

Last week the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Fr Adolfe Nicolas visited Australia to attend a meeting of the Jesuit Superiors of our Asia Pacific Assistancy. Many of us had an opportunity to meet him in Sydney at a gathering at Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview. The visit by Fr Nicolis was an occasion for us to reflect on our mission today, and to remember that we are part of a global community that is seeking deeper meaning. Fr Nicolas was born in Spain and has spent most of his life working in Asia. In 2008 he was elected the thirtieth Superior General of the Society of Jesus since Fr Ignatius in 1540. This was his first visit to Australia since being elected Superior General. Many have commented on the similarities between Fr Nicolas and form Superior General Fr Pedro Arrupe.

Blessed with a warm and engaging personality, Fr Nicolas is humble and down to earth possessing a good sense of humour. His presence exudes a calmness and at the same time, a contentment in life which is clear to all he meets. When he speaks it is like he is having a conversation with you rather than giving an address. In response to a question about his childhood he described himself as a slow and shy boy- a wonderful self-perception given the position he now holds. It gives meaning to the phrase "nothing is impossible with God".

Fr Nicolas in his address reminded us of our responsibility to the young people of today. "God has much to do with youth and their joy". He noted that in schools, there can be a danger of becoming so concerned with administration that opportunities for relationships are neglected. He continually used the word "presence" in his address highlighting the importance of good relationships. He invited us to consider this call to be "present" with young people, to accompany them on their journey. He encouraged a type of companionship that is emotionally attuned which tries to guide rather than decide for others. Only if we have their confidence may we be able to discern with them how they make their choices. "Young people need some guidance to discern their direction in life and our spiritual accompaniment is so important. Our first concern will be to help them become free; from the decisions made about and for them by others." He reminded us that young people learn best when they discover things for themselves. "We need to learn to accept that they want to swim and be willing to let them swim in troubled waters, rather than just instruct them on dry land. When we are willing to swim with them, then they will learn from us."

Young people may have a hard time making well-founded decisions. "They know that they will not remain young forever. That is why they seem to be in a hurry to make the most of their youth. We have to understand this and work to accompany them in this adventure." Fr Nicolas encouraged us to reflect together on the "how" question rather than simply respond to the "what". This is an interesting reflection on language - 'how' helps us to look deeper. Enquiry is sometimes like a tree where we should search for the strength of the roots rather than be captivated by the superficial rustling of the leaves. His educational vision is broad. Education is not just about helping our students pack content into their baggage but also to understand the processes of learning and play. In our measures of "success", he encouraged us to find ways of evaluating service, the quest to love and serve, to participate and inquire deeply, rather than place too narrow a focus on ATAR scores or sporting premierships. In response to a question about how we find our equilibrium amidst our continual strivings for success, he spoke about failure. "Failure is something we don't talk about a lot but it's something we all experience at one time or other in our lives. We need to spend time teaching the young that it is OK to fail - that failure is a chance to begin again". He asked "what .is the quality of our presence among the young who are poor, excluded, or vulnerable, the young who are most in need?" Given the universality of the Jesuits, he is confronted with the problems of the world more than most. Where many of us would look at crisis as a negative, he sees it as a positive – an opportunity to face the reality with creativity, to understand experience and go to the deeper parts of life. "That is how transformation occurs."

Fr Nicolas' view of faith is inclusive and welcoming. At one point he suggested that it is better to be an agnostic who is still searching than a Christian who has stopped searching. He asked us to consider how we can be "real bridges between the young and the Church". He spoke of his relationship with Pope Benedict XVI and of how the Pope appreciates the spiritual depth and intellectual rigour of the Jesuits, especially their mission "to go to the frontiers." Fr Nicolas challenged us to find these frontiers. During question time Fr General was asked how you can dedicate yourself to a life of service, amidst your

professional career? In Fr Nicolas' response he commented that rather than commit yourself to a service that you undertake only once a week or once a month, try to find a way in your workplace or your profession where you can make an ongoing commitment to helping the disadvantaged, the marginalised

– those most in need. Of course there can be a tension between a genuine presence with people and the challenge to go to the frontiers. Jesuits and their companions, who include so many of you, often have to live that tension. However Fr General also reminded us not to get so busy that we lose our sense of purpose or presence. It is a good thought as we begin a new year.