



Communal Reflection on
the Jesuit Mission
in Higher Education:
A Way of Proceeding

The
Jesuits

The Society of Jesus in the United States

PREFACE FROM THE JESUIT CONFERENCE BOARD

Dear Colleagues in Jesuit Higher Education:

In composing this document on the Jesuit, Catholic character of Jesuit higher education, we felt that some explanation of our intention would be helpful.

First, this document presumes that there has been local discussion on the essential characteristics of a Catholic university as these have been enunciated in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*:

- A Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the university community as such;
- A continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research;
- Fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church;
- An institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal, which gives meaning to life.¹

Second, we have prepared a document that invites inclusive local discussion, debate, and adaptation. By inclusive we mean that our universities *de facto* are ecumenical in their ethos. The higher education institutions that we call Jesuit are communities that represent a variety of beliefs and convictions. We are attempting here to present a document that is faithful both to our distinctive Catholic and Jesuit tradition and yet open to the values and convictions of other members of our communities who join us in our mission. Further, we believe that the faculty, staff, and boards of our institutions will be engaged only if they themselves can contribute to their self-definition and self-assessment. For those reasons, we called this document “a way of proceeding” and invite the participants to “communal reflection.” The document is *an* approach, not the only approach. It does indicate parameters of authenticity, but it does not dictate how these should be understood or implemented within each institution. It is meant to be a way to get people into conversation about the mission of their institutions.

Third, our aim was to help those institutions whose members have been working hard to create a Jesuit culture and Catholic ethos within their institutions. While we have tried to be sensitive to the rich variety of religious and ethical traditions that constitute our faculties, staffs, administrations, boards, and student bodies, we have turned our major focus on the mission of being a distinctive voice in North American higher education.

Fourth, we hope that these characteristics and their suggested focus questions will provide Jesuit higher education institutions with guidelines for their professional self-evaluations, their recruitment, and their fund raising.

Fifth, it is up to the leadership within each Jesuit university to use this statement as a tool for discerning the emphases and directions that their schools will take in sustaining and promoting their distinctive character as Jesuit and Catholic. Without local leadership we will have one more document for storage, not an incentive for reflection, discussion, and action.

The Board of The Jesuit Conference
May 2002

INTRODUCTION

The 34th General Congregation and the recent addresses of Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, attest to the importance of the work of higher education today and to the need for all who are involved in this enterprise to be committed to its distinctive character as Jesuit and Catholic. What governs the enterprise of Jesuit higher education is its sense of mission. There are three aspects to this mission.

First, it is a mission in continuity with the historical evolution of the Ignatian charism. “In 1551, the Roman College opened its doors, an emblematic figure of what would become the Society’s venture in the university field. Four and a half centuries later, the Society remains intensely dedicated to the work of higher education with numberless universities and other institutions throughout the world.”²

Second, the contemporary mission respects the reality of being both a university and a Jesuit apostolic work. In all its endeavors, Jesuit education is distinguished by intellectual excellence and academic rigor. “To be a university requires dedication to research, teaching, and the various forms of service that correspond to its cultural mission.”³ At the same time, a Jesuit university must reflect its specifically Jesuit character. “To be Jesuit requires that the university act in harmony with the demands of the service of faith and the promotion of justice found in Decree 4 of the 32nd General Congregation.”⁴

Third, the contemporary mission of Jesuit higher education relies, perhaps as never before, on the collaborative talents and energies of Jesuits and their colleagues. Today, Jesuits represent only a small numerical presence within those universities called Jesuit. The historical continuity of the mission and its crucial importance in engaging the needs of modern men and women require that a critical mass of the faculty and staff of Jesuit universities commit to and then work to advance that mission.

To engage the world in its own integrity is also to work within the cultural, social, ethical, and religious complexities of that world. To affirm the centrality of the wisdom, justice, and peace preached by Christ as characteristic of God’s Kingdom is to commit the resources of the Jesuit university to a work of sensitive mediation between the world and the gospel. Therefore, the world and the gospel must be in dialogue. Such dialogue needs discernment, the ability to judge when, where, and how the world and the gospel interact.

CHARACTERISTICS OF JESUIT HIGHER EDUCATION

The following characteristics of Jesuit higher education represent one way of proceeding in that discerning dialogue. These characteristics and the process that they invite are meant to enable each institution to locate its own sense of mission. Within each Jesuit university, groups of faculty, staff, administrators, students, and boards must engage in that dialogue out of their unique institutional histories, professional development, and local missions.

1. Dedication to Human Dignity from a Catholic/Jesuit Faith Perspective

Ignatian spirituality, the foundation of all Jesuit apostolic endeavors, views men and women as created in love and created to reflect the wisdom and goodness of God. The advent of Christ and the continued presence of Christ's Spirit enhance that created dignity. Men and women are enfolded in God's care and compassion, offered companionship as the brothers and sisters of Christ, and empowered by the Spirit to complete the work of Christ on earth. Jesuits believe that their colleagues from other religious and ethical traditions share this dedication to human dignity and work for its implementation.

Sample Focus Questions

- How do the hiring and promotion practices in your institution reflect a belief in the human dignity of all faculty and staff?
- How do your students learn in an environment of respect? Do they learn respect for themselves, for others, for the global community, and for the universe itself? Do they learn to value care and compassion because they are being treated with care and compassion?
- How well are diverse groups incorporated into the life of your institution? Do you rejoice in your pluralism?
- Have your graduates integrated this regard for human dignity into their habitual attitudes and life choices? How have you been able to gauge this integration?
- How does your institution engage its Catholic identity? How does your institution serve the local Catholic diocese?
- How does your institution express its Catholic identity in its sacramental, liturgical, and prayer life?
- How does your institution encourage and support the spiritual development of its students, faculty, staff, and alumni?
- How are the Spiritual Exercises adapted and made available to all the members of your educational community?
- How does your institution support members of the community from differing religious and philosophical traditions?
- How well does your institution support the priorities of the Society of Jesus and the local Jesuit province that sponsors your institution?

2. Reverence for and an Ongoing Reflection on Human Experience

The Jesuit university or college must be a place of intellectual honesty, pluralism, and mutual respect where inquiry and open discussion characterize the environment of teaching, research, and professional development. The idea of reverence was a pivotal one for St. Ignatius Loyola. For him, reverence was first an attitude of regard before the majesty of God, but it was also a regard for all that God had created as both a gift from God and a way into God's presence. Inspired by this sense of reverence, the Jesuit ideal of seeking and finding God in all things presupposes this genuine regard for the mystery within the universe. It is an ideal that gives serious attention to those great and abiding questions about the meaning of life and the conduct of human affairs. It is an ideal that encourages an openness of mind and heart to the varieties of ways in which the human spirit has named God and defined the moral life. It is an ideal that promotes a rigorous yet sensitive attention to the demands of the professions and of technology. It is an ideal that exults in the world of creative energy in literature and music, in art and theatre, in business and in the sciences. It is an ideal that engages the world both locally and globally.

Sample Focus Questions

- How is the Catholic and Jesuit character of your institution reflected in your undergraduate curriculum, graduate programs, and professional schools (e.g., in calling attention to the ethical and religious dimensions of every study, in hiring only faculty open to the full mission of the school, and in making known the specifically Catholic position on issues)?
- How does your institution acknowledge and reward excellence in research, in teaching, and in service? How does this contribute to the flourishing of Catholic intellectual life?
- Do you provide opportunities for inter-disciplinary seminars, workshops, or institutes so that faculty and staff can come to know one another, share their perspectives, and enrich the community of reflection at your university or college? In your undergraduate education how do you help students to integrate their studies into a lifelong ability to learn, to reflect, to critique, and to celebrate the life of the mind, heart, imagination, and religious experience?
- What are the research projects that characterize your institution? Do they reflect the distinctive mission of your institution?
- How are inter-religious dialogue and inter-cultural activity present in your campus?
- How are environmental and ecological concerns developed in and out of the classroom?
- How is a seamless respect for life taught and practiced on campus?

3. Creative Companionship with Colleagues

The contemporary Jesuit university is committed to creating a community of dialogue and service. Dialogue is the mutual investment in learning through listening, through honest exchange, and through a desire to come to a new level of understanding and appreciation. As such, dialogue enjoys a privileged place in the Ignatian tradition. Service signifies a mutual willingness among faculty, staff, and administration to enhance the entire environment of learning and service that should exist within the Jesuit university community and between it and the world outside its boundaries. There is a healthy professionalism that respects the differences in goals and methodologies among the various branches of knowledge and competencies. But the Jesuit educational ideal is also one that tries to find ways to transcend these boundaries in order to forge a community of scholarship and service.

Sample Focus Questions

- What mechanisms are in place within your institution to incorporate new faculty and staff into the overarching Jesuit, Catholic mission of your institution?
- How have faculty, staff, administrators, and board members—whether Catholic or from differing religious and philosophical traditions--been helped to incorporate their faith into the school's mission? How has your institution encouraged and supported ecumenical and interfaith dialogue with the larger community in which it resides?
- How are students—graduate and undergraduate—taught to work together, to share their research, and to learn with and from one another?
- What means are in place to assess the appropriation of your mission statement by your trustees, faculty, staff, students, and alumni? What has that assessment indicated about the overall appropriation of your mission?

4. Focused Care for Students

At the heart of the Jesuit educational ideal is a communal care for the integral development of the men and women who have chosen to come for instruction, guidance, and friendship. Everyone involved in Jesuit higher education—faculty, staff, administration, and board member—plays a role in student development. The pursuit of wisdom and competence, the quest for psychological maturity and spiritual depth, the desire for ethical grounding, and the challenge of social solidarity and global awareness—these student concerns demand our attention and response. In their relationships with students, faculty and staff inevitably model what they value. In communicating those values, they act as mentors to their students. Today, students often seek to resolve the feeling of disconnect in their lives. We need to develop appropriate processes that will facilitate the kind of intellectual, ethical, social, and religious integration that Jesuit and Catholic education has long espoused.

Sample Focus Questions

- How are new faculty and staff both supported and challenged to fulfill their roles as mentors to the undergraduates and graduate students of your institution?
- How does your institution affirm the work that students do in areas of service and community building?
- How does your institution help students to confront problems that inhibit their academic, social, ethical, or spiritual growth?
- Practically, do you provide programs for substance abuse, sexual confusion, addictive behavior, and psychological upheaval?
- Do board members receive profiles of student needs, the institutional response to these needs, and, when appropriate, a timetable for remedial action?
- What opportunities do students have to care for and even to act as mentors to one another? Is there any explicit education in this and guidance in learning such skills, especially in the residence halls?

5. Well-Educated Justice and Solidarity

The call to justice and solidarity is complex. Justice looks first to the justice that is God's saving action for men and women. Catholic social justice centers on the establishment of the Kingdom of God within the hearts of men and women and then within their societies. Solidarity with the rest of the human race means the practical awareness that only by working together can the human family meet effectively the challenges of worldwide hunger, ignorance, disease, and violence. But solidarity also means the extending of care to those close at hand who have been ignored or abandoned within our society. Solidarity also means a commitment to change the economic, political, and social structures that enslave, dehumanize, and destroy human life and dignity. Each Jesuit university must examine its own social environment, including its own commitment to justice and solidarity. Through community service, service-learning projects, immersion experiences, and faculty-student research projects, more and more Jesuit institutions have provided supervised opportunities for their students to meet and to learn from people from other economic and social groups. By confronting the poverty both in themselves as well as in others, students, faculty, staff, administrators, and board members have come to understand how precious is human dignity and how dependent it is on adequate food, water, housing, health care, and education.

Sample Focus Questions

- What courses or programs effectively raise social-justice questions in your institution? What research projects focus on issues of injustice and the need for global solidarity?
- Are there service-learning programs, immersion experiences, community-service opportunities in your institution? Do such programs include a process to select participants, to prepare them, to supervise their involvement, to help them to reflect on their experiences, and then to integrate these experiences into their lives?
- How are students of different economic, racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds incorporated into your school culture and how do they enrich that culture?
- Have faculty and student research projects assisted the neighboring community or the broader community?
- How does your institution work with its alumni to help them understand their solidarity with one another and their mission to work for a better world?
- Are there internal issues of injustice that your university needs to confront?

CONCLUSION

An institution of higher education has always provided its greatest service when it has promoted academic excellence on all levels. This practical esteem for the intellectual life has characterized Jesuit higher education from its beginnings. But the reshaping of the contemporary world according to the justice, peace, and love preached by Christ and cherished by the Church characterizes its apostolic ambition. World realities and personal faith have prompted a new understanding of Jesuit humanism, one that integrates academic excellence with social responsibility.⁵ These two goals must be in harmony in any Jesuit college or university. These characteristics can have practical meaning and implementation only if each institution adapts them to the realities of its own life and rhythm.

Within the shared Ignatian heritage abides a rich variety of histories, local traditions, pastoral needs, and educational opportunities. Every Jesuit university has its own resources and constituencies. Ignatian adaptation asks, “How does this principle or strategy fit your situation?” Therefore, these characteristics are neither commands nor commercials. Rather they are invitations to deepen a commitment already shared and to confirm a direction already undertaken.

FOOTNOTES

¹ *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, #13, in “Catholic Universities in Church and Society, A Dialogue on *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*,” ed. John P. Langan, SJ. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1993, pp. 229-253.

² “The Jesuit University in The Light of The Ignatian Charism.” Address by Father General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach to the International Meeting of Jesuit Higher Education, Rome, May 27, 2001. www.jesuits-europe.org/doc/univ2001e.htm. Paragraph # 57.

³ “The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education,” speech given by Father General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach at Santa Clara University, October 6, 2000, published in *America Magazine*, Feb. 5, 2001, Vol..184, No. 3, p. 8; and documents of the 34th General Congregation, D. 17, # 6.

⁴ *Ibid.* # 7.

⁵ “By means of a kind of universal humanism a Catholic University is completely dedicated to the research of all aspects of truth in their essential connection with the supreme Truth, who is God. It does this without fear but rather with enthusiasm, dedicating itself to every path of knowledge, aware of being preceded by him who is ‘the Way, the Truth, and the Life [John 14: 6],’ the Logos whose Spirit of intelligence and love enables the human person with his or her own intelligence to find the ultimate reality of which he is the source and end who alone is capable of giving fully that Wisdom without which the future of the world would be in danger” from *On Catholic Universities, Apostolic Constitution of August 15, 1990*, # 4, Washington, D.C.: USCC, n.d.