

Jesuit School of Theology
Commencement Address- "Change and Thrive"
By John E. Kerrigan, Jr.
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Standing in this Chapel this morning, I am mindful of many things, not least of which is my wife Elizabeth's pointed suggestion about this address. "John," she said, "take to heart the advice Laura Bush gives to the President before he gives a speech, "Honey, don't try to be charming, don't try to be witty, don't try to sound smart. Just be yourself."

I must say that I am honored to be numbered among the members of this graduating class and to have an opportunity to say a few words about change and the important role that it has played in the recent history of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley.

"Change or die." That's the sobering advice that the Dean of the Johns Hopkins Medical School gives to his post-coronary bypass patients. Change or die. "Eat healthier," he tells them, "exercise, stop smoking, limit your drinking and reduce stress if you want a longer, healthier life. Considering the alternative, do they really have much of a choice?"

Now, imagine for a moment that your family doctor--someone whom you trust and consider to be well informed--tells you after bypass surgery that you'd better make changes in how you think and act or "You gonna die!" How would you respond? My hunch is that most of us would quickly say, "Yes, of course, just tell me what I have to do!" Think again. Studies carried out with heart patients following bypass surgery indicate that only one in ten makes the necessary changes. That's right, one changes, nine do not.

Why tell a story about the Dean of the Johns Hopkins Medical School during this commencement at the Jesuit School of Theology? To the best of my knowledge, no one here has had recent bypass surgery. And I'm certain that those of you graduating today lead impeccably healthy, low stress, and studious lives. Right?

I tell this story about the challenge of change to make this point: the innovation that has marked the Jesuit school's pilgrimage the past 15 years has been as unsettling, taxing, and disorienting as creative change is anywhere else. Yet it has resulted in this school doing the finest and most exciting work in theological education and ministry that it has done in its nearly 75 year history. Perhaps that's because the changes initiated came

in response to these overriding questions: “How are we to best serve the Church today?”

and “How do we live into the Church of the future?”

Change is always unsettling, even planned change. But somehow we persist in believing that if change is necessary and the reasons for it explained well, all will go smoothly. So why be surprised if the change that has marked the recent history of the Jesuit School is a story about the price we had to pay to bring to completion the hard work of transformation. And embracing the changes we’ve made is an indication of our willingness to be transformed, one might even say converted. .

I’ve been privileged this past decade and a half to join some very exceptional people here as we made a pilgrimage together. The changes that have come about because of that journey trace their roots back to that 16th century soldier, Ignatius of Loyola. From what I have heard, he was a rough and ready type; a man who was wounded, suffered, and had a change of heart. And how did that come to pass? Ignatius had visions that were life transforming, visions that have ultimately made a great difference in the lives of so many other people. I know they have in my life, and I would imagine in the lives of all of us here today.

But the visions of Ignatius have gone far beyond the individual, they have made a difference also in the life of this school. In what areas? First of all, partnership. Second, the study of theology and the practice of ministry in the context of peoples' cultures. Third, and most important, a willingness on our part to arrive at decisions through the practice of discernment.

To begin with, I want to say a word about the nature of these changes and follow up with another word about how these changes were able to take place. I'll bring these remarks to conclusion with an appeal for your continued leadership in the life of our school.

The first change has been the moves we have made toward national and global partnership. Cooperative ventures have always been part of the fabric of JSTB, from the daily collaboration between Jesuits and lay people, women and men, teachers and students. And there are our partnerships with the rich faith traditions of the nine schools of the Graduate Theological Union, and by extension, the theological academy here in the United States.

And these past 15 years, we have multiplied our outreach to the dioceses of the Bay Area. The work of students' in the West Oakland Deanery is but one illustration. Our faculty has brought Theology to the City, through lectures to hundreds of lay people in NY, Chicago, Los Angeles and 10 other American locales.

And you have done so much more! The seeds of partnership sown with JSTB's initiatives with the Church of the Pacific Rim are taking root, at the Ibero Americana in Mexico, in Santa Dharma in Indonesia and at the Ateneo de Manila. Yes, the faculty and students of JSTB are at the frontiers of the great social, economic, demographic and political changes of our day. At these frontiers, you bear witness to the "harmony between faith and reason, between evangelical spirit and a thirst for justice."

The second change I want to mention today is the "the culturally contextualized study of theology and ministry." Yes, that's a phrase that does not come trippingly to the tongue, but the study of theology and the practice of ministry in the context of cultures shaping the faith lives of people today is one of the more important ways the Jesuit School is leading the Church into the future.

Recall the odds I gave you earlier about heart patients after surgery: nine to one against change. If the study of theology and ministry is not “local, particular and diverse,” as Professor Gina Hens-Piazza puts it, then that theology is mere words. It doesn’t move people. It doesn’t change them. The best of words are words at best, until those words are put to the real life tests of peoples’ lives, cultures, and struggles. True change, metanoia – even, occurs when the rigorous, systematic study of theology is immersed in local cultures, be they in Beijing, Nairobi, El Salvador, or St Patrick’s parish in West Oakland.

The third, and I believe most important change, or evolution, has been the practice of collective discernment when seeking a direction for the future of the school. All the major change efforts of this recent era, from partnering, to implementing a “contextualized” curriculum, to the successful implementation of our Strategic Plans have been accompanied by the practice of discernment, the hearing and heeding of the spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit. Many of you graduating today participated, along with our faculty, in the month-long discernment over JSTB’s independence or affiliation with a local Jesuit University, a process led by Professor Bruce Lescher in 2006. Through

opening ourselves to being transformed by God's Spirit and gracious desires for us, that discernment led to a decision that all, regardless of their opinions, believed had integrity.

The words of the late Father Pedro Arrupe guided us: "For discernment, when all is said and done, is nothing else but being guided by the Spirit: seeing the world, and what we must do and be in the world, no longer with our own eyes, but with the eyes of the Spirit. It is divesting ourselves of what St. Paul calls the "old person" in order to put on the new person: the person in Christ Jesus."

Earlier I mentioned that the roots of these three changes trace back to Ignatius himself and to his charism alive in the work of the Society of Jesus. Both the Society of Jesus and the Jesuit School of Theology have had the foresight and courage to reorient themselves and seek out the frontiers of theology and ministry. Are we on the right track?

For a proof statement, listen to the words of one authority on such matters. In a recent meeting between Pope Benedict XVI and the newly elected Superior General, Father Adolfo Nicolas, the Holy Father exclaimed, "Where would the Church be without the Society of Jesus?" And that was not a misprint. "Where would the Church be without the Society of Jesus?" Having witnessed all you have done to serve the Church

these 15 years, and for so much longer, I would rephrase the Holy Father's question as, "Where would the Church be without the faculty and students of the Jesuit School of Theology, and especially you, our graduates, whom we honor today?"

Well, I've described the "what" of change- partnership, context, and discernment.

How has the hard work of change come about? How have the 9 to 1 or higher odds against change been overcome? Permit me to borrow an image from researcher Jim Collins to tell my "Parable of the Fly Wheel." A flywheel is the modern day equivalent of a spindle or a potter's wheel. Picture mounted horizontally on an axle a huge iron disc, perhaps thirty feet in diameter, two feet thick, and weighing almost five thousand pounds. And now imagine that your job is to get the flywheel rotating on this axle as fast and as long as possible.

"Pushing with great effort, you get the flywheel to turn forward, moving almost imperceptibly at first. You keep pushing, and after hours of persistent effort, you get the flywheel to complete one entire revolution.

You keep pushing, and the flywheel begins to move a bit faster; and with continued great effort, you move it into a second rotation. Then three turns, five, seven.

Eventually it builds momentum, moving faster with each revolution, and then, at some point, breakthrough!” The forces of physics work in your favor, hurling the flywheel forward, turn after turn. Whoosh! It’s own heavy weight working for you. Each turn of the flywheel builds upon work done earlier, compounding the investment of effort.

“Now suppose someone comes along and asks, “What was the one big push that changed this thing from being immobile to going so fast?”

You wouldn’t be able to answer; it’s just a nonsensical question. Was it the first push? The second? The hundredth? No, it was all of them added together in an overall accumulation of effort applied in a constant direction. Some thrusts may have been harder than others, but any single heave-ho, no matter how large, reflects a small fraction of the entire cumulative effort upon the flywheel.”

My “Parable of the Flywheel” captures the overall feel of what it has been like for me to be here these past fifteen years, desiring and admiring this great period of transformation. The odds against change have been overcome by the tremendous efforts of so many leaders here at JSTB, and your work has been lifted up by the grace of God.

We have a marvelous President in Father Joe Daoust, who, along with the Executive Team, has helped name and address the educational, fiscal, and strategic challenges facing the school over the past ten years. They have moved the flywheel forward. In partnership with our own world-class faculty and students, the curriculum has been re-imagined, re-formed and implemented. And so the flywheel built momentum. And when students hone their scholarship and their passion for ministry by taking them to classrooms, seminaries, dioceses, parishes, villages, prisons, and refugee camps . . . Well, now that flywheel revolves at a thousand turns per minute.

And the centripetal force that sustains the momentum of the fly wheel? Here at the Jesuit School of Theology, that force is your energy combined with the Spirit of Truth, together guiding hearts and minds in the change process.

As you well know, this “change” business has not been easy. The words I used earlier were “unsettling” and “taxing.” For example, in the process of our discernment over affiliation with a university, there was not absolute consensus. There were concerns, legitimate concerns, about a loss of focus, about the risk of drift from our fine work in the Graduate Theological Union. These differing views are signs of a healthy institution and

of a vibrant discernment process. It's a testament to leadership at every level at the Jesuit School that, once a decision is made, people get behind it and support it, even in the face of uncertainty.

And my invitation to you, our graduates, my fellow learners, is to remain in relationship with this school. Link the effectiveness of your ministry to the resources here at the Jesuit School, be they scholarly, networking and career opportunities or through your prayerful or financial support. Employ the lessons from here, and change when it is good for you and good for others. Be the one in ten who can “change and thrive.”

Finally, my hope for your divine vocation is to go on practicing this discipline of discernment. May your discernment lead you to a state of quiet, stillness, tranquility, into what the ancient monks of the Egyptian desert called *hesychia*, because in that quiet is where deepening change and transformation take root and begin to blossom. And from that place, in and of the Spirit, you and we will continue to build up the body of Christ in our Church and in our world.

