

## ***Witnesses of Friendship and Reconciliation***

### **A message and a prayer for Jesuits living in zones of war and conflict**

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. .... Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation. (2 Cor 1: 3-4, 7)*

*Since the last General Congregation, we have seen situations of heart-breaking conflict in many parts of the world. The sad litany includes Syria and South Sudan, Colombia and the Great Lakes region of Africa, the Central African Republic, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Iraq and so many other places. There has been devastating loss of life and massive displacement of peoples. These conflicts have a global reach. Those who serve at the frontline have been especially affected. In solidarity and with deep affection, we write this message to our fellow Jesuits living and working in situations of violence and war.*

Dear Companions and Friends in the Lord,

We, the Jesuits gathered at GC 36, greet and support you, our fellow Jesuits, who serve at the frontiers of war and violence alongside courageous co-workers. You risk your lives daily in order to reach out, humbly yet persistently, for what sometimes seems impossible, namely the peace and reconciliation longed for by Jesus Christ. We give thanks for the love and support offered by your families and for the friends who sustain and support you on a daily basis.

Through you, we greet also the men and women of the Jesuit Refugee Service and all those who share our mission in those Provinces and Regions where conflicts are strongest and most intractable. Without their contribution our mission would be considerably poorer. Living the same dangers, threats and violence, you are brought together by the ties of friendship, prayer and solidarity.

Sometimes, in such a mission, you may feel forgotten, laboring in different parts of the globe, far from the spotlight of media. In this special message we call you to mind, pray for you and ask the whole Society to do the same. You remain at difficult frontiers, seeing, in those who suffer, the face of Jesus who remains a constant friend and companion.

We thank God for the witness of friendship and hope that you offer. We are grateful for the many blessings you receive from the people you serve, blessings that enrich the whole Society of Jesus. You are not alone, you are part of an apostolic body whose sole consolation is to be placed with the Son in his suffering as well as in his glory. Your “offering of great price”<sup>1</sup> contributes to the strength and efficacy of the Society all over the world.

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<sup>1</sup> *Spiritual Exercises* 97.

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We thank you, dear friends in the Lord, because through your consecration to the mission of Christ, you accept poverty with Christ poor, even at times humiliation with the humiliated Christ. You can rightfully make yours the words of Saint Paul:

*Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (Rom 8:35,37)*

Your Jesuit training has given you many gifts, prepared you for difficult struggles and enabled you to draw profit from every situation. You can face hardships and dangers with confidence. However, we are aware that those same hardships and dangers can erode you spiritually and affectively. That is why, on these fragile frontiers where you stand, discernment is vital as well as mutual care and solidarity. And when you experience powerlessness before the endless stories of wounded dignity or that meaningless drive to destruction, may you remember Jesus Christ who went through the same powerlessness and set his hope in the Father. He will sustain you. He who has called you is faithful and is working to make all things new.

Brothers, because the Society of Jesus is a Society of love and a communion of minds and hearts<sup>2</sup>, your names are close to our hearts. We are one body of friends in the Lord. We want to receive your news, to listen to your hopes and frustrations and to discern the right ways of solidarity with you. We want also our news to reach you, our successes and our failures to be known to you, so that you can rejoice with us, grieve with us and pray with us<sup>3</sup>.

Like you, we sometimes feel helpless before the myriad causes of war and violence. They can seem, and indeed often are, totally beyond our control. Whatever the reason, as always, it is the poorest of the poor who suffer. With you, we cry out against such injustice, we protest the suffering of so many innocent people.

### *A radical witness across all continents*

We take this opportunity to acknowledge the testimony of humble service of all who have given their lives in such situations. The list<sup>4</sup> includes Frans van der Lugt, a Dutch Jesuit priest who, living in Syria, was killed in Homs during 2014; the Jesuits and their co-workers martyred in El Salvador in 1989; and, in the years in between, many others across all continents. Theirs is a testimony to the power of the Gospel; to the beautiful but painful fragility of human life; to a commitment to a ministry of friendship; to the need to witness, even to the point of death; to the fact that suffering, risk and the call to courage are part of our Jesuit lives and of our Christian vocation.

We remember Paolo Dall'Oglio, the Italian Jesuit priest abducted in Syria in July 2013 whose whereabouts are still unknown. We pray to God that he can come back to us and to his

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<sup>2</sup> "...and also because it seems to me that 'Society of Jesus' means to say 'a Society of love and conformity of minds,' and not 'of severity and servile fear.'" Francis Xavier, Letter to Ignatius (12 January 1549) § 5 (*MHSI MX II*, Letter 70).

"Later, in Malacca, I was given many letters from Rome and Portugal, and I received, and am receiving, so much consolation from them whenever I read them, and I read them very frequently, that it seems to me that though I am here, my dearest brothers, I am there with you, and if not in body, at least in spirit." Francis Xavier, Letter to his companions in Europe (10 November 1545) § 2 (*MHSI MX I*, Letter 52).

<sup>4</sup> A full list of those killed since 1973 can be found in *Promotio Iustitiae* 117.

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family. We give God thanks for the safe release of Prem Kumar, the Indian Jesuit priest who was kidnapped in Afghanistan and held for over eight months.

### *Changing minds and hearts*

It is only through the Spirit of God that attitudes that generate and sustain these conflicts can really be changed. And so, the Congregation asks Jesuits throughout the world to pray for a conversion of hearts and minds through individual prayer and in our celebration of the Eucharist, and to invite others to do the same. Secondly, we encourage all Provinces to advocate for peace using whatever means are available, be they networks, social centers, educational institutions, parishes or publications. Thirdly, we remember the words of Pope Paul VI: "If you want peace, work for justice."<sup>5</sup> They remind us that, as we work for justice across the globe, we take part in this struggle for peace.

### *A mission at the heart of our Jesuit vocation*

This struggle for justice, peace and reconciliation brings us back to our Jesuit roots in the *Formula of the Institute*. It has been reiterated in recent General Congregations and is as relevant - and as urgent - today as it was when our First Companions founded the Society of Jesus. This mission at the frontier of war and peace is a mission that touches us all whether we are Jesuit novices, scholastics, brothers, priests, those in active ministry, or those who have retired and may be in Province infirmaries. It touches us whether we are working in a parish or a theology faculty, a school, a spirituality center or other ministry. It calls us to a deeper life in community as well as to personal healing and conversion since we know that, ultimately, the roots of conflict lie in the divisions within the human heart.

### *The Risen Lord brings hope, healing and consolation*

Our hearts may be divided, but "God is greater than our hearts."<sup>6</sup> The Spirit of God is active all across our world, this Spirit of the resurrected Jesus who can touch even situations that seem hopeless and can bring new life and healing where it is most needed. We know that our faith can overcome any darkness, that our hope can build bridges and that our love can heal. But this is not to say there are easy answers. The Cross of Good Friday and the silent waiting of Holy Saturday are so often starkly with us. It is precisely there that the Risen Jesus comes to meet us as Consoler and Friend. Our desire is to extend his friendship to those affected and brutalized by conflict, even to those seen as enemies. We have no weapons except this friendship. It opposes the dynamics of violence, gathers us as Friends in the Lord, and calls us to love and serve in all things, together with so many other friends with whom we cooperate, we celebrate, we communicate. Faced with huge challenges and even apparent failure, we still dare to dream of creating with them a different world because we know the One whose "power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine."<sup>7</sup> And so we stand firm, "wearing for shoes ... the eagerness to spread the Gospel of peace."<sup>8</sup>

### *Hearts on fire - Preaching the Good News wherever the need is greatest*

Working at the frontiers, you are risking your lives. You represent something at the heart of our Jesuit vocation, the desire, lived so imaginatively and with such passion by Francis

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<sup>5</sup> Paul VI. *Message for the Celebration of the Day of Peace 1 January 1972*, AAS 63 (1971), p. 868.

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 3:20.

<sup>7</sup> Eph. 3:20.

<sup>8</sup> Eph. 6:15.

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Xavier and the early companions, to go and preach the Good News whatever the risk and wherever the need is greatest.

As we write this message to you, we feel ourselves linked to the wellspring of our vocation. We find our hearts on fire, the fire our Lord came to bring to earth.<sup>9</sup> And so we are consoled. With you, we are moved with compassion, a compassion that translates into a strong desire to change the painful realities we see portrayed on our screens. With you, we want to bring about the reconciliation that Jesus Christ desires and that our world needs so badly. With you, we place ourselves at the foot of his Cross, asking how best we can serve and love, how best we can act for change, how best we can be channels of the Spirit of God into our broken world. With these deep and great desires, yet humbly knowing our limitations and aware of our smallness in this *minima Societas*, we make the following prayer:

*Lord our God,*

*We come before you to pray for our brothers who serve you at the frontiers of violence and war.*

*We place under your protection our companions present in Syria and South Sudan, Colombia and the Great Lakes region of Africa, the Central African Republic, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Iraq and so many other places. Together with so many partners in their mission, they share the consequences of war and violence with millions of women, men and children. Grant them your consolation. Be their strength.*

*You who are the Father of Peace, bring your peace to our world. Let it grow in the hearts of world leaders. Let it spread to the people of all parts of the world and of all beliefs. Let your love lead our world.*

*Finally, we recall those injured or killed while serving your mission in war zones. They show in their bodies the passion that animates the Society. May the living find comfort in the bread broken in the Eucharist, and the departed enjoy the light of your face in the Kingdom of your peace.*

*We ask you this through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Mary, Queen of Peace and Mother of the Society of Jesus, pray for us.*

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 12:49.