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Global Partnerships in Jesuit Higher Education

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In order better to confront the complex problems facing modern society, and in order to strengthen the Catholic identity of the Institutions, regional, national and international cooperation is to be promoted in research, teaching, and other university activities among all Catholic Universities, including Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties. (John Paul II, 1990, n. 7)

The Roman Catholic Church sponsors the largest worldwide family of educational institutions—135,000 elementary and secondary schools and 1,800 colleges and universities. Catholic identity provides a matchless opportunity for networking in an increasingly globalized world; it is sad *Ex corde Ecclesiae’s* exhortation to collaborate is often unheeded. Last April at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City, the Society of Jesus initiated new steps to counter that sad trend. The conference brought together some 300 educational leaders from over 200 institutions around the globe for 3 days of presentations and discussions on such topics as regional challenges facing Jesuit higher education; Catholic identity and mission; theology, science, and culture; markets, inequality, and poverty; ecology and sustainability; and human rights and the university.

Rev. Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, gave a keynote address, “Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry: Challenges to Jesuit Higher Education Today,” which highlighted three interrelated challenges to higher education. The first, “promoting depth of thought and imagination,” addressed the gradual process of dehumanization in the wake of our globalized and technological society where information is readily available, but seldom processed at a deeper level. “People lose the ability to engage with reality,” Fr. Nicolás asserted.

Shallow, self-absorbed perceptions of reality make it almost impossible to feel compassion for the suffering of others; and a contentment with the satisfaction of immediate desires or the laziness to engage competing claims on one’s deepest loyalty results in the inability to commit one’s life to what is truly worthwhile. (p. 3)

This stands in sharp contrast of the mission of Jesuit education, which seeks to

promote social justice and authentic solidarity through knowledge of cultures. “Serious and active intellectual inquiry” is a main point of emphasis in the Jesuit commitment to evangelization (GC 34, D.16, n.396, 3). To combat the growing disconnect between individuals and cultures, Jesuit universities need to engage in studies of the “emerging cultural world of our students and find creative ways to promote depth of thought and imagination” (Nicolás, 2010, p. 11).

Engaging in creative ways to promote depth of thought requires Jesuit institutions of higher education to work together. Too often each institution works “as a *proyecto social* by itself,” not taking “sufficient advantage of what our new globalized world offers as a possibility of greater service” (Nicolás, 2010, p. 7). Fr. Nicolás acknowledged the collaboration among regional organizations, but challenged the Society to expand these relationships “and build more universal, more effective international networks of Jesuit higher education” (p. 8). The conference highlighted recent efforts to help network Jesuit universities and apostolates, including Jesuit Commons. This effort partners Jesuit Refugee Service, Regis University in Denver, and faculty from more than 10 Jesuit universities to help provide accredited university courses to refugees who lack access to tertiary education. This effort utilizes and takes advantage of education and global technologies: “We’ve pulled together some of the best social media tools out there to create something unprecedented that will empower this network to reach its collaborative potential” (Lowney, 2010, para. 4). Currently serving refugee students at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees camps in Malawi and Kenya, program coordinators are looking to expand to other locations and “aspire to pioneer scalable, innovative models of delivering Jesuit-inspired higher education in the world’s lower-resource settings” (Jesuit Commons, 2010, para. 3).

Research, one of the cornerstones of the work of the university, was the focus of Fr. Nicolás (2010) third challenge. “Globalization has created new inequalities between those who enjoy the power given to them by knowledge, and those who are excluded from its benefits because they have no access to that knowledge” (p. 10). Fr. Nicolás argued that our globalized world is characterized by “aggressive secularism” and “the resurgence of various fundamentalisms” (p. 10) that refuse to acknowledge complexity and human reason. This “excludes the possibility of fruitful dialogue” (Benedict, 2009, n. 56). According to Fr. Nicolás (2010), Jesuit universities need to seek innovative solutions to disseminating research and its findings to those who are excluded and need to work toward renewed commitment “to the Jesuit tradition of learned ministry which mediates between faith and culture” (p. 11). This journal, which recently

transitioned to an open access model making all content freely available, represents one way in which Catholic colleges and universities have sought out new ways to distribute research.

The vast majority of the conference allotted time for participants to meet in small group discussions, processing the presentations and topics and facilitating networking among colleagues. To help stimulate discussion and imagination, faculty at various universities across the world prepared papers on each of the conference topics that participants were expected to have read prior to arriving in Mexico City. Two of these papers are included in this focus section: Rev. David Hollenbach, S.J.'s piece, "Human Rights in a Pluralistic, Unequal Globe: Contributions of Jesuit Universities" addressing the conference topic of human rights and civil responsibility, and Rev. Charles L. Currie, S.J.'s "Pursuing Jesuit, Catholic Identity and Mission at U.S. Jesuit Colleges and Universities," challenging participants to think deeply about identity and mission.

"Depth of thought and imagination in the Ignatian tradition involves a profound engagement with the real" (Nicolás, 2010, p. 4). This conference challenged participants to think creatively, finding meaningful solutions to address the pressing issues and signs of our times in light of the Ignatian tradition and founding mission of the Society. As Fr. Nicolás acknowledged, while there may be many successful programs already in place, these need to be expanded, especially in terms of networking Jesuit institutions across the world to "increase the scope of our service" (p. 8).

Conclusion

"If Ignatius and his first companions were to start the Society of Jesus again today, would they still take on universities as a ministry of the Society?" This was the question Fr. Nicolás posed during the international conference. The resounding answer at the conference was yes; Jesuit higher education, as a significant global network of higher education in the world, is uniquely poised to not only advance the intellectual apostolate of the Society, but to foster a more humane, just, and sustainable global society in the "new context of globalization and new communication technologies" (Locatelli, 2009, para. 2).

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