



REFLECTIONS ON THE LIVING TRADITION

The Role of Jesuit Universities in the Coming Global Society

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In these lines we focus on some current challenges faced by Jesuit universities. To frame this brief reflection, it's important to remember that the intellectual apostolate is an integral part of the religious identity of the Society of Jesus, and that it has a long-standing tradition in this field.

We can affirm that through the intellectual apostolate, we contribute both to the Church's evangelizing mission and to the advancement of knowledge and science. Our task is to emphasize how this commitment can manifest itself in today's context.

If we start with the question of teaching and learning, we observe that significant changes are occurring in this domain. Competency-based education aims to surpass more traditional approaches that are centered on knowledge, delivered through lectures and assessed primarily through memorization methods. Learning methods based on problems, projects, or challenges expand the objectives of educational action. Increased student involvement and autonomy in their learning, the connection with the workplace (for example, in dual training programs where external agents

co-design, co-teach, and co-evaluate courses in collaboration with faculty), the growing influence of external quality agencies striving to ensure the quality of the educational processes (though sometimes these efforts can result in bureaucratic procedures that fail to stimulate innovation), and the intensive use of digital technologies (for in-person, remote, hybrid, or online education) are already part of academic life.

The Jesuit vision, like other approaches, seeks to ensure that processes center the focus on students. The Society of Jesus, from its origins, defined education as “a form of assistance” to people. It may seem somewhat utilitarian, to use education in the service of humanistic purposes, but, in essence, this delves into the very heart of the educational process. For this reason, values (ethics, responsibility, transcendent vision, etc.) are part of the competencies that we want to include in the education offered, in addition to knowledge and skills. Beyond cognitive competencies and specific knowledge in each area of expertise, they aim for a more “holistic” education that encourages students to have formative experiences of different kinds (for example, those related to justice or social values, ecology or entrepreneurship, leadership or teamwork, interculturalism and international perspective, etc.). Generic or transversal competencies are defined that take into account different dimensions of formation. We want to demonstrate that this is also inherently part of a university education, not an external addition.

If we continue with the other classic dimension of the university as an institution, that of research, we see that we are also facing a nascent and growing phenomenon in university life in many places. For many centuries, the university was more of a teaching center rather than a research institution. Today, universities are distinguished from higher education institutions. The former generate their own knowledge and expand it, while the latter primarily disseminate and transfer knowledge generated by others. Humanity needs new knowledge to address the increasingly complex challenges it faces. This does not mean that social, political, or war-related issues are solved by science, technology, and knowledge alone. However, well-managed and directed science is increasingly becoming part of the solution to health, social, development, and other problems. On the other hand, we must remember that dedicating human resources to generating knowledge, as we aim to do in universities, is expensive. Significant financial resources are required. Here, differences between societies and countries become evident, widening the gap between them.

The Jesuit vision, in its beginnings and like most universities, has been more focused on teaching than on research. However, more and more institutions have begun to consider research strategies that have helped to

improve both the social contribution they make to their communities and the academic quality of the institutions themselves.

The Society of Jesus itself has emphasized that “the mission of research” is also inherent to our charism. From a spiritual perspective, the Jesuit vision sees God working in this world and therefore we are open to the emerging novelty, including in the realm of science. We seek to discern where more there is a greater opportunity for justice, faith, or ways to lead a more fulfilling life. It must be acknowledged that our societies are facing radical challenges. There are some questions to which Jesuit institutions seek to make significant contributions: “What does it mean to be human today? How can we live with different religious, spiritual, and confessional references in cultures often marked by secularism and fundamentalism? How can we establish the foundations for the peoples of the earth to live together in justice and mutual respect? How can we live on a with limited natural resources?” (Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, S.J.). Knowledge is a “frontier,” and our mission is to be there, to learn, and to generate socially relevant knowledge as guided by our discernment.

In addition to teaching and research, there is a third mission of the university more directly related to its role as a social leader. The areas of knowledge in which each university is involved do not only have an effect on the students themselves or on publications, but they also have an impact on activities that go beyond these boundaries. The university intervenes in social, economic, and political matters; it serves as a hub for relationships between institutions and, in this regard, can be a focal point of international attraction. It serves as a critical and constructive conscience on issues affecting the society in which it is embedded, collaborates in improving the city and region where it is located by contributing to the development of youth, and provides trained professionals for local business or government, among other things. Cities and countries aspire to have good universities.

From the Jesuit perspective, their universities collaborate with the progress of their physical and human environment, but they seek to do so with their own distinctive characteristics. They aim to promote ethical and democratic values, encourage certain debates over others, or strive to be sensitive in assisting weaker institutions. For the Church, these universities serve as a point of connection and presence in the cultural and scientific life, and for institutions teaching theology, they are a privileged place for dialogue with the world. Our institutions aim not to remain isolated in ivory towers, defending only the interests of students, faculty, researchers, and staff, but rather to collectively serve noble causes and progress.

Finally, it should be noted that all of the above must be made possible. To achieve this, there is a need for leadership capable of effectively harness-

ing the complex and powerful machinery of the university in service of the humanizing values mentioned above. The laws of countries must allow and support projects of this nature to the extent possible, rather than burden us with paralyzing regulations. We need flexibility, both within and outside our institutions, to adapt to the challenges that our time. Management must become increasingly more professional, and we must know how to attract and retain talent. In this regard, beyond merely utilitarian and financial motivations, the challenge will primarily be to offer work environments that embody attractive values such as diversity, justice, inclusion, sustainability, motivation, professional development, and a sense of belonging to an appealing and future-oriented project. Additionally, Jesuit universities around the world should genuinely collaborate and combine their efforts for common projects. We certainly have no shortage of tasks in this regard.

Further Reading:

Guibert, José M., S.J. "Jesuit Universities: Tradition, Renewal and New Goals." *Lumen* 6, no. 2 (2018): 24–36.

O'Malley, John W., S.J. "Jesuit Schools of Humanities Yesterday and Today." *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 47, no. 1 (2015): 1–34.

The Ratio Studiorum: The Official Plan of Jesuit Education. Translated by Claude Pavur, S.J. St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2005.

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