

# The Jesuit Network's Potential

Chris Lowney

*What follows is a text prepared for oral delivery at a conference. The editors have opted to preserve the directness and liveliness of the original, rather than adapting the language to the conventions of a written form.<sup>1</sup>*

I want to invite us to a much bigger imagination of what our network can be and encourage us to take the first steps in that direction, not worrying about mistakes or failures along the way.

I am supposed to talk about leadership, Jesuit education, and social justice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it sounds like such a complicated topic that I hope you don't mind if I tell three stories, one is about the potential of the network we are all part of; the second story is about the ultimate purpose of our network; the third story is how we put our network into action.

So, even though my assigned topic is leadership and Jesuit education, my first story is about navigating ships.

We all know how to navigate. We type our address of destination into Google maps, and then the GPS device tells us, turn right in 500 meters, or turn left in 500 meters.

But believe it or not, Christopher Columbus did not have Google maps. Navigators could usually tell how far north or south they were---their latitude—but for centuries had no good way to figure out how far east or west they were, their longitude. Anyone who has been in a boat and no longer able to see the shore can imagine how frightening it would be just to float along with no radio, no way of communicating, and no way of knowing just where you were.

Terrible tragedies happened. Once a fleet of British ships were on their home after a long, long voyage, and as they got close to Britain, they must have become relaxed. But it became stormy, and suddenly they couldn't see where they were going, and because they didn't know their longitude, they ran aground in the English Channel, and more than a thousand sailors, who thought they would be seeing their families in hours, all drowned.

Many Jesuits were also lost at sea, as you know. Sometimes because their tiny ships—made of wood and no bigger than a train car—broke to pieces in terrible storms; in some years, as many as a quarter of the ships leaving Portugal or Spain never reached their destination; sometimes they were attacked: in 1570 a pirate ship intercepted a boatload of Jesuits going to Brazil; they slaughtered 40 of the Jesuits, some they beheaded; some they simply threw into the water.

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<sup>1</sup> This Conference was delivered at the World Union Jesuit Alumnae Meeting in Medellin (Colombia) on 16<sup>th</sup> August 2013.

But sometimes it was simply because of the inability to navigate that Jesuits lost their lives. In 1555, three Jesuits were shipwrecked on a desert island on their way to the Far East, and eventually starved there. But, no matter the danger, these brave men kept going, east to Asia and west to South America and south to Africa. We know some of them very well: Frs. Xavier, Claver, Ricci, Anchieta.

But many of them we do not know, because they died before their ships reached their destinations in the New World. If we judge their result in a worldly way, they failed. But they had risked their lives to start the ministries and parishes that eventually became the schools that so many of us attended, and if their sacrifice do not bear fruit in their lifetimes, surely it was ultimately worthwhile. We can be grateful for their generosity and heroism and bravery. And maybe we can also imagine that these men who never made it in some way are inviting us, each in his or her own way, to carry on the task that they could not complete, by doing our own good works, in our families, schools, churches, and communities.

But let me return to my story about navigation, because it might help stretch the boundaries of our creativity as we try to imagine what our Jesuit network might be capable of becoming. Scientists long tried, with no success, to solve the problem of measuring longitude, in order to reduce the numbers of deaths at sea. Galileo had the idea that sailors could determine their longitude by taking observations of the eclipses of the various moons around Jupiter. Galileo was smart, but incredibly impractical: how in the world was some sailor with a 17<sup>th</sup> century telescope going to stand on a rocking ship and even see Jupiter, much less make accurate calculations about its moons?

Then, a few years after Galileo, a Jesuit had a better idea for solving the problem. Athanasius Kircher, a German Jesuit who taught in Rome in the mid 1600s, has been called, “the last man who knew everything” because he was an expert in languages and mathematics and sciences. And he knew that as you get further east or west of the north pole, the needle of a compass points a tiny bit away from true north. And Kircher also knew that Jesuit missionaries were working all over the world known to Europeans at the time---in fact no human organization had a network of people in so many places, and he thought if he could get each of these Jesuits to measure how far their needles were from true north in each of their specific locations, he could prepare a very simple chart, and any sailor could tell his longitude by checking his own compass needle and comparing it to Fr. Kircher’s proposed chart. Think how many lives might have been saved thanks to the ingenuity, collaboration, intelligence, and hard work of the Jesuit network.

So he wrote to Jesuits all over the world, and they started writing back with their readings. But in the end, they couldn’t quite succeed, because 17<sup>th</sup> century compasses were too primitive for the accurate readings that would have been needed. But they almost succeeded. They tried to do something that only Jesuits could have accomplished at that time in human history.

What great leadership! Let’s think about some of the values that these men all displayed:

- They were incredibly gifted and smart; but they tried to use their gifts and intelligence, not to serve themselves and become rich or famous, but--to put it in Jesuit language-- *para amar y servir*, in service to others.
- They were innovative: they tried to pull off something that no one else had even thought of or tried.
- They were humble: they realized that if they pulled it off, no one of them would be the hero. The hero would be this chart of a thousand different compass points. Each was willing to participate in a cause greater than self, or to put it in Jesuit language, to do something not for his own glory, but for God's greater glory.
- They took advantage of their network: they realized that because they were part of a global network, and, for that reason, they were capable of accomplishing things--*if they worked together*---that no one else in the world could accomplish.

Well, today the Jesuits themselves are still distributed all over the world, in more than one hundred countries. But Jesuits hardly dominate knowledge and learning the way they once did in history. In many parts of the world, their numbers are shrinking.

But what if we all started to think about this network in a completely different way, not just the Jesuits in one network, or the alumni of my school in another network, and WUJA as its own network? What if, instead, we understood that all of us, and millions more, are somehow part of a much broader network, what we might call the "Jesuit project" or the network of those willing to live as *hombres y mujeres para los demás*. Surely there is no network on earth with such depth and diversity of the one we already are part of: we are spiritual directors, bankers, lawyers, accountants, mothers and fathers, factory workers and chief executives, very rich and very poor people, those who have wonderful connections, and those who are refugees; priests, bishops....even a Pope.

How many people are in this Jesuit network today?

No one knows. No one has even tried to count.

Just think of millions of graduates of Jesuit high schools and colleges, all of the faculties, students in *Fe y Alegría* schools, those who worship at Jesuit parishes or make retreats inspired by the Jesuits, all together, part of a millions strong network.

By no means do I mean to minimize the Jesuits themselves in this network. By no means. I wish there were more Jesuits, and I would like to ask you to join me in praying for more vocations to the Jesuits.

I do not know why there are not more Jesuits. You will have to ask the Holy Spirit. But at least for this moment, those in this room, and in hundreds more places around the world, are the team that the Holy Spirit has put on the playing field. Some of us are Jesuits and some of us are not; some of us are Catholics and some of us are not. But we are the ones

who are here, and therefore we are the ones who are somehow called or invited to exercise the leadership values I introduced

**The second story: a boy in a Jesuit high school:**

My first story, Kircher, reminds us that we have an incredible network; no one can match it. My second story will help remind us for what purpose or objective we should use our network.

This story is not about a Jesuit like Kircher in the 1600s, but about a boy in the 1970s who attended a Jesuit high school in Manhattan. I took the train to Regis high school every day, and then also attended university. Like many in my class, I was the first in my family to attend university, and we are all very grateful to Regis for preparing us to succeed in life.

One summer during my high school years, the rector invited us to volunteer for two or three days to help clean up some old offices and attics in the school. I was cleaning out an unused desk, and I found a booklet from 1964, commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my Jesuit high school.

I stopped throwing old papers into the garbage. And I sat down, and I started turning the pages and looking at photos. I saw a world that had passed away in those photos.

And then I started to read some of the words. It was a homily for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary mass for the school, and the preacher used as his symbol the Owl, which is the mascot of our school, the classical symbol of wisdom. The priest imagined all of the graduates of our school standing in front of the Regis Owl, which was taking stock of their lives. And we too, as we listen to these words—let’s imagine all of us in this room, and perhaps all 3 million graduates of Jesuit schools, standing together while the Wise Owl surveys us and our lives:

“What would impress the Owl if we all gathered under his wing in the courtyard? Our degrees? Our tax brackets? Our credit cards? Our club memberships? Certainly he would blink many times as he beholds this vast panoply of material success, but, as a curious owl, isn’t he entitled to ask: “How are you using the gifts God gave you? You used most of them well here at Regis. Do you still remember where you are going?....Are people any better because of your pilgrimage through life? Is the world any better because you went to Regis? Does your light lead our people to glory?”

Even though I was only 15 years old, I knew those words were somehow very important. And even though the photos in the book were from an old fashioned time that had passed away, I knew that these words were enduring and lasting. So I kept that book. And every few years I read it.

All of you are familiar with the Owl’s message. Most of you heard it in a different way, for example, we were told that one of the objectives of our Jesuit education was to form, “Hombres y mujeres para los demás.”

After I went to Regis High School, I was a Jesuit seminarian for a few years. And so I made the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, and one of those Exercises told me to, “Imagine Christ our Lord suspended on a cross before you, and converse with him...” And while you are looking at the cross, Ignatius says, “reflect on yourself and ask: What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?” I know that we represent here not just the Christian tradition, but other religious and humanistic traditions, but every great human tradition emphasizes that we are not here on earth to serve ourselves.

A few years ago, Fr. Kolvenbach, the predecessor of Fr. Nicolás, put it this way in a talk he gave at a Jesuit university: “the real measure of our schools lies in who our students become.”

Well, I ask us, who are our students becoming? How successful are our schools at forming these men and women for others?

The truth is, and please pardon me for saying it, most Jesuit schools have no systematic understanding of who their students are becoming. Yes, for sure, if we ask, the school officials will be able to tell us encouraging and true stories about graduates who are good parents and graduates who are helping disadvantaged people in one project or another.

But is that 5% of all graduates? 20%? 90%? We don’t know. Let me make this comparison: in the United States my Jesuit high school and university knows exactly what percentage of the graduating class of 1985 donated money to the school this year; I am not aware of any Jesuit school in the world, however, that knows what percentage of the class of 1985 are men and women for others. Many of you will tell me how difficult it would be to measure such a thing, and I would agree completely. But I would also say this: if we do not at least try to hold ourselves accountable to our highest aspirations, how can we determine how successful we are? And how can we run a business if we do not even know if we are successful?

In fact, maybe it would be interesting to mail a letter to the school’s alumni, saying that we are trying to determine how many of us are men and women for others, and ask the alumni what they think it means, at age 40 or 50, when one is a parent and working in a company, to be a man or woman for others.

### **The third story: The Pope, Leadership and dusty shoes:**

Now I want to tell a third story. The first story, about Kircher, was about the vast potential of our network; the second, about myself, was about our network’s purpose, the goal, that is: the *magis*. The third story is about our current Pope, and it is a story about how one begins to tackle a difficult challenge, like activating the Jesuit network more fully.

How do you start? You do something. Find some need and help to answer it. Anywhere. In your own school, in your own city, in your own alumni group.

That's the strategy I learned from the Pope. Some of you know that I have written a book about the leadership style of Pope Francis, which will be coming out in English in about one month. *Pope Francis: Why He Leads the Way He Leads*. And I was privileged to communicate with some of the Jesuit seminarians who were under him in Argentina, and one of the impressions I took away was Fr. Bergoglio's proactive approach and willingness to experiment. One of them told me that Bergoglio used to say, "There are too many things that need doing; we are not Jesuits to sit around here polishing our nails...."

Another one told me that while Fr. Bergoglio was rector of the Jesuit seminary, the Colegio Máximo, he was asked at the same time to take over a new parish, in a very poor district, and he asked some seminarians to help him. They sketched out a little map of the district on a piece of paper, they divided up the zones, and each seminarian was given a zone. To do what? Go there. Meet people. "meternos en el barrio y caminarlo", "no peinar ovejas sino la de salir al encuentro de todas ellas", "visitar a los más pobres y atender sus necesidades". In other words, walk the barrio, don't skim the cream (as we would say in English), meet everyone.... Go to the poorest and attend to their needs. When they came home, Fr. Bergoglio used to look at their shoes. If they had dusty shoes, he knew that they had been doing something; if they had clean shoes, he knew they had not.

They made up the plan as they went along. They discovered, for example, that there were many hungry families there, and Fr. Gauffin remembers the mentality of Bergoglio, "no podemos quedarnos de brazos cruzados ante el hambre de la gente mientras que a nosotros no nos falta nada." So they bought a big pot, put it in a field, and started doing something.

But even as we help people; they help us: Bergoglio stressed to the seminarians: when you go to the people, listen, because you are going to learn from them about life before you give them anything.

To speak in the language of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Fr. Bergoglio was teaching his community to do what our Jesuit network has always done well: we find a need, and then we create an "app" for it.

I know that you think that only Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and Sergey Brin at Google are considered the experts at creating apps. But in fact, the Jesuit network has been even more expert at creating apps. But our apps are not downloaded onto cellphones; they are uploaded into people's lives because they address real human needs.

Our spiritual father St. Ignatius saw that people needed help to be able to make important decisions in life, so he created the app that he called the Spiritual Exercises. It is still in use after 500 years: let's see if Facebook is still here in 500 years.

And the first Jesuit generation also figured out that the world could benefit from a much more rigorous, ordered, widely available system of secondary education, so they invented the app that we now call a high school, a colegio.

In our own lifetimes, the Jesuit network has created some wonderful apps.

This gentleman created one famous app [*display the slide of Fr. Velaz*]. He worked as rector of Colegio San José in Merida in Venezuela, and, his biography says, “felt a calling for greatness in service, a yearning for boldness and risk taking.” So he started a network of rural schools along the plains of Barinas, but his Jesuit superiors did not approve, so they reassigned him to the Universidad Católica Andres Bello in Caracas, the UCAB. But he refused to stop working on his app. He was convinced that: “We are messengers of the Faith and at the same time messengers of Joy. ... They are two powers and two gifts of God which can transform the world.” (J.M. Velaz, Pedagogy of Joy).

Here is his App [*displays a slide of a Fe y Alegría school*]: *Fe y Alegría* started with just a few rural open air schools; now it serves 1 million students in more than one dozen countries.

Here is another gentleman who helped create a very successful app [*display slide of Fr. Arrupe*]. You see him here tending a young person injured by the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. Late in his life he visited another suffering community, of Vietnamese boat people, and he decided that Jesuits had to do something proactive to serve this community.

Here’s his app, the Jesuit Refugee Service, which now serves 600,000 people in 50 countries.

The first thing we can do to build our network is to take the advice of the pope, not to sit with our hands crossed, but to be personally involved in some Jesuit-style app in our lives: it can be in a family, parish, or community; it does not matter if it is connected to a Jesuit ministry or not, as long as it is an *hombres y mujeres para los demás* app which functions on the *en todo amar y servir* operating system

The second thing that each of us can do, beyond our own local initiatives, is take another piece of advice from the Pope in order to make WUJA a catalyst to help our global network to function better. In Brazil for World Youth Day, the pope said, “I want you to make yourselves heard, I want the noise to go out, I want the Church to go out onto the streets, I want us to resist everything worldly, everything static, everything comfortable, everything to do with clericalism... May the bishops and priests forgive me if some of you create a bit of confusion afterwards.”

So, may Fr General and the Jesuits forgive us if we now start making a bit of noise in order to better catalyze the network into action.

Let me approach my point by extending my silly comparison: there are about 800,000 Android apps. Anyone can access them; everyone can find them; if a new one comes along and it is really imaginative and excellent, it will soon attract funders and venture capitalists who will help it grow quickly.

But what about our *Hombres y mujeres para los demás* apps? We have some terrible problems and inefficiencies: for one thing, we don't even know our own apps. I can promise you that the majority of faculty in Jesuit universities in the United States have never even heard of *Fe y Alegria*. And there is no platform where we can find all our Jesuit apps. So think of the inefficiencies. Right now, someone in Africa is trying to create new kind of spiritual retreat for young adults, and so is someone in the United States: but the two of them don't know about each other and therefore are completely duplicating effort. There is someone who wants to teach a seminar on poverty, and there is a beautiful poverty curriculum that some Jesuit university here in Latin America would be happy to share, but there is no way to connect the need to the resource. There is some Jesuit in India who has pioneered a very effective program for training community leaders, and many of us graduates would be happy to donate money so that this Jesuit can scale up his program quickly, but we will never hear about it, and he will suffer from resource deprivation.

So what should we do to help this network really become a network? I have no better ideas than anyone else in this room, but in the interest of spurring our imagination, let me make ten suggestions of possible ways we could jump start ourselves. And almost every idea I mention below could also be launched at a purely local level; so if we cannot catalyze global buy-in, we can get started in any individual city:

- We could sponsor a global day of service and reflection, where graduates of traditional schools, *Fe y alegría* schools, refugees, parish members, etc, all working together to build our common Jesuit identity and network in our city, as a symbol of who we are and what we care about
- Sponsor a networking series of lectures in our city, once every month, with those in the Jesuit network as our primary target audience
- Create a multinational Jesuit student/alumni advocacy or study group on some global issue, like poverty, hunger, or water. We could all read the same book, or encyclical, or letter from Fr. General, and then post our discussions onto an online discussion board.
- Create an international Jesuit prayer circle, so that every hour of every day, someone was praying for the intentions of the Church and the intentions of Jesuit alumni



- Create an online fundraising site to feature Jesuit-sponsored projects serving the poor.
- Launch a social entrepreneur plan competition each year, and fund the best social entrepreneurship plan, and draw on Jesuit alumni expertise to give a business training bootcamp to the best plans.
- Compile a directory of those of us who are willing to offer consulting skills, in business planning, accounting, administration, etc, on a *pro bono* basis to small Jesuit enterprises that might need our help
- Create avenues and media for the Jesuits and the Jesuit general to talk to us directly, instead of relying only on our schools: tell us directly what are the Society's needs and priorities, maybe we can help! We all know what is the most important priority of the Jesuit school we graduated from; but if we are truly men and women for others, we should know what are the top needs and priorities of the Society around the world
- We need to network ourselves, but the Jesuits also need to network themselves! Once I was going to India and called a Jesuit friend in New York to request the email address of a Jesuit there in India. He told me that he only had access to the contact information for Jesuits in his own country: I was shocked. Even in the 1980s, I had a phone book with every officer of JP Morgan all over the world: how could the Jesuits, who founded the whole idea of networking in many ways, now be so far behind? In order to motivate the rest of us laypeople to be better networked, the Jesuits themselves must help point the way.
- Go to [www.jesuitnetworking.org](http://www.jesuitnetworking.org) , add your name to the Facebook page, add a comment, share your own ideas, register yourself to learn more about networking. This is a wonderful initiative from a Jesuit I know, Dani Villanueva, and a few others, to help get networking started, to realize the full potential of the Jesuit network.

Are all these good ideas? No, I'm sure half of them are terrible ideas. Unfortunately, I do not know which are good and which are terrible! That's why we need to work together as a network, to critique the bad ideas, and to surface and support the best ones.

And, even if we try terrible ideas and they fail, that is fine. Here's what the famous Irish poet Beckett said: "Fail Again. Try Again. Fail better." Others will learn from our lessons and take the next step.

After all, here is how the pope put it:

"A church that doesn't get out, sooner or later, gets sick from being locked up.... It's also true that getting out in the street runs the risk of an accident, but frankly I prefer a church that has accidents a thousand times to a church that gets sick."

My brothers and sisters. Let's make some noise. Let's run the risk of accidents. Let's be worthy successors of Frs Kircher, Velaz, Arrupe, Xavier, Claver. Let's turn our network into what it can become.  
Thank you for listening.