

Alpha Sigma Nu Induction Ceremony Address

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Thanks to Laura, Karina, and Dr. Willis for inviting me to address you, our Alpha Sigma Nu inductees, on this great occasion. As an ASN member and a triple product of Jesuit higher ed, with my undergraduate work at Boston College, graduate studies at Fordham, and now my career here at SCU, it's an honor to be with you.

I'll frame my comments tonight around ASN's core values: scholarship, loyalty, and service. But rather than reflect on these values in a face-value way—talking about scholarship as studies or service as community engagement—I'll look at these values through the lens of three core principles of the Ignatian tradition: contemplation, discernment, and action. After all, we're here as members of a Jesuit Honor Society! But even more importantly, I think this approach will greatly enrich our understanding of these values and open broader horizons for thinking about what it means to be formed in the tradition of Jesuit education and to belong to an *august Society* like ASN in terms that take us beyond “this will look great on my resumé” and lead us to reflect on who we are and discern how we can contribute to cultivating social and ecological justice by bringing our gifts, our knowledge, our passions, to the needs of the world.

So, first: scholarship. At face value, being recognized for scholarship might sound like “getting good grades,” or “being smart”—whatever that means. But in Jesuit tradition, studies aren't undertaken for their own sake. They're not undertaken for the sake of getting internships, good grades, good jobs—and certainly not to get rich! Scholarship is an art, a practice of life—a way of proceeding. It's most basically a practice of *contemplation* that cultivates an informed awareness about the world—and especially about suffering and injustice—so that we can bring our gifts to the world's needs. I first encountered real suffering—suffering that broke the shell of privilege I didn't even know I had for the first 22 years of my life—when I was teaching on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation as a Teach For America corps member. I'd heard of systemic poverty. I'd *studied* it. I thought I understood it. But *seeing* it—seeing people struggling to *exist* on barren land because of a history of oppression—changed everything. No longer was *scholarship* just about learning, or “book smarts.” It was about deep *encounter* and reflection on the world. This

is more than an ELSJ requirement can give us. It's about being authentically present to people and the earth, *listening* to the earth and the human poor when they cry out for justice. In the Jesuit tradition, then, scholarship is about attuning our minds and our hearts—Ignatius always integrates thought and feeling—to what the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador called *la realidad*, the total socio-ecological and political reality of which we're part, and contemplating that reality with a particular attentiveness to injustice and suffering.

This *requires* deep learning, but again, the learning is not an end in itself—or even a means to an end: a job, a paycheck. Because you are more than your grades; you are more than your major; you are more than the internship or job you get—or don't get. You are amazing, beloved, and certainly not reducible to your expertise or credentials. You are not a cog in a wheel; you are a *whole person*. Ah, but scholarly contemplation reminds us, Benson Workers are whole people, too, as are the poor of El Salvador and Pine Ridge, adjunct lecturers crying out for a living wage—all people who receive unequal pay for equal work. And not just humans: the goodness and integrity of Earth is being degraded by an ongoing *lack of contemplation*—as ecosystems collapse, lands and peoples are degraded by fires and storms, beautiful, intricate species go extinct—breathing their last in the name of human “progress.” In all of this, I think it's a lack of awareness coupled with an unspoken belief that some people, some creatures really are more valuable than others that drives this system of oppression. But engaging *la realidad* in *those* terms, encountering suffering, contemplating it deeply, bringing our *understanding* to bear on reality in service of a greater good: this is the heart of the Jesuit understanding of scholarship. Finally, I'll say that this stance of deep contemplation and informed awareness that arises from the Jesuit tradition of scholarship and is projected towards the needs of the world *humbles us* and calls us to *integrity*—on a cosmological scale. After all, right now, there are quarks with statistically indeterminate properties flying around your head. How often do you think about that? (My favorite property of quarks is “charm”—the *allure* of quantum particles—scientists are weird.) Not only that, but think of the great redwoods of our local ecosystem, which over the course of their evolutionary history developed the capacity to *drink fog*—how's that for a Bay Area ecological relationship?—and to return that fog to the world as oxygen, the breath of life. That process is happening all around us, and we humans *depend on it*. Trees don't need us—but

we sure need them. “Who’s superior now?” they ask us. Humility. In light of this ecological and evolutionary interconnectedness, in my classes I often invoke the “Spider-Man principle”: “with great power comes great responsibility.” What if rather than thinking that our big brain mass and capacity for critical thought makes us *superior*—recognizing that not too long ago White folks were using this same argument to assert superiority over peoples of color—what if instead of superiority, our advanced capacities actually make us *more responsible*, more *accountable* to the needs of the world. Rather than trying to change the world to meet our own needs, whether individually or as a species, what if we used our powers to transform injustice into justice, degradation into flourishing, suffering into joy?

We could do that if we wanted to. The world doesn’t have to be the way it is. Remind yourself of that every morning when you wake up. The world doesn’t have to be the way it is. So much for scholarship, or contemplation of reality. To my mind, the principal fruit of this idea of scholarship is a stance of *discernment*, which is the way I’m going to interpret ASN’s second value: loyalty. How do loyalty and discernment connect?

We often think of *loyalty* as a commitment to an institution, a relationship, a team: the Dubs, Niners, your spouse, ‘Murika—you name it. In light of the ways Jesuit higher education sees scholarship as a basis for contemplation and action for the common good, I’d suggest that loyalty in Jesuit education isn’t so much about being a *proud Bronco*—though of course that’s good, too!—as it is about living a commitment to the values and vision of Jesuit education. This means committing ourselves to the needs of the world, not to institutions; with loyalty to the idea that “another world is possible”—that the status quo is often unjust, but it can change.

Hand in hand with the vision of scholarship I’ve articulated, loyalty to this *vision* of flourishing, justice, and love invites us into a posture of *discernment*. By committing ourselves to such a vision—which in practice means committing ourselves to a vision of flourishing that says all creatures—human and other—have a right to live, thrive, and have what they need to live a full life reorients our priorities and pushes us to consider *in every moment* how we can use our intellectual and material resources to serve the world. Whereas loyalty to institutions can often blind us to suffering, creating insider and outsider categories that excuse injustice—loyalty to a vision challenges us to look out to *la realidad* and ask, “What is going on here? Where’s the

good, and where's the bad? Who is suffering? What can I bring to the needs of this place and time? If loyalty to one thing ever leads you to ignore suffering, or feign ignorance in the face of social or ecological injustice, then I'd invite you to reconsider the object of your loyalty. After all, whether institutionally or personally, accepting the status quo is a *choice*—but *loyalty* to the vision of Jesuit education is a way of proceeding, a stance of life that calls us continually to discern what's right and wrong, good or bad, lifegiving or demeaning, and to act accordingly. And that brings us finally, and most briefly, to service.

The third ASN value, service, is practically a commitment to *action*, or better, as a way of proceeding (and a way of connecting the dots of what I've shared), it is a call to contemplation-in-action through ongoing discernment with minds and hearts attentive to the needs of the world. In this sense, service is not about *charity* in the narrow sense—of giving some resources here or there or showing up once in a while to do something good for people in need, or hugging a tree or cleaning up a pond. Service is a *way of life* that arises out of scholarship and loyalty—out of contemplation and discernment. By being attentive to and deeply knowledgeable about *la realidad*, we as inheritors of the Ignatian tradition are called to do what needs to be done. In Ignatian lingo, this is about *Magis*, which doesn't mean “doing the most” but means doing that which brings about the greatest, most expansive good in any situation. It's a holistic orientation that calls us all to use our intellectual, personal, and material resources, our voice and our money, the whole of our lives, to transform injustice into justice, to speak out against oppression, so that all may flourish in freedom and the fullness of life. That's the vision that the Jesuit tradition gives us, and that to me is the gift and challenge to ASN members: to use our scholarship, loyalty, and service—our contemplation, discernment, and action—to build a better world. Congratulations, and go set the world on fire! (but not literally!)