

Restoration of a Charism

Points for the Province Recollection
By Pierre de Charentenay SJ

This recollection will invite us to meditate around the meaning today of the restoration of the Society 200 years ago. As we begin, let us pause and keep in our mind the history of our institute, all its founders, all who have suffered during the suppression, and all those who have helped in its restoration. We keep in mind especially Peter Faber who has been made a saint by Pope Francis.

We can ask the grace *“of an intimate knowledge of all the good that we have received”* since the restoration, 1814 – 2014.

I propose that we read together these events of the suppression and the restoration of the Society which are a sort of parable of our life as Jesuits today. Since memory and identity are related, it is important to go to the past in order to know how to decide today.

In three points, I will discuss first the suppression, trying to understand what happened. Then I will read this event through the lens of a restoration of our charism, asking what kind of restoration it should be. And finally, I want to have a look at Peter Faber, how he incarnates the values of the restoration proposed by Fr Nicolas; how he is sort of a model for our life today, although it took more than 4 centuries to realize that he was a saint. Maybe the French Province did not believe that it was still possible after so many years.

I. A suppression with indirect cause

I do not want to make a lesson of history. I am not an historian and we are not here just to listen to a lesson of history.

But God speaks through history and he can send a message through that sequence suppression-restoration. This is not reserved to specialists: it speaks to every Jesuit on the way he sees the Society today, and what he wants for her.

So, reading about this event is full of teachings. I propose an interpretation of the suppression, an interpretation which is necessary for our conduct in the future, even briefly, because this event has a great meaning for us.

The suppression of the Society occurred gradually at the end of the XVIII century and was worldwide in 1773. It occurred at a time when there were more and more tensions between the Church and the different states of Europe. Kings and princes were getting fed up with the Church's mingling in politics, her thirst for control, wealth and power.

In the turmoil of political powers against the Church, the Society became the first victim, by a suppression or expulsion in different countries, one after the other, starting with Portugal, then France and Spain, until the general suppression in 1773, except in Russia as we know.

The Society does not seem to have been completely guilty of any particular behaviour, even if she was making problems in Latin America or China. But she became the scapegoat of a fight which was well beyond her. In line with Enlightenment ideas, political powers wanted to free themselves from the influence of the Church.

Various steps of the fight between Church and State took place.

The American Revolution, in 1776, represents the first organisation of a state where religion is strictly separated from the political power.

The French Revolution took more radical measures by simply cutting off the heads of the king and of many priests for the same purpose: to keep religion out of political power. It led to the imprisonment of Pius VI by the French revolutionaries and his death in prison in Valence; and likewise the imprisonment of Pope Pius VII by Napoleon from 1809 to 1813. Imagine: one of the rulers of Europe would put the pope in jail. What a reversal from the time of the universal control of the Church over world politics! What a revenge after so many years of power by the Church!

It was the end of one world, and the beginning of another.

The story of the tensions between Church and State would go on for more than a century, but the symbolic steps had been made in the absence of the Society of Jesus, because she had been the first church institution to have been put aside.

How did the Society become the scapegoat of that fight? She was the most developed and powerful religious congregation (22,000 members), enormously wealthy, but especially dangerous because she was the educator of the youth all over Europe and America, especially in the south (700 schools in all). Politically, the Society had been very close to political powers, being asked to contribute to the spiritual direction of kings and princes.

To Suppress the Society was to weaken the Church in one of her most decisive institution.

So, there was really no direct reason for her suppression, even if some Jesuits did some mismanagement, but there was a whole set of situations where she was in the forefront of the Church. That made her the designated target of the power struggle between the Church and political powers of that time.

The Society would not have been suppressed if she had not been so powerful, if she had been humble, discrete and far from political power.

In some ways, she opened the way to the judgement that fell on her, orchestrated by her own enemies, who were acting against the Church.

That was the suppression. 41 years later came the official restoration of the Society.

The ambiguity of that term should catch our attention. Do we want today a restoration of the power of the Society like before? What does the General say about that? What does the new pope, a Jesuit, think about that? These are questions that can lead us into meditation on what the Society should be, and this is what you are invited to do today.

The question we raise is related to power and the will to be powerful. Not that power in itself is bad: power can be the best road to service. But the temptations of power are many, as we know.

I quote St. Jerome: “*The early Church had grown under persecutions and had been crowned by martyrs. Then came the Christian emperors, her power and her wealth have increased, but her virtues have decreased*”¹. So the problem is not just 200 years ago; it is permanent in our history.

So Fr Nicolas invites us to another restoration, what I call restoration of charism.

II. Restoration of a charism

This is a story of death and resurrection. But what kind of resurrection? This is my second part: the restoration of the charism of the institute, not of her power but of her charism.

Fr Nicolas wrote various texts on this anniversary:

He does not want a restoration of the glory of the Society. Something has to die of these desires of power, security, worldly ambitions. He asks us to avoid all sorts of triumphalism and pride, which is why there will be no big celebration in Rome next August but hundreds of initiatives in a decentralized commemoration of that event. He wants what he had said in many countries: an effort to live more profoundly our vocation.

In his recent letter on the restoration of the Society², Fr Nicolas quotes an important message of the Superior General, Jan Roothaan, written in 1830. 15 years after the official restoration Fr Roothaan was observing how members of the Society were attached to the growth of the Society in the numbers of institutions, happy to be once again close to power and influence. Fr Roothaan asks that the Jesuits be more interested in the promotion of the heart of the charism of the Institution, its spirit, its values, its way of proceeding, rooted in the Exercises. Restoration of charism, not of power.

I would select two features of the Society on which Fr Nicolas insists:

1. The universal character of the Society. Under the generalate of Fr Roothaan, 19% of the 5,209 members of the Society was working outside their provinces of origin. There was clearly a strong sense of mission. Times have changed in two centuries, and globalization is our daily life. Trips are even too easy. But there is still a lot to do in the cooperation between and among provinces, and their institutions. The sense of mission remains a call to be answered, even in time of a decrease in numbers.
2. The second point concerns our companionship. Fr Nicolas takes the example of Fr Joseph Pignatelli who had been able to encourage his brothers in the difficult time of the suppression. He was very active in promoting friendship, communication, hope among all his companions. They were supporting one another, without competition, without jealousy but with a will to remain together in the spirit of St Ignatius. In a time of individualism, it still is a great challenge: each one of us is tempted to build his own world, alone or with others, in order to build his own version of the Society of Jesus.

¹ Malchus, Latin Patrology, 23.55c

² November 14th 2013

To be more open to the charism of the Society will be the best way to fight what Fr Nicolas speaks about in his letter on the Year of Faith: an “*interior weakness*” in the world and in the Church.

In his letter for the end of the Year of faith, Fr Nicolas’ judgment is pretty strong about this “*interior weakness.*” He takes the concepts of Paul Ricoeur to put questions to our faith: Paul Ricoeur characterizes faith in two ways:

1. Faith is alive “*despite everything,*” despite the complexity of the world, despite the possibility to lose hope because there are too many evil problems in our societies; we go on believing in the future “*despite everything,*” because God is here in every one of us.
2. Faith follows “*the law of overflowing,*” believing that evil will never overcome the goodness of God. Faith will never be submerged by all the evil and sins that exist under so many forms in the world.

Fr General talks about a Church that is weak, touched by scandals, sometimes using a language that no one understands. We ourselves, as Jesuits, are weak; we are too often weak witnesses of faith; we lack passion, when problems of humanity are more and more complex, and more and more profound.

So he pleads for authenticity, coherence and a word he uses everywhere, in all his trips, depth. Go deeper into yourself. Be more profound in your prayer and your daily life. Beware of superficiality in your actions and your concerns.

This touches our daily life. What this world needs more is deeper humanity than just selfish and superficial lives. It needs prayer, reflection over what we are, discernment. We probably have to die to a society of consumption, to distractions, to a life that is too light. That was one of the remarks of Pope Francis against the “*light priests.*”

How can we arrive at renewal in intensity and in freedom? How can we have a restoration of the zeal and faith similar to what animated our early companions?

Extreme modernity is extreme freedom: how do we manage that? Do we take advantage of the situation for ourselves or do we try to make difficult choices in order to keep a healthy style of life and a deep intellectual and spiritual life. This needs reflexion, and examination.

This is not the time to sleep or to close in on oneself. These times are times of great challenges. You know that by the challenges raised in this country by the three crises of last semester: the Zamboanga rebellion, the earthquake in Bohol and Typhoon Yolanda. Death was in many parts. But people were strong to overcome and rebuild. They did not lose hope. They celebrated Christmas beyond all grief and showed an amazing capacity of resurrecting their lives by going back to what was essential for them, their faith. People have shown us a great capacity of going through this essential Christian movement: death and resurrection. They started to rebuild very quickly.

Wider challenges are many around us: poverty, corruption, violence, environmental degradation, mental confusion because of too much freedom. The list of problems is without

end. We do not have the technical solutions in our hands, but we have a message of hope, of faith, and we have a charism that has to be used again in all its strength.

This is what Peter Faber probably did best. This is why he is a saint. Let us go now to Peter Faber, the model for the restoration.

III. Peter Faber, the model

We have a model for our meditation: Peter Faber, the third man of the rented room in Paris, with Ignatius and Francis Xavier; the model of the Jesuit priest for Pope Francis, in whose memory he is going to celebrate a Mass on January 3 at the Gesu in Rome.

Peter Faber was born in a little village in the Alps, le Villaret in Savoy, in 1506. He lived in a family of farmers, somewhere in the mountains between France and Italy. He studied in local schools and then with a priest who taught him catechism and Latin. He was brilliant and curious with an excellent memory, but very quiet, shy and reserved. He dreamt of going away, of changing his condition in life.

He wanted to explore the world. So at 19 he came to Paris, in 1525, and arrived in the famous College Ste. Barbe the same month as Francis Xavier, the nobleman from Navarra. During all these years, Faber did not know what to do with his life: would he become a medical doctor, a lawyer or maybe a monk? He dreamt of intellectual success and books, but he was in constant turmoil, full of scruples, vain glory and rash judgements.

Faber and Xavier studied together for four years and got their degree in February 1529. Then a third man arrived in the same room, Ignatius Loyola. Faber was invited to coach, in Latin and Aristotle, this old student of 38 years, who was already famous. The exchange started between them. Ignatius was gradually educating Peter Faber in his spiritual life. But he waited 4 years to give him the thirty-day retreat in February 1534.

Peter Faber received the spiritual guidance he needed: it gave to his search a real objective and the necessary spiritual discipline; he entered into an ascetic consecration in order to give himself to God.

The small group took their vows together in August 1534 in the little chapel on the hill of Montmartre, where Faber, just ordained, said Mass. In all, Peter Faber spent 11 years in Paris, studying many topics and exercising himself in all sorts of debates, attending lectures everywhere. But he just did not like speculation per se and never finished his doctorate; he was doing all these studies better to bring people back to God.

Then started what we would call "*the life of a pilgrim*," pilgrim of the soul, for a very short life, but also pilgrim on the road, starting with a trip to Parma ordered by Pope Paul III in May 1539 until Faber's death in August 1546—that means only seven years of ministry. We cannot follow all his trips, but he went to Portugal, Spain, Italy, France and more often to Germany, generally on foot, at the order of the Pope or Ignatius. He would complain, "*I always must leave at the moment when I have the most reasons to stay.*"

Why is he a saint?

Not so much for his theological competence, which was great. St. Peter Canisius said about him: *“I have never seen or heard a theologian more knowledgeable and more profound.”* Faber was called by the pope to be member of the Diet of the Emperor in Worms and in Ratisbon. He participated in the debates between the new groups of Protestants and the Catholics. He did a good job in this position as theologian, discussing with princes and bishops, cardinal and kings. He knew the desire of power of bishops, the sins of the clergy and the pride of some spiritual people. He tried to reform the Church in Germany, which was in a very bad condition.

But his sainthood was elsewhere. He was not a man of government, like Ignatius, or a man of great achievement like Xavier. He had a very nice temperament which we see in a very often quoted judgement of Simon Rodrigues: *“in his dealings with others he revealed such a rare and delightful sweetness and charm as I have never, to this day I must admit, found in anyone else. In some way or other, he used to make friends with people; and by the kindness of his manner and speech so won his way into all hearts that he set on fire with the love of God.”*³ Pope Francis spoke about Faber in his famous interview with the journal, *Civiltà Cattolica*: he revealed some key aspects of the priest: *“[His] dialogue with all, even the most remote and even with his opponents; his simple piety, a certain naïveté perhaps, his being available straightaway, his careful interior discernment, the fact that he was a man capable of great and strong decisions but also capable of being so gentle and loving.”*

The best of the life of Peter Faber was spent in spiritual direction through confession, conversation and the Exercises. He was a man of *“soft pedagogy.”* He had a great humanity, ready to help. He was a master in giving the Exercises, without imposing himself between God and the retreatant. He loved people before speaking to them, whoever they were, even the more important people of this world.

Fr Kolvenbach insists on that ministry of *“cura personalis”* which is more important than ever *“because the necessary social changes need conversion of the heart, which could put an end to the misery in this world but do not really want it.”*

Peter Faber is also a saint because of the journey he made in his personal transformation. He was a fragile man, extremely lucid about himself, who had found peace and strength in the gift of himself to God thanks to Ignatius. This peace and this strength would just be contagious, and spread around naturally. But he was also subject to depression and to sudden fever. He could not get out of that.

But instead of being locked in this succession of feelings, he learned to take them as God’s way of speaking to him. Instead of dreaming about some fabulous mission, he learned to stick to the present, to the ordinary daily tasks and examined his conscience in order to find God in all things. This simple, constant attention to the ordinary would take him to the very heights of contemplation of God. He was saved by faith and by the Exercises. He was not afraid of anything anymore since he had found security in the work of God.

We see that in his “Memorial,” which he wrote in one year between June 1542 to July 1543, that he spent a lot of time discerning, trying to understand what was happening in his mind and his emotions. It could be the sign of a neurotic behaviour. But it was a way of becoming closer to who Christ was for him.

³ Quoted by “The spiritual writings of Pierre Favre”, p. 32

He used his capacity of introspection to look for a better union with God. This is one way of saying that what is important in spiritual life is not so much the result, but the road you take, knowing that one has to be always ready to learn.

So Faber was always searching between his desires, his emotions, the feelings of his heart, and the various motions which make up the interior life. That may be one of his great lessons: the signs in his soul are the signs of his relation to God. This is true also for us. The absence of awareness of one's spiritual movements is a sign of a low level of spiritual life. It's like the encephalogram. The absence of movement means death. We could be dead spiritually.

Peter Faber was making a constant movement of ascension – descent, which is no more the fruit of hesitation, but the movement of Christ himself. He would sum up this movement by the image of the fruits and the roots of the tree. *“Do not seek the root of the tree for the sake of its fruit, but rather the fruit for the sake of the root.” “If you can go down to the root, you will possess the fruit. But it is not the fruit but the root which will lead you to the glory of God.”*⁴

One feature of the life of Faber goes along with what we said about Fr Nicolas and his call to depth in our life. The whole life of Peter Faber is a journey in interiority. That practice was a way for him to go from the fruit to the root: it is important to observe the fruit of what we do, but it is more important to see where it comes from. Why do we do the things that we do? What about the purity of our intention?

Restoration is rejuvenation, renewal, search for the roots of our religious life. This is what I propose for our meditation on the restoration of the Society.

First, a sort of spiritual reading of our history as a process of suppression-restoration;

Second, a search for the deeper reality of our charism;

Third, Peter Faber as a model. He shows us a way of restoration.

We can finish our meditation by thanking God for the restoration of this least Society and for some of her figures, like Peter Faber.

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⁴ Memorial, n° 280