MESSAGE OF FATHER GENERAL PETER-HANS KOLVENBACH TO THE CONGRESS OF DIRECTORS OF JESUIT SECONDARY SCHOOLS OF EUROPE (JECSE)

Rocca di Papa, October 20-24, 1999

Esteemed Directors:

While you find yourselves taking part in the Congress of the Directors of Jesuit Colleges of Europe (JECSE,) I am participating in the Second Special Assembly for Europe of the Synod of Bishops. This circumstance prevents me from attending this Congress, as would have been my desire. Nevertheless, I do not wish to miss this opportunity to send you a very cordial greeting and to address to you some words of encouragement.

Europe is the motive that has brought the bishops together during this month of October, and is also what brings you together today. Europe, which is moving towards the third millennium and trying to discern the signs of the times in the historical moment that it is living. Following the icon used by the Assembly of Bishops, the contemporary European experience finds its interpretation in the image of the disciples of Emmaus. Like the two disciples, confused and disillusioned, discussing about "all that has taken place in Jerusalem", we must also pause a moment along the way and ask ourselves "what has been taking place in Europe", and let ourselves be challenged by the word and the presence of the risen Lord.

1. The European scene

The European scene of the last few years is sufficiently familiar to all of you. Let me only refer with broad strokes to some of the **signs of the times**, pointed out also in the Assembly of Bishops that are directly related to the educational effort of the Society in the Continent.

The hopes for unity and freedom which opened up ten years ago with the fall of the walls have been translated into cultural, social, and political changes of transcendent importance, especially for the countries of the East. Among the countries of the Union, the improvement of the quality of life and the process of growing unification and integration, including monetary, offer unusual perspectives for the future. Globalization, which affects very distinctly all the European countries, is an irreversible reality. The future of Europe is opening itself to opportunities never imagined in its millenary history.

But not all are signs of hope. The inequality between the countries of the East and the West comes to mind. With the prosperity and anxiety for economic growth comes along very worrisome **negative signs**. We need only to mention unemployment, disappointment of so many young people facing an uncertain future, savage competition, the logic of the market place which leads to destabilizing inequalities, corruption, violence, the rising danger of racism, injustice, exclusion, and a poverty all-the-more stark when surrounded by such wealth.

The transition of the ex-communist countries to new political, social, and economic structures is being fulfilled in the midst of grave tensions, at a high price. The exacerbating nationalism, the ethnic cleansing and war have overshadowed the most recent European history. The flow of migration coming from the countries of Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia, is met by waves of intolerance of the "others", the "extra-communitaires" of different origin, skin color, or religious beliefs. Ten years ago some walls fell, but new dividing walls have been raised within the hearts of the men and women of Europe.

From the point of view of **values**, we face a motley panorama. I defer to the experience of each one of you with the youngsters of your schools and their families. Alongside admirable sentiments of generosity, solidarity and impulses towards spirituality, there are mixtures of the most crass egotism and materialism. Consumerism, hedonism and the enjoyment of the present moment are the general norm. An authentic appreciation of human rights or ecology coexists with an even greater disinterest in political, social or civil involvement. Social mobility opens up new cultural horizons and a good number of young people have answered the call to voluntarism. Individual liberty is proclaimed as the absolute value, without moral restrictions of any kind. The media are giving birth to a true cultural mutation. Like a rising sea, a homogenous way of thinking and behaving is invading all classes of society.

In the **religious sphere**, disbelief, pragmatism and practical atheism are the general rule in a secularized world in which the sacred has been emptied of meaning and one lives and acts "as if God did not exist". This emptiness is accompanied in many by a real thirst for a sense of direction. New experiences and religious groups, from the nebulosity of the "New Age" to the sects, have a strong attraction for young people. The person of Jesus Christ has become irrelevant to most, and the institution of the Church and its authorities are looked upon with indifference, when not with hostility. Pluralism in Europe, as much in the sphere of faith as in culture, is a fact. The de-christianization and paganism of the Continent have reached such a point that one can now speak of the "apostasy of Europe".

2. The response of the Society

In this context and in the face of this concrete reality it is up to you to carry forward your mission. As in the contemplation of the Incarnation, the words of the Father resound in our ears: "let us redeem the human race". We are impelled by the **Ignatian desire to bring Christ** to a civilization practically atheist, to the men and women of our time in their concrete cultural and social context. Many people continue to trust us and prefer our education, not only for its quality but also because they find in it profound meaning and a consistent set of values.

The challenge is great. A good number of the Provinces of the Society represented here are marked by the aging of their members, and the lack of vocations, while others are stumbling through endless difficulties in the effort to begin again after fifty years of desolation. To both is directed the heartwarming reproach of the Lord: "how dull and slow you are to believe!".

In the light of the risen Lord, it is essential to discern "what is taking place in Europe", in order to go forward on the mission, without allowing ourselves to give way to the discouragement of the disciples of Emmaus.

The **discernment of the signs** of the times asks for a new way of approaching the surrounding cultural, social, and religious problems, in order to find new answers to the new problems, and to place the new wine into new wineskins. In spite of the notable change begun in our schools over the last twenty-five years with the 32nd General Congregation, the process of reconversion has not ended.

During the recent Congregation of Procurators, using a term inspired by the Synod on Consecrated Life, I spoke of the need for a "**refoundation"** of the Society. That is to say, a "conversion", a profound change in the way of being and acting of the Society that springing from our fundamental inspiration, our apostolate can be fulfilled in conformity with the new demands, conjugating fidelity to our roots with creativity and adaptation to the new times. The sector of the schools also requires its own "refoundation". I will highlight three aspects that I believe should be taken into special account in this "refoundation".

a) Identity

In the line of the specific mission of the Society and of the three dimensions emphasized by the 34th General Congregation -- faith-justice, culture and dialogue -- the identity of our schools needs to be actualized and strengthened day by day.

The **proclamation of the Gospel,** in season and out of season and from the rooftops, is an indispensable element of our mission. The Christian faith is a central theme in our schools. In the European context of prevailing pluralism and practical atheism, in which believers tend to lean as if they were the last Christians, it is necessary that the testimony of Christ and of the Gospel acquire transparency and visibility, and that the eagerness of the Society to bring Christ to the world be revealed as a corporate body.

In spite of its institutional limitations, our schools can and should make transparent the Christian motivation that justifies their very existence. Rejecting the institutions and opting for a dis-institutionalized work, hidden in the dough, can be a subtle form of dis-incarnation and a flight from reality, as in the case of the two disciples who were escaping from the community of Jerusalem. We cannot content ourselves with being salt that has its effect while lying hidden. Our spirituality asks us to be light which shines in the darkness. It is up to you to see the concrete way of assuring that persons and institutions give a visible witness to the Christian faith, proclaiming the risen Lord in the light of the world.

Neither can be overlooked the **justice required by faith**. It must be recognized that the theme of justice, unambiguously proclaimed in our planning and mission statements, has suffered erosion in the Society in recent years and runs the risk of being converted into mere proclamation. The sketch of the European situation described above, with the existing social

imbalances, offers a broad field for sensitizing young people to the situations of injustice, which surround them. This does not only mean offering outreach programs to the most needy, but awakening the conscience to a global reality which extends far beyond the frontiers of Europe and which requires a new way of acting in the area of justice, of ethics, and of solidarity.

In the same way, the **cultural universe** of European youth, so remote to the mentality of the adult generations, requires an effort of authentic inculturation on the part of educators in order to be able to enter the world of young people and to look for answers to their concerns. The society of information and of universal communication presents a challenge to our form of education. As with Paul at the Areopagus, we need to try to understand other cultures and to find the adequate language to communicate our message. In a world so often seduced by non-Gospel values, we must not fear to insert ourselves in the new culture in a critical and creative way, even at the risk of occasionally becoming inconvenient and "counter-cultural".

Finally, **dialogue** constitutes another of the inevitable components of our mission. Our schools should become laboratories in which students learn to live together and to grow in respect for others, especially for those of different faiths, cultures or social conditions, in a Europe more and more pluralistic. This does not mean falling into any type of eclecticism or syncretism, but rather accepting the diversified reality of Europe today, affirming at the same time one's own identity and convictions.

b) Leadership

The decrease in the number of Jesuits and the growing **participation of lay people** in the management of our educational centers is a fact. Jesuits do not perform today, nor will they be able in the future to perform the leading role they played years back. Concern is expressed to the central governance of the Society from all sides that the Jesuits not withdraw from their management positions, or that at least the Society not abandon its schools to their own fate. Does there not exist in this call a radical lack of confidence in the capacity of lay people to manage our works? The problem is not who directs the school - be they Jesuit or lay -, or in the number of Jesuits or lay people that manage the school; but rather, if the school reflects the Jesuit educational characteristics and inscribes the **Ignatian spiritual inspiration** and the pedagogical tradition of the Society.

The gist of the question is whether or not those who direct the school - the one who is the head and those who collaborate with him or her -- are imbued with the spirit that should characterize an educational institution of the Society, and if these dispositions are put into practice. The theme of the **competence for Ignatian leadership** is a pending matter. The role that corresponds to Jesuits and the lay people in the new governance structures that are being envisioned for the future, are still not well defined. The place that Ignatian spirituality and the *Exercises* of St. Ignatius should occupy in this process is of a determining importance.

I am very pleased that JECSE has chosen Ignatian leadership as the theme of this Congress. I invite all of you to share your experiences, to reflect upon them and arrive at joint operative proposals on this important theme of formation for Ignatian leadership. The identity and the very future of our schools in Europe will depend in large part on the measures that are adopted in this respect.

c) Teamwork

The answers expected from you on crucial themes such as the ones I have enumerated go beyond your capacity as countries or as Provinces. In a Europe on the road towards growing integration and in a world ever more globalized, to confine oneself within the narrow limits of one's own Provinces or countries is to condemn oneself to ruin. In my "De Statu Societatis" address to the Congregation of Procurators last September I affirmed that the hour had arrived in Europe to overcome boundaries and to **work together as European Jesuits**. Are we sufficiently exploiting the possibilities that are offered to us by the fact that the Society is an international apostolic body?

In this perspective JECSE could be something more than a simple coordinator and a platform of friendly encounter between directors, without further commitment. Respecting due autonomy, it would be good to think of ways to put into action **agile structures for mutual cooperation**, which would animate the network of schools and encourage joint activities and projects. I am thinking, for example, of the help that some Provinces and schools are already lending to schools in Eastern Europe, and all that still could be offered. I am not thinking now of grand European projects, but rather of very concrete projects involving interchange between schools, between Provinces, between nations, within and outside of Europe. The recovery of a sense of the Society as an apostolic body for the help of souls constitutes another of the consequences of the "refoundation" of the Society and of the schools.

3) Conclusion

The disguised traveler of Emmaus opened the eyes and warmed the hearts of the two disciples, who had lost hope and had not been able to make any sense out of what had happened in the city. Companions on the way, Jesuits and lay people committed to the schools of the Society in Europe, you follow in the footsteps of those who have walked with Jesus. It is up to you through your efforts in education to give meaning and to announce to men and women of this Continent "Jesus Christ, alive in his Church and the source of hope for Europe".

I wish you all a fruitful meeting and ask the Lord that He may assist you with His presence so that you may walk with new courage -- in the example of Ignatius of Loyola, pilgrim on the roads of Europe--, at the service of the mission of Christ.