

Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach's Address
to Faculty, Staff, and Students
Spring Hill College
October 4, 2004

Let me begin by congratulating you on your upcoming celebration of 175 years of service in the work of education. Although I have never before been to Spring Hill College, we share a common history, in more ways than one. Some years after Fr. Francis de Sales Gautrelet came to Spring Hill, as its first Jesuit president, his older brother, Francis Xavier Gautrelet, who was also a Jesuit, served as superior of the Syrian mission of the Lyons Province, which founded the University of St. Joseph in Beirut. Another superior of that mission, Fr. Ambroise Monnot, actually visited Spring Hill and his fellow Jesuits in 1872, when this college, like its chapel, also carried the name of St. Joseph. Having served several years on the faculty of the University of St. Joseph in Beirut, I share with you the heritage not only of Jesuit education in general, but also of the missionary outreach of the Lyons Province of the Society of Jesus. It founded colleges and universities in the southern United States, northern Africa, the Middle East and India. Long before the word globalization entered our vocabulary, those French Jesuits, like the Society itself, envisioned their life and their work in a global context.

In this opening year of your 175th anniversary, you are celebrating a Year of Solidarity, including in a special way the commemoration of your 50th anniversary of racial integration. Solidarity is at the heart of a profoundly Christian view of this global context, a view embraced explicitly by the contemporary Jesuit vision. Racial integration is a concrete demand for justice that emerged out of a particular historical context, turning the idea of solidarity into a vehicle of transformation.

The Gospel calls us not only to proclaim the Kingdom of God to all nations, but also to commit our lives to work with courage and generosity for a world in which we are called to live as one family, even one body, in Christ. Solidarity implies a recognition of our kinship, rooted in creation itself. Genuine solidarity must also embrace the responsibilities that are a consequence of that kinship. Despite all that divides us—language, culture, religion, race, class and gender—we are profoundly related to one another and responsible for our common good. Fifty years ago, this gospel-based vision of solidarity was challenged profoundly by the brutal, but culturally accepted, realities of racial segregation: realities questioned by few and desperately defended by many. The Supreme Court decision of 1954 was often resisted as unacceptable interference by the federal government, even as un-Christian and Communist. When Fr. Andrew Smith, a Jesuit who was born and raised in Mississippi, publicly welcomed the decision and then implemented it by mandating full integration of Spring Hill College in the coming fall semester, he took a different road. In his commencement address of May 1954, Fr. Smith pledged that this historic college, always the champion of social justice, stands ready to play its part together with all its sister colleges dedicated alike to teaching God's truth and promoting justice and charity among all. Even though he determined to act, as he said, without hysteria or unnecessary disturbance of any kind, the College

was targeted, a few years later, for a cross-burning by the Ku Klux Klan. More significantly, his professional development consultants advised Fr. Smith not to go forward with a much-needed and long-planned capital campaign, because of the general unhappiness among local benefactors over the College=s open rejection of the deep-rooted culture of racial privilege.

Nine years later, on April 16, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, cited the integration of Spring Hill College as one of the Anotable exceptions@ to his profound disappointment with the white church and its leadership.

Dr. King felt compelled to remind the readers of this famous letter of just what segregation meant for those who were caught in its grip. He knew that only by sharing something of the lived experience of those who suffered the consequences of the system, could he convey the sting of its injustice and the inability to wait patiently for gradual solutions. Nine years had passed since the Supreme Court mandated the integration of public education Awith all deliberate speed@, and the University of Alabama was still not open to Negro applicants. In fact, two months after King=s Letter, President John F. Kennedy appeared on national television as he mobilized the National Guard to enforce the integration of the University, while the governor of the state symbolically barred the entrance to its first black students. Dr. King shared the President=s deep frustration over the determined resistance to simple justice.

Dr. King had journeyed from Atlanta to Birmingham on behalf of civil rights. When attacked at the time for being an Aoutside agitator@, purposely breaking the laws of the state, Dr. King appealed to a gospel-based vision of solidarity, as well as the fundamental responsibilities of citizenship. He wrote:

I am in Birmingham because injustice is here Y I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

Today in Alabama, lunch counters and drinking fountains are no longer segregated. Today in Alabama, the integrated student body at Spring Hill College startles no one. While it is true that the challenge of racism remains real, the era of violent clashes over a legalized system of segregation is in the past. And yet our celebration of this 50th anniversary is more than a festive commemoration of courageous decisions made in the 1950s. What can we say about the present? Dr. King=s analysis of segregation from the perspective of the Gospel=s call for solidarity can still serve in helping us examine the present, with courage and generosity.

While Spring Hill must indeed continue to confront the sin of racism, new challenges have arisen in today's world. We now experience violent clashes on an international level. The assassinations of the Jesuit faculty of the University of Central America, in El Salvador, the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., the insurgency in Iraq and the ongoing violence in Israel and Palestine, are all symptoms of a deeply troubled world. Continuing outbreaks of terrorism around the world are only one of many symptoms of a dangerously fragmented world, where grinding poverty traps ever greater portions of humanity, even as unprecedented wealth and the power of technology shape the world of a privileged minority. The challenges of our profoundly globalized world are as complex as they are urgent. And they provide yet another reminder that in our Jesuit universities we need to increase our commitment to educate the whole person of solidarity or, in the words of your own core organizing principle: to provide an *education for the common good of the global human community*. If students in fact allow the stark reality of this world to enter into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering and engage it constructively, they will become Amen and women for others. @

As in the time of Ignatius, Jesuit higher education must strive in our day to give creative responses to the challenges that arise in changing times. Were Ignatius alive today, he would be intrigued and fascinated by the phenomenon of globalization, with its incredible opportunities and daunting threats. He would not run from the challenges that it involves. The harmful effects of economic globalization are obvious to all: dehumanization, individualism, lack of solidarity, social fragmentation, a widening of the already existing gap between rich and poor, exclusion, lack of respect for human rights, economic and cultural neo-colonialism, exploitation, deterioration of the environment, violence, and frustration. Although closely tied to economic processes, it must be recognized that globalization also includes other dimensions, which offer unique possibilities for the construction of a world more characterized by mutuality and solidarity. Never before have there been so many opportunities for communication, for integration, for interdependence and unity of the human race. The growing awareness of the dimensions of globalization, the tension between the global and the local, constitute at one and the same time opportunities and threats which the university cannot overlook.

The university remains the place where fundamental questions that touch the person and community can be aired. As a bearer of human and ethical values the university should be the critical conscience of society. It should illuminate with its reflection modern or postmodern society, and it should be the forum where the diversities of human thought are debated and solutions proposed. This recognition that the university should be challenged by society, and should, in turn, challenge society, both in a local and a global context, was brought from theory to practice in the witness of Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría, Jesuit president of our university in El Salvador, and his fellow Jesuit faculty, who were assassinated fifteen years ago, precisely because of their commitment and that of their university to society. We must never forget that knowledge is not neutral, because it always implies values and a specific conception of the human person.

In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius invites us to heed our deepest calling, to beg the grace not to be deaf to the call of the King, but prompt and diligent to offer ourselves with generosity for the building of a kingdom of true justice and lasting peace. The work of Jesuit education is not the work of a church or a retreat house. The mission of a Jesuit college is not indoctrination or social activism. And yet, the invitation to discover and heed our deepest calling must inspire, inform and enliven an education of the whole person. Translating this vision into the concrete tasks of shaping the curriculum, developing effective pedagogical strategies, and shaping our students' vision of their role in society, is no easy goal, but it is a necessary one. Faculty as well as students can become so taken up in the daily routine of classes, assignments, grades and grade point averages, committee meetings and department meetings, scholarship and service, that the broader vision of education for the common good of the global human community, becomes blurred or even lost to sight.

Your mission statement speaks of preparing students to become responsible leaders in the service of others by awakening mind and spirit to the pursuit of truth and to an ever deeper appreciation of the beauty of creation, the dignity of life, the demands of justice and the mystery of God's love. Inspiring words -- the kind of thing a Jesuit college ought to say about itself to impress everyone with its noble purposes and its adherence to the vision of a faith that does justice. But let us not forget that awakening mind and spirit to the pursuit of truth is a daunting task, a task that runs counter to the ubiquitous education of a culture of self-interest, a culture of consumption, competition, and entitlement, a culture that powerfully insulates those in control from those who have no voice. Dr. King addressed his famous letter to men who should have been his allies, to his fellow clergy, but he had to recognize in them the tragic absence of a well-educated solidarity. "A shallow understanding from people of good will," he said, "is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will."

To move from shallow understanding to the pursuit of truth requires the hard work of gathering and mastering information; it requires the discipline of genuinely critical thinking; it requires the empathy which grows out of a lived experience of suffering; and it also requires the courage of conviction. To quote once again from Dr. King:

There was a time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.

In an institution of higher education, this pursuit of truth is not accomplished by a program of indoctrination or apologetics, but rather through the role of academics in creating a human, humane world -- the very commitment which has shaped the humanities curriculum since the time of ancient Greece and Rome. This ideal and the humane responsible person it seeks to shape are threatened today not by its close relation

(or symbiosis) with Christianity, but rather by all the forces which turn the human person away from truth: from the truth of what he or she is doing, from the truth about the world in which he or she lives, from the consequences of one=s own choices or of government actions and economic policies. What threatens this truth is unwillingness to be responsible for the quality of the world in which we live, the refusal to be citizens because we prefer our private advantage, the failure to understand and enter into dialogue with those who live, think and believe differently from ourselves. The truths we do not want to see, which we can use our intellectual sophistication to obscure, are those which threaten our rigid categories, our privilege, our position.

It is here that faith, far from threatening objectivity, helps truth: for Christian faith is based on the reality of God=s love for each person. The most basic core of each of us is a dialogue of love, a love that takes in our actions, our intelligence, our treasures and commitments, but the partnership of this love is freely entered. Our prestige, wealth and social power do not earn for us a place at the table of God=s love. On the contrary, when Jesus noticed how his fellow guests were trying to get the places of honor at table, he told one of his many parables about the exalted being humbled and the humble, exalted (Luke 14:7-14). Genuine faith calls us beyond the narrow boundaries of our own needs and ambitions, our own prejudice and advantage, to a transformative dialogue between the Gospel we profess and the culture in which we live. John Paul II has pointed to this dialogue between Gospel and culture as an essential task of the Catholic university. A truly transformative dialogue is difficult because it requires an inner freedom for change, as well as careful study and critical analysis. In the most recent assembly of Jesuits throughout the world, General Congregation 34, the role of dialogue, cultural attitudes and economic structures is seen as indispensable in the pursuit of a faith that does justice:

In our positive approach to religions and cultures, we recognize that all of them B including the AChristian West@ throughout its history B have also found ways of being closed to the true freedom offered by God. Justice can truly flourish only when it involves the transformation of culture, since the roots of injustice are embedded in cultural attitudes, as well as in economic structures. The dialogue between the Gospel and culture has to take place within the heart of the culture Y Through dialogue the Gospel itself, the Word ever ancient and ever new, enters the minds and hearts of the human family. [GC 34. d-2.17]

If we fail to enter into this dialogue, holding on to our advantages at the expense of the truth about our present reality, if we prefer our privileged >position= to this responsibility, where is the advantage in that? We adults have lived through many wars and historical changes, and we know that the world and our own lives need the most clear-sighted compassionate gaze we and our students can muster. Critical thinking about our own assumptions and about the realities of the social, economic structures in which we live, will lead to genuine dialogue between the Gospel, the Good News of God=s kingdom of justice and peace, and the diverse cultures in which we live in today=s world. This noble task of higher education is also our duty as citizens: citizens

both of a particular nation, and of the human community, called to become the Kingdom of God. Or, to use the language of the Stoics of ancient Greece and Rome, citizens of the world, *kosmou polites*.

Better still, I remind you of the commencement address given in May of 1948, by Spring Hill's president, Fr. Pat Donnelly. Later published in pamphlet form, *A World Citizenship and the Unfinished Business of Democracy* reminded the graduates that *A* living organism, such as the community, the national body-politic or the international family of nations *Y* is only as sound and healthy as its member parts. Weakness anywhere is weakness everywhere. *@* He then turned to simile: *A* The family of nations all live in the same apartment-house, and there is only one house, though many apartments. This is the House that God built *CDomus Dei!* Therefore by design of the owner and architect the various families are neighbors *C* and they ought to be friendly, sympathetic, understanding, cooperative neighbors *Y* The best interests of each are the best interests of all *Y* an injustice done to one is a threat to all *@* (4-5). He then challenged the students to become *ACitizens of the World.* *@*

Our students generally expect their Jesuit education to challenge them to academic excellence, to prepare them for professional success, by acquiring skills which give them access to a special kind of life: they will be doctors, teachers, computer specialists, business managers. They will deal in knowledge putting them at the very forefront of human history. At the same time this knowledge confronts the flaws of our created world: illnesses both physical and psychological, poverty and racism, the tragedy and comedy of human beings portrayed in literature, and a human history marked by war and destruction as well as achievement.

Our students should also come to discover that their Jesuit education is inviting them to see their lives as vocation, as a calling to share in the work of building God's kingdom in today's world, an education of the heart. We teach and learn biology in order to cure disease and protect the oceans; law in order to practice justice and sociology to address all the ills that beset modern society, history and political science so as to understand the past and how to orient ourselves as citizens responsibly in this world. All of this study means that we are active in the remaking of creation, partners in the struggle to build a society which more fully promotes the kingdom of God.

Without this education of heart as well as mind, of virtue as well as expertise, we can all too easily use our skills principally to get something for ourselves, to gain access to a world marked by personal success and power: comfortable homes in gated communities, high-end automobiles and stylish clothes. A more complete education will invite us to a more genuine success: recognizing that the love of God calls us to use these gifts to create a world in which all may find a home and be participants in the human community.

It is very easy to be captured into a world of professional success and polish and to think that this is the ideal life. The prosperity that we believe to be the point of our lives and our educations may blind us to the real purposes of God. We call Abraham our father in faith because he left the comfort of his native land and followed God's call to a land he did not know. Jesus came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life for many. He reached out to those who were on the margins of society, to those who did not truly have a home or live as participants in the human community B lepers, prostitutes, the blind and lame B and for this, he was disrespected, even by those who invited him to dinner.

Do our students in choosing a paradigm of life understand the choices Jesus made, the calling to which he responded? Do they know that they also live in a world of the sick, the poor and lonely, who are the first concern of God? Do we bring into our classrooms the tension between the gift of learning, with state-of-the-art technology and beautiful buildings, and the stark reality of those excluded even from the means of participating in this world? Our minds must be challenged to think critically and investigate thoroughly, but our hearts must also be challenged not simply by concepts, but through the lived experience which awakens the understanding and opens the heart. Service learning, like study abroad, brings students to reflect on their experience of a world very different from their own, a world trapped in a web of disadvantage and desperation. Connecting with fellow humans who live on the margins of society, whether in the neighborhoods of Mobile or in other nations, opens the mind and the heart to a deeper level of learning.

The challenge of Jesuit education, of educating the whole person of solidarity, is met not only in the classroom, but in the life of the campus community, particularly a campus which provides residential living to the majority of its students. Those dedicated to the work of student life and of campus ministry share with the faculty the mission of this College. The hearts and minds of our students are also educated in the social dynamics and the spiritual growth they will experience in their years at Spring Hill. The official seal of the College calls you to this challenge: *In colle exaltatus fons sapientiae*, a spring of wisdom lifted up on the hill. That spring refers not simply to the fresh waters that flow out from this hill, and not simply to the wisdom that should emerge from years of study, but also and primarily to the wisdom that flows from the heart of God's love, a love made flesh in Christ who gave his life, lifted up on the hill of Calvary. Between your new library and restored chapel is a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, with the inscription, *O Cor Iesu, fons omnis sapientiae et scientiae*, Heart of Jesus, spring of all wisdom and knowledge. Is this not a reminder that education of the whole person is ultimately an education for love: the love of learning, the love of life, the love of God and neighbor. As we conclude, let me call to mind the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., words which provide a ringing challenge to Spring Hill's mission of educating for the common good of the global human community:

In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime—the crime of extremism.

Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

The spirit of Dr. King and the thousands of people he worked with set the races on a different course in the United States. Could that same spirit not also alter the destructive dynamics of a world torn apart by massive inequalities, violent reprisals and a growing culture of desperation? In that same spirit, we must have the courage – and teach our students the courage – to be bearers to the world of this transforming love, co-creators of a more deeply human world, collaborators with Christ in the building of God’s Kingdom.