Living Generously in the Service of Others

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Several years ago, I conducted a research project that involved interviews with 150 American men and women, ages forty to fifty-five, who had lost their white-collar managerial jobs and were in an involuntary state of career transition. They were out of work and on the street, victims of what business writers came to call “downsizing.” The American economy was at that time, according to the London Economist, in a condition of “corporate anorexia.”

I wanted to learn from these displaced managers how they coped with what for most was a personal, family, and career crisis. I wanted to discover what sustained them as they traveled the uncertain road to reemployment. I especially wanted to identify the principles that drove them and their job-search strategies. This research project put me in touch with several very interesting Jesuit alumni. One of them told me that in an effort to boost his spirits in this very dark period of his life, he found himself falling back on lessons learned in humanities courses three decades earlier at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

During his search for work, said this financial services executive, “I kept coming back to my college English courses and a line from G. K. Chesterton’s ‘The Ballad of the White Horse.’” He remembered that line as “They harden their hearts with hope.” The line, as Chesterton wrote it, reads “And Alfred, hiding in deep grass, / Hardened his heart with hope.” The man I interviewed explained that he understood these words to mean, “Don’t tell me it’s not going to work. I can do it.”

Elsewhere, in his famous 1905 book, Heretics, Chesterton wrote: “Hope means hoping when things

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are hopeless, or it is no virtue at all . . . . Hope is the power of being cheerful in circumstances which we know to be desperate."

This Marquette alumnus personally had to rely on that kind of hope twice in situations of job loss, he told me, and he often uses Chesterton's expression to encourage others in similar circumstances. Another line from the "Ballad of the White Horse" refers, as he recalled it, to "the giant laughter of Christian men."

"Here were men," this job seeker mused, "ostensibly on the verge of being exterminated, and they were laughing!" He derived from this literary snippet a guiding principle for dealing with adversity. He stated it simply: "You can't afford to lose your sense of humor."

As men and women who bear the stamp of a Jesuit education, what values might you be expected to carry with you into the twenty-first century? Would hope and humor be among them, as they were and continue to be for the Marquette alumnus just described?

Permit me to tell you the story of another Marquette alumnus whom I interviewed in the course of my study. This fifty-one-year-old was president and chief operating officer of a small graphics company located in the suburbs of Chicago. He reported directly to a working chairman. Just before he was ready to leave home for work one morning, his wife passed along some bad news she had received the day before: She had breast cancer. Her husband was stunned, saddened, and understandably upset. He wanted to stay with his wife that day, but it was simply impossible. An important meeting was scheduled with people coming in from out of town; he absolutely had to attend.

When he arrived at work, his chairman saw that something was wrong. "John," he said, "you look upset. What's the problem?"

"I just got some bad news," John replied. "Pat has breast cancer."

"Well, John," the chairman responded, "maybe you ought to get all your bad news on the same day. I'm afraid I've got to let you go."

John was reeling—for the second time within only a few hours. Although he had received a handsome raise just weeks before, he decided not to fight the dismissal. He later told me that he realized he had been trapped for some time in a dysfunctional situation. Best to break away promptly, he thought, and get home to take care of his wife. As if he needed further proof that he was working for the wrong organization, John soon discovered that his contractual twelve-month severance period had been unilaterally cut to six, and the one

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hundred percent of compensation that was to continue for a year in the event of involuntary separation, had been unilaterally cut in half.

After reviewing all the options, John decided not to litigate, choosing instead to get on with his life and help his wife get on with hers. (Both, by the way, are now doing fine. John is running his own company and Pat is in remission. “We were the best of friends when we got married,” John told me, in Pat’s presence, a year or so ago, “and having been through all this together, we’re better friends today.”) These two met at Marquette where they began to incorporate into their lives the values they were invited to consider during their student days—commitment, integrity, a caring concern, faith, hope, and love. These, John told me, are the values he subsequently used to build a successful business of his own.

These anecdotes from the lives of Jesuit alumni prompt me to put our keynote question another way: What might the great educational tradition that helped shape your minds and hearts during your student years expect of you now by way of contribution—through your minds and hearts, and your very lives—to the culture of the next millennium, to your family culture, your business culture, your national or professional culture? What will you bring to any sphere of influence that might be yours?

A culture, in the words of the late and great Canadian Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan, “is a set of meanings and values informing a common way of life, and there are as many cultures as there are distinct sets of meanings and values” (Method in Theology, 1972). What, therefore, are the meanings and values that make you members of a community of Jesuit alumni? What is it that you, as alumni, hold in common? What is distinct about the shared meanings and values that are yours as Jesuit alumni? And how might the culture that is the expression of the Jesuit heritage not simply hold, but gain ground against the competing, and even contradictory, sets of meanings and values that are present now or likely to emerge in the next millennium?

What is distinct about the shared meanings and values that are yours as Jesuit alumni? Perhaps you have not in the past given that question much thought. Perhaps you would not come to immediate agreement now on a precise answer to that question. Perhaps you would find it difficult or impossible, even after careful reflection and with the best of intentions, to come to any agreement on this point. Meanings of great significance to some may be of little importance to others.
Values firmly held by some of you may be the opposite of values in the eyes of others.

In August, 1992, a discussion paper drafted by a group of faculty and administrators at Georgetown, the oldest Jesuit university in the United States (founded 1789), was presented to the campus community as a baseline document for the development of a strategic plan for the entire University. This document reaffirmed "the Jesuit conception of education as pursuit of knowledge in service of the world." It spelled this notion out in the following words that I find compelling and offer now as a point of departure for this keynote address:

Georgetown seeks to be a place where understanding is joined to commitment; where the search for truth is informed by a sense of responsibility for the life of society; where academic excellence in teaching and research is joined with the cultivation of virtue; and where a community is formed which sustains men and women in their education and their conviction that life is only lived well when it is lived generously in the service of others.

Notice the four themes:

- Commitment
- Responsibility (for the life of society)
- The cultivation of virtue
- The conviction that life is lived well only when it is lived generously in the service of others.

Reduce these four themes to four words: Commitment, Responsibility, Virtue, and Service; there you have four keystones that might serve well as building blocks for this keynote address.

You may find yourselves divided in your understandings of what commitment, responsibility, and virtue entail. And although a common understanding of service might be yours, a commitment to the proposition that "life is only lived well when it is lived generously in the service of others" may not be shared. That would, in my view, be regrettable, but it is, of course, quite possible.

There will be hesitancies and contingencies, I suspect, surrounding any effort to identify a set of meanings and values universally shared by Jesuit alumni worldwide. But this is not to say the effort should not be made.

Where, then, can we begin?

I would direct your attention to the words of two Basques. They lived centuries apart. Their faith-based convictions established (in the case of the one) and profoundly influenced (in the case of the other) the Jesuit heritage. Ignatius of Loyola, born in 1491, founded the Jesuit order in 1540. Pedro Arrupe, born in 1907, served as superior general of the Jesuit order from 1965 to 1983.

"To help souls" is the expression found most frequently in the writings of Ignatius when he wanted to describe the purpose of the "company" he established—the movement known now worldwide as the Society of Jesus, the Jesuit order. "Helping others" is the way contemporary Jesuits would want to explain whatever it is they are doing in a variety of ministries in all corners of the world, and doing it all "for the greater glory of God."

The most remembered words of Pedro Arrupe will, I believe, prove to be those he spoke to the Tenth International Congress of Jesuit Alumni of Europe in Valencia, Spain, on July 31, 1973. After noting that "education for justice has become in recent years one of the chief concerns of the Church," he said:

Today our prime educational objective must be to form men-for-others; men who will live not for themselves but for God and his Christ—for the God-man who lived and died for all the world; men who cannot even conceive of love of God which does not include love for the least of their neighbors; men completely convinced that love of God which does not issue in justice for men is a farce.

The entire address was controversial because it called for change and pointed the Society of Jesus clearly in the direction of the promotion of social justice. The men-for-others theme (later edited to read "men and women for others") soon spread all over the world and gained even wider acceptance in Jesuit educational circles.

Both themes—helping others, and becoming men and women for others—are today not simply descriptive, but definitive of Jesuit life and work. They are intended to be a formative influence in the minds and hearts of those who are touched by Jesuits, Jesuit ministries, and Jesuit institutions. And all three—Jesuits, Jesuit ministries, and Jesuit institutions—are expected today to be faithful extensions of their Jesuit heritage by focusing on service and working for justice.

I invite you now just for a moment to look into the faces that I saw in front of me in my Georgetown classroom for a course on the social responsibilities of business during the past academic year. The students were all seniors, more than half female, and about one-third foreign born. If you were to look through their faces,
so to speak, and run a straight-line projection out thirty or forty years, you would be looking at women in high levels of executive responsibility (even though they themselves are now not completely convinced that the “glass ceiling” will lift for them), and you would see both men and women of cultural sensitivity feeling quite at home in a global marketplace. Many of these young men and women—now among our newest Jesuit alumni—are and will continue to be men and women of faith. It is interesting to speculate on the degree to which they will remain or become men and women for others. I asked them all at semester’s end to compose a “Personal Mission Statement” that would set the direction for their future lives. Here are excerpts from the statements of three young women:

- To live out my belief that God’s presence on Earth is manifested in others and in myself. This belief imparts to me a responsibility to treat others with the utmost respect and dignity as one would treat God, and to behave as God would—to exhibit love, energy and the wisdom of experience at all times. I am committed to service to the communities in which I reside and in which I will reside. I am alert to opportunities to participate in the life of my communities. I am especially dedicated to the service of women, children, schools, and the natural environment.

- I am a twenty-one-year-old woman who is half Chinese and half Greek, and who grew up in Kuwait. I feel Greek, but I’m not sure what it is that makes the Greek side of my heritage so dominant. I am very interested in advertising and I would like to work in the account management department of a large advertising firm in London or New York. I want to give back to the community in any way I can. I believe that in the advertising industry there is a lot of room for socially responsible behavior. I plan to have a positive effect on society through the products I will promote and the methods I will use to promote them. I will be a wife and mother. My children will come before my work and before my personal life. Through my children, I will give back to society.

- I’ve spent most of my life thus far studying, and during the most recent years pursuing two particular paths of interest: international business and the Russian language and culture. For as long as I can remember, I have been drawn to and fascinated by Russia—its people, history, language, and culture. This is actually why I began to study business. I think that business is potentially a great means by which one can help people, by providing new products and improving their living standard. It is my goal to create some sort of mutually beneficial relationship, wherein there is a sharing of resources and a fulfilling of needs. I know that although it may not be possible for one person to help the world, it is possible for one to help a few. During the course of my life I intend to extend my family. I think that children are miraculous creations; and although I don’t know at what stage of my life or how many I want to have, I cannot wait until the day when I will be a mother. Although I have my fears, just like everyone else, I hope that I will never be afraid to reach out to others, and to give them everything I can.

These are just samplings of the responses my students made to an assignment to write a mission statement that would have no impact at all on their course grade, but would, if they chose to let it happen, serve as a guide and checkpoint for their progress through life. It was striking to me that issues relating to the theme of this Congress and, for that matter, to the heart of the Jesuit heritage were alive in the minds and hearts of these young women who are now alumnas.

The question before us today is whether or not all Jesuit alumni are ready to permit themselves, as men and women who bear the stamp of a Jesuit education, to be described as truly concerned with “helping others” and defined as men and women for others. If not all, most? If not most, then what might be done to plant this heritage in the minds and hearts of those who remain untouched by these themes? As the few examples of student thought that I just presented attest, there is encouragement to be drawn from listening to our youngest alumni.

Let me state the obvious. Not all Jesuit alumni are Catholic; not all are Christian. There are Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists on our alumni rolls, as well as men and women of relatively unknown faiths or of no faith at all. They have, however, at least two things in common: possession of the same human nature, and the experience of a Jesuit education intended to nurture and release their unique human potential.

As I indicated earlier, the explicit expectation of Jesuit education today is to nurture in its students a commitment to be men and women for others. This is a value commitment, a commitment to work for justice and peace, a commitment (for those who profess the Christian faith) to the service of faith through the pur-
suit of justice. And implied in all of this is a requirement on the part of each to respect the faith commitments of all.

Reflect with me now on commitment, responsibility, virtue, and service. And ask, as you reflect, whether and why Jesuit education is truly the "pursuit of knowledge in service of the world."

First, commitment. Although we normally think immediately of commitments to a person or cause, it is wise to pause to think of what, if anything, we have to commit. What we have to commit, of course, is the self—your self. You have a self—your own self—to commit. The person with no real self to commit is a person of no character, a person of no depth. Jesuit education focuses on the care of the person and the cultivation of one's personal human potential. Jesuit alumni are persons who are taking a voyage of self discovery. They have a place to stand. They have a sense of place in the human community and the world of ideas. They hold common ground from which they can exercise "their conviction that life is only lived well when it is lived generously in the service of others."

Contemporary secular cultures, dominated by values that are alien to the culture of a Jesuit campus, are inhospitable to the notion of permanent commitments. We notice this in the way the young approach career and marriage commitments. Secular cultures are littered with broken promises. They encourage the postponement of commitment; in a complete misunderstanding of freedom, they celebrate the uncommitted life. In an age like ours where goals are ambiguous, there will inevitably be an emphasis on process over product, on endless undirected process in an unguided search for ever elusive meaning.

So think today about commitment and the self you have to commit.

Responsibility is our second keystone; recall that it is responsibility "for the life of society" that the Georgetown statement emphasized. Those who have a place to stand, who, as Robert Bolt wrote of Thomas More, know where they begin and where they leave off, have a responsibility to help society by doing what they can to halt the drift, to offer direction and guidance through the participation of their committed selves in the flow of history.

"Some are guilty; all are responsible" was the wise remark of Rabbi Abraham Heschel in considering injustices and destruction in the world around him in the 1960's. Blame is no substitute for analysis (which comes naturally to Jesuit alumni), but analysis
will become paralysis unless responsibility translates itself into the effective action of responsiveness. Jesuit spirituality is a spirituality of a choice. The Jesuit heritage offers centuries of evidence of informed action following upon deliberate choice. And all action, in the Jesuit tradition, is for the greater glory of God.

God, in the Jesuit view, is to be found and served in the work of building not a Tower of Babel, but a New Jerusalem, a better society. And this construction project is undertaken by exercising responsibility for the life of society.

Third, virtue. The word means strength. Who among us is strong enough to meet the challenges of life unassisted? And what assistance can substitute for the help of God?

Jesuit education is education of the heart, cultivation of the will, development of the mind; it is a celebration of the person—body and soul, mind and heart—striving for excellence.

The virtues are essential ingredients of a Jesuit education. Faith, hope, and love are called theological virtues because their ultimate object is God. All three of these virtues are part of a Jesuit education, which, as every scribbling schoolboy jotting "A.M.D.G." on the top of an assignment sheet knows, is provided ad maiorem Dei gloriam, for the greater glory of God. Nor will any Jesuit alumnus fail to recognize traces of the so-called cardinal virtues in his or her educational experience: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude were laced through the lessons, highlighted in the literature, and embodied in the lives and good example of the teachers, the dedicated providers of Jesuit education.

In a lecture delivered at Georgetown and later published in Theological Studies (December 1995), the moral theologian James F. Keenan, S.J., proposed his own list of the cardinal virtues: justice, fidelity, self-care, and prudence. The point of substituting fidelity and self-care for the traditional temperance and fortitude is not to suggest that there is nothing left to fear nor any threat of excess in modern life; it is simply one expert's effort to make our understanding of right living become more effectively transcultural and transgenerational. This is helpful if for no other reason than to make the point that a worldview that is characteristic of Jesuit alumni should be comfortable with what I like to call the distinction between the shrub and the seed, or the tree and the acorn.

My Australian Jesuit friend Peter Steele explained to me how early nineteenth-century landscape painters working in one country (British painters, for example, working in Australia) tended to depict the foreign country's trees in shapes and colors proper to the painter's native land—clear evidence of monoculturalism or cultural isolation, if not insensitivity. Evangelists who, figuratively speaking, uproot the church as they know it ceremonially, linguistically, and ritually in their home country, and set out to transplant that tree in foreign soil also demonstrate a great cultural insensitivity; their evangelical efforts are going to bring them into conflict with the culture they hope to evangelize. It would be a wiser and far more effective strategy for them to think of the good news of salvation not as a tree, but as seed to be planted in other fields where soil conditions and local rains, winds, climate, minerals and light will give a special size and shape to that which grows from the same seed but would grow into different shapes and sizes if planted elsewhere.

Keenan's "virtue ethics" would leave it to each culture to "fill each virtue with its specific material content and apply it practically" to local conditions. Accordingly, Jesuit alumni would be men and women of virtue even though culturally diverse. Their virtues would, in Keenan's words, be "about right actions coming from rightly ordered and virtuous persons."

Our fourth keystone is service, which for Jesuit alumni might be thought of as both action—turning talent inside out; and attitude—facing outwards. Recall that we are considering "the Jesuit conception of education as pursuit of knowledge in service of the world." Once that knowledge is acquired, the pursuit turns to service, to searching out and meeting human need.

An old African proverb advises, "God gives nothing to those who keep their arms crossed." So open up your arms to others; reach out to others with a helping hand. Jesuit alumni who are educated to become men and women for others are men and women of open arms.

With the rise of affluence in parts of the world where most, but by no means all, Jesuit alumni live, there has been a proliferation of socially atomizing appliances. We think it not at all unusual to have a private car, a single-family home, a personal phone (on your desk, in your car, and in your pocket), a stationary or portable fax, computer, radio, and television set. Most of us have ready access to a freezer, a microwave oven, and a host of other appliances. An automatic washer and dryer are ready and nearby. We rarely have to borrow from or ask anyone for anything to meet our daily needs. Without a conscious choice on anyone's part, we are now, for all practical purposes, sealed off from the human interaction previous generations enjoyed at
the village well, the general store, the daily food market, the bus or train depot, and the public gathering places for recreation, worship, and communication. Not so very long ago, these points of contact were routine—even indispensable—parts of ordinary life. Now, in their absence or diminished presence, a commercially sanctioned culture of loneliness, isolation and alienation, has set in.

You have to deal with this first in yourself, of course, and the best way to do that, in my view, is through service to others. You have daily opportunities to assist neighbors and others as they make their way through their similarly privatized, atomized lives.

Tom Mahon, a technology-marketing consultant in the San Francisco Bay Area, has written that science and technology “deal with things: atoms and galaxies, levers and micro-processors”:

The life of the spirit, on the other hand, deals with the connections between things: mercy, justice, and love. We have become very good in the age of science and technology at knowing about things, but we’re not really as wise as we should be at making connections. (TIMELINE, May/June 1996, p.11)

Your Jesuit education has prepared you to raise your head above the short-term chaos to notice that there are connections waiting to be made. You can make them. Helping others is the way to make those connections real. Never forget that “helping others” along with becoming “men and women for others” are the characteristics that define the common ground on which Jesuit alumni worldwide are proud to stand.

Quite recently, I had lunch with a Jesuit alumnus who is a well known and influential journalist in Washington. I asked him what he values from the eight years of Jesuit education that ended for him about 35 years ago. He replied by remarking that he had noticed over the years that he had something that graduates of other very good schools did not possess. “You taught us to take a set of facts, connect those facts, and draw right conclusions,” he said. “You taught us how to think, how to reason through the facts.” That response would match up with the post-graduation experience of many Jesuit alumni.

Some would have other ways of describing what they have carried with them over the years from their exposure to Jesuit education. One put it this way for me recently: “You showed us where north is.” Another recalled his Jesuit schooling as the experience of “something that came as close to being a pure meritocracy as I have ever known.” He had neither money or social standing, he said, and yet in his high school days he came together with others in a single place where he was “educated and treated equally.” And he added, “It all had the effect of generating a wonderful esprit de corps.”

Forging connections and using reason would figure often in alumni responses to the questions of what they gained from their Jesuit education. In the replies of younger alumni, phrases like commitment, responsibility for the life of society, the cultivation of virtue (especially justice), and the conviction that life is lived well only when it is lived generously in the service of others—phrases like these—are now occurring with more frequency and are likely to be heard more often as the great tradition of Jesuit education that brings us together here in Sydney moves forward into the unknown future.

These, in my view, are a few of the values that, in the expectant theme of this World Congress, Jesuit alumni will bring with them into the twenty-first century. In doing so, they will extend the influence of both Ignatius of Loyola and Pedro Arrupe. Whatever they do to preserve and expand the Jesuit heritage will indeed be done, as are all things authentically Jesuit, for the greater glory of God.