

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 40 *Re-creating Jesuit Higher Education: The General's Challenge*

Article 5

9-1-2011

Challenges to Jesuit Higher Education Today

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Recommended Citation

Nicolás, S.J., Adolfo (2011) "Challenges to Jesuit Higher Education Today," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 40, Article 5.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol40/iss1/5>

Selections from:
Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry:

CHALLENGES TO JESUIT HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY

ADOLFO NICOLÁS, S.J.

Remarks for Networking Jesuit Higher Education: Shaping the Future for a Humane, Just, Sustainable Globe

MEXICO CITY, APRIL 23, 2010 How then does this new context of globalization, with the exciting possibilities and serious problems it has brought to our world, challenge Jesuit higher education to re-define, or at least, re-direct its mission? I would like to invite you to consider three distinct but related challenges to our shared mission that this new “explosion of interdependence” poses to us. First, promoting depth of thought and imagination. Second, re-discovering and implementing our “universality” in the Jesuit higher education sector. Third, renewing the Jesuit commitment to learned ministry.

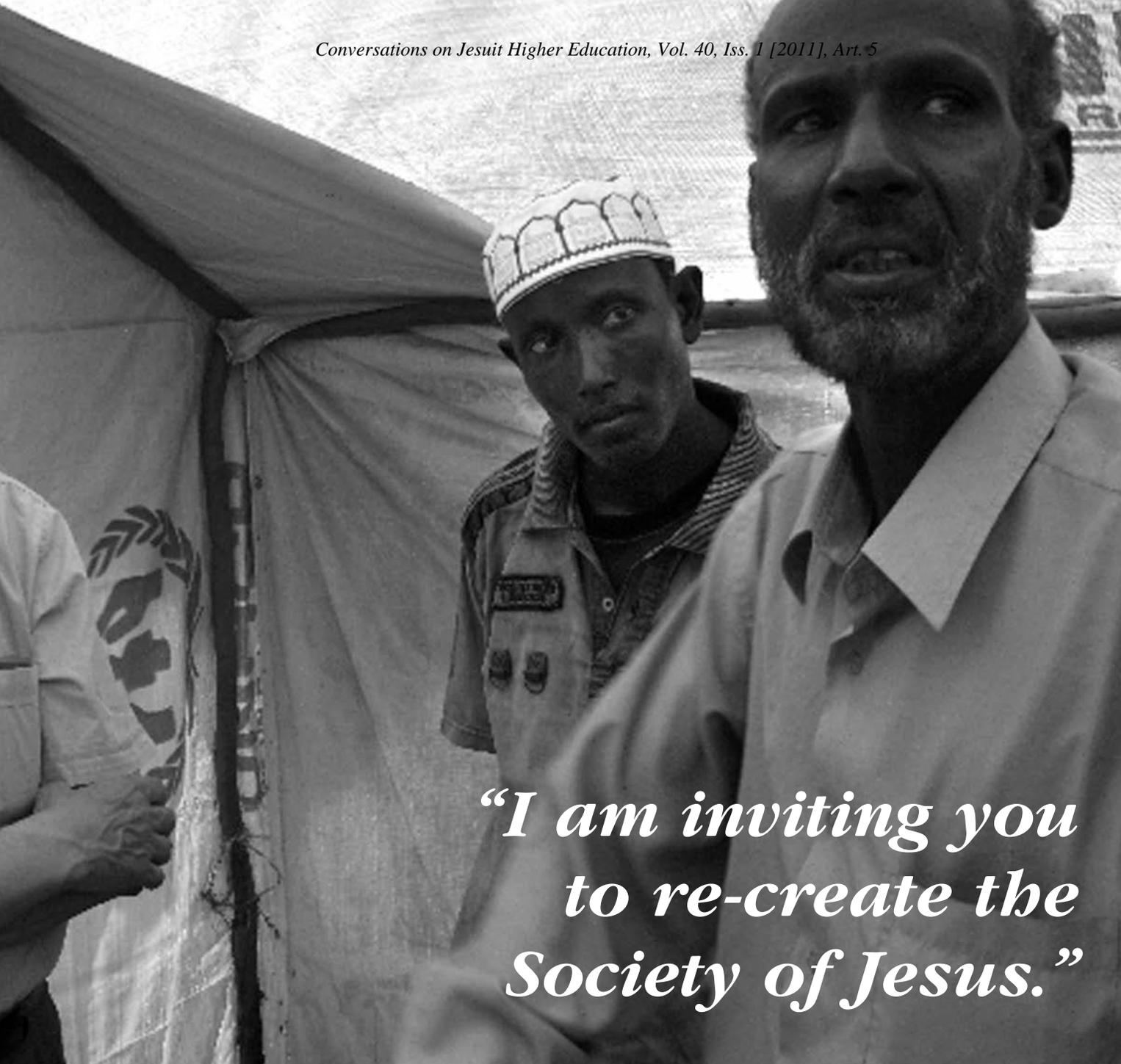
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Promoting Depth of Thought and Imagination

I will begin quite forthrightly with what I see as a negative effect of globalization, what I will call the globalization of

superficiality. I am told that I am the first Jesuit General to use e-mail and to surf the Web, so I trust that what I will say will not be mistaken as a lack of appreciation of the new information and communication technologies and their many positive contributions and possibilities. However, I think that all of you have experienced what I am calling the globalization of superficiality and how it affects so profoundly the thousands of young people entrusted to us in our institutions. When one can access so much information so quickly and so painlessly; when one can express and publish to the world one’s reactions so immediately and so unthinkingly in one’s blogs or micro-blogs; when the latest opinion column from the *New York Times* or *El Pais*, or the newest viral video can be spread so





*“I am inviting you
to re-create the
Society of Jesus.”*

quickly to people half a world away, shaping their perceptions and feelings, then the laborious, painstaking work of serious, critical thinking often gets short-circuited.

One can “cut-and-paste” without the need to think critically or write accurately or come to one’s own careful conclusions. When beautiful images from the merchants of consumer dreams flood one’s computer screens, or when the ugly or unpleasant sounds of the world can be shut out by one’s MP3 music player, then one’s vision, one’s perception of reality, one’s desiring can also remain shallow. When one can become “friends” so quickly and so painlessly with mere acquaintances or total strangers on one’s social networks – and if one can so easily “unfriend” another without the hard work of encounter or, if need be, confrontation and then rec-

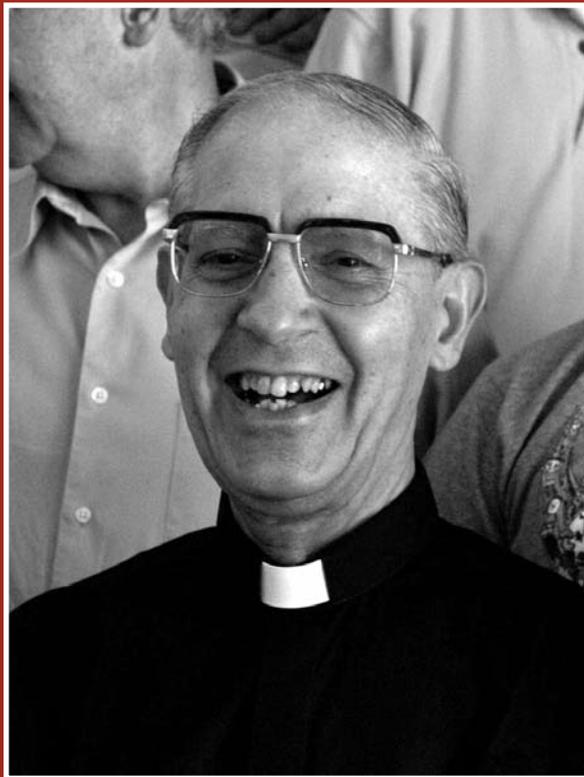
onciliation – then relationships can also become superficial.

When one is overwhelmed with such a dizzying pluralism of choices and values and beliefs and visions of life, then one can so easily slip into the lazy superficiality of relativism or mere tolerance of others and their views, rather than engaging in the hard work of forming communities of dialogue in the search of truth and understanding. It is easier to do as one is told than to study, to pray, to risk, or to discern a choice. I think the challenges posed by the globalization of superficiality – superficiality of thought, vision, dreams, relationships, convictions – to Jesuit higher education need deeper analysis, reflection, and discernment than we have time for this morning. All I wish to signal here is my concern that our new technologies, together with the underlying val-

ues such as moral relativism and consumerism, are shaping the interior worlds of so many, especially the young people we are educating, limiting the fullness of their flourishing as human persons and limiting their responses to a world in need of healing intellectually, morally, and spiritually.

The Ignatian imagination is a creative process that goes to the depth of reality and begins recreating it. Ignatian contemplation is a very powerful tool, and it is a shifting from the left side of the brain to the right. But it is essential to understand that imagination is not the same as fantasy. Fantasy is a flight from reality, to a world where we create images for the sake of a diversity of images. Imagination grasps reality. Creativity might be one of the most needed things in present times – real creativity, not merely following slogans or repeating what we have heard or what we have seen in *Wikipedia*. Real creativity is an active, dynamic process of finding responses to real questions, finding alternatives to an unhappy world that seems to go in directions that nobody can control.

When I was teaching theology in Japan, I thought it was important to begin with pastoral theology – the basic experience – because we cannot ask a community that has been educated and raised in a different tradition to begin with speculative theology. But in approaching pastoral theology, I was particularly puzzled by creativity: What makes a pastor creative? I wondered. I came to realize that very often we accept dilemmas where there are no dilemmas. Now and then, we face a true dilemma: We don't know what to choose, and whatever we choose is going to be wrong. But those situations are very, very rare. More often, situations appear to be dilemmas because we don't want to think creatively, and we give up.



ADOLFO NICOLÁS, S.J.

SUPERIOR GENERAL OF THE SOCIETY OF JESUS
BORN APRIL 29, 1936
VILLAMURIEL DE CERRATO, PALENCIA, SPAIN

Fr. Nicolás entered the Society in 1953, studied at University of Alcalá, Sophia University in Tokyo, the Gregorian University in Rome, and served at the Ateneo de Manila University and Sophia, where he taught theology for 30 years.

In several ways he is in the spirit of Fr. Gen. Pedro Arrupe, who also served for many years in Japan, and whom he describes as “a great missionary, a national hero, a man on fire” and who was passionately dedicated to the Society’s commitment to social justice. He speaks his native Spanish, Catalan, English, Italian, French, and Japanese.

Most of the time, there is a way out, but it requires an effort of the imagination. It requires the ability to see other models, to see other patterns.

Likewise, Jesuit education should change us and our students. We educators are in a process of change. There is no real, deep encounter that doesn't alter us. What kind of encounter do we have with our students if we are not changed? And the meaning of change for our institutions is “who our students become,” what they value, and what they do later in life and work. To put it another way, in Jesuit education, the depth of learning and imagination encompasses and integrates intellectual rigor with reflection on the experience of reality together with the creative imagination to work toward constructing a more humane, just, sustainable, and faith-filled world. The experience of reality includes the broken world, especially the world of the poor, waiting for healing. With this depth, we are also able to recognize God as already at work in our world.

Re-discovering Universality

Thus far, largely what we see is each university, each institution working as a **projecto social** by itself, or at best with a national or regional network. And this, I believe, does not take sufficient advantage of what our new globalized world offers us as a possibility for greater service. People

speak of the Jesuit university or higher education system. They recognize the “family resemblances” between Comillas in Madrid and Sanatadharma in Jogjakarta, between Javieriana in Bogota and Loyola College in Chennai, between Saint Peter's in Jersey City and St. Joseph in Beirut. But, as a matter of fact, there is only a commonality of Ignatian

inspiration rather than a coherent “Jesuit university network”: Each of our institutions operates relatively autonomously of each other, and as a result, the impact of each as a **project to social** is limited. The 35th General Congregation observed that “in this global context, it is important to highlight the extraordinary potential we possess as international and multicultural body.” It seems to me that, until now, we have not fully made use of this “extraordinary potential” for “universal” service as institutions of higher education. I think this is precisely the focus of many of your presentations and your concerns here.

This brings me to my main point: Can we not go beyond the loose family relationships we now have as institutions, and re-imagine and re-organize ourselves so that, in this globalized world, we can more effectively realize the universality which has always been part of Ignatius’ vision of the Society? Isn’t this the moment to move like this?

Learned Ministry

First, an important challenge to the learned ministry of our universities today comes from the fact that globalization has created “knowledge societies,” in which development of persons, cultures and societies is tremendously dependent on access to knowledge in order to grow. Globalization has created new inequalities between those who enjoy the power given to them by knowledge, and those who are excluded from its benefits because they have no access to that knowledge.

Second, our globalized world has seen the spread of two rival “isms”: on the one hand, a dominant “world culture” marked by an aggressive secularism that claims that faith has nothing to say to the world and its great problems (and which often claims that religion, in fact, is one of the world’s great problems); on the other hand, the resurgence of various fundamentalisms, often fearful or angry reactions to postmodern world culture, which escape complexity by taking refuge in a certain “faith” divorced from or unregulated by human reason. And, as

Pope Benedict points out, both “secularism and fundamentalism exclude the possibility of fruitful dialogue and effective cooperation between reason and religious faith.”

Conclusion

I would like to end, however, by inviting you to step back for a moment to consider a perhaps more fundamental question that I have been asking myself and others over the past two years: If Ignatius and his first companions were to start the Society of Jesus again today, would they still take on universities as a ministry of the Society?

I think one of the most, perhaps the most, fundamental ways of dealing with this is to place ourselves in the spiritual space of Ignatius and the first companions and – with their energy, creativity, and freedom – ask their basic question afresh: What are the needs of the Church and our world, where are

we needed most, and where and how can we serve best? We are in this together, and that is what we must remember rather than worrying about Jesuit survival. I would invite you, for a few moments, to think of yourselves, not as presidents or CEOs of large institutions, or administrators or academics, but as co-founders of a new religious group, discerning God’s call to you as an apostolic body in the Church. In this globalized world, with all its lights and shadows, would – or how would – running all these universities still be the best way we can respond to the mission of the Church and the needs of the world? Or perhaps, the question should be: What kind of universities, with what emphases and what directions, would

we run, if we were re-founding the Society of Jesus in today’s world? I am inviting, in all my visits, all Jesuits to re-create the Society of Jesus, because I think every generation has to re-create the faith, they have to re-create the journey, they have to re-create the institutions. This is not only a good desire. If we lose the ability to re-create, we have lost the spirit. ■



Father Adolfo Nicolas meets with local spiritual leaders while on a trip to India.