

The Living Example of Peter-Hans Kolvenbach

Many knew Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach as the leader of the Jesuits throughout the world. As for me, I only knew him as a simple Jesuit!

Let me explain. Back in August 2008, I was spending a year with the Jesuits before I officially entered the Society of Jesus, and Fr. Kolvenbach had recently resigned from being Superior General. He decided to come back to Beirut, where he was previously the provincial.

I can't forget our first encounter. I was confused about how to introduce myself and what I would say to this great man. He replied with one word: "Hmmm, *l'avenir!*" I only understood a little French. I had to ask what it meant: "the future." What an encouraging call from the "Black Pope" to a young candidate to the Jesuits!

During that time, I used to see him around in our residence. He worked as the assistant librarian. He had a silent presence and was surrounded by what I called his mystic halo. He was always in his cassock, walking prudently and acting very formally at the table – but never when you approached him to chat!

Later, during my philosophy studies, the Jesuits in Lebanon welcomed the Maronite Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, Cardinal "Mar Bechara Boutros al-Rahi." The humble Kolvenbach always wanted to be treated as any other normal Jesuit, so he first refused to sit next to this person, who was one of his students in theology at the University of Saint Joseph in Beirut. Father Peter-Hans waited near the door of our residence next to the provincial, who tried hard to convince him to sit next to the Patriarch. Fr. Kolvenbach resisted until his local superior, another Dutch Jesuit, said to him with laughter, "You know, I am your superior now. You obey me, and you sit next to him." Immediately, Fr. Peter replied, "I obey."

Fr. Peter-Hans was the perfect example of a Jesuit for us, particularly in how he humbly dealt with his illness. He disliked taking any advantage of his former post and was a model of obedience. It was thus easy for his superiors in Beirut – I can count five of them during the last eight years – to have the former Father General in their communities because he was easier for them than a stubborn scholastic like me...

I would often salute him in Armenian, "*Parev.*" Father Peter-Hans first came to my province in 1958 and was inspired by the work of the Jesuits with Armenian refugees. He became an expert in the Armenian language and stayed in the Near East and served the people whom he loved.

Now, I write this only a few metres away from the school where he first served in Beirut. He inspires our Jesuit life and mission by his delightful example. He inspires me to end my life peacefully, humbly and gratefully.

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