An Hour with Father Arrupe, Pedro Arrupe (1975)

The following is a partial transcript – as translated by Jerome Aixala and published by Jesuit Sources – of an interview Pedro Arrupe had an Italian television program Encounter in September 1975. Among the interviewer’s admittedly “provocative questions” are those on Arrupe’s own personal history (he provides a vivid account of the bombings and aftermath at Hiroshima), on what Arrupe describes as the “fable” surrounding the supposed influence of Jesuits, and on the crisis facing the order.

TV: We are in Rome, a few hundred meters from the Pope’s apartments. We have come to meet one of the leading figures of the Catholic world, the Superior General of the Society of Jesus.

The last General Assembly of Jesuits, gathered together in this very building last winter went through moments of great tension. The international press spoke of differences of opinion between the Jesuit General and prominent figures in the hierarchy. It was said in fact that Father Arrupe would resign from his office to which he had been elected for life ten years earlier. In the face of certain radical changes which the assembly might decide to make in the process of aggiornamento, there was a lurking fear that the Society might betray its loyalty to its traditions. For many of the participants it was a moment of perplexity and crisis of conscience. But after a period of silent prayer and reflection, the group in complete unanimity found a solution: full trust in Father Arrupe and unconditional submission to the will of the Pope.

In the tempestuous history of the Society of Jesus, therefore, it fell to the lot of Father Arrupe, a 66-year old Spanish Basque, to live one of the most and crucial periods of religious life – the postconciliar years with all the burden of stress and strain triggered by the exigencies of change and adaptation in the Church and the Society.

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TV: Who, then, is this man who rises every morning at dawn, whom we have seen at prayer squatting in the oriental fashion on a mat who lives with 120 Jesuits a few steps from the Vatican, and who usually celebrates Mass alone, like the Pope, in his private chapel? We ask him to tell us.

Arrupe: I believe I am the last person to whom such a question should be addressed; for, as they say, no one is a good judge in his own case. All I can say of myself is that I am a poor man I think I have good will and try to work for the Church and the Society as well as I can. Therefore I try to do what I consider best, which after all is what God expects of us. Naturally, virtue usually lies in a middle
course and thus we who take the middle path are condemned to be the object of criticism both from the right and the left. And this is why I myself do not know who I am.

TV: Anyway, Father Arrupe, you have a history behind you …

Arrupe: Well, I suppose you are right, though this is already becoming ancient history as we are getting on in years, is it not? Here is then my story … I was born in Bilbao 66 years ago. I passed my childhood in that city, then I studied Medicine in Madrid and in the fourth year of my career I heard the voice of the Lord calling me to a medico-spiritual apostolate, one in which I would have to try to be a doctor of souls; and although it cost me a lot, as I had a predilection for Medicine, I left everything and entered the Society of Jesus.

Of that time I still have very good friends, such as my fellow student the Nobel prize winner Severo Ochoa. I still keep contact with these former companions. From the day I joined the Society I have felt very happy. After studying in Belgium and Germany I went to the United States, from where they sent me to Japan, something I had been asking for a long time. I remained there 27 years until the General Congregation elected me for the job of General.

TV: This man who had spent the greater part of his life in the Far East, dedicated to the formation of batch after batch of Japanese novices, away from the main stream of Western history, was overnight placed at the head of the religious Order most in the public eye of the Christian world. In the front rank, not only because of the dimensions of its organization, its leading role in the apostolate and culture, or its ability to exert influence on political power, but also because of the criticism, the accusations and the mistrust of which the Society of Jesus has ever been the object, on the part of the world of unbelief and from other quarters as well.

Father Arrupe, you know very well that the man in the street would say the Jesuits are very influential men, who have much money and power, and that it is hard to know what a Jesuit is thinking. Is all that true or not?

Arrupe: There is a good deal of fable in that. Much, very much of it, is exaggeration. Especially there are numerous legends about the Society; many things have been attributed to us. I recall that when I was Master of Novices in Japan, young men came to us who were thinking of joining the Society. There used to be a Dictionary of Philosophy edited by Iwanami, one of the great publishing houses, which gave in five lines a definition which was a classic: A Jesuit is the prototype of the hypocrite, a man who doesn’t bother about the choke of means provided he can attain his end, a man who will always stick to power. That was all, in five lines. I used to show this to the young men and ask them: What do you think of that? Do you want to be one of these people? The lads were puzzled and bewildered, to say the least.
I tell you this because many tales have been recounted around our poor figure. I believe in all sincerity, whatever they may say and whatever be the impression we give, that what we want is to serve, and for this purpose we try to make use of what our studies, our personal attainments and our community resources place at our disposal, but without wishing to act through the instrumentality of power, which is quite a different thing. It is not a question, let us say, of political power or of an individual wishing to have plenty of money in order to have great influence; this is altogether against our spirituality, according to which, in what refers to riches and possessions, we take a vow of poverty.

TV: As a missionary, Father Arrupe devoted half of his life to the Japanese. From Japan he carried with himself back to Europe, a substantial baggage of eastern culture, philosophy and spirituality. But above all, he brought alive deep down in his heart a tragic experience. His residence was situated on the outskirts of Hiroshima. It was now exactly 30 years ago. An experience of this type and magnitude could not but leave a deep scar in his life. He tells us the story not as of a past event, but as of something he still sees with his very eyes. He, who had given up the prospects of a successful medical profession in order to be a Jesuit, suddenly found himself turned into a surgeon in an improvised tragic hospital....

Arrupe: It was at 8.10 on the morning of 6 August, the feast of Our Lord’s Transfiguration. There was an explosion. I was in the house, in the part away from where the explosion came. We saw a blinding light, and after 30 seconds we heard an explosion that shattered everything. The glass panes, windows and doors of the house were all destroyed. We did not know what had occurred and supposed it was a very powerful bomb, but of the conventional explosive type, some of which had fallen in our garden. But soon we noticed that there was nobody in the street, and as our house is on top of a hill, we saw that the entire city was a sea of fire and everything burning.

Very soon we found ourselves assisting hundreds and even thousands of wounded and ailing victims. At first the most evident symptoms were the traumatic wounds suffered as a result of the destruction of the houses and the fall of entire buildings — these were mostly fractures. But after some time the most puzzling and mysterious thing was the appearance on the skin of a dark pigmentation, like of sunburn, which after some days increased, suppurated and penetrated to the very bones, though there had been no direct contact with the flame. We did not know what it might be, nor did anybody else. It was this fact that threw us off. And for some days no light could be thrown on the subject, as then there were no transistors, and the radio set was silent as there was no electric current. We were thus completely cut off from the outside world. And they told us that it had been an atomic bomb … the new name conveyed very little to us as we did not know what an atomic bomb might be.

We therefore organized in the house an improvised hospital. We treated thousands of victims with means and methods totally primitive, as naturally we had nothing else at hand and in those days sulphamides were unknown. The greatest tragedy was that apart from the many dead, with entire families gone, a city of 400,000 inhabitants had been reduced with the dead and injured to 200,000. It was a human tragedy of immense proportions. I had to perform surgical operations without anesthesia,
cutting human flesh with plain household scissors. Those were unforgettable experiences, and I can say that in the first days of that holocaust I never heard a single complaint, a single groan. People bit their lips, clenched their fists and asked for help. Such episodes demonstrated once more the capacity of endurance of a well-behaved and patient people like the Japanese.

TV: Father Arrupe admires the people of Japan for their power of resistance and their human qualities. Perhaps because he himself is the son of a land, the Basque country, where live men famous for their straightforward honesty, hard to tame, and loyal to their origins. When he was elected General of the Society he had a reputation of being a progressive, and the talk in Spain was that he was no longer a Spaniard as he had left the country more than 30 years back; and besides, as if this were not enough, he was a Basque. What will this man feel today, after having been uprooted from his country so long and with such a burden of responsibility on his shoulders?

Arrupe: Well, frankly I will tell you that I feel myself neither a Spaniard nor a Japanese. I feel myself rather universal. Our task in reality consists in working for all, and thus I try to have a heart as wide open as possible, with world-wide interests, to embrace all.....

TV: Father Arrupe, when you joined the Society fifty years ago, this had a particular face or physiognomy. During this period many things have undergone change both in the Society and in the Church. There has been a Council. Do you feel yourself to be a Jesuit just as you did when you took your first vows?

Arrupe: The Society is exactly the same as it was then and in spite of this it has undergone external changes. But the essential elements have not changed. The Society is exactly the same. Precisely, the 32nd General Congregation recently concluded studied this important theme of the adaptation of the Society’s identity to the world of today. And we find that, preserving the essential characteristics and without changing an iota in them we have actually introduced a number of changes in externals. To one who regards exterior appearances only, the Society may seem an altogether different one; but the Society is the same. The fact is that the world has changed; hence, from this point of view, we must change at least at the rhythm of the changing world, if we wish to be of service to others as we should.

TV: If we are to trust statisticians, the Society of Jesus passes through a crisis. Every year the number of members diminishes. In your opinion, is this a passing or a definitive crisis?

Arrupe: It is a crisis. I am not very happy with the word “crisis,” as in reality we are living a moment of adaptation to new circumstances. As it happens in all such historic moments, it is a question of a confrontation with the present situation which produces a certain number of casualties. Then those who fall on the way separate themselves of the Society; though I would not like to use the word “fall”
in a pejorative sense, for there are many who leave us with a good conscience, and we must respect their way of thinking. I don’t know how long this situation will last, but it may continue for some time and our numbers decrease. Today the life of a priest, and concretely that of a Jesuit, is more difficult than before. We are much more exposed to the world and its struggles, we have to work in difficult surroundings. We are less protected. I would therefore say that to be a Jesuit is now more difficult than thirty years ago.…..

TV: The Jesuits have 37 canonized Saints and 134 Blessed. In this building resides the central government of the Society. The Jesuits are a force in the whole world. Their presence is well known in the cultural, scientific and missionary world, and above all in the field of education and social communications. At present they have 4,000 schools and colleges with a total of 400,000 students. Their religious universities are famous. In Rome 3,000 seminarists from 100 different countries are studying with the Jesuits. Through these Roman universities have passed two-thirds of the bishops of Vatican II, and except for Pope John XXIII, all recent Popes. Today half of the Jesuits work in the Third World. In the United States there are 6,500 Jesuits; in Asia, 6,000; in Latin America, 4,000; and almost another 4,000 in Spain; in Italy 1,000.

From your schools and colleges, Father Arrupe, have always come out great personalities; enough to mention De Gaulle, Voltaire, Fidel Castro. Some of them have been not only militant atheists, but enemies of the Society. Today even non-believers send their sons to Jesuit schools and colleges. How do you explain this? Is it that the training imparted there is such that permits the students to continue being atheists, or that there is something missing in your type of education?

Arrupe: Yes, it is true. We do whatever we can. The goal of our colleges in Christian countries is to form the Christian man, the normal citizen of human society, and not a few may some time or other feel the call to religious life or the priesthood. This then remains our ideal. But due, first to human weakness and secondly to our mistakes and faults, we are unable to avoid that from our institutions come out some atheists, anti-clericals or men of depraved morals. We try to avoid this, but the fact is that among so many hundreds of thousands or millions of students we have had there are of all sorts. This is to be expected. But it is our duty to see how, always safeguarding the rights of the human person and trying to develop their personality, the all-round formation of a Christian can be achieved. If we fail in this, whose is the responsibility? Only God knows. But we must confess that much of the responsibility is ours.

TV: Father Arrupe, a sector of the public opinion thinks that the Jesuits have always busied themselves more with the education of the sons of well-to-do families than with those of poor homes. Is this true?
Arrupe: I don’t think this statement is correct, if we consider the educational work of the Society as a whole. We have had very many schools in the Third World, thus contributing a good deal to the education of poor and very poor people. In the European scene during these past years we may have given this impression. A reason for this is partly not just the desire of educating students from the better families, but chiefly at times from adhering to the strategic criterion of educating youths who could have a greater influence in society. A second reason is that, since we have no other resources to establish our institutions on a sound economic basis, with what these better-off students contribute for their education we are able to help the poor who cannot afford to pay. On the other hand, in recent years we have seen a notable evolution in many of our educational centers; first, because we are convinced of the importance and urgency of the education of the poorer classes, and also because we have been able to secure more scholarships and other aids which before we did not have.

TV: One often hears that Jesuits are the champions of intellectualism and reason. However, some say that more than reason it is cunning. How do Jesuits conciliate evangelical simplicity and sincerity with this shrewdness and craftiness of reason?

Arrupe: I don’t think one can here speak of cunning. At most, it is a question of prudence, and often of apostolic prudence, a quality which is often interpreted as an action of political expediency. But, in fact, the intention is to proceed with prudence and human comprehension. Therefore I wouldn’t call that cunning, chiefly conscious cunning. On the contrary, it is a question of something much more human and evangelical — of charity, prudence, the desire to understand the neighbor’s needs. This last quality, if considered from the human and political angle, is likely to be interpreted as political shrewdness, which I don’t think is the case here….

TV: There is the problem of reconciling fidelity to one’s own conscience with obedience to Superiors. During the Council many of its members stated that the present crisis was not so much one of obedience as one of authority. We are therefore searching for a new concept of obedience. How do Jesuits live this problem?

Arrupe: I think that in this matter we try to maintain the position held in the times of Saint Ignatius. The terminology may change. There will be a development, let us say, in the meaning of personality values, community values … and all that modifies the accidental aspects or the execution of obedience, and even the exercise of authority; but fundamentally things continue exactly as they were in the days of our Founder.
TV: Father Arrupe, when a Jesuit has to face a personal conflict between obedience to his superiors and his conscience, what does he choose?

Arrupe: Obviously, if his conscience is well formed, he must follow it. And about this point some directives were given in the decrees of the last General Congregation. But such cases will be extremely rare, or perhaps none. So much so, that if one finds himself frequently in such a conflict, he is advised to leave the Society, as it is clear that his way of thinking is different and consequently his place is not in the Society.

TV: It would appear that the Holy Father has manifested his displeasure at the fact that some members of the Society of Jesus have criticized Church structures and even his own person. How do you explain this, Father Arrupe, if obedience to the Pope is the core of Jesuit spirituality?

Arrupe: It is quite true that this caused great grief to the Holy Father (and I do know that he has felt it very much). This has been also a cause of great pain to us, and personally to me, as this touches a vital point of the life of the Society. How is this possible? Well, it is possible because of human weakness. It happens not rarely, even with good will, that carried away by an hypercritical mentality, one crosses the line, and this of course cannot be approved at all. This explains why many of these men are Jesuits no longer. These things may happen due to a lack of moderation in a criticism which allegedly is constructive and may be useful, forgetting that constant criticism has a “second effect” as moralists say, a secondary result which is the erosion of authority. This is general doctrine. As regards the Holy Father, naturally it is perfectly understandable that he, the Vicar of Christ to whom we are particularly united by vow, feels all the more such an offence coming from a Jesuit, which is for us also a source of great pain.

TV: Father Rahner, who, I believe, is one of the leading modern theologians, not only of the Society but of the Catholic Church, has written: “Before Vatican II, the Society was considered to be the bulwark of orthodoxy and the vanguard of the Church and Papacy. But things have changed. In general Jesuits are thought to be of the left and progressive.” Do you agree with Father Rahner?

Arrupe: I don’t know in what sense, or in what context, might Father Rahner have said this. But beginning with Father Rahner himself and continuing with the other Jesuit theologians, I believe that what is intended is to carry on our traditions of loyalty and orthodoxy.
TV: But do you think that there is contradiction between being faithful to orthodoxy and the Pope, and being of the left and progressive, as Rahner says?

Arrupe: No. There is no contradiction, in the sense certainly intended by Rahner. There is no question of right or left, or of being progressive in the common sense of the word, but of persons who study problems in depth, and who therefore have to face reality. They are progressive in the sense that they wish that the world should advance, not in the sense that they put on a false mentality and an attitude which is not orthodox. I would not admit this posture. If something has occurred of this type, it was an error….

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TV: We have spoken with Father Arrupe, the 28th successor of Saint Ignatius. A Basque by birth, a Japanese by adoption, and Jesuit by vocation. His greatest preoccupation has been to defend the fidelity of the Society to its Founder. To our provocative questions he has always answered with steely calm and composure. All the time he has made us understand that his personal history is of no importance; that his ideas do not count. In this loyalty to the Jesuit spirit, he lives only for the Society; that this must change indeed, but without abandoning the guidelines traced out by the Founder; that it may discuss every problem, knowing however that the last word remains always with the Pope. That is why in reality it was difficult to discover who Pedro Arrupe is inside. In him there has always lurked the preoccupation of not divesting himself of the official mantle of General of the Jesuits, in a moment when Paul VI had reminded the Society that it was living its decisive hour.