

A Glimpse of General Congregation 35



by Fr. Edward W. Schmidt, SJ

From January 7 to March 6, 2008, the Society of Jesus held its 35th General Congregation. Delegates from all over the world—225 of us from a hundred plus provinces and vice-provinces, regions, and administrative units of various sizes—gathered in Rome. While it meets, a General Congregation is the highest authority in the Society of Jesus. Each province sends one or more representatives (determined by the size of the province) and some members of the General Curia in Rome also attend.

A General Congregation is a rare event. The first met in 1558 to choose a successor to St. Ignatius Loyola, the first General. Most are convoked upon the death of the Superior General to elect his successor and then to take up other matters of great current interest. A few have been called simply to handle those important issues.

This General Congregation had a new task: to accept the resignation of Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, SJ, from the office of Superior General. After almost 25 years in this office, Fr. Kolvenbach determined that the Society of Jesus would be better served with new leadership. After clearing the way with the provincials worldwide and with the Holy See, Fr. Kolvenbach convoked this Congregation to elect a new Superior General and address other important matters of the worldwide Society moving forward.

As Provincial of the Chicago Province, I attended by right of office. What follows is a photo journal that reflects on events that shaped my experience of General Congregation 35 and my profound sense of hope for the future. Pictured above are the Jesuits of the United States who served as delegates (detailed information at left).

General Congregation 35

Opening Mass

We gathered in Rome on January 7, weary from travel but excited about this great meeting and happy to see old friends and to meet new ones. We knew that the Congregation would have two phases: roughly two weeks to choose a new Superior General and a few weeks more to consider other important matters.



On the first day, we gathered at the Church of the Gesù for a solemn opening mass, at which Cardinal Franc Rodé presided (shown here with Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach).





In a piece of baroque drama, a large painting decorating the tomb of St. Ignace was lowered to reveal the silver statue of the saint. This touch of theater dates back to the early days of this church. I recall a sense of wonder mixed in with the reverence of the occasion.



Participating in the mass were three Jesuit cardinals who reside in Rome—Tomáš Špidlík, Roberto Tucci, and Albert Vanhoye. At the end of the mass, Fr. Kolvenbach lit a votive lamp at the tomb of St. Ignace to burn throughout the Congregation; many other Jesuit communities around the world lit a lamp in solidarity.

Resignation



The first two weeks saw the emotion-charged resignation of Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach. We approved his request for this, though not without great appreciation for his work. The Congregation warmly applauded his service, which Fr. Kolvenbach acknowledged with humility and affection.



Murmuratio

The election filled the second week. Many of these days were dedicated to a process of prayer and discussion which has the curious name *murmuratio*, a Latin term for murmuring! One is encouraged to discuss possible candidates for General with other delegates, one at a time and always free from any politicking. Electors here from Japan and Central America, Netherlands and Australia, discuss possibilities. We prayed privately for guidance during this time.

On Saturday, January 19, we went across the street to the Church of the Holy Spirit for a solemn Mass of the Holy Spirit. We were filled with anticipation and reverence. (We learned later that young Jesuits at Loyola University Chicago arranged a mass at the very same hour as we were praying in Rome.) After the mass, we went back to the *aula*, our meeting hall, for quiet prayer and then balloting.

We chose Fr. Adolfo Nicolás

as the thirtieth Superior General of the Society of Jesus.



With a striking sense of prayerful acceptance, he quietly left his assigned place and made his way to the front of the aula, greeted Fr. Kolvenbach, knelt down, and recited the creed. After this, the delegates came up one by one to greet him.



Chicago's Fr. Bradley Schaeffer congratulates Fr. Nicolás.

The First Public Event of Fr. General Adolfo Nicolás

The following evening, we returned to the Gesú for a Mass of Thanksgiving. Before it began, Fr. Nicolás went up to the rooms of St. Ignatius, which are in the same building complex. Here he heard words of encouragement from Fr. Frank Case, the secretary of the Society, about the qualities of a good General. Then he went to the church for his first public event as Fr. General Adolfo Nicolás. We all felt that we had made the right choice.



The Work of General Congregation 35 Continues

For the next several weeks we worked in groups either writing decrees or studying and making presentations on topics of wider interest. The decrees that came from this Congregation concern mechanisms of governing the Society, its mission, its identity, the vow of obedience, and collaboration with laity.



The next day was Monday, January 21, and we were back to work in the aula. There we sat in alphabetical order, each with his delegate number, microphone, and earphones for translation. I was delegate 293, speaking in English.





Fr. General Nicolás Gets to Work



Fr. Nicolás paid a courtesy visit to Pope Benedict XVI. Tradition suggests that the new Superior General renew his religious vows before the Pope, and it is reported that the Pope seemed pleasantly surprised by this tradition. The two chatted for a while, and the Pope presented the new General with a gift.



I worked with a group studying communications. We began these discussions in small language groups using English, French, or Spanish. Communications had only a French and an English group. After a preliminary report to the whole Congregation, we went back to refine and edit our reports and to make recommendations for future action. Eventually the whole Congregation voted on these recommendations.



Fr. Nicolás, meanwhile, was busy learning his new job. The General's rooms had been made ready for him, and he got to work quickly. Early on he gave an interview to two young Jesuits brought in to work on the website for the Congregation, Dani Villanueva from Spain and Pierre Bélanger from Canada. Stacks of files awaited Fr. Nicolás's attention containing business such as naming new provincials.



AN EXCERPT FROM THE ADDRESS OF

Pope Benedict XVI to the Society of Jesus

TODAY I should like to encourage you and your confreres to go on in the fulfilment of your mission, in full fidelity to your original charism, in the ecclesial and social context that characterizes this beginning of the millennium. As my predecessors have often told you, the Church needs you, counts on you, and continues to turn to you with confidence, particularly to reach the geographical and spiritual places where others do not reach or find it difficult to reach. Those words of Paul VI have remained engraved in your hearts: “Wherever in the Church, even in the most difficult and exposed fields, in the crossroads of ideologies, in the social trenches, there has been or is confrontation between the burning exigencies of humanity and the perennial message of the Gospel, there have been and are the Jesuits.”

A month later, all of the delegates made the short walk from the Jesuit Curia to the Vatican for a papal audience. Up ceremonial stairways and through Vatican courtyards, we entered the historic papal palace. After Pope Benedict entered the room to applause, Fr. Nicolás addressed him briefly; then the pope addressed us all with warmth and encouragement to continue our mission for the Church.

A Team Effort

Most work days in the aula—Monday through Saturday—began with morning prayer, which had a theme with appropriate readings, music, and prayers in multiple languages.



Fr. Vlastimil Dufka, a Slovak Jesuit, took care of all music for the liturgies, solemn or everyday. He was amazing! He composed, he conducted, he played oboe or keyboard. His gifts and those of his fellow musicians helped shape the prayerful atmosphere of the Congregation.



We were greatly helped by a group of talented translators. Delegates could speak English, French, Italian, or Spanish, and the translators kept everything flowing. Fr. Eduardo P. Schmidt (back row, fifth from the left), of the Chicago Province but in Peru for many years, was the captain of the translation crew.



The inspirational liturgies were a highlight of the Congregation. Every detail was thoughtfully planned out, including the programs, which I am glad to have as a keepsake.

The **Congregation** included many old friends and acquaintances. And we got to know the Society in areas where the Church and the Society are both young.



Our days included coffee breaks, enjoyed here by Br. Joseph Anthonydoss (center) from the Patna Province and some friends.

The Future Is Bright for the Worldwide Society



Many of us know Fr. Carlos Rodriguez, provincial of Peru.



One of the great joys of the Congregation was casual conversation with fellow Jesuits. Here, Fr. General Nicolás talks outside the aula with Frs. Renzo de Luca and Shogo Sumita (provincial) from the Japanese Province.



Africa was represented in part by Frs. Bafuidinsoni, Chilenda, and Bwanali. The last two did part of their formation in Fr. Fran Daly's tertianship program in the Chicago Province.

After sixty days—tired and satisfied—we voted ourselves finished. General Congregation 35 had done its work. We said good-bye. During the next few days, individually or in small groups, we made our way to Fiumicino Airport or to the Stazione Centrale and left our work behind. And we returned to our ordinary ministries renewed with a profound sense of the Spirit’s presence in our lives and work. In the days and months ahead, we, with the help of so many lay colleagues around the globe, will put into action the goals and plans of General Congregation 35.



Chicago Province Jesuits Brad Schaeffer, Edward Schmidt, and Robert Geisinger enjoy a moment with newly elected Fr. General Adolfo Nicolás in the roof garden of the Jesuit Curia in Rome.



I left with many memories, but one especially will endure. Early Sunday morning after the Congregation ended, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach was scheduled to depart and make his way back to Lebanon and to the quiet life of a scholar that he had enjoyed before being elected General. A small group gathered to see him off. He greeted us one-by-one and thanked us for being with him in service to God’s people and then drove off. We were deeply touched. We are grateful. We will remember him.



I.D. cards, worn each day in Rome, are now precious mementos of our participation in General Congregation 35.

For more images and information on General Congregation 35, please visit these Jesuit websites:

- * Jesuit Conference of the Society of Jesus in the United States, www.jesuit.org
- * Jesuit Curia in Rome, www.sjweb.info
- * Creighton University’s Collaborative Ministry, www.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/GC35