

The Spiritual Legacy of Peter-Hans Kolvenbach

IN ALL THINGS

[Daniel Cosacchi](#) | Nov 26 2016 - 8:45pm | 0 comments



Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., left, with Paolo Dezza, S.J., at GC 33 in 1983.

Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., the 29th Superior General of the Society of Jesus, who guided the order through one of the most tumultuous periods in its history, died on Nov. 26 in Beirut, Lebanon. He was 87. He was a Jesuit for 68 years and a priest for 55. He served as Superior General of the society for nearly a quarter-century; only four superiors general held the office for longer.



For more than a century the
Jesuits at America have invested in you.

**JESUIT LEGACY
SOCIETY**

Contact Dan Pawlus at 212-515-0118 or pawlus@americamagazine.org

Join today!

In his years as Superior General, and in the years following his 2008 resignation, Father Kolvenbach was known for his simplicity and moderation. As **America's** Vatican Correspondent Gerard O'Connell recounted of a recent visit with Father Kolvenbach, "he was a man of few words, but was ever gracious and kind." This characteristic reticence was, perhaps, the greatest contrast between Father Kolvenbach and his predecessor, Pedro Arrupe, S.J.. The two men did, however, share a love for their religious order and the church universal. Moreover, they had a common commitment to the Jesuit belief in "The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice."

Peter-Hans Kolvenbach was born on Nov. 30, 1928 in Druten, Holland, near Nijmegen. His father was Dutch by way of Germany and his mother was of Italian descent. As Father Kolvenbach recounted in an interview with Jean Lacouture for his book, *Jesuits: A Multibiography*, "I feel Italian one day and German the next." This comfort in different cultures would extend to ecclesial life, as Father Kolvenbach was raised in the Armenian rite and was at home in the Catholic liturgies of the east and west.

At age 19, Father Kolvenbach entered the Society of Jesus at Mariëndaal, in the Netherlands. [As he recounted](#) to America in 2007, "I discovered a small booklet, which caught my attention because it contained not only words but sets of horizontal lines. I opened it and read Ignatius' foundational principle. In all the turmoil and disappointment the war had produced, the vision of Ignatius came like a light."

Father Kolvenbach was first missioned by the society to minister in Lebanon as a 30 year-old scholastic. It is clear that the experience of living in a war-torn, but welcoming land had an effect:

When in October 1958 we arrived by boat in the harbor of Beirut, Lebanon, fighting was going on. The 18 different religious groups were trying to dominate one another, making political and military alliances with the help of neighbouring countries. Still, Lebanon

wanted to maintain a message that diverse people can live, work and practice their beliefs with one another. The welcome of the Lebanese was unforgettable. Even as the division in the country grew worse, never was the hope abandoned that Lebanon might become a sign of communal harmony for the whole Near East.

He was ordained to the priesthood in Beirut on the Feast of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, June 29, 1961. He earned his doctorate in sacred theology from the Jesuit-run St. Joseph University in Beirut and studied linguistics at the Sorbonne and the University of the Hague. Father Kolvenbach also served as both a professor of linguistics at St. Joseph University and as vice-provincial of the Jesuits' Near-East Vice-Province, which served the Society of Jesus in Egypt, Lebanon and Syria.

After nearly two years as the rector of the Oriental Institute in Rome, Father Kolvenbach was elected by the delegates of General Congregation (GC) 33 to succeed Father Pedro Arrupe as the order's leader and "Black Pope" (so named after the color cassock the superior general has traditionally worn).

Perhaps Father Kolvenbach's most lasting legacy will be his ability to ease the tensions that had arisen between the papacy and the Jesuits during the generalate of his predecessor. Pope John Paul II had widely-known concerns over the direction of the Jesuits under Father Arrupe. They had attempted to come to agreements in early 1981, but two events stalled those discussions. On May 13, 1981, John Paul II was shot in St. Peter's Square. Only three months later, on August 7, Father Arrupe suffered a debilitating stroke that prevented him from continuing as Superior General.

The pope disregarded Father Arrupe's request to appoint his vicar general, American Jesuit Vincent O'Keefe, as his replacement. Instead, the pope appointed two Jesuits to be temporary place-holders: Father (later Cardinal) Paolo Dezza, S.J., and Father (later Archbishop) Giuseppe Pittau, S.J. Only after a two-year interim period was the request granted to hold General Congregation 33 to elect a long-awaited successor for Father Arrupe.

As Jesuit Father Joseph M. McShane, president of Fordham University, told America, "most (if not all) Jesuits would tell you that his humility, holiness, integrity and savvy diplomacy were what stabilized the society after one of the roughest periods of our history. Without his serenity and savvy, we would have been very much at sea. We owe him more than we could ever repay."

In his nearly 25 years at the helm of the Jesuits, Father Kolvenbach was the quintessential peacemaker between the papacy and the society. Having entered in the context of John Paul's suspicions concerning the order, Father Kolvenbach made his and his confreres' loyalty evident from the very beginning.

In a letter Father Kolvenbach addressed to the entire society on the day after he was elected Superior General, he wrote:

The Lord wishes to make use of our Society to announce to the men and women of today's world—with a pastoral preference for those who suffer injustices in this world—the Good News of the Kingdom in a way that speaks to their culture and condition of life. He wants us in this way to serve His Church and the vicar of Christ, Pope John Paul II.

With one stroke of the pen, Father Kolvenbach was able to assure both his Jesuit brethren and the pope of his simultaneous fraternity and loyalty. This was instrumental in the good relations Father Kolvenbach enjoyed with John Paul and his successor, Pope Benedict XVI.

Father Kolvenbach's tenure as Superior General was not without its controversies, however. One notable example was the case of Belgian Jesuit, Father Jacques Dupuis, who was subject to inquiry from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). Father Dupuis's 1997 book, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, was being examined for its orthodoxy in the area of interreligious dialogue. Gerard O'Connell recalls "the fearless way" Father Kolvenbach defended Dupuis.

Mr. O'Connell reports, "Kolvenbach challenged the CDF to show where in his book were the errors attributed to him to be found." After that meeting, when the CDF released the final "Notification" on Dupuis's work, Father Kolvenbach released a statement of public support for Father Dupuis to continue his interreligious dialogue.

For Americans, the case of Jesuit Father Thomas Reese is noteworthy. Reese was removed as editor in chief of America at the behest of the CDF. Father Reese recounted today that he "always felt that Kolvenbach did everything he could to defend me."

President of the Jesuit Conference of the United States, Timothy P. Kesicki, S.J., reflected to America on Father Kolvenbach's legacy:

The first time that I met Father Kolvenbach was as a scholastic in the mid '80's. During a question and answer session a member of the province went to an open microphone and said, "Fr. General I have a difficult question for you." Father Kolvenbach responded, "Difficult for me or difficult for you?" He had this uncanny ability to cut to the heart of the matter with extraordinary confidence and wit. He governed the society for a quarter of a century during a critical period in our history. His words and legacy will inspire generations to come.

To students of Jesuit high schools and universities, perhaps Father Kolvenbach is best known for carrying forward Father Arrupe's model of "the faith that does justice." For many of these students, Father Kolvenbach's addresses are required reading. His words from 2001 are often invoked:

When the heart is touched by direct experience, the mind may be challenged to change. Personal involvement with innocent suffering, with the injustice others suffer, is the catalyst for solidarity, which then gives rise to intellectual inquiry and moral reflection...[Students] should learn to perceive, think, judge, choose, and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and the oppressed.

After his resignation as Superior General in January, 2008, Father Kolvenbach practically disappeared from public life, never granting interviews, and hardly ever making public appearances. He never sought to influence the tenure of his successor, Father Adolfo Nicolás, or speak out on this or that issue. In his final years, he was missioned back to the Province of the Near East, where he served as assistant librarian in his Jesuit community in Beirut.

While further details on his funeral arrangements are pending, the Curia of the Society of Jesus has announced that a special Memorial Mass will be celebrated on Friday, Dec. 2, at the Gesu Church in Rome.

Daniel Cosacchi is Canisius postdoctoral fellow and lecturer of religious studies at Fairfield University. He is co-editor of [The Berrigan Letters: Personal Correspondence of Daniel and Philip Berrigan](#). James T. Keane contributed to this story.

[log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments

RECENTLY BY DANIEL COSACCHI

[God & 'The Dark Knight'](#) (August 18, 2008)



Copyright © 2016 America Press Inc.
All Rights Reserved.

[Donate](#) [Subscribe](#) [About](#)
MAGAZINE NEWS FAITH OPINION CULTURE BLOGS MEDIA RESOURCES

[LOGIN](#) / [REGISTER](#)