

Father Gerald J. Chojnacki, Provincial of the New York Province, along with Fathers Vincent M. Cooke, S.J., and Thomas H. Feely, S.J., represented the New York Province at the 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus. One of the first acts of the General Congregation was to elect a new Superior General, Father Adolfo Nicolás, S.J.

Father Nicolás was born in Spain in 1936, joined the Society of Jesus in 1953 and was ordained a priest in 1967. The new Superior General has spent most of his ministry in Asia. He taught theology at Sophia University in Tokyo and, from 1978 to 1984, was director of the Pastoral Institute in Manila. From 1993 to 1999 he was Provincial for the Jesuit Province of Japan. After serving as Provincial, he became pastor of a church ministering to poor immigrants in Tokyo. In 2004, he was named to a leadership position for the entire Jesuit region of East Asia, including the new Province of China. The New York Province congratulates Father Nicolás and looks forward to working with him in our mission to the Church and the Society.

Father Chojnacki shared with us the process by which the new General was elected. The following reflection hints at the grace and spirit that filled the Congregation during the election period. Please continue to pray for all the members of the General Congregation, that their time in Rome may be filled with continued blessings.

“Nada te turbe, nada te espante.... let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you.... whoever has God lacks nothing, for God alone suffices.”

January 19, 2008

Dear Brothers and Friends in the Lord, P.C.

I write this after completing one of the most amazing spiritual experiences I have had in quite some time – the process of the election of a new General. It was in many ways, for me, like the experience of the *Spiritual Exercises*, but this time packed into five days. I remembered and prayed these days with and for our novices as they now experience the graces of the Exercises during their thirty-day retreat. I hope you all keep them in your prayers. I prayed also for the Superiors and Coordinators of our communities as they deal with the many challenges of governance. Finally, I prayed for all of you who are joined with us by prayer in spirit and in the apostolic body of the Society.

These days have been ones of hard work and great exhaustion. I remember telling one of our Latin American brothers that after our second day of *murmuratio* I was “cansado, consolado y confundido” (tired, consoled and confused). These have been days of prayer, penance and listening – intense listening to God speaking to us in prayer and through each other. Each morning we began our day with Mass. Since Mass was in linguistic groupings, I tried to make it

around to each of the four main groups (English, Spanish and Portuguese, French, and Italian) to pray with them in their language. I noticed other Jesuits doing the same. Since we all want to be friends in the Lord, it seems important for us to be able to pray together and language facilitates that. Work for the Church and the universal Society will require more and more from us in the future, and for that we will need to know and manage conversation in at least two, if not three, modern languages.

After Mass, we would gather one on one with a companion from some other part of the world to share our thoughts, visions and concerns about the universal Society as together we looked for someone who could lead us into the future after Fr. Kolvenbach. These dialogues were characterized by tremendous transparency, honesty, and charity. One would literally open oneself completely to another Jesuit and together try to find God's will for us. These dialogues would go on all day – even during lunch, which we all shared together in the recreation room. I would pick up a sandwich, a bottle of water and maybe a piece of fruit, and off I would go with another Jesuit to find out where God was leading us both. It is amazing how much gets accomplished in those dialogues and how much we learn about the action of God. We could almost feel it happening as we talked because what was most palpable in all of this was our love for God, for the universal Society and for the Church we serve. The one thing everyone wanted was not to push our ideas or opinions or points of view, but to find what is best for the Society today and to find the one who can lead us where God wants us to be.

These dialogues were broken up by periods of prayer throughout the day and night – frequently before the Blessed Sacrament. In two chapels the Blessed Sacrament was exposed all day so that anyone could be free to be there for prayer. At any time of the night or day, one would find a Jesuit or groups of Jesuits in prayer seeking to find God's will for us. It was extremely edifying for me to see our Jesuits working hard each day for four days in prayer, in dialogue, in discernment. At one point, I was moved to tears because what I had heard about and talked about as Provincial regarding communal apostolic discernment, I was witnessing right before my very eyes. It was palpably clear that God was there with all of us. I could feel His presence everywhere I went. Communal discernment can happen and does, if we first open ourselves to the possibility of God's action in our lives together.

I say that because that was the great grace God granted me these days. I came here wondering and somewhat doubtful about how this process would work. I did my homework and came prepared with names and categories I thought important for the work of the Society. For example, age was a big factor for me. I wanted no one too young or too old for General. I wanted someone with experience and governance of the universal Society and someone who could inspire us and help us deal with our many difficulties and deficiencies. Those were my categories and that is how I began my work. As I listened in prayer and to my brothers, however, my world began to be turned upside down. I remember one period of prayer about four or five o'clock in the morning: I was down in the chapel and God invited me to give up all my categories by reminding me so gently that this was His process and not mine. If I wanted to help and discern, I had to be free of everything that kept me from listening to God and

what God wanted for the Society. I cried a lot that morning because I knew God was right and those tears helped me to be free. If I was not free from my own categories, I could not help the Society find God's will. So, freedom came that morning and I began each day to pray the prayer of St. Teresa of Avila about trust in God: "Nada te turbe, nada te espante....let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you....whoever has God lacks nothing, for God alone suffices."

So with that grace, I was able truly to listen as God continued to speak to me through my brothers, and I began to be open to new possibilities – ones that I had never dreamed of before. The last question that haunted me as we came closer to election time was how could I possibly explain that I might be part of electing a General who was 71 years old to replace one who was retiring at 79 years of age? Surely there had to be other good candidates who were younger! And there were. There were excellent Jesuits whom I came to know – any one of whom would be a superb General. But was this the one that God wanted for the Society now? I realized I was slipping back into my categories once again and I had to be open to what God wanted for us.

Election day comes. We begin with Mass, a beautiful Mass, begging the presence of the Holy Spirit. We go to the *aula* (meeting room) and are wonderfully exhorted by Fr. Jacques Gellard to think about the good of the universal Society and to choose the man God wants for us. We enter into silent prayer – 217 Jesuits in quiet prayer for I don't know how long...but a beautiful moment of grace once again. A time to ask God once again for light: to help us choose the man He wants. The election ends and it is clear. More tears as we stand in unison to greet Fr. Adolfo Nicolás and thank God for the Jesuit chosen to lead us into the future. It's over. We have a new General. For how long? My answer now is: for as long as God wants. I am happy and content today to be a part of this wonderful Society of Jesus.

Joyfully in the Lord,

Jeff Chojnacki, S.J.