

COORDINATORS MEETING 2009

Assistancy/Conference Coordinators' Meeting 2009: A new apostolic model

A Commitment to Visibility Some impressions from Father General's talk to the Social Apostolate Coordinators Uta Sievers

The core of Father General's talk to the coordinators this year was the question "Is the Society of Jesus moving away from the poor?" This had come up as an observation during our discussions and was a source of concern for our group.

Father General pointed out how a circle of invisibility has led to fewer and fewer young Jesuits wanting to live and work with and among the poor. The starting point is that there are now fewer Jesuits in all apostolates, not just in the social apostolate. This overall scarcity is one reason why Insertion Communities, which represent the closest way of "being with" the poor and marginalised and are often small, are sometimes the first ones to be closed when a province decides to consolidate its communities; and the closure of an Insertion Community means a story that will go untold to the next generation of Jesuits¹. At the same time, there are fewer Jesuits who volunteer to live in Insertion Communities and provincials are aware that they cannot force people into this 'difficult' way of living. Why do the provincials perceive it as difficult? A possible reason is that however great the initial motivation based on the Gospel message to be with the poor, there is also a wish not to disturb other processes such as formation and university studies. Secondly (and this is the main reason for the small number of new faces in Insertion Communities), as we ourselves grow older in the social apostolate, we have lost contact with the Scholastics while focussing on the poor. Not all is lost, however. In places where the social apostolate has made visible a way to live as religious among the poor, where we have kept in touch with the Scholasticates, young Jesuits have in fact opted for this way of life.

Father General then shared some ideas with us as to what we, as persons active in the social apostolate, can do. One of his main concerns is the need to guard ourselves against the virus of success; working with the poor will never be 'a success' or make us successful in a secular sense. We need to discard the idea of success in our thinking, our mentality, our values – this is true for the whole Society of Jesus, but especially for the social apostolate.

¹For the stories of active insertion communities, see *Promotio Iustitiae* 100: <http://www.sjweb.info/sjs/pj/>.

According to Father Nicolás' vision of the Society, it is important to live in simplicity with the people whatever our field, pastoral or academic, or any other. This broad experience of commitment will inspire young people more than all-exclusive social justice work, which may send out the message that when you work with the poor, you cannot serve in any other way. In the same vein, he also warns against an "all or nothing" mentality in the social apostolate, since a purist's vision of social justice will produce admirers but not followers. Instead, we need to plan this form of work with care; we need to plan our free time, our study, and our service in an interrelated and meaningful way. And last but not least, if we manage to make friends among the poor, we will never feel we are "moving away" even if we change assignments.

Father Nicolás also raised the issue of the way in which we deal with our institutions, especially those that have a long Jesuit tradition. He was quite clear in his analysis that attachment was one of the weakest points of our traditional ministries. We become attached to our 'creations' and are very reluctant to let go of the good works we are running. In the process, we are literally killing Jesuits, overloading them with up to five different jobs, infecting them with the virus of success. Mobility is essential to our charism; thus we need to learn a new way of discernment, to let go and move on. For example, when starting a school, we should immediately prepare our lay successors so that we can hand the work over to them after no more than 15 to 30 years. He also stressed the fact that the shrinking number of Jesuits is being compensated for by the growing number of competent lay people who wish to work in our institutions. This gives us the freedom to dream again, to be creative, flexible and mobile. He encouraged us to see our institutions as our children: let them go off, get married and go their own ways.

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