

## Electing Our New Jesuit Leader

By John P. Fitzgibbons, S.J.



John P. Fitzgibbons, S.J., USF vice president for administration and acting dean of the College of Professional Studies, was one of 225 delegates of the 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus. The congregation convened in Rome in January to elect a new Jesuit superior general. After a four-day deliberative ritual, the congregation selected the Spanish-born Adolfo Nicolás, S.J. as superior general.

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**G**oing into the 35th General Congregation to elect a new Jesuit superior general, I was more than a bit skeptical. In our age of instantaneous communication, this four-day conversation seemed anything but modern and efficient. We began with prayer in the *aula* (the large meeting room for the General Congregation) on Jan. 15. Described as a prayerful but conversational atmosphere, it was critical that we enter into an actual spiritual discernment during these four days. Our task was much more than an “election” of a leader; it was a task of finding God’s will.

I must have spoken to a dozen men, including some potential candidates, that first day. On the second day, my list of candidates shortened considerably. A couple of new names were added and many were taken off. I was down to about five or six names and spent the day canvassing the folks who know these men well.

The process is a dance of short conversations mixed with long ones, all aimed at discerning who the Spirit is choosing. It was cumbersome and awkward at times, setting appointments and

chatting about the “lights” and “shadows” of each candidate. We were clear about the lights (loves the Society, would be a good public face for the Society, good organizer, team builder, fluent in three or four languages) and the shadows (workaholic,

lack of gravitas on some level, lack of governance experience).

By day three, most of the men I spoke with had roughly the same list I had, which I took as a good sign. We had been instructed to do our homework, pray over the names, think about these possibilities, and walk into the *aula* after Mass on election day without having made up our minds. Still, I felt like I was getting closer.

By Jan. 18, the fourth and final day, my list was down to three sterling men. The next day, we walked to Mass in the morning and prayed to the Holy Spirit for guidance. We then processed silently into the *aula* for an exhortation, an hour of prayer in our large group, the singing of the *Veni Creator Spiritu*.

The previous day, I had a remarkable talk with a man who would ultimately become the next superior general. My imagination was captured by Fr. Nicolás. He was quietly energetic and intense. He had held several major offices in the Society but carried himself lightly. His passion is for serving the marginalized people of Asia, especially refugees and internally displaced persons. At one point, he looked at me and, with tears in his eyes, said “This is a job for a younger man. It will take at least five years for a new general’s plans to come to fruition.” I looked back and said, “Adolfo, it is possible that we could elect a younger man but he would not have the depth or the breadth of your experience. Besides, we could elect a 44-year-old and he could be hit by a car tomorrow!” Fr. Nicolás laughed. Then he grew serious and said, “I do not wish to have this position but if the Society chooses me, I will take it as the will of God and I will give my life to fulfilling God’s will.” It was my turn to weep quietly.

With 217 electors, it took a minimum of 109 to elect. Fr. Nicolás was close on the first ballot and won on the second. Half-way through the second ballot, he closed his eyes and stopped keeping count. He folded his hands in his lap and prayed. Again, I saw the strength, the humility, and the tears on his face. The count was finished and we all stood to give him a standing ovation.

Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., the just retired superior general, read the selection and naming of Adolfo Nicolás in Latin. Then Fr. Nicolás came down to the main aisle to thunderous applause. I was once again in tears, but this time for profound joy. I am confident that we chose precisely the right man for this most burdensome and privileged service. [USF](#)