

## **LORD, IT IS GOOD FOR US TO BE HERE.**

**LECNA Address**

February 18, 2008

**Charles L. Currie, S.J.**

### **Introduction**

It is a great pleasure and privilege to have been invited by Ralph Wagoner to spend these days with you and to be made to feel so much at home. I have always felt more human and more Christian being in ecumenical and multicultural situations. That has certainly been my experience this weekend. Thank you!

Ralph and I have been friends and colleagues for almost ten years, enjoying our work with the group called “Executives in Church-Related Higher Education,” and with the NAICU Secretariat. Those of us working in Washington can’t wait for Ralph to come to town to bring his wisdom, sanity and sense of humor to a city sorely in need of all three. It has also been a great pleasure to serve with Loren Anderson on the NAICU board that he chaired. (Tell jokes: “Down by the River” and “Jesus is watching”).

### **Luther and Ignatius.**

You might ask, what is a Jesuit doing talking to Lutherans, other than because of Ralph’s kind invitation? I asked myself that same question. To find an answer, I did a bit of historical research on Luther and Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits. It proved fascinating.

They were roughly contemporaries, Luther being about 10 years older. In 1521, while Luther had been excommunicated and was protected by his friends at Wartburg Castle in Germany, Ignatius had suffered serious battle wounds as a soldier, and was undergoing his conversion experience at Loyola Castle in Spain. Luther was a biblical scholar; Ignatius was a romantic courtier turned religious pilgrim, who had to return to school in his 30s to get the education he knew was essential if he were to “help souls,” his new goal in life. In his *Autobiography*, he described himself as a “pilgrim.”

As you know so well, Luther developed the very important notion that everyone had a vocation, a calling from God; Ignatius, in a closely related way, wanted to share with everyone his own experience of being called by God. His *Spiritual Exercises* were geared toward developing the freedom to follow that call as generously as possible.

Ignatius spent 1528-35 at the University of Paris where Lutheranism was under attack and John Calvin was well known, but Ignatius never mentioned either. He was more interested in the struggle taking place in the hearts of men and women than in the religious battles of his day. In fact, Ignatius mentions Luther only once in all his writings. I suspect Luther never mentioned Ignatius at all.

It was only after Ignatius’ death in 1556, ten years after Luther had died, that Jerome Nadal would rewrite history, by pitting Ignatius as David vs. Luther as Goliath. While

Ignatius' early companions, Favre and Lainez prayed for Luther as a Christian brother, by 1560 some Jesuits had succumbed to the vituperative rhetoric common to religious parties of the day, and vilified Luther. Nadal's image of Ignatius was made more vivid by Protestant interpreters like Martin Chemnitz, the first Protestant to take notice of Jesuits in 1560. This image would prevail over the one Ignatius provided of himself in his *Autobiography*, namely, a simple pilgrim wanting to help souls.. Lutheran historians saw Ignatius and the Jesuits as nothing more than anti-Protestant agents of the papacy, unschooled in the Gospel and distorters of it. So, no warm and fuzzy feelings on either side!

There were some profound differences between Luther and Ignatius. Luther, appalled by what he had seen of the Church of Pope Leo X when he visited Rome in 1510, attacked the Church head on, and eventually separated himself from it. Ignatius was all too aware of the same problems, but was not as interested in reform of the institutional Church as in the reform of himself and the individuals he would work with, one-at-a time through his *Spiritual Exercises*.

Both were passionate Christians who had undergone an intense experience, Luther by his discovery of St. Paul and justification by faith alone, and Ignatius by his discovery of a very personal relationship with Christ. Both had an experience of sin and self-loathing that would lead in each case to a peace in Christ that they wanted to share with others.

Luther in Wittenberg and Ignatius in Paris were part of the humanist reaction against the scholastic tradition of medieval education, and were especially critical of the failure to relate learning to a life of virtue and public service.

John O'Malley, the leading contemporary Jesuit historian, pays this tribute to Luther:

*He made courage in fighting for systemic change perhaps the most distinctively Western of all the virtues. He was a reformer with a stance so prophetically radical that it put his life at stake.*

As you know, Lutherans and Catholics have come a long way in their relationship since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Roman Catholic-Lutheran dialogues that have been going on for years, and recently, an agreement was reached on mutual understanding of justification by faith. The dialogue demonstrates how we can learn from one another and how Roman Catholics today can learn from Luther to help clarify what Catholicism is or should be. Cardinal Dulles was recently quoted as saying that, in the end, for both Luther and for Ignatius, God's grace is everything.

I often fantasized that if Pope John XXIII had been Pope in 1520 rather than Leo X, instead of sending a dour and condemnatory Cardinal Cajetan to meet with Luther, he would have said to him directly: "Martin, let's sit down over a beer and talk this over," – or something like that. I can also fantasize what good vibes Luther and Ignatius would have had if they had met one another. They were different in many ways, but still had much in common. This weekend, we are making up for that missed opportunity.

My pleasurable task this morning is to follow on your presentations on Learning, Engagement, Conversation, and Renewal by talking with you about Affirmation. As a title for my remarks, I borrowed Peter's words at the Transfiguration, "Lord, it is good for us to be here." I will argue that it is good to a college or university president today,

despite all of the challenges and issues you face. I would divide my comments under three headings:

1. The reality of the college or university presidency today.
2. The presidency as a vocation or calling
3. The president as a corporate personality.

### **1. The College or University presidency today**

In a 2005 survey of college presidents conducted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 94% of the presidents said that, if faced with a choice to take the position again, they would do so. Such affirmation is probably counter-intuitive to many, considering the demands made on presidents today, and all of the war stories I am sure your sharing these special days.

Over the years, there have been many lists of the impossible demands made on presidents, often with tongue in cheek. One of the most popular is that of Clark Kerr, former president of the University of California::

*The American university president is expected to be a friend of the students; a colleague of the faculty; a good fellow with the alumni; a sound administrator with the trustees; a good speaker with the public; an astute bargainer with foundations and the federal agencies;... a persuasive diplomat with donors; a champion of education, generally;...a spokesperson to the press; a scholar in his own right; a public servant at the state and national levels; a devotee of opera and football equally; a decent human being, a good spouse, and parent....*

*He or she should be firm, yet gentle, sensitive to others, insensitive to self, look to the past and the future, yet be firmly planted in the present; he or she should be both visionary and sound, affable, but reflective...a good American, but ready to criticize the status quo fearlessly....*

Today, we would add to that impossible job description: effective in fostering the institutional mission; skill in developing collegial governance; attentive to new learning methods; committed to internationalizing the campus, to service learning and to community outreach; familiarity with the strengths and weaknesses of technology; awareness of important federal relations issues; and perhaps more. Are those 94% ready to take the job again crazy?

Search committees have been described as looking for “God on a good day.” Just reading the list desired qualifications, makes us yearn for the leisurely good old days of the fifties when Whitney Griswold, president of Yale (1951-63), would have one appointment in the morning and one in the afternoon, or the 19<sup>th</sup> century when presidents like Robert E. Lee would regally conduct a capstone seminar for seniors on moral philosophy on the campus of Washington College (now Washington and Lee).

Today more and more is demanded of presidents, who are on call 24/7. As you know so well, ever greater accountability and transparency is demanded. The latest version of the Higher Education Reauthorization Bill contains 50 % more reporting responsibilities for colleges and universities. Guess who has to make sure those requirements are met? Not only are presidents asked to do more, but with some critics they are no longer trusted. It used to be that was true only of faculty, and perhaps of the student newspaper, but now suspicion and mistrust has spread to Margaret Spellings, Congress (both parties, and friend and foe alike), the media, and the general public.

I suspect there is no one in this room who would give himself or herself an A in all of the components of a president's job description today. More importantly, we all realize that we don't do all or even most of these things on our own, as some sort of institutional Messiah. We try to surround ourselves with folks who can make at least many if not most of these things happen.

Paradoxically, as the satisfaction rate of students and alumni, especially of schools like ours, continue to run high, so too does the level of mistrust and/or hostility on the part of the public, the media and the Congress. Besides being told, unfairly I think, that we are not accountable, we are accused of costing too much, not being accessible, not delivering on our promises, and, most recently, hoarding our endowments to the detriment of students.

Recently, I happened to be paging through some talks I had given in the early eighties and was surprised to find one in which I mentioned the many criticisms and even ill-repute associated with higher education at that time. I could have lifted whole paragraphs for a talk today. So, perhaps, things are not all that different. The criticisms just seem to be more intense.

I would suggest that, instead of feeling sorry for ourselves, we need to be more proactive in making our case forcefully and well. For example, Lutheran colleges have a great story to tell about what happens to students on your campuses – the quality of learning, the faith development, etc. The challenge of being more transparent and accountable should not be a threat, but rather an opportunity to share the many good things we are doing. We need to show how we are being responsive to student needs, how we are doing our best to be accessible, etc. NAICU, CIC and LECNA are great helps in all of this. We have no need to hang our heads in the face of criticism. Rather, we need to get the good news out. It is amazing how uninformed many of our critics are about just what we are doing.

As a young president, when I used to get discouraged, I would walk around the campus and talk with students. Experiencing first hand what is happening with the young men and women on our campuses is a great antidote to feeling sorry for ourselves. We can find great happiness in what our schools are doing to help others achieve their potential. The presidency is the office through which the various constituencies of an institution are encouraged to meet their responsibilities and their goals. I don't know about you, but I have found there are special *eureka* moments when we experience things coming

together, e.g., at graduations, special convocations, or even a really good faculty meeting. Of course, there are negative moments as well, but then we need to remember the good moments and find strength from them.

James McGregor Burns, in his book, *Leadership* (p 425-26), poses the challenge of the transforming leadership to which presidents aspire:

*Leaders can shape and alter and elevate the motives and values and goals of followers through the vital teaching role of leadership. This is transforming leadership. The premise of this leadership is that whatever the separate interests persons might hold, they are presently united in the pursuit of "higher" goals, the realization of which is tested by the achievement of significant change that represents the collective or pooled interest of leaders and followers.*

This chance to "shape and alter and elevate" should be enough gets us up in the morning. The opportunities to get people to work together, to cut through red tape, to help create a humane institution where people come first, the excitement of ideas that occasionally breaks through the administrivia of our lives. -- this is what makes up for the "Mickey-Mouse moments," the frustrations, and the disappointments.

## **2. The Presidency as a Vocation**

I need not tell you that one of Luther's greatest contributions to the church and to society at large, has been to expand the notion of vocation beyond the calling of clergy and religious to include every Christian, and indeed everyone. Everyone has a calling from God. Luther first explicitly formulated his idea of vocation in 1520 in his treatise *To The Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*, the same treatise in which he proposed the notion of the priesthood of all believers. 440 years later, the Second Vatican Council emphasized both the vocation and the priesthood of the laity – so you got your way – it just took a while!

Your own former president of Augsburg, Bill Frame, has emphasized that Luther's notion of vocation as a call to service was fundamental to his own experience of being president at Augsburg. He had discovered the importance of Luther's sense of vocation at Pacific Lutheran. Frame has been instrumental in developing the very successful program of the Council of Independent Colleges and Universities, *Presidential Vocation and Institutional Mission*. As I am sure many of you know, presidents participating in the program have reported that it changed the whole way they approached their role as president. The program encouraged them to ask, What is prompting us, calling us, tugging at us to participate each day in the life of our institutions? Not just what I have to do, or what I need to do to win acclaim, or further my career, but what am I being called to do. In my brief time with you, it is obvious this sense of a call, of being called is very much part of your presidencies. What a difference that makes in centering and grounding all you do and in working your way through difficulties..

Mark Schwehn in his book, *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic*

*Vocation in America*, has discussed the idea of the academic vocation in very extensively, and the Lilly Endowment, with its many grants to promote the notion of vocation on campuses, has had a profound effect on many campuses.

One of the results of the Lilly program is an excellent book by John Neafsey, a clinical psychologist and theologian at Loyola University Chicago, *A Sacred Voice is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*. Neafsey emphasizes that our calling is not once and for all, but ongoing, each and every day, guiding us through the issues and challenges we face. In this, Luther and Ignatius merge: Luther with his great sense of a personal calling, and Ignatius with his *Spiritual Exercises* meant to free one to hear that call, and then to practice ongoing discernment to guide our response.

These initiatives certainly encourage presidents like yourselves to see your work as a response to a call to serve, and they provide many resources for this sense of vocation to be developed. This sense of a calling provides a dynamic center and a grounding for a life otherwise pulled in countless directions, often at the same time.

The linkage between institutional mission and the president's vocation is critical in providing the motivation needed to pursue the very difficult job description task cited above. I have been involved in one way or another in institutional identity and mission activity for over thirty years, and I think it is fair that there is no more important variable in measuring the effectiveness of those efforts than the participation of the president, articulating, supporting and modeling that mission. One with a sense of being called, and not just being hired to do this, makes all the difference in the world -- to the president, the institution, and its many constituents.

One good example of this is Dr. Jack DeGioia, the first lay president of Georgetown University. Because of his sense of calling and his effectiveness linked to institutional identity and mission Georgetown is at least as intentionally Jesuit and Catholic as it has ever been.

George Marsden writes in *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* of the difficulties religious scholars can face with their peers who operate from the perspective of the Enlightenment, scientific humanism, and naturalism, and who therefore discount the significance of religious perspectives in the academy. The postmodern rejection of "grand narratives" and any other kind of holistic synthesis is another threat to church-related colleges that base their distinctive identity on such narratives.

Marsden's *Soul of the American University* has reminded us that, on many college and university campuses, God is often, if not predominately, a stranger to important, essential questions, an appendix, or afterthought at best. Marsden and others tell a story of the disestablishment of religion and the secularization of American higher education. Moving from post-revolutionary America with its widely shared confidence that science, common sense, morality and true religion fit nicely together, through the influences of the Enlightenment and the German university tradition, the fears and reality of sectarianism, and the challenge of positivism, universities made the transition from an explicit

Christianity to a Christianity defined by the moral ideals of citizenship dedicated to freedom, science and service, and then finally dropped as unnecessary baggage.

Marsden's history is a story of great leaders of distinguished universities: Charles Eliot of Harvard, William Rainey Harper at Chicago, Henry Sloane Coffin at Yale, James Angell, at Michigan, Woodrow Wilson at Princeton, and Daniel Coit Gilman at Johns Hopkins., They struggled to develop broadly Christian institutions, but with even higher commitments to scientific and professional ideals and to the demands of a unified public life. The result was the elimination of almost all religious perspectives from main-line academia.

James Burtchaell applies this history to contemporary church-related schools and paints a very pessimistic picture, a "Dying of the Light." While Burtchaell's dour view is a good antidote to naïve optimism that current efforts will succeed in keeping our church-related identities alive. I think he fails to appreciate important differences with the past, and undervalues important new commitments and strategies.

Several things are currently working in favor of the church-related institution. The exaggerated Enlightenment confidence in a one-size-fits-all approach to knowledge is proving inadequate even in science, and the extremes of the postmodern critique are being questioned. Recent dialogue between science and theology has helped to stem the creeping infallibility on both sides and helped us understand how the two can complement one another, rather than be opposed to one another. We have discovered there is life beyond the Enlightenment.

But not everyone has caught up to these advances, and the bias against church-relatedness is by no means a thing of the past. Religious scholars are still challenged to be credible as scholars and church-related colleges and universities are still challenged to be authentic colleges and universities. This can bring out the best in both. Being religious was never and certainly is not now an excuse to be less than the best one can be.

I have been impressed with what various denominations are doing, e.g.,

- More and more sophisticated orientation and educational programs for students, faculty and staff, and most recently trustees. (We discussed these after Ann Svenungren's talk on Saturday.)
- "Hiring for mission" programs that seek faculty and staff who combine professional excellence with an interest and ability to contribute to institutional mission. (Loren Anderson pointed out that there seems to be new interest among faculty hires for church-related schools today.)
- A host of other ways of making the identity come alive as an energizing and in no way suffocating force within the institution, including seminars, ongoing conversations, heritage weeks, trips in the steps of founders, awards for specially effective exemplars of the mission, etc.

There will probably continue to be some hesitation or reluctance to get involved in these

efforts, but I see many instances of faculty and administrators engaged enthusiastically in them. The Lilly Endowment Fellows Program for young scholars at church-related schools is a highly successful ecumenical program designed to promote such engagement. If we can multiply these folks fast enough, our church-relatedness is will be in good hands. On Saturday, Loren Anderson noted his optimism about the increased interest of young faculty.

These efforts to foster church-relatedness, when pursued with creativity and sensitivity to the academic culture, present not a danger for the college or university, but an opportunity for a distinctive excellence that can serve as a leaven for all of higher education and be something of which any president can be proud.

Recently, the former dean of Harvard College, Harry R. Lewis, published *Excellence Without a Soul*, making the case that Harvard, for all its great achievements, lacks what is found on your campuses, a soul, that is animated in no small part by you. Derek Bok, former president of Harvard, in his most recent book, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, and in particular in the chapter, “Purposes” describes schools without a sense of clear purpose, identity or mission. While we all recognize we can do better, our schools do have that sense of purpose and mission that Bok finds missing in too many colleges and universities.

The challenge of the church-related college or university is to provide an alternative to the thinking that makes religion a threat to the fully human, but instead energizes and gives meaning to what we do, that gives witness to a God who grounds our relationships with one another, a God of the marvelous created world around and within us, a God comfortable with our freedom and the freedom of the created universe, a God who wants and needs our help in liberating the poor, the oppressed and the weak in our midst. Interestingly, the faculty and students who link their education with lives of service often find such a God in that service.

Without being judgmental or pretentious, we need to look within ourselves to see how we could be more effective in demonstrating the special contributions of the church-related and engaged college or university, so that our colleagues could see more of what we see. We certainly have much room for improvement in sharing the good news of what is happening on our campuses. I congratulate LECNA, under Ralph Wagoner’s leadership, and with your collaboration, for sharing your good news so well.

### **3. The President as a Corporate Personality**

All of my remarks are meant to be encouraging for the good and important work you are doing, and especially for the way in which you are doing it. So my intention in this third point is not to lay another burden on you, but simply to describe what happens when you do your job well within the context of vocation. You become a “corporate personality,” reflecting the best of what the institution stands for.

Students, faculty , administrators, alumni – everyone – is looking for a concrete

embodiment of the institution's values. More specifically today, students are looking for the living witness of someone who can help put the many disparate pieces of their lives together, who can be a living synthesis of the many parts that our disjointed world too often keeps apart.

We see some of this in the fascinating reaction to Barack Obama. Regardless of your political preferences, we have to admit that he has caught the imagination of many looking for a fresh start and a bringing together of pieces that have too long been apart.

Another example for me was at this year's Ignatian Family Teach-in for Justice which we we sponsor each year. I had asked Bishop Tom Gumbleton and a Congressman Jim McGovern to speak, two men passionately and credibly committed to justice. Each gave an inspiring talk, and afterwards, student after student came to me to say "Finally, I have seen a bishop and a congressman I can believe in." They embodied the best of what students were looking for.

The president has the opportunity to have the same effect on your campuses. That is another reason your calling is so special, and you are so special. You may not hear this at the time, but later you will. I continue to be amazed when a student of thirty or forty years ago reminds me of something I said or did that long ago.

That is not why we pursue the vocation of president, but it does offer evidence of the importance of what a president provides to an institution. We are not encouraging messianic aspirations, because we all know we fall short of the ideal, but a lot is accomplished even short of the ideal..

The notion of the "corporate personality" can be extended to include the credibility of the whole institution. Good examples of this were Loren Anderson's and Rick Torgerson's presentations on sustainability. The enthusiastic support of the president, the leadership of faculty, and the initiative of students together created a lived, corporate witness to the mission of the college..

In conclusion, I hope you will agree that despite the often monumental task facing the contemporary college or university, presidents with a sense of vocation linked with the institutional mission can find great personal fulfillment at the same time they represent the institutional ideals in a very tangible way.

Some meetings of presidents today can resemble a convention of Rodney Dangerfields. Higher education itself can adopt that persona as we face challenges and criticisms from all sides. Presidents with the faith that they have been called to lead and to serve, and with the faith that God can accomplish through them what they cannot do on their own, have indeed found a great antidote to the temptation to feel sorry for themselves. They can indeed say with St. Peter at the Transfiguration, "Lord it good for us to be here." Luther, and I dare say, Ignatius, would be proud of you. May God continue to bless you!

