

Address to Loyola School on February 23, 2010 at the Academic Convocation, delivered by Mr. Fred Agnostakis.

Good Afternoon, Fr. Katsouros, Mr. Lyness, Dr. Bolton, members of the faculty and student body and parents:

To prepare for this talk on academic excellence, I went to a source renowned scholars have consulted for centuries when a definition or idea escaped their grasp -- *The Oxford English Dictionary*. But this explanation did not suffice. I thought it merely brushed the surface of what our much deeper inquiry sought to uncover. So I consulted Fr. Curry on his thoughts on academic excellence. Fr. Curry stated:

- Have an open mind. Update oneself in specialty.
- See the big picture.
- Help those less gifted. Help each person reach his or her potential.
- Don't let the classroom get in the way of your education.
- See the relationship between ideas and movement. It's not so much what you learn, but what you do with what you learn.

St. Ignatius recognized the importance of education as a cornerstone for leadership in Christian life; and so he formalized the Jesuits as Christian teachers, founding over 546 colleges, and 148 seminaries in Europe alone, while sending St. Francis Xavier to Asia to carry on the Jesuit ideal of education and spirituality. This education has a strong spiritual component that helps develop three essential requirements for true leadership: a capacity for intellectual growth, reflection, and the desire to be of service.

In his book *The Jesuit Mystique*, author Michael Higgins states, "One need not be a Christian to benefit from the spiritual exercises." This slim book, with its hobbling syntax, and almost total absence of literary grace, has been influential for more than 400 years among a small group of mainly Roman Catholic Christians.

At present, however, the exercises are enjoying an unprecedented revival of interest both within Roman Catholicism and well beyond its boundaries among Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Quakers, Mennonites, and honest God-seekers who belong to no church and Agnostics -- all taking part in growing numbers of courses, retreats and workshops inspired by this book, the "spiritual exercises." Prayer and reflection are often accompanied by a communication of insights, and this communication can lead to sweeping changes in many lives.

Ignatius went back to school after his conversion. He attended school in Barcelona with schoolboys who often teased him because of his age. He attended 2 universities in Spain before heading off to the University of Paris. He understood that all we do is a gift of generosity. He learned by experience how life of prayer and penance might be combined with that of teaching and study.

Eventually he called that idea “Contemplative in action.”

Leaders do more. If leaders are visionaries, then leadership is the art of creating possibilities, and the leader’s task is to build effective teams. They teach responsibility and integrity, and serve as examples of both. They empower and inspire through presence without fear of risk. They listen to others in order to help with the needs presented.

Athletics, like all fields, builds leaders and helps you discover the world. The Vancouver Winter Olympics inspires us when an athlete stands on the podium with his or her gold medal. The Americans have taken an academic approach to the winter games. Gone are the days when a few American kids from the countryside could ski or skate. The “Center of Excellence,” which opened up in Park City, Utah, where specializes in “sports science” and is in full operation. American Olympic athletes work closely with physiologists, kinesologists, nutritionists, technology experts, and NASA aerospace engineers. These scientists interpret the athletes’s physical data, sport specific movement, anatomical strengths and weaknesses and tailor workouts for them.

The best moves of snowboarding gold medalist Shawn White may be when he works and plays with kids who have leukemia. Gold medalist and downhill racer Lindsay Vonn, speeding downhill at 80 miles per hour, inspires little girls with her gutsy hard work and her ability to get back up when she meets an injury. Ski champion Bode Miller, the all-time men’s medal winner, said of Vonn, “When she first came up, the men on the ski team asked ‘who’s that girl’ as she raced down the mountain.” Miller replied, “I don’t know, but she is taking the men’s line down the hill and using our skis.”

Super bowl winner Drew Brees, Quarterback for the New Orleans Saints, said before the game – “The team all knelt down in the locker room declaring they will win the game for the people of New Orleans, not ourselves.”

At Loyola School, we call upon the faculty to be leaders. For example, Christian Gregory teaches American Literature by inspiring his students to share their creativity with the community in productions, such as Coffeehouse and publishing the Award winning Lit Mag.

History remembers many leaders. But Mr. Sullivan’s dynamic lectures turn the past into the dramatic present. The excitement of ideas generated in his classroom overflows into the halls. His witticisms echo within one for days, as he makes history relevant. To our lives, he brings history to life and awakens the possibility in us of this quote offered by Mahatma Gandhi “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Leadership knows no gender. Eleanor Roosevelt, first lady during the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was active in the Civil Rights Movement, inviting African–American opera singer Marion Anderson to sing at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, when she was denied her performance to play to an integrated audience at Constitution Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt also acted as an unofficial ambassador to the disenfranchised, such as coal miners laboring in unsafe conditions, destitute farmers, and the poverty-stricken, voicing their concerns in the oval office. In doing so, she inspired strength throughout the Great Depression.

Loyola alumna Captain Karin Carolyn, graduate of Loyola School and The United States Military Academy at West Point served as a Logistics Commander during the NATO conflict in Bosnia. Building schools and then designing their infrastructure, Ms. Carolyn helped reconstruct a battered nation just as Eleanor Roosevelt did three generations before her.

Ms. Buckley-Lawson’s students learn Spanish, but she gives them an opportunity to immerse themselves into the cultural exchange by studying abroad in Spain.

Ms. Meuler opens a new world to her students with hands-on work in sculpture, film, drawing and art appreciation.

The art of dance builds leaders and helps you discover the world. Ms. Nagy encourages her dancers to be leaders by having them take a major role in their performances for all of you.

And then there is Arthur Mitchell, a dancer in the NYC Ballet under the direction of George Balanchine. He brought his talents to the children of Harlem, who had little opportunity to study dance formally. He created The Dance Theater of Harlem to do just that. And the sports enthusiasts among you may be interested to know that he recruited his male dancers among young basketball players at public parks, promising to teach them something that could help them with their jump shots -- it was called a *plié*.

Jacque D’Amboise, another Principle Dancer with the NYC Ballet, brought his skills in dance and expressive movement into the NYC Public Schools, and in the country of China

We have examples of such selfless service around us every day. The Loyola Brownbaggers have emerged early on many a Saturday morning to hand out food to the homeless and needy. She also directs the Baby Bottle Drive, the Canned Food Drive, and Your Closet Drive. These actions, which Ms. Kusk developed and implemented on her own, served as a precursor to the Loyola service program and what it is today.

Mr. Bludgus states, “Academic Excellence is closely related to committed to doing justice.” He wishes his students to go forth in the world always striving to learn and understand the world more in order to serve others better. As President Obama said in the State of the Union, “The best anti-poverty program is education.” Mr. Bludgus has done just that. He founded a school

in Tanzania, Africa, which reaches out to street kids, orphans, runaways, and abandoned kids. The school provides food and a safe place to live, while learning.

Scientists are among the most influential leaders in contemporary society and they still ask us to understand things that may be very simple; that are, in fact, far too simple to grasp without an initial doubt. Scientists challenge convention, just as Ms. Meyers and Mr. Joseph challenge all of you to extend the boundaries of your thinking by studying DNA, genetics, and atomic fusion.

In 1803, Lewis and Clark were sent by President Jefferson to Explore the American West. Also, they were to document what they saw. How did they meet the challenge? They described Yellowstone, the Grand Tetons, and the Columbia River to those in the colonies who never saw anything quite like them. Similarly, Mr. Richroath and Ms. Gelfand guide you though technology and library science as it extends its mission into the 21st century.

Perhaps the universal thread weaving together these profiles is that leadership involves decisions that often depend on bravery. As we celebrate “Black History Month,” we are reminded that Rosa Parks stood for a cause when she refused to give up her seat to white man. “Because I was tired,” she later claimed. But she was not just tired from one day’s work; her refusal was not made only on her behalf. A leader may enact a decision, but its consequence -- its struggles, its victories, and the ongoing efforts to secure that good-for which the struggle has been made – reverberate within us all. We share the duty of leadership or it will fall.

Thus, leaders serve as models for others; they uphold what they find of greatest value; they share their vision of the good. Their actions, guided by prayer and reflection, are the truest demonstration of their thoughts. When I sat where you are sitting now, President John F. Kennedy declared the challenge with which I will close: “Let the word go forth from this time and place that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans.” I ask you: what kind of leader will you become and how will you empower others? And what kind of legacy will you leave?

Thank you.