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REFLECTIONS ON THE LIVING TRADITION

## Honoring Our Roots, Renewing Our Mission, Embracing the Horizons Ahead

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### Roots

When I think about the history of Belén, I cannot help but think about my own family. My grandparents and parents grew up in Cuba. They knew a land, a culture, and a Church that was suddenly taken from them. My grandparents grew up in a Cuba that was still vibrant and free, while my parents experienced the crushing blow of exile at the hands of the communist regime in the early 1960s. Their story, like that of tens of thousands of Cuban exiles, is marked by loss, resilience, and faith.

This is also the story of El Colegio de Belén. Founded in 1854 by the Society of Jesus under royal proclamation, Belén thrived in Havana, first in Compostela and later in Marianao. It quickly became one of the most respected schools in the Americas. Its reputation was such that it attracted brilliant minds—scientists like Carlos J. Finlay (1833–1915), who discovered the cure for yellow fever, and Fr. Benito Viñes, S.J. (1837–93), affectionately known as “Father Hurricane,” who developed methods to predict tropical storms.

In 1925, Belén moved to a magnificent new campus in Marianao just outside the city of Havana. The new campus was, for its time, state-of-the-art, complete with a beautiful chapel where my grandparents would one day be married. This move had represented growth and promise. Yet, like the people of Cuba, the Jesuits of Belén faced political upheaval. Their commitment never wavered: they remained faithful to their mission of

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education and to the proclamation of the Gospel, even as the winds of revolution grew stronger. In 1961, they were exiled at gunpoint, escorted from the school by soldiers, loaded on a ship and sent away.

Exile could have meant the end. Instead, exile became the seed of renewal.

### **Renewal**

Just a few months after their forced departure, the Jesuits—together with the Cuban exile community—re-founded Belen Jesuit in Miami. With almost nothing but faith and determination, they made it possible for young men, many also displaced, to find a school they could call home. What they built in those early years was nothing short of heroic.

For me, this story is deeply personal. Nearly every male in my family has passed through Belen's classrooms, first in Cuba, later in Miami. My grandfather and father's memories of Belén—both in Havana and in those fragile first years in Miami—shaped my vocation to the priesthood and my mission today as President of Belen Jesuit Preparatory School. Their witness painted a vivid picture of what it means to be faithful to God's call, no matter the circumstances.

When I became president in 2016, one of my first priorities was the construction of the Our Lady of Belen Chapel. I often reflect on the Jesuits' decision to build a great chapel in Mariana nearly a century ago. For them, as for us today, the chapel was not simply a building. It was, and remains, the visible heart of the school. It proclaims to all who enter our campus that we are unapologetically Catholic, and that we stand under the loving protection of Our Lady of Belen.

From the day its construction began, our chapel has become the spiritual anchor of the school. It is where students gather for the sacraments, where we celebrate moments of joy and mourn losses together, where alumni return to be married and to baptize their children. The chapel embodies what has always been true of Jesuit schools: that our mission is not only to form minds, but to form hearts rooted in Christ.

### **Horizons**

While Belen Jesuit remains deeply rooted in our Cuban history, we are no longer only “the Cuban school.” Our student body now represents families from across Latin America, Europe, and beyond. Venezuela, Brazil, Spain, Colombia—our diversity has become one of our greatest strengths, reminding us of the universal character of the Catholic faith and of the global mission of the Society of Jesus.

Like our forebears in Cuba, we continue to build for the future. We have expanded and remodeled facilities to embrace new fields of study, always mindful that our goal is to care for the whole person: mind, body, and spirit. Our teachers are challenged not only to educate, but to innovate, forming students who can respond creatively to the complex problems of the world.

The Catholic Entrepreneurship Program is one example. We encourage students to dream boldly and to innovate with purpose. But we also insist their innovation be guided by sound moral principles, empathy, and love. In a culture that often celebrates disruption for its own sake, we want our students to ask: How will this serve others? How will this glorify God?

The Office of International Studies expands horizons even further. Through pilgrimages, immersion trips, and student exchange programs, students encounter the global Church and discover that our Catholic faith transcends borders. They come to see themselves as part of a universal body, united not by nationality but by Christ.

The Ignatian Center for the Arts reminds us that God is present in all things—what we see, what we hear, what we create. The Roberto C. Goizueta Innovation Center gives our students the space to imagine, to build, to push boundaries. But at the core of each of these initiatives is the same principle: education must be an encounter with the living God. Otherwise, innovation becomes empty, and culture becomes fragmented.

The past speaks powerfully here. On our campus, the Arroyo Quad honors Jesuits who gave their lives to Belen. The Sarria Family Dining Hall mural tells our history from 1854 to 2011. The Wall of Martyrs commemorates men who fought and died for freedom in Cuba. These reminders are not mere decorations. They are living witnesses, inspiring our students to courage, sacrifice, and fidelity.

## **Mission in Action**

With more than 170 years of history behind us, our foundation is strong. Yet Jesuit education has never been about nostalgia. It is about discernment: reading the signs of the times, listening to the Spirit, and asking where God is calling us next.

Today, this discernment brings us face to face with new frontiers. Technology is one. Artificial Intelligence, for example, presents opportunities and dangers. It is not unlike the transitions that came before—from chalkboards to notebooks, from notebooks to iPads. Jesuits have always engaged the sciences, not with fear, but with great joy and enthusiasm knowing the God of our faith is the creator God of the universe. The chal-

lenge is not whether to use these tools, but how to humanize them—how to ensure they serve truth, justice, and the dignity of the human person.

We walk this path alongside our students. We owe it to them to prepare not just for the jobs of tomorrow, but for the vocation of a lifetime: to be men of faith, men of conscience, men for others.

The stories of our alumni continue to inspire this mission. Some have led global companies. Others have advanced medicine, pioneered in law, or taken leadership in civic life. What unites them is not professional success alone, but a deep sense of service. The Belen Alumni Association strengthens these bonds, ensuring that the network of brotherhood and faith continues to guide future generations.

As educators, our role is to preserve this history, to tell these stories, and to invite our students into them. But we must also adapt, innovate, and take risks—always with one foot firmly planted in the Gospel. Jesuit education has never been static. It is a living tradition, animated by the Spirit, renewed in every age.

### **Conclusion: Gratitude and Hope**

In the story of Belén, I see my grandparents, my parents, my vocation, and my priesthood. I see a people who lost everything yet built again with faith. I see a school that was exiled yet thrives today, forming thousands of young men for the service of God and neighbor.

This is not just Belén's story. It is the story of Jesuit education. Again and again, history has demanded that we adapt. Each time, we have rediscovered that what matters most is not buildings, nor programs, nor prestige. What matters most is fidelity to Christ, his Church, and the mission of forming men and women for others.

As we look to the future—whether it be through innovation centers or chapels, through iPads or artificial intelligence—the question remains the same: How will we help our students encounter Christ? How will we send them forth as servant leaders?

If we remain faithful to that call, then we can face the future with confidence. For as our past has shown, exile can become renewal, and challenge can become grace. In every circumstance, God has been faithful. And so, we continue, with gratitude for the past, with courage in the present, and with hope for the horizons yet to come.

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