

Apostolic Priorities or Preferences of the Society of Jesus: 1970 and 2003



“Our Four Apostolic Priorities,” Pedro Arrupe, 1970

“Based on an address he delivered at the conclusion of the Congregation of Procurators in Rome in October 1970, Pedro Arrupe issued the following letter to the provincials of the Society of Jesus. The letter articulates the Jesuits’ four “apostolic priorities,” as determined by their superior general. The four prioritized areas are, in order, theological reflection, the social apostolate, the apostolate of education, and the mass media apostolate. For each, Arrupe notes how he had established secretariates at the Jesuit Curia in Rome ‘developing and coordinating the activities necessary in each of those fields’.”¹

We have taken excerpts from the documents so that the Jesuits of the USA East Province and our lay colleagues might capture the differences between the Apostolic Priorities from 1970 and 2003 and those from 2019.

Theological Reflection

In my judgment the first of all ministries that must be mentioned now is theological reflection on the human problems of today.

But if this ministry is to be seriously understood and assumed, it is certainly necessary that the Society devote itself more earnestly day by day to biblical and strictly theological studies, and to a many-sided philosophical-theological investigation, through which divine solutions may be sought for the human problems and difficulties of today. It is necessary also that the Society devote itself to the fostering of those sciences which can open the way to theology, such as anthropology, psychology, sociology and others. These sciences of man and the human environment offer material for theological reflection, and along with theology can effect a certain substantiality in difficult questions, which greatly trouble all mankind today. And indeed haste is of the essence: we may not wait, for men are constraining us!

The Social Apostolate

I would say that the social apostolate comes second in the order of precedence among the ministries of the Society today.

In the social apostolate it is not a question of some local problem, but of the truly universal problem of man living below the level of human dignity (who, we commonly say, are living a “marginal” existence), a problem which affects all nations, rich and poor, since everywhere is heard that cry, “much weeping and wailing,” which rightly demands the advent of another better world, which can be truly said to be and actually be “a kingdom of justice, love and peace.”

¹ A digital document from the Portal to Jesuit Studies of the Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies at Boston College. [The Portal to Jesuit Studies \(bc.edu\)](https://portal.jesuitstudies.bc.edu/)

The Apostolate of Education

So we come to our third point, which is the ministry of education. Today we need especially men endowed with strong willpower and solid preparation, men who are capable of spending their lives for others, of helping others, of directing others; men rooted and founded in the charity of Christ.

There will be no one who does not understand the duty and the importance of that true education. And the Society has been persuaded for centuries that the ministry of forming the minds of youth and fashioning their Christian morals is a most excellent one. Besides a large part of Ours devote their efforts to this ministry, and I have no doubt that from this ministry even now abundant fruits are gathered in the Society of the present day. Still I would like to exhort all to subject to a close examination the new forms of education, which meet modern techniques, and for this reason tend to fashion men such as actual circumstances demand, capable of offering the service which the human family now urgently needs. Necessarily they differ in different regions. We must give them Christian principles that are not abstract and impersonal but concrete and of such a kind that they may attain to true religious experience. Their social consciousness must be enkindled and developed, and an authentic bond with other men in charity and justice must be inculcated.

The Mass Media Apostolate

In the sixteenth century our Society did not hesitate to adopt fully and use the culture and technical means of that age. Our Fathers and the schools of the Society fostered the humanities, oratorical skill, scenic representations, technical development of every kind in that time, rejecting nothing but rather using all means for the purpose of gaining the world for Christ. What Ignatius, Xavier and so many others of our Fathers did, we too ought to do.

To your consideration, my dear Fathers, and through you to the consideration of your Provinces, I would like to commit this solicitude of mine, whereby I would judge that we can accomplish much more for the service of souls if we learn how to use rightly these modern instruments of the apostolate, if we consider those Mass Media and all who toil in them as part of our present-day apostolate, if finally we offer our cooperation in preparing, aiding, directing those numberless men who devote their efforts to means of communication of this kind.

In conclusion

Fr. Arrupe observed "I judge them of such vital importance that I resolved, as you know well, to establish special Secretariates in our Curia for developing and coordinating the activities necessary in each of those fields of our apostolate: namely, a Secretariate of the social apostolate, a Secretariat of Education, a Secretariate of the Means of Social Communication, whose directors I ask to be willing to share with us this discussion of ours on the apostolate of the Society today."

Apostolic preferences of Father Kolvenbach, 2003

from General Congregation 35, Challenges to our Mission Today, Decree 3, no. 39.

"While respecting provincial or regional priorities, these 'preferences' indicate apostolic areas requiring 'special or privileged attention'. In our present context, we may confidently say that they offer areas for the realisation of the mission orientations provided by this decree. In consultation

with the Conferences of Major Superiors, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach decided on the following apostolic preferences:

Africa

“Aware of the cultural, social, and economic differences in Africa and Madagascar, but also conscious of the great opportunities, challenges, and variety of Jesuit ministries, we acknowledge the Society’s responsibility to present a more integral and human vision of this continent. In addition, all Jesuits are invited to greater solidarity with and effective support of the Society’s mission of inculturating faith and promoting more justice in this continent.

China

“China has become of central importance not only for East Asia but for the whole of humanity. We want to continue our respectful dialogue with its people, aware that China is an important key for a peaceful world and has great potential for enriching our faith tradition, as many of its people long for a spiritual encounter with God in Christ.

The intellectual apostolate

“The intellectual apostolate has been a defining characteristic of the Society of Jesus from its beginning. Given the complex yet interrelated challenges that Jesuits face in every apostolic sector, GC 35 calls for a strengthening and renewal of this apostolate as a privileged means for the Society to respond adequately to the important intellectual contribution to which the Church calls us. Advanced studies for Jesuits must be encouraged and supported throughout formation.

The Inter-provincial Institutions in Rome

“The Inter-provincial Institutions in Rome are a special mission of the Society received directly from the Holy Father. Ignatius wrote that we should “treat the missions from His Holiness as being most important”. This Congregation reaffirms the commitment of the Society to the Houses and Common Works of Rome as an apostolic preference of the universal Society. To serve that mission most fruitfully, there should be ongoing strategic planning and evaluation by the institutions and by the Society.

Migration and Refugees

“Ever since Fr Arrupe called the attention of the Society to the plight of refugees, the phenomenon of forced migration for different reasons has increased dramatically. These massive movements of people create great suffering among millions. Therefore, this Congregation reaffirms that attending to the needs of migrants, including refugees, internally displaced, and trafficked people, continue to be an apostolic preference of the Society. Moreover, we reaffirm that the Jesuit Refugee Service adhere to its present Charter and Guidelines.

“We invite Fr. General to continue to discern the preferences for the Society, to review the above preferences, to update their specific content, and to develop plans and programmes that can be monitored and evaluated.”

