



Discernment of universal apostolic preferences

2017/13

TO THE WHOLE SOCIETY

Dear Brothers in the Lord,

With this letter I am beginning the process of discerning the Society's *universal apostolic preferences*, a task General Congregation 36 asked Father General to undertake.¹ The framework of this discernment is the formula used by the same General Congregation to describe the present-day mission of the Society of Jesus, a formula on which we have been reflecting in recent months.

In order to fulfill this mandate, it is proposed that we carry out, as a preparatory spiritual exercise, an *examen* of the experience we have had of our present apostolic preferences. The subsequent pages offer an explanation of the path to be followed as we carry out our discernment in common; that is, they explain the procedure that will be followed to help us arrive at a formulation of the *universal apostolic preferences* of the Society of Jesus for the next ten years.

It should be stressed from the start that we are beginning this process of discernment in common in order to seek and to find the will of God concerning the best way in which the Society of Jesus can serve the Church and the world, given our vocation and charism. This letter should be read while keeping in mind the decrees of General Congregation 36, and it should be understood in direct relation to my two earlier letters: the one on our life and mission (2017/08), sent out on 10 July 2017, and the one on apostolic discernment in common (2017/11), sent out on 27 September 2017.

With this discernment of *universal apostolic preferences* we propose to take a step forward without a need for repeating the apostolic planning processes that are now underway or that were carried out in recent years in the various Conferences, Provinces, Regions, and Apostolic Networks. The preparation for General Congregation 36 provided the opportunity for the whole body of the Society of Jesus to hear *the calls* that the Lord was directing to it at this moment in the history of salvation. The assimilation of General Congregation 36 has set us on the path of renewing the manner in which we understand and carry out the mission on which we are sent.

¹ *General Congregation 36 asks Father General to review the process —initiated by General Congregation 34 and continued by Father General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach — to evaluate progress on our current apostolic preferences and, if appropriate, to identify new ones. Discernment of such preferences should include the greatest possible participation of the Society and of those involved with us in our mission. To this end, as indicated by General Congregation 35, Father General and the Council should establish procedures for assessing the Society's complex processes for apostolic planning at all levels and encourage the use of ongoing discernment and planning. (GC 36, d.2,14).*



Discerning anew our universal apostolic preferences will help us to concretize important aspects of the renewal of our life and our mission.

Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace

In order to enter into this discernment of preferences with *great spirit and generosity*,² we will lay out the framework within which we propose to work. General Congregation 36 has deepened for us the meaning of the elements that have most characterized the mission of the Society of Jesus since the Second Vatican Council: service of the Faith, promotion of the Justice of the Gospel, and efforts to dialogue with other cultures and religions. The Congregation did this by placing at the center of our life and mission the ministry of reconciliation in Christ which God the Father realizes through the Holy Spirit. The image of the first companions deliberating about how to proceed in their following of the Lord is offered to us as an inspiration for the journey that we are proposing to begin today.

Reconciliation is today the most heartrending cry of humanity. Since biblical times Reconciliation has been a central, intrinsic dimension of the pursuit of Justice, that is, of the earnest efforts to restore the fine fabric of manifold relations that constitute the human being according to the original design of the Creator. The mature fruit of Reconciliation is *Peace*, the sublime situation in which human beings not only recognize one another's dignity, relate together in harmony, and guarantee the basic rights of all, but also work for the integrity of Creation as a whole.

The one and triune God, completely committed to the redemption of humankind,³ hears the cries of human beings and returns them to us as a summons to collaborate with him in his desire to save the world. General Congregation 36 took note of this divine invitation in reaffirming that we are called to be *companions in a mission of reconciliation and justice*,⁴ which includes preserving the integrity of the environment.

Our Faith proclaims that Reconciliation and Justice lead to Peace, which is the fruit of the Lord's generous love and human beings' commitment to making it a reality in history. *Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him and will make a path for his steps.*⁵

The peace of which the Gospel speaks⁶ is revealed in the way Jesus lived. It was also the way of life of the first companions when they met together in Paris and then in Venice and Rome to deliberate about their vocation and their manner of living.⁷ All of us human beings

² Sp. Ex. no. 5

³ Sp. Ex. no. 102.

⁴ *All our ministries should seek to build bridges, to foster peace. To do this, we must enter into a deeper understanding of the mystery of evil in the world and the transforming power of the merciful gaze of God who labors to create of humanity one reconciled, peaceful family. With Christ, we are called to closeness with all of crucified humanity. With the poor, we can contribute to creating one human family through the struggle for justice. Those who have all the necessities of life and live far from poverty also need the message of hope and reconciliation, which frees them from fear of migrants and refugees, the excluded and those who are different, and that opens them to hospitality and to making peace with enemies.* (CG 36, d.1,31)

⁵ Ps 85,10-13

⁶ See, for example: Lk 1,79; 2,14.29; 8,48; 19,42; 24,36; Mt 10,12; Jn 20,19.21.26.

⁷ *Lent was drawing to a close. The time was approaching for us to be scattered and parted from one another. We were eagerly anticipating this time so that we could the sooner achieve our appointed goal on which we had set*



are invited to adopt the style of life that produces the peace given by Jesus.⁸ His style of life has made it possible for us human beings to establish relations of communion based on the justice that leads to peace because its source is love. Peace is the defining gift of God; that is, it is the effect of our accepting the gift of himself that God grants us through his incarnate Son, God-with-us. For the Son took on himself the whole weight of sin that thwarts justice; remaining faithful in his love to the extreme of forgiveness and the surrender of his life, he transformed evil into good and opened up the possibility of peace.

Justice is possible when human beings are made just by God's action. Justice becomes reality when human beings, responding to the action of the Holy Spirit, follow the path of reconciliation by a conversion of heart that leads us to recognize our errors and ask for and receive forgiveness for them. Conversion leads us to commit ourselves to restoring our relations with other human beings and with the natural creation damaged by unjust actions and structures.⁹

Universal Apostolic Preferences in the light of the mission of reconciliation

In this context and from this perspective, General Congregation 36 has asked the Society of Jesus to review its *universal apostolic preferences*. We know that the present preferences were requested by General Congregation 34 (1995), formulated by Father Kolvenbach (2003), and confirmed by General Congregation 35 (2008).¹⁰

It is important to point out that since then, and even now, it is clear that the organization of the Society's apostolic work cannot depend on a universal apostolic plan. Our Constitutions invite us to keep in mind *persons, times, and places*. Accordingly, the Society of Jesus does its apostolic planning in Provinces or Regions, in order to respond to the needs of the Church in particular territories with specific conditions. Apostolic actions which reach beyond the limits of the Provinces are planned through the Conferences of Major Superiors, thus making it possible for us to maintain interprovincial and international apostolic projects such as the works serving the Church in Rome (the Vatican Astronomical Observatory, the Gregorian University, the Biblical Institute, the Oriental Institute, etc.) or the Jesuit Refugee Service.

Nevertheless, considering that the universal apostolic preferences have played a significant role in the Society's apostolic dynamism and in the personal and community life of Jesuits, we want to be mindful of their importance with feelings of profound gratitude, as the Ignatian examen proposes to us.

The apostolic preferences have been above all the Society's response to the needs of the Church, consistent with the charism of the Society and the resources available to it. They have expressed and should still express in concrete terms our readiness, as a universal apostolic

our minds and hearts. We therefore resolved to get together for a good long time before our dispersal and to discuss our vocation and covenanted way of life. (Deliberatio Primorum Patrum, meeting in Rome during the Lent of 1539).

⁸ *I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.* Jn 14,25-27.

⁹ Christianity is a religious faith that links us to the God who creates life; it is not a "religion" that fossilizes God and makes him into a Law that oppresses. As the prophets and Saint Paul remind us, we are justified by our fidelity to the God of mercy (by our faith), not by fulfilling the Law, which is limited to pointing out to us our faults.

¹⁰ See GC 34, d.21,28; Fr. Kolvenbach, Circular 2003/1, of 1 January 2003; GC 35, d.3,37-40. Rereading these documents would be very helpful in providing a setting for our personal and community prayer and reflection.



body, to work *beneath the banner of the cross, to serve the Lord alone and the Church, his spouse, under the Roman Pontiff.*¹¹ Thus, apostolic preferences create for us the tension of seeking the most universal good as the ultimate goal of the numerous apostolic activities the Society carries out.

Moreover, as we continually renew our interior freedom through the spiritual life we share with other Jesuits and with our companions in the mission, the *universal apostolic preferences* become a *horizon* for the discernment in common which helps to guide and orient the apostolic planning of the Society's resources at all levels.

The universal apostolic preferences, therefore, have been and are precisely what their name signifies: *points of reference* for the whole Society, that inspire its discernment in common and its apostolic planning at all levels of our life-mission. At the same time they are a guide for restructuring the Society's governance and for creating working networks, both among ourselves and with others, in this same ministry of reconciliation.

We are all too well aware of the disproportion between the needs of humanity which the Church seeks to meet and the resources we have at hand. The *preferences* provide us *guidance* about how to use those resources effectively, without dispersing them, so that they serve *the greater glory of God*, which has been the Society's aim since its foundation. The preferences do not establish a hierarchy of the needs of humanity or of the Church, but they do indicate the best ways for the Society to make use of the resources it has available for the service of Christ's reconciling mission in the world.

In our rapidly changing world, a set of *universal apostolic preferences* is valid for a reasonable amount of time. Using sociopolitical analysis, theological-pastoral reflection, and discernment in common, the Society at its diverse levels stays constantly attentive to the changes that take place in human society and to the Church's responses and efforts to make the Good News of the Gospel present in the new social situations. The process of discernment in common that we are commencing proposes to arrive at a formulation of the universal apostolic preferences for the next ten years.

In order to fulfill this function of providing a horizon, a point of reference, and an orientation, the apostolic preferences cannot be many. As we begin the process, we do not pretend to establish their exact number, but we want to emphasize that they should be sufficient to meet the complex challenges of making us companions in our mission of reconciliation and justice, and they should be as numerous as necessary to help us focus the joint efforts of the universal body of the Society.

Examining the path traveled so far

Good communal discernment of universal apostolic preferences requires us first to make an *examen* of the preferences that have guided us in recent years. We all know that the *examen* proposes that we go beyond a simple evaluation, as this term is ordinarily understood.

The apostolic preferences that have inspired the Society since they were formulated in 2003 were not accompanied with any indicators of effectiveness or other administrative mechanisms that would allow us to evaluate our performance in the style used for the programming of corporate activities. Nevertheless, the *examen* allows us to perceive God's action by means of those preferences and to assess how well we have been able to contribute to God's action in

¹¹ Formula of the Institute of 1550.



history through our consecrated life and our apostolic work as a universal body. The *examen* permits us to thank God for what we have received from him, to identify the moments when we have not lived up to the mission we have received from him, and so to ask forgiveness and to request the grace we need never to close our heart again to his action. The *examen* concludes by renewing our desires to serve better in the future, with the aid of the Holy Spirit who has been given to us as companion and inspiration.

Let us join together in thanking the Lord for the inspiration we have received in our lives as Jesuits as we carry out the mission we share with others through the apostolic preferences. The preferences have helped us to strengthen our bonds with the Church and to bolster our fidelity and our generous response to the missions of the Pope. They have made us aware of the profound meaning of our ministries and have kept us from being carried away by short-sighted goals or intellectual superficiality. They have heightened our sensitivity to the sufferings of the people of our time, and they have fostered solidarity and missionary readiness within the Society of Jesus.

Let each one of us ask in all humility: what have been the true benefits of the *apostolic preferences*, as defined by Father Kolvenbach and confirmed by General Congregation 35, in my spiritual and community life, in my apostolate, in my Province, and in my Conference?

Let us also ask ourselves sincerely: what contribution has been made to the implementation of the Society's apostolic preferences by the apostolate in which I work, by my Province, and by my Conference? Let us consider whether these preferences have formed the horizon of my understanding of the mission, whether they have been part of my personal prayer or the prayer of the communities in which I have lived, and whether the resources of the Province and the Conference have been placed at the full disposition of the Society so that it could make those preferences into realities.

Finally, with a heart full of gratitude to the Lord for all the good we have received and with a renewed readiness to seek what most befits the mission of the Society, let us ask for the grace to give the best of ourselves in this new stage, which will begin with our participation in discerning *universal apostolic preferences* in the light of General Congregation 36.

A new stage on the road

Beginning this month of October 2017 and continuing until January 2019, I invite all organizational levels of the Society of Jesus to undertake a discernment of the *universal apostolic preferences* for the next ten years, according to the following five steps.

We want to take the **first step** between October 2017 and January 2018. Each Conference, when it meets during that period, is called to comprehend and assimilate the process of discernment that we are proposing. Similarly, during this period of time Major Superiors are requested to design the manner in which the discernment will be done and to prepare their Provinces and Regions for the process.¹²

¹² Since the Provinces and the Regions of the Society are very different from one another, and since there will be variations in the way discernment is done, each Major Superior, in consultation with his own Provincial/Regional bodies, should design the best possible program for attaining the objectives which are the goal of this process. Insofar as he judges necessary, he will be helped by other members of the Conference.



During this phase the International Roman Houses and Works (DIR), the Apostolic Secretariats of the General Curia, and the Jesuit Formation sector will determine the manner in which they will participate in this process.¹³

The **second step** will take place once final preparations have been made by the Conferences, the Major Superiors, the DIR Delegate, the Secretaries, and the Formation sector, and will last until October 2018. This period will be dedicated to discernment at three levels of the Society: (a) that of the Provinces and the Regions; (b) that of the Sectors and Apostolic Networks coordinated by the Secretariats of the General Curia, and the International Roman Houses and Works (DIR); and (c) that of the Formation of Jesuits. At each of these levels we should make sure that there is participation on the part of our companions in the mission.¹⁴

The **third step** should conclude before 1 December 2018. In this phase of the discernment in common, the Major Superiors, after meeting together in each Conference and considering the contributions of the Provinces and Regions, should make proposals to Father General as to what might be the universal apostolic preferences of the Society for the next ten years.

During the same period the International Roman Houses and Works (DIR), the Secretariats, and the Formation sector should conclude their discernment and likewise offer to Father General their proposals about what the apostolic preferences might be.¹⁵

The **fourth step** will be carried out by the Amplified Council of Father General.¹⁶ In a meeting planned for 7-11 January 2019, the Amplified Council of Father General will reflect on the results received from all the aforementioned instances—the six Conferences of Major Superiors, the Jesuit Formation area, the Secretariats of the General Curia, and the DIR—and will make a discernment in common, which will result in the formulation of specific recommendations to Father General for the establishment of the *universal apostolic preferences* of the Society of Jesus.

The **fifth step** will be the responsibility of Father General who, on the basis of the Society's discernment, will formulate the *universal apostolic preferences*. For confirmation of the discernment that has been done, Father General will present the apostolic preferences to the Holy Father in order to hear in due course his observations and to receive his blessing. Finally, after hearing his Councilors, he will write a letter to the whole Society promulgating the *universal apostolic preferences 2019-2029*.

In the months ahead the General Curia of the Society of Jesus—through the General Councilor for Discernment and Apostolic Planning, the General Councilor for Formation, the Delegate for the International Roman Houses and Works, the Regional Assistants, and the sectorial Secretaries—will place itself at the disposition of the apostolic works, the communities, the Regions, the Provinces, and the Conferences of Major Superiors, in order to support them in each and every step of this process.

¹³ With the support of the General Councilor for Discernment and Apostolic Planning, the Delegate for the International Roman Houses and Works, the Secretaries for Collaboration, Education, University Education, and Social Justice and Ecology, and the General Councilor for Formation will conduct the process.

¹⁴ GC 36, d.1,14 and d.2,14

¹⁵ In dialogue with Major Superiors, the General Councilor for the Discernment and Apostolic Planning will offer the appropriate instruments for smooth transmission of the results of discernment at every level.

¹⁶ The Amplified Council of Father General is made up of the General Councilors, the Secretaries of apostolic sectors or dimensions of the General Curia, and the Presidents of the Conferences of Major Superiors. It meets three times a year to provide a space of discernment and consultation for Father General.



Let us go forth

In Luke's gospel (9,1-6) we read how *Jesus called the Twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. He said to them "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic." And they set forth.*

We also feel the fire of Jesus' words, and we accept the call to dedicate the whole of our persons and all of our resources to the healing of this broken world. To that end we wholeheartedly welcome the invitation to be companions of Jesus and servants of his mission of reconciliation: we set forth on the road, without staff or bag, without bread or money, but with our confidence placed solely in Jesus, in his call, and in the mission he entrusts to us.

The prayer of all the Society's members and of all our companions in the mission is the principal resource on which we rely to advance in this path of seeking and finding the will of God for the universal apostolic body.

May Mary, Mother of the Society, lead us by the hand along the path of her Son.

Arturo Sosa, S.I.
Superior General

Rome, 3 October 2017
Feast of Saint Francis Borgia

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