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A Balancing Act - Reflections on 37 Years at Regis University: An Interview with Fr. Michael J. Sheeran, S.J., President, Regis University

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**A Balancing Act—Reflections on 37 Years at Regis University:
An Interview with Fr. Michael J. Sheeran, S.J.
President, Regis University**

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Abstract

Father Michael Sheeran, S.J., who became the 23rd president of Regis University on January 1, 1993, will officially retire from this appointment May 31, 2012. Father Sheeran arrived at Regis University in 1975 as assistant professor of history and political science and director of Student Academic Services. He was named academic dean of Regis College in 1977 and in 1982 became academic vice president. Every facet of his tenure as Regis University President underscores and supports a deep belief that the role of a Jesuit, Catholic university is to serve as a catalyst to further the common good of the community at large. *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* (JHE) asked Father Sheeran to reflect on his accomplishments as well as the future of Regis University.

Introduction

Father Michael Sheeran, S.J., who became the 23rd president of Regis University on January 1, 1993, will officially retire from this appointment May 31, 2012.

Father Sheeran arrived at Regis University in 1975 as assistant professor of history and political science and director of Student Academic Services. He was named academic dean of Regis College in 1977 and in 1982 became academic vice president.

Just months after his inauguration Father Sheeran and Regis University were placed in the international spotlight when, in August 1993, Pope John Paul II and President Clinton met on the grounds of the Regis University North Denver (Lowell) campus. Father Sheeran served as an expert commentator for KCNC-TV and offered invaluable expertise to local news media agencies during World Youth Day that year. He would again serve as a resource to local media during 2005 election of Pope Benedict.

Regis University has grown significantly under Father Sheeran's leadership. The University's student enrollment was about 7,500 when he became president -- today enrollment surpasses 15,000. Along with that growth came a wealth of accolades: Regis University earned a top school in the Western United States ranking for the 16th consecutive year from U.S. News & World Report, gained recognition from the Templeton Guide as one of the top 100 schools in the nation for student character development, was selected for the 2010 United States President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll with distinction, and hosted numerous well-known international and U.S. visitors including Mary McAleese, president of Ireland; Jim Nicholson, former Ambassador to the Holy See; Vatican Ambassador of the United States, Archbishop Pietro Sambi; and 13 Nobel Peace Prize Laureates during the past 12 years. Those Nobel Laureates include Rigoberta Menchu Tum, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Jose Ramos-Horta, Oscar Arias, Elie Wiesel, Jody Williams, John Hume, Lech Walesa and David Trimble.

Every facet of his tenure as Regis University President underscores and supports a deep belief that the role of a Jesuit, Catholic university is to serve as a catalyst to further the common good of the community at large.

Sheeran: A Balancing Act

His vision for shaping a caring and responsible community through listening and communication led to the creation in 1998 of the Regis University Institute on the Common Good, which seeks to facilitate dialogue aimed at developing strategies to resolve important community issues.

The University's academic programs continue to expand under his leadership, including the addition of applied doctoral programs in pharmacy and physical therapy, online programs that are among the largest in the nation, and international programs, most notably partnerships with the University of Ireland, Galway and with ITESO, the Jesuit University of Guadalajara, Mexico for the first online bilingual joint MBA degree program.

Father Sheeran also oversaw Regis University's most successful fundraising campaign, raising more than \$82 million. The physical appearance of the University has consistently improved under his watch, including a \$5 million renovation of the Dayton Memorial Library and construction of the new St. John Francis Regis Chapel.

Born in New York and raised in Kansas City, Father Sheeran received his doctorate in politics from Princeton University in 1977. His dissertation on the consensus-based Quaker decision-making process is now a book used by the Quaker community to teach the method to new members. He entered the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1957 and was ordained a Catholic priest in 1970.

In addition to his previous positions at Regis University, he also taught at St. Louis University and at Regis Jesuit High School in Denver.

Father Sheeran's commitment to educating men and women to be leaders in the service of others is exemplified by the University's strong financial and curricular support of service learning, as well as his leadership in forming and shaping Colorado Campus Compact. He has worked with a number of local community organizations such as Father Woody's Haven of Hope, Escuela de Guadalupe and Mile High United Way, to further their efforts to meet the educational and social service needs of low income members of the Latino community.

A member of the Executive Committee of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, he also is a board member at Regis Jesuit High School. Father Sheeran is a former trustee of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, the University of San Francisco, the Rocky Mountain College of Art & Design in Denver, Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Mo., Creighton University in Omaha, Neb., Loyola University of New Orleans, and the national board of Campus Compact. He is a member of the Community College of Aurora Advisory Council and is a past chairman of the board for Mile High United Way.

Father Sheeran received an Honorary Degree (Doctor of Humane Letters) from the University of Denver in June 2000.

Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal (JHE) asked Father Sheeran to reflect on his accomplishments as well as the future of Regis University.

JHE: Your history at Regis is substantial; and your marks on Regis as President equally significant. Of what achievements during your Presidency are you most proud?

Father Sheeran: As far as construction goes, I'm glad we finally built a lovely chapel after fifty years in a Quonset hut. When it comes to students, I'm pleased we've succeeded in providing quality Jesuit education that's tailored to learners from 18 to 68, using different teaching techniques to match the needs of different age groups. In my 37 years here, I've watched Regis grow from just under 1,000 students to about 15,000, with each of our three schools carrying an excellent reputation.

Most of all, I'm proud that we've followed Vatican II so seriously. In particular, our classrooms and our atmosphere represent the invitational style that marked the documents of the Council rather than the command Catholicism which had been the hallmark of previous Councils. Vatican II realized it was dealing with an educated laity for the first time in the 2,000 years of the Church. It moved from the sort of giving commands which marked earlier Councils to a style of writing that invited the reader to be part of the dialog because readers had enough education to be trusted to make up their own minds. We've tried to model instruction at Regis on that approach.

JHE: What would be your wish for Regis University in the future?

Father Sheeran: It's simple. I hope people will still be saying Regis is different. Oh sure, it will be a place that does a great job of preparing accountants and chemists and managers and nurses and pharmacists and teachers. But it will go beyond that: Regis will turn out men and women for others, men and women who serve God by using all their resources to make a better world.

JHE: By what words, guidelines or mottos (if any) have you lived as President of Regis?

Father Sheeran: Years ago, I was struck by someone else's summation that Jesuit education is not just about information, it's about formation. That means active students in small classes who learn to question and argue and politely disagree, not people who sit in huge lecture halls and expect to just be tested on what they've memorized. If we're a Jesuit school, information isn't enough; the formation that complements the information is essential.

JHE: What advice might you give to a new President of any Jesuit institution?

Father Sheeran: I know our new President, Fr. John Fitzgibbons, S.J., shares my aspirations for Regis, and I'm especially proud to see him take the wheel. If John just follows his own Jesuit formation, he can't miss. His previous experience proves he knows how to drive. His vision of the future proves he knows where he's going. Ignatius will be happy.

JHE: Many say that the Jesuit charism and mission focus are quite evident at Regis, and at many Jesuit institutions of higher education. What forces/factors will enhance, challenge, and/or disrupt the continuation of that charism and focus on mission?

Father Sheeran: I think it's imperative to hire people who combine being very strong in their academic disciplines with being engaged in the search for meaning in their own lives. The faculty members at a Jesuit university don't have to have reached the Catholic answers of the Jesuits; but people who don't care about the search for meaning and who think they are just hired to teach their academic discipline tend to find they aren't appreciated by students or peers. After all, they care only about the information, not about the quest for a worldview and set of personal values that point to life's meaning. Such faculty don't fit, so they move on.

Jesuit universities that – like Regis – have serious funding of workshops, retreats, etc. for their lay faculty are in a strong position to help faculty continue their personal search for meaning. Again, what is important is not that everybody ends up a Catholic; what matters is that everybody is engaged in the quest for meaning.

JHE: With what types of challenges are the presidents of Jesuit universities likely to be confronted in the next few years?

Father Sheeran: It seems from recent history (even before the economic downturn) that federal and state governments will continue to cut their financial aid to students. Already, the grant programs that were dominant until the Carter Administration have been largely replaced by loans. For youngsters who have grown up in poverty and have seen their parents hounded by bill collectors, a large loan is a scary threat. Because Jesuit institutions are known for their academic excellence, they will always be able to survive by catering to the upper middle class and the wealthy. But this would be a terrible outcome because our schools would stop being the engine of upward mobility for the poor and lower middle class that these schools have been in the United States since their foundation when the prime audience was the Catholic immigrant poor. It

would be a shame to have to abandon this side of the mission of Jesuit schools in order to survive.

I think that electronic advances like hybrid courses and online “drills” in introductory courses will provide some help in keeping the cost of Jesuit education from rising as fast in the future as it has in the last few years. But honesty compels me to say that fundraising for endowed financial aid will have to be a major part of the work of Presidents of Jesuit universities and of most private schools except that tiny group like the Ivies that already have big endowments.

JHE: What does the future hold for Jesuit higher education in the next several years?

Father Sheeran: I think our schools will continue to be known for excellence among all Catholic and private universities. Jesuits themselves have already moved from being the majority of top players on the team to being occasional players, as well as coaches and cheerleaders. As lay people take more and more leadership, the Jesuits play a new intentional key function: Only the Jesuits have the years of Jesuit training, of learning to “think and live like Ignatius” that marks the years from novitiate to Tertianship. So the Jesuits, no matter what their formal job, become the guarantors of authenticity to whom lay faculty and staff can turn as they do their own growing in the task of incorporating the Ignatian worldview into their teaching and their lives.

JHE: What does the wisdom of experience suggest to you about the nuances involved in balancing mission and money in a Jesuit institution?

Father Sheeran: My predecessor, Fr. Dave Clarke, S.J. used to enjoy the saying, “We’re not for profit; but we’re not for loss either.” If you pay attention only to mission, you’ll run the ship onto the shoals of bankruptcy. After all, part of the mission is to be sure the school stays viable. Truly, the task is a balancing act. And each academic unit has to get used to judging itself by what it contributes financially, not just by the significance of the supposed wisdom it transmits to too small a number of students!

This is made especially difficult in American society, where legislators and businesspeople seem to think that universities are simply places to prepare students for their first professional job. These folks seek skills development, not education. They have lost the traditional insight of political theory that a stable democracy requires citizens who understand that self-sacrifice for the Common Good is essential, who have learned to make good political judgments about the community’s needs, not just to vote for their personal or class interest.

So Jesuit education (and liberal arts education in general) will be less and less valued by those who appropriate the money. And the leaders and staff and alumni of Jesuit schools will need to be especially wary of academic programs that are a drain on resources. Indeed, it’s a tricky balancing act. **JHE**