

Pedro Arrupe, S.J. (1907 – 1991)



Father Pedro Arrupe was the twenty-eighth superior general of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits). A Basque, as was St. Ignatius, he was born on November 14, 1907 in Bilbao. He decided at first to pursue medicine as a career, studying both in Valladolid and Madrid, but without waiting to complete his degree, he entered the Society of Jesus in 1927. In October of 1931, the Society of Jesus was dissolved by governmental decree, and he and the other young Jesuit students had to go abroad to continue their training, which he did in Belgium and the Netherlands. On July 30, 1936, he was ordained a priest. In 1938 he received an assignment to work in Japan, where by 1940 he was in charge of a rural parish in Nagatsuka, some six miles outside of Hiroshima. When Japan a year later declared war on the United States, Father Arrupe spent thirty-three days in solitary confinement in a Japanese military prison, suspected of being a spy for Western powers. Two months after regaining his freedom, he was named the director of the young Jesuits at their residence in Nagatsuka. From there on August 6, 1945 he saw the blinding light and heard the deafening explosion when the first atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima. With his medical background, Father Arrupe for the next six months converted the Jesuit residence into an emergency hospital where he and the other Jesuits took care of more than 200 of the injured.

In 1954, Father Arrupe became the head Jesuit of Japan. When the Society of Jesus in 1965 needed to select a new superior general (i.e. leader of all the Jesuits around the world), he was chosen.

During his leadership, he helped the Society to incorporate the changes of Vatican II while helping it to focus on both the promotion of faith and the cause of justice, a devotion which resulted in the murders of a number of Jesuits who, inspired by Father Arrupe, suffered because of their commitment to the poor and defenseless. He had a particular concern for immigrants and refugees, and it is he who challenged alumni of Jesuit schools to be “men and women for others.”

Father Arrupe served as superior general until 1983, although the final two years of his leadership were compromised by a debilitating stroke that left him unable to function fully. Fr. Arrupe’s illness lasted for almost ten years. During the latter years, he was physically confined to his room, unable to speak. He died on February 5, 1991 at the age of eighty-four, having been a Jesuit for sixty-four years, a missionary for twenty-seven and superior general for eighteen. He is buried in the Society’s Church of the Gesù in Rome, Italy.