

From Caracas to Rome: The Story of Arturo Sosa

An interview with the new Superior General of the Society of Jesus
Rome, October 16, 2016.

Two days after his election, the communications team of General Congregation 36 sat down with Father General Arturo Sosa to discuss his life and thought. The conversation introduces the new Superior General in a way that is more personal, to Jesuits and the wider Ignatian family around the world.

On being elected General of the Society

Like all the electors, I arrived at the congregation asking myself who would be the best candidates for the job of General, and obviously, I did not have myself on the list. The first day of *murmuratio*¹, I began to gather information about the delegates I thought were good candidates. The second day I began to sense that some delegates were asking about me or had asked about me. The third day I began to worry because the hints were much more direct, and the fourth even more so. In the final three days I spoke with 60 persons, and many were already asking me about my health. So I began to get the idea, though I was still praying that the companions would take seriously what Saint Ignatius says about entering the election without a predetermined decision. As I saw the votes on the date of the election, things became clearer to me, and I had the profound intuition that in this case I have to trust the judgment of the brothers because I don't trust my own. If they elected me, there was a reason, and I would try to respond the best that I can.

In this election I believe that importance was placed on my experience in both local and international work, and I have no doubt that these last years in Rome have something to do with that. But more importantly, I understand that I am one of many Jesuits in the Society of Latin America who have tried to put into practice what the congregations of the last forty years have decreed. I understand this election as the confirmation of the direction that the Society began to take in the time of Arrupe. I understand the election as a confirmation of the need for us to continue on that path.

I – Background

Family

I was born in 1948, during the very scant period of democracy that Venezuela had in the first half of the 20th century. My birth took place on November 12, and on the 24th of that month there was a coup d'état against the first democratically elected president of the country since independence. My grandparents had lived in great poverty, but my father belonged to the generation that built the country.

¹ The *murmuratio* is the four-day period of prayer, reflection and one-to-one conversations about possible candidates prior to the election of the Superior General.

We were a very extended family in which various generations shared the same space. Living so close together like that was very important for me. Our houses did not have walls fences; there was no distinction between one lot and another; we lived together. Our family was very Catholic, but we did not express our religious sentiment openly. In that setting I learned to see reality from the perspective of going beyond what appears to be; I learned that things are not necessarily the way they are. As I grew up, I was always fighting to go a little further beyond what was there to be seen.

In this regard, our family was well aware of the reality and was convinced of the need for study. They always encouraged me to get to know reality, to open up to the world, to study languages. My father was a very restless man who traveled a lot both within and outside the country. If in Venezuela at that time there were ten persons who read *Time* magazine, he was one of them. He was an economist and a lawyer, and twice he served in the government. Often he invited me to accompany him on domestic trips. When we arrived in a city that was strange to me, he always said, “Let’s go ride on the trolley,” and we would tour the city while he explained to me what we were seeing. Such experiences were constantly opening my eyes to an ever-greater reality so that I would not remain enclosed in what I already knew.

School

The other setting that influenced my childhood development was the Colegio San Ignacio in Caracas. I started there in the kindergarten at age five and studied there for thirteen years, until I finished high school. My father had also studied at that same school. Those were the days when the Society’s schools had many Jesuits, especially young scholastics² and brothers. For me it was a kind of second home. (My mother claimed it was my first home since I was never in the house.) There were activities from Monday to Saturday and sometimes even on Sunday, the day when there was Mass at the school. To be sincere, I don’t remember much of the chemistry or the mathematics, but I do remember very well that we formed groups within the school like the Sodality of Mary and the student center. We had a lot of activity of that sort. This explains a lot about the birth of my vocation: I experienced there the great meaning that life has when you give yourself to others.

II – Jesuit Journey

My Vocation

I got to know the Jesuits at the college, and I never had any doubts about my vocation to the Society. I never even thought of it in terms of priesthood but just wanted to be a Jesuit. In reality, as I recall those days, the Jesuits who most impressed me were the brothers. There were many brothers in the Venezuelan Province. Specifically, there were brothers who cooked, who fixed the buses, who drove them ... and there were brothers who taught. The primary school grades were taught in large part by brothers, and they were great pedagogues. The brothers and the scholastics were the ones really close to us

² Young Jesuits in formation

students; we hardly saw the priests.

My interest in the Society arose in this context, but it was always nourished by my sense that we had to take a hard look at the situation of the country. I thought that I could do something to help the country, and the best place for me to do that was the Society. My generation was very conscious of the need to continue to build the country. My companions in the Sodality of Mary and other groups became doctors and lawyers, they went into the Amazon. There was a sense of commitment; we believed in the need to build the society and the nation.

Time of the Council

The Council was very important for me. It was certainly great news, and we followed it like a TV serial. The Sodality of Mary was the place where we linked the social and the spiritual together in our reflections, and it was there that we read the documents, which nourished our weekly group reflections during those four years. We followed the Council closely, step by step...

Around that time there was the election of Father Pedro Arrupe, another breath of fresh air. Arrupe was elected when the boys in my group were deciding whether we should enter the Society. At the college we had a long relation with the missions of Japan and of Ahmedabad in India, so the election of a missionary in Japan was very symbolic and important.

Once in the novitiate, we had the book with the decrees of GC 31, and we read them more than we read Fr. Rodriguez.³ We studied them carefully. Then came the letter of Rio,⁴ coinciding with the conference of Latin American bishops in Medellin. What happened there was similar to what happened with the Council: we experienced very directly all the dynamics and reflections of that conference. Its preparatory documents were practically transformed by a dynamic movement from the bases, which was a cry that demanded to be heard. The people themselves were saying that we have to change, and that meant a tremendous advance for the Church of Latin America and Venezuela.

It should be said that it was because of the fragile nature of the Venezuelan Church that the Council was so important for us. The Church in Venezuela was practically exterminated during the 19th century. Venezuelan society is much more secular, much less religiously expressive, than that of Mexico or Colombia. Besides, it has been badly maltreated and exploited by successive governments. That's why when the Jesuits arrived in Venezuela: they were asked to work in the seminary and to train the clergy of a poor, fragile Church which had no vocations. It was in that context that Vatican II, Rio, and Medellin had meaning. It was as if to say: the Church has found its strength in the people; it has found its strength in the faith of the people; by that faith we must live, and by that faith

³ Author of a manual used for centuries in the formation of young Jesuits in the Society

⁴ Just months before the Bishops Conference of Medellin, the Jesuit Provincials of Latin America, meeting with Father Arrupe, addressed a letter to the Society called the "Rio Letter" (May 1968), which proved critical for establishing the Society's position in defense of social justice in Latin America.

we are going to build another church.

Regency at Centro Gumilla

At that time the Society was creating all around Latin America many centers for social research and action (CIAS), and an effort was made to have Jesuits trained in the social sciences. Many of my companions were sent to study economics, sociology, anthropology, etc., and they began to form research teams and working groups. The first such center in Venezuela was given the name Centro Gumilla⁵, named after a Jesuit who labored in the Amazon region and wrote many works about botanical anthropology. That center began its work just as I was entering the Society; as novices we were asked to help set up the library there. Since I was very anxious to study the social sciences, that coincidence motivated me greatly.

Years later, the provincials began to consider possible regency assignments outside the colleges, and I had the good luck of being sent as a regent to the Centro Gumilla of Barquisimeto. That center worked mainly with small-farmer cooperatives in the various districts there. Other companions went to parishes. The province was open to offering young Jesuits apostolic possibilities different from the traditional ones.

Theology in Rome

I had to go to Rome, but I went *reluctantly* because in Venezuela there were no opportunities to study theology. We wanted to study theology in Chile or in Central America since at that time they were the places that were very alive with dynamic religious and political movements. Looking back, I am thankful that they made me study in Rome since otherwise I would never have experienced the intensity of living together with Jesuits from thirty different countries. The people and the ambience were very alive. In Italy, I made good contacts with groups that formed Christian communities. Those years were crucial for opening me up to other perspectives of society, Church, and the Society.

To be sure, my group wanted to be sure that we could do our fourth year of theology back in Venezuela, and Fr. Arrupe, influenced by Fr. Cecil McGarry, was very understanding. After Centro Gumilla was set up, a complex of religious communities was formed in Venezuela with the idea of creating a theology faculty, so we had one year of an ad-hoc intensive seminary!

III – Political Science

Universidad Central de Venezuela

Since we always have to be busy with many things, we also worked during our final

⁵ Father Gumilla, was an 18th century Jesuit missionary who founded many villages on the Apure, Meta and Orinoco rivers. He was a great observer of nature and anthropology. He died in Venezuela on July 16, 1750, after 35 years of missionary work.

year of theology. During that time I was involved in considerable pastoral activity. While doing theology studies that year, we lived in Catia,⁶ a neighborhood where there was a parish of the Society, and I worked with another companion in a neighboring parish in the valley. At the end of the year I began studies in political science at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, which was the most important university in the country. Also, there were Jesuit professors there, and we ran the university parish. For the Society it was a very important work since we were seeking to maintain an apostolic presence not only in the Universidad Católica, but also in the Universidad Central, where there was a much greater range of ideological discussion.

Centro Gumilla

At that time I was assigned to Centro Gumilla. I began to work with the journal SIC while doing my doctorate and giving classes at the undergraduate level. I worked at this center from 1977 to 1996. When Ugalde was made provincial, I was named director of the journal, and I was involved in that work for the next 18 years. The journal was Centro Gumilla's communication medium; it was responsible for publicizing the intellectual and investigative work being done directly by the Center. The journal was called SIC, which means "yes" in Latin, because it had been born in the inter-diocesan seminary of Caracas many years earlier and was later adopted by Centro Gumilla.

In the journal we tried to give a monthly account of the social reality, and also to promote the socioeconomic formation of students, parish groups, people's organizations, etc. We were also closely linked to the university, where all of us worked giving classes or collaborating with some research group. In Barquisimeto we promoted savings and credit cooperatives in the city and farming cooperatives in the rural areas. Our times of shared reflection were very interesting. During those years I dedicated myself to writing, reading, discussion, and participation in training courses.

IV – Jesuit Leadership

Period as Provincial

I became provincial in 1996, at a time when it was clear that there were going to be strong social changes and that the province's identity needed to be strengthened. Everything was ready for a new growth of Venezuelan vocations within the province: not only of Jesuits but also of all the people who were committed to the different institutions, such as the universities, the colleges, Fe y Alegría, the parishes, etc. It was a very interesting time. We already had a large body of people working with us who had a strong sense of sharing in our mission. The idea thus arose of making a long-term apostolic project, until 2020, which is still underway. Those years were very intense. Many people, both Jesuit and lay, engaged in very interesting reflections where the provincial office was

⁶ *Flores de Catia* is a poor neighborhood of Caracas where the Society of Jesus has the Instituto Técnico Jesús Obrero, the Instituto Universitario Fe y Alegría, and the Parish of Jesus the Worker, site of the Jesuit residence where Fr. General lived.

only the catalyst. It lasted several years and finally established the major orientations of the province.

The moment came when we were able to give meaning to the concept of the “apostolic subject.” That expression, used by everybody today, was invented by us at that time in Venezuela. It was then, at a very personal level, that I had the intuition that the apostolic mission does not belong to us. The insight did not come from something I read; it was something I experienced as I encountered people who worked on the mission with greater dedication than one did oneself—and they living in much more difficult situations. Even though we Jesuits are freed of many things in order to carry out the mission, there are many collaborators who carry it out at the same time that they are raising a family in very trying circumstances—and they don’t for that reason lessen their dedication to the mission. This movement made us aware of the need to create conditions for promoting a sense of shared identity. Just as 20 years are needed to train a Jesuit—with studies, experiences, exercises, etc.—we considered how we might offer more systematic training and experiences for our lay collaborators. What emerged were new forms of offering the Spiritual Exercises to all social levels or to the “Footprints” movement, which is a youth formation program. The basic idea is that the Christian experience is an experience of formation in the faith and that it connects apostolic commitment with formation, spiritual life, and knowledge of the country.

Universidad de Frontera in Táchira

Táchira is a thousand kilometers from Caracas, almost on the border with Colombia, and there was no possibility of university study there. In the years before the Council, the bishop of Táchira saw that the way to keep the young people in the area was to offer them university studies. The Jesuits helped to set up an extension of the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello in Táchira, under the responsibility of the diocese. After twenty years it became the Universidad Católica del Táchira.

When I arrived, the university was already more or less consolidated, and there was a drive on both for institutional growth and mission development. We created a new campus, and the number of students grew, but what we emphasized most of all was putting the students in contact with reality. That was our key concept: integral formation that goes beyond the academic.

In Táchira, besides the university, we Jesuits are responsible for two parishes in the frontier region, a radio station, and five schools of Fe y Alegría. The Colombian part of the region also has institutions of the Society, especially schools of Fe y Alegría. We therefore proposed to work together in a regional, interprovincial project, since the border in that region is completely artificial. Of course, there are historical reasons for the border, but it’s the same culture, the same people, and even the same families spread out on both sides. Since that is the most fluid border between Venezuela and Colombia, we proposed to take advantage of the strong sense of identity among the people by creating an apostolic area that would join the two nations together through the various works typical of Jesuits, such as primary, secondary, and university education; pastoral ministry, refugee work, etc. The work we did was extremely interesting because the students participated in the pastoral

activities and the educational centers, and the other works used the university as a point of reference.

Experiences of Latin American Integration

My time as provincial was also an opportunity to come into contact with the Church and the Society in Latin America. I will describe three outstanding experiences of joint building efforts in those years:

The Provincials Conference of Latin America (CPAL) was formed when I was provincial in Venezuela. It was already decided to maintain the two assistancies, but at the same time to create a single conference of provincials. The establishment of CPAL was a vote of confidence for integration despite the doubts of many people. We owe a lot to the stubbornness of Paco Iber. Latin America is very big and very diverse. From Mexico to Patagonia, there is a good stretch, and the Caribbean has little in common with Argentina. Our effort had to break with the long-established custom of letting northern Latin American and Southern Cone go their separate ways. But we decided to do it, and common projects began to emerge.

The other experience was the birth of the Association of Universities Entrusted to the Society of Jesus in Latin America (AUSJAL). My experience of being part of AUSJAL's evolution into an effective network has been wonderful. We have gone from being a social club where the rectors would meet once a year and share experiences to being an organization which functions as a body and in which the universities collaborate in many projects such as fighting poverty and promoting youth leadership. In this way the network keeps developing. Given my experience of working in a small, isolated university on the border, AUSJAL supplied a breath of truth and opened up possibilities for new experiences; it made possible the exchange of professors, students, ideas, and projects. A new dimension was added to the importance of maintaining projects that were fragile but significant.

Another experience of the integration across provinces was the birth of Fe y Alegría and its transformation into an international network. With Fe y Alegría, my ties go back a long time. In fact, I have to say that I first got to know the barrios with the help of Fe y Alegría. That movement began when I was in the sixth grade at the Colegio San Ignacio, and after that we used to visit the barrios where Fe y Alegría was working. I loved biology when I was in high school, so my parents bought me a microscope as a gift. Very often I would visit one of the first schools of Fe y Alegría, Colegio Madre Emilio in the barrio Petares. When I entered the Society, my mother asked me, "What will you do with your microscope? Will you give it to the Colegio Madre Emilia?" Father Vélaz, the founder of Fe y Alegría, was well known in the circle in which we moved. Being able to help from where I was and seeing the growth of Fe y Alegría as an international network was a very joyful experience. The networks are very important on the frontiers, where resources are quite scarce. It's a privilege to see how belonging to a network endows a school of Fe y Alegría in a very vulnerable zone with a strength that it cannot attain by itself.

Experience in the Society's Central Government

GC 32 took place while I was studying in Rome. I'll never forget what it was like to listen to Arrupe himself telling us youngsters living at the Gesù⁷ about his experience in that congregation that was so important for our Society. My first experience as a delegate was at GC 33, to which I was elected when I was only 34 years old. I was the youngest delegate. It was a very intense experience with a complex movement that was not easy to understand. We reached consensus rapidly in electing Kolvenbach, and that was a really inspiring experience. The new Father General did a magnificent job in managing that transition and in regaining the confidence of other sectors of the Church for the Society, while allowing us to go deeper into the great intuitions of GC 32. Later I took part also in GC 34, working closely with Michael Czerny, who was coordinator of the social justice commission. That is where I got to know Adolfo Nicolás, who was secretary of the congregation.

My involvement in the central government began at GC 35 when Fr. Nicolás named some non-resident assistants (others called us the “flying” or “fluttering” assistants). After I was elected, he told me that he wanted me to help in the government of the Society but not from Rome. They named Mark Rotsaert and me as non-resident assistants, and that was a very interesting experience since we took part in the general council but did not live in Rome. Basically, we attended sessions three times a year, during the busy times, and we brought with us a voice and a vision that went beyond everyday concerns. It was a tiring period, but I learned a lot about keeping in contact with the universal Society at the level of governance instead of at deliberative sessions like the congregations.

Several years later the assistant sent me an e-mail asking: “How do you see the possibility of being responsible of the international houses in Rome?” I sent him the classical Jesuit response: “I entered the Society to do what they tell me to do, not what I want, but it seems to me” And I went on to explain all the arguments for saying No. Honestly, I had great peace of mind because I thought that the international houses in Rome were beyond my competence. But they didn't even ask me. The provincial called me and told me: “I have a piece of news that I have a hard time telling you or even speaking aloud because I don't know what we will do with the university if you leave.” And that was how I ended up going to Rome for a second time.

I have to say that the experience of these two years has been very interesting. Being a student at the Gregorian at age 28 was very different from coming here at age sixty-something and being responsible for 400 Jesuits who work in the international houses. This new perspective requires getting to know people well and understanding the dynamics of the institutions. I have to acknowledge the great efforts that have been in years past to renew these structures. The great dream now is the establishment of a consortium among the three classical universities of the Society in Rome.

During the last two years, I have encountered Pope Francis four or five times, always on topics related with the international houses of the Society in Rome, and the relationship

⁷ A community Jesuits in formation who are studying theology in Rome. It is adjacent to the Gesù Church.

has always been very genial and lively, graced by the sympathetic kindness characteristic of this Pope. I believe that the message of Pope Francis in these last few years has worked to energize the Society in the work we are doing, both here and in many other places. Just as the discourse of Benedict was a critical moment in GC 35, now Francis is confirming the direction we are taking in the mission of the Society. Indeed, he encourages us to go even further, as if to say: “You are still way behind in what you’re able to do.” It is the Holy Father who by his example and his knowledge of the Society continually urges us on: “Head that way!”

V – And now... from the Spirit and from the heart

Looking to the Future

People ask me what I am like, and I always respond that I am tranquil. I am convinced that there is no Society if it is not “of Jesus.” And this has two aspects: there will be no Society if we are not intimately united with the Lord; on the other hand, if the Society is truly *of Jesus*, we trust that he will help us take care of it. I think that is the most central, crucial thing for us: if the person of Jesus Christ is not before us, within us, and with us every day, then the Society has no reason to exist.

A consequence of this intuition is the certainty that the mission is “his.” The mission we share is that of Jesus, and we share it with all the others who have received this call. Therefore there are two themes that seem to me fundamental, and I touched on them in the homily at the Mass of Thanksgiving: collaboration and interculturality.

The emphasis on collaboration is not a consequence of our not being able to do the work ourselves. It is that we do not wish to work by ourselves. The Society of Jesus makes no sense without the collaboration of others. In this regard we are called to a tremendous conversion, because in many places we are still nostalgic about the days when we could do everything, and we regret that now we have no choice but to share the mission. I profoundly believe that it is just the opposite: our life is in being able to collaborate with others.

The other theme is interculturality or multiculturalism, which is part of the Gospel itself. The Gospel is a call to conversion of all cultures in order to uphold them and lead them to God. The true face of God is multicultural, multicolored, and multifaceted. God is not a homogeneous God. Quite the contrary. Creation is everywhere revealing to us diversity; it shows us how different things complement one another. If the Society succeeds in reflecting this diversity, it will become an expression of that fascinating face of God.

I believe that the Society has achieved this cultural variety since the Council. We have become rooted in all parts of the world, and from there have arisen vocations as authentic as any. You can find Jesuits, true Jesuits, in every region, in every color, in every activity. I think that is a sign of the Church for the world. What unites us all in our diversity is our connection with Jesus and the Gospel, and that is the source of the creativity of the Society and of the people with whom we share the mission. It is incredible how so many people are able to give their own personal touch to the one and only message which is a

message for everyone.

Conclusion

I have great hope that this congregation will help the Society and the recently elected General to have a clear idea of where we must go and how we must get there. The Society does not have many doubts about the nature of its mission as formulated by GC 32; it was reformulated by the following congregations, and it has now become the blood of our people. We can say that we already know what we can offer the Church. The great challenge for the Society now is how to organize ourselves to be truly effective in this mission. That is why I introduced in my homily still another theme, that of intellectual depth, because it is not a question of copying models but of creating them. Creating means understanding. Creation is an arduous intellectual process. We need to understand what is happening in today's world and in today's Church in order to understand faith. That will give us the keys for focusing the mission on the areas where we have found great consensus, and it will help us find the most effective ways to make it reality.

My impression is that the Society is very much alive and that there are many processes underway. We have to focus, and we have to fertilize, knowing that we can plant but the way things grow, we do not know—only the other knows that. God is at work. The key thing is to help, not get in the way. Our passion is founded on the certainty that we accompany the people with the guarantee that God is with us.

[Translated from Spanish]