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“Mexico is indispensable”

Remarks by Rev. John I. Jenkins, C.S.C, President, University of Notre Dame

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Club de Industriales, JW Marriott

Mexico City

The University of Notre Dame’s ties to Mexico reach back for more than a century. In the early 1880s, it arranged for special train cars, departing from Chihuahua, to transport Mexican students bound for Notre Dame on the five-day journey to South Bend, Indiana.

One of our early university vice presidents, Father John Zahm, traveled to Mexico often and wrote extensively about its archeology, geology and anthropology in the 19th century.

But Notre Dame is better known for its historic association with the Irish because we educated so many at a time in the United States when immigrants, especially Catholics, were viewed with suspicion and who were not particularly welcome at prestigious institutions of higher education.

The name “The Fighting Irish” was first applied to our football team by nativists who sought to depict Irish immigrants as the drunken, quarrelsome Irish. Later, we embraced the name “fighting Irish” and wore it as a badge of honor.

Notre Dame was founded in 1842. Its first graduation class of young men was four years later in 1846. (Women were admitted in 1972)

Maybe it’s only a coincidence, but that same year – 1846 – the young men who would soon form the Saint Patrick’s Brigade – *Batallón de San Patricio* – left the United States to fight on Mexico’s side in the war between our two counties.

The vitriol directed at the Irish – felt by Irishmen serving in the U.S. Army who defected to Mexico – and later the Italians, and other waves of immigrants to the United States – sadly is *not* a thing of the past; certainly not for Mexicans in the United States who have been slandered in extraordinary ways, as has Mexico itself.

It is churlish, insulting political theater, for certain. But it is not only that. It suggests that the United States distance itself from Mexico at just the time that our nations are most positively

engaged with each other and poised to reap the benefits of robust trade, industrialization and entrepreneurship.

Like many universities in the U.S., Notre Dame first looked east to Europe and more recently to Asia for valued partnerships. Let me assure you, the compass at Notre Dame now points south.

That orientation is critical for understanding the changing demographics of the United States. It is critical for higher education. And it is critical for the future of the Catholic Church in the United States. It is also critical to confronting economic and social issues of the Americas North and South; and how Catholic educators in both hemispheres come to terms with providing the great equalizer – a good education – to rich and poor alike.

Notre Dame is excited by the promise of innovation and applied research in collaboration with Mexican businesses and universities. In the long run, all of that may very well buttress economies and help people out of poverty in both of our countries.

We also understand the importance of values and ethics – of how the values of our graduating students prepare them for life and specifically to cope with and combat the kind of corruption that has plagued society through the generations. For as long as there have been seats of government and corporate suites, their occupants have been tempted and often snared by corruption.

Notre Dame's mission, and that of our partners in Mexico, is to produce future leaders armed to resist evil, trained to excel in business, or scholarship, or public service, or whatever path they choose, and prepared always to do good in the world.

Early in his papacy, Pope Francis said, “we are a single human family that is journeying on toward unity, making the most of solidarity and dialogue among peoples in the multiplicity of differences.” As a Catholic institution, guided by the Church and inspired by Francis, Notre Dame celebrates the interdependence and unity of peoples and nations.

It informs our outreach to our neighbor Mexico, in particular.

Notre Dame is taking a small step today in our bold vision for our future with Mexico by opening an office in Mexico City, thanks to the generosity and engagement of many of you in this room.

It's a first step, with lots more to do, in making Mexico City one of seven global gateways in the world from which we can launch student and faculty exchanges, engage in joint research and build partnerships with business and with your great academic institutions.

We recognize that Mexico has one of the most important economies in the world, that you are one of the United States' most important trading partners, that you have a rich, enduring culture and faith, and some of the best universities in the world.

In short, Mexico is indispensable.

Our futures are joined at the border, not divided by it.

Notre Dame knows it and wants to be a part of that future.

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