

Identity and Mission of Jesuit higher education in East Asia and Oceania: Its uniqueness and universality in a highly pluralist region

Antonio Moreno

Summary

In closing, our identity and mission are inseparable. We are who we are in our region because of what we have committed to do. Our diversity is not a problem to solve, but something we embrace, celebrate and take pride in. We are at the service of the church. We live in a multicultural setting, continuously engaging in dialogue, committing to the cause of truth, and bearing witness to the active presence of God in our midst. Our mission is a calling from God who challenges us to collaborate with others in various frontiers, to educate people for life, for faith-justice-dialogue-culture and to respond to the crying needs of God's people, the church.

This paper is about our experience of who we are and what we do in a deeply pluralist region. Who we are is not easy to define given the fact that there are more differences that we have than the commonalities we share. We are such a varied group. Even within particular countries, the higher education institutions differ a great deal from place to place. Nevertheless, the identity of Jesuit institutions of higher education in our region is found in their response to the region's diversity and challenges. Their mission comes from the heart of the Catholic Church and from the Society of Jesus, culled from the living traditions and imperatives issuing from both the Church and our Society.

On Identity

Jesuit higher education institutions in our region are found in Japan (Elisabeth University of Music and Sophia University), in South Korea (Sogang University), in Taiwan (Fu Jen Catholic University), in Indonesia (Sanata Dharma University and St Mikhael's Technical Academy of Manufacturing and Driyarkara School of Philosophy in Jakarta), in China (The Beijing Center) and in the Philippines (Ateneo de Manila University, Ateneo de Naga University, Xavier University, Ateneo de Davao University, Ateneo de Zamboanga University, Loyola

School of Theology and Loyola College of Culion). With the exception of institutions located in the Philippines, Catholics are a very tiny segment of the country population. What does it mean then to be Catholic and Jesuit institution when clearly the academic community is not and will not become Christian? How can we have a shared mission and dream in a deeply pluralist region made of disparate religious convictions, ways of life, and varying critical issues confronting our institutions? These are the questions I pose in this paper.

Firstly, our Jesuit identity cannot be appreciated outside of the horizon of our Catholic identity. Our educational institutions then seek to be bearers of Catholic identity and mission. We are committed to bring to our task “the inspiration and light of the Christian message.”¹ The distinct identity of Jesuit education in our region is precisely reflected in its unique blend of its rootedness in its own Catholic tradition as articulated by the allocution of Pope John II in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*² and its welcoming and embracing stance towards other religious traditions, which equally are indispensable marks of this highly diverse region.

Our Jesuit identity in the region is well appreciated when placed within the context of the local church. Our Society was founded for this purpose: “to serve the Lord alone and his spouse, the Church, under the Roman Pontiff.”³ This orientation has been reechoed by the Holy Father in his message to the 35th General Congregation: “...the Church needs you, counts on you, and continues to turn to you with confidence, particularly to reach the geographical and spiritual places where others do not reach or find it difficult to reach.”⁴ Our identity finds expression as we interact with the local church where our institutions are situated. Short of this we run the risk of heading into an identity crisis.

Secondly, our identity, however, is not static nor above historical context and culture. Cultures and multicultural settings have a way of enriching our identity. While our identity is

rooted in the living tradition of the Church and the Society of Jesus, it necessarily interacts with the given realities of the locality. East Asia and Oceania region mirrors a more heightened diversity compared with other parts of the world. The stark contrasts among the various characteristics of the people, environment, culture and traditions of the region are deeply ensconced in its rich and highly diverse heritage. The diversity in the region parallels pluralism. “Pluralism is precisely the admission and celebration of distinctiveness and difference on every level of unity. Each distinct unit makes an irreplaceable contribution to the richness of the culture.”⁵ The distinguishing character of Jesuit colleges and universities in the region is their privileged position to be a witness to this pluralism and celebrate it. This regional context requires the Jesuit universities to act as a “universal body with a universal mission, realizing at the same time the radical diversity of our situations.”⁶

Thirdly, owing to the evolving character of our identity, Jesuit colleges and universities in the region aim to provide an arena for an open and continuous dialogue, within ourselves and with others. This is a domain that welcomes and even inspires questions, a place where multiple horizons meet. The serenity in a university offers a shelter for deep reflection and contemplation which eventually lead to questions. These very questions feed into the life of the university; these very questions sustain the university and widen our appreciation of who we are. The Jesuit character of these universities is the very cloth that sifts the questions and the very answers, the process leads toward the promotion of life, of harmony among peoples and of the common good.

Fourthly, Jesuit education institutions allow a continuous search for greater and deeper knowledge about life, the humanity, the environment, and still other equally important aspects of human existence. Pope John Paul II declares that “(i)t is the honor and responsibility of a Catholic University to consecrate itself without reserve to the cause of truth.”⁷ The search for

truth remains a key identity that defines the character of our institutions of learning. In a region such as ours where not only secular pluralism is at work but also the multiplicity of religious, cultural, and social orientations, the search for truth becomes very challenging.

Finally, another important trait of our identity is our witnessing to the active presence of God in history. As Christians, we celebrate the life, mission and paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. How we share our faith experience with other Christians, non-believers and non-Christians and bear witness to the Spirit of Christ active in our world is an ongoing pursuit that is set before academic individuals and communities in our region.

On Mission

In the light of the characteristics of the present world, where human development seems to center on the accumulation of wealth, Jesuit universities must take to heart the call of Pope Benedict XVI as articulated in his encyclical that humanity must collectively reflect anew on the question of humanism.⁸ The question of what a human being is must take the center stage in every Jesuit and Catholic university. In this quest for a “new humanism,” we ask what it means to be human; who or what people are in relation to others and to God. Working toward integral human development rests at the very core of the Catholic Church’s mission. In this, Jesuit institutions of learning have an important role to play.

We note key frontier areas that our institutions can and should pursue.

Firstly, since collaboration is really at the heart of mission,⁹ by extension, our institutions ought to promote global levels of partnership. Collaboration, or in the language of Father General Adolfo Nicolas, the frontier of universality, is the way forward for our institutions and ministries.¹⁰ Left to ourselves, we are very limited considering the complexities and magnitude of our concerns today. Issues around migration, environment and globalization do impact not

only on individual communities or nations separately, but on our global society. These are no longer concerns that require response from individual communities and nations, but collective and coordinated action from our global society. For this intervention, it is crucial to build networks and linkages even with people, institutions and communities who do not share our faith but have some goodwill to promote integral human development. This partnership can be done in different levels: between and among universities in our region, between our universities and other institutions (bilateral or multilateral), and even between our educational institutions and association of states. We have pursued our Student Learning Program, essentially a gathering of our students to have a common structured learning experience. We have likewise planned to conduct collaborative research on various themes such as interreligious dialogue, environment, economics, migration, technology and social justice/human rights. To elevate our level of collaboration further, our universities have considered engaging ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), and even in its extended version, that is, ASEAN plus Japan, South Korea and China. These dreams, however, have yet to be realized.

Secondly, another area which Jesuit education can pursue is the frontier of depth, again borrowing from Father General's idea.¹¹ This frontier beckons Jesuit universities to go beyond the common indicator of excellence or achievement, that is quantity. It is not the number of achievements, tangible indicators of success, medals, awards that count but the impact of Jesuit education that is unseen as it becomes ingrained in the very being of those students who works under the tuition of Jesuit schools. This unseen seed planted through education in the Ignatian spirit will bear fruits as manifested in the students' ability to discriminate the essential from the trivial, the valuable from the nuisance, the serenity from noise, and the right from wrong. This unseen seed will enable the students to know and recognize his unique self in the midst of

faceless but equally valuable individuals. It will allow him to pause and go back to his values when confronted by a situation that promises an easy but ethically questionable life. It empowers him to find meaning in the simple but important things as oppose to promise of immense material gain. Jesuit universities must strive to form men and women who are “firmly rooted on God at all times, while simultaneously being plunged into the heart of the world.”¹²

Thirdly, the interaction between faith, justice, dialogue and culture, remains for the educational institutions of our region a valid thematic thrust in our mission. We basically follow the 35th General Congregation in regard to its reading of our mission today:

During the past years, the fruitful engagement of the Society in the dialogue with people belonging to different cultures and religious traditions has enriched our service of faith and promotion of justice and confirmed that faith and justice cannot be simply one ministry among others; they are integral to all ministries and to our lives together as individuals, communities, and a worldwide brotherhood.¹³

Interreligious and intercultural dialogue has in a way shaped our identity as Jesuit institutions of higher learning. It has enriched our appreciation of the link between service of faith and promotion of justice.

Finally, our character as a Catholic institution has greatly influenced our attitude in regard to our ways of thinking, feeling and acting with the local church. We realize the difficulties and challenges of putting oneself at the service of the local church, and yet some inspiring experiences of working for and with the church have been a source of consolation. The words of Pope Benedict XIV capture the spirit of this collaboration: “the church needs you.” This is an invitation, a challenge, a confidence and a mission given to us.

Endnotes

¹ Ex Corde Ecclesiae, #14.

² Ibid, #13. The Apostolic Constitution of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on Catholic Universities provides that every Catholic University, as Catholic, must have the following essential characteristics: “1) a Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the university community as such; 2) a continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research; 3) fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church; 4) an institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life”.

³ Expositio Debitum (1550)

⁴ Address of His Holiness Benedict the Sixteenth to the 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, 21 February 2008, #2

⁵ Michael Buckley, S.J., The Catholic University as Promise and Project: Reflections in a Jesuit Idiom, (Washington DC., Georgetown University Press, 1998) 48.

⁶ GC 35, Decree 2, #65.

⁷ Ex Corde Ecclesiae, #4.

⁸ Encyclical Letter, Caritas in Veritate of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI to the Bishops, Priests and Deacons, Men and Women Religious, Lay Faithful and All People of Good Will on Integral Development in Charity and Truth.

⁹ GC 35, Decree 6.

¹⁰ ARPN Adolfo Nicolas SJ, “On the Challenges and Issues in Jesuit Education,” On the Occasion of the 150th Anniversary of Jesuit Education in the Philippines, Ateneo de Manila University, 13 July 2009.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² GC 35, Decree 2, #56.

¹³ GC 35, Decree 3, #3.