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THIS LAND IS HOME TO WHEELING JESUIT UNIVERSITY:

Imagining Wheeling Jesuit University Afresh On Its 50th Anniversary

Financial challenges have hit many institutions of higher learning, and this fiscal blight has raised legitimate concern regarding the future of Wheeling Jesuit University. However, simply continuing to exist as a university is not the most important issue. Rather, it is paramount that Wheeling Jesuit be an institution of the Society of Jesus enfleshing values that gave it birth as a Christian “ministry” or “apostolate.”

Just as when it was founded, so now the University is challenged to discern what the region does not have and what it might uniquely provide. After all, West Liberty and Ohio University Eastern are state institutions of higher learning whose educational mission has much in common with that of Wheeling Jesuit. So why should this school “stay in business” if it does not make a distinctive contribution to the Appalachian region—a contribution that is consistent with its genesis as an institution of the Church?¹

In general terms, West Liberty and Ohio Eastern provide an educational opportunity for residents of the area just as does Wheeling Jesuit. Employees associated with West Liberty and Ohio Eastern no doubt take pride in the work they do just as

¹ I recently visited Berea College in Berea, Kentucky and listened to its president address the assembled. I thought I was hearing Wheeling Jesuit promotional material when he proudly began his presentation with the words: “At Berea College, we educate the WHOLE person—their mind, their heart and their spirit.” Since many at Wheeling Jesuit (myself included) utter these same words, it might be that what we think is our “distinctive” pedagogy has become a cliché in higher education.

employees at Wheeling take pride in theirs. However, Wheeling Jesuit was not founded simply to mime the actions of other regional facilities, and its employees should not be content simply to perform their tasks as conventionally done at state schools.

In light of its resemblance to other institutions, the University is challenged to seek what the founder of the Jesuits referred to as the “*magis*”—the “more” it offers students that they would otherwise not receive if the school did not exist. This tradition of seeking the *magis* is at the heart of Jesuit spirituality, and entails discovering what special contribution one is called to bring to each new encounter and each new activity. As an institution, Wheeling Jesuit is called to many such moments of discovery.

Since this is an ongoing process, discovery does not occur at just one moment in history. Rather, both the institution and its employees must discern the *magis* they are being called to incarnate on a daily basis. Understood this way, 1954 was the first of many “founding” years, since each year at Wheeling Jesuit is—from the perspective of Ignatian spirituality—a year of new discovery, new challenge, new insight and new presence to the landscape and its people.²

In this tradition of seeking the *magis* and in the tradition of Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” vision, what follows is an “imagining.” That is, when considering the many talents owned by those associated with Wheeling Jesuit, it is not difficult to reflectively “imagine” what the institution could become, what the university might initiate, what Wheeling Jesuit might produce in new, creative or innovative ways. The imaginings set forth below are intended to stimulate others within the community to dream of what *magis* they, in tandem with the University, might bring to this land that is

² Recording artist Jackson Browne was quasi Ignatian when he sang “Wherever I am, I’m a day away from where I want to be” (Ignatius saying that God calls us to be “more” than we ask or imagine ourselves to be).

our home. In this imagining, we should be mindful that dreams come true (they would not have been retained in our nature were this not so).

The Theology of Dreaming

Concerns addressed in this first dream-time have as their springboard Rachel Carson's classic Silent Spring and the 1990 papal message entitled "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility." Both documents plea for innovative stewardship while the United States Catholic Conference echoed the same sentiment in its pastoral statement of 1991 "Renewing the Earth." A broad spectrum of activists, theologians and committed others, too numerous to cite, would no doubt underwrite the proposals set forth here.³ Wheeling Jesuit is within the tradition of this diverse leadership and has the moral responsibility to maintain an ecological presence that is beneficial to all who are associated with the school (especially the non-human "nations" who reside below, upon and above the turf that is their campus home). Such a presence is part and parcel of the vision made explicit in "This Land Is Home To Me"—the pastoral letter on Appalachia that was itself given birth on Wheeling Jesuit soil.⁴

Stewards of Our Campus Environment

Just as the Chemistry Department abides by state and federal guidelines relating to the proper disposal of hazardous waste, so the rest of Wheeling Jesuit is called to discern how it can best exercise stewardship of its environmental resources. At present, no one person (or committee) knows everything that transpires ecologically on the premises (i.e., the Chemistry Department addresses its concerns, the Grounds Department manages its responsibility, the Physical Plant its concerns, etc.). Insightful and highly

³ Proposals here are mainstream within the field but novel to the campus.

⁴ The full title of this document is "This Land is Home to Me: A Pastoral Letter on Powerlessness in Appalachia by the Catholic Bishops of the Region"—promulgated via a press conference in Sara Tracy Hall, February 1, 1975.

skilled people oversee campus operations, but perhaps their efforts could benefit from more collaborative interaction.

Perhaps by means of an environmental stewardship board, the University could make certain that the institution's drinking water is regularly tested, that ducks and rabbits and deer and woodchucks and other creatures not be harmed or poisoned and that every effort be made to accommodate such creatures within the web of life we commonly share.⁵ Such a board could monitor contractors so that they not disfigure the landscape or dump material that is unacceptable to the overall vision of environmental propriety.⁶ The board could establish gardens and roosts or sanctuaries to foster the propagation of endangered or native species (and attractively identify these efforts for the many visitors who might walk a stone path nature-way through campus).

A distinctive environmental consciousness for Wheeling Jesuit includes these initiatives and more. Cited here are simply the seeds for creatively delivering Jesuit education afresh in the heart of Appalachia. The University can be a showcase in the region, if not all America, by making its very premises a grand lesson in archaeology, biology and geology—showing everyone that the institution is acutely conscious of how its actions affect the environment and, by extension, all people. The vision offered here is a beacon for higher education as the campus itself would be a special classroom. It would be an ethos—an experience that students would internalize and visitors would not forget.

Very Practical Implications of Ecological Dreaming

When winters are severe, rabbits forage wherever anything edible can be found, and this results in the loss of shrubbery. Rabbits do not know that their struggle to

⁵ “Service learning” implications are rife within this topic.

⁶ Architectural design is part of an eco-consciousness that applies to West Virginia just as much as it does to earthquake-prone areas.

survive puts them in the category of a pest that needs to be stopped. In a less enlightened era, this problem could be handled easily by shooting or poisoning these creatures. However, the killing of campus rabbits runs contrary to ecological ethics and a widely-held aesthetic sense that rabbits actually cast as much appeal—if not more—than the shrubbery upon which they were forced to subsist. The presence of rabbits, ducks, deer and other forest creatures is widely appreciated by students and visitors, and every effort should be made to see that their presence continues.⁷

There is now strong evidence that our native birds cannot nest successfully on some non-native shrubs and trees.⁸ It is incumbent, then, upon campus caretakers to take into account this latest research (which Biology Department teachers and students might regularly update). Grounds and biology personnel—along with interested others—could make it their mission to showcase native bio-diversity, avoid exotics and be in close partnership with colleagues throughout the campus. Students could also be a part of, and certainly benefit from witnessing, this collaboration. Most importantly, a stronger sense of “mission and identity” would be something commonly shared, in very concrete terms, as students, grounds personnel and teachers unite in this corporate effort.

For example, the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources needs help in cataloging what species even exist within the panhandle region. Because a kind of “surveying bias” occurs in West Virginia since all the DNR biologists work in the middle and southern counties, Wheeling Jesuit might fill this unnecessary void. After all, the literature indicates that common species one sees frequently on campus are never reported as even being in the area (e.g., the Spicebush swallowtail, some of the

⁷ Ohio Dominican University takes pride in the presence of white squirrels on its campus. There since its founding, the squirrels are seen nowhere else in the surrounding region. Special to the school’s tradition, they always are noted in literature referring to the University.

⁸ Exotics might be top-sellers within the landscape trade, but they could be detrimental to preserving life-forms that depend on other trees or shrubs, plants or flowers. The state of Ohio has implemented an eradication program for such plants that have begun to eliminate native growth.

sulfurs, and perhaps even the Milbert's tortoise—which is only listed as being in Monongalia county). Those associated with such a campus project could provide the very important function of reversing this oversight.

The National Wildlife Association has a back yard habitat certification program that is worth investigating while the state's Department of Natural Resources has mini grants (\$1,000) that seem well within the reach of campus petitioners. Involvement with such projects (and numerous others) can be appended to the school's Environmental Studies and service-learning programs. Students and faculty already do extensive research related to Wheeling Creek. Now their work, and that of competent others who would join this effort, can get the attention it deserves. Sites along the creek can be designed to serve as mini-learning stations for all who pass.⁹

Welcoming Visitors to Campus

Imagine coming onto campus and sensing right away that a very special, even sacred, ground has been entered. Not only would native flora (not exotics) comprise whatever canopy and foliage existed, but it also would be identified (in the fashion of benefactor plaques). So would the varied fauna whose roosts would be constructed, or whose presence noted, by means of tasteful display-charts (deer, rabbits, raccoons, woodchucks, possum and other creatures of the earth and air could be identified much as a teacher in class would identify them).

It might well be that no exotics even exist on campus at this time and that grounds personnel are light-years ahead of this reflection. Neither a biologist nor a specialist in

⁹ No one person can put together this entire plan. Rather, the board could tap the expertise of WJU's rich resource of professionals. WJU's Biology Department would clearly be a prime asset in this venture while I, as an anthropologist, could provide display-information related to the paleo-Indian site east of Ignatius Hall. It is my understanding that Kathy Stout is quite knowledgeable of native plant life while Penny Miller, Director of the Good Zoo, has offered to assist in a variety of ways. Others, too, could make their respective contributions—physical plant personnel, grounds personnel, and educators from diverse fields. Such involvement would provide the added benefit of expanding the number of people who feel personally invested in the well-being of WJU.

landscaping authors these thoughts, and full deference is accorded grounds personnel and Fr. Acker's former stewardship of the land (his doctorate was in Biology and he regularly planted trees throughout the turf). These are not the thoughts of a priest comfortably staying within his area of competence and "imagining" an innovative décor for the Theology department's office space. Rather, they are thoughts intended to stir minds more fertile than his—persons within those other fields who might truly bring their creative energy to the revitalization of Wheeling Jesuit.

Nothing in this imagining is a critique of what exists. Quite the opposite—these are thoughts intended to build upon the good that already surrounds us. Such is the vocation of all Wheeling Jesuit employees—the "tweaking" of an already fine product such that the product—WJU—be a light on top of the mountain even more than it has been.¹⁰ Already occurring on the premises (exhibited in a chemical-free garden behind Whelan Hall) is a box turtle restoration project (a grassroots effort seeking to remove box turtles from the "threatened" list by producing hatchlings that can be placed within niches that will favor their increase throughout the state).

Imagine the existence of attractive "pollinator gardens" throughout the premises that would attract not just butterflies but all local pollinators. Since native pollinators are in steep decline, and since one out of every three bites of food needs a pollinator to make it, Wheeling Jesuit's effort in this regard would be a significant contribution. For example, there are bluish-black orchard bees already on campus. These wonderfully-made creatures do not sting, and they nest in little wooden-block nests that are easy to construct. They could flourish on campus, and be of benefit to countless people who live

¹⁰ In projects with which I have been involved, I have experienced the wise counsel and generous assistance of Grounds and Physical Plant personnel, Biology Department educators, NTTC and zoo officials. Working with this array of talent prompted me to think that such partnerships could produce some really ground-breaking educational initiatives that nowhere else can be found—regionally OR nationally. WJU would, moreover, have something on campus that it currently does not have—magnet attractions for visitors. Such is the background to, and spirit of, the thoughts expressed here.

nearby and far away. This is a very simple way that Wheeling Jesuit could be educating students and acting locally such that its efforts impact others globally.

Finding Inspiration

Notre Dame recently published a book that recounted memories of students who visited the Lourdes-like grotto located on campus during their school days. Particularly gripping are accounts of people praying for assistance and getting some direction in life that eventually helped them become a man or woman for others. Also recalled are friendships (some evolved to marriage) that first began while visiting the shrine. Such a spot—clearly within the tradition of Ignatius—could serve a similar role at Wheeling Jesuit. Constructed for the campus community, the University grotto could conceivably become a pilgrimage destination for family members of students, graduates and others who seek inspiration associated with this place of prayer.

Imagine groups of elementary and secondary school children, people from the region, family-members of students and tourists coming onto campus and looking for what has been advertised as something of a “nature walk” through Appalachia. At the entrance to Wheeling Jesuit, a rock pathway could lead visitors behind the CET and around the perimeter of the campus toward Ignatius Hall—with plaques along the way that point out and describe the flora and fauna—going past Sara Tracy, along Wheeling Creek, behind the McDonough Center (where fossilized avian footprints are in evidence) and up the hill toward Ignatius Hall. There, overlooking the back gate, an outdoor display could describe the lifestyle of American Indians from centuries past who once inhabited, and left artifacts at, this very site. The pathway could extend in any number of directions elsewhere on campus, and indicate—via signs—all that one can learn about the special niche that is home to Wheeling Jesuit. Significantly, the path would at some juncture lead to a grotto prayer site—a kind of Wheeling counterpart to Manresa or

Lourdes—where visitors can give thanks to the Creator who so blesses their lives with all things great and small.¹¹

Educating Anew

Just as there already exists a faculty committee known as the "Institutional Review Board" that oversees research involving human subjects, and just as there might be a committee charged with preserving and protecting campus inhabitants from pollutants, so might there be a collaborative educational group that solicits input for and oversees initiatives that can enhance and affect the campus landscape. Comprising persons committed to the "mission and identity" of Wheeling Jesuit, persons with special skills such as grounds personnel, environmental studies majors and educators with expertise in the sciences and theology, such a board would be charged with innovatively transforming the campus into a holistic learning center wherein the many natural gifts of Appalachia would be specially featured, studied, showcased and preserved. By this means, Wheeling Jesuit could well be a kind of second Eden, a sacred space that gives testimony to the proper stewardship of God's creation.

Wheeling Jesuit and Artistic Dreams

While the beauty, or "curb appeal," of Wheeling Jesuit's campus always elicits praise, visitors usually conclude their tour of the premises in a very short period of time. Once the McDonough Center and Chapel have been visited, there is little else to see other than the residence halls (where there is nothing noteworthy to view), classrooms, library and dining room. At these sites, there is no reason to linger since they are all quite conventional in their layout.

¹¹ Such a spot on campus would be a site that no state school would permit, and would certainly be consistent with the mission and identity of a Jesuit institution. Specifically addressing the importance of a spirituality that integrates proper stewardship of the environment, WJU graduate and professor of business, Dr. Edward Younkens has written: "Between ourselves and God, we always have to give an account of what we do with whatever he puts in our care" (Review of The Cross and the Rain Forest: A Critique of Radical Green Spirituality in *Free Life*, 4/99).

In light of the above, and in light of there being no comparable facility in the region, additional enhancement of the campus might take the form of a kind of “Appalachian Aesthetics Center,” “Art Museum” or, for lack of a better term, “Visitor Center” accessible to guests year-round. Currently, a case exhibiting Native artifacts collected by University founder Cliff Lewis, S.J. is the only “visual” on the premises (it is in the vestibule of Donahue Hall) that visitors might look at, linger with and learn from—in the tradition of a museum display.¹² Perhaps, then, our “Visitor Center” (akin to what currently exists at “Tamarack” south of Charleston) could be given a place somewhere on campus. Perhaps this facility could show guests a history of Wheeling Jesuit and offer other aesthetic fare that would sustain interest and educate. While a permanent collection of artifacts could serve as a kind of Louvre for Wheeling Jesuit, the area would also accommodate changing displays, and provide variety to what is offered visitors.

The Publication of Dreams

The initiatives suggested above can transfigure Wheeling Jesuit, and this dream is contingent upon one very concrete reality that currently exists. Namely, the campus contains a goldmine of personnel generically categorized as teachers, grounds personnel, campus ministers, coaches, CET and NTTC employees. Within this treasure trove of God’s human blessings, there exists creative thought and other noble dreams that are waiting to be born and given expression. Such is why it might be worthwhile for a Wheeling Jesuit University Press to begin operation.

Just as a number of other Jesuit universities operate modest publishing enterprises, so might Wheeling Jesuit—not just for the purpose of producing the variety of year-round operational and public relations pamphlets that are necessary for the

¹² I set up this display case in 1995. When I chaired the social science department at Bay Mills Community College, I set up and curated a modest museum that featured Native arts. This facility won special praise from the North Central Association during the college’s accreditation process (March 1993). In light of this background, I would be willing to spearhead this initiative.

institution, but also for the production of books and manuals, essays, novels and all printed matter which personnel within our ranks might creatively produce and market.¹³

Courses across the disciplines could be tailored to the special interests of professors.

They, in turn, could generate their own course content based on an intimate knowledge of Wheeling Jesuit students. While the educational benefit of this initiative is transparent, an economic benefit would also accrue to students (reduced cost of textbooks), teachers (royalties) and Wheeling Jesuit itself (a percentage of profits).

Transcendent, Practical and Monetary Values

The above sampling of dreams embodies a theology and philosophy long advocated by Church leaders, environmental ethicists, social activists and diverse Jesuit and lay educators. Were one or more of the above imaginings suddenly to exist on campus, Wheeling Jesuit would be a very significant, regional attraction for tourists and locals. Teachers from all levels, too, would have a “must see” field trip destination. All would want to visit, and learn from, the “stone path nature-way,” the museum and grotto at Wheeling Jesuit.¹⁴ Such innovations would join the Challenger Learning Center which today exists (apart from athletic facilities) as the sole “magnet” for visitors to campus.

Two of the dreams appeal to persons who care about the mandate of Genesis to properly steward the earth’s resources, especially those who admire the tradition of St. Francis of Assisi (whose relationship to nature remains a standard for imitation). Each of the dreams lies within the tradition of Ignatius, founder of the Jesuits, who taught that

¹³ In preparing this paper, I contacted the Marquette University Press and asked for an overview of their operation. I also contacted a local printer and inquired about the costs associated with publishing books. Both conversations were encouraging, and I would be willing to spearhead this initiative, too (even forsaking my full-time classroom presence for part-time presence or indefinite leave).

¹⁴ University students, guided by their professors and campus caregivers, could help with, and upgrade, the environmental projects and the art museum. Moreover, their peers could always be in a learning situation by literally living in an educational environment that extended outside the classrooms.

God could be seen in all things—in good times and bad, in sickness and in health, in riches and in poverty, until death and beyond. Even those outside a faith tradition could be fellow travelers with the Wheeling Jesuit community because such persons share a common interest in the earth's proper stewardship. Creative initiatives are needed within the field of ecology, and such contributions transcend the barriers of belief or unbelief. Transformation of the Wheeling Jesuit campus into one grand outdoor classroom would also appeal to anyone wishing to partner with an institution that does justice by reverencing the environment which is our common home.

The Dream of Celebrating Community

On each Saturday in the spring, faculty, students, employees and friends of Wheeling Jesuit often pass one another at the many garage or lawn sales held throughout the region. On one weekend each spring, the campus stages what has become known as “last blast”—a social event that some eagerly anticipate because it is a kind of homegrown, mind-numbing, alcohol-based party. Incongruously staged the weekend before final exams, the event prompts others to stay away from campus because such fare is not felt to be particularly life-giving, or even consonant with Wheeling Jesuit's mission and identity. On yet another Saturday each spring, erratically advertised and attended, the Organization of International Students presents a very entertaining and educational “ethnic festival” at the McDonough Center that includes epicurean foods from around the world, song and dance of the globe's many nations.

In dreaming of what can be instead of what is, might there not be an event that blends all of the above, and offers all Wheeling Jesuit employees—students, teachers, administrators, housekeepers, everyone—a day of fun, profit and camaraderie? On a Saturday newly-named (a “handle” attractive to all—perhaps hatched by a competition or spawned in marketing classes), the ethnic festival can be reorganized into an international

buffet dinner period at which live, multi-national entertainment might be offered.

Perhaps audience participation can take place *a la* dancing as the night progresses and after ethnic (and other) performances have occurred. This dinner-theatre would follow upon a day that witnessed the campus alive with ALL Wheeling Jesuit employees and student-groups at designated spots throughout campus—conducting “garage sales” or food sales or some sort of fund-raising event of their own (the garage sale sites could, as is the tradition for them, operate from 8 a.m. to noon while the other concessions and events could occur throughout the day).

This event would be advertised throughout the region and would include a mailing to parents welcoming them to share the festive occasion with their sons or daughters before exam week (n.b., the origin of “last blast” was, in fact, a family event attended by parents). Signs with arrows pointing in appropriate directions could greet visitors to campus who would see one “sale” or concession fund-raiser site on a lawn here, one there, one over there, and perhaps at classrooms within Donahue or Acker, or in the McDonough Center.¹⁵

Besides faculty, physical plant and housekeeping personnel, NTTC and CET employees, campus clubs (e.g., student government sanctioned organizations) and athletic teams might set up a soda or hot dog stand, a dunking booth or carnival game, or some marketable-item stand. After all, numerous groups need to raise funds for projects they undertake or tournaments and conferences they wish to attend. This event would afford them a wonderful opportunity to meet their goal. Profits at each of these sites (be they garage sales or food-stands or carnival fare) would go to the persons or groups who operate them.

¹⁵ Vendors might be given 2 sites at which they could set up their goods—one site in case of good weather would be on a WJU lawn while another site would be at an indoor location.

Ads could appear in the newspaper that feature this event as something like “Wheeling Jesuit Community Day,” “Wheeling Jesuit Jamboree,” “a day featuring the largest garage sale in the tri-state area operated by university employees,” “End your day with international cuisine at the international buffet sponsored by the Organization of International Students,” or “International buffet and entertainment begins at the McDonough Center from 5 until . . .” Townsfolk, parents, teachers, housekeepers, secretaries, physical plant people, CET, NTTC, Campus Ministry, Security—the ENTIRE Wheeling Jesuit community might all be involved in what COULD be a wonderfully pleasant day of mixing and mingling and shopping and eating, dancing and singing.¹⁶

A byproduct of this event would be the gentle demise of “last blast” weekend in its present form since its present form does not reflect well on a University that no longer can even subsidize it. Envisioned here, by contrast, is a social event that promises broader student, parent, alumni and community involvement. Moreover, since the University cannot fund student groups to the extent it once did, this new event would provide an opportunity for such groups to recoup their loss and benefit from having the responsibility to finance their own efforts. More than ever before, a good time can be had by all.

¹⁶ WJU employees could do their spring cleaning at home, and then bring their sale-able items to campus. Besides creating an *esprit de corps* within the ranks of Wheeling Jesuit employees, the University would also be extending a welcome hand to people from the tri-state area who might not be familiar with the campus—hence there would be a “recruitment” aspect to the day, too. As this is being written, efforts are underway for half of this idea to be implemented in the Spring of 2004—the “garage sale” aspect.

“Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions . . . [U]pon the servants and the handmaids . . . I will pour out my spirit. And [through them] I will work wonders . . . on the earth”

This vision of the prophet Joel is the promise wrought by a Wheeling Jesuit education. Graduates have learned how to make a living, but more importantly they have been taught how to live. Ideally, they will not just “fit in to” the world but rather work wonders in it.

At the grotto imagined earlier, or at special sites on campus that witness much pedestrian traffic, tenets of Jesuit spirituality can speak to people by means of attractively forged plaques that would be clearly visible to passersby. One such plaque (among many) might be the inspirational prayer of St. Ignatius “for generosity” that reads:

“Lord, teach me to be generous. Teach me to serve you as you deserve.

To give and not to count the cost. To fight and not to heed the wounds.

To labor and not to ask for rest. To toil and not to ask for any reward

except that of knowing I do what you, Lord, want me to do.”

Seeing a prayer like this one, people will better understand the spirit that gives life to dreams and visions residing within our community at Wheeling Jesuit University.

Making this prayer (and others) their own, campus visitors might be inspired to dream, work wonders and discover the *magis* they were created to bring into the world. Making come true the dreams described in this paper would enhance a Wheeling Jesuit education that is already so special a gift to so many.

Postscript

In facing the varied challenges of our national economic woes, Wheeling Jesuit’s president, Fr. Hacala, often calls upon the community to concentrate on our “glass being half full” and not to think of it as half empty. In light of the promise and possibilities

described here, one easily can affirm the president's encouragement and be only optimistic in concluding that Wheeling Jesuit's cup, indeed, runneth over.