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Next Steps in Jesuit Higher Education

By Stephanie Russell

Three Points on the Path

Thinking about mission as an integrating principle for our schools is, in some respects, as old as Jesuit education itself. What are Jesuits, if not men on mission, and what binds Jesuit schools more than the holy restlessness implied by being “women and men for and with others”? An unswerving sense of mission has always driven Jesuit education forward. Yet the way in which we impart the mission of our schools to a new generation of students, faculty, and staff has shifted dramatically in the last 50 years. In short, we have moved through the sequential phases of mission awareness and mission leadership to the new territory of mission integration. These phases are cumulative. They build on each other and reflect both the external influences of American culture and the internal movements in the church of their day.

What Our History Tells Us

Land O’Lakes and Mission Awareness

The last issue of *Conversations* addressed in detail the history and rapid growth of Jesuit higher education in the United States over more than two centuries. The entrance of Jesuit colleges and universities into the academic mainstream after the Second World War and the expansion of the schools, with respect to enrollment and academic programs, necessitated the inclusion of more lay faculty in the project. In the postwar era, the faculty members of Jesuit schools were not so much formed as they were immersed in a Jesuit ethos of education. The core curricula of the schools typically included a substantial philosophy requirement (often equal to an academic minor) and exposure to an established pantheon of Catholic novelists and apologists. All-university litur-

gies such as the Mass of the Holy Spirit were commonly mandatory for Catholic undergraduates, who composed the overwhelming majority of the student body, though Jesuit schools were also noted for their hospitality to students of other faiths.

The Catholic commitment of most faculty members was assumed, but what made the school Jesuit was the visible and active involvement of Jesuits themselves. In these boom years for the number of priests and sisters in the United States, the laity rubbed elbows with Jesuits on a daily basis in offices, academic buildings, laboratories, and sacramental celebrations, and the élan of the Jesuits permeated the spirit of the institutions. More than a few Jesuits were true legends on their campuses, praised for being both erudite and unpretentious, an appealing pastoral combination to students and colleagues alike. The mission of Jesuit higher education was in the air, but it was understood to be generated and safeguarded by the Society of Jesus and implemented through the communal identity of the local Jesuit community.

Two key developments shaped the conversation on mission in Jesuit schools following the heady growth of the postwar era. The first was the groundbreaking Land O’Lakes “Statement on the Nature of a Contemporary Catholic University” of 1967, in which a group of Catholic university presidents and other academic and ecclesial leaders charted a new course for Catholic institutions of higher learning. The document’s clear emphasis on academic freedom, modernization, and independence from church authorities is sometimes recalled at the expense of its dual commitment to “a self-developing and self-deepening society of students and faculty in which the consequences of Christian truth are taken seriously in person-to-person relationships, [and] where the

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importance of religious commitment is accepted and constantly witnessed to.” Nonetheless, the Land O’Lakes Statement is recognized as a pivotal redefinition of the mission of U.S. Catholic universities in the 20th century. The existence of lay boards of trustees in Catholic schools can be traced directly to the impact of the document, which established a framework for intellectual autonomy that was embraced by Jesuit and other Catholic schools across the country.

Anecdotally, it is notable that alumni of Jesuit schools who graduated in the two decades following Land O’Lakes remark that they recall few explicit references to their schools’ Jesuit or Catholic mission as a strongly articulated institutional value or a topic of discussion in the classroom. This does not mean that the mission was unimportant to the university leaders of the day or that students were not educated in ways that were firmly rooted in the Jesuit commitment to the liberal arts, moral and spiritual development, and service. Graduates in this era, however, tend to say they recall the locus of their university’s mission as residing in campus ministry, the Jesuit community, and the person of the president. With the exception of a few memorable professors and administrators, they do not recall it as a shared responsibility of the entire campus community. Given the effects of the Land O’Lakes Statement, this perception should not be surprising. With a renewed focus on the academic heft and quality of Jesuit universities, making too much of a school’s religious identity ran the risk of seeming “soft” or reducing its relevance among its academic peers. Just as Jesuit missionaries have always entered a culture on its own terms – respectfully adapting to its language and customs before engaging its citizens on questions of faith – so, too, were Jesuit schools of the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s entering and learning the ropes of a new and larger culture, inclusive of both public and private non-Catholic partners. They were, in short, in the academic Big Leagues.

The arm-stretching freedom of Land O’Lakes was a consequence, in part, of the Second Vatican Council’s emphasis on engaging culture and the America of the 1960s and ’70s, which spared no scrutiny of the established order. The march toward social justice and civil rights was well populated with Catholics, including the students and alumni of Jesuit schools, and the expression of mission on Jesuit campuses took on a similar hue. There was indeed a strong “mission awareness” during these years, but it found form in teach-ins, student protests, and roundtable discussions on peace and justice issues. The newly founded campus ministry at Marquette University, for example, took draft counseling of young men bound for Vietnam as its first venture.

Mission was also very much alive on a quieter, per-

sonal level. In the wake of Vatican II and their own international meetings, Jesuits reclaimed their heritage as bearers of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and were exposing students, faculty, and staff to the treasures of Ignatian spirituality in wholly new ways. Through retreats and spiritual conversations with Jesuits, lay colleagues were brought more intentionally into the Jesuit tradition in a serious manner, and many were afforded the chance to consider their work in light of Ignatius’s world-affirming spirituality. “Mission awareness” was tied closely to an awareness (new to many lay people and renewed for Jesuits) of the Society’s mission in a changing world.

Ex Corde Ecclesiae and Mission Leadership

The second game changer in Jesuit higher education’s conversation on mission was Pope John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation on Catholic universities, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. Issued in 1990, the document sought to repair what the pope identified as a disconnection between the intellectual and religious identities of Catholic universities and to reaffirm the necessity of both institutional and personal fidelity to the teaching authority of the Church in matters of faith and morals. Just as the Land O’Lakes document was born in the wake of Vatican II’s emphasis on renewal, inculturation, and lay leadership, *Ex Corde* was written 23 year later, in a more restorative vein, in order “to unite existentially by intellectual effort two orders of reality that too frequently tend to be placed in opposition as though they were antithetical: the search for truth, and the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth.” Initial fears among some academic leaders that *Ex Corde* would result in a widespread reassertion of church control of the universities have been largely (though not completely) unfounded, but the subtler impact on institutional mission has been profound. In Jesuit colleges and universities, the exhortation piqued interest in reclaiming the religious spirit of the institutions and not throwing the proverbial baby of Jesuit and Catholic religious identity out with the bathwater of academic constraint. In an increasingly competitive American culture, it had become even more evident that Jesuit higher education’s distinctiveness would lie in the fusion of its spiritual and academic identities – to sacrifice one for the other would rob the entire enterprise of its purpose.

Practically speaking, the years following the issuance of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* have given rise to a variety of new initiatives, intended to anchor the university’s mission strongly in the laity who occupy most of the leadership positions in the schools. Among these initiatives have been the hiring of chief mission officers, workshops on Ignatian pedagogy, retreats and spiritual

support for faculty and staff, hiring for mission policies, national formation programs for new and senior lay leaders, campus discussions on the nature and meaning of Jesuit higher education, and mission education programs for boards of trustees. Thus “mission leadership” has been the watchword, particularly in the last ten years, as Jesuit schools sought to reclaim their religious animus while remaining credible as universities in every sense of the word. The increasing number of lay presidents in Jesuit schools – fluctuating around one-third since 2006 – has accelerated the dialogue on how to provide structured, high-quality formation for lay leaders that honors the founding tradition and extends it in creative ways. Jesuit provincials, too, have invested thought in the preparation and placement of men in the 28 AJCU universities. Given the choice of preparing Jesuit presidents, faculty, or pastoral personnel, they must decide where and how the Society of Jesus can best exert its influence and sponsorship in the future. The past 25 years have been fascinating times in the Jesuit sphere of academia.

An Invitation to Mission Integration

The phases of mission development in contemporary Jesuit higher education are neither clear-cut nor obvious when we are in the midst of them. What look, in hindsight, like liminal moments may seem quite ordinary in real time. Building on the preceding periods of mission awareness and mission leadership, what can we say, with all humility, about where our Jesuit, Catholic mission might be headed? Two factors come to mind among the significant influences of this moment.

First, we are living in an increasingly complex religious context, and the populations of our faculties, staffs, and students are more diverse than ever before. The Pew Research Center’s Religion and Public Life Project reports that “While nearly one-in-three Americans (31%) were raised in the Catholic faith, today fewer than one-in-four (24%) describe themselves as Catholic.” Further, the ranks of those who are unaffiliated with any faith tradition have risen to one-fourth among adults under 30. These factors and others influence the pool of faculty and staff who serve (or will serve) in Jesuit institutions, making the formation of leaders for mission a considerable challenge. Beyond the familiar work of bridging denominational diversity and acclimatizing faculty who were educated in secular settings, Jesuit universities must now address the reality that many applicants will come to us with no religio-cultural context of any kind.

Second, Pope Francis has commanded the attention of the world as he urges Catholics to embrace simplici-

ty, the mercy of God, a missionary spirit, and personal authenticity. Due, in part, to his Jesuit identity, the pope’s words and actions have had an exhilarating effect on Catholics and non-Catholics at Jesuit universities. He is at once the worldwide leader of the church and a companion who “talks the talk” of the same Ignatian spirituality that animates our daily work. While all Catholic schools are likely to consider their commitments in the new light of his leadership, Jesuit universities are especially attuned to the message.

These two factors – the growing spiritual complexity in the faculty and staff of Jesuit schools and the attractive Catholicism of Pope Francis – invite us to step into a new phase of “mission integration,” drawing on lessons learned from the last 50 years. Combined, they raise fresh opportunities for Jesuit universities to reclaim the best of their Catholic and Jesuit tradition without returning to the isolation that once kept them at arm’s length from the rest of American higher education.

On one hand, mission integration implies a respect for religious freedom and unfettered inquiry that was championed by Land O’Lakes. On the other, it names and claims a Catholic motivation for our ecumenical and interfaith partnerships, relies freely on the spiritual and cultural richness of the church, speaks the name of Jesus without hesitation, and expects that every member of the academic community will actively embrace the mission according to his or her conscience and spiritual tradition.

Equipping leaders to guide Jesuit schools toward this lofty aim for the next 50 years of our history will entail deep listening and considerable investments in their Ignatian formation. It will require not only the expansion of the many successful programs that have been underway on our individual campuses and collectively through the AJCU but also a series of ongoing, national conversations among lay and Jesuit leaders about priorities for the future. With respect to the Jesuit orientation to embrace the real and to the earthy entreaties of Pope Francis, the time is ripe to ask ourselves, “What is the end game?” If every person on our campuses were in some way connected to the mission of Jesuit higher education through our efforts (broadly construed and inclusive of all the work that faculty and staff do to advance it), what specific and tangible differences would we expect to see in 5, 10, or 20 years? How will the education of women and men in our schools affect and include the poor, reveal the mercy of God in a radical way, and call all of us to spiritual authenticity? It is difficult to imagine a more Catholic way of approaching our common work. Mission integration helps us to embrace the narrative of faith that has steered us to this moment and to imagine what our Jesuit universities might now – together – become. ■