

On Apostolic Priorities

Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco

Following are excerpts from Father Privett's letter on apostolic priorities to the California Provincial Fr. Thomas H. Smolich, S.J.

August 8, 2001

Dear Tom,

I am finally in a position to give you at least a provisional sense of where I think the University stands with regard to the Province's apostolic priorities. The University is not only "in sync" with Province goals but actively pursuing them, albeit with a different rationale for doing so.

The University is well on the way to establishing a "Center for Politics, Service and Social Justice." The focus and purpose of the Center is a coherent curriculum and faculty directed research rooted in direct experiences with the poor and marginalized. The hoped-for result of this effort is a distinctively Jesuit approach to public policy and service — one that represents the interests and perspective of the poor and that measures the success of such efforts by their impact on those same populations. This is an attempt of the University, as a university, to make an option for and be in solidarity with the poor. That the Center is more than a dream is evidenced by the \$2.2 million that we have already raised to support the Center. USF's Center for Law and Global Justice [www.usfca.edu/law/globaljustice] was launched in 1999 by the Law School to focus on legal education, judicial training, free and fair elections, and the protection of human rights around the world. The Center already has programs in Cambodia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and El Salvador, and students are working on death penalty appeals in Mississippi.

We are also launching a summer immersion program in Africa in 2002 – our first foray into that continent. This program is in direct response to an explicit exhortation from Fr. General that our universities focus some attention on Africa. For the same reason, the dean of Arts and Sciences and a faculty member are presently working with Cardinal Abre of the Ivory Coast who hopes to establish a Catholic University there. We will be prepared to send faculty and staff, if feasible and as needed. As Fr. General suggested, we hope to help Africa help itself in the crucial area of higher education.

USF continues to support experiential learning across the curriculum, including summer immersion courses in Manila, El Salvador, Cambodia, and the tribal lands of South Africa, as well as promote faculty research on pressing global issues. An interesting note: slightly more than 40% of the research by our faculty addresses real problems and issues, versus a country-wide average of 26%. Just one example, Professor Lois Lorentzen is directing an \$800,000 Pew research effort that aims at better understanding the role that churches play in the lives of recently arrived immigrants from Asia and Latin America.

Fostering Partnership for Mission

USF has the usual programs and initiatives aimed at sharing our Jesuit story with colleagues and listening, in turn, to their stories. 2001 marked the first year of operation for the Jesuit Foundation, which is a relatively small endowment that supports, on a competitive basis, University initiatives directed toward deepening and broadening Jesuit values and vision. It would be difficult to overstate the current impact and future potential of the Foundation as its endowment is increased. The Jesuit Foundation is located in the Jesuit Community, but jointly directed by Jesuit and lay colleagues. With support from the Jesuit Foundation, Ignatian 19th annotation retreats* are available to faculty and staff this coming year for the first time. The Foundation hosts a reception and dinner where each individual explains what s/he accomplished with the funding. It is a most inspiring evening and great way to engender creativity and enthusiasm for worthwhile projects and programs.

Let me preface this paragraph by expressing my conviction that USF has moved beyond "preparing" for lay leadership and moved very directly into strengthening the partnership within the leadership of the University, which is overwhelmingly non-Jesuit. Of the 14 members of the leadership team, only two are Jesuits. The day for entrusting USF to lay colleagues is not "coming"; it has been here for some time. Our most innovative experiment in partnership was a full three-day retreat for the University leadership team — president, vice presidents and deans — that utilizes the Spiritual Exercises as a content-free structure to help us name what brought each of us to the enterprise of Jesuit education, what is important to us in our work, what sustains and nourishes us, what discourages us, and how we can support each other's efforts to help USF realize its vision of educating leaders for a more humane and just world. The retreat had five cycles of reflection on printed materials, followed by a presentation, followed by

silent reflection, followed by communal reflection, with shared liturgies each morning and evening. This was not your typical planning retreat with flip charts, etc., but an effort to create a strong sense of shared-meaning and purpose among the University's leadership. Going in, we were excited, hopeful, and somewhat apprehensive about the impact of this experience on the overall direction of the University. The reality of the experience, thanks largely to the sensitivity and skill of Mark Ravizza, exceeded the hopes of all the participants. Within this group of very diverse individuals, we know there is a strong set of shared values and a common vision. The immediate future of USF is in competent, capable, and caring hands.

Responding to Diversity

USF is among the most diverse universities in the country. The demographics of the University community closely resemble that of society at large. Twenty-six percent of our students are first-generation college students who do not speak English at home. We

have received, just this year, a \$1 million Irvine Foundation grant to help USF assess how to use its diversity as a learning resource for the entire University community. We are rich in cultural resources, but we are a long way from effectively capitalizing on this distinctive characteristic. This is a challenge that we will wrestle with, and resolution seems a long way off. Currently, our major effort is directed toward recruiting more faculty of color, on the assumption that such faculty are key to infusing diversity into the major academic structures — curricula and research agenda. We are obviously working from a "critical mass" theory of institutional change.

Evangelizing Culture

This is perhaps the priority that is least well understood by my colleagues and me. Our current thinking is directed toward engaging contemporary culture in a conversation that allows us to hear whatever is "gospel" in our culture, as well as find opportunities for challenging culture to recognize "gospel" in our tradition of teaching, learning, and scholarship. Our model is dialogic rather than mono-directional. We are initiating a lecture series in which prominent Church persons speak to contemporary issues, with allowance for a follow-up seminar with a select group of faculty and students.

USF's Fine and Performing Arts Department is making a concerted effort through theater to engage underserved populations in mutually enriching learning experiences. For example, this past year USF students and faculty worked with convicted felons and crime victims on a dramatic production that played on campus and in a downtown theater to packed houses. This was an incredibly rich learning experience — dialogue — for all involved, including the audiences. We are still conceptualizing how we can build on this strong beginning to use theater as the basis for such experiences, as well as an agent for social analysis and change. I am optimistic that Tom Lucas' leadership, supported by the creativity and commitment of his colleagues in the arts, will make some real headway in this area. We are trying to keep our focus narrow and sharp, in the hope that we may learn something from the arts that is transferable to other programmatic efforts.

If one looks at this goal on a more macro level, the obvious but much more difficult challenge for USF is to effectively institutionalize the values and traditions of a Jesuit Catholic university, so that they permeate the total campus environment and shape the students' living and learning experiences. If successful, this would offer students the experience of a somewhat "counter cultural community" that, in turn, offers them a critical perspective from which they could creatively engage those aspects of culture which are in conflict with human values and affirm those that support a humane way of being together in the world. This is clearly the overarching challenge for all of us in higher education, but one that may be lost sight of when we talk exclusives in terms of "strategic goals" that are too narrowly framed. Basically, to be a Jesuit Catholic University is to evangelize culture.

Concluding Comments

I resist the temptation to offer you a long listing of all the good things that are happening here and in virtually every Jesuit school and college. However, I do not want my silence to signal that there are not a number of individuals, activities, and programs here that support and advance each of the Province's four apostolic priorities, because there are. One of the determining factors in my decision to work at USF was a campus culture that is responsive to the challenge of placing education at the service of faith that does justice. There are strong pockets of faculty, staff, and student support in each of the schools and colleges, as I indicated above. The leadership is ready to take USF further in the direction indicated by the Province's apostolic priorities, not because they are Province priorities but because they are central to our integrity as a Jesuit Catholic university. I am proud of what this University has accomplished and confident with regard to its future contributions to the academy and society.

Sincerely,

Stephen A. Privett, S.J.
President

* Editor's Note: A retreat designed for working adults and stretched out over several weeks.