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MAKING SACRIFICES TO ENHANCE MISSION

Higher Education Responds to Father General's Challenge

By Michael Sheeran, S.J.

Last October 11, Fr. General Adolfo Nicolás spoke at Loyola Chicago's Watertower Campus to the 28 AJCU board chairs and presidents, the nine provincials, and various key staff, as well as four rectors representing the four new provinces currently being formed. In a homey style of speech reminiscent of a homily from Pope Francis, Fr. Nicolás avoided technical language like a call for "transcendence" in Jesuit education. Instead, he told his audience that Jesuit schools are about "conversion" – not conversion from Buddhist or Presbyterian to Catholic – but conversion of Catholics and Buddhists and Presbyterians to "humanity."

In similar language, he pointed out the gradual decline in the number of Jesuits even as Jesuit universities have grown more and more popular. With gentle teasing, he encouraged the board chairs to sit down with their provincial and give him some guidance about how one goes about recruiting the next generation of leaders for a business corporation. (Fr. Nicolás quipped that he had tried this unsuccessfully; maybe the board chairs could get a better hearing!) And he gave everybody a mandate: to rethink the priorities and the relationships among our schools in hopes not only of better utilizing the Jesuits, but also in an overall effort to make the schools even more successful at turning out graduates who are "converts to humanity," i.e., alumni dedicated to using their talents to make God's world a better place.

His challenge was the same for each group in the audience: "What selfless actions – based in freedom, generosity, and shared values as a community committed to Jesuit higher education – might God be asking of you" as leaders of

your universities, as collaborators in the AJCU network, as direction setters in the national Jesuit Conference?

The talk left provincials, presidents, and especially board chairs with real enthusiasm for this new challenge. The style of Fr. General's remarks had motivated everyone. There was even some disappointment when people read the official text of his remarks printed later in *America* (Nov. 11, 2013). The official text was in official language. The points were all there, but the motivational magic of Fr. Nicolás's personal way of speaking was, of course, missing. And now the hard task began of thinking through how the schools might make intelligent sacrifices to better achieve their mission.

At the February 3, 2014, meeting of the 28 presidents, a lengthy discussion added a dramatic further consideration: a few of the schools faced financial issues tied to the ongoing inability of potential students to handle the ever-rising burden of private tuition in a time when state and federal financial aid is not keeping up. And presidents of schools that are in fine shape today agreed that the same trend was likely to hit them within a few years.

Suddenly, Fr. General's challenge was made even more immediate. The question became, "What economies and collaboration can all of us make with the goal not merely of survival but of even more successful fulfillment of mission?" The danger, of course, was that the goal would become mere survival rather than enhanced mission, when only the latter could be the ultimate goal.

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Fr. Nicolás, center, converses with Fr. Bill Leahy, S.J., president of Boston College, (right) and Fr. James Grummer, S.J., American assistant to Father General, at the October 2013 meeting. "Photos courtesy of the AJCU."

Brainstorming by the presidents was candid and creative. Why does each school need its own academic record-keeping processes? Why not a common "back office" serving multiple schools? Similarly, why not have a back office serving multiple schools for business records, student financial records, payment of vendors? More modestly, why not move staff out of separate departments in a school and combine their efforts at a single central campus site, achieving better results with less duplication? How about a fresh look at purchasing alliances which have proved great money-savers for Catholic hospitals? Do we really need all the academic programs each school offers? Might core curriculum reforms with an eye to more profound education improve on today's array of required introductory courses? Could we find ways to share the talents of Jesuits, e.g., making a man who is a professor at one place available for special talks and symposia at some of the others?

The list above is a "sampler" of the ideas that surfaced. No decisions were made except agreement that a process has to be put together to be sure possibilities get serious evaluation so good decisions can emerge.

Two complementary approaches are underway. First, since the merger of the nine provinces into an eventual four is well underway and deeper collaboration among schools within each of the four provinces is already under discussion, attempts at collaboration in each of the four groups of schools should yield ideas both on things that might work and on processes of decision making that turn out to be fruitful. For example, as the Chicago/Detroit and Wisconsin provinces merge into a Midwest province, a process of consultation among key leaders at all six of the universities in the

new province is under way. Agreement on six of initial collaborations among the group was agreed at the start of June. This process of moving towards consensus in a period of less than a year could become a model for others.

Second, the 28 AJCU presidents will meet again next October to focus on how best to proceed. In preparation, they asked the 28 chief academic officers to develop at their spring meeting an initial list of possible ways to enhance academic economies and collaboration. A similar request was taken up by the chief finance officers. The two lists will be further explored, then used by the presidents in October as they decide what avenues might be worthy of deeper analysis. The idea is to

move not quickly but carefully. As well, it is understood that collaboration might be among two or three schools on one topic, among a larger number on others, and even among all 28 should something appropriate emerge. In many situations, individual schools may ask another school for consultation or may imitate a model developed by one school to cut costs in order to better carrying out the mission.

Now that the board chairs have had a first meeting together, thanks to Fr. Nicolás, there will emerge occasional meetings of chairs. This will respond to their requests after that October 11 gathering for sessions where they could compare notes on evaluating performance of presidents and boards, on helping trustees understand Ignatian spirituality and educational practice, or on conducting an effective search for a new president!

More important as an outcome of Fr. Nicolás's talk, of course, each president and board chair will decide how best to involve their school's board in mission-enhancement discussion involving collaboration and sacrifice.

Presidents and board chairs will have to keep carefully in mind the challenge Fr. General gave them. Because the economic pressures of the moment will underscore the urgency, those pressures also can become a temptation: if the schools stop with financial savings to ensure viability, Fr. General's challenge will go unfulfilled. Only if the financial rethinking is part of improved collaboration and academic impact will the result be mission enhancement as our schools more effectively turn out graduates who have been "converted to humanity." ■