



Response to the letters “Ex Officio”: Youth

2011/19

TO ALL MAJOR SUPERIORS

Dear Father,

God has much to do with youth and their joy. Many of us still know by heart the old Latin response at the beginning of Mass: “*Ad Deum qui laetificat iuventutem meam*” (“I approach the God who brings joy to my youth”). Last August 2011, in Loyola, where I encountered thousands of young people from all over the world participating in the MAGIS program prior to the World Youth Day in Madrid, I had a profound experience of the truth of these words. There, for all to see, was this simple joy of young people: contagious, inexplicable, abundant. You could not miss it. Neither the heat of the summer sun nor the sudden rains could alter that happiness. I felt that God must have been very near. I heard that some days later, in Madrid, there was that same kind of joy among the young people gathered there. It is not surprising that the heart of the message of the Holy Father also concerned joy. In his final homily, Pope Benedict XVI invited young people to say to the Lord: “I want you to be the power that strengthens me and the joy which never leaves me”.

The *ex officio* letters of 2010, focusing on the ministry of the Society of Jesus to youth, gave me much valuable and indeed consoling information about the many good things Jesuits and our collaborators are doing to serve the youth and promote their deepest joy. At the same time, the letters raised concerns and questions. For example, all over the world, our main contact with the young is in our educational institutions. However, because we are fewer, and because we have so many schools, some note that there seems to be a tendency for Jesuits to be primarily in administration. While this is an important service, some observe that, as a result, there are fewer opportunities for the personal contacts and relationships that have always been at the heart of Jesuit education. Thus, some have asked whether our educational institutions are still the best way we can serve the youth, or, at least, whether we Jesuits are playing the best or most apostolically fruitful roles we can in our schools.

Many letters raised larger concerns about the relationship between the Church and youth. Some expressed concern that many in the Church do not speak the language or understand the culture of the young, and vice versa. A good number of Jesuits ask themselves how can we be real bridges between the young and the Church, particularly when many young people have difficulties with the image of the Church they receive in the media, sometimes confirmed by their own experiences. A good number of reports ask about how we can be more present to the young, about how we can share the gift of the Gospel in ways that really speak to them, to their experience and their search for meaning, direction and love. Many reports also raised questions about whether we are doing enough to serve young people who are poor or excluded.

I am not attempting to summarize here all the issues that the letters brought to my attention. Nor do I bring up these questions in order to deny or downplay the many valuable contributions of the Society in this apostolic field. Perhaps, however, it is an essential part of



our Jesuit spirituality to be, in a sense, always apostolically restless, to continue to ask questions about the nature and quality of our service in order to sense the Lord drawing us to greater generosity and new frontiers. We cannot and should not imagine that we can do everything. But the questions we raise or which are raised by others can invite us to that continuing personal and apostolic discernment that is part of the life and mission of every Jesuit and of every Jesuit apostolate.

I wish to contribute to this process of discernment by sharing with you some personal reflections about what I feel Jesuits can do today in this important field of ministry to the young. I would like to introduce and structure my reflections with the help of a simple story. A doctor wanted his son to be a doctor like himself, but the son told his father that he wanted to become a painter. The good doctor replied in three sentences: “(1) My son, I have always wanted the best for you and dreamed that you would become a good doctor like myself. (2) But, I want to tell you that I am very happy to see you become a good painter. (3) Just allow me to accompany you in the life you have chosen”.

1. Value youth as a special time of life: “I have always wanted the best for you...”

Young people know that they will not remain young forever. That is why they seem to be in a hurry to make the most of their youth. We have to understand this and cooperate with them in this adventure. It is important that we contribute to a very important period of possibilities and of creativity. Human beings are created by God with the capacity to grow, to build and construct societies and communities. Youth is the time when these capabilities are put to the test.

This is the area in which Jesuits have been most involved with youth, through educational work. In our tradition, we have been known for integrating in creative ways all the factors that make the person human. We have been concerned with helping young people draw the best from their God-given gifts and open their hearts to other men and women, especially the suffering and the poor. We have sought to help them find their deepest meaning and joy in God’s love and friendship.

This dedication still continues as generously and explicitly as in the past. The need is also great and the challenge also as complex as ever: how can we help the young to draw the most from their own hearts and to learn from the wisdom of the past in order to enable them to create a better future? We want them to thrive, to dream great dreams of life and of hope. And we want to offer them the tools that will help them discern from among the many dreams offered them which ones follow the path which offer the true joy of our Lord Jesus, and which ones simply follow the shallow trends of profit and the market of the moment.

We want to be with the young so that they do not exchange enthusiasm for cynicism but put all they have at the service of goals and dreams worthy of the dedication of their lives and their hearts. Our first step, as Jesuits, therefore, is to ask ourselves if we are where the young are. Our presence is our first and most valuable contribution. In Provinces or Conferences where institutional options have separated us from the young, we might have to ask ourselves if those options are worth maintaining, or whether we are being invited to a new and freer discernment. Youth happens only once. It can open the person to incredible riches of true life or it can end up deflating all possible dreams and hopes. We, Jesuits therefore, have to ask ourselves: what is the quality of our presence with the young, and how deep, genuine and Christian is it?

We have to ask further: What is the quality of our presence among the young who are poor, excluded, or vulnerable, the young who are most in need? I wonder whether each Province



could plan in such a way that at least 20% of our resources (men, structures and finances) could be directed to these marginalized young people.

2. Facilitate discernment: “I am very happy to see you become a good...”

Our second great service to the young is to facilitate their discernment. Young people have a hard time making well founded decisions. At this period of their life, they are confronted with decisions about what to do with the rest of their lives: what relationships to enter into, what profession or career to pursue, what values to embrace. Thus, Ignatian service of the young must always involve helping them to discern

Our first concern will be to help them become free; from the decisions made about and for them by others. We live in a world where many people and agencies want to decide for us; they want us to buy their products, their fashions, their values, their style of life, their ideologies. Our role will not be to become the alternative choice, but to help the young be free before all these possibilities which face them.

This is where our most creative work with the young begins. Ignatius helped us “touch bottom,” as it were; to enter the depths of our hearts in order to find the work of the Spirit, who is the most reliable source of inspiration for the right decision about what is important. Only the Spirit knows the Will of God, and only in the Spirit do we have any hope of finding it ourselves. Ignatian service of the young, therefore, is a service in depth that cannot be exercised through administrative relationships alone. It requires that closeness that can facilitate the great decisions, in which the young risk their own identity and on which they can build the future house to which they will be able to invite the world.

Here perhaps is the biggest challenge to our work with young people. Nothing really important just happens automatically. To become sensitive to and perceptive of the work and the gifts of God in our hearts requires education and training in interiority: the capacity to feel, to sense, to perceive the movements of our heart. Young people are full of capabilities, of gifts and of extraordinary depth of heart. But this very abundance can be a source of inner noise; and it is very easy to grow insensitive to what is happening inside, unaware of the music and the affections that make our lives so beautiful and so promising. The challenge then is to help the young become sensitive to the marvelous forces and movements that God, other people, reality, and their own generosity and life produce in their hearts

Many of the *ex officio* letters show an awareness of this important challenge of facilitating discernment among the young. Many express a great openness to rethinking our work with the young in the light of this challenge. The letters rightly point out that, in order to do this task well, we need to know more about the young, their culture, their values and language. Some letters propose reflection on this apostolate at the Province level, or even the need for Centers of Reflection on the youth and their situation. The biggest obstacle that emerges in the letters is that Jesuits, who are capable of this apostolate, are usually overburdened. At this point, I would like to add that I am convinced that this widespread trend of overburdening our men with work is the clearest sign of the poverty of our discernment, and the most suicidal decision that Superiors and individual Jesuits can make. It is bad for the individual, for the Province, for the apostolate and for the well-being of the Society.

3. Accompany the young in their life-long journey: “Just allow me to accompany you in the life you have chosen.”

Youth does not finish with University graduation. The decisions taken before the age of 24 have to be lived out in subsequent years. Marriage, professions, social or political engagements, even graduate school are all only beginnings of a long life of perseverance in a chosen path. All kinds of traps, deviations, temptations and apparent short-cuts will be offered



to the young as they start their new lives. Decisions do not end with the “Big Decision.” Young adults will still need accompaniment.

The accompaniment of young adults is a serious challenge to us Jesuits. The letters received indicate that we are not very present at this stage, at the time when young people take their first independent steps away from our institutions. And yet, we know that the first five years of marriage can be the most difficult, just as the first five years of priestly life and ministry often are. We hear that most of the problems we lament in persons with public responsibility, from procrastination to bribery and corruption, often begin in the first years of their social or political life. The struggle to become oneself, with integrity and with all one’s human values in place, is a long, difficult and tough battle. To be present in order to accompany, support, share and console in those crucial years when people create their personal style is one of the most important services we can give to humanity.

That is why we have to ask ourselves about our presence to and service of young adults. It is consoling to hear that in some Provinces, there have been creative efforts to accompany young adults, such as the MAGIS program, which has been experienced in various continents and continues in some places beyond World Youth Day. There remains, however, the great need of programs of growth that can support young people as they face the first tough challenges of adult life. I ask Regions, Provinces and Conferences to reflect on this challenge and discern on how we can respond.

Conclusion

In reading and reflecting on this year’s annual letters with my Council, I have grown in the conviction that the Lord is calling the whole Society to pay much more attention to the service of young people. Having successful institutions does not excuse us from discerning whether we are giving the best possible service that the Lord calls us to give at this time and whether the accompaniment the young receive from us is adequate. I hope the brief reflections I have offered in this letter are received as an invitation to examine ourselves, our communities, our works, our Provinces and our Conferences, and to enter into a fresh and creative apostolic discernment.

Once again we look to our Father Ignatius and we remember how he paid so much attention and gave so much energy to a group of young men, with whom he built our Society. We ask then for his vision, his dedication and his wisdom so that, in our time, we too can do something worthy of that first group of young Jesuits who gave themselves unconditionally to Christ and created a new way of service.

Fraternally yours in the Lord,

Adolfo Nicolás, S.I.
Superior General

Rome, 21 October 2011

(Original: English)