

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

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

Article 11

September 2011

For Spiritual Depth: The Questions We Must Ask Ourselves

Patrick Lee, S.J.

Patrick Howell, S.J.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Lee, S.J., Patrick and Howell, S.J., Patrick (2011) "For Spiritual Depth: The Questions We Must Ask Ourselves," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 40, Article 11.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol40/iss1/11>

FOR SPIRITUAL DEPTH

The Questions We Must Ask Ourselves

By Patrick Lee, S.J., and Patrick Howell S.J.

All Jesuit institutions in their origins arise out of the inspiration of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. They are meant to be centers for prayer, imagination, and discernment for what God is doing here and now so that this discerning vision might lead to action on behalf of justice and truth. Those inspired and formed by the Spiritual Exercises regularly ask, “Where is God laboring today?” The concluding meditation in the Spiritual Exercises, for instance, is entirely about going deeper into all of our experience, our history, our learning, and our journey with God.

So a vital question for Jesuits and Jesuit collaborators today is whether American Jesuit higher education is the place where this discernment continues to happen. Are we consciously asking how God is working and laboring in and through these Jesuit institutions? Is this the place which provides the most effective instrument for reconciliation with God, with one another, and with our Earth?

This Ignatian-inspired focus became more evident after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Following the mandate of the Council to go back to the founder’s vision—in our case, Ignatius of Loyola—to go deeper into Jesuit spirituality, and at the same time to follow the “signs of the times,” the 28 American Jesuit universities have made a complete overhaul. They have become more articulate, more focused, more broadly aware of the Jesuit vision than they were when this vision was simply taken for granted because of the large number of Jesuits on campus. The Jesuit mission, now shared by a broad array of colleagues, has taken root and flourished.

But now Father Nicolás invites us to go forward with still greater depth and creative imagination.

At a meeting with the American Jesuit Provincials in February, 2011, in Jamaica, Father Nicolás continued his probing exploration of the key themes he had articulated at Mexico City the year before. He provocatively asked how the Society, the Church, and our Jesuit institutions have them-

selves been waylaid from pursuing greater depth. What have been the distractions over these last 45 years which at times has led to shallowness rather than depth? What have been the misguided steps, which the Society, the Church, and our Jesuit institutions embraced and hence been distracted from pursuing greater depth? Have we, driven by prestige, responded too quickly, too casually, to the fads or impulses of our diverse societies? Hence he continued to urge Jesuit higher education to “deeper analysis, reflection, and discernment.”

Father Nicolás suggested at that same Jamaica meeting an iconic metaphor for how the international Society of Jesus might collaborate more fully, more richly, more deeply: He said that he looks to Africa for new **life** and vitality, to the West for its traditional pursuit of the **truth**, and to Asia for the **Way** (Tao) for intuition, harmony, and beauty to complement the West’s overreliance on rationality.

These questions about depth and creatively are backdrops for the further question which we pose: “Has the Jesuit mission lost its groundedness in the *Exercises* of Ignatius?” We offer three considerations:

Dialogue

A constant in earlier Jesuit education was the dialogue between faith and reason, faith and science, faith and philosophy. Karl Rahner, the great 20th century Jesuit theologian, engaged in dialogue with Heidegger and the whole Enlightenment tradition in order to re-think and to re-imagine all the great mysteries of the Christian tradition.

Patrick Lee, S.J., former vice president for mission and ministry at Gonzaga University, is currently the Jesuit provincial of the Oregon Province. Patrick Howell S.J., professor of pastoral theology, is the rector of the Jesuit community at Seattle University and chair of the National Seminar in Jesuit Higher Education.

How do we do this today? Do our Jesuit universities provide an arena where faith engages science? Do our philosophy departments provide a dialectical partner for faith? Given the dominance of deconstructionism and its premises of relativism and power interests, is it even possible to establish a dialogue with faith?

When the Jesuits affirmed that a central element of their mission was “Our Mission and Interreligious Dialogue” (GC34), they cited the fourfold dialogue recommended by the Church: a) the *dialogue of life*; b) *dialogue of action*; c) *the dialogue of religious experience*; d) *and the dialogue of theological exchange*. Is this rich level of dialogue occurring in every dimension of our universities?

Does the undergraduate core, the required course of studies, the heart of a Jesuit university, still carry the intellectual component of the Jesuit mission? For 420 years (1551-1971) the core rather clearly advanced the formation of the whole person and the God-given dignity of every individual. Students in Jesuit universities and colleges had a strong dose of ethics and spiritual formation, of the humanities and languages, with a few requirements in science and mathematics. The core was not just for educating the whole person, but for the sake of the world, for the sake of shaping leaders who addressed unjust social structures that perpetuated poverty and oppression.

What happens when we strip out art and poetry and literature from our cores leaving only skeletal remains? As Mary Reichardt, in *Between Human and Divine* (2010) aptly explains,

In a postmodern world where the primacy of reason has disintegrated, the arts may actually grow in significance as a means of re-imagining the current cultural shift. Despite a variety of contemporary forms and themes, Catholic literature continues to draw on tradition in emphasizing the human encounter with transcendence and mystery, and in exploring ultimate questions in light of the incarnational and sacramental basis of the faith. As does all art, its prophetic voice can help point the way toward a new synthesis of culture and faith, making all things new in Christ.

Has the laudable movement towards globalization, multicultural awareness, and welcomed diversity been achieved at the expense of a common core, which formerly provided a source of identity, a fulcrum from which to leverage one’s convictions? Have the increasing accreditation demands of professional schools devalued

the core? Without an adequate metaphysics and a theological background, how can Christology, the understanding of Jesus Christ alive and living in our world today, be taught and understood? In the Spiritual Exercises, the contemplations using the “application of the senses” on scenes from the life of Christ provide the integrating experience for an encounter with Christ. Does the core, with an emphasis on discerning wisdom, still provide the integrating principle for all disciplines?

Since 1970 our Jesuit universities have sought to hire the very best in their fields—topnotch scholars and researchers in their fields. But, often enough, these talented faculty members have no understanding or background in the Jesuit mission when they step through the doors of a Jesuit college. Consequently, the college or university is constantly starting from scratch, infusing them with Jesuit Mission 101, hoping that somehow they will be able to carry forward the Jesuit core of the university. Do we need in the future to be much more attentive to hiring for mission and hiring at least a cadre who have had previous experience with Jesuit education?

Wisdom

The universities in the 12th century arose out of the monastic traditions, especially the Benedictines and Carthusians. They were marked by quiet reflection, study, and questions seeking wisdom. Likewise, the Jesuit colleges in the 16th century were centers of wisdom, places where conversation, reflection, prayer, and the arts could flourish. And they went a step further: they were creating leaders who could act on behalf of the poor, the widow, and the oppressed. They were asking, “What is God doing here?” “Where is God laboring in the world today?” Such contemplative study was for the sake of going deeper into the realm of mystery, exploration, and discovery.

Since the worldwide revolutions of the 1960s in which the voices of wisdom were muted and the voice of youth given ascendancy and the primary value, we have lost respect for tradition, for leisure as the basis of culture, and opted for measurable outcomes, analytical results, and education as commodity. The immediate, the now, the instant drive our psyches and our souls.

Likewise, financial pressures, economic upheavals, and the dominant values of American culture have driven Jesuit universities to rely more and more on business models often enough antithetical to primary Jesuit values.

The academy itself, ironically, gets pulled into this

Given the dominance of deconstructionism is a dialogue with faith possible?

New talented faculty members do not know the background of Jesuit education

mode of production—generating articles for tenure files without questioning at times whether they offer helpful insight and actual wisdom. Does the academy allow itself the leisure “to waste time” for a dialogue of discovery, for research in depth, and for creating penetrating lectures that dispel illusions and arrive at truth?

Hope

At the heart of our Jesuit institutions lies a contemplation on hope—hope for each of us and hope for our world. At its best Jesuit education engages in a dialectic of the present with the past, of the ephemeral with the wise, of faith with reason, of personal spirituality with prophetic action on behalf of the common good.

Discernment in the Jesuit tradition lies precisely here. It lies in this dialectic; it welcomes the apparent divergence of opposites. That’s why the four dialogues of life, action, religious experience and theological exchange, recommended to all Jesuit enterprises, are so vital

In addition to drawing on the wisdom of the ages through rigorous academic study, certain advances in Jesuit education seem brightly new and offer greater hope: engagement with the world and service learning. Engagement with the world, properly conceived, can induce students to garner an “educated solidarity with the poor and oppressed.” And service learning, fired by faith and integrated with critical reason and commitment to action, can lead to a lifetime of civic leadership on behalf of truth and justice. These are great opportunities to enliven empathy. Student development likewise provides experiences for leadership, relational maturity, and a greater empathy for others.

The challenge then is, What do you do with it? Students come out of a morally gray world in which life commitments are increasingly difficult. Will their Jesuit education offer them the wisdom for discerning the good, for gazing contemplatively on the world, for appreciating their own lives and talents, and then intuiting and committing to wherever God is laboring with



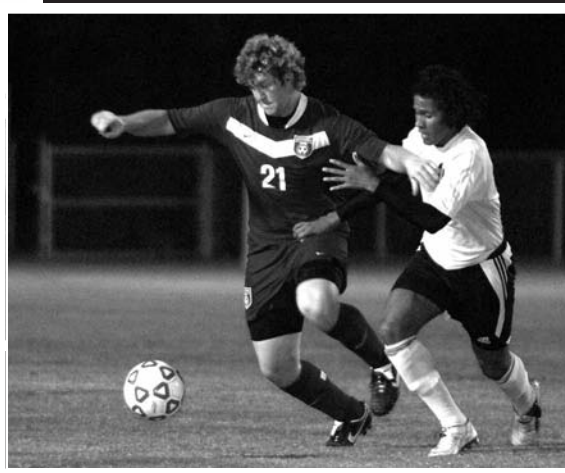
Photo by Loyola Marymount University student Majorie Allen, class of 2014.

and for them today?

Without a grounding in faith—whether Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist — many of our graduates may be like reeds shaken in the wind. Without lifelong commitments, they may simply pursue power and prestige and the latest consumerist lure.

Throughout this essay, we have raised questions about faith and wisdom, about truth and justice. We have asked whether our Jesuit institutions are free enough to engage these questions. It will be easy enough to dismiss these questions, especially if the link between the Spiritual Exercises and contemporary Jesuit higher education is broken irreparably.

Our hope is that Ignatian discernment will guide us deeper into the mystery of God so that our creative imagination can propel us towards a more just and peace-filled world, towards a sensitivity to the world “charged with the grandeur of God.” ■



SPRING HILL COLLEGE

