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An Exciting Moment for Jesuit Higher Education: A Board Chair Responds

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A Historic Encounter

Fr. Adolfo Nicolás Meets Higher Education Presidents and Board Chairs



Fr. Nicolás with Fr. Michael Garanzini, S.J., president of Loyola University Chicago. Photo courtesy of the AJCU.

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.

An Exciting Moment for Jesuit Higher Education: A Board Chair Responds

By Kathleen Aikenhead

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 Catholic and Jesuit. Often those holding varying understandings are at odds and view others with suspicion. This makes it harder for leaders to reach decisions from a place of shared values. It is the role of the board to assist the presidents in creating a shared communal vision around our Ignatian principles. At LMU, we just announced a Campus Conversations on our Catholic Identity (CCCI) committee to help integrate the various understandings

and meanings of who we are, so that we can make better decisions based on Father Nicolás's vision.

Second, he noted that decision making must be open and free. All voices must be heard "without fear of recrimination." He stressed that participants must speak their minds during the process and that leaders must set up processes that allow for maximal participation. If people wait until the decision-making period has ended and then wish to voice their objection to the decision, he noted that "[their] power is illegitimate."

Finally, Father Nicolás candidly noted that presidents of Jesuit colleges and universities no longer need be Jesuits, priests, or even Catholics. Furthermore, he did not hesitate to discuss the fact that the future of Jesuit higher education in the United States rests more and more in the hands of boards of trustees and other lay leaders. In fact, he underscored with enthusiasm and confidence the role to be played by the laity who serve as trustees in the successful future of Jesuit higher education, a partnership that must be strong and engaged.

Fr. Nicolás's openness and inclusive nature are extremely welcome for those of us who work in this apostolate, and it is personally very exciting for me to be a part of this significant moment for Jesuit higher education in the United States. ■

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Fr. Nicolás addressing AJCU presidents and board of trustee chairs. Photo courtesy of the AJCU.

Here are some excerpts from Fr. Adolfo Nicolás's address to the presidents and board chairs of Jesuit colleges and universities.

“Leaders of a Jesuit institution must reinforce and motivate their members and communities in the values and attitudes that are based in the sacred Scriptures of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Leadership at a Jesuit institution is about evangelization – for Jesuit institutions exist only because of the particular, scripturally based faith perspective that led to their establishment.”

“Service is the basic concept of understanding authority.... The lesson for us is that authority exercised at a Jesuit, Catholic institution is always a form of service.”

“The principal function of a leader is to help the members of the community grow to become the living presence of God in the world. In the Ignatian concept of service, growth leads to transformation. If there is no transformation, then the school or the parish is not Jesuit.”

“My purpose today is to make sure everyone knows that the future of Jesuit higher education in the United States is in the hands of boards of directors, and that I am very happy that is the case because I know, looking at you, that it is in good hands indeed.”

For a full text of Father Nicolás's address, see <http://americamagazine.org/issue/call-spiritual-leaders>.