

Jesuits continue to discuss identity, future of their ministry

VATICAN CITY – Members of the Jesuit General Congregation are continuing to discuss what it means to be a Jesuit today with concrete directions for their ministries and for living their vow of obedience.

At the end of the congregation's third week of work on possible decrees to guide the Society of Jesus, Italian Father Carlo Casalone said identity and mission, the structure of the society, obedience and collaboration with others continue to be the topics of focus.

Father Casalone, a member of the congregation, met with reporters Feb. 8 at the Jesuit headquarters.

The themes were proposed to the congregation by provincial gatherings of Jesuits more than a year ago, but also reflect the delegates' concerns after studying and discussing a report on the status of the Society of Jesus worldwide.

On the question of identity, Father Casalone said, "obviously, we are not starting from zero," but from the writings of Jesuit founder St. Ignatius of Loyola, the history of the society and the needs and pressures of the modern world.

"What does it mean today to be religious, to be Jesuits in today's world?" and "What kinds of activities does today's world ask (us) to carry out?" are two key questions, he said.

Father Casalone said an eventual document on Jesuit identity is likely to contain a strong section on Jesuits and ecology, a topic many provinces had asked the congregation to discuss.

"From what I have seen, there was a bit of surprise over the number of requests and reflections we received on the theme of ecology. In terms of apostolic activity, lifestyles and sensitivities, this is a theme whose importance cannot be ignored," he said.

The concern is not one of keeping up with “a fashion,” but responding to ecological concerns for the sake of justice, he said. “Care for the environment is strictly connected to one of the important aspects of proclaiming the Gospel for Jesuits today, which is the promotion of justice.”

The Italian Jesuit said that obedience and particularly the Jesuits’ special vow to obey the pope when he asks an individual or the Jesuits as a whole to fulfill a specific mission has led people to see the Society of Jesus as “the heavy artillery of the papacy.”

“But obedience in the society has no military shading,” he said. The first Jesuits wanted to be at the service of the universal church and to go where the need was greatest, and it was the pope who knew where those needs were.

At the same time, the first Jesuits also saw a need for a vow of obedience to their superiors in order to guarantee the unity of the society when the members were dispersed throughout the world, he said.

The history of Jesuit obedience underlines “the fundamental missionary characteristic of the Society of Jesus and the meaning of obedience in the name of the apostolate and obedience for the sake of unity,” he said.

“Obedience is a delicate subject because today obedience is no longer seen as a virtue,” he said. People see it as setting aside one’s personal conscience and refusing to take responsibility for one’s own life.

But for the Jesuits, Father Casalone said, obedience is seen as flowing from its Latin root in the word “to listen,” which is what makes a person able to respond. A response of obedience requires an act of freedom and an ability to make a commitment, he said.