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### From the Thirty-Fourth General Congregation: Cooperation with the Laity in Mission

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## Cooperation with the Laity in Mission

EXCERPTED AND INTRODUCED BY GERALD M. FAGIN, S.J.

On January 5, 1995, two-hundred-thirty Jesuits from around the world assembled in Rome for the Thirty-fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus. A General Congregation is the highest legislative body of the Society, and has the power to issue decrees on questions and concerns facing the Society.

One concern that has been at the heart of discussion and reflection for the last thirty years, especially in Jesuit Universities, is the fostering of cooperation with the laity in Jesuit life and mission. The following are key paragraphs excerpted from the Thirty-fourth Congregation's Decree Thirteen: "Cooperation with the Laity in Mission." Though the document is written for Jesuits, it speaks to a much wider audience because it goes well beyond reaffirming the desire of Jesuits to share mission with others. It commits Jesuits to be of service to the mission of the laity.

1. A reading of the signs of the times since the Second Vatican Council shows unmistakably that the Church of the next millennium will be called the "Church of the Laity." During the past thirty years increasing numbers of lay people have responded to the call to ministry flowing from the grace received in baptism.<sup>1</sup> The actualization of their vocation in so many and such varied situations has become the predominant way by which the People of God minister to the world in promotion of the Kingdom. This growth of lay ministry will surely continue to expand during the next millennium. The Society of Jesus acknowledges as a grace of our day and a hope for the future that laity "take an active, conscientious, and responsible part in the mission of the Church in this

great moment of history."<sup>2</sup> We seek to respond to this grace by offering ourselves in service to the full realization of this mission of the laity, and we commit ourselves to that end by cooperating with them in their mission.

2. We discover a similar grace if we read the signs of the times in the apostolic work of the Society of Jesus over the past thirty years. Spurred by the council, General Congregation 31 urged us to "foster the cooperation of the laity in our own apostolic works."<sup>3</sup> Since that time a growing cooperation with the laity has expanded our mission and transformed the ways in which we carry it out in partnership with others. It has enriched what we do and how we understand our role in that mission. Jesuit works in some areas of the world depend primarily upon lay persons for the carrying out of the mission of the Society. We foresee the expansion of lay apostolic leadership in Jesuit works in years to come and pledge ourselves to assist this development.

3. We also cooperate with many others: priests, men and women religious, with their distinct charisms, as well as people of all faiths and beliefs who seek to build a world of truth, justice, freedom, peace, and love. We are grateful for this cooperation and are enriched by it.

4. Jesuits are both "men *for* others"<sup>4</sup> and "men *with* others."<sup>5</sup> This basic characteristic of our way of proceeding calls for an attitude and readiness to cooperate, to listen and to learn from others, to share our spiritual and apostolic inheritance. To be "men with others" is a central aspect of our charism and deepens our identity.

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, n. 3.

<sup>3</sup> GC 31, D 33, n. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Pedro Arrupe, "Men for Others," Address to the Tenth International Congress of Former Jesuit Students of Europe, 1973.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Hans Kolvenbach, "To Friends and Colleagues of the Society of Jesus," AR 20 (1990): p. 602.

5. Because of the experiences of the recent past, many Jesuit provinces as well as many lay persons have urged this general congregation to take new steps forward in cooperation. In response to these requests we offer recommendations concerning (a) the Society's service to the laity in their mission, (b) formation of both laity and Jesuits for this cooperation, (c) Jesuit cooperation with laity in works of the Society, other works, and associations, and (d) opportunities for the future.

### A. SERVICE TO THE LAITY IN THEIR MINISTRY

6. The expansion and variety of lay apostolic service in our day has remarkable dimensions. Many lay persons recognize their activity as Christian ministry and seek to be trained for and commissioned to this service. Others engage in apostolic service in a more informal and implicit manner. Still others participate in lay associations for varied apostolic purposes. In all these ways many lay men and women give witness to the Gospel. Where they live, worship, and work, laity are taking on greater responsibility for the ministry of the Church. Called to be holy and concerned for faith, justice, and the poor, they evangelize the structures of society.

7. The Society of Jesus places itself at the service of this mission of the laity by offering what we are and have received: our spiritual and apostolic inheritance, our educational resources, and our friendship. We offer Ignatian spirituality as a specific gift to animate the ministry of the laity. This apostolic spirituality respects the unique spirituality of the individual and adapts itself to present needs; it helps persons to discern their call and "in all things to love and serve the Divine Majesty."<sup>6</sup> We offer to

laity the practical wisdom we have learned from more than four centuries of apostolic experience. Through our schools, universities, and other educational programs we make pastoral and theological training available. Perhaps most important, we join with them in companionship: serving together, learning from and responding to each other's concerns and initiatives, dialoguing with one another on apostolic objectives.

### B. FORMATION OF LAITY AND JESUITS

8. Putting ourselves at the service of the apostolate of the laity challenges us. We need to respond to their desire for formation so that they are able to minister as fully as possible according to their call and gifts. This formation should draw on the abundant resources and experiences of the Society. We should not hesitate to offer, when requested, the experience of the Spiritual Exercises and our spiritual direction. We can encourage them towards the apostolic priority of the service of faith and the promotion of justice with a preferential love of the poor. By responding in this way we offer who we are. As persons whose lives are centered on loving and serving God in all things, we should help others recognize and discern the apostolic possibilities of their lives and work. Laity who collaborate in Jesuit apostolates can expect from us a specific formation in Ignatian values, help in discernment of apostolic priorities and objectives, and practical strategies for their realization.

*Taken from John L. McCarthy, S.J., ed. Documents of the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus. St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995. Used with permission.*