

Leading with Mercy: A Profile of Rhona C. Free, Ph.D., President of the University of Saint Joseph

By Jane M. Bailey

I pulled into a University of Saint Joseph (USJ) parking spot reserved for the office of the president and took a deep breath. I was on a mission to discover the common values that USJ president Rhona Free and head basketball coach Jim Calhoun said they shared during a recent television interview on the station WFSB.

Even more than wanting to know the values of President Free, I wanted to learn about the values of the university and how they are transmitted to students. I clicked my car lock and headed past a sign for Mercy Hall. Entering the building, I hurried down the hallway to the president's office, feeling piercing eyes from the portraits of former presidents.

One of the portraits is of Mary Rosa McDonough, RSM, Ph.D., the founding sister who led the school from its inception in 1932 until 1950. It was Sister Rosa who spearheaded the development of the school itself—the buildings, the resources, the academic programs, and the culture of excellence. Dressed in the traditional nun's habit, Sister Rosa looked regal as she stared down at me; strong and serious—a nun you wouldn't want to cross. Under her guidance, a values-centered curriculum combining liberal arts and professional preparation became the curricular cornerstone of USJ.

I passed the paintings and headed through the gleaming glass door with the embedded USJ presidential seal. As the door closed behind me, I felt the quiet order of serenity. Nicest of all was the warmth of the greeting I received from President Free.

Settling into our chairs, I asked about the values of the Sisters of Mercy, since those are the foundation of USJ. She explained that helping the poor through education was the original Sisters of Mercy mission and that USJ takes that value very seriously. They actively recruit students who are first-generation college-bound and have limited means of income. About half of USJ students meet those criteria.

Sisters of Mercy today espouse a wider array of values, including spirituality, community, service, and social justice. They have identified five critical concerns (earth, immigration, nonviolence, racism, and women) that guide their social-justice efforts. These values are evident in the USJ mission “to provide liberal arts and professional education for a diverse student population in an inclusive environment that encourages strong ethical values, personal integrity, and a sense of responsibility to the needs of society.”

Today there are three Sisters of Mercy on the USJ faculty, and six more on the board of trustees who

help to guide this Mercy institution. A brochure for prospective students has a striking headline: *A University with Values & Value*. If faculty and students put their Mercy values into action, then USJ has well earned its 2017–18 award from *Money* magazine as one of the “Top 10 Best Colleges That Add the Most Value.”

Dr. Free is the ninth president of USJ, and the first non-Catholic president in the school's history. She came to USJ from secular higher education, having spent 25 years teaching and then serving as vice president for academic affairs and provost at Eastern Connecticut State University.

I wondered how that secular background meshes with leading a Catholic institution. Dr. Free said that she knew early in the interview process that Mercy values resonated powerfully with her. Having done her graduate work at the University of Notre Dame, Dr. Free understands the Catholic intellectual tradition of service, ethical development, and social responsibility. At Notre Dame, she studied political economy and delved deeply into issues of economic disparity.

When she was named USJ president in 2015, the chair of the search committee said, “Dr. Free's strong background as a teacher and administrator, coupled with her commitment to the Mercy values and faith-based education, make her the perfect fit

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for the University of Saint Joseph.”

Students have multiple opportunities to engage with the values that Dr. Free upholds. One of the tenants of the new core curriculum is “Understanding Mercy,” which includes the Mercy Integrative Capstone Seminar that requires students to engage in the critical concerns of the Sisters of Mercy. Additionally, all students must take a course in values and ethics. Community engagement experiences are threaded throughout a student's program of study.

The beautiful Connor Chapel of Our Lady supports students of all faiths. Both the Catholic chaplain and the director of campus ministry provide interdenominational opportunities for students to explore their spirituality.

Radiating across campus is a “Mercy Path” of banners proclaiming each of the core values of USJ: Catholic identity, development of the whole person, compassionate service, academic excellence,



***University of Saint Joseph
president Rhona C. Free, Ph.D.
Photo credit: University of
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respect/integrity, hospitality, and multiculturalism/diversity.

It is President Free's duty to uphold the Catholic intellectual tradition. I have heard criticism that Catholic education, or any faith-based school, focuses on faith at the expense of intellectual exploration of diverse views. I asked Dr. Free about an online student action petition to prevent Father James Martin, SJ, from delivering USJ's 2018 Buckley Lecture. The petition's 14,433 supporters argue that Father Martin is pro-homosexuality, and that his liberal views on the LGBT community are against Catholic values.

President Free didn't blink. She told me that she consulted with the Sisters of Mercy, considered the arguments for and against having Father Martin speak, and made the decision—and it was her decision—to go forward with the lecture. “Being a university of ideas doesn't mean you give up your values,” she said calmly. It was clear to me that she is grounded in the Catholic intellectual tradition, and that includes the value of diverse voices.

This past year, President Free oversaw the transition of USJ from an all-women's college to a coeducational university. Dr. Free realized that a major athletic development would help recruit new male students. At the same time, Hall of Fame UCONN basketball coach Jim Calhoun was ready to come out of retirement. He said he missed making a difference in the lives of his athletes by guiding and mentoring them. When asked in the WFSB interview why he came to USJ to build a Division III program after having coached Division I

University of Connecticut, he cited the values that he shares with Dr. Free—the Mercy values.

Coach Calhoun's philanthropy is as legendary as his coaching. The Pat and Jim Calhoun Cardiology Center at UCONN Health is one of his many gifts to society. From his generosity to his love of students and belief in education as a means to upward mobility, Coach Calhoun is well aligned to Mercy values.

While Rhona Free is calm and steady as she keeps USJ on a Mercy course, Coach Calhoun is intense and hard driving; just watch a video of him coaching. Yet whether it is President Free or Coach Calhoun, they each model their values and give students opportunities to put values into action. Dr. Free quoted her grandmother's adage: “An ounce of performance is worth a pound of preaching.”

When asked about her hope for USJ, President Free responded, “That we continue to graduate students who will serve the needs of society.” Dr. Free's hope comes full circle back to Mercy values. I wondered how Dr. Free can be sure that USJ students walk out the door with Mercy values in hand and heart. How is that measured?

Dr. Free looked at me and smiled. “Measuring values is a challenge we've been grappling with. It's like measuring critical thinking . . . hard to capture. What is measurable are the opportunities we provide for students to explore Mercy values.” President Free is confident that USJ comes out strong with regard to these opportunities.

I left our interview with a sense of peace, having spent time with someone who knows what she's about: values-based education. Coming out the glass door, I once again passed the portraits of previous presidents. I said a silent prayer to Sister Rosa, reassuring her that Mercy values are in good hands.

While Sister Rosa might not recognize the 90-acre campus, the upgraded status from college to university, or the change from all women to coeducation, she would know that Mercy values are alive and well at the University of Saint Joseph—from the halls of leadership to the basketball court. Best of all, they are alive in the careers of USJ graduates who carry Mercy values into the world . . . and on to the future.

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