

Speech by Rector René Chamussy, s.j.

**A Jesuit university in Lebanon :  
requirements and specificity**

on Saint Joseph Day, Patron Saint of  
Université Saint-Joseph, the 19th of March 2012



Excellencies

Rectors of the Universities of Lebanon Ladies and Gentlemen,

Presidents of Professional Associations Instructors

Representatives of the General Services Staff Students' Delegates

Presidents of Alumni Associations

Dear Friends,

It was not useless to listen to what Pope Benedict XVI said, on that day of summer 2011, in Madrid, about the University (Meeting with Young University Professors, 18th of August 2011). He described it as “the house where one seeks the truth proper to the human person”. And denouncing an exclusively utilitarian vision of education, he pointed out that: “the University embodies an ideal which must not be attenuated or compromised, whether by ideologies closed to reasoned dialogue or by truckling to a purely utilitarian and economic

conception which would view man solely as a consumer...” In short, he repeated, the University is about “professors and students who together seek the truth in all kinds of knowledge”.

University, a house, an ideal place for seeking the truth, a community where teachers and students meet... who could, insofar as we are what we are, challenge such indications? Nobody. However, we know that there is still much to say to celebrate our University because it has for us all its specificity. Born in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century at the heart of the Near-East, composed gradually of a multitude of teaching modules that have been taking shape through time, carried by Jesuits and lay people coming from all cultural and religious backgrounds, it has become this whole that tends to get unified while leaving at each instance its own particularity. It remains a Jesuit University that should offer Lebanon in which it is rooted and the region which surrounds it something original and fundamental, and for this we are responsible.

Are we sure we can answer such assertions? This “original and essential something” which makes our identity, have we perceived it, captured it, made use of it well? Answering such questions is not easy. We could actually plunge into the historical study of the development of our University, try to discover what was in the mind of those old time bearded old men who went through a thousand difficulties but set up and developed this institution in all its greatness, but this would be a job that is beyond our capacities and the components of which remain scattered. We could, conversely, desperately try to develop the semantic evolution of the concept of “University”, specifying

what that meant in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, back in 1875, what it means today not only in view of the Church's Magisterium, but also according to the explanations of different general congregations of the Society of Jesus (la Compagnie de Jésus) who stressed, all over the years, some ever more peculiar points, such as the obligation for the Jesuit universities to be teaching and research institutions that are “at the service of faith and promotion of justice” (as it was said in the 34<sup>th</sup> General Congregation Decree 17-1995]).

We shall take neither one of these approaches nor the other. As one French Jesuit Father Pascal Sevez said, in a lecture given at Montpellier, we think that there is no Jesuit pedagogy that can be positively recognized. However, if the early Jesuits did not want to explicitly be teachers, still they wanted to get education at the Sorbonne and it is this educational system, with all its repetitions by older students with younger ones and its practiced debates that they later had the idea to reproduce. That is how it seemed to them that they were capable of being, as Saint Ignatius wished to, at the service of the learners, in the respect of each person.

Saying that our University is truly a Jesuit University means of course saying that it is duplicating today too this primary concern of our predecessors, that it is still living of this essential intuition, but this also means trying to demonstrate it. This is what we would like to do by asking ourselves successively about the societal whole that we have built, about the training and research endeavors we develop and finally about the specific features that should apparently mark our work: openness to

the external world and innovation continues, the “ever more”, the “magis” that has made so many disciples of Saint Ignatius function, the critical look that leads to the discernment of the best etc...

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### **A political choice, an economic and social commitment**

Asking ourselves first of all about the societal whole that we have built, it is to repeat the story of a University that was originally a mere pasting of institutions or departments with specific purposes and to question the cultural, economic and political choices that prevented and are still preventing our University from being a confidence game with commercial purposes. History, I leave others to take care of writing it; I have already said it, some sketches already exist, but there is still a long task to accomplish. What is more important for us is the decoding of the three dimensions that make a whole become a society. Here there is a political gesture, some economic and some cultural engagement.

A political gesture. In the beginning and in our perspective, establishing a qualification education institution at the heart of the host society is a political gesture. There is at the same time a commitment to serve the City, an establishment of groups that are capable of investing themselves for the sake of this City. But not in any way; this will happen according to values that will always be advocated as being essential: respect of the other whatever his/her religious or political commitment is, concern

about human rights, recognition of the spiritual dimension of the person. And also according to requirements that will lead to the quick establishment (1913) of a Faculty of Law, which means that for the Jesuits at that time building the City could only rely on the solid socle of a quality legal reflection. And finally according to a concern about a public representativeness of a certain section of the Lebanese society, of citizens of all confessions and of all socio-economic belongings even if priority is given to the Christian community and, de facto, to the middle to middle-lower classes.

So it is a political gesture, as well as an economic concern. If the establishment and the development of the University is a matter of finding a political position at the core of the societal whole, it goes without saying that it is also a matter of meeting the real human needs of all, by providing those who will decide to join us with the legitimate means for founding families, building productive wholes, in short surviving. Certainly, we all know that it is a matter of facing a big challenge and some will even, maybe hastily, consider that the University in the end produces mainly expatriates and unemployed. We know however, from the surveys undertaken by the University Observatory of the socio-economic reality that lately, three out of four of our graduates settle in Lebanon, while four out of five of our graduates find a job. And this is a good score compared to the national average, even if, in Lebanon itself, the jobs that are found are not necessarily very lucrative.

There is still the third dimension that is entailed by the commitment of the University to a societal whole: culture. Quoting a master of the University of Tubingen,

one of predecessors wrote: “We do not have the right to let our Universities be just teaching institutions for the various disciplines... It is also necessary that they train the human being and the moral person. We should thus awaken in all of those the sense of their responsibilities vis-à-vis the culture and make them capable of becoming guides in this field”. We cannot but refer here to those researchers who make the essential out of the culture: “Culture, said one Philippine researcher, is that inexhaustible source that determines and feeds the human behavior.” Let that source disappear – that source, i.e. « the art, the ethics, the knowledge, the wisdom, our sense of the sacred and many other things that make life worth living”, - let that source disappear and we will find ourselves facing a sequence of absurd and destructive behaviors.

So these are the three parameters that prevailed when they were taken into consideration by the founding gest of our University. There was that political gesture, there was also that concern about the economic, there was that cultural requirement. There is also, at least this is what we wish, that interaction of those three dynamics. And this is what makes us first and foremost live with our specificity.

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### **Education, research, citizen commitment**

But there is more, as we were saying, there is that whole set of training and research options that make our learning. If we happen to visit the Archives, we discover wonders. There is that

Rector who, in 1907, thirty-two years after the founding of the University, recalls before his students the training tracks that are the dearest to his heart. There are those that already exist, Theology for the young men and women who are “tormented by sublime aspirations”, Medicine for those who find in the Good Samaritan parable the incarnation of charity, and the Oriental Faculty for those who “carry on their brow, the sign, so rare, that designates the elected people of the high science”. Then there are those multiple careers that the University cannot yet offer because of the “living conditions” that characterize the country – which means that it has not yet obtained the permit for this! – but it is already offering advice about them... “Those multiple careers where the activity of the merchants, the industrialists, the engineers, the financiers, the lawyers, the consuls, and other men of work and influence”. Very quickly, the University decided to set up the Ecole d’ingénieurs and the Faculty of Law. Then, after having overcome the sad moments of the 1914 war, it set off on a process of continuous development...

In this genesis of the University, what is important is on one hand, the methods according to which the bases of this work were laid down. There was first of all and concomitantly, the care of both the spirits and the bodies, Theology and Medicine and there was immediately the concern about oriental sciences, the mark of the “high science” that is reserved to the Orient, its culture, its languages, its productions. There could have been also the Bibliothèque orientale, the *Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph* (1906), the *Faculté Orientale*, cradle of the *Institut de lettres orientales*... The *Université Saint-Joseph* at that time,

was a college where the issue of languages was raised with acuteness – Latin and Greek for some, Turkish, English for the others and French and Arabic mainly for all; but at the level of higher studies, it was already the professional excellence, but also research and publications, in short, the “high science” as will never be abandoned by our University!

So that was the specificity of our University at its early stages. It stands to reason that, with time, there were more and more trainings put in place, with faculties and institutes trying to position themselves at the university and national levels and trying to set themselves as a very well structured whole. They will all be, well trained of course, thanks to a kind of teaching that does not ignore that in order to pass, course teaching should be tackled through new educational treatment methods that also carry skills that are essential today: capacity to create in the field of business – and these are services that Berytech offers here -, taste for innovation and research – as at the Technology-Health pole and the Innovation Chair -, openness to a new type of implications that are at the service of society – and this is Opération 7ème jour here -. Teaching, research, openness to the world of labor, commitment to the good of the City, student life that is trying to be structured finally through sport or other activities; these are elements that allow us to draw the portrait of a University that has its proper style and that, day after day, is trying to shape and reshape itself in excellence.

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## **Dialogue, francophony and tradition**

But emphasizing these specific features does not tell everything about the University, beyond the specific features that we have just revealed and below the assets that we will still have to depict, there are concerns that will often reappear in the debates and that are indeed significant. Our University is Catholic but concerned with the dialogue of cultures and religions; our University is francophone but multilingual; our University is open to modernity, but faithful to the traditions received.

A Catholic University but one that is concerned with dialogue of cultures and religions in the first place. We know in this regard the final words of our Charter: The Université Saint-Joseph assumes its teaching and research task with the Christian prospect that has been its own since its foundation. It is according to this founding affirmation that is organized without any problem the whole system of values put in place at that epoch and this is how we can talk of “openness to spiritual life” or to “spiritual transcendence”, but also of “religious freedom”, “social justice”, “intellectual honesty and moral rigor”. But at the onset, the founding of the Faculté orientale then the Institut de lettres orientales is the first witness to that before the Institut d'études islamo-chrétiennes came in 1977, it is in an interreligious prospect that our University is thought. In 2002, the creation of two chairs came to give more scientific support to these assertions of openness and dialogue: the Chair Louis D of intercultural anthropology of the Rector emeritus Selim Abou and the Unesco Chair of compared studies of religions, mediation and dialogue that has just been taken back

by H.E. Mr Tarek Mitri. Our University can thus without any problem assert its Christian identity, it does not fail to reject any sectarianism, as in terms of recruitment, it refuses any confinement to one specific community.

A francophone University, but one that is concerned with multilingualism... It is not for no reason that the Université Saint-Joseph has found itself one day amongst the founding members of the Agence universitaire de la francophonie. The latter remains in fact for the University more than a label. Beyond the injunction that emanates from this theme which means cultural openness to a world that has been getting on well with some countries of the Arab world, there is this principle assertion that makes us say that a training that is founded on that socle is terribly costly. Francophony is indeed a way of grasping the real in all its dimensions. It is a method of reflection that does not hide either the scientificity, or the rhetoric, or the poetry. Carrier of great spirits, the francophony is benefiting now from a dozen new cultural spaces; it appropriates these worlds as well as so many values that are linked to it and that praise freedom and solidarity. It would be really sad to abandon such prospects and we are indeed away from even wishing it. However, what was already been mentioned in the first stages of the University is now getting a more urgent doctrine: being francophone is, of course, cultivating French like it is rightly done in each institution and Katia Haddad's Leopold Sedar Senghor Chair of francophony is the best symbol of that, but is also accepting to open to other worlds, to other languages. Therefore our University took the decision to set up a system that promoted the certification of our students' trilingualism. Therefore, we

acknowledge the importance of courses in Arabic as well as in English, in addition to the mass of courses in French. Therefore we have settled in Dubai and we could obtain the green light for some courses that could be trilingual. We should not forget other languages... always available within the USJ; soon a Faculty of Languages will open its doors.

Finally a University that is rooted in tradition, but widely open to modernity. The past 136 years cannot be erased from our collective memory. The USJ remains this institution within which so many masters have been working hard so that from it emanate those cohorts of professionals, men of letters and citizens who are capable of changing their country. It is always the same will that drives us, it is always the same concern about being ourselves while being open to all novelties. We have mentioned above, our concern about valuing this specificity which is ours; so we discover that it cannot be described with a few words, but that it is through successive strokes that we can gradually draw the portrait of a University that is eager for its originality and academics who have nothing to regret, neither their past nor their burning present.

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### **The specificities of our University**

In addition to the elements we have just revealed, there is still for us to determine what could be at the heart of ourself. Many authors wanted to say what the University should be for sure. We like to hear Noam Chomsky describe the University as “the

place where the free intellectual, the social critic can exist as well as the irreverent and radical reflection that we desperately need to escape the gloomy reality that threatens to overwhelm us”<sup>1</sup>. As we applaud the assertions of a certain Theodore Berchem declining the different forms of dialogue that should be at the core of the university behaving: dialogue between the different disciplines, dialogue between the civilizations, dialogue between the generations and with the forces of society<sup>2</sup>. But what about us, what do we have to say? We have just seen how the USJ was built, but for which dominating characteristic should we fight now?

There are no ready-made answers to such questions. Let us say however that there are some requirements that we need to live and that here lies the main thing. It is based on these very Ignatian requirements that we can insist on the four dimensions that should mark our University and describe it in its specificity. Such a University should as well be for us a place of openness to all social classes, to all differences, a place of radical questioning and discernment, a place from which we depart to get involved further in society, the place finally of innovation and creation.

“ A place of openness to all social classes, to all differences... ”. Here we find again this theme of the living-together that is so essential to us all, as well as the concern that should be ours of always hosting all those who wish to live a university training whoever they are. Meeting this desire,

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1 - N. Chomsky. *Réflexions sur l'Université*. Ed. Raisons d'Agir. Québec 2010, p. 63.  
2- Théodore Berchem. *Tradition et Progrès ; la mission de l'Université*. Collège de France. Fayard 2004.

cultivating this desire, this is an essential thing and nothing should really hinder both the reception of some and the necessary accompaniment that this involves. We have already talked above about the importance of the intercultural and the interreligious in our University; we cannot but confirm here that this openness should move to facts in a general point of view in terms of our method of living in the country as well as more specifically at the level of the institution which is ours.

“ A place of radical questioning and discernment ”. The governance exercises that we had to do taught us many things. First, that we should always establish within the institutions some mechanisms of rendering accounts. Then, we had to discover that all the processes lived by every person required to be regularly assessed; this assessment may lead of course to radical questionings and discernment of new ways that we should then approach. It is truly a hard but fundamental work, a work that supposes at the same time a great freedom of spirit – for the sake of the institution, everything I do can always be questioned – and a real capacity to discern what is the best for the University. Assessment, discernment, free appreciation and questioning, all these are concepts that are there to help us keep our institutions alive and healthy, keep our University continuously on the alert.

“ A place where we go to get ever more involved in society ”. It is F. Arupe, former Father General Superior of the Jesuits, who said it once when talking about colleges: it is your duty to “train people for the others”. It should not be different for the University. Whether it is a matter of professional dimension or socio-political commitment, the prospect cannot

change, the student of a Jesuit University cannot but be trained for the others, for serving, for changing what must be changed, for living with all those who have to develop a family, a group, a country.

“ The place, finally, of innovation and creation ”. a Jesuit University cannot finally but be the absolute opposite of any conservatism. In its core, in its heart, there should always be this dynamism that pushes each one of us to innovate, to create. The Latin word “magis” so often used by Saint Ignatius means “more” and it is the key for acting which must be inside of us. It is up to us to know how to decline this necessity as we should; we are in fact provoked, because of our engagement in such University, to do ever more in terms of giving for the country, in terms of innovation in research, in terms of creation at the institutional level. There is here like an internal requirement that should push us to always try to break the frames that hold us tight and cripple us; to always develop each one’s potentialities that are too often hidden, to always engage further in processes that carry us and involve us at the national, regional and international levels, at the level of both persons and institutions.

There is no doubt, the University which happens to be the place of so much potentiality, could not but be a University with very well marked features, a typical University, this Jesuit University which hundreds of academics, Jesuits or lay people, have been working hard, for decades, to build.

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## Conclusion

Some years ago, in the realm of the University works on what was called “ USJ 2007 ”, a manifesto was drafted concerning the mission and vision of the University, in which everything we have just exposed was inevitably mentioned. There was much talk in it about quality and participation in the life of the city. I was particularly sensitive to two items of this series of requirements. Let me come back to this. One concerned the students and invited us all and each to “allow the students to become persons who are free, autonomous, capable of undertaking thoughts, synthesis, critical judgment, initiative and having the taste of entrepreneurship, integration in a social body, and open to spiritual questionings”. Another item catches me today; it is what calls us to “use the function of reflection on the problems of society, with the concern for national unity”. These two items must remain for us calls for more real commitment within the University, within Lebanon. In fact, they aim at achieving the essential: training the student, taking care of the problems of the Lebanese society. And we see clearly in these fields that the path we still have to cross is long. We also know that it is not an easy one. It is however essential for us to get attached with passion to this task. We have said what should be a Jesuit University and that the mission we are entrusted with and which we are valuing is at the heart of all things. Helping our students become free men and women; making all efforts for the country to be able to free itself from what is crippling it: nothing could be more exciting.

This is our task, a task that we must accomplish together, which means that the educational community of our University was able to be itself by itself. A few months ago, we asked the Deans and Directors about their vision of the USJ at the Horizon 2020 and one of them rightly noted: “Currently, the teachers are accomplishing willingly and with success their different tasks... But we sense with most of them a feeling of discomfort and lack of enthusiasm. They complain of not being acknowledged, of being overloaded, of not being capable of giving time to research and of being underpaid...” All this is real and must be solved. We will not be able to make of the University what we wish it to be if we do not take such first warning signs seriously. A Jesuit University in Lebanon, it is a whole, it is a call to each one for acting, it is a concern that addresses all partners. Hopefully the coming time, whatever the storms shaking our region will do, will let us continue our path securely, while being sure that together we will be able to reach our goal, which is the search for, let us say first of all, the *truth*, which is also a training of *free* students, as we also already said, and which is finally the constitution of a community characterized by *solidarity*, as we repeat it again now. This is the core of everything.