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We Remember a Great Educator: Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., 1928-2016

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Listen attentively. Defensiveness, while an easily adopted default stance, often inhibits genuine listening and true conversation. Attentive listening requires my vulnerability, my full presence and sincere openness to the other.

Seek the truth in what others are saying. No matter how fully I may wish it were otherwise at times, I am not the keeper of all truth. Every difficult conversation holds the potential to teach me something, something about the topic at hand, about the other, and, undoubtedly, about myself. I strive to learn.

Disagree humbly, respectfully, and thoughtfully. While not the keeper of all truth, as a sharer in the conversation, it is incumbent upon me to speak *my* truth in love with humility and respect.

Allow the conversation the time it needs. Resolution is not always readily apparent or feasible. Some conversations simply take time, leaving me to trust, as Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin advises, “in the slow work of God.”

As we engage the difficult conversations that are components of our life and work, may we strive to do so guided by the above attributes and always rooted in an approach that assumes the best of the other and seeks the good of all. In so doing, may we readily welcome discomfort, embracing it as an avenue to the transformation we seek as companions in Jesuit higher education.

Cindy Schmersal is the director of campus ministry at Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Missouri.

We Remember a Great Educator

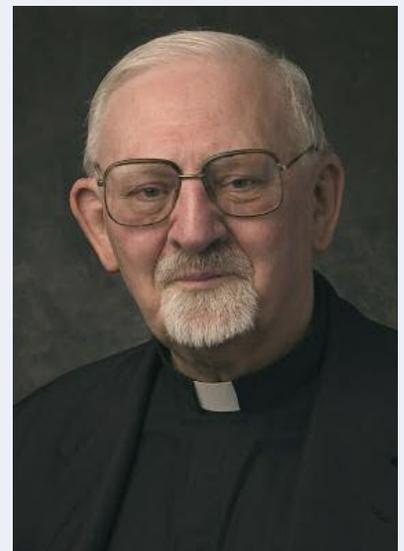
*Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J.,
1928-2016*

By Edward W. Schmidt, S.J.

As the news went out of the death of the Jesuits’ former superior general, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, on November 26, 2016, in Beirut, Jesuits and others who had known him began to reflect with gratitude on his legacy. Elected superior general on September 13, 1983, during a time of marked tension in the Society’s relationship with the Vatican, he went on to serve in that office for over 24 years with quiet dignity and grace, with skillful diplomacy and competence. In 2006 he announced his desire to resign from that office as he approached his 80th birthday, and on January 8, 2008, the Jesuits’ Thirty-Fifth General Congregation accepted his resignation.

Such a bare outline hardly begins to hint at what he did for the Jesuit world, and particularly the world of Jesuit education. He was an educator. He held a doctorate in theology from the Université de Saint-Joseph in Beirut, Lebanon. He became an expert in general linguistics and in Armenian. He taught in Beirut and also in The Hague and in Paris. In 1981 he became rector of the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome.

As superior general he had a great impact on Jesuit education



and on how schools relate today to the Jesuit history, spirit, and governance. In 1989, he addressed Assembly ’89, the meeting of 800 Jesuits and lay collaborators in higher education held at Georgetown to celebrate its bicentenary as the first Jesuit school in the United States. First, he noted the significance of the occasion: “This is an historic occasion: the first assembly of Jesuits from the entire spectrum of activities at all United States Jesuit institutions of higher education.”

And he continued: “The talent and dedication assembled in this room is potentially a massive resource for building the Kingdom of

God on earth. And that is not only true for your impact upon the minds and hearts of young people in this country; like it or not, what happens in the United States affects the lives of hundreds of millions of women, men and children on every continent."

He then went on to describe the place of education in the larger Jesuit mission. In 1975, a general congregation had decreed that this mission was "the service of faith through the promotion of justice." Some had taken this new articulation of the Jesuit mission to suggest that the schools were no longer a priority but even an obstacle to the mission. Father Kolvenbach clearly disagreed: "The Society proclaims that the service of faith through the promotion of justice ... must be integrated as a priority, into every one of our apostolates. This change of priorities in our Society in no way calls into question the value of education as such. The famous Decree 4, in spite of erroneous interpretations, actually asked that the edu-

cational apostolate be intensified!"

And he went on to unpack this point of view: "The decree describes the power that the educational apostolate has to contribute to the formation of multipliers for the process of education. ... In this way education can be a powerful leaven for the transformation of attitudes, humanizing the social climate. ... It is not, therefore, education itself that is questioned, but whether education is, or is going to be, integrated into the one apostolic thrust of the Society. Fr. [Pedro] Arrupe declared very clearly that our purpose in education is to form women and men for others, in imitation of Christ, the Word of God, the Man for others; and Fr. Arrupe challenged us to work out the pedagogical implications of such an objective."

He spelled this out in more detail in an address at Santa Clara University in 2000, at which the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States held a conference on "Commitment to Justice in Jesuit

Higher Education" to mark the 25th anniversary of Decree 4 of the 32nd General Congregation and to reflect on its impact upon the Society's university apostolate in the United States. The 420 participants, among them many top administrators, endorsed that address as the basis upon which to plan education for justice on every campus.

The surge of energy on Jesuit campuses for Jesuit spirituality and commitment are a development from these early ideas. Father Kolvenbach articulated issues of the diminishing of the number of Jesuits on the campus, the entrusting of governance to dedicated laypersons steeped in this spirit. The language that lets students identify themselves as men and woman for others, that energizes their commitments to justice, to the environment, to the common good has grown explicit and intense in recent decades. Father Kolvenbach pushed these developments.

Through his pragmatic diplomacy and astute leadership, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach strengthened Jesuit education in a contemporary context and gave it strong energy for the future. We are grateful for the great man who served us so well.

Edward W. Schmidt, S.J., a senior editor at America Media, is also the editor of Conversations.

Notes: One clear sign that Father Kolvenbach's ideas have caught on is Heidi Barker's Teaching the Mission article in this issue (p. 52).

The texts of these addresses are available on-line at several sites; search "Kolvenbach Assembly '89" or "Kolvenbach Santa Clara 2002."



Fr. Kolvenbach in the Aula at the Jesuit Curia preparing for the Jesuits' 35th General Congregation. Photos by Fr. Don Doll, S.J.