

Discerning the Future of Alpha Sigma Nu as a Jesuit Honor Society

- 34th Triennial Conference
- October 12, 2018
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

We are honored that you have chosen to hold the 34th Triennial Conference of Alpha Sigma Nu here at Seattle University. We believe that you have done so not only because of the beauty, vitality, and cultural life of Seattle as a city, but more because we have sought a way to revitalize the Seattle University Alpha Sigma Nu chapter with greater meaning, fuller participation, more relevant activities, significant service, closer affiliation with the Jesuits themselves, and a truer sense of being the one and only Jesuit Honor Society. So welcome to our city, to our university, and to our very alive chapter of your association.

I am in my 22nd year as president of Seattle University and am coasting to a conclusion after two dozen years of service to the common Jesuit mission we all serve in our colleges and universities. Before that I was the provincial of the Jesuits of these five Northwest states and before that the rector of a Jesuit university community and before that was a teacher here at Seattle U., and before that gained a doctorate in Spirituality. (I will not go all the way back, because the Associate Justice Brett Kavanaugh and I too are graduates of Georgetown Prep.) It is from the perspective of these long years of service and especially my observation of the growth, development and change in Alphas Sigma Nu that I wish to speak to you this morning.

I was asked ten years ago to give an address at Marquette University at the Alpha Sigma Nu Faculty Advisors Conference. The over-lengthy title of my talk was “A Renewed Alpha Sigma Nu within the ‘New’ Jesuit Mission of Our Universities and Colleges: Some Ideas of One Jesuit President”. I ended it with eleven ideas of an eleven-year president. I believe those ideas have helped to nurture the evolution of Alpha Sigma Nu since then. Today I give a talk with a somewhat shorter title: “Discerning the Future of Alpha Sigma Nu as a Jesuit Honor Society”. It is chapter two—enriched by experience—of that earlier address. I have not only learned some degree of brevity, but also, fear not, I will not inflict on you “Twenty-one ideas of a Twenty-One-Year President”. Instead I offer you three ideas with a preamble and a conclusion.

Preamble

We are all proud that Alpha Sigma Nu is the one and only Jesuit honor society. That gives it a special place or status or significance in our Jesuit colleges and universities with their multiple honor societies. That it is the only Jesuit honor society also means even more to the Jesuits themselves. We do not share our name easily. Our founding, our history, our spirituality, our martyrs, our scholars, and our own vows, lives and ministries within one Jesuit mission make “Jesuit” a deeply meaningful and deeply personal word. We do not share it easily. But we do share it with Alpha Sigma Nu, and in doing so we believe that it must mean what “Jesuit” in its fullest sense means. Alpha Sigma Nu can only be true to itself and can only discern its true future if it lives out and evolves, in a way appropriate to an honor society, what it means to be Jesuit.

I believe, however, that Jesuit is in itself an evolving, changing reality while grounded in Jesuit origins and fundamentals. I love to say, for instance, that my university is and has been not simply a Jesuit university but has been “Jesuit in an old way”, “Jesuit in a current way” and “Jesuit in a new emerging way”. That is a matter of a whole other, though related, talk. The point is that how our universities and colleges are Jesuit is not static or univocal but changes, evolves, grows, takes on a different relevance, adapts to new generations of students, gives witness through new cohorts of faculty, staff, and Jesuits, lives in a new university context and impacts and is impacted by a new world. This evolution of what it means to be Jesuit—and what Alpha Sigma Nu must mean—is shown most clearly in what the Society of Jesus itself has indicated as its priorities over the last fifty years in its official, worldwide congregations.

Getting stuck on one meaning of “Jesuit” reminds me of how young persons and old can get stuck on misunderstanding a phrase. I was told last week of a boy who was present at a burial when the priest ended by saying, “giving thanks to the Father and the Son, and to the Holy Ghost”. What the boy heard and kept thinking for years was “to the Father, to the Son, and into the hole he goes”! My own younger sister for years praying the family rosary at home and hearing, “Hail Mary full of grace” thought it was “Hail Mary full of grapes”! Made sense to her and her devotion to Mary. She liked grapes. And it is not just the young. A Jesuit friend of mine named Bob told me of celebrating a home Mass on August 15th, on the feast of the Assumption of Mary. He preached on its meaning. Afterwards his 80-year-old Mom exclaimed, “Bob, all my life I have thought this was the feast of the assumption that Mary was a virgin!” People get stuck on meanings of words. We should not get stuck on the word “Jesuit.”

So this is my preamble. Discerning the future of Alpha Sigma Nu as a Jesuit honor society depends most significantly on what “Jesuit” means and how that meaning evolves. My three points speak to this evolution and its application to the honor society we love and lead.

Discernment

I start with discernment itself. Jesuit colleges and universities must discern their futures. Alpha Sigma Nu must discern its future. Jesuit students and alumni—and especially students and alumni of Alpha Sigma Nu—must know how to discern the life choices which shape their futures. There is something jarring, dislocated, to being honored as a member of the Jesuit honor society and to not know and practice how to do discernment. We must invite and teach our honor society inductees and members how to discern their life choices.

Discernment is more than and different from decision-making. The latter is required for 90% of issues we face in life and a Jesuit education is renowned for graduating students who are good decision-makers. You could almost say it is the forté of our education—great decision-making, informed deliberation leading to action, practiced good judgement. But discernment is more, is for the other 10%, and that 10% is the critical part of making life choices that shape who and what our alumni become. Discernment requires quieting, removing all distractions and noises, gradually learning how to be present to oneself, coming into a freedom from the voices all around, learning to hear and listen to one’s own voice, one’s own deepest self and truth where our deepest desires can guide us in unexpected ways and where we believe the Spirit of God

dwells and moves and speaks and calls within us. This is what discernment, rather than ordinary decision-making, is. It only is applied to good things, good choices, and it only should be used for seeking guidance in the biggest choices of our lives.

There is nothing I more desire in graduates of our schools—and nothing more a sign of it being truly a Jesuit education—than that they have the capacity to discern their life choices. This is one of the new or rediscovered or renamed foci of what it means to be “Jesuit”. It has grown as a capacity and a requirement in the Society of Jesus and it has become prioritized because the times more than ever demand it. Because of the society we live in, discernment has risen up as more important than ever.

I was troubled a couple of years ago when fifteen senior students in an Ignatian leaders honor society, and most if not all members of Alpha Sigma Nu, invited me and Michele Murray, then our VP, and now VP for Student Development at Holy Cross, to speak to them in a personal way about how we prayed and made life choices. Michele told them her way, I told them mine. They were super attentive. In the course of my description I spoke of “being present to the truth of myself in silence”. I noticed an unease among the students when I said this. So I pressed the point saying, “I take it that each of you wants to be present to the truth of yourself in silence.” There was silence! Then one student spoke up, “We are told that when we are present to the truth of ourselves in silence, we will find peace... instead I find anxiety.” Another confirmed this and the others assented. Ouch! They wanted to make life choices but they lived lives which kept them from being present to the truth of themselves in silence because that silence and that presence and that truth of self was so hidden or unaccustomed to them that it was scary, forbidden territory... anxiety-ridden. And those were our best students in a Senior Ignatian leaders honor society.

Alpha Sigma Nu, as a Jesuit honor society, must discern and find its own future by finding the ways to help its inductees, members, and alumni to discern their life choices. Doing so is one way for Alpha Sigma Nu to evolve with the emerging priorities of our day of what “Jesuit” means. Does this require retreats for members? Does it mean exposure to the daily examination of consciousness? Does it ask for greater involvement of Jesuits and Jesuit lay partners skilled in discernment in Alpha Sigma Nu? Yes, Alpha Sigma Nu is about loyalty, service, and scholarship; as Jesuit it is also about something beneath and informing all three of these: discernment.

Freedom

I begin my second point about discerning the future of Alpha Sigma Nu as the meaning of “Jesuit” evolves with a little incident. I was driving back one early weekend morning from walking around a local lake called Green Lake where I take my mind for a 3-mile walk the way you take a dog for a walk, when at a stop light I came up behind a car with a bumper sticker which read “Don’t believe everything you think!” The coin dropped for me! This says what I most fear and want to escape both for myself and for our students. That is that we cannot trust what we think as being our own thoughts because most of the time it is not what we really think but only what our culture is thinking through us as if it is a body-snatcher that uses us through which to think. The cultures in which we live are many times more overwhelmingly

predominant in their impact on us and even more so on our students than in earlier eras in terms of what we think so that we really should not believe everything we think. Jesuit education always has been about disrupting this hold on our thinking that the culture has on us. I call it “being intellectually roughed up for life”. Reflect fully on your students, on the members of your Alpha Sigma Nu chapter, and ask yourself how much they are truly and freely thinking for themselves and how much they are not—though they think they are—but are unconsciously embodying their culture thinking its ideas, assumptions, values, beliefs in them. We cannot exempt ourselves from this condition of being held hostage by our culture doing its thinking in us.

When we promote scholarship as one of our three pillars in Alpha Sigma Nu we must evolve its meaning from deep knowledge of things outside ourselves to free knowledge of our own thinking, values, assumptions, beliefs, faith. At the heart of all Jesuit education and the rationale for our humanistic and core curricula, and our almost excessive focus on reflection, lies the fundamental truth that we are far more unfree and attached in ourselves than we think we are, and that real Jesuit education is about coming to internal freedom in thought, or “being intellectually roughed up for life”.

The evolved Jesuit take on this today derives from its appreciation of how much culture shapes and even can control us and that, therefore, we need inter-cultural dialogue and inter-religious dialogue. We need to stand outside of ourselves, enter into the experience and thoughts of others, so that we might see ourselves afresh and more freely. Essentially we need, more than ever, the other, and must allow the other to be other. I firmly believe that the greatest evolution of what “Jesuit” means today is how it has come to take culture much more seriously and much more critically and that coming to the freedom at the heart of Jesuit education cannot occur in our day without this inter-cultural, inter-religious, other-engaging dialogue.

David Brooks, in his column this last Sunday entitled “A Complete National Disgrace”, says that in the recent Supreme Court nomination process we all went beyond the “vague condition called ‘polarization’” to “the toxic emissions we all produce in low moments”. He speaks to my point about our entrapment in culture and that we really should “not believe everything we think”:

“...and we have to set up more forums for personal encounters between different kinds of people. You detoxify disputes when you personalize them. People who don’t have regular contact with people they disagree with become intellectually dishonest quickly.

The Jesuit foundational view of the need to come to freedom in one’s own thought—especially as Jesuit education takes seriously the impact of culture on this freedom of thought—calls for Alpha Sigma Nu to adjust, deepen, and expand its commitment to scholarship.

It is not, however, a matter only about how we think. It is more critical even than that. In her book Reclaiming Conversation, Sherry Turkle states that the measures of empathy show that college students over the past ten years have had a decline of 40% in empathy. Her view is that empathy, the ability to stand in another’s shoes, to see and feel life from their perspective, is developed in us by actual person-to-person, direct conversation. Substituting connections by technology does not equal or bring about the same effect as does conversation in terms of empathy. It is a matter of encountering, genuinely encountering the other, persons who are

different, in order to disrupt not just our own assumptions in thought but even our capacity to feel with and for others.

In regard to this second suggestion what can Alpha Sigma Nu do if it takes seriously what it means to be the Jesuit honor society in our day, in our cultures, with our students who are our members? Does this call for an adjustment not only of what we mean by “scholarship” but also by what we mean by “service”? How much, if it is to be truly Jesuit today, does Alpha Sigma Nu need to be a society of encountering the other, persons of different views with whom we disagree, both within the chapter itself, and in the scholarship and service it advocates? Could Alpha Sigma Nu be a good and much-needed space in our colleges and universities for genuine dialogue and inclusion even of voices and views which are in hiding today on our campuses? The emerging sense of being “Jesuit” today calls Alpha Sigma Nu to take seriously “Don’t believe everything you think” and to help its members know their own thinking and learn the empathy so needed in a Jesuit-educated person.

Reconciliation

My third and final suggestion for what Alpha Sigma Nu might take into consideration in discovering its future explicitly as Jesuit focusses on recently articulated priorities of the Society of Jesus.

We all know the priority of anything that is called “Jesuit” is something like the service of faith through the promotion of the justice of the gospel in inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue with a preferential love of the poor. That is quite a mouthful and quite a complex priority with many dimensions. Over the last dozen years all of this has been focused more centrally and more simply on reconciliation. Would this have emerged if it was not felt that in our current day we live to an extensive degree with the opposite of reconciliation, live with discord, hostility, inequality, alienation, dislocation, disruption, isolation, not just outside ourselves but also within ourselves where we are fractured, such that the overarching mission of what is “Jesuit” must be reconciliation? It is seen as reconciliation with God, reconciliation with one another, and reconciliation with the planet, each of them inherent to and dependent on the other.

If reconciliation in this triple sense truly is the unifying and catalyzing mission of whatever is “Jesuit”, what does this mean for what the education of our colleges and universities is about, what their campus cultures are like, and what service they advocate? And how is the discernment of the future of Alpha Sigma Nu as Jesuit affected by this new articulation of the Jesuit mission for our day? I wonder if this calls us to reflect on what the pillar of “loyalty” most of all needs to be in the sense of to whom are we asked to be loyal? Yes, loyal to our Jesuit education; yes, loyal to our colleges and universities in their wonderful missions; yes, loyal to other members of Alpha Sigma Nu and its tradition. But if reconciliation is centrally the Jesuit mission, isn’t the loyalty called for a loyalty to a wider common good and community?

Fr. Kolvenbach called it “a well-educated solidarity”, i.e., a solidarity with others that because it is well educated knows the conditions of those with whom one is in solidarity and because it is well-educated can be effective in changing the conditions so that solidarity is not an idea or a feeling but acts on behalf of justice, equity, and dignity. Fr. Nicholas famously warned against a

“globalization of superficiality” which would undermine any true reconciliation and all well-educated solidarity as well as reconciliation with God and with the planet.

The call to consider the connection between loyalty and reconciliation is not foreign to what we repeatedly ask of our students and our members. In asking them repeatedly how they are going to use their education we almost naturally ask them, “For whom are you going to use your education; with whom will you stand; who will count in your world?” That is a loyalty question and that is a reconciliation question.

In regard to this question of loyalty, reconciliation, and with whom we ask our Alpha Sigma Nu members to stand, let me tell you of a recent experience. In July I attended—together with Kate Gaertner and perhaps others of you—the international conference of Jesuit higher education in Bilbao. Over four excellent days of meetings, presentations, and discussions together with representatives of 150 Jesuit institutions, one comment from Fr. Arturo Susa, the Superior General of the Jesuits, most stood out for me. In a question and answer session he said that the most difficult mandate he had been given by the last general congregation of Jesuits, which elected him, was for the Society of Jesus “to promote a culture for the protection of all vulnerable persons”. He said he was not talking about practices to assure the protection of minors by Jesuits—though important—but how all Jesuits and all Jesuit works might promote a culture—obviously different from the culture we have—which by its very nature protects all vulnerable persons, young, old, disabled, helpless, unprotected. That mandate is an instance and a focus of solidarity, a loyalty, a reconciliation that appeals to all of us in our Jesuit endeavors and is suited to our colleges and universities. It is not just about the protection of vulnerable individuals, but the creation of a culture which protects all. What would that look like, and how would we do that?

If this is the most difficult mandate for the head of the Jesuits, is it also a difficult mandate for Alpha Sigma Nu as it follows the evolution of the Jesuit mission today? Aren’t our students and members especially attuned and sensitive to this protection of the vulnerable? Aren’t all of the disciplines and majors and levels of education of our members necessary for the formation of a culture of protection? What would happen if we brought together our members and proposed this mandate? How would they respond? What ideas would they have? How would they complement and collaborate with one another in seeing how to take up this mandate in a systemic way? This would be putting “loyalty” into practice in a new way, a way of a “well-educated solidarity” and a way of “reconciliation”.

In conclusion, I have made three suggestions about how Alpha Sigma Nu might discern its future in alignment with how what it means to be Jesuit as the meaning of Jesuit evolves:

1. Discernment: the development and use of the capacity for discernment of life choices;
2. Freedom: coming to true freedom in one’s thought and genuine empathy in a culture which militates against them, and
3. Reconciliation: pursuing reconciliation with and loyalty to those with whom we are in a well-educated solidarity, especially in the creation of a culture which protects all vulnerable persons.

These three suggestions for our consideration perhaps help to reframe or deepen what scholarship, loyalty, and service might include today. I suggest that they may be helpful for us as we discern the future of Alpha Sigma Nu as the Jesuit honor society so that it may mean more for our students, our alumni, and ourselves.

I didn't start with a prayer, but let me end with a poem. It is by Mary Oliver and says much about what we want for our members in their discernment, their freedom, and their reconciliation. It is called "The Mockingbird" and suggests what finding one's own voice requires. Today let this person it be about our members and Alpha Sigma Nu itself finding their own voice.

All summer
the mockingbird
in his pearl-gray coat
and his white-windowed wings

flies
from the hedge to the top of the pine
and begins to sing, but it's neither
lilting nor lovely,

for he is the thief of other sounds—
whistles and truck brakes and dry hinges
plus all the songs
of other birds in his neighborhood;

mimicking and elaborating,
he sings with humor and bravado,
so I have to wait a long time
for the softer voice of his own life

to come through. He begins
by giving up all his usual flutter
and settling down on the pine's forelock
then looking around

as though to make sure he's alone;
then he slaps each wing against his breast,
where his heart is,
and, copying nothing, begins

easing into it
as though it was not half so easy
as rollicking,
as though his subject now

was his true self,
which of course was as dark and secret
as anyone else's,
and it was too hard—

perhaps you understand—
to speak or to sing it
to anything or anyone
but the sky.