

International Networking In the Society of Jesus

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Networking is coming to be seen as a new apostolic way of proceeding enabling better collaboration on global and regional levels in the service to the universal mission.

Have you ever thought what would happen if all the works of the Society of Jesus could coordinate to create a world project in common? Are you aware of the possibilities that concerted action offers to organizations like ours, present in many countries? Do you imagine the advantages that derive from this in the service of the faith and the promotion of the justice of the Kingdom? These are only some of the questions that lie behind the proliferation of the international networks we have been witnessing in the past few years throughout the broad apostolic body of the Society of Jesus.

This type of networking is coming to be seen as a new apostolic way of proceeding that enables better collaboration on global and regional levels in the service to the universal mission. These are new initiatives that connect people and institutions in such a way that they enable the implementation of action as a global and interdisciplinary body, where collaboration raises apostolic structures to a level of organization which, going beyond its local provinces and environments, achieves a regional or global scope and impact.

No one can deny that we live in an ever more connected world in which the processes of globalization, together with the effect of the information and communication technologies have fired connectivity and networks of interdependence at all levels. “Our society is structuring its principle functions and processes around networks”, said the sociologist Castells. This new emphasis is affecting the development of forms of work in all types of organizations, including the Society of Jesus and the Church. “Interconnection is the new context in which to understand the world and discern our mission”, according to the Father General.

The potential for the mission which accompanies these new levels of collaboration is changing the way in which the Society of Jesus understands itself, its mission and above all above all its structures for this new context. Just like other international institutions, we Jesuits are also immersed in this process of interconnection, especially visible in the last few years, after General Congregation 35, when the rediscovery of our vocation to universality reactivated the dynamism of the creation and development of international networks in the different apostolic sectors.

The fact is that adaptation to a globalized context is already in our genes. Already in the first Society Ignatius promoted a universal vision clearly present in the contemplation of the Incarnation (EE 102) which translates into a hitherto unknown sense of being sent out on a global apostolic mission and of a dimension of availability and mobility for the greater glory of God. The fourth vow itself is a call to universality, to service to the bishop of the world’s Church, and the union of minds is a spiritual means to achieve unity in a mission that inevitably disperses the body apostolic throughout the world.

In the 1950s Fr Janssens pondered the possibilities of the Society “if only we were to unite our strengths and to work in a spirit of unity”. Since then, interprovincial cooperation, the international dimension of the mission and the need for cooperation on a global level have been gradually appearing in the successive General Congregations. In 1995 the development of global international and regional networks for the mission were definitively recommended (CG34, D21, n13), and our last Congregation was to be the one that points out that work on the international web is an “undeniable necessity” for the Society in the 21st century (CG35, D5, n17).

So once the doubts were dispelled, the curious thing was that the gradual awareness of the corporative meaning and universality of the mission, crystallized in the apostolic priorities formulated in 1970 (repeated in 2003 and updated in 2008), were not accompanied organically by the gradual updating of the corresponding structures, making the question of organizational development today one of the apostolic keys to the future.

This is why our flexible spirituality and our tradition of dialogue with the world urge us to review the existing structures with the aim of finding better answers to the global challenges and to the international problems. This, and nothing else, is the reason why the Jesuits are developing networks, since they are networks for the good of the mission.

Already in the 1970s they were beginning to create such networks formed among similar institutions within the Provinces and some Assistancies, giving rise to networks between colleges or universities of one country or region that have been functioning since then. It was only after the 1980s that large apostolic networks appeared like the *Jesuit Refugee Service*, the international federation *Faith and Joy*, (founded much earlier but which has only now begun to network), or the African network against AIDS (AJAN). We had to wait until the past 10 years to see the new wave of modern networks emerge, such as social centres in Latin America or Africa, the SAPI (*South Asian People’s Initiative*), and the promising *Jesuit Commons* or the *Global Ignatian Advocacy Networks*.

All these projects were born with the intention of creating new collaborative work spaces in the service of the mission. Some operated for a few years and lost their meaning or did not even get off the ground. Others contribute significantly to our apostolic task, to the point that it would be difficult to speak of our universal mission today without mentioning some of them. Some networks simply provide support for individual works, centralizing and integrating services or common bonds.

Others, however, may be considered organizational networks in which the members coordinate their efforts and act jointly as a single body. This is the new agency level sought for Jesuit networking, where institutions and individuals see themselves as part of a wider mission that transcends the boundaries of their institution or region and are therefore prepared to contribute in order to advance in this more broadly shared mission.

The first Jesuit institution that really implemented the idea of international networking was the *Jesuit Refugee Service*, following Arrupe’s prophetic intuition of responding to a demand for international aid with the Society of Jesus’ first global

structure. Almost 30 years later the most innovative example of the creation of a network is the GIAN (*Global Ignatian Advocacy Network*) that may be consulted on www.ignatianadvocacy.org and which links Jesuit institutions throughout the world around five priorities of concerted action for global public needs.

Since 2008 networks are being organized about the right to education, governance and natural resources, peace and human rights, and migration and ecology. Another interesting project is *Jesuit Commons* www.jc-hem.org which attempts to bring higher education to the frontiers of our mission with the help of technology. These initiatives are increasingly international, inter-disciplinary and multi-sectorial.

Even so, we are far from being able to say that the Society has found an organizational strategy to implement the global mission. Not all networking is exactly our way of proceeding, since there is a risk of reductionism based on inequality, of homogenization, or of promoting superficial approaches to individuals, cultures or the mission. These difficulties, together with our strong tradition of local inculturation make our collaborative work complex. Our greatest challenge is cultural change that needs to involve people and institutions, not just at the institutional level but also at regional and global levels so that they begin to feel they are an integral part of wider networks for action and for the transformation of reality. We need to be able to generate a new “ecosystem” that encourages collaboration and association on a broader scale, such as the formation of Jesuits and collaborators with the necessary abilities to bring vision and leadership to a mission that is ever more universal and shared.

At the end of December 2012, to this end we inaugurated the “Jesuit Networking” initiative at the same time as we published the first document focused on the subject of international networking in the Society of Jesus. Since then we have been creating distribution and work networks to continue in this reflection, to accompany these initiatives under way and to encourage innovation in this direction that presents so many objectives in our present structure and ways of proceeding.

This short article aims solely to spread and promote among Jesuits and our collaborators the idea that international networking is part of being sent to frontiers to build bridges, to dialogue and collaborate with those with whom we share our mission. To clarify what these new structures and ways of proceeding in the universal mission should be is the task of the whole apostolic work. If this subject resonates with your preoccupations and you wish to contribute with your experience, wisdom and suggestions, do not hesitate to visit www.jesuitnetworking.org and add to one of our channels for those to whom the Society is listening for the new ideas that the Spirit is suggesting to each one of us as a member of a global apostolic body.

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