



# The Jesuit community as mission<sup>1</sup>

Andreu Oliva de la Esperanza SJ  
*UCA in El Salvador*

I have been invited to begin today's discussion on community based on the idea that we can help all of you reflect on the new vision that GC35 gives us about community. In its d.2, "A fire that kindles other fires", which is about our identity, GC 35 presents our life as a tryptich consisting of identity, mission and community. In that decree, a Jesuit's identity and mission are both linked by community life. And d. 3, "Challenges for today's mission", will add in n. 41 that "Community life in the Society is not only for mission, but community itself is mission". I do not know much about the situation of other communities in the Society; thus I can't generalize what I'm going to say about community life. I will stick to the reality I know, which is a house of a concrete province (Central America).

## GC changes the paradigm of our community life

We all know that the last Congregation made an important change in the way it conceived community life. I dare to say from my short life of 25 years in the Society that GC 35 made a new paradigm official for understanding community life in the Society of Jesus. Many of us have missed this. It is not a sudden change, but one that has been slowly taking place over the last 50 years, starting with the renovations proposed by the second Vatican Council and deepened by a greater knowledge of our sources. This gradual change crystallized in GC35, when it said that Jesuit community life is its own mission. It is the road that many had already taken when they went to live in small communities, in many cases in poor neighbourhoods with the desire to share the life of the poor and be the love of God in their midst.

The change that GC35 makes sums up the feeling of the majority in the Society and deepens what Fr. Kolvenbach said in his letter about community life in 1998. For many years in the Society, community life was understood to be for mission, for dispersal, and with this we have been justifying the deficiencies and lacks of our life in common. For many, community life was a practical reality; its quality was not considered to be in itself to be important. GC35 offers us a road to better understand our life in common, giving it greater value, since it is not only for mission, but is in itself mission. Both realities must be present and complement one another.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was presented by the author, with few changes, at the last Procurators Congregation in 2012.

## **Tension between mission and union**

This change in understanding community life has important implications. It is one more strand of tension in the fabric of a Jesuit's life. In the same way we live tensions between being and doing, between contemplation and action, between the universal and the local, between total union with God and insertion in the world with him. To all this we now add tension between community (union) and mission. This tension that has its roots in our own identity, of which community life is an inextricable part just as our apostolate is an inextricable part. The apostolate takes us outside and community invites us inside. Community life can be understood as part of the call to be with Him, who is part of our vocation. We cannot be companions of Jesus or friends in the Lord, if we are not companions among ourselves in the first place. To be with Him is also to be with our brothers; it is to find him present in each of our companions; to know that we all share the same thing, the same mission, and that we are responsible for one another.

That there is tension does not mean that there is a contradiction between a community that *is* mission and another that is *for* mission. On the contrary, a community that *is* mission strengthens our companion and helps him give himself with greater generosity and dynamism *for* mission. GC35 says that "in order to live our mission we need fraternal and joyful communities, where we can nourish and express with great intensity our only passion that can unite our difference, and give life to our creativity."

## **Elements of a community to be mission**

Perhaps the best question we can ask is this: how do we respond to this important change. Without a doubt, it requires a conversion of our heart through the grace of God, who moves us to respond better to community life.

Fr. Adolfo Nicolas himself gives us direction in this respect about the state of the society when he says that community must be "the place where we are called to live with generosity, respect, patience, forgiveness, friendship and disinterested giving of self, it's the place where we are called to live the Gospel together". GC 35 d.3 n.41 says that "community is the privileged place for collective witness where we live our personal and communal relationship with the Lord, the mutual relationship as friends in the Lord, the solidarity with the poor and marginalized and with a lifestyle responsible to creation".

"Community life as witness to communion is in itself an integral part of mission" (Kolvenbach, Letter about community life, 12<sup>th</sup> March 1998), and "must foster fraternal love and unity so that we may be recognized as disciples of Christ" (CN 316, 2).

"We must go way beyond sharing a roof, a table and rules. We must share our faith, reason for living, and work as companions of Jesus, our experience of profound encounter with Him who sends us. It is a community style known for simplicity and compassion, solidarity and gratuity, preferential love for the poor. Being communal witnesses of the poor Christ and his love for the poor" (CN 327).

For community to be mission, it must also respond to the mission of the Society. It is not that communities need to have a specific mission that is different from the Society's. Communities must make their own the mission proper to the Society and respond in that light. From this perspective, community which is mission, must defend faith and promote justice in dialogue with cultures and religions. It must be a community that reconciles humanity with itself, God and nature (GC 35, d.2). It must be a community that tries to live evangelical values and make

present the Kingdom of God. A community that seriously lives the Society's options must therefore live seriously the option for the poor which the Society has made its own since GC32 and which subsequent Congregations have ratified.

## **Friendship**

I would like to give a bit more attention to the theme of friendship because I think it is extremely important. In our world friendship is highly valued and meaningful, and our friendship as men of God has something to offer the world of today. Unfortunately we are not always able to live as friends, just as we are not able to show others how we care for each other. Building friendship requires time and effort, and no friendship spouts from one moment to another. And it most certainly requires empathy. All friendships are formed gradually, little by little over time, and are based on giving and receiving, a mutual concern for one another, time spent together and knowing something about each other's joys and hopes, sadness and worries. If we are not available to give time to our companions, giving even more than receiving, then friendship in our communities will not be able to grow.

But this is not just a friendship to promote trust, to be hospitable, or to celebrate together; to share in the faith, we must be ready to spend time in our communities, and one thing I have noticed is that those who most complain about community life are the ones who are most often absent.

## **Lifestyle which more authentically reflects the Gospel will make us more credible**

I have already commented on some of the problems we face in our communities, which are problems that are opposed to the Gospel. How is it possible that a body which desires to be reconciled to humanity is not able to find and enable reconciliation between two of its members? What type of witness is a body that is radically divided? With what authority can we announce the Gospel of Christ if it is not even present in our own home? This also happens with the promotion of justice, and with the employees in our communities (many of whom are women). We do not always comply with the appropriate labour laws, and we do not make sure that these persons receive a proper salary to live with dignity.

This new vision and concept of the community is an important step forward in the life of the Society, and it points toward a deeper way of living out our charism. Let us remember how the first companions wanted to live: in union together, in trust, and in profound friendship. This was the same for the first Christian community. The Spirit continues to shape varied and diverse ways for us to live our lives together.

## **Rethinking Community Structures**

In order for our communities to be Mission, we may have to rethink what community life means, and perhaps Father General and his Council could help us in this. As a new concept, it is normal that a body should have some suggestions and guidelines in order to better understand it. This is most probably why Father General has chosen this as a theme for Procurators Congregation 70.

It seems therefore appropriate that, having now a new way of articulating what it means to live in community, we should ask ourselves how communities be the role of the superior if community is Mission? How does the role of the minister change from being in a Community for the Mission? Can we continue to live in large communities where personal and more

authentic communication are not easy? Can communities in large buildings where we slip into anonymity be Mission? Should we live in the more privileged neighbourhoods of cities, where our lifestyle is often higher than that of most people in our countries? Is such a lifestyle of comfort appropriate if we want to show others our dedication to the Gospel of Jesus?

So often we say that our poverty is apostolic, just like our other vows, yet are we convinced of that? Would not our poverty be more apostolic if the world saw us living as the poor do? Would that not truly bear witness that the Kingdom of God is of the poor, and that "God is enough for us".

I know that these questions are not easy for us. They might even make us uncomfortable. But honestly I think that we can embrace them and approach them in the true spirit of Ignatian discernment.

This new vision of the Jesuit community which has been proposed to us by General Congregation 35 is a moment of grace for the Society of Jesus. To take our Mission to the heart of our community life unites us around Mission, and around Christ. It integrates us as people who go out as apostles into the world, but also as apostles in our own home, in our community. It will make us more authentically companions of Jesus, and, in the eyes of others, it will allow us to grow in the goodness and grace of God. If we are able to move in this direction, then our community life may be a better witness of God's Kingdom, and we will also be seen as more genuine in the eyes of the men and women of our world.

General Congregation 35 invites us to give new value to the Jesuit Community, which is not easy. We know all too well the problems we face in our communities. I am sure that in all of our minds we can see the names and faces of those Jesuits with whom it is difficult to live. But we also know that by the grace of God we can do even more than we can imagine. This process will in some cases take a long time, but it has already begun and will continue if that is what the Lord wants of us and we are able to do that which is in our reach.

### **Help that the Society offers for our growth in this new idea of community life**

In my judgment, the Society's documents concerning community life have been very good, and they inspire us to embrace a more Jesuitical way of life which is apostolic while being at the same time very human and Christian. Our problem is not that we don't know how to be a Jesuit community and how community life should be. I think we have plenty of directives in this area. The difficulty is putting them into practice. Unfortunately many of ours are not familiar with how the Society has articulated these directives, which Father Kolvenbach tried to summarize in his letter on community life which I mentioned earlier. Perhaps it would be good to compile in one single text all that has been said about community life from GC31 to the present day, all that is found in the constitutions, the Complementary Norms, the decrees of the General Congregations, and the letters from the Father General. Perhaps it could be a help for our communities to have a text on Community as Mission and its desire to improve our life in common.

Another thing that can help in this area is the development of a Community Project in which the members define how they want to live their lives together. Such a project creates a process of communal discernment whereby the Jesuits agree to a certain level of commitment. The experience in my province is that the development of a Community Project has without any doubt helped us improve our common life.

The role of the superior is fundamental in facilitating the quality of our life in common. The superior who has a gift for this communicates with others, is attentive to the needs of others, offers support and gives space for the necessary human and religious growth of all the members.

As with all things that are worth doing in life, it takes practice. We must challenge ourselves in this area, and must therefore search for the means that can help us to grow in our style of community life so that it becomes our mission. It would be a help if each community were to generate mutual trust amongst its members through community prayer, spiritual conversation, apostolic discernment, brotherly compassion, and solidarity, so that we can go down a path which will lead us to a life in common more suited to our charism and our proximity to the Gospel.

*Original Spanish*