"Excellence Tempered by Gentleness"

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I am very happy to have the opportunity to be with all of you who represent the colleges in the C/SSJ Consortium. I think this is a very important collaboration and one which has the capacity to serve the colleges and the congregations by contributing to the vibrancy of the mission on our campuses.

In the context of the mission of the Sisters of Saint Joseph and their related ministries, the language about excellence and gentleness comes to us through the Consensus Statement of the Central Ideas of Jean Pierre Medaille as drawn from the Primitive Documents of the Sisters of Saint Joseph. This statement contains, in brief, an expression of the charism, mission, and spirit of the religious communities whose heritage and/or sponsorship influences the colleges we represent.

Now, I've waded into the jargon of the day and, while some of you are still with me, I am fairly sure that some of you may have begun to beat a hasty retreat somewhere between "consensus statement" and "sponsorship."

Confronted with the jargon of a particular organization or profession, people often report a desire to get out of the situation as quickly as possible. Often the message is rejected because of the unusual language.

You'll be happy to know this is in fact a very natural, almost primitive human response. In an essay called "Riddles and Charms,"Northrup Frye includes jargon in the kinds of language puzzles and riddles that are heavily charged and ambiguous in expression. The power of a charm comes, for the most part, from the fact that the speaker understands the meaning while the listener lacks the key to interpretation. The result is that the speaker has a certain power over the listener who in turn feels at a disadvantage, almost at the mercy of the charmer.

In the face of this distress, Frye says, there are two options open to the listener. He/she can either raise the defenses necessary for protection against the charm - refusal to believe, escape, rejection of the charmer – or acknowledge that there may be good in the charm and yield to it.

So with jargon. We can refuse it as harmful, ingenious, or deceptive. On the other hand, if we sense there might be something in the new vocabulary that is meaning-laden, we can yield ourselves to the language and flow with it until we acquire the key to its interpretation. If the new language is indeed a "good charm," its power will work for our benefit, and our understanding of ourselves and our world will be greater.

I do happen to believe that the language and "jargon," related to the charism and mission of the Sisters of Saint Joseph is indeed a "good charm," and worth the effort to understand and absorb, so I am not going to abandon my role as charmer, but I do *not* want you disempowered – just the opposite is in fact my aim, so I will try to provide the keys to interpretation that will help you to draw strength, grace, and power from the words.

I'll return then to the point that, within the C/SSJ tradition, the language about excellence and gentleness is found in the Consensus Statement. (See handout). This statement is a summary of the central ideas of the founder of the Sisters of Saint Joseph, Jean Pierre Medaille as they were culled by a research team who studied the original and foundational documents of the first Sisters of Saint Joseph in seventeenth century France

The research project was undertaken by the Federation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph in response to the Vatican II

call to religious to renew themselves by reflecting on the gospel, the signs of the times, and the founding purposes of their congregations

For the Sisters of Saint Joseph this turned out to be an especially important challenge since, over the centuries, and especially with the rewriting of our Constitutions (Holy Rules) in various times and cultures and under various influences, we had in fact lost access to central expressions of the founding purpose and spirit of the congregation.

Take our Boston congregation, for example. If you had asked me when I entered to describe the purpose or mission of the congregation, I probably would have spoken about the ministry of education or said we were a "teaching order," as opposed to a "nursing order," or a "missionary order." This was the effect of many things, but two causes might be sited. First, we were invited to Boston for the purpose of staffing Catholic schools after the mandate of the mid-eighteenth century Baltimore Councils that the Bishops should provide opportunities for Catholic education in their dioceses. We responded to that need with energy and vigor and education continues to be an extremely important ministry for us.

The second cause was a rewriting of the Holy Rule following the 1917 revision of Canon Law. There was at this time a curious homogenization of the documents of religious congregations, which showed a loss of the language describing the unique charisms and founding spirits and a strong description of the life in terms of Church ministries and canonical obligations which were common to institutes of religious life.

The study of the original documents and of the history and tradition of the Sisters of Saint Joseph recalled us then to our original founding spirit and a central truth that the Sisters of Saint Joseph were not founded for any particular ministry, but rather, with the idea of helping to fulfill the prayer of Jesus "that all may be one."

First of all, then, the sisters were to move always more and more deeply into God, loving God so profoundly that their only desire would be to be one with God, to see the world through God's eyes, and desire what God desires.

They were to communicate God's desire that we all be one, and **do the work** of unity by being a sign of God's great love to the people they called their "dear neighbors."

In imitation of Christ, they were to live among their neighbors and minister to them "without distinction," in fact, with special attention to the most poor and abject and marginalized .

And the underlying purpose of all their ministry was to help to unite neighbor with neighbor and neighbor with God..

So the first part of the consensus statement reads: *Stimulated by the Holy Spirit of Love and receptive to its inspirations, the Sister of Saint Joseph moves always towards profound love of God and love of neighbor without distinction, from who she does not separate herself, and for whom, in the following of Christ, she works in order to achieve unity both of neighbor with neighbor and neighbor with God, directly in this apostolate* (i.e., of unity) *and indirectly through works of charity.*

This captures the essence of what we now refer to as the charism and mission of the Sisters of Saint Joseph. Since *charism* is also a major piece of jargon and at the same time an immensely meaningful concept, let's unpack that. The term comes from the Greek and refers to a gift given by the Holy Spirit to the Church for the sake of the people of God. Individuals and groups may receive charisms. Religious life itself is referred to as a charism in the Church since it stands as a sign to the people of God that God's reign is among us and witnesses to the primacy of God in

our lives. Each religious order's particular character and spirit derives from its charism.

The charism of the Sisters of Saint Joseph is unity and reconciliation, a gift for helping to unite people with one another and with God, and (we say now in the light of new cosmological understandings) with the whole of creation. Another way of describing the charism is to say that we witness to God's active and inclusive love. It is a love that gathers and holds, a love that seeks to bridge differences, and to close the gaps.

The mission derives directly from the charism: we are about the work of unity and reconciliation, so that all may be one. We witness to the fact that God's love excludes no one and that we are all called to that inclusive love. The work of unity describes the particular part of the mission of Jesus which is our focus.
When we say that the ministries, and here, the colleges, founded and/or sponsored by the Sisters of Saint Joseph participate in the mission and help to make available to people the charism of the Congregation, this is what we're talking about, that permeating the educational mission of the college is a deep and underlying understanding that we all come from God, that we are each and all beloved, and that we are moving together toward unity in God. It's our mission to help bring about this unity, to witness to it, to help others experience it, and to help create the systems and world order that reflect it.

The rest of the consensus statement describes the manner in which we live out the charism and the mission it inspires. First, we strive for *humility*, and the scripture cues us to the idea that this is not about unworthiness or subjection, but rather about emptying ourselves to be filled by God, just as Jesus emptied himself to share our humanity. Second, we strive for *sincere charity*, taking Joseph as our model and patron. Third, and here we are finally, we strive to live the charism and mission *in an Ignatian-Salesian climate: that is, with an orientation toward excellence, tempered by gentleness, peace, and joy.*

So what does this mean for us and what does it tell us about life on a campus of the C/SSJ college.

Jean Pierre Medaille was a Jesuit and, therefore, steeped in the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus. He was a contemporary of Francis de Sales, founder with Jane de Chantal of the Visitation Sisters and inspiration for all the congregations in the Salesian tradition.

The spirituality and way of life Medaille taught the first sisters was influenced by both Ignatius and Francis de Sales. This influence can be seen in the emphasis on love, in the basic thrust toward unity, and in the strong incarnational theology, all of which were common to both Francis and Ignatius. Both were also founders of apostolic communities, so they shared the conviction of Medaille and the first sisters that our own paths to holiness and service to the "dear neighbor" are one and the same.

But certain characteristics emphasized by the two saints become pivotal in the C/SSJ way of life.

From St. Ignatius comes the emphasis on excellence. He founded the Jesuits "for the defense and propagation of the faith and for the rendering of any service in the Church that might be for the glory of God and the common good. He was motivated by a desire for "an ever more inward knowledge"of Christ, "that we may the better love and follow him."

This personal love "engendered in Ignatius a divine discontent which kept urging him to the *magis* – the ever more and more giving – the ever greater glory of God.."

He writes: *Those who wish to give greater proof of their love, and to distinguish themselves in whatever concerns the service of the Eternal King and Lord of all, will not only offer themselves entirely for the work ... but make offerings of greater value and more importance.*

For Ignatius, there is always the *magis*, the more, the better, the greater. He repeats the idea, according to C.F. Kelly, 376 times in the Jesuit Constitutions.

At their 1995 General Congregation meeting, the Jesuits reaffirmed this central theme.

"The *magis*," they said, "is not simply one among others in a list of Jesuit characteristics. It permeates them all. The entire life of Ignatius was a pilgrim search for the *magis*, the ever greater glory of God, the ever fuller service of the neighbor, the more universal good, the more effective apostolic means. 'Mediocrity has no place in Ignatius' world view.'

"Jesuits are never content with the status quo, the known, the tried, the already existing. We are constantly driven to discover, redefine, and reach out for the magis. For us, frontiers and boundaries are not obstacles or ends, but new challenges to be faced, new opportunities to be welcomed. Indeed, ours is a holy boldness, 'a certain apostolic aggressivity," typical of our way of proceeding."

At the University of Scranton, a Task Force on Mission reflected on excellence in a Jesuit university:

They affirm that the vision and values of Ignatian spirituality are "world-affirming," resolutely maintaining the inestimable worth of human beings "created in the image and likeness of God" and the inherent goodness of the created world that is "charged with the grandeur of God. The world and human society are worthy of study and probing; they are worthy subjects of both awe and critique.

Articulating a distinctively *Ignatian* educational excellence, the Task Force wrote in its report:
"The primary goal of Ignatian education, which distinguishes it among a variety of other approaches, is explicit attention to the transformation of the whole person. The end result toward which Ignatian education strives is not simply the inculcation of knowledge or skills, valuable as these are. The Ignatian educator also envisions his or her ideal graduate as learned, virtuous, and spiritually aware. The goal is integration of the life of the mind with habits of the heart and right living.

"We aim to form leaders in service, in imitation of Christ Jesus, men and women of competence, conscience, and compassionate commitment." "The pursuit of academic excellence is appropriate in a Jesuit school, but only within the larger context of human excellence."

As Medaille and the Sisters of Saint Joseph absorbed the *magis*, it became *le plus*, the more. The first Constitution urges to sisters to practice what they know will be "most pleasing" to God, to gather around them colleagues "who of all those dedicated to God in the world, are most desirous of holiness, to aim toward perfection," to bring "great exactness, to whatever they do, they are to "conceive great plans for the honor and glory of Christ and for the salvation of souls as far as is possible for mere women." (Cf. DeMaupas' Faux Pas). They are urged to do everything with fervor, zeal, purity, and completeness, greatness of desire, and totality of gift. They are to live entirely for God and depend completely on the direction of God's grace.

This is what is meant by excellence: that the experience of being loved and the desire to respond in love, always move us to "the more."

Francis de Sales had a fondness for what he called the little virtues. He found motivation in the words Matthew attributes to Jesus "Come to me, for I am gentle and humble of heart (*Matt. 11:28-30*) and he exhibited a preference for the hidden and the unnoticed. Francis taught that Jesus lives hidden in the heart and that love expresses itself not only in great acts of heroism or sacrifice, but also, and perhaps even primarily, in little things.

The privileged Salesian virtues are the little virtues: humility, patience, simpleness, and gentleness .

Francis' theological anthropology is profoundly optimistic – he sets great store on human capacity and believes in the innate goodness of humankind. Like that of Ignatius, his spirituality is essentially world-affirming. In a departure from the ways of his confreres in the seventeenth century religious schools, he shows a deep understanding and love for the human condition. His spiritual instructions always urge a life of virtue and striving for perfection, but he seems always to have a love for the humanness in it all.

Francis advocates the development of a fundamental tranquility. He teaches that hospitality to oneself and to others is the pathway to change and growth. He believes that union with God results in a deep inner peace which is manifested outwardly by an unfailing gentleness toward others as well as by a spirit of joyful optimism even in the midst of difficulty and challenge.

While advocating a strict pursuit of the good, and suggesting very disciplined practices for the life of virtue, Francis says, when something goes awry, "it is always dangerous to take strong remedies. If you can learn to redirect your own heart with gentle remonstrances, "having more compassion for it than anger against it," it follows that your attitude toward your neighbor will be lifted to an entirely different plane. With self knowledge and understanding comes wisdom and with wisdom comes the conviction that we should not pass judgment on each other. "What are we that we should judge our brethren, Francis asks. "But for God's grace, I should have done worse."

"Be patient with everyone", he told one of his followers, "but above all with yourself. I mean do not be disheartened by your imperfections, but always rise up with fresh courage. I am glad that you make a fresh beginning daily; there is no better means of attaining to the spiritual life than by continually beginning again, and never thinking that we have done enough. How are we to be patient with our neighbors' faults if we are impatient with our own? How can we reprove others in a spirit of meekness if we correct ourselves sharply, bitterly, and spitefully? .... What is God's mercy if not an infinite abyss into which one's stupid mistakes are to be cast and then forgotten by a simple gaze at (God's) grandeur?"

So the gentleness, the "douceur" advocated by Francis is also a spirit of compassion, relying on an ability to identify with the other and to refrain from judgments that fracture relationships, create barriers to communication, or demonstrate lack of reverence for the other.

Current religious orders in the Salesian tradition call themselves to this compassion, using these words:

"Compassionate love exemplifies our solidarity with others and especially makes us realize our common human vulnerability, our mutual interdependence and our need to be with those who are suffering. It makes us see the interconnectedness of our lives.

"The love of compassion gives us the ability to identify with the person we love and makes us appreciate what struggles, difficulties, suffering and hardships others are enduring or can experience. This is why compassionate people are slow to judge and condemn others because they can always make allowances for the pressures and the pain that others might be experiencing.

"Our Constitutions remind us that we are ... to enjoy being with the people we serve.... Because we are to serve all people, we are to make a serious effort "to meet them, to listen to them, to understand them, in their living conditions," and to help them. Ministerial initiative is envisioned here. It is not envisioned by our spirit that we will wait in some regal isolation for people to reach out to us, to break through our resistance, or to beg us to serve them, No, we are to go to them eagerly and we are to find joy in being among them, just as Jesus did, just as Francis did. In that way, we are to be ready to meet, listen, understand, and help them."

As Medaille and the Sisters of Saint Joseph absorbed the concept of *douceur*, it became a call for inner peace and outward manifestations of kindness and understanding. The Constitution urges the sisters to gentleness, humility, and courage They are to exhibit a gentleness and mildness of manner that will witness to their unity with God. They are to go about their daily work in a gentle and unhurried fashion and remember that God will lead them gently to the perfection they desire.

We hear hints about what gentleness looks like in action when the novice mistress is advised to "be gentle and affable to all her novices, and by this gentleness and affability try to gain their hearts so that she may more easily lead them to the virtues characteristic of the community." "Should a novice be tempted or worried, she shall come to her aid gently, listening lovingly and quietly to the problem."

The deeper aspects of gentleness, the hospitality to humanness and to vulnerability are seen in the call to love the dear neighbor *without distinction* and these concepts help us to understand the phrase from the consensus statement, "from whom she does not separate herself." The spirit of gentleness reminds us who and what we are, and it needs to be invoked when arrogance or pride or self-importance rise in us.

What have we learned about excellence and gentleness or compassion? We've learned first that, in the C/SSJ tradition, they are at the service of the charism. They describe the spirit in which we do the work of unity and reconciliation. The Consensus Statement says that we go about the mission *with an orientation toward excellence, tempered by gentleness, peace, and joy.*

Each is a virtue to be striven for in its own right as well as a way of going about things. When we look at excellence as a goal, we know that people seek excellence for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is to profit the bottom line, but for us the search for excellence in higher education has to be much more like that we heard the Jesuits describe. It is a search for human excellence, a desire that all members of the college community, students, faculty, staff, administration, are somehow more able to achieve their human potential and know themselves as valued and loved members of a community because of their connection with the college. It challenges us to see that the students we serve are better able to understand God's creation and the human society they live in, that they can probe their world, wonder at it, critique it, and offer it leadership; that they can enter into the religious and ethical dialogue of our time.

Excellence also demands of us that we are always striving for the more, the better way to do things, the best practices and policies, the best way to build up the community, the best way to teach the students, to strengthen their faith, to help them develop in their fullness. In whatever sphere we hold responsibility we want to give it our best. Why? Because we are continuing the mission of Jesus, helping to bring the whole of creation together into God. And that requires our all.

Gentleness as a virtue is about our growing ability to be one with, to recognize the littleness of ourselves as well as our greatness, to be truly honest about who we are and to be able to stand then with other people. It leads to a spirit of compassion and understanding that comes from knowing the greatness of God and our own place as God's beloved. It calls us to develop a spirit of tranquility out of which we can meet people, to act out of the peace in our hearts which comes from unity with God, to slow down, be less reactive in our responses.

So, when we speak of *excellence tempered by gentleness, peace and joy*, we are speaking of a call to strive always for the more with a tranquility of spirit that invites others into communion and holds them.

During this conference, you will be invited to consider what all of this might mean in the practical arena. I'd like to suggest a few things.

Having an orientation toward excellence tempered by gentleness means that we need to approach things with the joyful optimism characteristic of Francis' disciples. We frequently have to deal with difficult events and choices. There are obstacles to the things we want to achieve. Some dilemmas pose threats to our desires for excellence and perfection. In some cases excellence and compassion seem to be pulling at one another. If we have a spirit of gentle optimism, we approach problems believing that we can find a way through, that God's grace will assist us, that somehow the connecting of the human spirits involved in the situation will help us to find a way. Excellence and compassion are not achieved at the expense of each other.

Operating in this spirit doesn't always make everything all right. Our goal is to do what we can to communicate human understanding while still holding to things that need to be held, confronting things that are not right, correcting, challenging, doing what needs to be done. Sometimes justice and integrity call us difficult choices and responses. One of the implications of being bearers of a charism for unity and reconciliation is that you have to live with the pain of disharmony and brokenness. Too easy reconciliation is the shadow side of the charism and usually marks a backing away from the goal.

Tempering excellence with gentleness may also require that we keep our eyes on the ultimate purpose and check into our own motivations. The true excellence we seek in our colleges has to do with the way we foster fullness of humanity and develop in the members of the college community a capacity for communion with God and neighbor. Our judgments about the balance of holding to standards and yielding in the face of human circumstances and limitations need to be made in light of the central goals. Knowing ourselves well is important here. Our own preferences for order, neatness, and the primacy of rules may get in the way. Our need to be right, or to be needed, or to fix it may be very powerful. Our fears, our resistance to manipulation, and our prejudices may influence us. All of this, Francis would say might be thrown into the abyss of God's mercy, but it will surely help if we are aware of our own motives.

As we move from my reflections to your conversation about what all this really means on the campus, I'd like to leave you with a few more words of advice from Francis de Sales: If we want to develop these virtues, we need to practice the spirituality of the little by little. "Accustom yourself to walk quietly and speak a little more gently. Let all you do be done with composure and tranquility, and in three or four years you will find you have quite regulated your hasty impetuosity. Speak and act thus more particularly at times when there is nothing to excite you, as, for example, when going to bed, getting up, sitting down, eating; in short, never dispense yourself from it. I know very well your natural activity will always be breaking out in you and you will make a thousand slips a day; but if your will is not in them, if there is no deliberation, and provided that upon perceiving these moments you try to calm them, I have no anxiety about you."

More than that, I have immense hope in you. And I am grateful to you for the partnership in mission that we share. May all that we are and do bring us and all those we love closer to God and to one another.

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