



CURIA GENERALIZIA DELLA COMPAGNIA DI GESÙ

Memorial of St. Robert Bellarmine
17 September 2019

To the Presidents and Trustees Participating in the *AJCU Trustee Forum*

Dear partners in mission,

As Superior General of the Society of Jesus, I would like to warmly welcome you to the first *Trustee Forum* sponsored by the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities. I hope that these days will give you the opportunity to meet your fellow trustees and presidents, listen to insightful speakers, and – most important – talk with one another about the work of leading Jesuit universities today.

Before anything else, I want you to know how grateful I am for the time and care you are expending to be part of this event and for all that you do in governing your universities. As trustees, you are stewards of your institutions, rather than owners. You hold your Jesuit college or university in trust for the Society of Jesus, for the Church, for students, and for the Common Good – always with an eye toward those on the margins of society. I know this is not easy work. As the financial footing of Jesuit schools becomes more fragile, reflecting the financial fragility of many households in an increasingly unequal world, holding a Jesuit university in trust and helping it to flourish is a complex task. The fact that you are here this weekend brings me great consolation. There are more than a thousand trustees of Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States, and you will leave this *Trustee Forum* as ambassadors to them, inviting fellow board members to enter more intentionally into our common project of Jesuit higher education. Thank you for generously guiding and serving your institution, and for imagining together a new and interconnected future for our schools.



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When we speak about the "mission" of Jesuit education, it is important to clarify that this mission has not been invented by the Jesuits, nor is it contained only in the mission statements of our schools or their strategic plans. At the deepest level we receive our mission from Christ; indeed, the mission is really not ours but his. The mission is a gift that calls us to an encounter with God, the human community, and the earth. The more we leave our places of comfort and familiarity, to seek God in the faces of others, the more authentic our mission will be. It is at the margins – with those the world has cast off and dismissed – that we discover the presence of the Lord and find our true purpose.

Intellectual work is at the heart of any university, but that work becomes Jesuit when it is carried out in the open air – not shut away in an office or the comfort of its own certainties and convictions ... when it can dialogue with other disciplines, allowing its own position to be enriched by other perspectives and cultures; when it is not shut up in its own version of the truth; when it is lived as a mission, being sent to help build a freer world. This ministry of intellectual work does not seek esteem from individuals or institutions. It seeks not its own glory – but to show the greater glory of God.

Jesuit universities are called to be agents of social and spiritual transformation. We are called to enter fully into the lives of those whose dignity has been stripped away by poverty, racism, displacement, xenophobia and other dehumanizing forces. A university that sees itself as a venture aimed at transforming society will gravitate towards the margins of society, to the people who are left out by the structures and interests that dominate our world. Such a university will throw open its doors and windows to the people at the margins, who will in turn bring with them a new breath of life that will be source of life in abundance for all.

When our suffering brothers and sisters cease to be issues in our eyes and become our beloved friends, our attitudes change. Their world is our world. We see that everything about the university belongs also to them. Our research, teaching, student formation, community engagements, and even the work of the board are all accountable to their needs and concerns. They are no longer simply people we serve. Now we belong to each other. ✕



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St. Ignatius is often quoted as saying, "Love is shown more in deeds than in words," which is wise counsel for all who seek to walk a path to God. How a board of trustees makes decisions and governs the school speaks volumes to the rest of the university about living the mission with integrity. Your choices as trustees set a clear tone for others to follow. If the board is focused only on the university's survival or its own reputation – if it operates from a posture of fear – then faculty, staff, and students will understand and live the mission in a similarly narrow way. This fear and isolation are completely contrary to the way of Jesus, who ate with sinners (Matt. 9:10-13), accompanied others with tenderness, and "healed those who needed to be cured" (Lk. 9:11).

In contrast, a board whose members know that they are part of a mission larger than themselves – larger, even, than their university – communicates something very different. They undertake their responsibilities in a humble and collaborative way, teaching others to form a strong community, and to be interdependent. They exercise both courage and compassion, to seek and follow the leadings of the Spirit. They prayerfully discern the choices that they must make, demonstrating through their actions that the university belongs to God. And they reach out on a regular basis to other Jesuit higher education institutions, in the U.S. and around the world, to give their work context, and to strengthen the international project of Jesuit higher education.

As you know, the leadership of American Jesuit universities has changed dramatically in the last fifty years. At one time, the Jesuits owned the institutions, served in key administrative positions, determined the curriculum, and did a great deal of the teaching. Now Jesuit higher education is a wholly collaborative project. There is more diversity among our students, faculty, and staff, and the large majority of them are committed lay people who bring new insights and expertise to their work. For the first time, most of the presidents of Jesuit schools in the United States are not Jesuits. And the schools are guided by boards that are largely made up of non-Jesuit trustees.

It might be easy to see these developments as a simply a reflection of dwindling Jesuit resources, but this would miss the invitation of the Spirit among us now. Look around you. In the room are trustees and presidents of tremendous talent and experience who bring civic, educational, financial, and other gifts to the work of the board. For many years, these



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have been the gifts that we Jesuits asked for and gratefully received from you – and they continue to be important for the future of our schools.

St. Ignatius emphasized over and over in the *Constitutions* of the Society of Jesus the need to be attentive to the circumstances of persons, places, and times. Much later, Vatican II expressed this as attentiveness to “the signs of the times,” to the ways in which God is working with us and accompanying us in this moment. Jesuit education has been given a large and greathearted community of lay trustees, each of whom brings professional expertise and spiritual depth to the board. Our mission is strengthened by so many different voices and perspectives – and it is more credible when it is embraced by all of us, lay and Jesuit alike. Today, more than ever, the universities need your mission governance. And this capacity for mission governance is not conferred automatically on every trustee. It must be cultivated through encounters like this *AJCU Trustee Forum*.

In the document we call his “autobiography,” St. Ignatius often refers to himself as “the Pilgrim.” His lifelong journey toward spiritual intimacy with Christ led him in many different directions and, time after time, he was forced to reconsider and readjust his plans. Some early Jesuit ministries succeeded and other failed miserably. You might say that Ignatius and his small band of companion were reading the “signs of the times.” They were exercising a kind of mission governance for their community, just as you are doing for Jesuit universities today.

Through the centuries, the mission of the Society of Jesus has remained the same - evangelization, the spreading of the Gospel, the Good News. But there is something more specific to these times that focuses this general mission even more. The last two big gatherings of the Jesuits (GC 35 & 36) used the same word - reconciliation. Why reconciliation? Because we live in a world that is breaking into pieces, and reconciliation has to do with bringing things together again. The Society of Jesus is deepening its commitment to higher education because we want to contribute effectively to making it possible for each and every human being to live their life, fully and with dignity – now as well as in the future

I know that you have already read about the Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Jesuits, which will guide the life and work of all Jesuit apostolates for the next ten years. These Preferences were discerned over a



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16-month period by the whole Society, in conversation with many of our collaborators. They are not priorities, nor are they a strategic plan. They are more about how we do things than what we do; and they are the “true north” for trustees, as you exercise mission governance.

So I ask you, as collaborators and friends in the Lord, to embrace and advance these four Preferences in your work:

- To show the way to God through the Spiritual Exercises and discernment;
- To walk with the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice;
- To accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future; and
- To collaborate, with Gospel depth, for the protection and renewal of God’s Creation.

The walls of our schools are meant to be porous and permeable. We are truer to our institutional vocation when doors, minds, and hearts are thrown open to the refreshing breeze of the Spirit, who will take us in directions we do not anticipate (Jn. 3:8). Therefore, as a trustee, your work is not to preserve Jesuit higher education like a fossil in amber. No – it is to open yourself to God’s transforming light, discern choices with integrity, and foster an environment that invites every person to know, love, and serve the Lord.

Thank you for all that you bring to your college or university, and for creating a network of Jesuit schools that speaks to the heart of our mission. I send you my prayers for a fruitful *Trustee Forum*, and look forward to our future together.

Sincerely yours in Christ,


Arturo Sosa, S.I.
Superior General

Cc: Rev. Michael J. Garanzini, S.I.
Secretary for Higher Education