Inauguration of Eduardo Peñalver

- September 24, 2021

- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

It has been twenty-four years this week since Seattle University has been able to join in joyful celebration for the inauguration of a new president. Today we gather as a university community, with representatives of other colleges and universities; with civic leaders; with the provincial of the Society of Jesus which sponsors Seattle U.; with representatives of the Catholic Archdiocese; with alumni; donors; and friends to welcome, install, and embrace Eduardo Peñalver as the twenty-second president of Seattle University. Twenty-four years is a long time to look forward to this kind of joyous occasion.

President Peñalver will be the new leader of a new era of the university. We have had several eras in our history from 1891 to 2021: from college to university; from men-only to co‑education; from a small Catholic college on the hill to a large, comprehensive and inclusive Jesuit and Catholic university; from a local to a national and international institution; from a school staffed and principally led by Jesuit priests to a lay-led-and-empowered academic community; from a quieter to a more bold and assertive enterprise; from an academic sanctuary to a community-engaged and issue-defined Seattle University. This is a history of eras and a tradition to be proud of, to build a future on, to be true to in its values and the sacrifices of its people.

Now it is clear that we are moving into a new era that calls for the kind of leadership that President Eduardo Peñalver will bring. This is a time when the voices of all need to be heard, so we have a president known for his listening. Now the university needs to be smarter than ever in the choices and directions it takes, so we need the brilliance and thoughtfulness and judicious decisions of our new leader. The university is poised in this new era to reach out as never before in partnerships, civic, business and commercial alliances, so we have a president known for his capacity of collaboration. It is time to move in our Jesuit and Catholic character into changes and challenges that only a deeply-Catholic and Jesuit-inspired lay president can discern, respond to, make credible, and animate. This university will increasingly be evaluated for the quality, depth, and relevance of its academic programs, so the university has found a proven and acclaimed academic scholar and leader. The new era is marked more than ever before by diversity, inclusion, and respect for all identities, so in Eduardo the right president from personal and administrative experience will eagerly join the whole university in these commitments. Finally, Seattle University is really still a young university, coming only now into its own, with its best years ahead of it, so it will have a young leader with his best years ahead of him. What we are doing today is inaugurating a new leader for a new era of Seattle University.

We are also inaugurating today a leader within a much wider compass. Eduardo, early in your term Seattle U. will reach the 100,000 mark of alumni… inspire them and mobilize them as “empowered leaders for a just and humane world”. In these two years, last year and the coming year, twelve of the twenty-seven presidencies among Jesuit colleges and universities are changing… become personally a leader in U.S. Jesuit higher education. Also, in these two current years five of the ten presidents are transitioning in the Independent Collages of Washington… be a leader among them for the role of independent higher education in our State. Step forward in leadership among the thirteen presidents of the Western Athletic Conference and beyond as Seattle U. seeks prominence in athletics as one part of its reputation and Jesuit identity. Seattle needs your personal leadership and what you can bring from the resources of the university to address homelessness, inequality, discrimination, and the revitalization and healing of our city. Be a leader locally and also nationally, commenting as you have done on wider social and legal issues, and convincing America of the irreplaceable and critical value of higher education for the wellbeing of its citizens and its service in the world. None of this wider compass of leadership is extrinsic to being president of Seattle University: its mission and your position within it invites and encourages you to this wider service as integral to what the university is and to what it calls you.

Eduardo, it may seem to you that a lot, perhaps too much, is hoped for and expected of you. I have one comment and two pieces of advice.

The comment. At first you may not relish the repeated question of others: “Do you enjoy being president of Seattle U.?” It’s a bit too big and too overwhelming in the beginning to enjoy, though it’s always meaningful. But joy takes over. The joy of welcoming new students to the campus with their parents and the exceedingly great joy at graduation. The spontaneous, often zany, comments of students about whether their courses are hard enough, or what they think your job is. Enjoying presentations of faculty and student scholarship, of senior engineering projects, of students dressed up and primed heading for career interviews. What joy there is in the huge crowd lighting the Christmas tree, or you on stage giving a pitch at the Dance Marathon, celebrating a sports championship, sitting back and bursting with pride at an S.U. choir concert or play, being joyfully humbled by the generous philanthropy of committed friends, being with bright-eyed kids of the neighborhood served by our students in the S.U. Youth Initiative, perhaps holding back tears of consoling joy in the Chapel of St. Ignatius celebrating the lives of beloved colleagues or in St. James Cathedral at the glorious Baccalaureate Mass. Joy indeed comes forward, suffuses, and lightens all the expectations and dedicated work. That’s my comment; now for the two pieces of advice.

First of all, count on others. Count on a faculty and staff who know the mission of the university and are committed to making it real. Count on the best board of trustees, board of regents, cabinet, deans, academic and staff leaders any president could inherit. Count on the Society of Jesus, this Jesuits West Province, and the Arrupe Jesuit Community, to partner with and support you. Count on the Catholic faith community to be grateful for how this university always has been and can even more fully be a resource for its life. Count on the civic, business, and not-for-profit communities to welcome you warmly for your service, your joint leadership, and the unique contribution the university can make. Count on the presidents of the ten Independent Colleges of Washington—what we like to call “The Terrific Ten”—to be your closest colleagues. Count on the association of the twenty-seven Jesuit colleges and university of the United States to support, guide, and share with you how to advance Jesuit higher education. Count on the students and the alumni of the university to be your best inspiration and daily uplifting source of purpose. Count on the spirit of Seattle U.—a unique spirit, which is bold, outgoing, socially engaged, and free—to buoy you.

My other, my second, advice goes like this. The Board of Trustees chose you to be president of Seattle University. The most important word in that is “you”. They did not just choose a qualified candidate; they chose you. So be who you are, nothing more, nothing less, nothing better. Let the university know you: know your thoughtfulness and what you think; know your faith and what you believe; know your leadership and what you most care about; know what you treasure as husband, father, son, brother, uncle; know your humility, your warmth, your humor, your Northwest spirit, your love. Let the university and the wider community know you and know you soon. That’s the place to start as you have already begun to do. Knowing you will give others confidence, trust, respect, and a sense of shared mission. The job will shape you, change you, deepen and expand you, enrich and relax you, grow you. It all depends on accepting that the Board of Trustees chose YOU to be president, humbly yet fully accepting this, rejoicing in it. And let yourself be known daily in prayer by God, as God works through you, blesses and guides you as president and as a beloved son of God who has been chosen to this great endeavor and is being inaugurated for it this joyous day. Thanks for accepting to be the twenty-second president of Seattle University.