A Historic Encounter: Fr. Adolfo Nicolas Meets Higher Education Presidents and Board Chairs

Editorial Board
It was a privilege for me, as chair of the board of trustees of Loyola Marymount University, to attend the AJCU meeting in Chicago with Fr. Adolfo Nicolás. I had previously met with him and others in Rome, where I had learned what a humble, holy, and astute man he is … and that he listens intently! His interest in hearing and learning more from board chairs led to the Chicago meeting.

Two points impressed me about Father Nicolás’s vision of how leaders engage in decision-making. First, as most of us have experienced, presidents and boards of trustees face tough decisions on a regular basis. Father Nicolás emphasized that their decision making must come from shared values within each campus community. His vision for involving the community in decision making, rather than having a single person decide tough issues, is his first prerequisite for leaders who make good decisions. If these decision makers and their communities do not share the same values then they cannot achieve the same objectives. This is where universities sometimes have difficulties.

Father Nicolás noted that there are many understandings within individual colleges and universities, and the broader culture as well, of what it means to be an American, Catholic, and Jesuit institution of higher education! This question has been around for decades since the religious communities stopped owning and fully controlling these schools, but discussions were often casual or anguished and answers tentative. Father Nicolás now brings new energy, determination, and urgency to these issues and in so doing looks forward with optimism. It is up to the leaders who heard him to push forward, deciding from competing values and divergent directions, choosing a future rather than just letting it happen.

An extraordinary meeting took place at Loyola University Chicago last October 11, when Father General Adolfo Nicolás met with the presidents and the board chairs of the 28 Jesuit institutions of higher education in the United States. Present too were the major superiors of the nine U.S. Jesuit provinces and other leaders. The meeting was without precedent, and it should have serious implications for these schools.

In his address to the meeting, Father Nicolás praised the educators for their accomplishments, thanked them for their service, and challenged them to shape a worthy future for their schools. He asked what it means to be an American, Catholic, and Jesuit institution of higher education? This question has been around for decades since the religious communities stopped owning and fully controlling these schools, but discussions were often casual or anguished and answers tentative. Father Nicolás now brings new energy, determination, and urgency to these issues and in so doing looks forward with optimism. It is up to the leaders who heard him to push forward, deciding from among competing values and divergent directions, choosing a future rather than just letting it happen.