

Always Looking to the Mission

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Frequently we say that one of the characteristics of modernity is pluralism. We have ceased to be a homogeneous world, and perhaps ceased to think of it as homogeneous. Today we talk about an interculturality shaping our societies. With this plurality comes a fragmentation of identities. We all wear many hats; when we change hats, our self-image changes as well.

We might use a mathematical image. We are members of various sets. Some of these are subdivisions of greater wholes: I am a member of my community, of my province, of the Society of Jesus, of the Church. But we also belong to sets which are not part of one greater whole, but which overlap. Not everyone in my community is also part of the professional association to which I belong, or of my soccer team.

We form our subdivisions and affiliations because they help us, and because they are useful for structuring our relationships or achieving our goals.

Traditionally in the Society, the governmental subdivisions are provinces and communities. The Assistancies are also subdivisions, but not governmental. They exist so as to facilitate the government of Fr General.

The Conferences of Provincials arose for a similar purpose: to facilitate the government of Provincials. But General Congregation 35 gives them a new significance. It affirms that Conferences are not “mere instruments of inter-provincial coordination.” (D. 5, 18 a) Rather, they are means by which the Provincials do apostolic planning together. They should become “structures of cooperation ... regarding specific inter- and supraprovincial aspects of mission” that require collective decision making.

This opens up the possibility of something that is often required by mission in a globalized and interconnected world: Provinces grouping in the interests of responding better to their mission. This can happen through a common agreement of the Provinces involved (for example: a house of formation in common, or the sharing of men and money), or through a territory being a joint responsibility of different Provinces (like the existing projects at the triple frontier of Chile, Peru and Bolivia, or at the frontier between Colombia and Venezuela).

It follows that we can think of other forms of subdivision within the conference: regions with common concerns as regards mission, or projects in a territory covering parts of each of the canonical Provinces involved. This is what I mean when I talk about new subdivisions of CPAL: regions or territorial projects. These two possibilities are not mutually exclusive; nor are we ruling out possible fusions

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between provinces. For instance, we could think of the so-called Carribean Project as a 'region' in this sense, promoting greater interprovincial cooperation between different Provinces and regions in the canonical sense. This co-operation includes Provinces uniting (so Antilles and the independent region of Cuba), and also a border project shared between Venezuela (one of the member provinces) with Colombia (which is not). All this bespeaks a great flexibility, one that is always adapted to mission.

We might wonder why we are talking about regions in this sense, and about interprovincial projects. There are many reasons. I list just a few:

- It seems a tendency of the general context within which we are moving. Small countries from our continent are tending to group together in order to negotiate more effectively with the big countries in this globalized world. Such grouping is a means by which disputes about borders can become opportunities for cooperation and growth. It is a shrewd means of entering gradually into what is an inevitable globalization.
- The fall in Jesuit numbers raises questions for us. The fall does not necessarily mean we should shut down works and diminish our impact. Maybe the Lord is inviting us to think about mission more in ways that do not identify it exclusively in terms of a particular work or Province. Maybe the Lord is telling us to work more in collaboration with others, both non-Jesuits and Jesuits. And that implies a new focus and new structures that exploit the possibilities of communication offered us by the modern world. We used to talk about sending on mission, about sending to mission territories. Perhaps today we have to add: participating with mission territories in networks.

What are the advantages that might bring us to organize ourselves in this regional way, or to form supraprovincial projects?

The first and main advantage is that of responding better to the mission received. That is the goal: a greater collaboration for the sake of the mission.

And why does such a step allow us to respond better to the mission we have received?

- It allows us to make economies of scale, enabling us to use more effectively the economic, administrative and human resources we have.
- It helps us to improve the quality of our service by uniting our efforts and using to greater advantage our human, technological and institutional resources. We might even say that it enables us to become more competitive globally. Regions of this kind could serve the provinces by coordinating investment in, for example, houses of formation or the Jesuit Refugee Network. We could think of formation, both Jesuit and lay, on this kind of regional basis, in a way that would guarantee numbers, the quality of instructors and programs, an appropriate context, the presence of some stage of formation in all the provinces, and the intercultural dimension of formation at all stages.
- It allows us to deepen our sense of the body of the Church and of the Society of Jesus, making us more sensitive to our shared identity and mission.

- It means that we are working along with the historical trend among our peoples, which is one of integration rather than conflict, and of a cultural enrichment coming through dialogue.

This is a novel proposal that requires serious discernment. But there is no need for us to fear novelty. Fr General himself in his letter invites us to be creative with regard to mission. That was the great achievement of Jesuits in the Reductions.

This path does not involve the creation of new levels of intermediate superiors, but rather agreements between provincials to assign a delegate for the common work of their provinces.

- Perhaps an apostolic sector could be organized on a regional basis. For example, various provinces might unify their vocations promotion, or social ministries, or formation under a common delegate or coordinator.
- We could think of a community as regional, of the kind that it is proposed to establish at the triple frontier of Chile, Bolivia and Peru, or a formation house.
- We might organize a particular work on a regional basis: the Jesuit Migrant Network, for example, could have one director for various countries.

Would this kind of regional structure be more helpful to us in our mission?