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FAITH IN THE FUTURE

New Frontiers for Social Justice in Jesuit Higher Education

By Jason Welle, S.J., in cooperation with The Jesuit Post

Formation for justice has been a part of Jesuit education from its beginning. As Ronald Modras writes in *Ignatian Humanism*: “The early Jesuits were not bent on fomenting social revolution, but they were conscious of being reformers. They saw education as a means of producing good leaders and citizens for society and good priests for the church.” In late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Jesuit colleges in the United States adapted the *Ratio Studiorum*, while staying true to its formative principles, to keep pace with changing realities in American higher education, replacing the standard seven-year European model with differentiated high school and university four-year curriculums, allowing students to explore broader subjects through elective courses.

By the time Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, former superior general, addressed Jesuit educators at Santa Clara University in October 2000, Jesuit education had undergone another shift. A well-rounded classroom education was no longer seen as adequate in a rapidly changing world; contact and practical experience were now considered vital to holistic education. Inspired by the Second Vatican Council’s call to engage the world, Jesuit universities found both inspiration and consolation in Fr. Kolvenbach’s words: “When the heart is touched by direct experience, the mind may be challenged to change.”

So with service and justice well ingrained in the Ignatian pedagogy and in Jesuit universities today, what might the future of social justice look like? Perhaps the answer can be found in the address given by the current superior general, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, in Mexico City in 2010. He likewise comments in that address that Jesuit universities have recognized the need to move beyond an

intellectual education and provide opportunities for direct contact. However, Fr. Nicolás also reminded representatives of Jesuit universities then that a Jesuit university is not merely an intellectual institution, requiring “learning and intelligence, imagination and ingenuity, solid studies and rigorous analysis,” but that it is also a “‘ministry or ‘apostolate’: in the service of the faith, of the Church, of the human family and the created world that God wants to draw more and more into the realm of his Kingdom of life and love.” Fr. Nicolás reminds us of the 32nd General Congregation of the Jesuits, which states: “The mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement.”

While it is true that many universities include faith in the articulation of their missions, in phrases such as “Faith that does Justice,” it is also true that for many of our students, the social justice mission is disconnected from its foundation in Catholic principles. I would suggest that a reinvigoration of the service of faith, that is, the ministry aspect of the mission of Jesuit universities, is the next stage in the development of the *projecto social* (as noted by Fr. Nicolás in Mexico City) for our universities.

Renewal of the Catholic faith identity of our Jesuit universities cannot be expressed merely in terms of numbers of Catholic students nor by stately chapels on our campuses. It also cannot be limited to the scholarship and instruction of Catholic theology, although that

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is certainly essential, especially as Catholic theologians engage in dialogue and investigation across disciplines. Furthermore, most of our schools reflect more and more the religious diversity of the United States and the global community, and we are rightly sensitive that the service of faith not be reduced to proselytization. So in what ways might we renew Catholic faith identity in our universities in a diverse environment?

To answer that, I suggest the example of another Jesuit who has risen to prominence recently: Pope Francis. In particular, three moments in his first two weeks as Bishop of Rome present a model for our universities to engage the ministry of faith in the promotion of justice.

- In his mass at a juvenile detention facility on Holy Thursday, Pope Francis demonstrated these two principles in action by washing the feet of prisoners, both men and women, including Muslim youth.
- At an audience with journalists he said: “Since many of you are not members of the Catholic Church, and others are not believers, I cordially give this blessing silently, to each of you, respecting the conscience of each, but in the knowledge that each of you is a child of God. May God bless you!”
- In his audience with ecumenical and interfaith leaders, he spoke of “promoting friendship and respect between men and women of different religious traditions...There is much that we can do to benefit the poor, the needy and those who suffer, and to favor justice, promote reconciliation and build peace.” Furthermore, the different faith traditions can work together “to counter the dominance of a one-dimensional vision of the human person, a vision which reduces human beings to what they produce and to what they consume: this is one of the most insidious temptations of our time.” He went on to identify non-believers who, while searching for truth, goodness, and beauty, are partners in the cause of human dignity, peace, and the care of creation.

In these instances, Pope Francis articulates a model for bringing together the faith and justice aspects of the Jesuit mission. It respects the individual conscience of believers without obscuring or compromising Catholic faith and identity, and it engages people of all faiths and backgrounds in a dialogue not only about justice but also about a multidimensional vision of humanity. And it offers the service of faith in the promotion of justice to all members of society,



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regardless of background or religious identity. Without faith, Pope Francis explained in his first homily, the Church and by extension her institutions, including our Jesuit universities, are nothing more than “charitable NGOs.” We are set apart by the *magis*, the search for more: more meaning and more truth and more beauty in humanity and humanity’s works, including those of justice and mercy.

In the last 100 years, Jesuit universities have demonstrated a characteristic adaptability to suit the mission to the particular situation, all the while staying true to the founding identity of Jesuit colleges and universities in forming ethical leaders for a complex world, both through rigorous academics and opportunities for service. In the next 100 years, our universities have another opportunity to demonstrate that same adaptability by enacting a renewal of “the service faith, of which justice is an absolute requirement,” in a pluralistic culture. Fr. Nicolás, in his Mexico City address, noted that “this commitment to a dialogue between faith and culture...has always been a distinguishing mark of Jesuit learned ministry.” In doing so, he recalls Pope Benedict’s words to the Jesuits that our mission is to serve “those places where ‘faith and human knowledge, faith and modern science, faith and the fight for justice’ meet.” Therein lies the future of social justice in Jesuit higher education. ■