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The Challenges to Mission and Ministry in the COVID-19 Moment in Jesuit Higher Education

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Introduction

On November 25, 2020, the International Association of Jesuit Universities (IAJU) sponsored a webinar focused on the challenges of the COVID-19 era for Jesuit higher education. This webinar was the inaugural webinar of the IAJU Best Practices in Jesuit Higher Education Project.

The participants included:

- *Michael Garanzini, S.J., Secretary, Higher Education, Society of Jesus and President of AJCU*
- *Philip Geister, S.J., President, Kircher Network*
- *Mark Bosco, S.J., Vice President for Mission and Ministry, Georgetown University*
- *Stella Porto, Knowledge, Innovation and Communication Division, Inter-American Development Bank*
- *Javier N6, Dean of Social Sciences, Universidad Loyola Andaluc3a*
- *Sylvia Schmelkes, Academic Vice President, Universidad Iberoamericana M3xico*
- *Susana Di Trolio, Executive Director, Kircher Network, Panel Moderator*

The context for the discussion was set with this narrative: “The disruptions caused by the Coronavirus pandemic have posed significant challenges for nearly every aspect of a Jesuit institution of higher education, including enrollment, health care services, on-campus events, sports and the arts. But how has this crisis affected the teaching and learning processes and, especially, the pursuit of an integral formation through a Jesuit higher education? Universities have been successful at delivering content, but how is this so-called ‘new normality’ and online instruction affecting and leaving space for an integral formation? Or, for Cura Personalis in our institutions?”

The questions posed to the panel included:

- *How can the values and ideals of Jesuit higher education help us in this new era?*
- *How do we continue innovating from our hallmark to adapt to this context?*

Father Mark Bosco, S.J., Vice President for Mission and Ministry at Georgetown University, was invited to submit the reflection that he offered at the webinar to Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal.

For webinar recording, see [The Challenges of the COVID-19 Era for Jesuit Higher Education](#)

—Marie Friedemann, Regis University

As I look back over this year at Georgetown University, living under the cloud of COVID-19, I am aware that each phase of this pandemic has affected me differently. Those first months of the pandemic in the spring of 2020—when students were sent home mid-semester to finish their classes online—felt more like an adventure, a profound test of our abilities to pivot to the virtual classroom during this crisis. We found

ourselves as a *communitas ad dispersionem*, a community in dispersion, a phrase that the early members of the Society of Jesus used to describe their far-flung ministries around the globe. Just as the early Jesuits used the technology of their day—letters and other correspondences shared amongst them in order to stay connected—so, too, we have spent the last year exploring the technology of our era—Zoom—as a way to stay

united with one another. Then came summer. As COVID-19 continued, we were engulfed in shock and anger at the police killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many other people of color, revealing to us again the sin of racism in our nation. Then, while struggling with COVID-19 and the effects of racial injustice and police brutality, the fall 2020 semester brought out the political polarization of an election year: months filled with misinformation, false theories about COVID-19, and untruths about the safety of the vaccines. The culmination of these political challenges was revealed in the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. And through all of this, the pandemic never waned. I kept thinking to myself: any one of these crises is burden enough, but to have all of these challenges hit us at one time fundamentally undoes any sense of adventure. Living in the time of COVID-19 is an endurance test, a physically and emotionally demanding time when, in addition to everything else, we are required to manage both the anxieties and the expectations of our university community.

This semester (Spring 2021), Georgetown is still very much a *communitas ad dispersionem*. In light of this, I see my task as one which matches our institution's call for instructional continuity with the accompanying call for spiritual continuity. When we first transitioned to virtual learning and teleworking, the chaplains in the Office of Mission & Ministry immediately moved our worship services online, streaming Mass in our main chapel, for example, and drawing not only our students to the Sunday liturgy, but many faculty, staff, and alumni as well. Our chaplains and staff also set up virtual office hours with students via Zoom. Our retreat directors spent the summer of 2020 engaging with student leaders to reshape our retreat programs, keeping a special eye on our freshmen class, who will soon complete their first year at Georgetown entirely remotely. The fruits of these efforts have been consolingly successful. Our retreat programs have created spaces for friendships to form and grow, even though many of the retreatants will not meet in person until everyone returns to campus.

Continuing our work of spiritual continuity, we invited students and chaplains to lead daily Christian meditations online, and asked the Jesuits on campus, along with many lay spiritual directors,

to offer week-long Ignatian retreats for faculty, staff, students, and alumni. The one-on-one spiritual direction of the retreats worked unexpectedly well on Zoom. As our community responded to the ongoing racial injustice witnessed through this pandemic year, we brought together university chaplains, administrators, faculty, and students in virtual prayer services for interracial justice and reconciliation. Finally, we have continued to reach out to students to schedule regular check-ins, especially with those who find themselves struggling with our current moment and their current situation.

Though this year has been an exhausting one, there is much that we have learned as we have adapted to virtual life and the technology that has kept us together. Some lessons, in fact, will likely continue once we find ourselves in a post-COVID-19 world. The option for virtual office hours and check-ins with chaplains—and with faculty—has opened up opportunities for students to connect in ways we have not seen before. There is also much we can take from asynchronous models of learning, especially when it contributes to increased flexibility for students in the learning environment. Finally, the pandemic has really forced us, in higher education, to be more collaborative, not only within our institutions, but with others as well. Through virtual platforms, for example, I was able to give a lecture at Oxford University this semester when university-sponsored travel was suspended. Georgetown was able to host Cardinal Peter Turkson from the Vatican virtually to discuss ways of making the COVID-19 vaccines accessible in developing countries. The ability to bring scholars and leaders from around the globe together through virtual settings has certainly been one of the graces of this past year.

As we remain vigilant in the face of this ongoing pandemic, the release of more and more vaccines is offering the world the hope of a light at the end of the tunnel. I look forward to the day when disembodied faces on a computer screen become—once again—the real bodies of students and faculty in classrooms, residence halls, and dining facilities. My hope is that we can capitalize on all that we learned during this year of virtual connectivity as we return from a community of dispersion to a community on campus. 