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Whether John Fitzgibbons, S.J., deserves congratulations today or they are more appropriately directed to members of the search committee and Board of Trustees for successfully recruiting him, I don’t know. I do know from personal experience that Regis University is blessed with his leadership.

Let me review a bit of Jesuitica with you. The Society of Jesus was established in the 16th century “to promote the greater glory of God and the common good.” It is worth noting that with this broad and all-encompassing mission, the Society quite serendipitously found itself involved with schools as early as 1548. In a characteristically Jesuit manner of proceeding, reflection upon the experience of running schools led Ignatius to decide, after the fact, that schools were an effective means for promoting “the glory of God and the common good.” In fact, when a Jesuit superior complained to Ignatius that school work was taking Jesuits away from the traditional practices of religious orders such as prayer, liturgy and common life, Ignatius wrote back that the Jesuits “by means of its schools hoped to pour into society educated individuals in numbers large enough to leaven it for good.”

“Educating individuals … to leaven society for good” remains as compelling a rationale for Jesuit education today, as it was in the 16th century. Gauging success for Jesuit schools is more complex than measuring our graduates’ income, influence or social status. An alumnus told me that after two years as a Jesuit volunteer in Honduras, he learned that if the whole world were put in a single line from the wealthiest to the poorest, he would be at the very front of the line; he could spend the rest of his life fighting to be the very first person in line or turn around and look at all the people behind him. He decided to do the latter and that he said has made all the difference. Contrast his worldview with that of a Silicon Valley “wanna-be” who sees his life as a marathon with no finish line. He told a New York Times reporter, “Here the top one percent chases the top one-tenth of a percent and the top one-tenth of a percent chases the top one-one-hundredth of a percent.”

Joseph Campbell said the greatest tragedy of life is climbing the ladder of success, and then finding that it’s up against the wrong wall. Our Jesuit tradition educates for lives of purpose and meaning, not scaling a ladder that leads to tragic regrets. Regis succinctly captures this central dynamism of Jesuit education in its motto “men and women in service to others,” which is printed on the cover of the program for this inauguration.

Let me say something about the more familiar “glory of God” aspect of Jesuit mission. This expression, when viewed through the lens of the classic theological maxim, “Gloria Dei homo vivens” – the glory of God is a fully alive human being – reveals a God whose glory is human beings reaching their full potential. Our God is not a distant, ethereal being above the clouds, but the spark at the core of our humanity, the insatiable hunger and uniquely human drive for truth, love, beauty and goodness. Whatever ignites that spark or satisfies that hunger is “of God,” whether we acknowledge it as such or not. From a faith perspective – which I realize not everyone shares – education is an inherently religious enterprise, insofar as it calls persons to that radical integrity wherein lies the fullness of our humanity. Jesuit education liberates us to follow “the better angels of our nature.”
We should never lose sight of the fact that “human being” does more than designate entities like you and me. “Human being” describes a distinctive way of being in the world. There are human and inhuman ways to be in the world; and the world is not an abstraction. Through technology, we witness in real time starvation in Somalia, a brutal civil war in Syria, cholera in Haiti, flooding in Manila, riots in Libya and poverty all across America.

Regis University explicitly commits to having its students wrestle with the question, “How ought we to live” in this world where 1.2 billion people lack access to safe drinking water and one child dies every 20 seconds for that reason? There is no fast, easy answer to the question of how to live humanly in an inhumane world so steeped in needless misery; but not to ask that question or to pretend that the question does not concern us is to tragically erode our humanity and theirs. It is to diminish God’s glory and stunt our humanity. The human way of being in this world is in solidarity with the least of our sisters and brothers, not in denial of their humanity and, ultimately, of ours. Our Catholic tradition views the human family as one body with many mutually interdependent parts. The poet John Donne expresses this fundamental insight elegantly:

No man is an island, entire of itself...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

We cannot achieve our humanity while others are denied theirs. Their diminishment is also ours. The least human way of being in the world is at the expense of others.

We are blessed with the challenge and the promise of our Jesuit tradition, which holds itself to standards higher than those that are generally accepted by the academy and employed by the likes of U.S. News and World Report. Of course, we offer the academically excellent education that is expected of every university; and we offer so much more. We offer depth, humanity, warmth, wisdom and compassion to our broken world.

Today, we celebrate our Jesuit Catholic educational tradition with pride and conviction. We celebrate Regis University’s efforts to “educate individuals to leaven society for good.” And, we give thanks for the passion and vision that John Fitzgibbons, S.J., brings to the leadership of this grace-full enterprise to the glory of God and the common good of all humanity.

Notes


Bibliography