

Toward the 36th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus

*Interview with Luis Orlando Torres, S.J.
Rector of the International College of the Gesù*

By Paolo Pegoraro

The 36th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus will begin with the Eucharist on the evening of October 2, 2016. It will elect the successor of Fr. Adolfo Nicolás and it will discern the calls that the Lord makes to the whole Society today. It is an event of ecclesial importance since the Society is the largest religious congregation in the Catholic Church, and it is active on every Continent at the service of the same Church. We asked Fr. Orlando Torres, who participated at GC 35 as secretary of the election, to tell us in detail how the Congregation unfolds. Originally from Puerto Rico, Fr. Torres worked for 10 years at the General Curia as General Counselor and Assistant for the formation of Jesuits. Since June 2014, he is Rector of the International College of the Gesù.

- What is the relationship between the General Congregation and the Superior General?

“First of all we must bear in mind that the supreme legislative body of the Society is the General Congregation, not the Superior General, who in turn represents in a certain way the executive function, that is, he is called to put into action the orientations that come out from the GC. It is so much so that the Superior General is able to present his resignation – as Fr. Arrupe did after suffering an ictus, or as Fr. Kolvenbach did in 2008 and then Fr. Nicolás will do in 2016 – but his resignation has to be discussed and accepted by the General Congregation. One of the two tasks of the Congregation is, therefore, to elect a new General.

The other task is to reflect on the life and mission of the Society in light of the signs of the times. Differently from the religious chapters of other religious congregations, the General Congregation is not convened at set intervals of time. It is more often convoked for the election of the Superior General, because it takes Jesuits away from mission and St. Ignatius did not want this to happen unless there were motives of utmost importance. However, the Congregation has also been called for reasons other than the election, usually due to especially long Generalates, such as that of Claudio Acquaviva – who was elected at 37 years of age and guided the Society for about 34 years – and Peter-Hans Kolvenbach who was Superior General for almost 25 years.”

- Besides the General Congregation, there is also the Congregation of Procurators, which meets at regular intervals. What is its role?

“This is another characteristic proper to the Society, which began in the early years on the occasion of the 2nd General Congregation (1556). At the Congregation a discussion arose regarding the obligation to convoke or not the General Congregation at fixed times, but the Congregation rejected this proposal. However, in order to respond to the request of General Congregations at fixed times, a specific number of the Constitutions

that deals with information to be provided to Fr. General, was implemented through the creation of the Procurators' Congregation.

The Procurator is a Jesuit elected by the Province Congregation – therefore not the Superior of the Province but a regular Jesuit who visits the communities and writes a report on the state of the province. Each Province sends a Procurator to this Congregation, which meets with Fr. General and his Council every three years, in order to put together the individual reports and obtain a comprehensive view of the state of the Society. If the state of the Society deems it necessary, the Procurators' Congregation can request the convocation of a General Congregation and the General must convoke it in 18 months. This structure has been maintained for many years – thus far 70 Procurators' Congregations have taken place – even if now the Congregation meets every four years since the conclusion of the last General Congregation.

To return to the original question, prior to a General Congregation the Provinces prepare a report of the state of the individual provinces in order to help in drafting the state of the universal Society.”

- What are the characteristics of the Superior General according to St. Ignatius?

“Ignatius speaks of the Superior General in Part IX of the Constitutions. The General should be closely united with God our Lord and have familiarity with him. The second quality is that he be a person whose example of religious life inspire the companions; endowed with gifts of great intelligence, judgment and prudence. Ignatius also talks about his “physical appearance”, since it is a task that requires good health, even more so today if we consider the extensive traveling the General is expected to undertake. In fact, lack of good health or advanced age in the Superior General can be motives for presenting his resignation. Ignatius concludes saying that if any of these qualities should be wanting, he should not lack great kindness and love for the Society, nor good judgment accompanied by sound learning. His collaborators can help him in what he lacks.

Together with these characteristics, he should have magnanimity and fortitude to guide the Society with perseverance to face the challenges that the Congregation calls him to address. It is worth noting that the three last Superior Generals had all lived experiences of mission in the Middle- or Far East. This means that one of the main characteristics for a General today is a certain “cultural intelligence”, that is, an openness and freedom, which allows him, not just to be in contact with, but also to accept and live other cultural realities from within.”

- Concretely, how is the Superior General elected? It may not be possible for all participants to know one another...

“Here we have a mode of election difficult to believe in if one has not taken part in it! It happens this way. After the presentation of the report on the state of the Society, we have four days of the so-called *murmurationes*. In an atmosphere of prayer and discernment, with daily exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and many Jesuits praying together, those participating in the Congregation dialogue with each other – one by one, never in groups – and only among themselves, asking whether in that province or region

of the world there are names of persons who could assume the role of General, the qualities of that person and his limitations. It is absolutely forbidden to say, “vote or do not vote for this person”. It is not allowed to form “pressure groups” or to have “candidates”. A commission called *De Ambitu* (on ambition) ensures that the process be kept from any attempt to pressure in favor or against anyone, as well as from any attempt at self-promotion. Ambition was something Ignatius detested more than anything else, and the commission on Ambition can exclude from the Congregation anyone trying to run for office or any “kingmaker”.”

- **Let’s talk about the election as such.**

“After those four days of personal exchange the election takes place. It begins with a brief exhortation – about 15 minutes – by a Jesuit chosen to do this, in which he encourages to elect the person most apt for the greater glory of God. The exhortation is followed by 45 minutes of silent prayer; and it is there that each one is called to choose whom to elect. The vote is made by each person, on a paper ballot, and signed, because it is forbidden to vote for oneself. Someone who is not present at the Congregation can be elected, but he has to be a priest, professed of four vows. And it is incredible to see how the names coincide already on the first ballot. Fr Arrupe was elected on the fourth ballot, Fr. Nicolás obtained the majority vote on the second ballot; Fr. Kolvenbach was elected at the first ballot...thus showing there was wide consensus regarding his gifts at a difficult moment for the Society. We should not forget that the members of the Congregation are locked in the Aula, without any contact with the exterior, and cannot go out until they elect the General.”

- **Will there be some novelty at GC 36?**

“Yes, there are some new developments in light of the experience of the last Congregations. For instance, the report on the State of the Society will be ready before the start of the General Congregation in order to allow for a more serene and reflected formulation. Also, the previous work done by other commissions on various topics will be considered part of the General Congregation. Finally, for the first time six Jesuit Brothers will participate as electors with the right to vote in the election of the General.”

- **Taking into account the contemporary situation of the world and the Church, what are some topics that may probably be part of the reflection?**

“In the letter of convocation of the General Congregation, Fr. Nicolás asked each Jesuit to reflect and discern the three most important calls that the Lord makes to the Society today. It seems to me that gathering together these calls could indicate some important themes for the General Congregation. I think we should also keep in mind the call of the Holy Father to go to the frontiers and peripheries of the world, issues connected with migrants and refugees, the Jubilee of Mercy, the Synod on the family. It is important to recall that the well-known decree 4 of GC 32 on the service of faith and the promotion of justice was inspired as follow-up to the Synod on Justice in 1971-72. Another big issue that I think should be addressed is the demographic change in the Society. As it happens in the universal Church, the number of young Jesuits grows

especially in Asia (47%) and Africa (20%), it remains more or less the same in Latin America (12%), and continues to diminish in Europe (12%) and the United States (9%). That means that 79% of young Jesuits is found in the global South (Asia, Africa and Latin America) while only 21% is found in the whole of Europe and the United States. The Society of the future, and by that I mean in the next ten years, will show a different face. Considering that key positions in many institutions – such as in the Gregorian University – have been occupied by Jesuits from Europe and North America, we must reflect on the consequences of this demographic change so as not to find ourselves unprepared.”