IMAGINING OUR FUTURE
REMEMBERING OUR MISSION

An address given in the series sponsored by the Jesuit Communities at St Louis University, February 28, 2013, to faculty, staff, and students.

The American churches want our universities to remain religious. The Baptists at Baylor, the Disciples at Pepperdine – the motto of Wheaton in Illinois is still “For Christ and His Kingdom.” Notre Dame and SLU.

Is it reasonable to expect to remain religious? After all, Yale was Congregational; Emory used to be Methodist Episcopal; Webster was Catholic; Brown had a Baptist minister president for 200 years, but not now. Now, these and many others are as secular as West Point or Mizzou. Is this secularizing force in Western culture irresistible? Is SLU doomed to join Wash U in the secular race?

To remember our mission and imagine our future, we need to open and face this issue. I’d like to suggest three considerations: (about which I’ll say just enough to leave everyone confused). First, in the West, war, the law, and the cosmos have gone from religious to secular – and now the university? Second: the church, which invented higher education, still needs it – and not just for the young. Third, Jesuit-sponsored universities can retain their identity, if their faculties want them to.

First consideration: war, the law, and the cosmos.

War is secularized. The “holy Crusade” is over. Popes no longer hire armies; and we don’t see American bishops blessing tanks. It is true that in the Middle East, some yearn for holy war. Not here. Not in the U.S. after Korea, Nam, Iraq, waterboarding and drones. As Paul VI cried to the U.N.: La guerre, jamais! Jamais la guerre! We may well think a war just; we cannot consider it holy. War is secular entirely.

Then second, the law is secularized. Moses got it directly from God. Cicero wrote that law is in human nature, put there by the eternal gods. Christians embraced a natural law, explained in the 7th century by Isidore of Seville as “do to others what you want them to do to you.” Well. In the 17th century, the devout Christian Grotius proclaimed natural law absolutely rational – but “under God.” During the Industrial Revolution, “under God” got deleted and then Jeremy Bentham declared natural law “nonsense upon stilts.” Now in the West, law is what humankind decide it is. This is no small matter: American law is re-defining what person means: the foetus is not, the corporation is. The law is utterly secularized. Why not the university?

Third, thinking about the cosmos.
The Hebrews, God’s People, believed that God created the world from nothing: Xàos – and that God intended to found a divine kingdom on earth. Christians refined that: God is always creating, moment by moment. More, God came and dwelt among us.

Well, we all know that Enlightenment rationalists found the God-Man unbelievable. Pushing the curve along, the Darwinians found the Creator an unnecessary hypothesis. Reason, chance, and evolution explain everything. Karl Sagan, secular prophet: “the cosmos is all that is, that ever was, that ever will be.” It’s not clear how he knows that – but never mind. His secular way of thinking about the cosmos is utterly within this world and time – secular. And “science” confront us with a radical choice: chance, or God?

One option: you are one of the latest happenings in an infinite series of random events. You have no reason to exist and no purpose but “making it” in this life. Then you will die, period. One ultimate. Other option: you are the work of a Creator who has a purpose in creating you – and gives you a purpose: you are meant to live with the Creator forever in joy.

Now, you know that surveys of religious belief indicate that the nation – and universities – are drifting toward chance, away from God. So war, law, and the cosmos are secular now – and the universities? Are we all doomed to go the way of Harvard, Webster, the Quakers’ Duke?

Well, the churches have been struggling against this curve for a century. About sixty years ago, when religious – and Jesuit - universities chose updating and excellence, we threw ourselves fully into the struggle. Andrew Greeley called that a move From Backwater to Mainstream, where the secular current is stronger.

The Jesuits got into it early. In 1973, we formed a national umbrella office, the Jesuit Conference. The Conference’s first task - “Project #1” – was to study the Jesuit mission in education in the United States. John Padberg and I (for our sins either in this life or a former one) launched it. We saw then, immediately, that the Catholic Church is in higher education because we belong there. This is my second point.

The second consideration: why the Church is in higher education:
Recall here that the Church invented the university – a truly magnificent invention, hugely fruitful, constantly creative. A starting in Bologna1088, Oxford 1127, and Salamanca 1218, Christians came together to work on philosophy, theology, medicine, and law.

Here’s why: Christians are in higher learning because keenly intelligent men and women have embraced Jesus Christ and are driven to understand what we have done. It was so from the start. The earliest Christian writing is not the story of Jesus of Nazareth – Matthew’s genealogy and Luke’s annunciation. No - the earliest Christian writing shows the fierce intellectual struggles disciples had to engage in. Paul wrestled with this: “we know that our old self was crucified with him so
that the body of sin might be done away with” – but it doesn’t seem to be “done away with.” (Rom. 6:6). On what grounds do I “rejoice always” while I observe the vileness around me – school children slaughtered, one in three people hungry, one disease after another. A good God? A redeemed people? Unless a follower of Christ (including the young) finds a way to handle these mysteries intelligently, we cannot remain faithful. It is hard to be a follower of Christ – most especially if you think seriously about the human mind and heart, about our violent histories, about rapacious trade, about immigration, about the homeless and the hungry.

So it’s clear that the Christians’ purpose in inventing the university was radical: to hold the mysteries of human existence and the mysteries of Revelation. A reviewer in the Chronicle of Andrew Greely’s book, From Backwater to Mainstream, found “little communicable evidence” of a “meaningful distinctiveness in the purpose and quality of Catholic higher education.” This reviewer quite certainly could not see this “meaningful distinctiveness.” What is it? That this institution stands for an ultimate, knowable, livable Truth revealed in both nature and the Word. We witness that the ultimate meaning of human life is revealed only in Christ Jesus the Lord.

Forty years after beginning this project, we get clear again that this university is fides quaerens intellectum – not faith, but belief seeking understanding – and not just in theology, but also in psychology, history, economics, medicine, law, physics, and philosophy. This is our project. Henry Kissinger snarled: "University politics are vicious precisely because the stakes are so small." We disagree entirely. The stakes could not be higher.

We want to create space for a heroic life given to seeking the truth of human life made holy by the gift of faith, even though marred by the drift of sin. (Jesus never said that His disciplines would be sinless. We’re just holy. It’s hard work to be His disciple.)

And no one can do it alone – not the unlettered and most emphatically, not the educated – we can NOT remain believers solo. The first step into unbelief is going solo. That solo is American secular individualism and it is what our religious universities confront. Flannery O’Connor put it vividly, as she regularly did:

Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to was never there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. Where is there a place for you to be? No place... Nothing outside you can give you any place... In yourself right now is all the place you’ve got.

We want our universities to be a place to be yourself outside of yourself, a place where we can hope to heal that desolate secular individualism – we elders, and the young, our students. Jesuit institutions are first for the faculty, and for those whom we help, beginning with our students.
This is the third consideration: why Jesuits are in higher education.

I am talking about Jesuit history, but to make sure you understand that this is a story about persons, I’ll tell you a personal experience. I was about 21 or 2 – the age of many of your students. A Jesuit about five years, in a seminary connected with Loyola of Chicago – I was studying philosophy – in Latin, 12 hours a day five and a half days a week – in a community of about 120 Jesuits in philosophy, as many in theology, and the faculties to instruct us. I stood one day in an equipment room by a table with a pair of white gym shorts, and thought, or felt, “I do not believe in God.” I told no one. I won’t describe what I lived through – I may not have to for a lot of you. I do not know how long the unbelief lasted. I knew only that I had to stay where I was. And I got over it. (I hope you noticed.)

Only some decades later did I grasp how. It was this: I was surrounded by others who gave me a place to be, a place outside myself, full of, smart, believing, arguing, sometimes enraging men (Yankees play basketball rough) – men like myself.

All of us (or nearly) would come to grasp this corrosive, humiliating truth: the human mind can NOT explain everything. No science can give the meaning of human existence. We can name and measure the universes and their stars, but we cannot find in that scientia divina, that heavenly science, why they exist. Plato or Aristotle, Augustine or Aquinas, Lonergan or Becker – none of them understood all that much of anything: DNA and stem cells, dark matter and the red shift, repression and transference, tectonic plates and why nations fail. And if they didn’t and couldn’t know any of that, where was I? Nowhere.

But I could go on in the heroic quest to live the Truth surrounded by learned others who have made it through their crises, as did Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins, who fought desolation to find that

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

Jesuits have been in higher education from the beginning. It’s where we came from and where we find colleagues and collaborators. The first Jesuits, everyone knows, were students at the University of Paris and earned their magister artium. More relevant to our point, these students were conversation companions. They talked – they talked. They spent most Thursday afternoons up the hill called Montmartre. They found a kind of companionship that gave purpose and meaning to their lives – a nearly mystical relationship that they could call only “friends in the Lord.” They were all seekers; and they lured and led one another into the magis, a greater belonging to Christ, to the greater glory to God.
So when a young man wanted to join the Jesuits in Rome, Master Ignatius would test him for a year or two and then send him off to a university – to Padova, Salamanca, Paris – the best. His purpose was to develop in each student the deeply educated character who could handle harsh changes – like fraking in the soul – and remain solid and steady.

About 400 years later, long after the Ratio Studiorum had faded into disuse, the American Jesuits were doing the same. I mentioned Project #1, our national Jesuit study forty years ago. It ended when our national leadership (provincials) sent us a letter saying “steady on.” Our universities hope to form in us and our students the human characteristics that the Ratio Studiorum set out to form. They are these:

- objectivity; an openness to being ‘claimed’ by the truth as it is revealed; attentiveness to the value in any proposition; the freedom to change our minds; a perception of the relativity of all finite expressions of God’s reality; and, above all, a desire to contemplate whatever is true, good, or beautiful. (Letter of Jesuit Conference, 1978).

So war, the law, thinking about the cosmos have gone secular and it’s been a good thing in general. But the injustices that institutes in this university fought so hard against – poverty, unjust labor practices, racism – are still rampant, intractable wickedness and wrongs. Yet, SLU stands for the faith, and we believe that

... for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

SLU will remain Catholic and Jesuit because its current people keep making it both. Its identity is not mystically caused by transcendent faith; its identity comes with human belief. Flannery O’Connor again: faith is what you know is true, whether you believe it or not.” If we are honest, and accept the Faith as true, then we remain here because we **need higher learning** because we believe it. And we are very glad to pass on that belief and the need it meets and fills.

Thank you.
Joe Tetlow, S.J.
22 February 2013