Fifty years of the Secretariat for Social Justice and Integral Ecology (SJES)

To follow Jesus accompanying the People on the road toward a reconciled world

Dear participants in this World Congress of the Social Apostolate of the Society of Jesus. Thank you for being here; thank you for your commitment to the service of the faith that struggles for the justice of the gospel, in dialogue and collaboration with many persons of different religions and cultures who contribute to reconciliation and peace.

In November 2018 I invited you to meet here in Rome during these days, not just to share precious memories of our past commitments, but to make of the commemoration of the first fifty years of the Secretariat for Social Justice and Integral Ecology a propitious moment, an acceptable time, a *kairós*, to give thanks together for the many gifts received, to discern the steps to take now, and to elect the new or renewed calls of the Lord in the commitment to the promotion of justice and reconciliation, as we are reminded by the logo of this World Encounter.

For fifty years, we have been in a process tied to important social and ecclesial events, both outside and within the Society of Jesus, that were unleashed by the fresh winds of Vatican II. Now is not the time to offer a detailed list of the events that we have experienced over these years. However, I invite you to bring them to mind in your personal prayer and fraternal sharing during these days. Events like the Conferences of Latin American Bishops at Medellin and Puebla; the Letter from Rio de Janeiro that Father Arrupe wrote about the social commitment of the Society of Jesus; Decree 4 of General Congregation 32; the inspiring synthesis of all this experience that was made by General Congregation 36 when it called us to be "companions in a mission of reconciliation and justice"; or the strong wind coming from the preparation and recent celebration of the Synod on the Amazon which has put in motion a process of deepening the commitment to the life of persons, peoples, and the planet.

These events are associated many times with particular faces that have moved us prophetically. Again, bring those faces to mind during your prayer and sharing during these days, giving thanks to the Lord for figures like Dom Helder Câmara, Saint Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Rutilio Grande, Franz van Der Lugt, Christophe Munzihirwa, A.T. Thomas, Richard Fernando, Thomas Gafney, or Pedro Arrupe, inspiration and founder of SJES. Following inspiring figures I have convoked an "Ignatian Year" as an occasion to allow ourselves to be moved anew by Ignatius Loyola, wounded in Pamplona in 1521 and transformed by the action of God in Manresa into the pilgrim who blazed the trail that we too have chosen to follow in the service of Jesus Christ and his Church.

Let us take advantage, then, of this special moment in which God is again speaking to us and inviting us to remember, to thank, to discern, and to take audacious, bold, and risky decisions to accompany Jesus and his people at the frontiers, together with the most excluded, poor, and vulnerable.

Taking advantage of this moment to **remember** means to renew our commitment with the best of the past, bringing forward and strengthening our desire to respond to the calls received during years of searching, discernment, and decision-making. We are here to "hacer memoria," to renew and reinforce the faith the demands justice, the dialogue with cultures, the commitment with integral ecology, and to promote our reconciliation with God and with all God's creation. Remembering, we also recognize our errors and accept our shortfalls, seeking to take advantage of what we have learned from our lived experiences. Recognizing our sin and our omissions, we become present to our fragility in need of so much help. At the same time, we experience the mercy that allows us to become "ministers of reconciliation," contributing to the construction of the future guided by the Spirit.

We are in a privileged moment to **give thanks** to God for his presence, inspiration, and accompaniment, evident above all in the women and men who have given their lives in service of the most poor and excluded persons. We thank God for the gift that God has given to the Church in the commitment of so many martyrs who during these 50 years have handed over their lives for faith and justice. Now is also a moment to thank the Lord for calling us sinners to be servants of the mission of Christ sent to the frontiers.

This is the privileged moment to **discern** the new roads to which the Lord in calling us. We know well that the discernment requires boldness; the audacity to seek what seems impossible, because we count on God's grace, which is enough for us. Let us take advantage of these days above all to look toward the future inspired by what we have learned in the past and urged forward by the challenges of the present in this Church that seeks renewal under the inspiration and guidance of Pope Francis.

Let us take advantage of this **kairós to remember, thank, and discern** the call of God in the light of the Universal Apostolic Preferences, 2019-2029, of the Society of Jesus, the Amazon Synod, the invitations given us in the magisterium of Pope Francis and the most committed social movements and institutions.

Permit me a personal note. This anniversary of the Secretariat for Social Justice and Integral Ecology is an occasion to thank the Lord for his presence in my own life through the commitment to the struggle for justice derived from the impulse of the faith. I have just completed 53 years since entering the novitiate of the Society of Jesus at Los Teques, Venezuela. My vocation, formation, and apostolic mission in the Society of Jesus have been marked and nourished by what we call "the social apostolate." This World Congress is for me an opportunity to express gratitude for that

experience while at the same time being confirmed in the centrality of this dimension of the mission of the Society of Jesus today and in the long run. The Society of Jesus – we read in the Formula of the Institute of 1550 – was "founded chiefly for this purpose: to strive especially for the defense and propagation of the faith and for the progress of souls in Christian life and doctrine" [1]. To fulfill this objective today as followers and companions of Jesus of Nazareth is only possible becoming incarnate, like Him, in humanity crucified by the sin of the world and, together, contributing to overcoming the causes of the oppression of human beings and mistreatment of the environment.

I reiterate, then, my invitation to each of you, and to this important group of persons gathered here, to call to mind and express gratitude from the depth of the heart:

- First, to God, and then to God's Church, because with Vatican II He invited us to renewal by returning to the original sources, a process that led to the foundation of the Secretariat whose 50 years now bring us together;
- To the innumerable Jesuits and to men and women companions in the social apostolate. As pioneers they had to live through difficult situations surrounded by criticism, misunderstanding, caricatures. Because in the midst of so much adversity they remained faithful to the cause of the most poor and vulnerable;
- To Father Arrupe, to whose intercession we entrust this World Congress. From an authentic "*sentir con la Iglesia*" he trusted his intuitions and, in the midst of suffering and incomprehension, with audacity and generosity, helped to renew the mission of the Society of Jesus, giving us a priceless and exhilarating example of creative fidelity;
- To each of the previous secretaries of the SJES – Francisco "Paco" Ivern, Michael Campbell-Johnston, Henry Volken, Michael Czerny, Fernando Franco and Patxi Alvarez – for their commitment and leadership, now in the hands of Xavier Jeyaraj. All of them have counted on generous persons for support in an immense work with scarce resources, deserving our sincere recognition and thanks;
- To all the Conferences of Major Superiors, provincial delegates, directors of works and social centers, who have taken up in different parts of the world leadership in promoting the justice that is rooted in our faith;
- To all the works, in all areas of the apostolic labor of the Society of Jesus, that have incorporated social concern and integral ecology as a fundamental dimension of the mission that they carry out;
- To so many persons, lay and religious, with whom we have experienced being part of a single apostolic body whose shoulders have borne this daily commitment for 50 years. Without all of them, without each of you, the ground would not have been broken, nor the seed planted, nor the fruit harvested. It is clear that the present and future leadership of this mission falls on you and on those who, following the road we have begun, will be innovative successors in a mission that becomes each day more complex and more urgent.

[1] Formula Istituti, 1550.

I want to invite you to make this World Congress a **moment of spiritual renewal**, seeking, as the universal apostolic preferences indicate and Pope Francis insists, to deepen our relationship with God in order to show that path of new life. Drinking from the font of the gospel, and guided by the lights offered by the apostolic preferences for the next decade, let us open our minds and hearts to the signs of the times through which the Lord shows us how He is acting in our history and moves us to collaborate with Him, with one another, and with others.

One of the most important lessons of the discernment in common of the universal apostolic preference was to understand that they do not tell us what we should do, but how we should live in what we do. The apostolic preferences are vital orientations that lead us to grasp life and mission as integrally united; they lead us to seek convergences and integration among the many ways in which we carry forward our collaboration in the mission of the Lord, avoiding the temptation to "sectorialize" dimensions that are necessarily present in what we are and do.

Discernment that is inspired by grateful memory and that looks to the long run can be enriched by what Ignatian spirituality, with exquisite originality, calls the *examen.* I heartily recommend retreading the Letter on the Social Apostolate of Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach of 24 January 2000. I remember the following paragraph:

> "At the same time and paradoxically, this awareness of the social dimension of our mission does not always find concrete expression in a vital social apostolate. On the contrary, the latter manifests some troubling weaknesses: There seem to be fewer Jesuits available and less prepared for the social apostolate, while those already in the field are sometimes discouraged and scattered, somehow lacking in collaboration and organisation. Factors external to the Society are also weakening the social apostolate: The times are marked by unforeseeable and very rapid socio-cultural changes, not easy to read and even harder to respond to effectively (e.g., globalisation, the excesses of the market economy, drug traffic and corruption, mass migration, ecological degradation, outbreaks of brutal violence). Formerly inspiring visions of society and broad strategies for structural change have ceded to scepticism or a preference, at best, for more modest projects and restricted approaches. Thus the social apostolate risks losing its vigour and momentum, its orientation and impact."

As input for these days I dare to offer to you ten points about which we can examine ourselves with transparency and courage:

1) The spiritual dimension of our commitment with social justice and integral ecology: How much does our personal social commitment and that of our works bring us closer to God and point out the pathway to God?

2) The role of personal and group discernment in our life-mission: How much are we discerning, personally and institutionally, the mission to which we are invited by the Spirit who acts in history?

3) Collaboration among Jesuits, laymen and laywomen, other persons and institutions: To what extent do we take collaboration with other parts of the body as something normal and necessary in our work? To what extent do we build fraternal and horizontal relationships among all?

4) The place of women in our social institutions and priorities: What role do women play in processes of discernment and decision-making for our life-mission? What place do they have among the priority challenges of a world that marginalizes women and a Church that is reluctant to recognize their coresponsibility in the leadership of the community of the followers of the Lord Jesus?

5) Networking: How much are we working in networks: among us, with other apostolic works of the Society, and with other institutions that from their own identity contribute to the growth of the Lord's reign?

6) Closeness with the poor as a constitutive dimension of the path of redemption opened by Jesus of Nazareth: How close are we with the poor and excluded? To what extent are we effectively disposed to move our lives and work in that direction? How does closeness with the poor condition our way of viewing the world and our sensitivity in facing the situations that we live?

7) Our intellectual work. The Society of Jesus has since its birth been associated with spiritual depth, closeness with the poor, and intellectual comprehension of human processes. The discernment that leads us to choose the actions to carry out needs intellectual depth. Do we accompany our social work with the reflection and research that are demanded by the complex global world that confronts us?

8) Strengthening the leadership of the poor and excluded: What place in our social plans is occupied by the most excluded groups (migrants, women, youth, the vulnerable of our societies)? Are these people only objects of our mission or, on the contrary, are we opening spaces where they are subjects who have leadership of the processes of liberation?

9) Local and global advocacy: Are we concerned about going beyond direct service to develop advocacy processes that can change structures of exclusion and produce the greater and more universal good?

10) The commitment to eradicate abuse within and outside the Church as a necessary dimension of the transformation of the unjust structures of society. How great is

our sensitivity to sexual abuse and abuse of conscience and power in our institutions, in the Church, and in the whole web of social institutions? Have we developed appropriate strategies to detect, respond, and avoid all forms of abuse? What is the place of the promotion of "a culture of safeguarding" in our struggle for social justice?

No doubt the exchange of these days will bring up other issues for the *examen* and especially new lights for the future of our social apostolate. The best way to commemorate this 50th anniversary of the SJES is to imitate Ignatius Loyola who took to the road, leaving the past behind, learning to be guided by the hand of the Lord and putting all his trust in Him.

The mission of the Secretariat of Social Justice and Integral Ecology is not to make social and ecological issues the particular mission of a specialized part or group of the Society, but rather to promote social and ecological commitment in the whole body. For that reason, there are people present here who are involved in different apostolic activities of the Society of Jesus. All of us are pledged to social and ecological commitment as a profoundly spiritual experience. Social and ecological action are lived in an experience of intimate union with the Trinity who contemplate the world and, out of love, send the Word incarnate in history to redeem it through the promotion of justice, the care and protection of the common home, exercising the ministry of the reconciliation of all things in Christ.

Let us ask, through the intercession of Pedro Arrupe and our martyrs, to reach the openness of heart and mind that are needed to take advantage of this *kairós*, and through the mediation of our Mother Mary may we become ready to be placed with the Son.

Muchas gracias.

Arturo Sosa, S.I.
4 de noviembre de 2019