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Reason, Responsibility and Resilience: The Role of Jesuit Higher Education in Contemporary Society

It is a great joy and privilege to be with you today as we celebrate the centenary of the Munich School of Philosophy - a hundred years of dedicated service to the Society of Jesus, to the Church and to the world. On this very special occasion, I extend my heartfelt congratulations to everyone associated with the institution—faculty, staff and students.

Philosophy, at its best, does not remain in the abstract—it shapes human thought, sheds light on fundamental questions of human life, upholds human dignity, and offers guidance for ethical decision-making. By cultivating critical thinking and a constant search for truth and justice, philosophy helps us address the societal challenges we are encountering.

One of the defining characteristics of the Munich School of Philosophy is the focus of its research and teaching on the current societal challenges as defined in its mission statement:

> *"We engage in philosophy together with our students to enable them to critically grasp complex interrelationships and gain orientation regarding the fundamental questions of human existence. Our aim is fruitful research and teaching in philosophy that addresses the major societal challenges of our time."*

This mission uniquely positions the Munich School of Philosophy to make a deeper impact in today's challenging times.

Today, I would like to reflect with you on the role that the Munich School of Philosophy is called upon to play in our present context—a context marked by profound challenges and rapid change—and how it might continue to deepen its impact on all those it serves.

Universities, particularly schools of philosophy, serve as centres for serious research and sustained reflection. This assumes a certain distance from society as an object to analyse — to think carefully, but also to observe, explain or critique the world or society as a whole. However, Jesuits have never viewed universities simply as detached places for objective knowledge production. Instead, universities are always deeply rooted in societies and thus part of political crises and debates. Academic reflection, therefore, must address the crises of our time. The Jesuit tradition not only calls for describing and understanding these crises thoroughly but also for guiding toward effective and just solutions. I believe that

philosophy offers a wealth of theories capable of generating this essential knowledge, providing guidance that is crucial for analysing and addressing societal problems.

Some trends of the world context

Humanity is living through a profound change of epoch. The consequences of this change sometimes take us by surprise. We must humbly recognise the inadequacy of our intellectual tools for measuring the effects of epochal change, understanding the present, and visualising the future. Uncertainty is gaining ground in personal and social life. Uncertainty then sparks fear, provoking defensive reactions that turn our gaze toward an idealised past that never really existed. Fear tempts us to reject the newness of our time.

On every continent, social and political processes are creating adverse conditions for our apostolates. International trends make processes of justice and peace more and more an uphill climb. A few years ago, Moisés Naim published[1] an analysis of the trends that threaten democracy in the world. He called them the three Ps: *populism*, *polarization* and *post-truth*. The three Ps serve the disordered lust for power of groups whose particular interests are at odds with the common good of humanity and the planet. Recently, we have seen the rise of nationalist proposals and ideologies that favour closed borders and the expulsion of immigrants. Policies protecting national economic activities are proliferating. We can, therefore, add a fourth P: *protectionism*. Step by step, these trends are gaining ground and even gathering growing electoral support in many countries.

We face a worrisome weakening of democracy, even in countries with a long democratic tradition. We also recognise the diminishing influence of the international institutions that were created to uphold and advance human rights, social justice and citizen participation in decisions that affect the common good of humanity.

Reviewing this situation could leave us feeling overwhelmed. Uncertainty can turn into anxiety that paralyses action. That would serve the purposes of those who seek to weaken citizen participation in public life, to weaken democratic rule to the point of rendering it inoffensive, and to undermine the civic culture of the people. However, when we confront this situation in the hope that strengthens us, uncertainty can be experienced as an opportunity, a chance to contribute to changing the course imposed by those who feel themselves to be in charge today.

[1] *The Revenge of Power: How Autocrats Are Reinventing Politics for the 21st Century*, St. Martin's Press, 2022.

Universities as Places of Learning and Education for Resilience Against the 4 Ps:

Philosophy plays a crucial role in this situation: it enables us to address the fundamental questions underlying the developments of the 4 Ps. In the Kantian sense, these are the questions: What is the human being? What can humans know? What should they do? And what may they hope for?

Let me give a few examples: Philosophy in the Jesuit tradition can demonstrate that the human being is not merely the Hobbesian wolf simply seeking personal advantage or bending the truth. Rather, the human being —following influential thinkers like Bernhard Waldenfels or Hannah Arendt, two philosophers important to the anthropology taught here at the Munich School of Philosophy—is perceived as diverse, capable of re-evaluating and starting all over again, as well as oriented toward reciprocal responsiveness. Humans are able and willing to respond—not just to polarise or escalate, but to listen, differentiate and open new perspectives. These capabilities form the essence of philosophical contemplation.

What does this mean specifically in relation to the four Ps—populism, polarization, post-truth and protectionism?

Firstly, philosophy helps us to examine critically populist movements and to promote new forms of social coexistence. As a consequence, we are able to expose the manipulative use of disinformation by populist movements, explain complex interrelationships and enable plural perspectives to emerge. Philosophy shows ways to overcome a widespread culture of superficiality and polarisation by striving for more precise concepts and deeper understanding. The program of public lectures and discussions that the Munich School of Philosophy has organised over the past ten months for its centennial celebration is a powerful testament to philosophy's commitment to transformation toward greater democracy and against populist power claims.

Secondly, philosophy can help us redefine knowledge and truth. What does truth mean in a world that seems to recognise only populist "truths"? How can we agree on knowledge in a world that has become pluralistic? Epistemology, but also metaphysics, natural philosophy, and philosophy of religion, all make important contributions to these questions. The history of the Munich School of Philosophy shows that these three disciplines have always been central. Just last year, two conferences explored how we can grasp meaningfully rationality and truth in the age of artificial intelligence.

Thirdly, philosophy can help us to reflect critically on dichotomies and break them down, for instance between black-white and friend-enemy. It's about differentiation—or, to use a term from Jesuit spirituality, the "discernment of spirits." Philosophical reflections can be helpful here, for example, when looking at intercultural processes or at the self-reinforcing dynamics of the political

sphere. Following the logic of these examples, neither do cultures consist of monolithic blocks nor is politics merely a struggle between a few particular interests. Such interpretations only fuel the polarisation described earlier and obscure our view of the world. Political processes are always complex and multi-layered, and they necessarily depend on mediation and dialogue. The research projects at this university that focus on intercultural and political processes reflect this and represent an urgently needed form of differentiation in a polarised society.

Fourthly and more importantly, philosophy in the Jesuit tradition often culminates in critique—more precisely, in social critique. This tradition has always been cultivated at the Munich School of Philosophy. Protectionism has mainly affected the poor, the migrants, and those on the margins. It has also widened the cleavage between the rich and the poor. Social critique incorporates the perspective of the most vulnerable people who are severely affected by 4 P's and offers support for those excluded from or underrepresented in societal processes. This accords with the second universal apostolic preference of the Jesuit order: Walking with the Excluded - to stand with the poor and the marginalised. Philosophy does a service to the poor when seeking an order in society that is characterised by self-reflection and continuous debate, most importantly giving a voice to those initially excluded from the discourse. In this sense, the various forms of social critique and the Jesuit understanding of education have always been closely linked at the Munich School of Philosophy.

Artificial Intelligence and Human Dignity:

Another important challenge we face today is digital disruption. Digital technology is advancing rapidly, particularly in the field of artificial intelligence, which is quickly taking hold of our lives. Its potential is immense in all fields. It also raises profound philosophical, ethical, anthropological and spiritual questions: What does it mean to be human in an age of intelligent machines? How should we understand moral agency, responsibility, and discernment in this new environment?

This is not merely a technical challenge; it affects the core of what we do as an institution of higher education, as a school of philosophy. Artificial Intelligence not only transforms how we conduct research, create knowledge, and teach. Artificial Intelligence also influences why we do what we do. Are we capable of educating individuals who can navigate a world shaped by these technologies with wisdom and responsibility? Are we ensuring that Artificial Intelligence serves humanity and does not become a tool of dehumanisation?

Our Jesuit identity requires us to contribute to an ethical, humanistic and spiritual vision of the digital future. We need to create spaces of critical dialogue with technological advances, giving clear priority to human dignity, justice, and the

pursuit of the common good. This entails promoting a critical digital literacy, cultivating an ethic of care and responsibility in the design and use of technologies, and educating professionals aware of the human and social consequences of their work.

We must also renew the dialogue between science and faith, between reason and spirituality, at a time when the authority of scientific knowledge is questioned and conspiracy theories, fake news and scepticism about the truth take hold. Our institutions have a duty to strengthen critical thinking, the rigorous pursuit of truth and intellectual discernment as part of integral formation.

The Threat to Academic Freedom:

The necessary condition for philosophy to be able to think and act critically in the way described is *academic freedom*. Without academic freedom, no freedom of philosophical thought, no international and global exchange, and no critical distance from arbitrary power is possible. No pursuit of shared knowledge through the synthesis of results obtained in diverse research projects, debated and then interwoven, is possible.

The current autocratic tendencies worldwide that are seeking to undermine massively the autonomy and freedom of universities in some places are therefore extremely concerning. In Germany too, we are seeing political inquiries from the Alternative for Germany (AfD) Party, which question the legitimacy of certain academic programmes or the funding of research projects that do not align with their political stance. These attacks are often made under the guise of advocating "academic freedom"—but in a post-truth, distorted sense.

Commitment to the truth is a fundamental dimension of the university's task. It is a commitment not to the defence of dogma but to the honest search for a deeper understanding of all the dimensions of life.

As a Jesuit Institution, we need to stand for truth and actively promote academic freedom in spite of the challenges we face.

Summary – A Look to the Future with Hope

Philosophy is a discipline that places great emphasis on reasoning. This is immensely important in a time in which the pursuit of truth is becoming less valued. Philosophy can provide modern societies with essential knowledge, providing orientation—especially in the face of complex crises.

At the same time, rationality, when treated as absolute, becomes narrow. Therefore, in Jesuit universities, the advocacy for an enriching relationship between faith and knowledge is a significant basis of philosophical teaching - we know that we need more. Let me conclude by naming three additional aspects: hope, creativity and dialogue.

Hope: Hope does not contradict reason. Instead, it reminds us that we must always look beyond the present world. Through our teaching, research and political engagement, we as universities hope for a better world—one that pays special attention to the vulnerable, one that gives young people the chance for a brighter future, and one in which we address the crises of our time in solidarity—together, not against one another. This is precisely what the apostolic preferences of the Society of Jesus express. The many events organized by the Munich School of Philosophy in recent years and decades are a clear expression of such hope.

To achieve this, we also need *creativity*. Creativity, too, is grounded in philosophy and yet points beyond it. It refers to the generative potential to think beyond well-trodden paths. Especially considering the 4 Ps and their societal influence, we as universities need creativity more than ever. The Munich School of Philosophy has repeatedly sought new paths in recent years. It has succeeded in broadening its financial base, has built diverse partnerships with academic and societal institutions that would have been unthinkable 50 years ago, and has developed new academic programs that appeal to young people in creative ways beyond rigid curricula. One example is the Philosophical Orientation Year ("Gap Year") for young people after finishing school. These are creative philosophical programmes—of which we need more—to offer young people a philosophically grounded perspective for the future.

Finally, universities need *dialogue*. This may seem counterintuitive for philosophy, as some philosophical traditions are certainly more monological than dialogical. But in this regard, too, the Munich School of Philosophy is an excellent exception. It understands philosophy as a conversation—with students, with other universities, and with all people in society.

I wish the Munich School of Philosophy the continued ability to remain in dialogue, the willingness to challenge the established in search of a deeper truth, and the creativity to pursue forward-looking paths. In doing so, the Munich School of Philosophy may continue to inspire hope for many decades to come.

To Conclude

The Munich School of Philosophy was founded in a time marked by complexity, sharp polarisation, and the rise of populist temptations. Since then, it has come a long way. Today, we gratefully remember the many individuals whose vision, dedication, and tireless work have shaped this school into a respected and renowned institution in Bavaria and far beyond.

We are privileged to have the school located in the heart of Munich's university district, where its presence has fostered rich collaboration and exchange with neighbouring universities and with the wider academic community.

Undoubtedly, the Munich School of Philosophy has contributed significantly to philosophical thinking in Germany over the last 100 years. Throughout these years, the school has served not only Jesuits, but also members of other religious communities and the laity. We are proud that eminent figures such as Alfred Delp, SJ, and Karl Rahner, SJ, have passed through the portals of this venerable institution.

We can be justifiably proud of the hundred years of service that the Munich School of Philosophy has offered to the Society of Jesus, to the Church and to the world. As we gratefully and proudly look back on these past 100 years, we also recognise the profound responsibility to carry forward the mission entrusted to us.

In thanksgiving for the Lord's abiding presence with us on this journey, I pray that He may continue to bless us, so that we may remain faithful in fulfilling the mission He has entrusted to us.

Thank you.

Arturo Sosa.