

The Call to Leadership of a Jesuit University: Context, Charism, Partnership
Board Chairs, Presidents, and Provincials, Chicago, 6 April 2024

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I am very happy to meet today with the presidents and Board chairs of North American Jesuit universities, together with the provincials and other friends. Thank you for being here.

Leadership in a Jesuit university is a very demanding job. I know that. For ten years I myself was a university president. Every day my team worked on enrollment and faculty recruitment, on curriculum and technology, on facilities and finances, on social outreach and government relations.

University leadership is a challenging job, but it is not *only* a job. It is a call, a vocation. This morning I would like to develop this call in three steps. First, we must look courageously at the world in which we live, the world to which we are sent. Second, we need to recall some fundamentals of the Jesuit charism. Third, I want to reflect on partnership in mission in a practical way that touches, among other points, on the Mission Priorities Examen.

Context: The world in which we live our mission

A phrase that appears very often in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus is: “according to the circumstances of persons, places, and times.” We need to begin our consideration of university leadership by considering our circumstances.

Let’s speak plainly. We live in a world at war. Every day we see the results of appalling international conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza. We see civil war in Sudan and generalized violence in Haiti. In Europe we see a kind of war against newcomers, against outsiders with strange ways, against migrants and refugees. Conflicts are fueled by nationalism, racism, tribalism, caste discrimination, and sometimes by religious intolerance.

We live in a world ever more conscious of the reality of climate change. Some years ago a senior American politician said to me, rather dramatically, “Father, my lifelong effort to support just wages for working people won’t mean much if we end up destroying life itself.” Four years ago, we thought that the experience of a global pandemic would change us, making us more sensitive to the urgent need to care for our common home. Did it? I don’t think so.

In our world, technology outruns our understanding of its possibilities and dangers. In 2011, Father Adolfo Nicolás, my predecessor as Superior General, warned an international meeting of university leaders that the explosive growth of social media posed a risk of “the

globalization of superficiality.” The problem was worse than he knew. It was not just that Facebook made it too easy to “friend” and “unfriend” people. The problem was that we began to listen only to our “friends” and to repeat whatever they repeated, without worrying about whether or not it was true. Today we are at the beginning of an even more far-reaching technological change, glimpsing the enormous potential of Artificial Intelligence without yet understanding its consequences. Unfortunately, our legislatures struggle even to approve budgets, much less to orient the use of new technologies toward the common good.

Peacebuilding, care for the common home, orienting the use of new technologies toward the common good. What makes all these problems particularly difficult is the collapse of dialogue. We speak, but we do not listen. We are losing the skills needed even for reasonable and respectful dialogue across differences, much less the disposition to negotiate in order to reach the goal of all true political action, the common good. The Venezuelan political scientist Moisés Naím writes about the three “p’s” of populism, polarization, and a post-truth practice of political rhetoric. As a student of political science myself, I see this as a crisis of democracy, a crisis of citizenship, a crisis of responsible participation by everyday citizens in shared processes of decision-making, and a crisis of accountability for politicians as public servants.

If we look specifically at higher education in North America, we can see all these challenges and more. Demographic change means that far fewer young people will soon be seeking to enroll. Cultural change means that fewer families fully appreciate the value added by formation in a Catholic and humanistic tradition if it costs them more than education in a state school. The search for students leads to competition in the construction of expensive facilities and to heavily discounted tuition fees. Financial viability is a real question for many Jesuit universities in North America. I have heard some say that “the business model is broken.” A Vatican official once asked me, “If a Jesuit university closes, who claims the assets?” I was tempted to respond, “The real question is who inherits the debts!”

But all these challenges are only half the story. When a Jesuit looks at the world, he always also sees the grace of God at work. The Jesuit superior for Haiti wrote to me two weeks ago: “Armed groups of bandits are taking over more and more territory. The streets are empty. It is like living in an open-air prison. We are furious that our country has not been capable of finding a way forward, but we are not afraid, and we have not lost hope.” We are not afraid, and we have not lost hope.

Our university communities can also say exactly that. We are not afraid of these challenges, and we have not lost hope. I sense hope, not fear, when I consider your institutes that link integrated sciences with the good of society, fundamental medical research with global public health, engineering programs with environmental sustainability, theology programs with pastoral outreach. I sense hope, not fear, when our universities open space for difficult conversations that make people uncomfortable, conversations about the past and the future,

about cultures and churches, about what it means to be human and who we are called to become. And I sense more hope than fear when I speak with our students, young adults from a wide range of religious and cultural backgrounds who seek to lead lives of goodness, integrity, meaning, and love.

The Jesuit Charism

I would like to speak now about the Jesuit charism that marks the way of proceeding of Jesuit universities.

As many of you know, the second week of St. Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises begins with a contemplation on the incarnation. We imagine the Holy Trinity looking down upon the whole surface of the globe and all its people in all their diversity of dress, language, and way of life. Looking at this creation, God is so moved with compassion and love that the Trinity sends the Divine Word into the world to save it, to open to all people the fullness of life.

In the late 1520s, a few graduate students at the University of Paris felt themselves to be called to serve that Divine Word, following the way of life of Jesus poor and humble, serving the mission of reconciliation and justice that he left to the Church. Ten years later, they recognized that they were called not just to serve as individuals but to join together as an universal apostolic body, a small Company to serve the mission of the Church wherever the Pope decided to send them, anywhere in the world, always seeking the greater praise and service of God and help of souls. The foundational document approved by the Pope Julius III in 1550 describes our work very expansively, including "any works of charity according to what will seem expedient for the glory of God and the common good." We still engage in an enormous variety of works, but educational ministry has become in many ways a signature apostolate.

The foundational charism of the Society of Jesus marks our university communities with a particular style. They embody a specific form of "intellectual apostolate," a mission received as a gift of the Holy Spirit. As apostles we are sent. We hear a call, accept the invitation, and are sent on mission. If we simply mimic what others do, we are not living up to our vocation. We share with all universities a commitment to teaching, research, and service, but we bring our own charism to bear on those activities. Our universities must not set aside the humanities but instead integrate them with the natural and social sciences in an orderly fashion, helping students to discover an overarching framework within which their choices have meaning. Our style of learning is Ignatian, active, engaged, rooted in experience. Our universities prize religious experience, not locking it away in some corner of personal preference but bringing it openly into dialogue with other human experiences. Our universities should be places of solid education but not only that. They should bear witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ. Our universities are diverse, multicultural and

intergenerational communities that always involve learning together and often involve living together. We hope that our students will grow to be friends with one another, friends with the poor, and friends in the Lord.

Our educational charism invites us all, as Pope Francis often says, to integrate head, heart, and hands. In fact, all the perspectives that Pope Francis gave to the Society of Jesus to orient our work today, all four of the universal apostolic preferences, are very much at play in the universities: sharing the pathway to God, walking with the excluded, accompanying young people in constructing a hope-filled future, and collaborating in care for our common home. These preferences are becoming the main criteria for decision-making, guiding research, teaching, service, and collaboration.

All our universities participate in this one mission, a universal mission. Institutions have a legitimate autonomy, and market pressures push each one to compete with the others. However, we will be much stronger if we understand ourselves to be part of a network, if we contribute to the network, if we leverage the strength of the network for greater service. If each university goes its own way, the future is very uncertain. If we understand ourselves, each of the universities, as complementary parts of one body, then we can face the future with hope.

Finally, our charism is also a charism of choice, of election. Faced with a choice between two goods, we discern and deliberately choose the one that is more conducive to the praise and service of God and help of souls in the context of a universal vision that gives us the freedom to choose the more universal good. Individuals are called to make such elections, and so are communities.

An implication of this spirituality of election is that a university cannot be a Jesuit university without *choosing* that identity over and over again, through one concrete choice after another. If a university stops actively choosing to be Jesuit, then we should talk without any fear about the possibility of parting ways.

Partnership in Mission

For some of our most cherished colleagues, working in a Jesuit university is *not* a vocation. It is just a job. A good job, but still, basically, only a job.

That is not true of anyone in this room. No one is a president or a Board chair by default. You have chosen to serve as presidents and Board chairs deliberately, in a free and generous response to the call that each one has experienced, one way or another, in his or her heart ... a call that I would presume to identify as the mysterious and gracious movement of the Holy Spirit. We Jesuits therefore don't just want to work for and with you, we want to partner with

you in mission. Together we must nurture the Jesuit and Catholic identity and mission of each of the universities and of the network as a whole.

In 1998 two leaders of important Vatican Dicasteries wrote to Father General Peter Hans Kolvenbach asking what sort of structure the Society of Jesus intended to use to assure the Catholic and Jesuit identity of universities governed not directly by Jesuit superiors but by largely independent Boards of Trustees. The whole idea of Boards puzzled them greatly. One said, “The people who control the money control the mission. If the Boards control the money, they control the mission. What gives the Society of Jesus confidence in their governance for mission?”

Over the following fifteen years much was done to strengthen the Jesuit identity of all members of the university communities, from trustees to groundskeepers, particularly through mission formation programs. There were also experiments in governance such as reserving certain decisions to a separate Board of members controlled by Jesuits. By 2015 it was clear that the way forward in governance was not to be found in a mechanism of control but in a lively and engaged partnership among all of us who have the vocation of Jesuit university leadership.

I came from Rome last night and have not been part of this meeting. Your discussions here may well have developed new ways to exercise that partnership. I look forward to hearing about them. Until now, I have looked to two particular characteristics to give me confidence in the vibrancy of a particular university’s Jesuit identity and mission.

First, the university has to have a strong relationship with its provincial, and through him with me. This living relationship to the Society of Jesus was authoritatively identified by our 35th General Congregation in 2008 as distinguishing a Jesuit work from the larger group of Ignatian works (Decree 6, number 10). This relationship is nurtured by the provincial’s annual visitation but also in many other ways, including meetings like this one, meetings at the province level, meetings with the provincial’s assistant for higher education, and participation in province apostolic planning. All Jesuit governance depends on knowing one another, trusting one another, delegating authority in appropriate ways, sharing complete information and maintaining transparent communication.

Second, I need to know that the university community engages in ongoing discernment of the steps it should take as it seeks the *magis*, strengthening its mission and identity in response to changing circumstances. This discernment should always be underway, but it reaches a high point of intensity in the periodic Mission Priorities Examen in which the Board chairs play an important role.

I know that several of your universities are involved in your second Mission Priorities Examen this year. I have not yet seen those reports. However, I have read thirty reports in past years, and I would like to mention a few of the themes that have emerged.

I have learned that both the product and the process of the MPE are important. A president once confessed amazement at the enthusiastic response of the people who were invited to participate in the MPE process on his campus. He thought people would see it as a burden, an annoying requirement to check off. Instead, people were energized by meaningful conversations about identity and mission. Experience shows that the MPE is most effective when it is broadly participative, including not only trustees and administrators but faculty, staff, students, and local stakeholders including the bishop and the leaders of other Jesuit works in the city, “according to the circumstances of persons, places, and times.” This experience is itself formative.

The Mission Priorities Examen is designed as an Ignatian examen. Elements in the process may take on the flavor of an accreditation or an exercise in strategic planning, but the examen can and should be more. The process starts by recognizing and giving thanks for all the good that has been done and all the gifts that have been received. Its final goal is to make choices about next steps, seeking the *magis* as in an everyday Ignatian examen. The goal is not to marshal evidence of having met criteria for accreditation. An impressive list of past achievements is not enough to give me confidence in confirming the Catholic and Jesuit identity of a university. What matters even more is the university community’s demonstrated ability to make an Ignatian examen in common, accompanied by visitors from other Jesuit universities who are partners in a discernment process, not inspectors. What matters is the ability to discern the next steps to which we are called by the Holy Spirit, steps that are clear, strategic, achievable, and verifiable.

What have we learned from past Examens? We know that the universities reflect the diverse regional cultures in which they are embedded ... the circumstances of persons, places, and times. In general, there is a widespread commitment to Jesuit identity and mission. People working with the academic curriculum, with service learning, with student development, and with admissions all use identifiably Jesuit language. Often faculty, staff, and students ask for even more opportunities for systematic, deep, and continuous formation for mission. There are many initiatives to expand access to the university and to develop truly intercultural communities. In this regard, I want to say a special word of thanks to the universities that welcome Jesuit graduate students from the global South.

I have also read about challenges. Many find it easier to talk about service than to talk about faith. The broad commitment to Jesuit identity is sometimes rather shallow. Mission initiatives often depend on the personal commitment of charismatic individuals and are not embedded in the structures of the university. We are quick to take on positive values of the

cultures in which we are embedded, such as a concern for ecology and for inclusion, but we do not always have the ability to question those cultures, drawing on the Catholic intellectual tradition. I have also seen that financial constraints can be ignored when a university commits to unrealistic next steps.

I am always happy when an MPE process asks a local Jesuit community to step up its game, developing a more corporate apostolic presence at the university. I also want to say, however, that having fifteen Jesuits or five or none at all working full-time on a university campus cannot by itself “make” or “break” the university’s Catholic and Jesuit identity. If we can field a team of fifteen Jesuits, wonderful. If we can’t, let’s remember that for the past several decades the vitality of the mission has depended less on us Jesuits than on those with whom we partner.

Tanto bien recibido

I love the university apostolate. Once I start talking about it, I find it hard to stop. I’ve not yet spoken about leveraging better the enviable international network of Jesuit universities to strengthen the universities in North America. I have not spoken about the selection and support of university presidents as directors of apostolic works. I have not spoken about what can and cannot reasonably be expected from a local Jesuit superior who may well serve a university, a “traditional” high school, a Cristo Rey school, a Nativity school, a parish and a retreat house. I have said little about the extremely competitive environment in which the universities carry out their mission. But I think I have said enough! Now I would like to hear from you.

I want to close by thanking the presidents, the Board chairs, the provincials and their staffs for your outstanding service. Through your efforts, God is giving much to the world. Thank you for embracing Jesuit university leadership, not as a job but as a vocation. Keep up the good work! May God bless you all.