Jesuits for Today and Tomorrow

Norman Tanner S.J.
Rome, Università Gregoriana

To commemorate 100 and 150 years of the restoration of the Society of Jesus, which had been promulgated by Pope Pius VII on 7 August 1814, popes Pius X and Paul VI wrote to the Superior-General of the Society of Jesus with words of thanks and encouragement. The two letters\(^1\) provide wisdom for the bicentenary of the Society’s restoration, this year 2014, and they make the best \textit{point de départ} for this lecture.

1. Pope Pius X

Pope Pius X addressed his letter (\textit{Epistola}), dated 10 May 1914, to Father General Francis-Xavier Wernz. Having expressed his appreciation of all religious orders as “specially chosen within the Lord’s flock” (\textit{pars lectissima sint Dominici gregis}), the pope turned his attention to the Society of Jesus. He gave thanks for

\(^1\) The two papal letters were published (in Latin) in \textit{Acta Apostolicae Sedis}, VI (1914), 303-305, and LVI (1964), 803-805, and in \textit{Acta Romana Societatis Jesu}, I (1914), 13-15, and XIV (1961-1966), 413-415. The Society of Jesus was approved by Pope Paul III in 1540, suppressed by Pope Clement in 1773, and restored by Pope Pius VII in 1814.
everything that had been done by the Society: thanks “which surely ought to be
given by all good people on account of their (Jesuits’) distinguished merits for the
Church (pro suis in Ecclesiam praeclaris promeritis).

The pope then reflected on the last hundred years. He thanked the Society for
what it had done so well for the glory of God and the salvation of souls (tam bene
se gesserit in Dei gloria et animarum salute promovenda), specifying some of the
relevant ministries: missions, the formation of youth, philosophy, theology according
to the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, the daily tasks of priesthood and especially
giving the Spiritual Exercises. But above all (sed praecipuum) the pope gave thanks
that Jesuits had borne, and continued to bear, so many indignities and reproaches
from the wicked as a result of their devotion to the Holy See, in accordance with
the words of Christ “Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude and
revile you, and when they cast out your name as evil on account of the Son of
man” (Luke 6, 22).

The letter expanded further on the significance of the hundred years since Pope
Pius VII had revived (revixerit) the Society in 1814. So the pope urged Jesuits, as
alumni of Father Ignatius (quotquot Ignatii Patris estis alumni), ever to keep in
mind that very wise passage in Part 10 (no. 813) of the Constitutions: “All
members of the Society should devote themselves to solid and perfect virtues, and
attach more importance to them than to learning and other natural and human gifts.
For these interior gifts are necessary to make those exterior means efficacious for
the end that is being sought.” In short, he said, Jesuits should avoid three things
especially: worldly spirit, levity of mind, zeal for rash novelty (spiritum mundi,
animi levitatem, studium temerariae novitatis). The pope urged Jesuits to be united
in mind and action (una sit fides mentium et pietas actionum) and he concluded by
bestowing his apostolic benediction upon Father Wernz, “beloved son” (dilecte Fili),
and “the entire most loving Society of Jesus” (Societati Iesu universae amantissime).
Mention should also be made of another letter (Littera Apostolica) which Pope Pius had addressed to Father General Wernz four months earlier, on 23 January 1914, granting plenary and partial indulgences for the centenary of the restoration. Here the word “restoration” of the Society of Jesus (Societas … restituta feliciter fuit) was used, rather than “revival” as in the pope’s letter of 10 May. The tone is upbeat and celebratory. The restoration was to be commemorated “happily” (feliciter) through plenary indulgences which could be gained, under the normal conditions, on the centenary day of the restoration, 7 August, and the three preceding days. Various partial indulgences were also granted. This letter mentions, too, similar indulgences, in thanksgiving for the restoration of the Society, which had been granted by Pope Gregory XVI in 1840.

For further information about the centenary of the Restoration in 1914, we can be specially grateful to Fr Giuseppe Castellani S.J. (1886-1976) of the Roman Province of the Society of Jesus. He collected together a remarkable number of periodicals and other literature containing presentations on the centenary, which are preserved in Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (ARSI), the central Jesuit archives in Rome, as Fondo Castellani, 1014 and 1016-1018. Castellani’s collection includes publications from all around the world. Many of the articles provide translations into vernacular languages of the letter written by Pope Pius X to Father General Wernz in May 1914. In this way the pope’s thoughtful and encouraging message gained wide coverage. Other articles indicate the remarkable recovery and expansion of the Society of Jesus worldwide during the hundred years since the restoration in 1814.

However, the year 1914 would prove momentous for the Church and the western world as well as for the Society of Jesus. Within three months of Pius X’s letter in May, both pope and general had died: Francis Xavier Wernz on 19 August and Pius X on the following day. In that same month of August the fateful World War

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2) Acta Apostolicae Sedis, VI (1914), 220-221. The letter is not included in the relevant volume (I, 1914) of Acta Romana Societatis Iesu.

3) There is no similar collection in ARSI for the commemoration of 1964.
(1914-1918) broke out. If the centenary of the Restoration had occurred a year later, the tone of the pope’s letter - one may surmise - might well have been more sombre.

2. Pope Paul VI and Pope Francis

Fifty years later, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the restoration, pope Paul VI wrote to Father General John Baptist Janssens on 20 August 1964. Here the pope speaks of the “full restoration” of the Society of Jesus in 1814 (Pius VII … Societatem Jesu in integrum restituendam decrevit). He began by thanking God for this auspicious celebration (fausta hac data celebratione) which rightly brings joy to the members of the Society of Jesus and which, he hoped, would inspire them to conceive healthy proposals (ad salutaria concipienda proposita). The pope praised both the constancy of Jesuits in adversity and their loyalty to the Church and the papacy (firmissimam illam erga Ecclesiam et Summos Pontifices fidelitatem).

Then, importantly, Pope Paul indicated the continuity of the Society of Jesus through the years of suppression from 1773 to 1814 by speaking of this suppression as incomplete (Societatem vestram, per totum terrarum orbem paene deletam) and of the restoration as a recall to earlier life (ad vitam quam primum revocandi). The pope recalled the praiseworthy apostolates and works of the Society in words similar to those used by Pope Pius X in 1914: missions, promoting sacred doctrine, education of youth, vindicating the rights of the Apostolic See, and especially the practice and inculcation of Christian perfection, all with great benefit for the divine glory and the catholic religion (magno cum divinae gloriae et catholicae religionis emolumento).

The pope then turned to the present and future, addressing Jesuits directly. May you be faithful to Saint Ignatius in your way of life and works (in moribus et in operibus vestris); ever more faithful to the Church and the Vicar of Christ (in
fidelitate erga Ecclesiam et Christi Vicarium magis magisque confirmemini); and diligent - following the example of your predecessors - in preserving intact catholic doctrine, as it has been handed down by the Church, as well as in combating errors, with unconquered spirit and by appropriate means. May you omit no human discipline (nec ullam humanam disciplinam praetermittatis) that can shed new light on Christian truth in our contemporary age. Thereby you will respond excellently to your religious vocation and you will welcome a new age of the Society of Jesus, which coheres suitably and decorously with the past and which, through your virtue, will be a worthy heir of this previous Society in magnanimity of both works and holiness. Pope Paul concluded his address by imparting his apostolic blessing upon Fr Janssens and members of the Society.

The year 1964 would also prove crucial for the Society of Jesus, in ways that were both similar to and different from 1914. At the time the second Vatican council was in full flow. The Society of Jesus was close to its all-time peak in numbers of some 36,000 members. However, less than two months after the pope’s address, Father General Janssens died in October 1964. Vatican II’s momentous consequences for the Church and religious orders were soon to be felt and reception of the council would prove difficult. The Society of Jesus sought to address the new situation in its 31st General Congregation of 1965-1966. Arduous years for the Society followed and the number of Jesuits declined markedly, so that today’s total of some 18,000 members is half that of the peak years.

The election in 2013 of Pope Francis, the first Jesuit ever to become pope, and the warm reception he has received worldwide, have provided much encouragement to the Society of Jesus. However, the changes of tempo from optimism to trials so soon after the anniversaries of 1914 and 1964 suggest that caution and watchfulness are wise, alongside thanksgiving and rejoicing, as the bicentenary of the restoration is commemorated this year 2014.
3. Some further Reflections

Please allow me, in this second half of the lecture, to make some further reflections on this bicentenary year, some of them about the past and others more relevant to the present and future of the Society of Jesus.

3.1. Restoration not Inevitable

My first reflection is that the restoration of the Society of Jesus in 1814, and the growth of the order thereafter, were not inevitable. This may seem an obvious reflection, but all of us are in danger of reading history backwards and the temptation is perhaps greater for events in which we have a personal interest. So for Jesuits, there is the danger of believing that the restoration of the Society of Jesus in 1814, forty-one years after it was suppressed in 1773, was almost inevitable. Maybe in terms of divine providence this restoration was always planned. But in human terms - the terms within which a church historian must work - it is important to realise that the restoration was problematic. Two factors are persuasive in this regard.

First, it seems crystal clear that Pope Clement XIV intended the permanent suppression of the order, not some temporary rearrangement, when he promulgated the bull of suppression *Dominus ac Redemptor*, which is dated 21 July 1773. The key sentence reads thus: “We (the pope) …, in the fullness of our apostolic authority, extinguish and suppress the said Society of Jesus” (*… plenitude potestatis apostolicae saepedictam Societatem extingvimus et supprimimus*). The completeness and finality of the suppression were then spelled out in detail in the long document.

Secondly, plenty of religious orders had been suppressed previously and were never restored. Among many examples in the Middle Ages, the most notorious occurred at the general council of Vienne in 1311/12: the suppression of the order of Knights Templar for men, and (though less completely) that of beguines for
women, in both cases on account of alleged irregularities - just as various complaints against the Jesuits were mentioned in Pope Clement’s bull *Dominus ac Redemptor*. More suppressions followed in the wake of the Protestant Reformation of 1517, though for the most part the suppressed orders were limited to a particular country where the Reformation had been embraced: one such case in England - my own country - was the Gilbertine order, an unusual religious order comprising double-monasteries of both monks and nuns on the same site. In short, therefore, there would have been nothing exceptional if the Society of Jesus had never been restored after its suppression in 1773.

3.2. Partial Survival

Pope Clement XIV’s bull suppressing the Society of Jesus had the paradoxical effect that while the order was suppressed in Catholic countries, it managed a residual survival in several non-Catholic countries. How so? The explanation is surprisingly simple. Such was the dependence of the Church upon national governments at that time, that papal decrees - at least those of a disciplinary rather than a doctrinal nature - had to be approved by Catholic rulers if they were to be put into effect in their countries. The rulers of the principal Catholic countries - Spain, Portugal, France, Austria and other Catholic countries mainly within the German-speaking world (the Holy Roman Empire) - had been pressing Pope Clement to suppress the Society of Jesus. They disliked the supra-national character of the order, especially its placing fidelity to the papacy and the universal Church above loyalty to the national government, and they hoped to benefit from confiscation of the Society’s wealth - which proved to be much less than they hoped. As a result, these rulers readily promulgated the papal bull of suppression in their countries as well as in their extensive colonies outside Europe: Brazil, Goa in India and other colonies of Portugal; the Philippines and most of central and south America apart from Brazil, for Spain; and various French colonies.
Rulers of non-Catholic countries, on the other hand, were, for the most part, wholly unresponsive to papal directives and therefore not interested in promulgating papal bulls. The results were specially important in the expanding British Empire. Due to the non-promulgation of the papal bull of suppression within these lands, the Society of Jesus survived in residual form within the British Isles and various of its colonies, including north America. Good recognition of this Anglophone continuity came with the quartercentenary of Heythrop College in London, which was celebrated with fitting solemnity earlier this year: founded in 1614 and still thriving in 2014, the college could claim Jesuit continuity all the way through the suppression of the order from 1773 to 1814.

Russia provided another exception, though for different reasons. Catherine the Great, empress and effective ruler of Russia from 1762 to 1796, favoured the Jesuits on account of their educational work. She was aware of the papal suppression of the order and even though she and her country owed allegiance to the Orthodox rather than to the Catholic church, she insisted on the Jesuits remaining. As a result Russia, including areas of modern Poland and Belorussia which then lay within the Russian empire, became the most important countries where the Society of Jesus survived during the years of its general suppression.

3.3. Expansion and Contraction

Although there was this residual survival of the Society of Jesus during the years of suppression and the order was formally reconstituted by Pope Pius VII in 1814, the remarkable growth of the order thereafter was far from inevitable. Once again, it is important not to read history backwards, as if what turned out to be was almost bound to happen! The early growth of the restored Society occurred principally during the long periods as Superior-General of Fr Roothaan (1829-1853) and Fr Beckx (1853-1887), to reach just over 12,000 members in 1887. This expansion
continued thereafter until the peak of some 36,000 members was reached in the early 1960’s.

How can this expansion be explained? Of course there were many factors but two principally come to mind. First, with its emphasis on worldwide mission and with a core base still in Europe, the Society of Jesus was well suited to benefit from the colonial expansion of European countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Jesuits from Europe could become missionaries relatively easily in many countries outside their native continent. Secondly, the papacy, especially from the time of Pope Pius IX (1848-1878) onwards, greatly supported the Society of Jesus, acknowledging the loyalty of the Society towards the papacy even in difficult times - with a few exceptions - and recognizing the order as particularly well suited to missionary work in the world beyond Europe.

This expansion came to a halt somewhat unexpectedly, however, just when the second Vatican council seemed to give added encouragement to the Catholic church. Here three factors come to mind; though again I speak from a European perspective and would welcome your wiser and deeper thoughts from an Asian perspective. All three factors may be seen - paradoxically - as counter-factuals to the reasons for the growth of the order in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. First, the 1960’s brought independence to most of the remaining countries which had once been European colonies. Within them, therefore, there came about more autonomy and self-reliance for the Catholic church. Western missionaries no longer had such easy access and welcome in these countries, so one key apostolate for Jesuits - missionary work - became more problematic. Secondly, the Society of Jesus - together with almost all religious orders - experienced a notable decline in vocations as well as the departure of many members after Vatican II. The reasons are complex. The council’s emphasis on the centrality of the laity and the importance of their apostolates encouraged this more normal way of Christian life. This encouragement, in fact, seemed to work somewhat to the detriment of the diocesan
priesthood and religious orders even though the council had robustly defended their importance. Thirdly, the attitude of the papacy towards the Society of Jesus became notably cooler. Maybe the papacy had favoured the Society too much earlier, while the difficulties and the decline in numbers experienced by the Society after Vatican II seemed to corroborate the need for a more detached and critical approach to the order on the part of the papacy.

3.4. Recent encouragements

In addition to the election of Pope Francis, there has been notable encouragement for the Society of Jesus during the last few decades. At the most basic level, the Society is still on its feet. This may seem obvious, but the large exodus of Jesuits in the period after Vatican II and the papal intervention in 1981, already mentioned, were radical trials for the order.

The total number of Jesuits has halved, from some 36,000 in the early 1960’s to around 18,000 today. The drop has been felt severely in western Europe and north America, but in other regions the number has increased - most notably in India and southern Asia but also in Latin America and Africa. In these countries of growth, moreover, the direction of the Society and its ministries has passed to indigenous Jesuits, away from devoted missionaries mostly from Europe. This new self-confidence has brought appropriate and adventurous innovation as well as continuity with the past.

The apostolates undertaken by Jesuits may appear similar to before - as outlined broadly in Pope Paul VI’s letter of 1964 - but they are inspired and organized by fresh minds and hearts. Many Jesuits of these countries, moreover, are now working as missionaries in the western world. Jesuit Refugee Service, founded by Fr Arrupe and promoted by his successors as Superior General, Frs Kolvenbach and Nicolás, to accompany refugees worldwide with material, spiritual and educational assistance, illustrates well both continuity and innovation in the order in recent times.
4. Conclusion

Let me conclude with some more personal reflections. Entering the Society of Jesus as a novice in the British Province (then called the English Province) at the age of 18 in 1961, I’ve had the privilege of living in many Provinces of the order worldwide, partly through teaching church history in our various Jesuit theologates and universities - just as today I’m glad to find myself here at Sogang University. This has meant quite an intimate experience of the Society of Jesus of the last fifty years, from the peak years of some 36,000 members and the upbeat message of Pope Paul VI in 1964, through the long period of difficult years, then some recovery crowned with the unexpected election of our fellow Jesuit as pope. I’m ever grateful for God’s grace and the support of so many Jesuits and friends.

It is specially encouraging to realise how much the apostolates and spirituality of the Society of Jesus have been appreciated throughout this half-century. Requests to our Jesuit authorities to undertake new apostolates, as well as to maintain existing ones, have been continuous and urgent even during the difficult years. One notices, too, how many of those who showed reserve during the lean years are now more forthcoming in their encouragement! However, to reflect again on the difficult times that followed the apogees of 1914 and 1964, may Jesuits today keep their heads down and avoid triumphalism.