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Finding the *Magis* in the Jesuit Mission at Regis University: An Interview with Tom Reynolds



Tom Reynolds began his exemplary service at Regis University in Denver, Colorado in 1987. He served for many years in the role of Vice President for Student Life. In 1998 he took the position of the university's first lay mission officer and has served in that capacity until his retirement in May 2017. As a respected and admired leader, he has promoted living out the Jesuit mission not only by words but by actions. He agreed to share his thoughts in response to questions about his experiences at Regis University.

An interview upon retirement as Vice President for Mission of Regis University with Dr. Pamella Stoeckel, Associate Professor, Loretto Heights School of Nursing, Regis University, pstoecke@regis.edu

What have been the most significant events in the thirty years you have been at Regis University?

It's difficult to choose singular events as being the most significant markers of how Regis has evolved in my years here. If I had to choose one, I would point to August, 1993, when World Youth Day, the triennial gathering of over half a million young Catholics from around the world, came to Denver for a week. Regis was the host for several hundred of these young people, serving as the lead on the program. In addition, we hosted a visit of Pope John Paul II to our campus as he met with President Bill Clinton. Those events galvanized the Denver community, gave Regis worldwide recognition, and inspired our university community.

Perhaps more importantly, and certainly more gradually, I have been continually grateful for our steady growth into a comprehensive, mission-

inspired, and ever better university. When I came in 1987, we were really two colleges; one our long-time undergraduate Arts and Sciences program; the other, a new and growing program for working adult learners that eventually became the School for Professional Studies and later became the College for Professional Studies.

In 1988, Loretto Heights College in Denver closed, and they asked Regis to continue some of their programs and bring on as many of their faculty and staff as possible. The great blessing out of these new members of our community was that their nursing program became the Loretto Heights School of Nursing, which has expanded and become a successful university program. It has become the genesis for many other health professions schools, like Physical Therapy and Pharmacy. With this growth in quality and variety of academic programs, Regis has truly become a

university, and a better one for our students and our surrounding community.

Similarly, I have great hope for the changes we are still engaged in through our most recent strategic planning effort, in which we are renewing our vision of ourselves and becoming a university of five colleges, each with its own distinctive ways of educating students and contributing to our Jesuit, Catholic mission and identity. These gradual and challenging re-imaginings of who we are provide evidence of a learning community that is still re-inventing itself in search of the “greater good” (the Jesuit value of *magis*).

How has your role as Vice President for Mission evolved over the years?

Many folks at Regis are unaware that I was asked by our former president, Fr. Mike Sheeran, S.J., to change roles after a number of years here as the Vice President for Student Life. Looking back at that change, I realized that the timing was right for both me and Regis. I had done some good work in that role, but I needed new challenges; similarly, Regis needed some new energy to build up our Mission programs.

Initially, I kept my Student Life role while I began to slowly develop Mission efforts on a pilot basis until I switched to an exclusive focus on Mission work in 2002. I was really creating a Mission vision and set of activities from scratch during those early years, and I spent a lot of time trying out various ideas and finding out which of them “stuck” and which of them didn’t. Fortunately, this was a new profession at that time. No one at Regis, or almost anyone else in Jesuit higher education, really knew what we should be doing to build up awareness of our Jesuit mission values. So I had the luxury to experiment, fail at times, succeed at times, and gradually build up a set of efforts that could draw our Regis community into a deeper commitment to our Jesuit identity.

Among the projects that have been grace-filled for me:

- Our efforts at “hiring for mission” and providing mission formation experiences for our new faculty and staff colleagues;

- Our collaborative work with other Jesuit schools to develop joint mission programs such as the Heartland-Delta conferences and the Ignatian Colleagues Program;
- Helping to involve Regis in great projects that serve first generation students and families and give them the possibility of a Regis education, such as the Porter-Billups Leadership Academy, Arrupe Jesuit High School, and Escuela de Guadalupe;
- Working with great Mission colleagues like Ken Phillips, Kristi Gonsalves-McCabe, and Paul Alexander, who have brought their own creative vision to our campus religious art installations, our Chapel, our University Ministry programs, and the Institute on the Common Good;
- Relationships with other wonderful faculty and staff colleagues that allowed us to enrich our core curricula, create new mission-focused courses and departments like Health Care Ethics and Peace/Justice Studies, develop innovative service learning programs, and widen our engagement with the community beyond our campus.

Along the way, I have had other opportunities to be a part of the Regis family, often in ways I had never expected. For example, our president, Fr. Fitzgibbons, asked me to chair our strategic planning efforts soon after he arrived. Then some time later, he asked me to serve as his chief of staff along with my mission duties. In one sense, these were not “mission” duties, but they reminded me that Mission work is a piece of what everyone at Regis does, and we all have opportunities to deepen our commitment to this shared work, no matter what our job titles or departments.

On a personal level, I learned that I had to let go a bit and invite others to take on new mission roles as my time was shifted to other duties. In addition, I came to see that the time for new leadership and creativity in the mission area was now. I had done my good work and others could take it even further. That’s why I am grateful and hopeful for Fr. Kevin Burke’s decision to join our Regis family with his new Mission team. They will bring a new

sense of energy and insight to our wonderful Jesuit, Catholic identity.

What decisions have been particularly challenging for you during your time at Regis?

My general answer would be that virtually all decisions we make in life carry with them challenging elements or trade-offs, even those that involve choices between two or more good options. In some ways those are harder than choices between good and bad. The Ignatian discernment process that Jesuits have shared with their colleagues has been helpful for me in considering what might be the best direction that would lead to the greater good for our community or an individual (the *magis*).

That said, the hardest decisions are always those that involve the lives and careers of students and colleagues. During my years at Regis, I have had to tell students that they had to leave Regis because of their behaviors or academic performance, I have had to tell colleagues that they would no longer have a job with us, and I have had to make changes to departments or programs that were not always popular. In making these decisions, I have tried to balance what Jesuits call care for the person (*cura personalis*) with care for the community and its needs (*cura apostolica*), which is not always a simple choice. I have also come to realize that caring for someone, such as a student or colleague, always involves respecting their dignity and getting to know their needs, treating them with an ethic of care does not necessarily mean giving them what they want. Often, we need to hold others accountable for their actions, or lack of action, so that they can grow into the people they hope to become. This is rarely an easy message to convey and frequently, I suspect, it was harder on me than on them.

In my work a few years back on our “Regis Rising” strategic planning process, I came to realize that the three-college model, which had functioned well for us for many years, had not kept up with the changing landscape of higher education, and further, was no longer serving the needs of our current students or university community. Convincing colleagues that change was needed—never a happy message—was

difficult. Getting the changes accomplished, and supporting individuals through the difficult transition process, took a toll on me. I still believe that it was necessary, and ultimately will lead us to growth and renewal.

How do you believe that Jesuit schools can live out the shared Catholic identity in the future?

They can accomplish this by working together on our unique model of transformative education. We can no longer be independent islands in isolation from each other. Joint programs like the Regis-Creighton graduate program in Occupational Therapy need to be part of our future.

We can also do this by collaborating with each other to share best practices, especially in how we share our Jesuit values and traditions. This *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* is a perfect example, as are programs of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU), like the Ignatian Colleagues Program.

Our mission is also accomplished by being visible models of an “invitational” style of Catholicism that is faithful both to the noun “university” as well as the adjective “Catholic.” We bring a world-affirming tradition of Ignatian spirituality; we challenge our students to make a difference in the world; and we try to demonstrate inclusion and respect for all those who join our communities and contribute their talents, experiences, faith traditions, and commitments to our mission. Perhaps our best model for this Catholic identity is Pope Francis, who invites the Catholic Church to be at the service of the world, especially those who are vulnerable, poor, and marginalized.

What did Regis University learn from our recent Jesuit Institutional Examen process?

We learned that we have come a long way in our efforts to share our Jesuit mission values with our students, faculty, staff, and alumni. The visiting team that reviewed our self-study was very positive about our programs. We also learned that our faculty, staff, and students are vocal in their desire that we involve them even more in these opportunities in the future! The engagement of so many in our university community in these

conversations was heartening and a tangible demonstration of their commitment to Regis.

What are your plans for the future after retirement?

First, I will spend lots more time with my wife, children, grandchildren, and parents. They deserve more of my time and have been very patient. Second, I will be working part-time with the Jesuits of our province as Assistant for Higher Education, a role that allows me to assist and consult with the great folks at schools like Regis, St. Louis University, Loyola New Orleans, and other great places. So I'll get to stay connected while letting go of day-to-day management responsibilities—a pretty good deal! HJE