

# Conversations

*On Jesuit Higher Education*

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**MISSION:IMPOSSIBLE**

**YOUR MISSION, SHOULD YOU CHOOSE TO ACCEPT IT**



**Mission Impossible?**

A Reality Check



# The American Jesuit University

*A Source of Reconciliation*

By Mick McCarthy, S.J.



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skepticism, and disagreement. And yet Stephen always added: "It's both our blessing and our curse."

The blessing of our "opinion-rich environment" is the range of ideas, beliefs, commitments, points of view, backgrounds, and purposes that members of the same community inhabit. It is what makes life so rich and universities such interesting places to work! The curse is not the tension such differences can create but our liability to tribalism: the unexamined instinct to galvanize against perceived threats from others and the dynamics of chronic mistrust and resentment such reflexes generate within institutions.

In this way, American universities reflect the country as a whole. Blessed with an embarrassment of riches of every kind, we also seem cursed with polarizing habits. Research confirms, for instance, the intensified political antipathy many Americans feel. According to the Pew Center in 1994, 16 percent of Democrats polled viewed Republicans "very unfavorably," but in 2014 that number had risen to 38 percent, with 27 percent even saying the other party was "a threat to the nation's well-being." In the same period Republican strong disfavor of Democrats rose from 17 percent to 43 percent, with 36 percent seeing Democrats as a national threat.

The dynamics of political polarization, that is, the increased distrust of "them," affect universities in many ways. Difficult issues contemporary campuses face, such as diversity, free speech, race, as well as concerns about economic viability and curricular innovation seem to invite the tribal instinct. Moreover, data shows increasingly negative attitudes toward institutional religion, the Catholic Church, as well as public perceptions that higher education itself is headed in the wrong direction. All these conditions spell significant challenge for American universities, and particularly those that advance their mission and identity as Jesuit and Catholic. In short, we face a general erosion of mutual trust that manifests itself in serious and varied ways, both internally and externally. Most, if not all, of the AJCU schools could point to painful examples of breakdown in their recent histories.

To colleagues who work at these colleges and universities, therefore, I would argue that it is in our

**The superior general** of the Society of Jesus made an extraordinary claim in July 2018 at Loyola, the birthplace of St. Ignatius. A university, Fr. Arturo Sosa asserted, is "a source of a reconciled life."

The university as a source of reconciled life? For anyone who works in higher education, the concept seems counterintuitive at best. Before his sudden death earlier in the same month, Dr. Stephen Freedman, provost at Fordham and dear colleague to many of us in the AJCU, frequently remarked that universities are "opinion-rich environments." He usually said it with a smile, as if to remind us never to presume that people will go along with what may seem to us so eminently reasonable. We operate in contexts of constant debate, tension, unrest, contest,

own institutional interest and in the interest of our country to invest more in building up our internal cultures, so that our natural blessings may be multiplied and the effects of our curse may be contained. We need to focus not on our “virtual communities” but on our actual communities, so that bonds of personal relationship, if not actual affection, may ground our ability to imagine the possibility of common good.

For those who have special concern to promote the distinctively Jesuit, Catholic mission and identity of our institutions, such investment in fellowship will pay dividends, precisely because that mission IS impossible unless people have hope that, within a community of divergent viewpoints, they may work together toward deeply shared values and ideals. Moreover, if we can create habits of generosity, even a willingness to sacrifice, rather than a propensity to draw the wagons into ever-smaller circles, we will also benefit society as a whole. We face the task of building real community in a cultural context where people are often conflicted between a desire for shared good and impulses that undermine it.

How might the challenge before us relate to Fr. Sosa’s claim that a university is “a source of a reconciled life”?

## Why Reconciliation?

Over the last 50 years, addresses of Jesuit superiors general have pointed out emerging challenges and opportunities confronting Jesuit education. In 1973, to alumni who were proud of the excellent academic and religious education they received, Fr. Pedro Arrupe’s famous “Men for Others” speech stressed that our primary educational objective must now be to form people who understand that pious devotion is a farce if it does not issue in a love that actively works for social justice.

In his 2000 speech at Santa Clara, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach cautioned that even in Jesuit institutions promotion of social justice was becoming detached from its wellspring in faith. He urged a renewed sense of integration. He also noted that, in the American context, Jesuit universities needed to maintain commitment to their grounding mission and identity

as they advanced in achieving academic excellence and institutional success. In Mexico City in 2010, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás championed “depth of thought and imagination” at a time when digital technologies were advancing the “globalization of superficiality.” Moreover, he challenged Jesuit institutions across the world not to operate as silos but to seek ways to network effectively.

At Loyola in July 2018, Fr. Sosa repeated the call to continue building up a network with common goals. His emphasis on reconciliation, however, reflected a theme that has come to prominence in Jesuit documents over the last ten years. In 2008, the Thirty-Fifth General Congregation, which elected Nicolás, retrieved from the biblical tradition the notion of justice as “right relationship” and asserted that Jesuits and their collaborators are called to establish such relationships through a “mission of reconciliation.” St. Ignatius called his early companions to be agents of reconciliation, but today, in a world torn by violence, strife, and division, there is just as much need. “This reconciliation calls us to build a new world of right relationships, a new Jubilee reaching across all divisions so that God might restore his justice for all” (GC 35 Decree 3.16).

In 2016, the Thirty-Sixth General Congregation, which elected Fr. Sosa, developed this theme even further. It asserted that all Jesuit works should seek to build bridges. In no sense retreating from a commitment to social justice, the emphasis on reconciliation seems to recognize that claims to “justice,” as indeed to “faith” itself, can justify multiple forms of violence. It notes:

Fundamentalism, intolerance, and ethnic-religious-political conflicts as a source of violence: In many societies, there is an increased level of conflict and polarization, which often gives rise to violence that is all the more appalling because it is motivated and justified by distorted religious convictions. In such situations, Jesuits, along with all who seek the common good, are called to contribute from their religious-spiritual traditions towards the building of peace, on local and global levels. (GC 36 Decree 1.28)

Sosa's address begins by noting the Society of Jesus is committed to university work in order to "turn the words of Jesus into historical truth ... *I came that they may have life and have it abundantly*" (Jn. 10:10). The fullness of life involves "plunging into the broad range of skins and cultures that make up humanity." Because humanity is complex, however, to achieve this task demands the habit and constant work of reconciliation. Because universities trade in complexity, they should have the capacity to attend to the historical and cultural processes of change, which leave us so uncertain of the future:

The university that we seek, as a source of life, deeply committed to the processes of reconciliation, experiences in its own daily existence the tensions of social and cultural complexity.... The university also lives in the uncertainty of the historical period in which it operates, and experiences in its own being the fragility of life, because it feels and knows itself to be fragile.

Moreover, Fr. Sosa argues that Jesuit universities should prepare their graduates to be citizens who are active in political processes, with a view to effecting justice in ways that bring peace. He says: "being called upon to make a direct commitment in politics involves placing oneself at the service of reconciliation and justice." Indeed, he goes so far as to say that one of the most important contributions of Jesuit higher education is to educate people engaged in politics for the betterment of human societies worldwide.

The emphasis of the Jesuit superior general on political participation at the service of reconciliation and justice is striking. Furthermore, he asserts that our identity is the source of our own particular contribution to the broader work of higher education. In

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the American context, his stress on reconciliation highlights the unique challenges and opportunities we face in the ACJU. Large scale issues such as fiscal sustainability, shared governance, the status of adjunct faculty, suspicion and even hostility toward our Catholic, religious, or spiritual moorings, support for the humanities, questions of race, gender, class,

the health, well-being, and safety of our students, as well as basic affordability...all of these issues and more surely constitute major challenges that need to be addressed. Many people, it seems to me, waste a lot of time and energy looking for silver bullets that will solve our problems once and for all. But, friends, those silver bullets don't exist!

Our greatest opportunity is to enhance the conditions for citizens of our universities (and of our country) to become what the pope called "artisans of the common good." In a talk in Rome on the eve of New Year's 2018, Pope Francis noted that people who have most influence in society are common people, who create a culture through the small, quotidian habits of interaction and behaviors that express love for the city. If we can put our energies there, we will develop the capacity to address the major concerns that face us together.

And then our "opinion-rich environments" will be places of more blessing than cursing.

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# Beacons of Hope Amid Strong Disaffection

By James P. McCartin

**The last three** decades mark an era of kaleidoscopic transformation in U.S. Catholicism. Alongside momentous demographic shifts, major changes in the church's institutional life, and persistent battles between theological progressives and traditionalists, U.S. Catholics have experienced a profound and lasting crisis of credibility due to clerical sex abuse and its cover-up by church officials. Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States thus operate within a context markedly different from what it looked like when Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, then superior general of the Society of Jesus, called upon leaders in Jesuit higher education to recommit to their "distinctive identity and their special role in the transformation of society."

Of course, when Kolvenbach issued his charge in 1989, U.S. Catholicism had already entered a period of change. The reform impulse of the Second Vatican Council, which concluded in 1965, continued to provide a keynote in various areas of Catholic life—including in Catholic higher education, where increased lay leadership and a renewed emphasis on lay theological education had been among Vatican II's fruits. A heightened emphasis on social justice and peace, an outgrowth both of Vatican II and of the era of social and political upheaval associated with the 1960s, likewise served as a hallmark in the 1980s, a decade during which the collective body of U.S. bishops issued historic pastoral letters pointedly criticizing injustices in the U.S. economy and challenging the morality of modern warfare. Father Kolvenbach's address, which underscored lay responsibility and the practical applications of a "value-oriented" education, was, therefore, very much of its time.

But changes whose implications were just becoming evident in the 1980s eventually altered the U.S. Catholic storyline. Consider some key demo-

graphic shifts. In 1989, over 70 percent of U.S. Catholics claimed a Euro-ethnic heritage, and they were largely clustered in the Northeast and Midwest; today, over 40 percent of U.S. Catholics are Hispanic, and the locus of the Catholic population has drifted toward the South and West. Further, 30 years ago, a hefty 10 million Americans self-identified as "former Catholics." Now, some 30 million adults say they have left the church. It stands to reason, therefore, that over the past three decades the number of annual baptisms has decreased by some 400,000, while instances of church weddings—an important indicator of adult identification as a Catholic—have declined by more than half.

Such data align with major shifts in the church's institutional presence and leadership. Nearly 9,000 Catholic elementary and secondary schools existed in the United States in 1989, compared to a current total of nearly 6,300. Then, there were some 52,000 priests and 102,000 religious sisters; today, there are some 37,000 priests and 46,000 sisters. About 1,800 Catholic parishes operated without a resident priest in 1989; today, about 3,500 U.S. Catholic communities have no permanently assigned priest. In sum, practicing Catholics today often have a comparatively less persistent and robust experience of engagement with church institutions and consecrated spiritual leaders.

An array of internal factional disputes, generally grounded in divergent interpretations of Vatican II and frequently energized by the culture wars which have fractured the American polity, have been no less important for U.S. Catholicism. While progressives champion ongoing reforms such as women's ordination and an embrace of LGBT Catholics, traditionalists reject such notions and aim to reinforce older gender hierarchies and models of sexual

morality. These divergences have nourished opposing styles of liturgical worship and spiritual practice, and many church-affiliated institutions (including some Catholic colleges and universities) have carefully branded themselves to appeal either to progressives or to traditionalists.

The divisive tenor of recent papacies has not helped: With John Paul II and Benedict XVI, traditionalists attested to a cherished affinity while progressives complained bitterly about their own marginalization; now under Pope Francis, the tables have turned, and the sense of factional division among progressives and traditionalists remains as palpable—and as volatile—as ever. Interestingly, researchers have found that, especially among younger cohorts, bitter internecine warfare has heightened alienation from the church and has weakened their sense of religious affiliation.

Yet nothing has produced more alienation, anger, disappointment, distrust, and cynicism among Catholics—and nothing in recent history has so altered the future trajectory of U.S. Catholicism—than the clerical sexual abuse crisis. The tip of the iceberg came into view during a nationally covered trial in 1985, when Gilbert Gauthier, a Louisiana-based priest, pleaded guilty to sexually abusing 11 boys. But the stunning reach of the sexual abuse of minors, along with its systematic cover-up by bishops and religious superiors, would begin to come to light only in 2002, when Boston became Ground Zero for a narrative of sexual predation and misuse of authority that soon engulfed Catholic communities across the United States and around the world. In the wake of the August 2018 release of a shocking Pennsylvania grand jury report on decades of clerical sex abuse, it seems that, finally, a number of bishops may be held to some account by church and government authorities for their significant roles in the sex abuse crisis. Likewise, Pope Francis' recent expulsion of the highly influential archbishop, Theodore McCarrick, from the

College of Cardinals after credible accusations of abuse may signal a new day in terms of episcopal accountability. But much as Vatican II framed the narrative for U.S. Catholicism in the decades after its conclusion, clerical sexual abuse has supplied the

dominant note in U.S. Catholicism for nearly two decades now—and no clear end is in sight. As periodic waves of revelation and outrage continue to crash, alienation and exodus from the church will remain powerful themes in U.S. Catholic life for the foreseeable future.

Amid all these developments, Catholic colleges and universities have remained a relatively stable, even robust, element of U.S. Catholicism. In 1989, 228 Catholic colleges and universities shared a combined enrollment of 619,000 students;

today, 225 institutions serve 765,000. Indeed, over the past three decades the majority of these institutions have endeavored to advance a more conscious, articulate, and integrated sense of their Catholic identity and mission. Of course, these developments belie the enormous challenges, which for some Catholic institutions are nothing short of existential, in U.S. higher education today. But one heartening takeaway for Jesuit colleges and universities is that, despite the atmosphere of profound disaffection, their reputations remain strong, and they still represent valued sources of spiritual and moral authority in today's world, no less in need of transformation than it was in 1989.

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# Fostering a Vibrant Jesuit Catholic Tradition

By Jennifer Tilghman-Havens

**When I orient** new faculty to the university, I begin by projecting a black and white like this 1948 photograph of the Seattle University Jesuit re-founders of the 1930s in their distinguished clerical attire. I remind our faculty that at one point our university was made up entirely of faculty and staff who looked like this. I flash to a second photo next, of a team of women faculty and faculty of color who collaborated on a multidisciplinary, community-based research project with the local Yesler Terrace neighborhood. These faculty represent another generation of “re-founders,” as the majority of the administration and teaching at our Jesuit universities is handed on to lay people. What a profound shift has occurred over the past century! What a gift for laypeople to carry this tradition forward, and what a challenge to animate it so that it can thrive for the years to come.

As we discern the possibility of a vibrant, relevant Jesuit Catholic mission that will sustain our uni-

versities into the future, some considerations come to mind. The introductory question for AJCU schools beginning the Institutional Mission Examen is: “Do we *want* to be a Jesuit Catholic University?” Rather than a checked box before moving on to the rest of the process, this question is an honest, Ignatian-inspired invitation to reflect on our deepest desires. Our universities have a very real choice. Excellent secular universities with a social justice mission serve an important role in higher education. But if we believe Jesuit Catholic universities have something distinctive to offer, then a deep, abiding desire must animate us – a desire for transformative Ignatian pedagogy, for opportunities to seek sacred meaning and purpose, for spaces to grapple with the Catholic intellectual tradition, for just action inspired by the Gospel, for honoring the dignity of our students, for mutually enriching interfaith dialogue, and for beholding the sacramentality in all things. If we do indeed desire these things and want to see them flourish, how do we seek out colleagues to join in this mission who also reflect these desires from their own different backgrounds and experiences? Our desires for the transformative potential of Jesuit education are the seeds from which a healthy, ever-expanding mission-inspired community can thrive.

The revered Howard Gray, S.J., spoke of Ignatian spirituality as “self-awareness leading to self-donation.” The purpose for reflection on our desires, our values, and our mission is to discern how to embody ever-expanding love. Do we have the courage to love into greater freedom our students, our colleagues, and our communities? This is no small task, especially amid pressures to raise funds, improve our pedagogy, maintain our scholarship, retain our students, update our infrastructures, and respond to our ever-proliferating inboxes. But *how* we do our



Jesuits re-founders of the 1930s, (l-r) R. Nichols, S.J., A. Lemieux, S.J., J. McGoldrick, S.J., D. Reidy, S.J., H. Peronteau, S.J.





Seattle University faculty today represent another generation of “re-founders.”

work – our way of proceeding – is as important as *what* we do. At Seattle University, the tag line of our mission is “empowering leaders for a just and humane world.” We animate and honor the “humane” when we approach one another with respect, kindness, and joy.

Finally, our universities are invited to trust the movement of the Holy Spirit. When Pope Francis spoke to the Jesuits’ General Congregation 36 in 2016, he encouraged the Society of Jesus to align with the work of Holy Spirit wherever Jesuits find themselves. Can we, as collaborators in the Society’s mission, become free enough to trust this? I am reminded of the early Jesuits, whose intention was to sail to Jerusalem to minister there. When passage was blocked by the Venetian-Turkish wars, their mission became impossible. Yet the Holy Spirit was working through that impossibility to guide them toward something they couldn’t have imagined – opening schools. If that boat had sailed from Venice, none of us would be engaged in the meaningful work of whole-person education for justice and love.

What are the contemporary parallels? Where are we called to trust that the “ship isn’t sailing” because the Spirit is doing something new? Several examples come to mind. Even as the number of Jesuits who are able to serve in the university apostolate declines, lay faculty and staff hunger to make the Spiritual Exercises, to learn about the history and charism of the Society of Jesus, and to commit themselves to ad-

vancing the Jesuit educational mission. Programs like the NSF ADVANCE IT grant at Seattle University offer opportunities to honor the robust contributions of women and faculty of color through renewed promotion processes. The Spirit is also working through efforts to recognize the sovereignty of indigenous peoples and to build partnerships at our Jesuit universities. She is alive in the willingness on our campuses to examine whiteness, patriarchy, and privilege so as to dismantle them in our structures and policies. And she is working

through the energy and passion of our students whose faith and love inspires movements toward fossil fuel divestment, just wages for contingent faculty, and race and gender justice.

The late Monica Hellwig reminded Jesuit Catholic universities: “If we are not always clear and successful in what we are doing, it is not from ill will or unconcern, but due to the uncharted nature of our situation.” Sometimes the mission feels impossible because we’re in uncharted places – places marked by challenging budget constraints or student demands for inclusion or the declining number of Catholics on our campuses. Jesuits have always been on the frontiers of something new, and the adaptation so central to Ignatius’ approach to the Exercises is a key resource in these times. Let us employ Ignatian imagination to envision what is possible now, as we read the signs of these times in 2019 and we honor the richness of the diverse colleagues who contribute to our mission. May our desires motivate us, our love sustain us, and our imaginations spur us on, emboldened by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

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