

## “The Mission and Ministry of Jesuits in Higher Education”

BY FRANK H.T. RHODES

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*Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., is this year observing the 200th anniversary of its founding by the first U.S. Catholic bishop, John Carroll, an anniversary that also marks the bicentennial of Jesuit education in the United States. A central event of this celebration was "Assembly 89: Jesuit Ministry in Higher Education," a conference on June 5-8 that brought together as representatives of the 28 U.S. Jesuit colleges and universities more than 900 Jesuits and their colleagues at these institutions. At this meeting's first plenary session on Monday evening June 5, Frank H.T. Rhodes, a British-born geologist who since 1977 has been president of Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., delivered the following keynote address. He was introduced by Timothy S. Healy, S.J., who was president of Georgetown University from 1976 until this summer when he became president and chief executive officer of the nation's second largest library, the New York Public Library, which is exceeded in size only by the Library of Congress.*

Fellow laborers in the vineyard: I am honored to meet with you on this historic occasion and to bring my congratulations and good wishes to this notable gathering.

Let me note in passing that, honored as I am to be here, I am also apprehensive. After all, it is a formidable prospect to face 750 Jesuits and some 180 coworkers to deliver a keynote address on Jesuit higher education in the United States not least when I am a layman, a non-Catholic, an Englishman and the president of an institution so avowedly non-sectarian that it was once described as "godless Cornell." I recognize that this represents affirmative action with a vengeance, as well as a measure of optimism and trust on your part, but I must confess that it leaves me at some substantial disability. Father Healy, of course, has been kindness and thoughtfulness itself. Toward the end of a delightful dinner this evening, he leaned over



toward me and said in a voice full of understanding, "I think we'd better go downstairs. The lions are waiting."

I congratulate you, both on the conference itself and also on the historic anniversary it celebrates. Georgetown is, indeed, the alma mater of Catholic higher education in this country. From a modest beginning 200 years ago, it has now given rise to a system that includes 28 Jesuit colleges and universities and 46 Jesuit high schools.

These are remarkable results, and I want especially to congratulate Father Healy for his extraordinary leadership of Georgetown over the last 13 years. He likes to describe this university as "being built on a bluff on the Potomac, and having been maintained that way ever since," but his leadership involves no bluff. It is the result of a perceptive view of the character of a Catholic university and a devoted and thoughtful commitment to the highest professional standards. I want to thank him as a colleague and a friend and to wish him well in his new vocation.

I also want to congratulate you on the title of your conference. The notion of "ministry" in higher education would sound unfamiliar to many in our colleges and universities today, and yet it is surely the secret of the effectiveness of the Jesuit endeavor. It is a missing ingredient in much secular higher education today.

Jesuit higher education has come a long way from Sicily in 1548, when the first Jesuit school was founded. It has come a long way from Maryland in 1634, when Andrew White, S.J., and four fellow Jesuits landed from England with Cecil Calvert, becoming a part of the Maryland colony that ultimately produced John Carroll, the founder of Georgetown. And yet those distant days are linked by a continuous chain of devoted service and distinguished scholarship, which have been a transforming influence not only in education but also in a wider humanitarian and cultural context.

This is not to say that all those who have been exposed to the Jesuit experience have reacted in a similar fashion. I suppose the high view is that of Charles D. Ferris, the former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, who commented in a recent issue of *America* on the remarkable way in which his Jesuit teachers stressed the joy of life over the



fear of death and seemed to him full of confidence and at ease with both their faith and their ideas, having a completeness and happy balance to their lives.

In contrast, political satirist Mark Russell, commenting on his days at Canisius High School in Buffalo, remarked, "After the nuns and the Jesuits, [Marine] boot camp was anticlimactic."

The May 20, 1989, issue of *America*, which contains these reflections, also contains an editorial that asks two piercing questions on the occasion of this bicentenary. First, how good are Jesuit institutions academically? Second, how Catholic are they? It would, of course, be presumptuous for me as a visitor to address these issues, but I do want to respond to your invitation, not with anything so ambitious as a set of answers, but rather with a series of questions, musings and tentative suggestions, all of which might encourage the discussion that these few days will involve.

I confess, however, that I feel rather like the old man whose proudest achievement was that he had survived the Johnstown Flood of 1889, which that Pennsylvania city commemorated with its own centennial celebration just last week. The old man would talk about the Johnstown Flood at every opportunity he got. Finally, ripe in years and wisdom, he went to his reward. As he arrived in heaven, he asked St. Peter if he might tell the other residents about his experience. St. Peter made the necessary arrangements, then told the old man, "It's all set. You are to speak at 3:00 P.M. on cloud nine." Then he added a word of caution: "But I should tell you--Noah will be in the audience."

But if Father Healy, who first invited me to this occasion, can make the intellectual leap from Georgetown to the New York Public Library, perhaps I can take a similarly broadening excursion from non-sectarian Cornell to the Assembly of Jesuits here this evening. I want to explore with you the historic role in education of the followers of Ignatius Loyola; how that role has evolved in the United States, where the greatest number of Jesuits pursue this ministry, and how, as you dedicate yourselves to "the service of the faith and the promotion of justice"--the mission adopted at the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus in 1975--you can continue to provide a context for higher education that is solely needed in our



current age.

### **The Legacy of Ignatius Loyola.**

No one contemplates the legacy of Ignatius Loyola over these past 450 years without feelings of humility and admiration. As all here know, the Society of Jesus' involvement in education began in 1537, when St. Ignatius and several companions from the University of Paris journeyed to Rome to serve the church. The story of that journey is as moving as it is heroic. When the travelers finally reached Rome, they worked with the poor, the aged and the sick, and, in addition, were asked by Pope Paul III to engage in scholarly disputations of theology at his breakfasts each day--something that one of your participants, John W. Padberg, S.J., director of the Institute of Jesuit Sources, has likened, given the early hour, to "pouring gin on corn flakes." The Pope apparently thrived on the diet, and the following year he appointed two members of the group to teach theology at the University of Rome.

The Jesuits' major undertakings in education, however, began in response to the Society's own needs to provide suitable education for those seeking membership in the Order. Although the first Jesuits, like Ignatius Loyola himself, were distinguished scholars, later recruits were less well versed in the knowledge of the day. St. Ignatius, at first, sent these men to the great universities of Europe, themselves largely products of the Catholic faith, to acquire the scholarly perspective expected of Jesuits.

Later, the Jesuits undertook to train new members of the Society, and also lay students, in their own colleges and universities. By 1556, the year Ignatius Loyola died, Jesuits had established some 40 colleges around the world. By 1600, there were 245 Jesuit schools, including 15 universities, and by 1749 the Jesuits had established 875 schools around the world--some 700 for the education of lay students and the remainder for training individuals for the priesthood. Those 200 years of educational growth still stand as an extraordinary achievement. Even the suppression of the Jesuits by Pope Clement XIV in 1773 and the havoc of the French Revolution could not destroy the Society's commitment to its educational ideals. Upon the Society's restoration in 1814, it again took up its educational



mission.

In the United States, Jesuits helped assimilate the great waves of immigrants who flooded to our shores, giving them knowledge through which they could contribute to American life while keeping the tenets of their faith in a land of largely Protestant heritage. Indeed, most of the 28 Jesuit colleges in existence today had their roots in the great century of immigration to the United States that stretched roughly from 1814 to 1914. Their success is a heroic story of dedication and scholarship and a major chapter in the annals of the church.

The purpose of Jesuit educational institutions was described simply and unequivocally by St. Ignatius himself in the fourth part of the Society's Constitutions: "The end of the Society and of its studies is to aid our fellow men to the knowledge and love of God and to the salvation of their souls."

There were, at least at the beginning, several characteristics that made these institutions of the Society of Jesus, at their best, truly "Jesuit" in character. First was the conviction that moral excellence was the ultimate goal of Jesuit education.

Second was the belief that scholarly excellence was vitally important because of the role it played in achieving moral excellence. One cannot help but contrast that with our current views of knowledge, belief and conduct. The synergy between the intellectual and moral aspects of life was reaffirmed by the 31st General Congregation of the Society in 1965-66, but it was less clearly reflected, I think, in the 32nd General Congregation's commitment of the Society to "the service of the faith and the promotion of justice"--and it is something, as I shall discuss in a moment, that Jesuit institutions may not yet have been fully able to achieve.

The third characteristic of the early Jesuit institutions was the priority given to the role of the teacher. The teacher's responsibility was not only to keep his instruction lively and his students engaged, but also to set an example, through his personal conduct and through his membership in the Jesuit community, that would inspire students to a life of moral and intellectual excellence and spiritual commitment. The Jesuit teacher served not only as instructor but also as mentor, friend and spiritual father to his students.



St. Ignatius himself expounded on this priority in a letter to the scholastics at Coimbra: "Be models of virtue yourselves, so as to make them what you are....Wherefore, if you would perfect others, be first perfect yourselves."

Yet in our current age, when Jesuits may be only a small fraction of the faculty at nominally Jesuit institutions, that ideal is far from easy to achieve.

### **The Present Context.**

But it is with the present that the major part of this assembly's discussions will be concerned. There is little doubt that the last several decades, especially since Vatican II, have been times of great turmoil and change, both within the Catholic Church and outside it, with wide scale questioning of institutions and purposes and wide scale experimentation with alternatives, some more productive than others.

Jesuits have not been immune to these wider influences. Prof. David O'Brien of Holy Cross College in Worcester, Mass., has noted that in the late 1960's Jesuits were concerned about their intellectual isolation and church domination, but by the early 1980's, having overcome those perceived shortcomings, in large measure through the appointment of non-Jesuits to their faculties and boards of trustees, they had new concerns about whether there remained anything distinctly "Catholic" or distinctly "Jesuit" about their institutions.

Maintaining the "Jesuit" character of Jesuit institutions has been complicated by the "graying" of the Society, the declining number of young men joining the Society of Jesus, and the smaller number of new members pursuing the advanced degrees that would enable them to teach at the university level. It has been complicated, as well, by rising enrollments at Catholic colleges and universities, which have increased by nearly 25 percent over the past decade, despite a slight decrease in the number of Catholic colleges during that time. It has been complicated, finally, by the other avenues of endeavor, beyond teaching, that were opened to Jesuits as a result of the Society's commitment to "serve the faith and promote justice." All these have diluted the Jesuit presence in Catholic higher education and have led some to wonder whether there would continue to be distinctively Jesuit institutions or



simply secularized institutions that could trace their founding to the Jesuits. The more I read the more puzzled I become, and this evening I should like to share with you some of the questions that have come to mind.

### **The Challenge for the Future.**

First, what is the mission of Jesuit education? Is it the original "end" of St. Ignatius: "to aid our fellow men to the knowledge and love of God and to the salvation of their souls"? Or does that 450-year-old goal need amplification or amendment for our current age? For example, St. Ignatius' view was that learning is not an end in itself but may lead to apostasy. How should we regard such a view today? How do we explore advocacy and its limits?

Is "to serve the faith and promote justice"--the goal emphasized by the 32nd General Congregation--a valid and adequate mission for Jesuit education? How does one define "justice"? Is there unanimity or a "Jesuit" position on what constitutes justice, and how it should be promoted? And if justice is promoted actively, what are the implications of advocacy for scholarly impartiality? Do we end up with something dangerously like dogmatic Marxist economics, which promotes only one point of view?

Are there alternative models for the mission of Jesuit education? Is Jesuit education really, as Alfred North Whitehead phrased it more generally, education to "promote the art of life"--education for responsible citizenship with a veneer of moral sensitivity? Or is the mission of Jesuit education to create a "Jesuit presence" or a "Catholic presence" or even a "Christian presence" in higher education?

In the earlier history of the Society, Jesuits were often distinguished professors in non-Jesuit universities. Is that also a major direction for our current age? And, if it is, will we soon speak only of the "Jesuit origins" of places like Georgetown, in much the same way that we might speak of the Christian origins of such institutions as Harvard, Brown, Dartmouth and Columbia?

Or is it the Jesuit mission to prepare outstanding professionals in medicine, law, engineering and other fields--as more and more Jesuit institutions seem to be doing, not only



at the graduate and professional level, but at the undergraduate level as well? Certainly that would be a perfectly valid and praiseworthy mission, but is there anything particularly "Jesuit" about it? And if outstanding professional preparation is your mission, how do Jesuit-trained alumni differ from those who have graduated from other institutions?

Or does the Jesuit view of education parallel the view of Cardinal John Henry Newman: that the true end of education is defined chiefly by its product of liberal learning? As Cardinal Newman put it in *The Idea of a University*: "... a university training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, of cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspirations, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life...."

A true university education, Cardinal Newman wrote, "gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them."

I have found all these ideas expressed in the recent literature of Jesuit higher education, yet the more I read, the more confused I become. A clear statement of mission is essential, but what is it? And who will develop it? Will it be developed by the Society, by each university or college, by each department, by each faculty member? Will this conference develop it? Can it? Should it?

### **Three Foundations of Jesuit Education.**

Whatever task is selected, and whatever group is charged with making the selection, Jesuit education seems to me to offer three foundations of great significance.

The first foundation is the contribution of principled and committed professors who acknowledge and profess their commitment. This foundation can combat the disciplinary isolation and fragmentation that now characterize much higher education, both within the Jesuit and Catholic institutions and outside them. It can provide students with a distinct





moral dimension in their educational as well as a purely academic one.

If it is argued that such acknowledged assumptions are dangerous, I answer that in my view the greater danger from unidentified and unacknowledged assumption; which can lead to a shallow conclusion in which all questions of ultimate purpose or value are either meaningless or moot. All teaching and all knowledge involve some assumptions. We must ask, what are the minimal assumptions for a Jesuit university or college? Do, should and/or must all members of the faculty share them?

The second foundation of a Jesuit education is a student-centered learning community. This contrasts sharply with the "discipline-centered" environment found in most universities and many colleges today. Jesuits traditionally have created a learning environment where, at least in retrospect, the student can truly say, "The professors were on my side."

But what are the implications of this for faculty-student relationships? Does a real community of learning exist on most Jesuit campuses? I hope it does, but the reality is often far different from the ideal, as Cardinal Newman pointed out in his characterization of the Oxford he knew. "A university," he wrote in *The Idea of a University* when he discussed "Knowledge Viewed in Relation to Learning," is "according to the usual designation, an alma mater, knowing her children one by one, not a foundry, or a mint, or a treadmill...." But, he continued, knowledge "never will issue from the most strenuous efforts of a set of teachers with no mutual sympathies and no intercommunion ...with no common principles, who are teaching or questioning a set of youth who do not know them, and do not know each other, on a large number of subjects, different in kind, and connected by no wide philosophy, three times a week, or three times a year, or once in three years, in chilly lecture rooms or on a pompous anniversary...."

And in our current age, we must also ask, "How can the sense of community on our campuses be strengthened? How can bonds between the faculty and the students be nurtured? What is the minimum basis of belief that is required for the faculty to make a true Jesuit community of learning?"

The third foundation of Jesuit education is excellence in scholarship. Why? Because if



Christ is Lord, then all of creation is his handiwork. If Jesuit educators are to have any influence, either with the young or with their colleagues, they must speak as engaged scholars. Without this, they will be merely quaint critics of a bygone age. They can speak with influence only if they speak with the authority of the scholar. This is something that Pope John Paul II, speaking to U.S. Catholic educators a decade ago, urged upon all Catholic colleges and universities, but it is something that not all have yet achieved.

I realize, of course, that Jesuit scholars are pulled in many directions. They have obligations to their disciplines, to their departmental colleagues and academic institutions. They have obligations to their students that often go beyond classroom teaching and research. They have obligations to the Jesuit community, which may overlap only partially with their roles as scholar teachers. And it is a simple fact that it is easier for some to be more pastoral than learned, just as it is easier for others to be more learned than pastoral.

Yet unless Jesuit scholars are, and are perceived to be, every bit as distinguished and academically involved as their lay colleagues, they will remain largely uninfluential as scholars and as teachers. Without a commitment to scholarly excellence, they will be unable to demonstrate "a concern to show the full meaning of the human person regenerated in Christ," as urged by Pope John Paul II, and unable to achieve the synergy between intellectual excellence and moral excellence toward which St. Ignatius aspired.

But is universal excellence realistic? Must choices be made? Probably no single Jesuit institution now qualifies as among the very top 20 or so U. S. institutions in terms of scholarly excellence. It is appropriate, I think, to ask why not and also to ask whether an appropriate goal might be one superb Jesuit institution.

### **The Task.**

The task of Jesuit institutions is education. On this we can readily agree, but we must also ask what this education's characteristics might be. Is the aim to inspire potential new Jesuits? Is it to inspire practicing Catholics or to reaffirm the Christian faith? Is the aim to provide intellectual sophistication and moral maturity? Do you want alumni and alumnae who are



creative and compassionate? Competent and committed? And if so, to what end? Social justice? Do you want your graduates to be liberally educated or professionally skilled? Do you have other goals? Or should the products of Jesuit education be all of the above?

And having decided upon your aim, you must ask how it can best be achieved. Can it be achieved through the curriculum? Charles Eliot's elective system at Harvard marked the end of a prescribed set of courses at most institutions, including Jesuit ones, eventually. Can coherence now be restored?

Can your aims be achieved through the use of mentors, who serve as friends of the students and models of what graduates might be? Can they be achieved through special "events" such as guest lecturers or programs on a particular topic or theme? Can they be achieved through the humanities and the performing arts, which seem best able to reach students across disciplinary lines? Can they be achieved by stressing the objectivity of the topic and the subjectivity of the process involved?

And you must decide where the debate on the "what," "how" and "why" of Jesuit education will take place. At large meetings like this one? In individual Jesuit houses? On individual campuses?

The second task is the renewal of professional practice. Such renewal is needed in medicine, in law, in business and in government, for there are immense problems in each of these fields. How can Jesuit institutions offer new models for professional practice? Partly, I suppose, through personal professional practice, partly perhaps through influencing the whole profession, partly through the examination of the societal implications of the professions: for example, the relationship between medicine and public health. We must also ask where this task begins.

The third task is a quest for coherence--within the disciplines, between the disciplines, in life at large. Can the Jesuit presence in higher education bring us to a new world view, such as that put forward by the French Jesuit Pierre-Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955)? Unbridled specialization is higher education's mortal sickness, leading to atomistic narrowness and



incoherence. In the memorable words of John Donne, "'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone" ("The First Anniversarie"). Or as T.S. Eliot asked in "The Rock":

*"Where is the life we have lost in living?*

*Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?*

*Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"*

The achievement of coherence is clearly a personal goal, yet we can perhaps examine the basis for such reordering. For Jesuits, the implications of the incarnation of Christ are immense. How different would your teaching be had that event never happened? Coherence comes from integrated lives. As Alfred North Whitehead wrote: "Education has but one aim: life, in all its richness and manifestations." Therefore the end of education is abundant living, in teacher and student alike.

Can the means be the curriculum? Perhaps, but perhaps it can also be achieved through personal example, and perhaps by grace in scholarly insight. Most would conclude that it is too narrow to teach, say, the Christian view of the novel or of biology, even though Christ the King is encountered in experience and in history and represented in creation. But how do the implications of the incarnation influence your teaching? Should they be known from your teaching? What is the proper balance between ideology and instruction?

Can Jesuits in higher education achieve something of a new renaissance here, providing models of "committed integrity" as they grapple with scholarship and contemporary society?

If Jesuit education is to be as distinctive, as empowering and as enriching in the 21st century as it has been since the 16th, your order will need to answer these questions and consider the implications of the answers. You will be undergirded in this by the three fundamentals that have given strength to Jesuit education for 450 years, while seeking to enrich them with new meaning suited to our current age.

Jesuit education, for all its other strengths, has always been characterized by its adaptability. Cardinal Newman once said that to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often. That is precisely what the Society of Jesus has done for more than 450 years.

When our successors gather here in the year 2089, for the 300th anniversary of



Georgetown, I wonder what Jesuit higher education will be then. Will there, I wonder, be more or fewer Jesuit institutions? Will there, perhaps, be none? Will there instead, perhaps, be institutions that will then be described as having "Jesuit origins": universities like Harvard, Yale and Princeton, which, though they were Christian in foundation, now owe no allegiance to any particular doctrinal view?

I believe the answers you develop during the course of the next few days may well determine the character of Jesuit higher education for the coming century. Beyond that, I believe they may have substantial significance for all of higher education. I say that because I believe that Robert Bolt was right when he commented, in his preface to "A Man for All Seasons: "...it is with us as it is with our cities--an accelerating flight to the periphery, leaving a center which is empty when the hours of business are over."

I wonder if that is not a malady of the present academy: the loss of a center when the hours of business are over, lacking something that goes beyond disciplinary subtlety, noisy academic freedom and personal gratification.

You have set yourselves a formidable agenda. First, what is the mission of Jesuit higher education? Is it to be a Jesuit presence, a pale influence, or something more? Is it to be a professional school, or a liberal arts institution? Is it to be some or all of these, developing in different ways in different places? Who decides? And how is the decision made?

Once that crucial issue of mission is decided, three questions emerge. First, what is to be the particular goal of education? Is it now meaningful and possible to talk about education that will provide a living synthesis of faith, culture and professional practice, and if so, what particular model should be adopted, and how will it be achieved? Second, can the Jesuit universities offer the renewal and perhaps the redemption of professional practice, in both an individual and a corporate sense? Third, can these same institutions contribute to the quest for coherence, both within the disciplines and in the wider sense of human understanding?

Of these things, all education--not just Jesuit education--now stands in need, and I see no group with quite the advantages of the Jesuit community in achieving them. Consider again the strong foundation from which you begin. You have a dedicated faculty. You have a



student-centered community. You represent a tradition of scholarly excellence. You have a healthy pragmatism in educational method and, not least, a security of personal grounding and conviction that follows knowledge as a worthy end and not as a source of personal gain, rejecting alike the seductions of unfettered professionalism and the emptiness of intellectual sophistry.

If the Society is to succeed in this difficult quest, there must, I presume, be some integrating principle to its activities, and I ask myself what it is. It seems to me that the heart of it was expressed very well by Cardinal Newman when, in *The Idea of a University*, he examined the "Bearing of Theology on Other Knowledge":

"All we see, hear, and touch, the remote sidereal firmament, as well as our own sea and land, and the elements which compose them, and the ordinances they obey, are His. The primary atoms of matter, their properties, their mutual action, their disposition and collocation, electricity, magnetism, gravitation, light and whatever other subtle principles or operations the wit of man is detecting or shall detect, are the work of His hands. From Him has been every movement which has convulsed and refashioned the surface of the earth...and so in the intellectual, moral, social and political world, Man, with his motives and works, his languages, his propagation, his diffusion, is from Him. Agriculture, medicine, and the arts of life are His gifts. Society, laws, government, He is their sanction."

A century later, Newman's words still have a powerful ring. But are they just florid Victorian prose, or are they to be taken seriously in all the complexity and ambiguity of our own generation?

Cardinal Newman's style is certainly Victorian, but the idea that he embodies is not his alone. It goes back to St. Paul, who described the principle behind his own teaching in an equally remarkable passage:

"Now Christ is the visible expression of the invisible God. He existed before creation began, for it was through him that everything was made, whether spiritual or material, seen or unseen. Through him, and for him, also, were created power and dominion, ownership and authority. In fact, every single thing was created through, and for, him. He is both the



first principle and the upholding principle of the whole scheme of creation" (Col. 1:1517).

This surely is a conviction upon which our present society divides. If there is a guiding strategy for all the Jesuits' efforts, it must presumably be the principle Paul enunciated. If his audacious claim is correct, the map of knowledge has a new orienting compass. It is systematic mining of that unique lode, the particular implications of that unique event and the personal exemplification of that unique relationship that have, over the centuries, represented the great strength and unifying power of Jesuit higher education. And it is that same principle that is surely the hope of Jesuit education and may indeed inspire all education now and for the future, here and elsewhere.

