

Xavier University Presidential Installation
October 28, 2021
Cintas Center

Inaugural Address

Good afternoon.

I am honored to be with you today, and to serve as the 35th President of Xavier University. I am especially touched by those who have offered such generous greetings and gifts today. Thank you.

It has been said that we cannot discover new oceans unless we have courage to lose sight of the shore.¹

Today is a day to celebrate all that Xavier University has become, since 1831, as we have, many times over, discovered new oceans while losing sight of the shore, yet always clinging fast to our Jesuit Catholic mission, to hold us afloat.

Since that first day almost 200 years ago, we have worked to transform the lives of our students, forming them to be professional leaders and laureates, community engagers, spiritual seekers and remarkable men and women, for and with others.

So, today, we gather to reflect on the sacred Gifts of our Ignatian heritage and to fix our collective gaze on the very exciting oceans ahead.

Let me begin with a few words of thanks for those who created today's celebration and for those who are here to celebrate with us. You each have my deepest thanks:

- a. **Chairman Vince Caponi**, and members of the Xavier's Board of Trustees and President's Advisory Council;
- b. **The Very Reverend Karl J. Kiser, Provincial of the USA Midwest Province of the Society of Jesus**, other members of the Society of Jesus and leaders of the Midwest Province;
- c. **The Very Reverend Father Anthony Brausch**, representing the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, and other religious leaders in the greater Cincinnati Region;
- d. **Vice Mayor Smitherman, Mayor Schneider** and other government representatives;

¹ Andre Gide.

- e. Members of educational networks, including the **Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, the Association of Independent Colleges & Universities of Ohio...**and others, as well as our local primary and secondary school colleagues;
- f. Community and business leaders, including partners at **TriHealth, Messer Construction and the Big East Athletic Conference.**
- g. And to the alumni, faculty and staff colleagues, parents and families of our students...and to our incomparable Xavier students ..thank you! And of course, Musketeers, you have all been released from class this afternoon...so you are welcome! ☺

I am touched by the number of you who have traveled from near and far to celebrate this wonderful institutional milestone with all of **us** at Xavier. For those of you who are here to represent your respective universities as delegates, including many who have become colleagues and friends over time, I am deeply strengthened by your presence and blessed by your friendship.

I am truly grateful to **Xavier's Board of Trustees** who elected me and to the members of the **Presidential Search Committee**, led by past Chair of the Board, **Barbara Howard**, who selected me. I actually happen to think ...you made a great choice... and I know that I did. I am honored by the trust that you have placed in me to carry forward the tremendous mission of Xavier University. To be able to live this mission **HERE**, in this community, in this moment, is a distinct privilege and a responsibility that I undertake solemnly.

Thank you also to **Dr. Debra Mooney and Dr. Niamh O'Leary**, and to the other members of the Inauguration Steering Committee who have toiled for months to bring forth this entire week; a statement of institutional commitment to our mission and a celebration of the Gifts of our Ignatian heritage. This has been a remarkable week, from our National Day of Service and Solidarity working in our community, through a wonderful brunch co-hosted with our Cincinnati Jesuit Community where we welcomed hundreds of families. I had the benefit of learning from our faculty of the ways in which the Universal Apostolic Preferences are woven into their scholarship, teaching and service..and spent an evening with our students, speaking about vocation and purpose in their lives. Finally, yesterday's Missioning Mass brought all of us together amidst beautiful music, prayer and blessings for our future. I am grateful to the hundreds of hands who played a part in all of the events of this week, culminating in today's celebration.

I am thankful, as well, for the leadership of my immediate predecessor **Fr. Michael Graham, SJ**, and for his generous offerings of time and advice. Fr. Mike, as you know, I have always been inspired by the gifts that you have brought to Xavier and now I have the added grace of your friendship. Thank you.

I remain grateful, also, for the contributions of **Fr. Hoff, before Fr. Graham, and the 32 Jesuit presidents** who preceded them. To literally carry their names, etched into this medallion is a physical reminder not only of their contributions as stewards of this ministry for almost 200

years, but also of their continued prayers and intercessions as members of the communion of saints.

Peter and I are especially blessed to be able to be joined this week – in person and remotely- by members of our family and close friends. Given our Canadian roots, Covid continues to make it very difficult for our extended crew to cross borders and gather in person, but I know so many of them are here in spirit – and livestream - today. I am particularly grateful to be traveling this path with our children, **Erik and Claire**. They are at different stages of their college journeys and, as such, both keep me informed **and humbled**, ensuring in a very direct way that I never lose sight of the needs of the young people who I am committed to serve... even if those needs are more salad dressing options in the dining hall. ☺ And none of this would be possible without my best friend, Peter. You and I have traveled a long and winding road together over the past 25 years and I can't imagine that journey without you.

On behalf of my family, our deepest thanks to each of you for the tremendously warm welcome that you have given us at Xavier and beyond in our early days in Cincinnati.

Now I would be remiss if I did not recognize those participating in today's program – the talented members of the **Xavier University Concert Choir**, conducted by **Dr. Matthew Swanson**, the **Seven Hills Brass**, conducted by **Dr. Dan Grantham**, **Dr. Ben Chamberlain**, Associate Professor and Director of Xavier's Instrumental Music Activities and our organist, **Dr. Brenda Portman**. Thank you also to our Xavier student leaders who have assisted in preparing me, figuratively and literally, for this moment. Will you please join me in thanking them?

Today

As a direct result of the long and successful tenure of my predecessor, very few of you have lived through a Xavier University presidential inauguration. The last one was celebrated over 20 years ago. I am reluctant to point this out, Fr. Mike, but it must be said that some gathered here today had not yet been born when you were inaugurated. Just saying.

The temptation is always to view an inauguration as being focused on the person wearing the new robe. But the real focus of an inauguration should be on the institution itself – it is about the resilience of this place, thriving through countless generations of students and faculty and staff and alumni, and presidents...outliving its founders and with certainty, being destined to outlive all of us here today.

It is a celebration of the enduring spirit of this institution, a spirit that is passed down through the ages, evolving and adapting, but never losing its rootedness. And so, today, as we celebrate this institutional milestone, let us reflect on the legacy of excellence and impact that Xavier University continues to build.

I have been at Xavier for 120 days as of today, not that anyone's counting.

They have been days of learning and days of wonder and days of dreaming. They have been days of understanding and not understanding...of questioning and listening and observing. They have been days of examining and discerning. I have met so many people: celebrating milestones, watching our fierce student athletes play the sports that they love, hearing testimonials from alumni who are now proud to be sending their children or grandchildren to Xavier, observing our remarkable faculty and staff colleagues engaging our students both in and beyond the classroom. They have been days of kind and generous greetings from new colleagues, old friends, presidential peers from across the country and especially our AJCU network. In short, these have been days of countless blessing.

And here is what I have learned.... which while newsworthy to me, may be 'old news' to many of you.

Xavier is a Jesuit Catholic university with remarkable bones, steeped in a richness that provides a strong foundation as we turn to the future. Ours is a community that is dedicated to academic excellence and to forming students for lives of faith and purpose, committed to justice. It is a community that holds itself to the highest ideals of inclusion, to creating an environment of belonging for all. Xavier knows itself and the gifts of its Ignatian heritage...well.

Ours is also a community that is committed to.... community. A community that cares for our neighbors around the corner and across the globe. This is a place where young people arrive, facing inward and leave, transformed, having turned outward in their focus. They tell us and show us that they are devoted to making the world better.

Ours is a place where the young men and women who we serve are reminded that they are children of a loving God who has a plan for each of them. They learn here that, whatever challenges arise, they are not alone and they are resilient enough to overcome them. We are an inclusive Catholic community that welcomes others, regardless of faith, to join us in celebration of God's gifts and blessings, however each of us names God.

In one of my favorite pieces, "Praying", American poet Mary Oliver reminds us:

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

At Xavier, I have learned, we work hard to encourage one another to listen, in the silence, for another voice that may speak. And that very inclination to listen, be that through our daily

examen or otherwise, is something that will change our world for the better. It was the belief of St. Ignatius Loyola, 500 years ago, as he approached the founding of the Society of Jesus, and it is our belief now. It is an honor to help to teach our students to “see God in all things” as St. Ignatius called us to, so long ago.

And, so what is next for this remarkable, mission-driven community of Ignatian educators and students as we turn our focus to the future and to those new oceans ahead?

It is a future that needs Xavier more now than at any other time in our history. As Xavier approaches our third century, we must retain our spirit of innovation and commitment to the common good. We are currently living through a period of increased noise, a time of extraordinary instability and volatility in higher education.

The American public is increasingly skeptical of the value of a university degree and whether or not the experience that higher education offers is one worthy of what has become a large price tag. At Xavier, we must focus on not only our core competencies, but on our capacity to be distinctive, to be unique and unlike any other university in our midst. We must balance the need for greater agility with a doubling down on the critical outcomes of a Xavier education that we, alone, can offer to the world.

Higher education is on a collision course with what can only be viewed as the great reckoning of our generation. The United States is experiencing profound, relentless and accelerating demographic, economic and technological change. Our population is rapidly aging, dramatically shifting in its racial make-up and now, with the onset of this extended pandemic, rethinking its orientation to work and spaces.

We are beginning to see the impacts of three plus decades of explosive inflation in our sector as certain populations – most notably, young men – are far less inclined to go to college today than even 5 or 10 years ago - and many are saddled with debt that will chase them well into middle age, delaying the traditional milestones of adult life, be that home ownership or starting a family or even continuing to graduate school.

Despite its many innovations and contributions – higher education is inherently structured for a post-industrial world that needed the teaching of specific skill sets (for the masses) and then higher-level education for the elites, mimicking the assembly line production model of the early 20th Century economy. The academic year is divided into two, 15-week semesters, each with five courses that typically each meets for three hours a week. At the end of each semester, 15 credits are awarded and once the student achieves 120 credits, they earn the degree.

The currency of this model is the credit-hour. It is the credit-hour, the time spent on task, that our accreditors audit and universities reward with credentials. So, even though we know better as educators, we adopt input, rather than output, as the measure of learning.

As the world around us shifts away from this model, adopting novel approaches to innovation and knowledge creation, what is to be the role of higher education in this new landscape? And

digging deeper, what is the role of Catholic higher education in the midst of this shift? And finally, what role will this remarkable Jesuit Catholic school, Xavier University, play in all of this? How can we be a factor in both advancing change and reasserting our historic value proposition?

Xavier University has a unique opportunity in the midst of this chaos...an opportunity to seize our Jesuit Catholic potential in its fullest sense, and to be the change that our world needs.

In this moment, we have the envious opportunity to restate our values in a way that is compelling and appealing— a value proposition that is as strong and necessary in 2021 as it was in 1831:

- a. the value of an ongoing, foundational commitment to the liberal arts as a platform that provides students with the profound capacity for solving the multi-dimensional and complex problems of the day with mental agility, critical thought, powerful communication, rational analysis and ethical reasoning, preparing them for lives of impact as good citizens and leaders in their communities and professions;
- b. the value of belonging to a community that seeks to make the world around it better; through thought and deed; through reflection and discernment and solidarity and kinship...recognizing the intense gifts that have been given to each of us and the corresponding duty to employ those gifts in the pursuit of justice;
- c. the value of enabling our students to thrive in the many different vocations that they will answer across their lifetimes, personal and professional, helping them to understand that their options should always be exercised with an eye to leading lives of purpose and impact;
- d. the value of living and learning in the midst of a Jesuit Catholic university, **surrounded** by Ignatian educators, whether it is the professor who teaches you Calculus or the assistant coach on your soccer team or the residence hall director reviewing a noise complaint or the reference librarian helping you to find an important resource or the preceptor who supervises your clinical hospital placement or the retired Jesuit who strikes up a conversation when you meet him on the Yard. This milieu is limitless in its formation potential.

Drawing upon our Ignatian values, we encourage our students to treat those around them as subjects – not objects – developing relationships across our communities that will last a lifetime. We model for them holistic care for the entire person – *cura personalis* – calling them to care for one another as we care for them – in mind, body and spirit, and inviting them to encounter something bigger than themselves.

All of this unfolds under the larger intellectual umbrella of the Jesuit Catholic university, steeped in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and situated at the very intersection of faith and reason. We invite our students to recognize that our faith is not only compatible with what they are encountering in their studies, but that God is the source of both faith and reason, without contradiction.

So where do we go from here?

As we lift our gaze to those oceans in our future, we must not be complacent. Rather, we must be clear-eyed and clinical about who we are and, perhaps more importantly, *who we are not*. Xavier cannot be everything to everyone, and as we find ourselves facing the winds of demographic and economic change, we must begin to make critical choices. And yet, we can be MORE in advancing the common good.

What are our spires of excellence – those elements of a Xavier experience that stand above others and are worthy of even greater focus and investment? Where do we need to intensify our efforts and what, conversely, must we allow to wither? To thrive in the years ahead, Xavier must remain committed to its mission and values, while strengthening its agility, innovation and self-awareness.

We are now beginning the process of creating our next strategic plan, a plan that will guide Xavier into its adjacent possible. This plan will evolve in the coming months into something that we will all write together: our students, our colleagues, our alumni, our Jesuit community and our trustees.

I cannot predict what this plan will hold. But I can assure you of this: it will be a plan designed with our **students at its core**. It will be a plan dedicated to forming each woman and man, 'intellectually, morally and spiritually', a plan that will both impact - and in turn be impacted by - the changing and imperfect world around us.

We have tremendous opportunities in this moment to lead in our community and beyond our region as we begin to identify emerging themes, many of which intersect with the Universal Apostolic Preferences promulgated by Fr. General Sosa in 2019:

1. The need for accelerated academic innovation through structures and programs and populations as we look to this current environment and position ourselves as critical partners in preparing our students for success in this rapidly evolving knowledge economy;
2. The need to recognize, in our pedagogy, the extent to which technology has forever altered processes of learning and cognition, along with the content of knowledge itself. The 'digital natives' who we now serve are engaging technology at an exponentially increasing rate, pressing educators to 'livestream on demand' their education. We must find ways to thrive in the midst of this tension, developing certain agilities while confirming the need for other historical approaches as we strengthen patterns of learning and ways of knowing;
3. The need to take advantage of Cincinnati as our classroom, recognizing the perfect location of this striking campus within a broader regional landscape that is poised to continue its rise and that allows us, with our students and partners, to explore countless cultural, historical, political and societal challenges immediately beyond our campus borders;

4. As we form men and women, for and with others, we see the need to reflect more deeply upon the students who we serve and how best to serve them, employing the Gifts of our Ignatian heritage. This includes traditional and unconventional students, residential and commuter, transfer students, graduate students, underrepresented student populations, veterans and international students; students with special learning needs and students who have challenging responsibilities beyond the classroom. How do we journey with these young people in creating a hope-filled future ?
5. The need to intensify our commitment not only to diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism, but more profoundly to building an architecture of radical belonging and to sustaining a campus community that welcomes students and colleagues from diverse backgrounds, lived experiences and viewpoints, celebrating those differences as sources of enrichment for all. By walking with the marginalized, by addressing issues of economic exclusion and inequities, we will advance our mission of reconciliation and justice. Frankly, this generation of young people – Gen Z - has little tolerance for superficial justice; globally, they are demanding a profound culture of belonging across our communities, belonging that addresses sustainability, poverty, access to education, racial justice and economic mobility. We must find ways to support them in this commitment;
6. The need to continue to form students who are able to reflect critically, by exposing them to a marketplace of diverse ideas and views and platforms, resisting the temptation – as we parents in the room may relate to – of urging these young people to simply mirror our own views and beliefs. Employing the gifts of the humanities in particular, we must teach our students how to think, and never tell them what to think. That is a challenge, especially at a time of growing division and entrenchment in political viewpoints, but if we do not commit to this, then we have abandoned what may be our greatest responsibility to these young people and to the world they will enter after Xavier. We must redouble our commitment, in the midst of such dissonance, to cultivating and modeling the capacity for listening to other views and encountering uncomfortable opinions, while remaining open to diverse ways of seeing;
7. And at a time when there is so much despair in the world, a despair that is being experienced profoundly by our young people, we must amplify our efforts to serve them through a ministry of radical encounter. We must deal with what has become an epidemic of overwhelming mental health challenges among this college generation. We must find better ways to support this growing challenge, while reminding our students that God is always with them, holding a plan for them, however deep the water might be;
8. And the need for Xavier University to continue to discern its best role in supporting and standing with the marginalized around us. As was said by **Fr. Ignacio Ellacuria**, a Jesuit martyred in El Salvador in 1989, when speaking of oppression in the developing world: *“What does a university do, immersed in this reality? Transform*

it? Yes. Do everything possible so that liberty is victorious over oppression, justice over injustice, love over hate? Yes. Without this overall commitment, we would not be a university, and even less so would we be a Catholic university". So, too, must Xavier discern its role in loving and lifting those who we serve.

Suffice to say that this extraordinary community has a singular opportunity to ask the world WHAT it needs Xavier University to DO at this crossroads, WHO it needs us to BE in order to advance the greater good, while remaining firmly rooted in our Jesuit Catholic mission and identity, as we move into our future.

This is what will nourish us, what will support us, as we again 'leave the shore to discover new oceans', ones that are certain to be populated with high ambitions, committed communities and a deep and abiding commitment to the Magis...to doing the extra, the more, and the better...in serving one another for the Greater Glory of God.

I am honored and excited to be able to work with all of you, seeking those oceans as we compose the next profound chapter in Xavier's life. I promise you nothing short of my tireless effort in the pursuit of this hope-filled future.

Once again, my deepest thanks to each of you for celebrating with us today.

All for One and One for ALL!