

Justice in Jesuit Higher Education Conference
8 June 2021

Good afternoon. Although I cannot be with you in North America today, from Rome I want to greet you and to share some thoughts with you about the commitment to justice in Jesuit higher education today. My predecessor, Father Peter Hans Kolvenbach, gave an important address at the first of these conferences, which was held at Santa Clara University in the year 2000. My remarks are not as formal as his were, but they do draw on my own experience as political scientist, a former university professor and president, a Jesuit and now Superior General of the Society of Jesus. I hope that my experience will connect with yours.

I want to do three things in the next few minutes: to thank you; to situate this conference in the present moment; and to offer the universal apostolic preferences of the Society of Jesus as guideposts for the path forward.

Thanks

Before anything else, I want to thank the members of the AJCU Steering Committee and Georgetown University for organizing and supporting this conference, the sixth in a series that began at Santa Clara University and continued at John Carroll University, Fairfield University, Creighton University, Seattle University, and now Georgetown University. These conferences have opened important spaces for reflection on the contribution of university communities to ministries of reconciliation and justice. You have made these conferences happen. Thank you!

Of course, it is not enough just to talk. We need to do. We need to continue to deepen the processes of change, the processes of conversion, that began long ago and continue today in our university communities and in our countries.

The present moment

You may know that a few days ago we marked the 500th anniversary of the battle in which a cannonball struck the leg of Ignatius Loyola, putting him on a new path of life, beginning his conversion, allowing him to see things in a new way, to see all things new in Christ.

Something similar can happen for all of us now, I think. The pandemic has struck us all. It has knocked us all down. Which of our plans will change? How can we better accompany the young as they build a future of hope? How will new voices be heard in our classrooms? How will our research be reshaped to respond better to real needs? How will we better cultivate the virtues of national and global citizenship? How can our intellectual work better point beyond ourselves toward a world that is more humane, a world that better embodies what God wants for all of us? How will we see all things new? In short, practically, how will we grapple with the five focus topics of your conference: racial justice; immigrant justice; Ignatian spirituality and justice; environmental justice; and women's leadership in higher education?

One of the things that the pandemic changed is the way that we will interact with one another during this conference. In past conferences colleagues came together for workshops, roundtables, plenary sessions, hallway conversations, prayer, meals, and celebrations. Person-to-person interaction brought inspiration and insight. Networks were built, collaboration was strengthened, and new practices, policies, and programs were developed. The Society of Jesus around the world is grateful for the pioneering work of those past conferences. Now I look forward to seeing how those same goals can be reached through your virtual interaction over the next few weeks. Please bring us insight and inspiration, collaboration and networking, proposals for new practices, policies, and programs.

You are meeting, I think, at a moment of temptation. We used to say that the pandemic had opened our eyes, that we now understood the interconnectedness of the human community and the insidiousness of structures that drive us apart. We said that we would do things differently when the pandemic was over. I don't hear that said so often now. The pandemic is not over, but already we hear people say that they just want to go back to the way things were. We should not fall into that temptation! It is urgent that a different way forward be found on the campuses that are represented here.

Many of you spend much of your time with young people. Let's start by thinking with them, about them. While this past year has been challenging for all of us, it has impacted our young people most profoundly. Their faith has been shaken, their faith in God and their faith in the ability of democratic societies to address complex problems like equity and inclusion for those who have been pushed aside because of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation. The poor have carried the burden of keeping our communities safe and secure during the pandemic, but they are now the last to receive the care that they need to keep themselves and their families safe. The poor and even the middle class have felt the insecurities that our modern social and financial structures have created, while those who were already well off are now even more secure and self-sufficient.

Young people must construct a new narrative of hope, a way of re-imagining the world that could be built if we overcame racial and social divisions, divisions that haunt not only your country but many others including my own Venezuela. The divisions cannot be overcome with words alone. We need with genuine encounter and respect. Our young people need examples of how to do this. But how do we confront extreme nationalism? How do we address the rise in discrimination against those at the margins, the displaced, the migrant, the poor? How do we turn the tide on destruction of ecological systems and the growing climate crisis? How will we rebuild societies in the wake of this global pandemic that has taken such a toll on the vulnerable and exacerbated global inequalities? What will we do?

Jesuit universities can offer young people tools for opening up new paths. Jesuits and Jesuit universities have sometimes been part of the problem, I know. At times we have accepted uncritically the values, institutions, and ways of proceeding of the dominant culture. But I also know our tradition of academic rigor and depth, of involving the whole person in the formation process, of becoming comfortable with what is not familiar, of risking encounter with the

stranger and the unknown ... this is Jesuit education. When we situate this education within the context of faith in a God who still labors in the world so that all might have the fullness of life, then we offer young people powerful spiritual resources to ground real audacity so that they, the young, can take the lead in constructing this new narrative of hope.

Universal apostolic preferences

What should shape our response to this fragile world over the next few years? What directions should we pursue in the mission of reconciliation and justice? How can we chart the post-pandemic journey? What sensitivities and attitudes will carry us forward?

I wish to offer you the fruit of a discernment that was carried out throughout the Society of Jesus worldwide and confirmed for us by the Catholic Church through Pope Francis, four universal apostolic preferences. These are not priorities that pit one sort of apostolic work against another. They are attitudes that must characterize each and every Jesuit 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
- To collaborate in the care of our common home

Notice the verbs. We are showing and walking and accompanying and collaborating. These actions are not separable from one another. They have to work together like the four fingers of a hand if we are to take hold of the grace that is being offered to us.

This road map tells us that those who wish to build a better and more just society must be men and women of deep discernment, committed to sharing the tools of Ignatian discernment that help persons to better understand God's desire for them.

Those who are committed to building a new city must encourage and support the dreams of young people. They carry the ideals needed to shape this future.

Those who want to construct a new and more humane city are well aware that such a city must offer equal opportunity to those now marginalized and welcome those who are displaced from their homes, who flee violence and poverty, who through no fault of their own must seek a new beginning.

And, finally this new city must be one that recognizes the fragility of the planet, that fights to end the squandering of resources, the depletion of our forests, oceans and lakes, and that better cares for all our natural resources with the goal of leaving a better environment to those who will follow us.

The Society of Jesus is proud of your commitment and grateful for your dedication. We are here to assist you in any way that we can. We wish only to labor with you and to labor with the Holy Spirit who is at work today in the world.

Thank you. My prayers and best wishes for a successful conference. May God give us the grace to see all things new.