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The Jesuit University as an Instrument of Mercy¹

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Abstract

The university today is being challenged to reimagine the fundamental paradigm out of which it works, in order better to respond to unprecedented political, cultural and ecosystemic challenges. A Catholic, Jesuit university can and should do this work using resources drawn from its roots in Ignatian spirituality, offering these to all members of the university, whether or not they are Christian or existentially committed to this spirituality. Pope Francis's writings on education while he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires and his writings on Ignatian spirituality in general provide clues on how to do this. Following these clues leads first to the conclusion that the university should be an instrument of consolation—understood in Ignatian terms—in the world, most prominently by enabling a combative hope for a different kind of world. Second, the way to do this suggested by Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* is to invite all members of the university community into an experience of mercy that recognizes our limitations, frailty and even our failures, but within a broader context of being accepted by God and called to creative agency despite, or even in terms of, these limitations. A realized experience of mercy of this kind is a powerful impetus toward action to understand the world and change it, one that carries key markers of consolation: peace, humility, acceptance of others, courage, hope, and love. In conclusion, some examples of how a university can enable this experience of mercy and consolation are offered.

Many years ago, when I was in graduate studies at the University of Chicago and was also teaching as an adjunct at Loyola University Chicago, I was chatting with a Jesuit friend who worked in higher education administration. We were talking about the idiosyncrasies and vagaries of the two universities that I was involved with at the time, and he remarked to me, "You know, Matt, universities were founded by a bunch of guys who got together in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and patched something together... and we've been doing it more or less the same way ever since." While a bit of an exaggeration, it is true that even though attempts have been made, some more successful than others, to rationalize the structure of the university, it retains a good measure of this ad hoc character and often has the feel of more or less artfully constrained chaos. This is probably to the good, since in the chaos one can stumble onto previously unforeseen avenues of research and teaching, or explore with one's students, in ad hoc fashion, new insights that might never surface in a more tightly controlled process. On the other hand, it is also

true that universities have, for good or ill, a robust supply of inertia; at the institutional level they do not typically change easily or quickly.

From time to time, however, universities have entered into times of crisis, when they have been challenged to reinvent themselves, shifting the fundamental paradigm out of which they operate. Beginning in the fifteenth and then continuing into the sixteenth century, Renaissance humanists, Protestant reformers, and Catholic counter-reformers alike agreed that university education was too often sterile, irrelevant to the needs of the times, and ineffective in achieving even the goals that it set for itself. New universities were founded that conceived higher studies differently, such as the University of Alcalá de Henares, where Ignatius first traveled to study in 1526 after learning the rudiments of Latin in Barcelona. Founded by the great Spanish cardinal and reformer Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, it was a center not only of Scholasticism (in Nominalist, Scotist and Thomist varieties), but also of humanist studies and critical scholarship.²

Reforms were made within existing universities as well, such as the introduction of a more orderly curriculum and new modes of instruction at the University of Paris, which, along with other innovations, together came to be known as the *modus parisiensis*. Xavier, Favre, and Ignatius were all exposed to this reform when they studied at the Collège Sainte-Barbe, and when the first Jesuits started founding schools in 1548 at Messina, it seemed natural to them to base their curricula on their experience of this approach, which seemed to them to cohere more closely with their “manner of proceeding.” They later codified the method in the *Ratio Studiorum*, a document that governed their universities well into the twentieth century.³

Another time of crisis came at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when European universities were forced to come to terms with the upheavals of the Enlightenment and the Age of Revolutions. One result was the University of Berlin, founded in 1810 as perhaps the first modern “teaching and research university.”⁴ The paradigm that this university was meant to exemplify was premised on the idea that it is not just the retrieval or reorganization of knowledge, but the *production* of *new* knowledge that best promotes the health and progress of human society. Berlin provided a model for such a university, not only in Germany but around the world, particularly in the young but expanding United States.

There are many signs that we are now in another period of crisis as we struggle to come to terms with the upheavals of our own age. This crisis has been building for quite a while at different rates and taking different forms around the world. It was shockingly manifested at the University of Berlin itself, for example, when, beginning in 1933, its Jewish faculty were expelled and, on May 10th of that year, faculty and students participated in the burning of books banned by National Socialism. The university proved unable to provide a counterweight to eruptions of the demonic in a culture such as National Socialism. While the history of the university in the United States lacks such a dramatic moment by which one can identify this underlying malaise, legitimate questions have nonetheless been raised about how creative and critical a role it plays in the broader

culture. Over six decades ago the preeminent Catholic church historian John Tracy Ellis noted that among intellectuals at the time there was “a fundamental agreement with [Henry Steele] Commager when he remarks of the American intellectuals, ‘They have failed to enlist the great mass of their countrymen in the common cultural and intellectual enterprise necessary for the Republic’s progress and security.’”⁵ In an age of “alternate facts,” “fake news,” and “political correctness,” there seems little doubt that the situation is, if anything, worse today. The university is often seen from the outside as a luxury that society cannot afford, an institution increasingly available only to the wealthy and indifferent to the life and concerns of others. Even within the academy many voices have echoed the worry voiced by the former Dean of Harvard College, Harry Lewis, that “Harvard teaches students but it does not make them wise.”⁶

What has fallen into crisis, I suggest, is the premise that production of new knowledge alone suffices to define the *telos* and role of the university in modern society. Production of knowledge, yes, but what kind of knowledge and to what end? Is the end simply to maintain and augment the physical, informational and economic technologies that now touch every aspect of our lives—including the technologies that can already mold the human genome itself? And who can have access to that knowledge? A deeper vision is required to combat the ideologies that threaten to hijack the university today. The murder of the six Jesuits and their two co-workers at the University of Central America in El Salvador in 1989 marks one chapter in the story of the attempt to re- envision the university in the face of the way this crisis manifested itself there, and there are other encouraging stories to be told of the ways that the faculties, staffs and students of universities are looking for a new way to make these wonderful instruments more responsive to the world’s needs today.

Every university has to meet this multi-dimensional challenge from its own traditions and resources. It seems natural then, to turn to the resources available to a Catholic university—and a Jesuit one in particular—from its own specific traditions, to think about what a university can be.

Ignatian spirituality and its concretization in the Society of Jesus have potent resources for envisioning what a university can and should be like in order to respond to the needs of our time. I will educe and elaborate a few of these resources by drawing not only on Ignatius of Loyola's works but also on the wisdom of the first Jesuit pope, Jorge Mario Bergoglio. I do so in part because he has himself been very concerned with Christian education and in part because of his deep and innovative grasp of Ignatian spirituality.

One initial propaedeutic is necessary before launching into the main work of my argument. Catholic, Jesuit universities are complex, multi-traditioned institutions. It is important to be clear that presenting these Catholic and Jesuit resources for thinking about the rationale for a modern university must be done with this reality of the modern university in view. The modern university is and should be diverse, pluralistic, and open to conversation and debate by its various participants and stakeholders, even regarding its own most fundamental principles. Any appeal to a particular tradition within that debate must recognize this diversity and recognize that any conclusions drawn must be open to further reflection and renegotiation. Pope Francis himself recognizes this. In 2003 he wrote to Christian educators that

by no means should our schools aspire to form a hegemonic army of Christians who will know all the answers, but rather these schools should be the place where all the questions are welcomed, where, in the light of the Gospel, the personal search is encouraged and not blocked by verbal walls, walls that are pretty weak and that inevitably fall shortly thereafter.⁷

The responsibility of Christians within such a diverse context is to make the symbolic and conceptual resources of their tradition available to all, including non-believers, as what theologian David Tracy has called a "suggestive possibility."⁸ A category that Tracy framed with interreligious dialogue in view, "suggestive possibility" seems quite apt as well for pluralistic settings like that of the modern university, in which there are not only adherents of many religions, but of no religion at all. For Tracy, presenting the articulated expression of one's own religious experience as a

suggestive possibility means offering it to the other as an option for herself, inviting her imaginatively to indwell it and the possible world it projects, even if she does not indwell existentially the tradition out of which it arises. All it asks of the other is a recognition that "[t]o recognize the other *as* other, the different *as* different is also to acknowledge that other world of meaning as, in some manner, a possible option for myself."⁹ This openness of mind and spirit, this willingness to venture beyond one's convictions and worldviews to explore what is different and perhaps even strange is, I would argue, a foundational premise of authentic and creative scholarship in general. On that basis one can propose this Ignatian vision without apology, but also as an *invitation* to those who do not share the Ignatian worldview, or even the Christian one.

The philosopher Jürgen Habermas—a non-believer and firm advocate of methodological atheism in reason's work—has recently reflected on how believers and non-believers should relate in a modern secular society. He has come to an analogous conclusion from the other side, *vis-à-vis* Tracy, of the dialogue between believers and non-believers:

When secularized citizens act in their role as citizens of the state, they must not deny in principle that religious images of the world have the potential to express truth. Nor must they refuse their believing fellow citizens the right to make contributions in a religious language to public debates. Indeed, a liberal political culture can expect that the secularized citizens play their part in the endeavors to translate relevant contributions from the religious language into a language that is accessible to the public as a whole.¹⁰

In what follows then, I attempt to express a vision of the *University as an Instrument of Mercy*. This is one that can help orient us as we discern how the university, with its nine-hundred year history, can respond to the challenges of our day. It is one that is "thickly" Christian and Jesuit, but one that I believe can be made accessible to a broader public—rendered a "suggestive possibility" even to those who do not fully inhabit the worldview of

Christian discipleship (voiced in an “Ignatian key”) out of which it arises.

To do this I propose two thesis statements that I will then explain using the writings of Pope Francis, insofar as he elaborates them in terms of the most central dynamisms of Ignatian spirituality: (1) the ultimate purpose of the Christian, Jesuit university today is to open its participants to consolation, and to hope in particular; and (2) the foundational way that a university does this is to invite them into the experience of mercy. I then conclude with some thoughts on what this might mean in the concrete for a university as a university.

I. The ultimate purpose of the Christian, Jesuit university is to open its participants to consolation and to hope in particular

Following the devastating collapse of the Argentinian economy in 2001, when seven million people were living on less than a dollar a day, Buenos Aires’s Cardinal Archbishop Jorge Mario Bergoglio started writing a yearly address to Christian educators. In one of these addresses he asked why the Church gets into education anyway:

it would not be superfluous to ask ourselves the fundamental question: *for what purposes do we educate?* Why does the Church, why do Christian communities invest time, assets and energy in a task that is not directly *religious*? Why do we have schools, and not hair salons, veterinary clinics, or tourist agencies? Perhaps as a business? There will be those who think so, but the reality of many of our schools puts the lie to this affirmation. Would it be to exercise an influence in society, an influence from which we subsequently hope for some benefit?

It is possible that some schools offer this *product* to their *clients*: contacts, environment, *excellence*. But neither is this the reason for the ethical and evangelical imperative that pushes us to offer this service. The only reason we engage ourselves in the field of education is the

hope for a new mankind, in another possible world.¹¹

Note what the future Pope did *not* define as the *telos* of Christian education: It is not primarily intended to catechize or form young Christians in the faith. Neither is its main purpose training Christians so that they can become movers and shakers in society, get a piece of the pie, as it were, and give the Church influence in circles of power. Rather, the Christian school’s primary goal (which does not necessarily preclude the others) is to arouse and nourish a hope for a different way of being human and a world that is different from the one we see around us.¹² In an earlier address he wrote that “*Our schools are called to be real signs, living ones, that ‘what you see is not all there is,’ that another world, another country, another society, another school, another family is possible.*”¹³ This kind of hope, moreover, is for him not a passive optimism that everything will work out okay. This is why he often modifies the noun hope with two adjectives: “active” and “combative.” Speaking of Argentina’s situation, but in terms that seem eerily resonant today, Bergoglio talks about that hope in these terms:

What exists is a people with a history that is full of questioning and doubts, with political and economic institutions that are barely maintaining themselves, with values that are followed by a question mark, with minimal short-term tools. These things are too weighty to be entrusted to a charismatic leader or a technocrat; they are things that can work their way toward a happier outcome only by means of a collective action of creation in history. And I do think that I am not mistaken in my intuition that your task as educators is going to be in the vanguard of this challenge. *To create collectively a better reality, within the limits and possibilities of history, is an act of hope.*¹⁴

The action that arises out of such an active hope is not the *creatio ex nihilo* by which God created the cosmos. We can only create with the cultural resources at hand. Yet neither is it simply rearranging what is, which in our case would come perilously close to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Rather, “to act creatively implies

taking seriously into account what there is, in all its density and to find the way by which from that starting point something new may become manifest.”¹⁵ If a modern university is not a place that can enable and even press us to “take seriously into account what there is, in all its density,” then where else? Yet on Bergoglio’s view, the university’s work is incomplete unless it also holds out the possibility of something genuinely new. Hence, the university is, to be sure, the place for the production of “new knowledge,” and the formation of those who can continue that work. But it must be knowledge oriented toward a different world than the one we see around us, and not just its reinforcement and extrapolation.

In these essays Bergoglio was writing as an archbishop, not as a Jesuit per se; and the Ignatian depth structure of his thinking is submerged. Yet it is there. To surface it I turn to another text of Pope Francis’s: a set of retreat talks he gave to the bishops of Spain in 2006 “in the manner of St Ignatius of Loyola.”¹⁶ He speaks there as well of combative hope, but also of joy, and of peace, and groups all of these under the key Ignatian category of “consolation.” This gets us to the heart of my thesis that the university should be a place of consolation, which today means especially a place of hope.

Consolation, according to Ignatius, is a way of God being present to the person by virtue of which she is filled with faith, hope and love, feels God’s presence in her life and work, and is impelled to great generosity and acts of love for others. It was for Ignatius a sign that the person was on the right track in life. In fact, acting in and out of consolation is simply another way of phrasing the well-known Ignatian ideal of acting as a “contemplative in action.” Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises* were constructed as a way of opening oneself to consolation and rooting one’s identity and one’s actions in *that* experience—rather than, say, in the desire for wealth and security, in fear or hatred of others, in self-doubt or in guilt, or in a sense of despair over the possibility of a different world. Jesuit historian John O’Malley writes of the first Jesuits that

“Consolation,” if this occurred in the person unto whom Jesuits ministered, was the surest sign that all was well. Nadal,

Polanco, and others had learned from the *Exercises* what this meant and how central it was. They had, in fact, learned it so well that I am tempted to dub their ministry a “ministry of consolation” and their spirituality a “spirituality of consolation.”¹⁷

O’Malley goes on to quote from one of Ignatius’s first companions, Pierre Favre—Pope Francis’s favorite early Jesuit after Ignatius. Favre was explaining the kinds of work that Jesuits do, quoting from Pope Julius II’s 1550 bull approving the Society of Jesus. That bull gives a list that includes public preaching and lectures, giving the Spiritual Exercises and educating children, and then lists “especially the spiritual consolation of Christ’s faithful through hearing confessions.” Commenting on this Favre writes that

These words—“especially spiritual consolation”—refer to *all* the primary ministries of the Society.... The word “especially” means that there are other ends we must pursue, but this one in the first place, as our primary intention and goal. If we do not have time and resources for both this and the others, we should omit doing them, and apply all our energies to this one.¹⁸

Thus, we could say that in insisting that Catholic schools be places that inculcate hope, Pope Francis was simply repeating, in his own way, this foundational Jesuit principle. Whatever else Jesuit institutions do—in the case of universities, passing on knowledge and creating new knowledge, giving students new and important skills, guiding them to an appreciation for the riches of human culture and history—if they do not give students hope then they are missing their mark. They should be rethought and restructured. If that is not possible they should be left for others to conduct, in favor of other institutions that show greater promise of opening people to the grace of consolation.

Hope does not just drop from the sky for Ignatius or for Francis; neither is it a mood that I have today because the sun is shining, but dissipates when it is cloudy. Hope is both a firm and resilient disposition and also a gift, a grace. That crucial caveat noted, Ignatius is convinced that one can

open oneself to it; one can engage in exercises that make it more likely that one will inhabit hope and engage in the kind of creativity in which hope expresses itself. This is the point of the *Spiritual Exercises*. And in the progression of the Spiritual Exercises,¹⁹ it turns out that the experience or grace of mercy in one's life is fundamental to choosing and living a life of combative hope and the creative historical agency in which that hope manifests itself. Following the logic of Ignatian spirituality as found in the *Spiritual Exercises*, then, my second thesis follows: a university becomes a place of hope by becoming an instrument of mercy for its own members and for others. To this I now turn.

II. The foundational way that a university becomes a place of hope is to invite its participants into the experience of mercy

A richer understanding of what Francis means by mercy and its connection with combative, creative hope can be gleaned from the texts of the 2006 retreat. Before considering the retreat, a few words on the structure of Ignatius's exercises provide necessary context. The goal of the Spiritual Exercises, as Ignatius defines it, is to "prepare and dispose the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments and, after their removal, to seek and find the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our souls."²⁰ In other words, they are about becoming truly free so that one can make a life-orienting choice in a way that gives oneself life and gives life to others—aligning our work with the work that God is doing in history. Ignatius structures the Exercises into four stages, which he names "weeks." These weeks can be distinguished by the materials for prayer proper to each week, but more helpfully by the type of grace Ignatius has the retreatant seek at each stage. During the first week one contemplates the death-dealing presence of sin in the world, one's own complicity in that sin, and its ultimate outcome: death and hell. The grace one prays for is shame and confusion over how many times one has deserved damnation because of her or his sins, and intense sorrow and tears for those sins. But it is crucial to note that the first week is not just about self-accusation, shame and confusion, and it is certainly not about self-loathing. For Ignatius it involves equally the experience that, my sins notwithstanding, God is still faithful to me.

Ignatius expects that I will utter "an exclamation of wonder" that, as a sinner, I am still held in existence and given the gifts of creation. The created world continues to sustain my life and enliven my spirit; the angels and saints still intercede for me. In other words, my sinfulness is met by God's mercy, reaching out to me and sustaining me in existence, even in my sinfulness, giving me the opportunity to turn toward life. Encountering *both* the depth and power of sin *and also* the deeper and more efficacious mercy of God at work in the depths of my being and in the breadth of the human community and the created world in which I dwell, will elicit, Ignatius believes, a powerful and energizing disposition of gratitude and hope. This disposition is essential to an authentic choice, or election, of how to live my life. This is, as we shall see, the encounter with mercy that is so central to Pope Francis's thought.

It is only on the basis of a deep appropriation of this realization, this grace, that Ignatius will allow one to go on to the "second week." The second week is made up of a series of imaginative exercises that frame the process of discernment of the choice that will enable me more fully to seek and find God's will in ordering my life. Some exercises of that week are meant to continue the work of detecting and confronting the continuing presence of sin in my life that makes me unfree—"inordinate attachments." Only in this way do I achieve a state of indifference in which my affective responses to the world are supple enough to be reoriented by a choice for a particular good that gradually emerges in the process of discernment of God's will for my life. Other exercises reshape my imagination for what is possible in my life by having me walk with Jesus from nativity and the hidden life in Nazareth, through to the conclusion of his public ministry, as depicted in the Gospels. Generally, in this part of the Exercises one asks for the grace of "an intimate knowledge of our Lord, who has become human for me, so that I may love him more and follow him more closely" (*Spiritual Exercises*, §104). In the third week one meditates on the passion and death of the Lord, noting how "the divinity hides itself" (§196), and asking for the grace of "sorrow, compassion and shame because the Lord is going to his suffering because of my sin" (§193), and "sorrow with Christ in sorrow, anguish with Christ in anguish, tears and deep grief because of

the great affliction that Christ endures for me” (§203). Finally, the fourth week takes up the resurrection, in which one prays for the grace “to be glad and rejoice intensely because of the great joy and the glory of Christ our Lord” (§221).

Francis’s presentation of the *Spiritual Exercises* to the bishops of Spain followed Ignatius’s advice that the Exercises be accommodated to the needs and capacities of the one making them (§18). He spends the greatest part of his time on the exercises of the second week, which is about making wise choices. He shows a clear awareness of the challenges, perils and pitfalls that face a bishop (unsurprisingly, since he had been facing them himself for over fifteen years by the time he wrote his talks). He also shows an awareness of the dispiriting prospect that a rapidly secularizing Spanish society and culture presented them. Many themes for which the future Pope would come to be known show up here: the dangers of corruption, clericalism and spiritual worldliness; the need to pray for and cultivate a combative hope in the face of challenges facing the church; and the importance of discernment. And, of course, mercy appears frequently and prominently.

That Francis associates the traversal of the Spiritual Exercises with the experience of mercy is clear from the very outset of the retreat, as is the connection he makes between mercy and hope. He chooses to frame the entire retreat with a line from Mary’s Magnificat, “his mercy is from age to age” (Luke 1:50):

As with Mary our acts of thanksgiving,
adoration and praise found our memory
in the mercy of God that sustains us.
With hope that is firmly rooted in him,
we are thus prepared to fight the good
fight of the faith and of love, on behalf of
all those entrusted to our care.²¹

The itinerary of the Spiritual Exercises, as the Pope interprets and presents it here, is a remembering of God’s mercy (first week) giving rise to a hope that will enable the bishops to make the difficult pastoral discernment required of them (second week), which is confirmed by the ways that the resultant decisions allow them and the churches they watch over to persevere in peace and joy in the midst of trials, apparent failure, and

even persecution (third and fourth weeks). As with his earlier talks to Christian educators, he associates this discernment and the creative action that arises from it with “the grace of a *combative* hope.”²²

There are many interesting features of the way that Francis interprets and presents the complex weave of Ignatius’s Spiritual Exercises following this itinerary. For the purposes of this essay, I draw attention to the way that he tightly connects the first week of the Exercises with the second. One might see the first week as a stage through which we pass and then, having acknowledged and repented of our sins, leave behind in order to go on to the second in order to find the particular way that we exercise our combative hope. Francis does not see things this way; he presents the two weeks as dialectically interrelated. The experience of mercy proper to the first week and the historical creativity that comes with active hope and discernment in the second week are not separate stages, but are internal to one another, each entailing and educing the other.

This connection is most evident in the chapter in which he treats the first week contemplations on sin. He identifies what he calls a “paradoxical pattern” that emerges from the Gospels:

As we read the Gospels, a paradoxical pattern emerges: the Lord is more inclined to warn, correct, and reprimand those who are closest to him—his disciples and Peter in particular—than those who are distant. The Lord acts in this way to make it clear that ministry is a pure grace.... In this context of the Lord’s gratuitous choice and his absolute fidelity, to be reprimanded by him means that one is receiving a sign of God’s immense mercy.²³

To illustrate this paradox he uses what he calls “the first confession of Simon Peter” in the story of the miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5:1-11). The context, the Pope notes, is evangelization. The Lord is teaching the crowds from Peter’s boat. Having completed his teaching, Jesus tells the disciples to put out into deep water and, their night of fruitless toil notwithstanding, has them throw their nets over one more time, only to have

their nets filled to the bursting point. Francis's commentary on what follows is worth quoting in full:

At the sight of this prodigy, Simon Peter confesses himself a sinner. And in this very act, the Lord converts him into a Fisher of men. Conversion and mission are thus intimately united in the heart of Simon Peter. The Lord accepts his "*Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man*" (Lk 5:8), but he reorients it with his "*Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching men*" (Lk 5:10)... From that moment on, Simon Peter never separates these two dimensions of his life: he will always confess that he is a sinful man and a fisher of men. His sins will not prevent him from accomplishing the mission he has received (and he will never become an isolated sinner enclosed within his own sinfulness). His mission will not allow him to hide his sin, concealed behind a pharisaical mask.²⁴

This is for Francis the fruit of a genuine, graced experience of the first week: "The Lord is the ever greater One: when he call us to conversion, far from diminishing us, he is giving us stature in his Kingdom. From the hand of the Lord who corrects us also comes his abundant mercy."²⁵ While he does not mention it here, I think that he had in mind the so-called "colloquy before the cross" of the first week. There, fresh from the experience of God's faithful love and mercy even in the face of one's sin, one places oneself before the cross and asks "what have I done for Christ?"; "What am I doing for Christ?"; "What will I do for Christ?"—the questions that Ignacio Ellacuría reconfigured for an address at Santa Clara University's 1982 commencement:

I would like to think—and this is the meaning I give to this honorary degree—that you understand our efforts, our mission, something of the tragic reality that is El Salvador. And how do you help us? That is not for me to say. Only open your human heart, your Christian heart, and ask yourselves the three questions Ignatius of Loyola put to himself as he stood in front of the crucified world:

What have I done for Christ in this world? What am I doing now? And above all, what should I do? The answers lie both in your academic responsibility and in your personal responsibility.²⁶

Mercy *could* be understood and experienced as an act of condescension on the part of the one showing mercy, an act that only confirms the one being shown mercy in his or her condition of being inferior and subaltern. But that is not what Francis is talking about and it is not what Ignatius has in mind for the first week. The action of mercy, as Francis describes it by tying the first and second week closely together, is not just the forgiveness of a debt that the debtor cannot otherwise repay, or the removal of a stain that one cannot be free of by his or her own power; it is also, and indissolubly, an invitation to participate in God's own agency in the world. The experience of mercy is not just the experience of being pardoned but the experience of being "given stature in the Kingdom of God," being given the dignity of being not just the *object* of God's saving mercy and love, but its *subject*, making it a reality for oneself and for others.²⁷ It gives one dignity; a work to do. And what is that work? Precisely to reach out in mercy to others. As we all know, for Francis this means going to the margins—the shunned fringes, be they defined economically, culturally, psychologically, existentially, or religiously, the places where people feel defeated, crushed by their limits and spurned by others. I do not know of an institution that can do this better than a university. Perhaps this is why even though founding and running universities was not a part of the original plan of Ignatius and his companions when they sought permission from the Pope to form the Society of Jesus, within ten years they had started doing it, and soon had devoted themselves to it so wholeheartedly that it became the work most associated with the Jesuit charism.²⁸

Mercy is, thus, the engine of mission; it is the font of the kind of creative historical agency, the expression of combative hope in the world that Francis had called for in his addresses to Christian educators a few years prior. Why? First, because it does not find the limitations and even the ambivalence of the history in which we attempt to exercise this creativity something we have to deny

or overlook in order to act; rather, our agency transpires precisely in being called in and through this limitation, frailty and sinfulness. If we try and fail, or only partly succeed, that is simply an invitation to re-enter the first week experience of mercy, and then discern anew. “Do not be afraid” means “do not be afraid of your failures and only-partial successes.” In the same vein, people schooled in this experience are better equipped to examine the painful underside of our history, “to brush history against the grain,” as Walter Benjamin wrote.²⁹ Universities are charged with finding and exposing the truth of our history, no matter how painful. I remember how painful it was for me as a high school student in Colorado Springs in the seventies to discover the truth of what the coming of Europeans to the West I loved meant for its indigenous inhabitants, as well as for its finely tuned and beautiful ecologies. It is still difficult for me, as a privileged white middle class man, to come to grips with what my privilege has cost others. Yet a university can and should do more than the necessary work of exposing these unpleasant truths. It can invite all of us into an experience of mercy that calls us not to be afraid, so that, to paraphrase Francis’s words on the meaning of mercy: “our sins will not prevent us from accomplishing the mission we have received (and we will never become isolated sinners enclosed within our own sinfulness). Our mission will not allow us to hide our sin, concealed behind a pharisaical mask.”³⁰

In addition to this, the experience of mercy will not allow us to divide the world into opposing camps of the good and the evil; it resists demonizing others, especially those with whom we disagree and those we must oppose. Why? Because we have experienced our call to historical creativity not as superior beings who have all the answers and never make any mistakes, but as sinners. “We have met the enemy and he is us,” as Pogo famously said it in a poster to promote Earth Day in 1970.³¹

Finally, the experience of mercy leads, paradoxically, to hope. “Do not be afraid,” says Jesus to Peter, who has been made suddenly aware of his frailty, finitude and sinfulness. In his lecture to Christian educators Francis insisted that true historical creativity *accepts* the ambivalence of the materials of history with which we must hope for

and craft a different, more human world. This is precisely what the experience of mercy does. I find that my students (not to mention I myself!) easily become discouraged at the magnitude of the challenges that face us, precisely as the best university scholarship reveals them—a political system that appears irreparably broken; a culture poisoned by endemic racism; a globalized techno-economic system that is destroying our biosphere. I am also painfully aware of how paltry the responses of my university and my church have been. Yet, the experience of mercy does not put the focus on that; it puts the focus on moving forward creatively and hopefully. The initiatives that arise from this experience may not succeed the way we want them to, but they will arise not first from an impulse to move up a few notches in the *US News & World Report* rankings, or increase endowment, or enrollment or graduation rates, but from a powerful impulse to create hope by being a catalyst for the experience of mercy that has changed one’s own life. All those other things are important, but—following the line laid out by Pierre Favre—if we cannot have all of them and also be a place that creates hope, we should do the latter first. This tempts me to formulate the following principle: just as for Ignatius, one should not move forward into the discernment of the best way of life unless one has had the experience of mercy, so too a university should not start a new concentration, build a new building, fund a new faculty line or student organization, initiate a new speaker series, and so on, unless it comes from a realized experience of being an instrument of mercy for all its participants (staff, students and faculty alike), and thereby for the broader world it serves as well.

III. Conclusion: Being an Instrument of Mercy as a University

I have proposed that a Christian-Ignatian vision offers us a framework to imagine the modern university not most fundamentally as the place for the production of new knowledge—the paradigm created in the early nineteenth century, which has come up against its limits in the face of the challenges of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Rather, it invites us to envision the university as a place that awakens and sustains hope for a different, more fully human way of living together, and suggests concrete, realistic, but

efficacious strategies to structure our world accordingly. Furthermore, by putting this proposal in the context of the *Spiritual Exercises*, and following Pope Francis, I have suggested that the experience and action of mercy, as envisioned in the first and second weeks of the Exercises, is the soil out of which such a hope springs, and that therefore a university should see itself as a catalyst for that experience and action.

A university is not a retreat house, so how does it do this in a way appropriate to its identity as a university? It is not my place here to provide a full answer. Such an answer must be the product of a discernment distinctive to each institution and one that should operate at different levels and with different constituencies. It can take place in a department meeting, a student residence hall, in a teaching and learning center, in a board of trustees meeting, and in a weekly lab team meeting. These discernments will look different, and it seems to me that one job of administrators is to try to encourage and coordinate them so that the whole becomes even more than the sum of the parts.³² I have tried to drop a few hints in the course of my argument as to how the work a university fits well with the Ignatian vision of mercy/consolation (and, once again, I suspect this is why they so enthusiastically took to founding them in the sixteenth century). But let me bring a few of those hints together in a more systematic way to make a few general suggestions.

First, a university can help us understand both the presence of sin in the world and our history, *as well as* their continued beauty and goodness. Holding both sides of this insight into our situation in tension, in all their depth, in order not to lapse into enervating cynicism on the one hand or superficial optimism on the other, requires an exacting existential-intellectual-spiritual discipline.³³ Recall Francis's insistence that Christian educators engage reality and history, *as they are*, often broken, ambiguous, rarely black and white, and full of suffering and injustice; but *also* charged with beauty and goodness, filled with acts of creativity and heroism, large and small. This is the stuff of the first week experience of mercy: despite the mess we have gotten ourselves into, we have not been abandoned—life and hope still break out. God's grandeur "will flame out, like shining from shook foil," as Gerard Manley

Hopkins reminds us.³⁴ No place can inform, provoke and enrapture us with such a vision like the modern university, with its faculties in the sciences, the arts, and the humanities, especially when harnessed by a spirituality such as the one created by Ignatius and his first companions.

Second, the university can propose new and creative solutions to afflictions that leave millions or even billions weighed down and feeling abandoned—the university can in a very concrete way be an instrument of mercy and hope, especially on the margins. Faculties of business, engineering, medicine and law can surely find a role in this work. Such work requires and engages our intellect and heart, and does, to be sure, mean building endowment—as does making what we have more accessible to the poor so that our universities don't continue to be drivers of growing inequity in our nation.

Third, the university can and should be a place that empowers its students, young and old, not only by *what* it gives them, but by *how* it gives it to them. The university can and should *attract* its students to a deeper, more fully human vision of the future, and by that token more divine. This work of attracting, and of helping students recognize and work against their biases, compensate for their blind spots, and in general be free of their fears and anxieties so that they can respond to their deepest desires and aspirations aroused by this vision, is a worthy task for the kind of holistic education a university can give. In modern terms, it is to go beyond instructing in order to offer wisdom. It was what Ignatius meant by "spiritual conversations" and "aiding souls," which is what he began to do almost immediately after the transformative experience he underwent at Manresa almost six hundred years ago.

These are all university tasks; university instructors, administrators and staff have developed many tools for doing them well. I suggest, though, that the way we do this work will shift subtly but decisively when we do it from this Christian-Ignatian paradigm. It is not, to be clear, the only paradigm that can enable the revisioning of higher education that the current times demand. I have no interest in disparaging the contributions that a University of Michigan or a Stanford can make from the worthy traditions in

which they stand. We need to preserve and even increase the “academic biodiversity” of institutions of higher education. Within this diversity there is, however, a decisive and unique contribution to be made by Catholic universities, including those of Ignatian inspiration. This vision should be equally prized and its contributions

made unapologetically available to the broader public. This is an act of love in the political and cultural key, one that, to paraphrase the culminating exercise of Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*, “ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than words.”³⁵ HJE

Notes

¹ I would like to thank Fr. Kevin Burke, S.J., Vice President for Mission at Regis University in Denver, Colorado, for inviting me to give the lecture that gave rise to this essay. I also thank Professor Kari Kloos, Assistant Vice President for Mission and the Director of the Institute on the Common Good, for her diligent work shepherding it to publication, and, finally, the anonymous reviewers who provided feedback.

² On this university and its place in religious reform in fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, see Bernard McGinn, *Mysticism in the Golden Age of Spain (1500-1650)*, *The Presence of God: A History of Christian Mysticism*, vol. 2 (New York: Crossroad, 2017), 4-6. This reform, including the reforms of universities, provided a crucial background not only to Ignatius’s spirituality, but also that of the great Carmelites, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila.

³ On the critiques of the sixteenth century university and the response of Ignatius and his first companions, see John O’Malley, S.J., *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 200-242; on their appropriation of the *modus parisiensis*, and on the ways they departed from it, see O’Malley, *First Jesuits*, 215-225; Luce Giard, “The Jesuit College: A Center for Knowledge, Art, and Faith, 1548-1773,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2008); Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *The Catholic University as Promise and Project: Reflections in a Jesuit Idiom* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1998), 55-73; on the *Ratio Studiorum*, see Vincent J. Duminuco, ed., *The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum: 400th Anniversary Perspectives* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); on the *modus parisiensis* in particular, see Gabriel Codina Mir, “The ‘Modus Parisiensis’” in *The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum*, 28-49.

⁴ For an account of this crisis and the influence on theology of this new location for the doing of theology, see Thomas Albert Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁵ John Tracy Ellis, “American Catholics and the Intellectual Life,” *Thought* 30 (1955), 352. The Jesuit literary critic William Lynch, S.J. discerned this crisis as well and responded to it on Ignatian terms. See, for instance, “Saint Ignatius and the ‘New Theological Age,’” *Thought* 31 (1956), 187-215. For an overview and assessment of Lynch’s proposal, see John Kane, *Building the Human City: William F. Lynch’s Ignatian Spirituality for Public Life and Culture* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016).

⁶ From Harry Lewis, *Excellence without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2006). Quoted in Jordan L. Hylden and Jordan T. Teti, “Excellence

without a Soul?” *The Harvard Crimson*, December 19, 2006, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2006/12/19/excellence-without-a-soul-the-task/>.

⁷ Jorge Mario Bergoglio, S.J., *Education for Choosing Life: Proposals for Difficult Times*, trans. Deborah Cole (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2014), 55.

⁸ David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-religious Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1990), 40-44. He draws on William James’s classic *Varieties of Religious Experience* and James’s category of “immediate luminousness,” in particular, complementing it with the hermeneutics of Hans Georg Gadamer, to elaborate the first of three sets of criteria for inter-religious dialogue. The other two are “rough coherence with what we otherwise know or more likely believe to be the case” (44), and “ethical-political criteria” (46). Space does not permit an exploration of the relevance of these other two sets of criteria to mining the Ignatian tradition for the enrichment of the modern, pluralistic university.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁰ Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 51, Kindle. This is from a chapter authored by Habermas.

¹¹ Bergoglio, *Education for Choosing Life*, 60.

¹² In this, the future Pope echoes a view articulated almost thirty years earlier by the then-rector of the Jesuit university in San Salvador, Ignacio Ellacuría. See Ignacio Ellacuría, “Is a Different Kind of University Possible?” in *Towards a Society that Serves Its People: The Intellectual Contribution of El Salvador’s Murdered Jesuits*, ed. John J. Hassett and Hugh Lacey (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 177-207.

¹³ *Education for Choosing Life*, 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10. Emphasis added.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶ Jorge Mario Bergoglio, S.J., *In Him Alone is Our Hope: Spiritual Exercises Given to His Brother Bishops in the Manner of St. Ignatius of Loyola* (New York: Magnificat, 2013).

¹⁷ John O’Malley, S.J., “Some Distinctive Characteristics of Jesuit Spirituality in the Sixteenth Century,” in *Jesuit Spirituality: A Now and Future Resource*, eds. John W O’Malley, S.J., John W Padberg, S.J., and Vincent T O’Keefe, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1990), 19.

¹⁸ Ibid., 20f.

¹⁹ I follow here the convention using “*Spiritual Exercises*” to refer to the text and “Spiritual Exercises” (without italics) or simply “Exercises” to refer to all or part of the actual making of the retreat for which the text provides instructions to the one who is giving the retreat. Quotations of the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* are from George Ganss, S.J., *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1991).

²⁰ *Spiritual Exercises*, § 1.

²¹ *In Him Alone is Our Hope*, 9.

²² Ibid., 9, 10.

²³ Ibid., 29.

²⁴ Ibid., 30.

²⁵ Ibid., 29.

²⁶ “Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J.’s June 1982 Commencement Address Santa Clara University,” Santa Clara University, Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education, last modified November 29, 2016, <https://www.scu.edu/ic/programs/ignatian-tradition-offerings/stories/ignacio-ellacuria-sjs-june-1982-commencement-address-santa-clara-university.html>.

²⁷ This is ultimately the meaning of the Ignatian impetus “to help souls,” an impetus which does not arise subsequent or apart from the desire for one’s own salvation. This is clear from the “General Examen” of the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, which was to be proposed to someone thinking of entry into the Society of Jesus. He was to be told consider that “The end of this Society is to devote itself with God’s grace not only to the salvation and perfection of the member’s own souls, *but also, with that same grace* to labor strenuously in giving aid toward the salvation and perfection of the souls of their neighbors” (§3, from Ganss, *Ignatius of Loyola*, op cit., 284, emphasis added).

²⁸ They did this despite the fact that it required substantive changes to their original vision. See O’Malley, *The First Jesuits*, 15-16, 200-242, especially, 239-242 (on the changes this new focus required).

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 257.

³⁰ *In Him Alone is Our Hope*, 30.

³¹ In this regard it is helpful to notice as well that in the Meditation on the Two Standards, which has a strong apocalyptic cast, Jesus sends persons into the world to attract others to his standard (attract! not bully, coerce, or trick). Satan sends not persons but devils, and he sends them not just to “the evil people” but to everyone, “not missing any provinces, places, states, or individual persons,” ourselves included. There are no evil people; there is no axis of evil on which we can vent our righteous anger. See *Spiritual Exercises*, §§137-148, Ganss, pp. 154-156.

³² “The whole is greater than the parts.” This is an important principle that Pope Francis defines for the social dimension of evangelization, the purpose of which is “to make the Kingdom of God present in the world.” See Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), §§234-237, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html. It is reflected, *inter alia*, by his own tendency to consult multiple local loci of discernment (regional bishops conferences) in encyclicals such as *Laudato Si*.

³³ Both sides are necessary. Citing a Jesuit who was for many years an advisor to Fr. Pedro Arrupe, former Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Anthony DeMello observes that “[Fr. Maurice] Giuliani says very nicely that the balance of the Holy Spirit is not in the middle of the road, but in keeping both extremes. The evil spirit keeps only one extreme.” One set of such extremes that DeMello goes on to cite is “awareness of our sinfulness and of our loveliness.” It is characteristic of any robust spirituality, and of Ignatian spirituality in particular, that it is able to keep in play extremes or contrasts that cannot be definitively configured conceptually with the same balance. See Anthony DeMello, S.J., *Seek God Everywhere: Reflections on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, eds. Gerald O’Collins, S.J., Daniel Kendall, S.J., and Jeffrey LaBelle, S.J. (New York: Image Books, 2010), 136.

³⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., “God’s Grandeur,” in *Hearts on Fire: Praying with Jesuits*, ed. Michael Harter, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004), 9.

³⁵ *Spiritual Exercises*, § 230.