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Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J.: The Man Who Was There

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*Mass for 100th Anniversary of the birth of Pedro Arrupe
November 18, 2007*

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It was the Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6, 1945, in Hiroshima, Japan. A short, wiry, 37-year-old Basque Jesuit priest served as Novice Master on the outskirts of the city. He tells what happened that morning:

“The roof tiles, bits of glass, and beams had scarcely ceased falling, and the deafening roar died away, when I rose from the ground and saw before me the wall clock still hanging in its place but motionless. Its pendulum seemed nailed down. It was ten minutes past eight.

“For me that silent and motionless clock has been a symbol. The explosion of the first atomic bomb has become a para-historical phenomenon. It is not a memory; it is a perpetual experience, outside history, which does not pass with the ticking of the clock. The pendulum stopped and Hiroshima has remained engraved on my mind. It has no relation with time. It belongs to motionless eternity.

“A shock in time of war, a terrible explosion of extraordinary power: these always leave an impression. For me, at that first moment, it was just one more explosion. What did we know of the atomic bomb? We were ignorant of what that solitary B-29 had carefully laid, at a height of 1700 feet, in the semi-transparent atmosphere, on that cloudy August morning.”

The Jesuit priest was Pedro Arrupe. We celebrate this week the 100th anniversary of his birth. Our Jesuit community at this university is named for him. Born in the same region of northern Spain and bearing a remarkable likeness to St. Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Jesuits in 1540, Fr. Pedro Arrupe went on to become, from 1965-1983, the twenty-eighth Superior General of the Society of Jesus, after Ignatius, who was the first Superior General of the Jesuits.

Those 18 years were the exciting, demanding, confusing first 18 years after the second Vatican Council. I view Pedro Arrupe as the “Ignatius of Loyola” of our era, the re-founder of the Jesuits for the globalized, nuclearized, contemporary age. I do not believe I would still be a Jesuit if it were not for Pedro Arrupe, nor do I believe that Seattle University would be the kind of Jesuit university it is with its mission of “empowering leaders for a just and humane world”, but for him. He is the greatest person I have known in my life and there is no individual I would wish more that our students could have met than Pedro Arrupe. I was privileged to pronounce my final vows a Jesuit into his hands 29 years ago this month. Pedro Arrupe lit up and led us along the way we are following today. And so it is right that he be remembered on this 100th anniversary of his birth in this Chapel of St. Ignatius, just as he is now buried in the same church as Ignatius is in Rome, a church called simply, but appropriately, for both of them, “The Jesus Church”.

If it were not for Hiroshima, there would not have been this visionary, contagiously alive, mystical pioneer named Pedro Arrupe. Hiroshima placed him at the cross-point of the modern world and placed him there with Christ on the cross. Here is how he describes it:

“The oven of Hiroshima has become a fixed satellite in the stratosphere, accompanying the earth in its course round the sun. It is like a latter-day Sword of Damocles hanging over mankind. Its sinister light, capable of destroying the retina of anyone staring it in the face, is an illuminating and discriminating power greater than

that of the X-ray. In the midst of so much destruction, confusion and corruption, the dark mystery of atomic radiation renders the screen of humanity clarescent, revealing both the fleshly futility of that which disappears like a shadow, and the solidity, firmer than bone, of spiritual values. A frontier situation that transposes values. Atomic energy in destroying matter discloses its instability, while making the spirit stand out with its features more strongly pronounced.

“In leading us to the central core of matter, atomic physics confronts us with the limits of the material universe. It impels us towards interiority, towards searching for the very root of being and of matter. It is a decisive step inward. When will the day come on which man reaches the final stratum of matter and is able to glimpse as if through a delicate tissue a new reality encased in all being—the divine reality? Above all when will he discover that in the core of his person there lives that divine reality? For this he will need a flash of light far more powerful than that which blinded us at Hiroshima: the light of faith which illumines without blinding because it is both powerful and gentle.

“On that day, when man discovers through the light of faith God in himself and in his fellow men, and sees that this God does indeed live and is a God of love, wars and violence will cease and hatred will be no more. God will be seen as the cause of true union and human happiness. On that day will be born a new humanity that of the children of God.”

Pedro Arrupe was a man who was chosen to be there when the world broke in two, when in the breaking a light revealed the truth about the world and about God active in the world. He saw the divine X-ray of humanity at this breaking apart of worlds as had Paul of Tarsus, Augustine of Hippo, Ignatius of Loyola, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and Mother Teresa. His vision is of time stopping as the screen of humanity is made clarescent in a divine X-ray showing the futility of all in humanity that we rely on but that falls away, and the solid, permanent, skeleton of humanity which is our divine core, God in our humanity, God in all humanity. He perceived by faith—a greater light than the atomic flash—God making us all children, God’s children, leading us with Christ at the head to the Kingdom.

Pedro Arrupe was the man who was there at the crossroads of our contemporary world, experiencing by faith with Christ on the cross the inhumanity of our age’s crucifying of the divine-human humanity of all humanity. Pedro was the man who was there and saw, so that he might lead the Jesuits into a new vision and, with them, lead our university to a new mission. Pedro was the man who was there and saw and thus inspired the two most important sentences of the Jesuits in the last 200 years:

“What is it to be a Jesuit? It is to know that one is a sinner, yet called to be a companion of

Jesus as Ignatius was... What is it to be a companion of Jesus today? It is to engage, under the standard of the Cross, in the crucial struggle of our time: the struggle for faith and that struggle for justice which it includes.”

Let me tell you two little stories about Pedro Arrupe, the first a personal one, and a second one that was told to me.

In the fall of 1973 I was in my third and last year of theology studies before ordination, living at The Jesus College in Rome. Pedro Arrupe was Superior General of the Jesuits. The head of communications for the Society of Jesus, Fr. Stefan Bamberger, wanted to experiment with a new way of communicating among Jesuits worldwide using the latest technology. The hot idea was to video a group of young American Jesuits in Rome in conversation with Pedro Arrupe, to send the video by airmail to a similar group of young Jesuits in Boston, and for them to record and send back their own video conversation. The latest technology of 1973!

Fr. Bamberger came to see me and asked if I would choose and gather the young Jesuits from our Jesus College in Rome and would facilitate the video conversation with Pedro in our college’s living room. We were free to choose the subject and so we chose “What do you think about how Jesuits in America are living their vow of poverty?” Fr. Bamberger coached us that we needed to ask the “hard questions,” not let Fr. Arrupe be too spiritual, not let him take us to the “poor Christ on the Cross.” Our gang practiced our tough questions, pumped one another up and was ready for a conversation with the most inspiring person of our lives. We were determined to put Pedro Arrupe on the spot.

Pedro came across Rome from the Jesuit headquarters to our Jesus College and sat among us around a low table with espresso coffee. The camera ran; we were on; I led him into the topic. Pedro said something like “Our failure to live poverty is a mortal wound in the side of the Society of Jesus.”

One of our guys, Ben, broke in “Yes Fr. General, but what do you think about American Jesuits having credit cards?!” Pedro said the local superior knew better and that maybe the poor Christ on the cross was calling those Jesuits to use credit cards totally for their apostolic work for others. We were losing! So, Chuck shot back, “But Fr. Arrupe, what do you think about American Jesuits having beer kegs in their recreation rooms; is that poverty?” Pedro replied that what was important was not beer kegs in community but that the community not be like the apostles who fled from the foot of the cross where the poor Christ hung saving them and the whole of humanity. And off he went on the poor Christ.

We had lost; Pedro had won. End of the tough questions about credit cards, beer kegs, cars, vacations, clothing, entertainment etc. He took us to the heart of his vision, a vision of faith from the revealing light of Hiroshima, the vision of the man who was there at Hiroshima and because of that always in faith on Golgotha with Christ on the cross.

The other story I was told was that all of the presidents of our 46 Jesuit high schools in the United

States were once gathered for a meeting in a Midwestern city. Pedro Arrupe was among them and spoke to them. It came to the question and answer period with this jovial, humorous, spirited man radiating hope and energy and generosity. One president casually asked Pedro: “Fr. General, what do you like most about being Superior General of the Jesuits?” The questioner expected an answer about travel, meeting great people, regular private conversations with the Pope, the opportunity to give speeches around the world or to shape the future of the Jesuits. Pedro asked the questioner: “Do you really want to know what I like best about being the General of the Jesuits?” The man said, “Yes.” Pedro replied softly and considerately, “What I like best about being Superior General is that it gives me a greater share in the cross of Christ.” Gulp! Gasp! Silence! Any more questions anyone?!

If among the apostles—the original Companions of Jesus—Ignatius of Loyola was like Peter, then

Pedro Arrupe was most like Paul, an apostle born out of time, ripped untimely from the womb, knocked also like Paul, literally to the ground by a flash of light and an explosion in the air, placed with the crucified Christ at the crossroad of the world, given an X-ray of how God is redeeming the world through Christ, through us in Christ, through our surrender in our humanity with Christ to God. Ultimately, Pedro Arrupe was who he is for us as Jesuits and for us as a Jesuit university because by faith he perceived in the flash of Hiroshima the X-ray that it is all about what God is doing in us, in all, in the world itself to make us his children in the Kingdom. That’s a vision and that’s a God to whom to surrender oneself and one’s whole life.

Pedro Arrupe—whose 100th anniversary of birth we celebrate—tried all his life to give himself over to the God he glimpsed in the clarescence of our humanity at Hiroshima. After being incapacitated for ten years by a stroke, lying helpless in an infirmary room of the very Jesuit headquarters in Rome where he had inspired and led the Jesuits into a new era, into our era and our mission, his final words before he died in 1991 were the following:

“More than ever I find myself in the hands of God. That is what I have wanted all my life from my youth. But now there is a difference; the initiative is entirely with God. It is indeed a profound spiritual experience to know and feel myself so totally in God’s hands.”

Pedro Arrupe the man who was there at Hiroshima, there at the head of the Jesuits in a new era, there in the end totally in the hands of God: the first a terrible place, the second a faithful place, the last the only safe place.