

2000 YEARS: A TREASURE CAVE OF WISDOM?*

A time of reflection, a time for discernment

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1. Introduction.

We are living these months through a very peculiar time. The days succeed one another without any particular difference; the clocks tick, the days begin to get a little longer, the weather continues unstable and unpredictable. People continue to debate about when the exact beginning of the third Millennium is. And yet in the midst of this triviality of days and hours and theories, we are living through a **highly symbolic time** and we cannot avoid speaking of **centuries, and Jubilees and millennia**. We cannot pretend indifference. 2000 is just too round a number to let it pass unnoticed. Our coming together again here today as Jesuits, as Companions and Friends in the Lord, is marked by this number and we have to pay due respect. At least take notice and do something worthy of our Tradition: do a little, even if minimally, of the Ignatian thing in the face of time: **reflect, learn and discern**.

*The following essay was originally delivered on January 1, 2000, as points for reflection and prayer at the annual recollection of the Philippine Province of the Society of Jesus. Its provenance accounts both for the absence of the customary "scholarly apparatus" of footnotes, and for the constant references to Jesuit life and traditions. Landas is pleased, however, to offer Fr. Nicolas' essay to a wider public, convinced that his reflections and questions are of significance for a larger Asian audience that is engaged in the difficult task of discerning directions for the Church in Asia of the new millennium.

History is an exciting topic for relaxed reading and for intensive research as well. It can be so dramatic at times; so disappointing at others. It can feed the mind with ideas, with dreams, with missed or exploited possibilities. But it can also be a **sobering** presence to accompany us into new responsibilities. Ignatius would surely invite us to look straight at our own journey and **ask the hard questions**: how have we used such a long time, so full of the presence of the Spirit? What have we done with our shared pilgrimage of service and love? Where are the treasures of insight, of tradition, of the generous blessings that the Lord has lavished on us through these 100 years, 460 years, or 2000 years of our recent history? These past few days this history has struck me as never before as **an extraordinary gift**: *two thousand years to learn from*, 2000 years to keep in our minds, like Mary, turning all those many things in our hearts.

We have often looked back at our history; more often than not we have extolled the glories and have lamented the mistakes, the failures. Maybe at this time, this year, we are invited to **look at the whole span at once**, helped by the concrete narratives, but not bound to the details. Maybe we need, at a time like this, to look at *the big currents, the big lessons, the missed or recovered opportunities*. This is the **task of the whole year 2000**. My task today will be a simple, insignificant contribution to this shared reflection about the Jubilee. And since today we are in the mood of thanksgiving, of prayer and recollection, I will pay special attention to some of the lessons that our past offers to our spiritual journey. I apologize from the very beginning for not trying to be nice, for not trying to be scholarly, for taking the risk of being subjective. I do it in the confidence that we are praying today; that, in the best of our Ignatian style, we do not pray about the ideas of others, but let the Spirit speak to our hearts in the way and manner that he chooses. I am very willing to let the words I share fly away from this chapel, in the hope that they stimulate other reflections, other insights, other "learnings," and the process of filling the year with depth and meaning continues.

2. Learning, first, FROM the Past.

It would not be very adventurous to take for granted that most of

you have grown in the Society in a way very similar to mine as far as our history is concerned: we **started** with the glories of our forefathers, those *far away in the past*, had to **struggle** later with the shortcomings and weaknesses of the fathers and brothers *nearby*; were **consoled** and encouraged when the GC32 declared that *a Jesuit is a sinner*, called to follow Christ; this finally has **prepared** us better to look back and see our history with the *sincerity of the Ignatian purity of intention* that can *transform* the acknowledgment of a deficiency into a source of wisdom and thanksgiving. You do not need to agree. I simply invite you to make your own "examination" of the Church's consciousness through the gift of our past.

◆ The first thing that strikes me, particularly when looking back from the perspective of Asia, is that **no single culture or culturally rooted Church has ever been able to exhaust the mystery of Christ and our faith**. No culture has even been able to express in an adequate manner the core of our religious sense and experience. *The fiction of the "Christian West" or "Christian Europe" has collapsed* before our eyes and now we know better that at no time in history was Europe Christian *"in Spirit and truth."* And most of the mistakes of our Church, as well as of our Society, happened when the "spirit of the time" became a determining principle of our decisions. Culture is *us, our lives, our habits, our patterns of behavior and interaction*. But **it cannot claim our deepest faith**: it is possessed by too many *mediations*, too many crossed *interests*, too many *ambiguities*, **too little transcendence** to even claim the ability to express adequately the ultimate source of life and love. The Mediterranean cultures failed first, the Atlantic cultures failed subsequently, in the age of the Pacific we can take for granted that Asian-Pacific Cultures will also fail.

This is a difficult thing to say today, in the age of **Inculturation**. Even John Paul II says in his Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, n. 21:

"The various cultures, when refined and renewed in the light of the Gospel, can become true expressions of the one Christian Faith."

We can save the papal statement, with all respect, in terms of "possibilities." My reflection is in terms of our past: **when** has this ever happened? We are familiar with the prejudices, the injustices, the mistakes in social living, in international relations, in personal life, even in the unfairness of our lack of dialogue with positions different from our own and the violence so often imposed on language when formulating doctrines and theology. I hope that we finally learn from our past not only that it was wrong to impose that cultural package on other human communities, but that it was a **temptation for us to consider that package a final product** in the Christian journey at any particular time of history. Rahner made this point better. Maybe this is the time to learn.

◆ One second fact that stands out in our past history can be indicated by saying that *Christianity* — like humanness, faith, life in the Spirit — **does not grow in a steady and constant progress through time**. There is no "accumulation of growth"; there is never a point at which we can stop and say, "That was it! I did it!" or "We did it!" We have not been called to climb picnic hills or explore the trivial valleys of cozy and domesticated religious families. We have been called, as the Acts of the Apostles repeat, to join "*this Way*," to follow the Lord Jesus on *a long journey* without stops and without end. Each year, each Age, each Generation has to **re-discover and even be re-created and re-create the world**, most of all, the spiritual world in which we live, move and exist.

This is a very sobering principle of life in the Spirit. It is the opposite of the ongoing temptation to rest on the achievements of our predecessors, or relish our own, if ridiculous, performance. This seems to me to be an ongoing

temptation for well meaning religious groups. A temptation, as well, for Jesuits. Isn't the feasting of our Saints and Blessed, in a very creative mix of international goodies, more visible than the effect of their inspiration in our lives? Involuntarily we might be doing the same as Boris Yeltsin, pinning medals on his Generals while the war is going on, pretending that it is practically over and victorious. As the *Baghavat Gita* teaches so well, the battle is always on and there are no medals; there are only acts of service offered to the god as sacrifice. Allow me to quote here a verse from the Sufi poet Rumi:

"Originally you were clay. From being mineral you became vegetable. From vegetable you became animal, and from animal, man. During these periods man did not know where he was going, but he was taken on a long journey nonetheless. And you have to go through a hundred different worlds yet."

As William Thompson, an American raised as Catholic, turned agnostic but in earnest search of spirit, says, the Real Thing in the life of the Spirit is not the Celebration and Glorification of our past, but, he adds:

"the final passage, in all universal religions, involves humility, a 'Dark Night of the soul,' a passage through a 'Cloud of Unknowing,' or, in the words from T. S. Elliot's *Four quartets*, 'a condition of absolute simplicity **costing no less than everything.**'" [Coming into Being. 1998]

In a more ironic, and even sarcastic tone, he continues:

"Since the Devil is the ape of God and is always out of timing, energizing and celebrating what has been passed over in spiritual evolution, this form of American 'theme park mysticism' is a **tourist trap.**" [Ibid.]

And Rumi closes this consideration poetically again:

“Gamble everything for love
if you’re a true human being,
if not,
leave this gathering.
Half-heartedness
doesn’t reach into majesty.
You set out to find God,
but then you keep stopping
for long periods
at mean-spirited roadhouses.”

- ◆ A third learning from history seems to me to be the fact that **mental and intellectual growth is no guarantee of spiritual growth**. We have known theologians and other scientists who were holy men; we have also known the opposite. In the Society we have a *“foundational” option for serious study, for intellectual search and consistency, for concern for truth* in whatever form it can be encountered or unfolded. As recently as at our last GC 34, we have received a Decree on the Intellectual Apostolate. It has been important and will continue to be important in the Society. But we have to remember, as Ignatius wanted us to, that *it never makes up for our communication with God or with the poor*, the two references that will give body and orientation to our Christian theological or scientific reflections. We Jesuits have to acknowledge that we have a bias for intellectual work, mainly of the left side of the brain. This has been one of our favorite temptations, *to go so fast on the intellectual journey - especially on religious matters - that we come to believe that we have reached the spiritual heights we so expertly describe*. And we have not, mostly.

Lonergan, one of our greatest intellectuals has defined this *mirage* as “**Anticipated insight**”; and I con-

sider it the most frequent temptation for our men from the early stages of formation. I am an expert in this because I have been there on and off for long years. Modern neural science is helping us understand it better and now we know that the neural operations required for academic intellectual work are different and located in different areas of the brain than those operations that, for instance, Ignatius or John of the Cross offer us to help us come in touch with the divinity or be effectively changed into the Kingdom of Christ.

This historical observation is compounded by the realization that through a sort of strong but not discerned intellectual imposition, even real growth and great spiritual achievements of one age can become semi-dogmatic positions that hinder that same growth in the next. At the end of the 20th century, we know how easy it is for good insights, ideas and for theology itself to turn into ideological tools that have moved away from the original religious experience. The Ignatian recommendation to discern should find here our most faithful response.

3. Learning for the Future.

Maybe we can venture a couple more glimpses, but directed now to our future; that future that begins every time we turn to the Lord with a desire to proceed with Him and in Him in the service of Christ's Mission.

- ◆ You will forgive me again for beginning close at home, my home: **Theology**. I am more and more convinced that there is a growing, though greatly silent, consensus that **true Theology is Spirituality**, and that **both, Theology and Spirituality are much more "Spiritual integral practice" than mental intellectual speculation and research**. It is obvious that there is no science without reflection and research; but we have also reached a

moment in history when there is no science any more without ongoing contact with global realities, without imagination, creativity and holistic perspectives. The Newtonian-Cartesian paradigms are falling apart. With theology, they should have disintegrated ages ago. Only in serious and deepening spiritual practice can theology regain the respectability it once had. It is of great interest to realize that the American Association of Philosophy has been recently opening a branch within its own body for something that is called more or less: "Philosophy as Philosophical Practice." Philosophers take the lead in this rediscovery of what really matters when dealing with humans and the world. It is not abstract ideas of the left side of the brain that count, but the opening of the heart to the deepest truth of being, relating and building a more harmonious world. Isn't this opening of the heart also our **Holy Door** for a truly theological Jubilee?

Looking back again to our past I would venture to say that this "Spiritual Practice" is three-fold:

- ***Practice of the Heart in communion with God***, His Spirit and the Word, as it feeds our memory and imagination and re-creates us as his Kingdom.
- ***Practice of the Body in the universal asceticism of poverty and communion with the poor and suffering***. Asia has still a lot to teach us about this "practice of the body," that fits so well with the practice of Jesus and his most inspiring followers. And,
- ***Practice of the Mind as it disciplines itself to be free from the easy allurements of ideology and system*** and as it contributes to build meaningful paths for a more harmonious and compassionate humanity.

This kind of Theology is *absolutely necessary for every single Jesuit*, if we want to continue the dream of Ignatius and his First Companions. This is a challenge for our future. A challenge to contribute to a Church that, at present, is *theologically weak, in disarray, and that will have to face ever new situations, new data, new and ever more complex systems*. We will be questioned again for our "theological authority" or "lack of it." Will it be the academic authority of what others have thought for us, or the inner authority — like that of Jesus — of speaking from the center of life and of transcendence and mystery?

- ◆ Our second challenge, at this point, is, I believe, the realization that **the most inspiring and universally effective means of communicating the Gospel through the Centuries has been poverty, simplicity, and love and compassion for the poor and suffering**. You know our history, a history that goes from Jesus, to Francis of Assisi, to Vincent de Paul, to the Little Flower, to Mother Teresa. I do not know of any other human or religious factor that has touched so deeply and changed people through centuries, cultures, religions, states of life, generations and genders. It has always been the best complement to "spiritual practice," or "exercises of the heart" of any kind. It has offered the world that "**transparency**" of the divine and the true that we always need to keep on believing and gambling our life on God. It has produced spiritual fruits beyond measure and saved the faltering credibility damaged by our mistakes and even the mistakes of our Mother Church. *It is a tremendous pity that we Jesuits are not known for these qualities, while our Constitutions are full of them*. Fr. Kolvenbach has repeatedly spoken to the Society about the need of "**visibility**" (*another word for transparency*) of *our deeper and inner life and vocation*. Maybe we are challenged to listen carefully to the **empty sound of words and ideas**, when they are deprived of

this living support; and we are certainly invited to recover the *“silent music”* of our real weakness, the foundation of our true humility, that will truly show that when we confess our sinfulness, we mean it.

There are two more observations I would like to make about our need to learn from the past for the sake of our future. But this is becoming too long and I will have to be brief. Perhaps it is better this way; it will leave the questions in your hands for you to pray, to explore, to formulate in a much better way than I could ever do.

The first observation is about **the ongoing encounter we have always experienced between our life and “modernization,”** which today should be understood in the context of **“globalization.”** Maybe here we — I — have more questions than answers. The phenomenon is global, ongoing, massive, pitiless and there is no way to stop it. Both, modernization and globalization are extremely complex and difficult to analyze and to subject to discernment. We cannot deny the good and we cannot avoid the bad consequences of both. We are dealing with means and ends in an age when we know that the *“medium is the message”* and the distinctions become blurred. In the coming century, this will get more and more complex. **And we ask:** in our eagerness to be modern and up to date, **who is being transformed?** The process? The culture? Or is it ourselves and our spirit? Is our discernment basically adequate? Does it include the impact of change on the weaker and less powerful parts of the world, people, countries, nature? **What are we losing with every technological gain?** What aspect of *community life and availability for service* is weakened with every new gadget that we joyfully install in our houses?

With globalization, we have it still harder; because it is also **threatening the deeper life of the spirit that**

Asian cultures and Religions had developed and protected for so many centuries. There is a new flood taking place in the world: a flood of consumer values and objects, of trivial and virtual experiences and communication, of easy ecstasies; and *widespread alienation from the heart, from real personal encounters, from sensitivity to silence, symbol and the sense of the divine.* Who will build the Ark this time? Isn't this the time that challenges us, Jesuits, to **a total commitment to DEPTH?** We have to work now with other Religions to keep the old treasures of Asia, for a world starving for the Spirit, or, at least, for the communion, peace and serenity of God's Kingdom. *Maybe from this perspective of depth and of responsible and creative custody of the Asian depth, we can find a new path to Inculturation.*

Finally, we cannot avoid a question thrown at us without compassion from the very shape of our modern reality. It might be *the hardest question*, and the most painful to voice; but we cannot leave it aside. Looking at our world in this moment of transition, of incredible new possibilities and of massive threats to the sanity and wholeness of humanity, we have to ask ourselves in all humility: **do we have in our midst the Spiritual and Human depth needed to make the necessary contribution to the Church and the world that is now emerging?** I have only questions, again.

I have also the feeling that much of the fear that still exists in the Church towards a serious and open dialogue with Other Religions stems from a *not formulated suspicion that we do not have the needed depth to enter into dialogue with Asian Masters of prayer, with persons who have spent their lives in meditation and asceticism, with believers of other Religions who are truly transparent to goodness, simplicity and total detachment.* Asia in depth is much more demanding from us than Europe or the Americas have been or, maybe, can be. In the West

we can function relatively well if we can handle the basic Christian language with a sprinkle of politically correct terminology (although this is changing rapidly now). But, after all, the West has questions that are somehow related to the questions we had and handled in our seminary years. In the East, on the other hand, *we are questioned about our embodiment* of what we say; about the *foundations of our insights*; about *the living answer to life's questions*. Francis Xavier met in Asia much tougher questioners than he had met at the Sorbonne in Paris. We do not dialogue in Asia with "theologians" of books and libraries, but with *Masters of the spirit*, Yogis, Zen Roshi, even people walking in the streets, but living at the edge of mysticism. Are we ready to offer a credible and transparent account of our hope?

The new year we begin today is challenging us to move ahead not at the sound of past glories and battles, but to the serene and gentle rhythms of our Asian traditions and wisdom. Let the poet, an Asian poet, close these reflections:

"Those who don't feel this love
pulling them like a river;
those who don't drink dawn
like a cup of springwater
or take in sunset
like supper;
those who don't want to change,
let them sleep."

Today we have come here to **be awakened together again by the Name of Jesus**, our Name. 2000 years have passed (symbolically, at least) between the giving of this Name and our present moment. Years 1 and 2000 are our two points of view to understand our history and our vocation. It is a privileged perspective from which to move ahead to the kind of renewal that John Paul II and Peter-Hans Kolvenbach are earnestly asking of all of us. And this renewal is what we pray for.