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Jesuit head: Religion isn't doctrine, but sensitivity to human experience

Joshua J. McElwee | Mar. 18, 2014
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Religion is less a code of doctrines and teachings than a sensitivity to the "dimensions of transcendence" that underlie the human experience, the head of Pope Francis' Jesuit order said Friday.

Likening the religious experience to a person who can appreciate the intricacies and variations of classical music, Jesuit Fr. Adolfo Nicolás said "religion is first of all very much more like this musical sense than a rational system of teachings and explanations."

"Religion involves first of all a sensitivity to, an openness to, the dimensions of transcendence, of depth, of gratuity, of beauty that underlie our human experiences," Nicolás said. "But of course, this is a sensitivity that is threatened today by a purely economic or materialist mindset which deadens this sensitivity to deeper dimension of reality."

Nicolás, who as the superior general of the Society of Jesus leads approximately 17,000 Jesuits worldwide, spoke during an event Friday through Saturday at the Pontifical Gregorian University to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Jesuit-run Sophia University in Tokyo.

A former student of Sophia in the 1960s and a former provincial of the Jesuits' Japanese province, Nicolás opened the event, "Between Past and Future, the Mission of the Catholic Church in Asia: the contribution of Sophia University."

The Jesuit superior, who counts among his members the pope, urged Japanese Catholics to promote religious sensitivity in their country and not to lose hope because they represent a small minority of the country's population.

Comparing how many people have lost attentiveness to music because of the many other distractions of the modern technological age, Nicolás said, "Just as this musical sense is being eroded and weakened by the noise, the pace, the self-images of the modern and postmodern world, so is religious sensitivity."

"I suggest that mission today in Japan and Asia must first of all work toward people helping discover or rediscover this musical sense, this religious sensibility," he said. "This awareness and appreciation of dimensions of reality that are deeper than instrumental reason or materialist conceptions of life allow us."

Nicolás also urged the staff and faculty at Sophia to not make the institution a place that is "primarily market driven."

"Competition, the search for higher rankings for the sake of even more economic gain, has become the driving force for some institutions," he said. "It would be a tragedy if our universities simply replicated the rationality

and self-understandings of our secular, materialist world. Our reason for being in education is completely different."

"We are not in education for proselytism, but for transformation," Nicolás continued. "We want to form a new kind of humanity that is musical, that retains this sensitivity to beauty, to goodness, to the suffering of others, to compassion."

"We offer a Christian education because we are convinced that Christ offers horizons beyond the limited interests of economy or material production, that Christ offers a vision of a fuller humanity that takes the person outside himself or herself in care and concern for others," he said.

Turning toward the state of the Japanese church, where recent statistics [2] from the Japanese bishops' conference said Catholics represent only about 0.35 percent of the country's population, Nicolás said he has heard "an almost despairing judgment that evangelization has failed in Japan."

"One might speak of an ecclesial desolation some are feeling today in Japan," he said. "Naming this movement thus, one realizes that this is a movement that calls for discernment and action."

Referencing the late Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama, Nicolás said Japanese Catholics cannot expect immediate results in the efforts at evangelization.

"We want quick success, immediate results," said Nicolás, quoting from Koyama's book *Three Mile an Hour God*. "But [Koyama] insists this is not God's pace. God goes at 3 miles an hour, which is the speed a person walks."

"Love has its speed," said Nicolás, quoting from the book. "It is a spiritual speed. It is a different kind of speed from the technological speed to which we are accustomed. It goes on in the depths of our lives, whether we notice it or not at 3 miles an hour. It is the speed we walk and therefore the speed the love of God walks."

The Jesuit superior general was one of about a dozen speakers at the Gregorian University event, which focused both on the wider role of Jesuits in Japan and on the specific contributions of Sophia University since its founding in 1913.

Among attendees were faculty and staff from both universities, Jesuits from various parts of the world, and Japan's ambassador to Italy, Masaharu Kono.

Jesuit Fr. Shinzô Kawamura, a professor of humanities at Sophia University, focused his presentation on St. Francis Xavier, a 16th-century Jesuit who co-founded the order with St. Ignatius of Loyola before devoting his life to living as a missionary in India, Japan and Borneo.

Kawamura compared contemporary accounts of Xavier's missionary work with modern understandings of the missionary's role, calling him a "classic exemplar" of a "balance between doctrine and practice" in missionary work.

Xaverian Missionary Sr. Maria De Giorgi, an Italian missionary who has lived in Japan since 1985, also spoke at the event. De Giorgi, who has spent much of her time in Japan at an interreligious retreat center called Shinmeizan near the southern Japanese city of Nagomi, focused on interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

Yoshiaki Ishizawa, who led Sophia University as president from 2005 to 2011, spoke of efforts initiated by the university to send missions and personnel to help preserve and restore the Angkor monuments in Cambodia.

The monuments, including the Hindu/Buddhist Angkor Wat temple, one of the largest religious monuments in

the world, have experienced significant decay since their 12th-century building.

Along with others, Ishizawa founded in 1996 a branch of Sophia University in the Cambodian city of Siem Reap, called the Asia Center of Research and Human Development, which has focused on preserving the country's heritage sites.

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