



Q&A

Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, SJ, was elected the 29th superior general of the Society of Jesus in 1983. As superior general, Fr. Kolvenbach directs the Society of Jesus, which today has 20,000 members serving in 127 countries. Born in Druten, Holland, in 1928, Fr. Kolvenbach entered the Society in 1948. He completed his studies to become a priest in Holland and at University of St. Joseph in Beirut, Lebanon. Fr. Kolvenbach spent 25 years serving in Beirut before being called to Rome to serve as rector of the Pontifical Oriental Institute.

# An APOSTOLIC BODY and Its Head

**FR. GENERAL PETER-HANS  
KOLVENBACH, SJ, EXPLAINS WHY  
HE'S NOT A CEO AND WHERE THE  
SOCIETY OF JESUS IS HEADED**

*interview by George Kearney*

**Q** Organizationally, the worldwide Society of Jesus looks to outsiders much like a large multinational corporation. Apart from the fact you wear a cassock and not a business suit to work, how does your role differ from that of the CEO of a multinational corporation?

**A** It's true that to outsiders the worldwide Society looks and operates like a large multinational corporation. To the several hundred highly visible educational institutions all over the world are added thousands of parishes and hundreds of spiritual and social centers and other works. The general superior, however, cannot act as a CEO because the 20,000 Jesuits at his disposal are not wage earners and employees, but freely "available" fellow Jesuits, his friends in the Lord, who actively share the same vocation and the same mission. Another big difference is the fact that the Jesuit "CEO" cannot hire new staff-members. He can and should pray that the Lord "send new workers into His vineyard," but he cannot just take them in. Every year the Lord sends around 500 young men to join the Jesuits. Maybe the superior general needs them most in the United States and Europe, but more that 60% of them come from Africa, Asia, and South America. So even if, organizationally, we work in the framework of a multinational corporation, we live together on all these levels out of a mission, freely accepted, lovingly accomplished as an apostolic body.

**Q** How does the question of "globalization," so often in the news today, impact the Society of Jesus?

**A** By the time Ignatius died on July 31, 1556, his companions had spread to virtually every part of the globe. Started as an international group—even the original companions belonged to different European nations—putting themselves at the disposal of the

pope as universal pastor, they considered not their home country but the universal world as their home. Blocked from an outreach to nearby North Africa, they bypassed the “Islamic” wall to announce the gospel in Asia and Latin-America. Ignatius, without knowing the expression we use today, thought globally and acted locally. Today’s Jesuits are still aware that they are on mission, that they have to be ready to go anywhere and everywhere on the globe, ready also to respect the local language and culture of the people to whom they are sent.

Although the “globalization” of our day fits well with the operative methodology of the Jesuits, it also opens up, on the other hand, new ways to exploit and raises new problems—especially those related to an unjust world market—that have to be resolved. The impacts of globalization on the Society are, on the one hand, the opening of so many possibilities to share with one another concerns for peace and justice, but also, on the other hand, the challenge of how to defend and be of support to the men and women whom globalization is marginalizing in violation of their rights to welfare and to their own culture and language. For that reason the Jesuits have committed themselves in a special way to all the people on the move, refugees and migrants.

**Q** Due to occasional stories in the media, our friends in the United States often ask about the Society’s relationship to the Vatican. How would you describe that relationship today?

**A** Right from the beginning Jesuits wanted to become like the apostle Paul, not only exploring, as a pioneer, unknown countries to evangelize, but also testing out new approaches, like Paul’s in Athens where he announced the gospel with the help of Greek poetry. Jesuits tested new visions, new orientations like those in China or in South America at the service of the mission the Holy See had entrusted to them. All this missionary vitality, however, as in the time of Vatican II, implied trial and error, sometimes even to the point of a breakdown in trust and communication between the Vatican and the Jesuits. John Paul II never called a halt to the creativity and the research, but he expressed concern—as is his pastoral duty—especially if a Jesuit went astray in advancing his mission or if the apostolic body of the Society took a direction that was not in harmony with papal orientations. Today the contact with the Holy See is as it should be, and John Paul II sees that Jesuits want to be at the service of him whom Ignatius called the Vicar of Christ on earth.

We have learned from Ignatius to take a positive view of whatever goes on in the Church. It was for him like the mystery of the moon. It has no light of its own, and

the American astronauts saw there only sand and stone—still, thanks to the reflected light of the Sun, it illuminates our night!

**Q** What in particular does the Pope ask the Society of Jesus to do? Are there particular ministries or geographical areas the Pope has asked the Jesuits to focus on?

**A** The first Jesuits discovered so many possibilities for their apostolic work that they did not know what to choose. So they asked the preferences and the options of the Pope who as universal pastor would know where to go. This remains a reality. The Jesuits would not be in Siberian Russia or in Albania to help rebuild the churches there without the expressed desire of John Paul II. In the same way, we would not have undertaken pastoral care in Kyrgyzstan or Cambodia, we would not have universities in Japan and in Cameroon, without the Holy Father having made known his desires. He has also often urged the Jesuits to continue the implementation of Vatican II—through ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, and, in general, in the difficult task of bridging the increasing gap between culture and faith, science and faith.

**Q** What do you think the Society of Jesus will look like in 25 years? What will be the most noticeable changes?

**A** It’s difficult to foresee the future because the number of Jesuit vocations, on which much of our future depends, is not in our hands. The church will always need an apostolic body that helps the people of God to be on mission and to announce worldwide from the rooftops that Jesus Christ is Lord. This evangelization, however, will be done more and more in partnership with all the vital groups in the church. This partnership especially with the laity is not something done out of necessity—because we recognize, for example, that the number of Jesuits will never be sufficient for all our apostolic endeavors, especially in education— but it is something we should do out of our shared sense of mission. In the United States, new Jesuit ministries are already emerging that are based more on sponsorship and on the capacity to guarantee the gospel values than on the exclusive physical presence of a Jesuit. That was so in Ignatius’ day, when he had so few Jesuits to send in answer to the requests he received from all over Europe, Asia, and the “New World.” It’s just as true today, so perhaps the next 25 years will see more of the same. The emphasis should not be so much on the quantity of services as on a service of excellent apostolic quality. ■