



Delegates to the 35th Jesuit General Congregation, 2008



Photo by Don Doll, S.J.

# Inside Jesuit Justice: A Forty-Year Journey into the Public Square

BY FRED KAMMER, S.J.

Jesuits articulated the *mission of faith and justice* most dramatically in the 1970s, following two major Catholic events. First was the Second Vatican Council and its 1965 declaration that:

*The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the followers of Christ.<sup>1</sup>*

The second was the Synod of Bishops in 1971, which taught that “action for justice [is] a constitutive element of the preaching of the gospel...”<sup>2</sup>

The Church arrived at these refinements of its mission in two ways. It discerned that the reality of worldwide injustice was a denial not just of human dignity, but of the very existence of the God who created and loves all people.

The church also recognized that the practical atheism of injustice was not only person-to-person but structured into the social, economic, and political systems of societies: schools that do not teach; prisons that do not rehabilitate; a food and agriculture system in a hungry world that pays farmers not to grow; a health care system that leaves



millions of people out; and an economic system that makes some people very, very rich while leaving billions of others poor.

The gospel then must have, as constitutive parts, *denouncing unjust structures* as did the prophets, including Jesus, and *announcing more just and life-giving ways of living together* as children of one loving God, including societal structures. In *Economic Justice for All*, the U.S. bishops explain:

*Whether the problem is preventing war and building peace or addressing the needs of the poor, Catholic teaching emphasizes not only the individual conscience, but also the political, legal, and economic structures through which policy is determined and issues are adjudicated.*<sup>3</sup>

Connecting faith and justice then commits the church, Jesuits, and our colleagues to work to eliminate individual injustices and unjust social structures.

### General Congregation 32 [1974-75]

Drawing on wider church teaching, the mandate from the 32nd General Congregation (GC32) pivots around three poles:

1. *The mission of faith and justice:* “What is it to be a companion of Jesus today? It is to engage, under the standard of the Cross, in the crucial struggle of our time: the struggle for faith and that struggle for justice which it includes.”<sup>4</sup>
2. *The reality of social structures:* “There is a new challenge to our apostolic mission in a world increasingly interdependent but, for all that, divided by injustice: injustice not only personal but institutionalized: built into economic, social, and political structures that dominate the life of nations and the international community.”<sup>5</sup>
3. *The call to solidarity:* “Similarly, solidarity with men and women who live a life of hardship and who are victims of oppression cannot be the choice of a few Jesuits only. It should be a characteristic of the life of all of us as

individuals and a characteristic of our communities and institutions as well.”<sup>6</sup>

GC32 launched the Society of Jesus and our colleagues into what the 33rd General Congregation (GC33) (1983) later called “an experience of grace and conversion,” persecution for the sake of Christ’s Kingdom, difficulty in understanding “the Church’s recent emphasis on changing the structures of society,” and “tensions both in the Society and outside it.”<sup>7</sup> GC33 confirmed the mission of faith and justice and emphasized key directions for the future.

### General Congregation 34 [1995]

From the 34th General Congregation (GC34), we Jesuits learned that the mission of faith and justice must be fleshed out in two complementary dimensions: culture and interreligious dialogue.

*Faith and culture.* In the 20 years between the GC32 and GC34, Jesuits and others became more convinced that social and economic injustices are woven deeply within the fabric of cultures. U.S. cultural myths, for example, of rugged individualism, manifest destiny, pragmatism, private property, white racial superiority, and economic self-sufficiency are so deep-seated that they make it difficult, if not impossible, for many Americans to hear the Gospel’s call to community, stewardship, solidarity, and a special care for the *anawim*, the poor of God. To hear Pope John Paul’s emphasis on the diabolical role of the “desire for profit” and “thirst for power”<sup>8</sup> in our economy and culture requires a complete “conversion.” [See “CST and Conversion” in this *Quarterly*.]

Not to understand how culture promotes injustice or justice is to miss its subtle but profound force and, for us, culture’s role in preaching the gospel and building the reign of God ... or opposing those efforts. As GC34 put it, “Justice can truly flourish only when it involves the transformation of culture, since the roots of injustice are embedded in cultural attitudes as well as in economic structures.”<sup>9</sup>

Second, *faith and religious dialogue.* GC34 taught that the faith and justice mission also required a commitment to interreligious dialogue. Central to most cultures is the role of the transcendent, so transforming culture to pursue justice requires attention to the role of religion. And, aware that Christians are fewer than 20 percent of the population, “any commitment to justice and peace, human rights, and the protection of the environment has to be made in collaboration with believers of other religions.”<sup>10</sup> This consciousness was enhanced by many experiences of working hand-in-hand with other faith communities in advocating for justice and peace.

The Ignatian vision that commits us to the faith that does justice then presupposes a commitment to the transformation of culture and to dialogue with religions that inspire, shape, and sanction cultures. As GC34 put it,

*...this justice cannot be achieved without, at the same time, attending to the cultural dimensions of social life and the way in which a particular culture defines itself with regard to religious transcendence.*<sup>11</sup>

### General Congregation 35 [2008]

In 2008, the 35th General Congregation (GC35) expressed this commitment to faith and justice in terms of a triple reconciliation—going back to the image of Jesus as the bringer of Jubilee, the biblical call to unity with one another, with God, and with the earth. GC35 called Jesuits and their colleagues to promote reconciliation with God, reconciliation with one another in the whole human community, and reconciliation with the earth. In a global world, this implies building bridges between rich and poor, establishing advocacy links between the powerful and powerless, care for creation, using new communications technologies more effectively, and networking internationally.<sup>12</sup>

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### ENDNOTES

- 1 The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, No. 1.
- 2 1971 Synod of Bishops, Rome, "Justice in the World," No. 6.
- 3 Economic Justice for All, No. 259.
- 4 General Congregation 32, "Jesuits Today," 1975, no. 2.
- 5 General Congregation 32, "Our Mission Today: The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice," 1975, no. 6.
- 6 *Ibid.*, no. 48.
- 7 General Congregation 33, "Companions of Jesus Sent into Today's World," 1983, nos. 31-33.
- 8 Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (*The Church's Social Concern*), 1987, no. 37.
- 9 General Congregation 34, "Servants of Christ's Mission," 1995, No. 17.
- 10 General Congregation 34, "Our Mission and Interreligious Dialogue," 1995, No. 8.
- 11 "Servants of Christ's Mission," *op. cit.*, No. 18.
- 12 General Congregation 35, "Challenges to Our Mission Today: Sent to the Frontiers," 2008.

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