

3 September 2018

Dear JST Community:

As we begin the academic year tomorrow, our school takes on new life. Professors are fine-tuning their first class. Learning technology is being tested. Students are reviewing reading lists or savoring the last hours of summer. Friends meet again after the summer away. New members to our community are settling in.

Most fundamentally, the **purpose of a university is to gather people so that meaningful conversations can take place**. The conversations inspire new thinking and creative action. But they also challenge as we engage diversity of thought and perspective that results from our blessedly diverse learning community.

These conversations are all the more important this year in light of the recent revelations in the United States and other countries about sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults by the Church's ministers and the systemic cover-up and abuse of authority that compounded the harm. There are many necessary responses, including instituting and evaluating prevention programs and insisting on accountability for those responsible for the harm.

Beyond those immediate concerns, there is something distinctive that we can offer here. As a theology center in the Jesuit and Catholic tradition, we can help the Church do its rigorous thinking and deep discernment about what lasting reforms are necessary. For example, we can explore the following questions:

- *How is authority distributed and exercised in the Church?*
- *How do we effectively contest clericalism?*
- *How do we preach the Gospel to a Church that is wounded?*
- *How can moral theology, including our tradition in Catholic social thought, deepen our understanding of the problems we now face?*
- *How do we interpret Scripture in light of sexual violence, the suffering of victims, and abuse of power?*
- *How can systematic theology and Scripture offer hope to those in despair?*
- *How can we best form future ministers in the Church to lead effectively and to accompany those impacted by abuse and disheartened by the betrayal of trust?*

I invite you to join us in the conversation during this academic year, both inside and outside the classroom, **raising your own questions and proposing some possible solutions**. Our theological, biblical, and spiritual resources offer a way forward to the reform and reconciliation that we seek. But such progress requires us to take seriously our vocations as teachers and scholars, ministers and servant-leaders.

Our faculty and staff have committed to offering in the months ahead some structured opportunities for reflection and conversation. That we engage the questions is vital, given our mission here to serve the Church. Equally important is how we engage them: thoughtfully, creatively, respectfully, and constructively. Such an approach offers a much needed corrective to the recent infighting among ecclesiastical authorities and the scapegoating of gay and lesbian Catholics, which has only served to alienate even more Catholics distressed by the current crisis.

As we do every year, we ask God's blessing on our labors, and await what God wants to teach us and how God wants to motivate us for action, as ministers of mercy and reconciliation.

I look forward to seeing you at our Mass of Welcome in the Gesu chapel, 5:15 p.m. on Friday with a festive meal to follow.

Gratefully,

Kevin O'Brien, S.J.