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## Inaugural Address for Regis University

John P. Fitzgibbons S.J.

*President, Regis University*, [president@regis.edu](mailto:president@regis.edu)

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**Inaugural Address  
Regis University  
September 25, 2012**

John P. Fitzgibbons, S.J.  
President  
Regis University  
([president@regis.edu](mailto:president@regis.edu))

Allow me to begin by quoting one of my more illustrious and vastly more talented presidential predecessors:

“Governing this place is bringing me a good deal of trouble and precious little in the way of obvious results. The [president’s] principal duties are to enroll new students, to force debtors to pay their bills, to listen to the complaints which men and women citizens of the town bring against the [students], to arrest, reprimand and jail the students who get drunk and roam around the streets at night, and finally to preside at official festivities and at academic functions connected with the conferral of degrees... They say, and it’s true, that lawyers run the place.”

The quotation comes from a letter of St. Peter Canisius, then president of the University of Ingolstadt, to St. Ignatius of Loyola, October 1550, 452 years ago.<sup>1</sup>

Four hundred and sixty-four years ago, the merchants and political leaders of Messina, Sicily, asked the Jesuits to teach their sons in the context of their culture – a merchant and agricultural culture. The College of Saint Nicolas opened its doors in 1548. The families that endowed the school – the first run by the Jesuits primarily for lay students – knew how to hand on the business savvy and political acumen to their children but they desired something more. They wanted their children to have a new level of erudition, an education that connected the world of wealth and politics with higher values; they wanted Catholic faith to inform the lives of their children; and they wanted the Church to be important in their children’s lives.

Ignatius sent four priests and six scholastics – the finest residing in Rome at the time – to Messina, including Peter Canisius and Jerome Nadal. This **pioneering**, innovative kind of education was nothing short of a **prophetic** encounter that brought the best thinking about morality, intercultural/international politics, as well as classical literature and theological reflection to their context. Their desire was to apply the best that had been thought and said to the material world of commerce which, simply put, brings more wealth to the community – monetary well-being to be sure – but much, much more... indeed, infinitely more.

Ten years later, in 1556, “there were forty [Jesuit] colleges spread throughout Europe and already in parts of the New World, in India and a few places in Africa.”<sup>2</sup> Those of us who now labor in the mission of higher education know that we have much in common with such pioneers and prophets.

Pioneers, like prophets, have always had a dual role. On the one hand, they articulate the real presence of God in our midst, even as we wait for the totality of the fulfillment of that presence.

On the other hand, pioneers and prophets have the noble, even holy – if unenviable – role of unmasking the idols of the present; they always challenge the false gods a culture conjures. As Kathleen Norris writes, “a prophet’s task is to reveal the fault lines hidden beneath the comfortable surface of the worlds we invent for ourselves, the national myths as well as the little lies and delusions of control and security that get us through the day.”<sup>3</sup>

The task of university education is, then, what it has always been: to unmask fear and deconstruct

the idols that leave us with false security and ignorance. We seek truth and wisdom. We walk a difficult road on, at times, a tension-filled journey because we all want to be stable, to rest securely, to pass on our faith and our heritage to the next generation. But we know that pioneers and prophets engage risk, tell the truth when that is not popular and endure the pangs of cultural growth because the future is where the next generation lives.

There is a tension in this role, an “already/not-yet” quality to this vocation, because as my Jesuit brother, friend, and history professor – Steve Schloesser – states, true prophets, true pioneers, “must live by the love that they will never see”; they work for the future of humanity by teaching the persons before them; they know that the glory of God is the human being fully alive yet they understand that we are on the way, not there yet. They help us see that God is already in our midst and they remind us that there is more for us to see and do. Our work is not finished; it is only well begun.

Now, more than ever, the world needs the prophetic and pioneering education that Jesuit universities provide. Since there is little that is thought and said that is not accessible to the rest of the world, God’s people need an education that teaches a reliable method of discernment. The context for this discernment is globalization and that context itself can have a powerful impact for good or for evil.

Adolfo Nicolás, the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, has written compellingly of the challenges globalization offers Jesuit higher education. In sum, he names them as (1) promoting depth of thought and imagination rather than a least common denominator that settles for mediocrity; (2) a rediscovering and implementing a ‘universality’ in the Jesuit higher education sector which can transform all higher education; and (3) a renewal of the commitment by all engaged in learned ministry especially in Jesuit higher education.<sup>4</sup> Depth, universality, learned ministry; these three themes animate if not define Jesuit higher education. We, in the academy, know these as teaching, service, and research. The challenge to all engaged in Jesuit higher education today is to subvert the tendency

toward superficiality and promote a practice of “depth of thought and imagination,” not fantasy, if fantasy is understood as a flight from reality. “This means that we aim to bring our students beyond excellence of professional training to become well-educated ‘whole person[s] of solidarity.’”<sup>5</sup> For Ignatius and for us today, imagination grasps reality; fantasy flees from reality. “In other words, depth of thought and imagination in the Ignatian tradition [of higher education] involves a profound engagement with the real, a refusal to let go until one goes beneath the surface of an issue; it’s a rejection of simplistic and untruthful answers. It is a careful analysis (dismembering) for the sake of an integration (remembering) around what is deepest... The starting point, then, will always be what is real: what is materially, concretely thought to be there; the world as we encounter it; the world of the senses so vividly described in the Gospels themselves.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, this so valued sensate world is distorted by the new technologies which can “shape the interior worlds of so many” and lead to a globalized superficiality of thought that does not challenge emerging “fundamentalism, fanaticism, ideology and all those escapes from thinking that cause suffering for so many. Shallow, self-absorbed perceptions of reality make it almost impossible to feel compassion for the suffering of others; and a contentment with the satisfaction of immediate desires or the laziness to engage competing claims on one’s deepest loyalty results in the inability to commit one’s life to what is truly worthwhile.”<sup>7</sup>

With regard to the second theme, Jesuit higher education has always been intrigued with the highest or the universal point of view; this comes right out of the *Spiritual Exercises*,<sup>8</sup> the “Contemplation of the Incarnation.” As globalization challenges traditional boundaries and our narrow understandings of identity, it becomes clearer that “in all our diversity, we are, in fact, a single humanity, facing common challenges and problems... and bear a common responsibility for the welfare of the entire world and its development in a sustainable and life-giving way.”<sup>9</sup> Today, a true university should have a universal view. It should mirror the whole world; the faces of the students and the professors should reflect such a world. Nicolás states that, “the new context of globalization requires us to act as a universal

body with a universal mission, realizing at the same time the radical diversity of our situations. It is a worldwide community – and, simultaneously, as a network of local communities – that we seek to serve others across the world.”<sup>10</sup> This network of 200-plus Jesuit colleges and universities is only beginning to be aware of itself as a network, but is called to be an “effective, responsible instrument of progress – for individuals as well as for society,” the *global* society, where the vast majority of persons are still poor, hungry, and undereducated.<sup>11</sup>

The final theme of his reflection on the context of Jesuit higher education I wish to call attention to is Nicolás’ focus on academic research, “the genuine search for truth and knowledge,” also called in universities today “the production of knowledge.”<sup>12</sup> If the promotion of depth of thought and imagination corresponds to what the academy calls “teaching,” and the service to a universal or global society is what corresponds to the academy’s duty called “service,” then we now turn our attention to research, the hardest work of the academy. This is a call to be prophets and pioneers on the frontiers or boundaries between reason and faith, culture and faith; it demands intellectual honesty and the most rigorous intellectual training. Nicolás warns of a possible negative byproduct of globalization, namely, the creation of new inequalities in the world, between “those who enjoy the power given to them by knowledge, and those who are excluded from its benefits because they have no access to that knowledge.”<sup>13</sup> More sinister still is the possibility of having to choose an alternative in a bogus dichotomy. That is, a forced choice between “secularism” and “religious fundamentalism.” In other words, without the rigorous academic research done in a context of faith that Jesuit universities provide, many people are left with an untenable choice. The choice is between a dominant aggressive secularism that claims faith has little or nothing to say about world problems or the destiny of humanity and the disparate but passionate religious fundamentalisms that offer another form of false relief from complexity by promising escape and clarity in a “faith divorced from or unregulated by human reason.”<sup>14</sup>

Let me come home and speak about our University. Regis University is one of the finest

articulations of the pioneering and prophetic vocation in higher education I have known. Now, I’ll admit to you, I have fallen in love with our community but that does not mean I come to this special place as blind or naïve! Regis pioneered distance and adult learning when these populations were thought beyond inclusion by the academy. We continue to respond to the needs of students of all ages – traditional, adult, and professional – to build a better Colorado and a better world. Ours is a pioneering and prophetic community focused on making the world more humane and just. For instance, Regis partnered very early with Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins to bring tertiary education to the refugee camps in Malawi and Kenya as well as the besieged city of Aleppo, Syria. And while our curricula in the camps and with the urban refugees are brought to a struggling business community, they carry the humanistic education and theological reflection Jesuit higher education is known for.

Let me add that it is important that Catholics and non-Catholics learn and teach at this Jesuit Catholic University. It is important because the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm – experience reflection, action – suffuses who we are as well as what we do. It is important that Regis University engages the world’s questions this way because the context of higher education in the United States and the world indicates that ours is a much smaller world than in the day of Peter Canisius and Ignatius Loyola. In sum, Jesuit higher education in the twenty-first century is at a new frontier which calls forth the prophets and pioneers among us in new and innovative ways.

I accept this presidency because I believe passionately in this pioneering and prophetic message which is at the heart of Jesuit higher education. Even more important, I believe Regis University is uniquely situated in its mission to be a leader among the Jesuit colleges and universities throughout the world.

For our university to proclaim the pioneering and achieve the prophetic witness we all value, I invite each of you gathered here as faculty, students, staff, and trustees to embrace our mission and join with me on this marvelous adventure to be that prophet and live that pioneer spirit so human life

may thrive and we may live in a more humane and just world society.

These are the most important challenges for Regis University in our day. All of our other challenges are opportunities to live this marvelous vocation of pioneering and prophetic engagement with God's world.

Thank you. 

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Peter Canisius, S.J., *Epistolae et Acta*, 8 vols., ed. Otto Braunsberger, S.J. (Freiburg in Breisgau: Herder, 1896-1923), vol. 1, 338-339, no. 96.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1996), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Adolfo Nicolás, S.J., "Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry: Challenges to Jesuit Higher Education Today" (remarks, Networking Jesuit Higher Education: Shaping the Future for a Humane, Just, Sustainable Globe, Mexico City, Mexico, April 23, 2010), [http://www.sjweb.info/documents/ansj/100423\\_Mexico%20City\\_Higher%20Education%20Today\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.sjweb.info/documents/ansj/100423_Mexico%20City_Higher%20Education%20Today_ENG.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>8</sup> George E. Gaus, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A translation and commentary* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Nicolás, "Depth, Universality," 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 10.

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