to our spiritual sources. Important initiatives were taken during the generalates of Fathers Arrupe and Kolvenbach so that a consistent effort by outstanding Jesuits, Jesuit publications, and Jesuit centers channeled the vision and intuition of the two Generals, producing a vigorous renewal of our Ignatian charism and spirituality.

The vision of our universal vocation “to go anywhere in the world where there is hope for God’s greater glory” was central to Father Ignatius and his companions. Their main concern was to cooperate with God’s plan of salvation for the whole world. We find this perspective filling every consideration of Ignatius from the Spiritual Exercises to the last pages of the Constitutions. Echoes of the worldwide mission at the end of the Gospels of Mark and Matthew and of 1Cor 15:24-28 are present in the meditations on the Kingdom and on the Two Standards. Biblical references in other parts of the Exercises and the Constitutions give evidence of Ignatius’ focus on the history of salvation and God’s earnest desire to save all humanity. His perspective is fully christological, pneumatological, and trinitarian. We can imagine Ignatius being totally taken up with the contemplation of Jesus completely dedicated to the Father’s will for the salvation of the whole world. So today we follow Ignatius in emphasizing again “an availability for the Church’s universal mission, that marks our Society in a particular way, makes sense of our special vow of obedience to the Pope, and makes us a single apostolic body dedicated to serving in the Church, men and women everywhere.” (GC 35. Decree 2, § 16)

During and after Ignatius’ time, this vision of our universal vocation was expressed in different forms in India, East Asia, Africa, and throughout Europe and the Americas. The history of the Society’s universal service fills volumes in our libraries. After the temporary lull of the Suppression, the restored Society under the leadership of Fr. Roothaan plunged itself with no less enthusiasm into the same universal mission which now forms part of our own personal experience.

It is very encouraging to meet Jesuits today who live this universal availability and repeatedly affirm their willingness to be sent anywhere in the four corners of the world. Some of

them do so in spite of old age or faltering health. It was inspiring, touching, and moving for me to hear from a Jesuit: “I confess that to receive this mission to an unknown frontier is frightening, but I accept it very willingly, because it touches something very deep in my Jesuit identity.” Such a statement may be the best summary of what I am writing about in this letter.

### **Our universal vocation strongly reaffirmed by GC 35**

When the Society gathered at GC35 to meditate on our mission today, it developed decrees on Responding to the Invitation of the Holy Father, and on our Identity, Mission, Obedience, Governance and Collaboration. In all of these decrees there is a profound sense of living a universal vocation that links our charism as described in the Constitutions with the challenges we face in today’s world.

So many of the issues that concern us, that affect our ministries and challenge our apostolic discernment, are of a universal character. The Society of Jesus is involved in a growing number of projects that have a supra-provincial, supra-national, or supra-continental character. We have been and are involved in corporate responses to issues that have universal scope such as migration and refugees, advocacy and networking on social issues, ecology, and sustainable development.

At the same time we are aware that many of the areas we Jesuits want to contribute to are much larger and more complex than we can address by ourselves. Issues such as poverty, globalization, peace, unemployment, education, and those mentioned above require us to work wholeheartedly with many others. Moreover, we rejoice that we are able to work with so many others of good will and good heart, well-educated men and women with excellent training and skills for cooperative planning and international networking. We are blessed to cooperate with them for the good of all humankind. However, such cooperation underlines the need of a universal dimension in all we do.

### **Universality of mission and our way of governance**

GC35 has affirmed the need to restructure the Society at all levels (Provinces, Conferences and Central Government) so that we can better respond to new and more universal challenges. This response requires great agility and flexibility while maintaining or promoting excellence and responsible management in whatever we do locally. It also demands greater willingness to share resources among Provinces and Conferences .

The discernment of Major Superiors working with other officials, consultors, and directors of works should explicitly include the apostolic needs and works of the Conference as well as those of the universal Society. Thus, the barriers that can divide Provinces and/or Conferences need to be reconsidered. Major Superiors can contribute to the awareness of more universal needs by sharing with the members of the Province the results of their discernment after every important international meeting.

I encourage all the Major Superiors to establish or continue the practice of many Provinces in the past, who generously sent 10% to 25% of their members abroad – what we formerly called ‘sent to the missions.’ In the spirit of the Gospel’s ‘extra mile’ (Mt 5:41), to enrich the needier parts of our world we should send abroad Jesuits who are academically and spiritually gifted, even if the cost to the sending Province is great.

The Account of Conscience can be most helpful for growth in availability as an ordinary part of ‘our way of proceeding,’ a taken-for-granted aspect of the universal mission of the Society. I ask all Major Superiors to welcome conversations about such availability in their annual visitation to our communities and works.

## Consequences for our formation

Past experience indicates that these wider perspectives of our universal vocation can become faint, even if they are never lost. We want to keep them vibrant and apostolically effective. Consequently those in formation have to be trained in this awareness of our universal mission. We need to foster in all our scholastics and brothers a universal availability to be sent anywhere in the world. They should be told that offering themselves voluntarily for difficult assignments abroad is a very good way of expressing and strengthening this availability. Finally, they have to understand that the readiness for universal mission is not just a once-in-a-lifetime spiritual exercise for one's younger years, but a permanent attitude for all our men in the Society.

Learning foreign languages, especially those that are more widely used in the world (English, Chinese, Spanish, etc.) has to be considered an important part of our training. Others do this for business or diplomatic career purposes. We do it to further our mission with Christ. The languages have to be chosen on apostolic grounds and not simply according to limited personal interests.

It would be ideal if all our Jesuits had a meaningful international experience as part of their training. Some Conferences of Major Superiors have courageously decided that all the scholastics and young brothers in their Provinces or Regions will do some part of their training abroad.

A good principle in our formation has always been to give all our men a strong general education. We want to have well formed men who can understand reality with depth of heart and breadth of mind. At the same time we have to encourage our men to be exceptionally good "at something." The fields of expertise can vary: science, theology, social issues, pastoral work, counseling, art, etc; however, if we are exceptionally good at something, the world will need us and our expertise. Some parts of the world are regulating and reducing more and more the role of so-called 'outsiders;' even there, having some special capabilities will open many doors for new apostolic opportunities. In this sense, preparing young men for the intellectual apostolate will make them all the more prepared to address the wider needs of our Society, of the Church, and even of the "secular" world.

I will finish this letter evoking the time when Ignatius decided to send Francis Xavier to India. Ignatius did not plan to send Xavier, who was his Secretary. Nicolás Bobadilla was expected to go but fell ill. So Ignatius asked Xavier to take Bobadilla's place. Francis, in total readiness, simply answered: "Here I am. Send me," and he left shortly thereafter. I am sure that this story of our First Fathers touches the heart of every Jesuit and elicits something that we have all interiorized as part of our vocation. We pray that what our First Fathers lived with such energy, generosity, and spiritual consolation can continue to move us and fill us with the grace that the Lord gave them in such great abundance.

Joyfully yours in the Lord's mission,



**Adolfo Nicolás, S.J.**  
Superior General

Rome, 19 February 2009