

## “Ten Theses on Jesuit Higher Education”

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I joined the Society of Jesus in 1961 at age 18 because I knew I wanted to be a college teacher and I thought God wanted me to be a priest. After finishing my undergraduate studies, I was sent to Fordham to do doctoral studies in philosophy. I received my Ph.D. in 1973 and was ordained in 1975. From 1976 until 1993 I taught philosophy at Loyola University in New Orleans. I have thought and even prayed a great deal about Jesuit (and Catholic) higher education. I have written what amounts now to a stack of unpublished position papers, memos, letters, even a monograph-length study on the topic.

What I have come to think about Jesuit higher education--and much of it also applies to U.S. Catholic colleges and universities more generally--I propose in 10 theses for discussion. I can only sketch the arguments for each.

### **Thesis #1: The Second Vatican Council inspired radical changes in Jesuit colleges and universities, and these changes are the source of their current success.**

I claim that U.S. Jesuit colleges and universities have never been better than they are today precisely because of changes made after Vatican II. The council's discussion of mission strategies, lay ministries, ecumenical relations and religious freedom were especially influential.

That radical changes occurred in Jesuit colleges and universities I take to be obvious. Jesuit superiors gave up control over hiring and curricula, the two most fundamental determinants of any college or university's character. Ownership in most schools has been turned over to boards mostly controlled by lay persons. These new boards, as is the practice in U.S. higher education, choose the president, who serves at the board's pleasure--i.e.,



without a set term. The Jesuit superior general now no longer appoints the president. The president has been relieved of his responsibilities as religious superior of the Jesuits, and the post of superior of the Jesuit community has been created. The Jesuit general continues to appoint the community's superior for the traditional term of six years.

This first thesis claims not just that the changes in Jesuit colleges and universities were radical, but that these changes were both inspired by, and defensible by appeal to, Vatican II--in particular its treatment of missiology, laity, ecumenism and religious freedom.

First, Vatican II's missiology: In the late 1960's Jesuit colleges and universities "went native," as it were. To minister more effectively in American higher education, Jesuits inculturated their mission, accommodating it to the tribal customs and mores of the wider U.S. higher education culture. Vatican II called for such accommodation to be more effective. Jesuits had in fact been accommodating all along to the American educational scene--for example, dividing the six-year program characteristic of European Jesuit colleges and gymnasias into four-year high schools and four-year colleges typical in the United States. The inculturation strategy worked. Even after completing the mission to help Catholic immigrants get the education they needed to succeed economically and socially, our colleges and universities have prospered. Many are highly respected by the wider community, including the higher education community, as they never were in the past.

Vatican II on the laity: Inculturating our mission involved inviting Catholic lay men and women to share that mission as faculty, staff, administrators and board members. Needs due to expansion--the 1960's were an unprecedented period of growth in the numbers of students in colleges--partly explain such an invitation, but lay involvement was more than a practical necessity. Vatican II had called on all the baptized to live their mission to promote the kingdom of God. The church was not just the pope and the bishops, or the clergy and religious, but the whole people of God, all of whom had gifts to contribute.

Vatican II on ecumenism: The decrees on ecumenism called for dialogue with fellow Christians, Jews, other believers and nonbelievers. Jesuit colleges and universities hired faculty and staff from backgrounds other than Catholic. This seemed both consonant with



and positively called for by the council. The dialogue it urged could now happen within the Catholic university itself. Catholics no longer needed to go outside the college or university to find dialogue partners.

Vatican II on religious freedom: The council's statement on religious freedom affirmed the inalienable right of persons to follow their consciences in matters of religion. Separation of church and state was accepted as legitimate. The doctrine that "error has no rights" was rejected. The council's teaching implied that religious belief and practice in the Catholic college or university were matters of free choice. Required Mass attendance, for example, the whole philosophy and theology curriculum did not seem consonant with such freedom.

**Thesis #2: The radical changes inspired by Vatican II led to the challenges and perils to our mission in higher education that we feel today.**

Matteo Ricci and other Jesuits also "went native" in their mission to China in the 17th century. Their mission was suppressed because certain church authorities judged that the integral Gospel was being compromised. A strategy of inculturation runs genuine risks that missionaries will go in the culture's door, as it were, and never come out their own. Many great North American universities, were once clearly and openly religious (e.g., Harvard, Duke, Syracuse, Boston University). They have become purely secular--indistinguishable from their nonreligious counterparts except for spacious and now largely unused chapels. Catholic colleges and universities run this same risk. Influential clerics have already claimed that particular Jesuit colleges or universities are no longer Catholic. Hence all the recent writing, researching and conferencing about Jesuit (and Catholic) colleges' and universities' religious "identity" and "mission."

**Thesis #3: Jesuit and Catholic colleges and universities need to debate and decide how their religious identity or mission modifies simply being good (even excellent) American colleges and universities.**

This thesis follows directly from the previous thesis about inculturation, which implies



not just accommodation to, but criticism of, the prevailing culture. The principal place where the critical and qualifying elements must be discerned and decided is the particular college or university community itself. I propose a broad criterion for being Jesuit and Catholic, and a procedural one at that. My basis for this position is in Alasdair MacIntyre's claim that a living tradition is in large part a continuing debate about the current meaning of that tradition in light of its past and in view of the present. A continuing willingness to debate Jesuit and Catholic identity and mission, to ask anew what it means today to be a Catholic and Jesuit college or university, qualifies such a school as Catholic and Jesuit. Would any and all substantive answers qualify? It depends on what they are. Clearly any such community's debate must acknowledge past self-understandings and attend to current and official church teaching such as the Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (1990). But the religious identity could be declared null and void only on the day that groups and individuals no longer entertained the question of how the Gospel modifies being simply a college or university.

**Thesis #4: The process of discussing the religious identity or mission and the inspiration derived from that process will be far more important than any statements formulated.**

Frequently enough, the outcome of the discussions and debates that thesis #3 recommends are "mission statements" or "profiles of the ideal graduate." On the one hand, these statements often seem bland and uninspiring--catalog rhetoric--or, on the other hand, are so lofty and ambitious as to be unattainable. The latter lead to the conclusion that the college or university never has been and never will be what it claims.

Effective dialogue about mission has different aims. The result we ought to seek is the sharpening of individuals' and constituent groups' sense of how, by doing well what they were hired to do (teach, research, feed, shelter, recruit, coach, clean), they might further the Catholic and Jesuit intellectual and formational aims of their college or university. Debating the question of religious identity should result in the sense that "I genuinely do have



something to contribute to at least some element of the religious mission"--whether the person be Jesuit, Catholic, Jew, Buddhist, agnostic or atheist For example, the atheist who doubts the reasonableness of faith or questions belief in God challenges the believing faculty and students to appreciate why they believe, the unbelieving to appreciate why they do not and the agnostic to decide one way or the other. Adult religious belief (or unbelief) is developed by the kind of intellectual questioning and examination that ought to characterize Jesuit colleges and universities.

**Thesis #5: A college or university's Catholic and Jesuit identity and mission must be realized in many specifics if the religious mission is to be effective.**

Our language about the university may obscure the truth that "university" does not really refer to one thing, but to many things. A university is made up of current students, former students, faculty (divided into schools, departments, programs), professional staff, support staff, administrators of many ranks and stripes, boards both governing and advisory. Religious identity is an overall impression derived from courses taught, lectures given, symposia held, phone calls answered, students counseled, words of consolation spoken, misdeeds forgiven, whenever these activities are inspired and qualified by Gospel standards. The religious mission is, above all, a person-by-person achievement, or else it does not happen, catalog rhetoric and mission statement notwithstanding.

**Thesis #6: Theology is not as important to the Catholic and Jesuit identity and mission of our colleges and universities as some have claimed.**

I say this not to affirm that some other subject is more important--for example, philosophy or literature. I make this claim despite the primacy St. Ignatius Loyola gave to theology in Part IV of the Jesuit Constitutions.

George Ganss, in his 1954 masterpiece, St. Ignatius' Idea of a Jesuit University, appealed to the history of Jesuit education to formulate 12 principles "in the spirit of St. Ignatius' Constitutions on education." The two principles he articulated that had most to say about



the actual curriculum gave pride of place to theology: "A care to impart a scientifically reasoned Catholic outlook on life" was the most important intellectual end, and "Among all the subjects in the curriculum of his universities, Ignatius gave the place of importance to theology." I am quite sure, however, that theology's primacy in our first schools was not so simple and clear, and I realize Father Ganss is not exactly claiming it was.

For Part IV of the Jesuit Constitutions did not originally refer to what we think of as a university, since it describes the program of intellectual formation for young Jesuits preparing to become priests. Theology is obviously the most important subject in educating priests. Granted that lay students were soon admitted into the schools founded to educate young Jesuits, the vast majority of lay students did not ever study "scientific theology."

To deny that theology played a central role in the curriculum of our schools for lay students is not to say that Christian religious formation was unimportant. Such formation was central. But these schools were not universities or colleges in the American sense; they were more like high schools. And the religious formation in these high schools was not primarily accomplished through formal classroom religious instruction.

This reading of history is not meant to deny that, today, theology might have primacy in the curriculum of the contemporary Jesuit college or university and might be the integrating focus of all studies. But such a proposal must ultimately be presented for a particular Jesuit college or university's faculty to debate and decide. After Vatican II we have agreed, correctly in my view, that the faculty should have the primary responsibility for determining curricula. The pro argument would have to be that new theology requirements, or whatever the proposals for theology's role, are good things for this Jesuit college or university here and now, so good that they should command student time, faculty positions or endowment revenues instead of, or in addition to, what is now being done.

The suggestion might well be that a religious studies department become a theology department and religious studies requirements become theology or Scripture requirements (if they currently are not). What is not a legitimate argument in this context is to claim that a particular role for theology is of the essence of a Jesuit college or university, and that a Jesuit



school where theology does not play this role is no longer "real" or "authentic" but merely a "pseudo-" Jesuit school.

**Thesis #7: Certain ways of talking about Catholic and Jesuit identity and mission harm efforts to achieve these very goals.**

The religious "identity" and "mission" of Vatican II inspired Jesuit universities and colleges are qualities to be achieved in the present and in the future. Returning to sources in Ignatian spirituality, the Jesuit Constitutions and early Jesuit educational practice and theory is essential and quite suggestive for what is to be done today. But what we find must be brought into the many dialogues and to the deciding bodies as proposals for what might be done today to further our religious mission.

I formulate this thesis as much against my own tendency to argue in an apodictic way as any one else's, for in the heat of argument I would characteristically insist that the primacy of theology (or religious studies) and philosophy in the core curriculum is essential to a Jesuit university. I argue and have argued--quite vociferously--before the relevant recommending and deciding bodies that my school's 9-hour requirement in both religious studies and philosophy (in a 48-hour core) stamps the curriculum as distinctively Catholic and Jesuit. Nonreligious schools do not emphasize these subjects. I have made this argument to colleagues considering a core revision, but in a context where departments not presently offering required courses argued that their discipline would enhance students' liberal education and that the easiest way to add new requirements was to cut philosophy and religious studies requirements. After all, they argued, it is hardly fair that philosophy and religion should have nine hours each while political science and sociology, for example, have none. (Our "justice" talk, at least, has been heard!)

In such a debate, I am sorely tempted to identify my adversaries as opposed to the university's religious mission--to think in terms of "us" who are loyal to this mission and "them" who are against it. They must be anti-clerical at least, anti-religious at worst. When I think and talk like this, I cease to see faculty colleagues as correspondingly engaged in the



complicated work of making Loyola a better university.

Some colleagues may not know much about the university's religious mission because we are often not adept at explaining it or forthright in asking, during the hiring process, how they might contribute to it. Or they may simply judge differently about what in the concrete should take priority in allocating scarce resources of time and money. My school has a small chapel that seats no more than 300 students, and an old, unattractive and cramped library. Which need is greater? Happily, I believe we have decided to build a library first. Small as our chapel is, it meets our current needs in a time when the students' religious freedom is respected. Our current library does not meet our academic needs.

**Thesis #8: We need to beware of "punishing ideals."**

Those who advocate and promote Jesuit identity and mission in the university need to avoid making their view of this mission into a "punishing ideal," one so exalted, so lofty, so impossible to achieve that, before it, we stand condemned as failures, now and always. The Spirit's work among those who are trying to be more faithful disciples, St. Ignatius reminds us, is like "a drop of water penetrating a sponge" (Spiritual Exercises, #335). The Spirit's activity is not violent in these circumstances, not disturbing. It inspires and strengthens. Jesuit colleges and universities have received abundant gifts of grace and nature, especially in the years during and after Vatican II. We rightly press on and cannot rest content with what we have achieved, but we are unfaithful to God's work among us if we do not recognize what we have been given. American Jesuit colleges and universities have never been better, not just as colleges and universities, but as Jesuit and Catholic. In these circumstances we can expect God's leading will be gentle, knitting a community together rather than dividing and separating it.

**Thesis #9: While our end is to promote the Catholic and Jesuit identity and mission of our institutions, we should think of specifically academic, school-oriented means. Models for exercising such influence already exist.**



We should never forget that in choosing a mission in and to colleges and universities, we have chosen to shape institutions whose primary mission is intellectual (teaching, learning, research). Faculty must teach and research; students must go to class and study. They are both free (after Vatican II) not to go to Mass, make retreats, attend diversity workshops and so forth.

Many interest groups compete to promote their ideas and values within a university context. They most often do so by trying to shape the university's intellectual agenda. For example, businessmen and industrialists frequently enough promote free enterprise by endowing chairs, institutes or lecture series and by funding essay contests, research grants or summer faculty institutes. Disciplines and professions compete for scarce university resources by making accreditation contingent upon levels of financial support, numbers of faculty positions, student-faculty ratios and curricular content.

Such tactics suggest that Boston College's endowed Jesuit Institute provides a model that ought to be copied. The Jesuit Institute sponsors and funds discussion groups, symposia, fellowships and research that get Jesuit mission concerns (for instance, the interconnection of faith and justice, international education, peace studies) on university faculty and students' already overcrowded agendas.

The summer institute, "Faith and Intellectual Life," held at Fairfield University in Connecticut last summer--see James R. Kelly's article (*AM*. 9/11/93) describing it--provides another example of what I am advocating. Jesuit colleges and universities ought to sponsor one or more such institutes each summer. The model is common in American higher education. The National Endowment for the Humanities, for example, has for many years sponsored summer faculty workshops and seminars, some for as long as eight weeks, to promote more effective teaching of the humanities.

We ought also to explore processes and criteria for officially accrediting our colleges and universities as Jesuit. Such accreditation would have to be willingly sought by individual schools, but it would focus in a concrete way the question of what exactly it means to be a Jesuit college or university. In schools achieving accreditation, the means to insure command



of resources for the Jesuit mission agenda would be in place and accountability for the mission established. Short of accreditation or comparable measures, I fear better organized constituencies will win this battle for resources to achieve special intellectual interests.

At my school, while the Jesuit Identity Task Force was devoting thousands of hours to the general religious mission, a talented, savvy, irenic group of women and men faculty have effectively promoted women's studies. They have established essay prizes, discussion groups and a women's studies minor. Part of their strategy has been to encourage all faculty members to address women's issues in

existing courses and to develop new courses that treat women's issues. My own sexual ethics course, for example, was cross-listed as a women's studies course. There is a lesson here for us Catholic and Jesuit missionaries.

**Thesis #10: Catholic and Jesuit colleges and universities that remain faithful to the inspirations of Vatican II may have to bear the bitter cross of being officially stripped of the name "Catholic."**

No one knows the final outcome of current efforts by the Vatican and U.S. bishops to implement the "Proposed Ordinances for Catholic Colleges and Universities in the United States." Ladislav Orsy, S.J., has shown (*AM*, 11/20/93) how the three ordinances requiring Catholic theology professors to obtain an official mandate to teach are unworkable, unwise and potentially destructive in the U.S. context. I perhaps naively trust the ingenuity of canonists and theologians like Father Orsy, as well as the strong opposition of Catholic colleges and universities themselves, to persuade U.S. Catholic bishops and the Roman authorities not to impose ordinances incompatible with U.S. academic freedom.

But Catholic and Jesuit colleges and universities may be faced with the painful choice either to remain authentic post-Vatican II American colleges and universities or to lose official designation as Catholic. To be an authentic Vatican II--inspired university means to support academic freedom (freedom to teach, to inquire, to debate) and, further, to support the freedom of faculties to recruit fellow faculty and to assess their qualifications and



performance when called for. To lose or be stripped of the name "Catholic" would not destroy the Catholicity of the college or university truly formed according to Vatican II's vision of the church as the entire people of God on mission to announce the kingdom of God to the world for its free acceptance or rejection.

We members of such a university, however, would surely have a great deal of explaining to do to our various constituencies. We might be hurt financially, and our public reputation diminished. Our explanations of why we continue to claim a Catholic identity and mission might fail with some, even many. But we might have no other choice if the conditions for accepting or gaining official recognition as Catholic destroyed the project of being an authentic, Vatican II--inspired Catholic and Jesuit college or university.

We have no guarantees that our mission in Jesuit colleges and universities will succeed. In the past, Jesuit missions have failed. Some were abandoned. Others were suppressed. A few succeeded. But for now we go forward, seeking to discern the next step God calls us to in our current mission to Jesuit colleges and universities--always in such matters, trusting utterly in God.

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