

A Father in Faith: The Legacy of Pedro Arrupe, S.J.

By Kevin Burke, S.J.



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In the introduction to *Pedro Arrupe: Essential Writings*, a book I edited several years ago, I wrote, “Pedro Arrupe, S.J. was the Superior General of the Society of Jesus when I entered the order in 1976 and in ways too numerous to count he inspired, taught, encouraged, and formed me as a Jesuit. Although I never met him personally, I count him among my spiritual friends and fathers in faith.”

These words still ring true. I consider Fr. Arrupe a great man, even though, in his own lifetime and since his death he has been viewed as controversial. He is seen by some as too hard-line and traditional and by others as too permissive of “new ways” that were damaging to the traditions of religious life within the Church. I believe he ranks among the holiest and greatest Catholic leaders and saints of the 20th century, people like Archbishop Oscar Romero, Mother Theresa, and Pope John XXIII.

Fr. Arrupe was a human being and, as such, a person of his times and his own training, with shortcomings of temperament and experience, with passions, biases, and even peculiarities. But his life itself serves as a parable of contemporary Christian discipleship. He was born 100 years ago this November in Bilbao, Spain. He grew up in a family of modest means, the youngest and only boy among five children. His mother died when he was 10 and his father when he was 18. At 15, he began undergraduate studies in medicine at the University of Madrid. In 1926, after the death of his father, he and his sisters traveled to Lourdes where he witnessed a miraculous healing, an experience that led him eventually to set aside his medical career (over the vigorous protests of his favorite teacher) and enter the Society of Jesus.

It might have seemed that Pedro Arrupe turned his back on the world when he entered the Jesuit Novitiate. Jesuit training at that time manifested many of the features of monastic life, including a radical withdrawal from the world followed by years of seclusion, asceticism, and study. But the world kept interrupting Fr. Arrupe. He was directly affected by the chaos afflicting Europe from the

Great Depression through World War II, including Hitler’s rise to power in Germany and the violent Spanish Revolution. In 1932, the Republicans expelled all the Jesuits in Spain from the country, sending Arrupe, a 24-year-old seminarian, into exile.

Witness to History

Following his ordination and in response to his own urgent desires, his provincial sent him to Japan in 1938. There he planned to work as a missionary for the rest of his life. But, of course, life in Japan represented no retreat from the world or the events shaping it. Fr. Arrupe assumed the duties of the master of novices for the Japanese mission and moved to Nagatsuka on the outskirts of Hiroshima. He was there on Aug. 6, 1945, when the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on the city. He later wrote of that day:

“I shall never forget my first sight of what was the result of the atomic bomb: a group of young women, 18 or 20 years old, clinging to one another as they dragged themselves along the road. One had a blister that almost covered her chest; she had burns across half of her face, and a cut in her scalp caused probably by a falling tile, while great quantities of blood coursed freely down her face. On and on they came, a steady procession numbering some 150,000. This gives some idea of the scene of horror that was Hiroshima. We continued looking for some way of entering the city, but it was impossible. We did the only thing that could be done in the presence of such mass slaughter: we fell on our knees and prayed for guidance, as we were destitute of all human help.”

Once he rose from his knees, Fr. Arrupe converted the novitiate into a hospital and his novices into nurses. They cared for about 150 people suffering from the mysterious aftereffects of radiation poisoning and of these, only one, a small child suffering from meningitis, died. It was an extraordinary and disconcerting experience. He didn’t know what he was treating, and he was overwhelmed by the sheer



Don Dell, S.J.

enormity of the event. He was standing at the epicenter of a world-changing historical moment without yet realizing it.

In 1954 Fr. Arrupe was appointed superior and then later the provincial of Jesuits in Japan. In 1965, much to his surprise, the 31st General Congregation of the Society of Jesus elected him as its 28th Superior General. A man whose life took shape in the midst of the great events of the time, who experienced exile, imprisonment, war, and the dawn of the atomic age, now assumed responsibility for the largest religious order in the Church at the very moment the Church was asking itself anew how to engage the world.

Fr. Arrupe helped the Society of Jesus rediscover its fundamental call to discernment, its call to read the signs of the times. Jesuits found they were not so much called to abandon their schools or missions or retreat work, but to do all these things in new ways. We serve the Church by being at the growing edge where the Church is constantly running up against the world.

Jesuit Education after Arrupe

Fr. Arrupe's call to embrace a faith that does justice had an enormous impact on Jesuit education. In 1973, on the feast of St. Ignatius Valencia in Spain, he gave one of his most famous speeches. Its title has become a motto for Jesuit education: "Men and Women for Others." His audience was comprised of the alumni of Jesuit schools from various parts of Europe, many of whom came from wealthy and prestigious families. Early in his talk, Fr. Arrupe asked his audience whether their Jesuit teachers had adequately educated them for justice. He then observed, "You and I know what many of your Jesuit teachers will answer to that question. They will answer, in all sincerity and humility: 'No, we have not.'" Fr. Arrupe went on to explain that our primary educational objective must be "to form men and women for others... men and women who cannot even conceive of love of God which does not include love for the least of their

neighbors; men and women completely convinced that love of God which does not issue in justice for others is a farce."

A generation later, a palpable shift in Jesuit life and ministry has taken place. The task of educating men and women for others has become almost a byword in the various circles of Jesuit education. Many Jesuit schools now promote some version of this saying as an official or unofficial motto, and changes in the curricula and campus ministries of the schools reflect the shift to justice-centered evangelization. The 32nd General Council, over which Fr. Arrupe presided in 1974-1975, declared: "The mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement." This, perhaps more than anything else, represents the defining achievement of his term as Superior General of the Society of Jesus.

His address, "Men and Women for Others," remains a striking reminder and symbol of that achievement. Indeed, one can hardly imagine the Lane Center for Catholic Studies and Social Thought at the University of San Francisco, or the kind of Jesuit president this university has in Stephen A. Privett, S.J. without Fr. Arrupe. If Jesuit education has always had a humanistic emphasis on excellence in the arts and sciences, what it has today, as a direct result of Fr. Arrupe's legacy, is a special emphasis on education for a faith that does justice, a deep attention to the education of the whole person, and above all, on education as a way to find God in all things. [USF](#)

A Man for Others: Former Jesuit Superior General Pedro Arrupe, S.J., born 100 years ago this November, is credited with helping the Jesuits rediscover their call to justice-centered evangelism.

This article was adapted from a talk given by Kevin Burke, S.J. as part of the Joan and Ralph Lane Center for Catholic Studies and Social Thought's fall lecture series.

To read the full text of Fr. Burke's talk on Pedro Arrupe, S.J., visit: www.usfmagazine.com

