In Conversation with the City

Benedictus montes, valles Bernardus amabat, Franciscus oppida, magnas Ignatius urbes.

As the old Latin verse has it, while Benedict loved the mountains, Bernard the valleys, and Francis the smaller towns, Ignatius loved the great cities. From its beginnings, the Society of Jesus has pursued a course that Thomas M. Lucas, S.J., has called an “urban strategy.” Long before social scientists gave it a name, writes Lucas in our Taphroots feature, Ignatius understood the “multiplier effect.” Work in “important cities” and in universities is strongly encouraged in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus because such places give access to “numerous persons who by being aided themselves can become laborers for the help of others” (622e).

Today the urban strategy is alive and well in the work of the twenty-eight Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States. Twenty-one of the twenty-eight AJCU schools are located in metropolitan regions of one million people or more, with eleven in the eight largest population centers in the country. All but two institutions are in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. (See the chart on page 27.) The potential that this network affords for our 188,000 currently enrolled students to become “laborers for the help of many others” is enormous. The question, of course, is how to realize that potential.

Both authors of our featured articles focus on the importance of the urban university in addressing what has been called the “crisis” of American cities—the out-migration and regional sprawl that have emptied so many of our city centers, the fear and desperation that fuel the flight, and the unjust maneuvering through which public funds are often secured to aid and abet the flight at the expense of those who cannot afford to flee. As Joseph A. O’Hare, S.J., president of Fordham University, notes, because of the “preferential option” of Jesuit universities for the city, they and other Catholic institutions are especially well situated to play a role in determining what the American city will be in the 21st century. Underscoring that observation is the Most Reverend Anthony Pilla, who, as bishop of Cleveland, has worked to forge impressive links between his diocese and the universities in his region in his “Church and the City” initiative. Both writers testify to the extraordinary investments of time, talent, and treasure through which students, faculty, and staff members help to make our cities better places to live. Both also urge that we do more, suggesting especially that we use our privileged position and our peculiar talents as scholars and teachers to change hearts and minds, to find new ways not just to do works of mercy, but also to combat the injustice and corrupt thinking that are so often at the source of our cities’ troubles.

Fr. O’Hare offers the example of the priest-activist Joseph P. Fitzpatrick, S.J., who worked tirelessly in his teaching and writing, as well as in his pastoral and political activity, to make Fordham a center of hope to its community. The citation he received in 1978 naming him the first (and still only) Irish “Puerto Rican Man of the Year” praises Fr. Fitzpatrick especially for recognizing “the ever deepening responsibility of the urban university to offer its rich resources for the social healing of our constantly changing world—beginning with the world at its own doorstep.” But Fr. Fitzpatrick is Fr. O’Hare’s prime example not only because Fr. Fitzpatrick used the resources of his university to help his community, but also because he was wise enough to learn from the community in which he lived. New York City holds obvious riches for the university. Fordham’s location provides its students with unparalleled opportunities for experiential learning, internships, and career networking. Its Lincoln Center campus sits in the midst of the most vibrant cultural center in the world today. Fordham students are indeed fortunate to have Manhattan as their classroom. What Fr. Fitzpatrick understood is that learning from the city doesn’t stop at the Cross-Bronx Expressway, that the relationship of the Bronx campus with its neighbors is also a mutual one, in which the university is as often the student as it is the teacher. “Is it too fanciful,” Fr. O’Hare asks, to suggest that Fordham students may learn as much, albeit in a very different way, from their disadvantaged neighbors as they learn from the “professional and corporate mentors they meet in their internships”?

Is it too fanciful to hope that the Jesuit university, as a nationwide expression of the urban strategy of its founder, can lead a 21st-century rejuvenation of American cities?