



*From the Office of the President*

**John P. Fitzgibbons, S.J.**  
REGIS UNIVERSITY | DENVER, COLORADO

Welcome Remarks  
New Student Orientation  
Sports Authority Field  
John P. Fitzgibbons, S.J., President  
August 24, 2017

Introduce: Dr. Barbara Wilcots, VP for Student Affairs; and Father Kevin Burke, S.J., VP for Mission

Allow me to add to the chorus of welcomes to Regis University!

I have worked in Jesuit higher education for over thirty years as an English professor, an administrator, and as a trustee of several Jesuit universities. But the truth is that none of the other universities have moved me or captured my imagination and my affect as deeply as Regis.

My initial remarks to you are both introductory and forward looking. I wish to say a bit about what you can expect at Regis and what the community is like.

But of course, since I'm an old English professor, I want to begin by telling a story. It's a story from an essay by the popular poet and spiritual writer, Kathleen Norris.

She wrote about the experience of being a guest in a school in North Dakota. While teaching poetry to grammar school children, Norris writes, "A strange thing happens when I enter a classroom as a visiting artist, to read poetry and eventually get the [students] to write... With me, they are suddenly handed a fresh slate... I've found that the kids the teacher described as 'good students' will inevitably write acceptable but unexceptional poems and stories. The breathtaking poems come from left field, as it were, from the bad students, the ones teachers will say don't usually participate well in classroom activities" (*The Cloister Walk*, 53-54).

It was one of these so-called "little criminals" who took her breath away. On his paper, the ten-year old wrote "My Very First Dad." Norris learned a lot in checking back with the boy. She hadn't asked the students to write about anything personal but to work with similes and metaphors; he had chosen to write about his "very first dad." She complimented him on his similes and encouraged him; this pleased him and he worked hard at mining his truth about his loneliness and loss.

"He'd written of his father: 'I remember him/like God in my heart, I remember him in my heart/like the clouds overhead,/and strawberry ice cream and bananas/when I was a little kid. But the most I remember/is his love,/as big as Texas/when I was born.'"



The lad told Norris, rather proudly, that he'd been born in Texas, but otherwise, he told her nothing else of his story. The returning regular teacher was simply stunned; she filled Norris in on the rest of the story. Norris was not surprised to learn that the little guy was not a good student. "He tries,' she said, 'but he's never done anything like this before' - but then she told Norris that the boy had never known his father; he'd skipped town on the day he was born."

The right moment, with the right teacher "allowed this student to tell the adults in his life - his teacher, his mom, his stepfather - something they needed to know: that a 'very first dad' looms large in his psyche. Like God in his heart... a revelation from the depth of the boy's soul.

What really is happening in a classroom is the right moment, with the right teacher. It's not restricted to elementary or high school students. It happens every day with students in universities; it happens here, especially at Regis University, whenever a student opens up her or his soul to truth, a truth that will possibly hurt a little or maybe a lot, the truth that will name the exile he or she has known for a long time. Such experience is the beginning of becoming whole. It is the process of education, which in its Latin root, *educare*, means "to lead out from oneself."

In the Catholic tradition, we have two words that name very well what happens in a classroom: epiphany and revelation. When we examine our truth, it's a reminder from our God that the world and we ourselves are more mysterious and more cherished than we know. It's a reminder that our epiphanies and revelations invite us to move beyond ourselves.

Let me ask the parents and family members here: What was your favorite moment in your education? Was there a teacher or classmate who opened your eyes and your heart to a deeper reality? Was there a transformation in the way you came to know yourself and our world? That transformation is precisely the goal of Jesuit, Catholic education. It is the legacy and promise of Regis University.

If there is a method to Jesuit higher education - and there is - it can be summed up by three other words: **Experience, Reflection, and Action.** St. Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits, was a pragmatic romantic. At the foundation of all we Jesuits and colleagues do, there is this method of Experiencing the real; Reflecting on what you have experienced; and Acting in accord with the best of your reflections on the experience.

That's why Jesuit universities are extraordinary places. And that's why I am so proud and excited to serve at Regis University. The dynamic of moving from experience, through reflection, to acting in accord with what is learned, demands rigor and compassion. It keeps Regis from being an ivory tower and assures that we remain engaged with reality, not fantasy, and that we imagine new possibilities and opportunities. At Regis, we invite our students to consider the important questions that give our lives meaning.



Regis University aims to make learners into leaders. This is the place where the Church, the community, professors, and students give back to our neighborhood. As any professor at Regis will tell you, we humans cannot learn unless we contemplate the struggles we all have, take risks, sometimes make mistakes, and listen to voices with different opinions.

And so we live in a privileged place, a community that requires love and care. We need courage and diligence to fulfill the goal we have – to make the community – local and global – thrive.

I have come to love Regis because we live out the Ignatian ideal of *cura personalis* better than any Jesuit school I know. *Cura personalis* is a Latin phrase that means “care for the whole person” – mind, body, and soul. Nowhere have I seen professors or staff more attentive to individual students’ needs. Developing personal relationships is a hallmark of what we do at Regis.

A fundamental Jesuit principle is to help people. Jesuit schools are places where knowledge is advanced, where high powered research is conducted, and where we prepare professionals – WE DO ALL OF THAT!! But Regis University also cares deeply about the growth and development of our students.

In the words of our former Jesuit Superior General, Adolfo Nicolás, “Jesuit education should change us and our students... The meaning of change for our institutions is who our students become, what they value, and what they do later in life and work.”

Here is one example of a Regis graduate we celebrated this past May at Commencement and how she is using her Jesuit experience:

- Estefania Ayala, who graduated in May with a bachelor’s in business administration. As a young girl growing up in Houston, Estefania always knew she wanted to be an entrepreneur. She also knew from an early age that business isn’t just about profit. It’s about empowering your community. It is about serving others. Estefania credits her mother with helping her understand that.
- More than two decades ago, Estefania’s family started selling homemade tamales around their apartment complex to make ends meet. Today, that has grown into an expansive Latino grocery store chain – one of the largest in the Houston area. With degree in hand, Estefania has taken her life and career to the next level. She is the Vice President of her family business, which now has 10 stores in the Houston area. Estefania partnered with the Mayor of Houston to build one of her family’s stores in one of the city’s most notorious food deserts. We are so proud to have Estefania as a Regis alum.



And here is an example of a current Regis senior who will be changing the world in just a year:

- Crystal Ayala – Crystal will be the head of the student organization Students for a Just Society, this year. She also returns as an engaged scholar activist, a senior psychology and Spanish major. Last year, Crystal was head of Somos, our Hispanic student association. Crystal is also heavily involved in immigrant rights work in the community and over the last two years, she was a ROHO academic year participant. Crystal has done amazing work while at Regis and I have no doubt will be a leader in any community she joins.

Both of these students have been transformed by their Regis student experience. Each of them is currently making a difference in our community and in our world. They have shared with us how they were impacted by people at Regis – our faculty, staff, and their fellow students. Here’s the point: All of you here have the opportunity to do great things as well. You are learners who are also leaders among your peers.

Allow me to add one more thought. This university’s mission has never been more important. Our cultural/societal struggles are crying out for just solutions.

A year ago, we began our academic year following a summer of racial violence. Now, one year later, we have watched in disbelief the horror of Charlottesville. Like all of you, I am deeply saddened by the hate-inspired violence and the tragic death of Heather Heyer, the injuries of numerous others, and the deaths of two police officers. My heart goes out to the victims’ families. These events are yet another example of what concerns so many of us here at Regis University and higher education more generally. We are witnessing an erosion of civil rights that so many generations have fought for. Our community has:

- mourned the killings of unarmed African Americans;
- ached for the fears of DACA students, immigrants, and refugees; and
- denounced violence against women and the mistreatment of good people based on their sexual orientation and gender identity.

Yet our fears and disbelief multiply as hate speech is increasingly normalized. As a Jesuit, it is my calling to pray, think, and act. I invite you – students and families – to do the same. I believe in prayer that gives us courage, cleanses our egos, strengthens our devotion, and recognizes that God is at work within us. I believe that moral issues require rigorous thinking. I also believe in action that stands up to injustice.

As a Jesuit, Catholic university president, I denounce white supremacists, the Ku Klux Klan, and Nazi ideology. Anyone who knows history knows that these movements are a cancer to a free society and have caused untold human suffering.

These forces will fail again – *if* good people stand resolute and not fall victim to the deceit these forces breed. From Martin Luther King, Jr. to Mahatma Gandhi, to Jesus of Nazareth, we have living proof that love overcomes hate. We cannot settle for anything else.



A university worthy of the name – and a Jesuit, Catholic university even more – is a sacred place, a place where there are no unaskable questions, where disagreement is the first step in finding truth and the beginning of wisdom.

As Kathleen Norris says, we need to listen to each other's stories. We need to open our hearts as well as our minds and respond to hate not with more hate but with the courage and the kindness and the hope that makes us human.

In these early weeks you will experience a number of things:

- a little homesickness,
- excitement, even thrill at a new stage of your life,
- nervousness,
- and without doubt, tons of fun!

You'll fall in love with Colorado and the mountains; you may even fall in love with another human being!

So, as these next weeks unfold, I hope you engage a deeper level of your own good hearts, that you take advantage of the call Regis University offers you.

Thank you.....God bless you.....and welcome to Regis University!!

John P. Fitzgibbons, S.J.

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