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# Justice for All, Including Adjuncts

By Gerald J. Beyer

**O**n February 25, 2015, faculty and students staged walkouts on a number of U.S. campuses marking National Adjunct Walkout Day, as a growing chorus decried the working conditions of adjunct faculty at our nation's universities. Those at Jesuit and other Catholic universities calling for change have the weight of their traditions on their side. Those who either ignore or perpetuate the plight of adjuncts – intentionally or not – violate basic tenets of those same traditions. In addition, they jeopardize the faith formation of their students and impede the evangelizing mission of the Catholic university.

The phrases “the service of faith” and “the promotion of justice” encapsulate the heart of the Jesuit educational mission. As articulated in General Congregation 32, justice and concern for the poor should animate everything a Jesuit university does. Pope John Paul II echoed this view in his apostolic constitution on higher education, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. According to the pontiff, “a Catholic University pursues its objectives through its formation of an authentic human community animated by the spirit of Christ.... it is characterized by mutual respect, sincere dialogue, and protection of the rights of individuals....” (Part I, no. 21)

Seen in this context, the church's long-standing defense of workers' rights sheds much light on the controversial conversation about justice for adjuncts at Catholic colleges and universities. Much work remains to be done on Catholic campuses to protect the right to a living wage and to form unions, two foundational elements of justice in the economic sphere according to John Paul II (*Laborem Exercens*, no. 19).

According to a statement by more than 135 Catholic scholars, including eight past presidents of the Catholic Theological Society of America, many adjunct professors

today rank among “the poor and vulnerable.” Sadly this is not hyperbole. Most adjuncts are neither graduate students nor professionals earning a salary elsewhere while teaching as an avocation. In other words, teaching is their vocation and their sole source of income. As the *Chronicle of Higher Education* has reported, a growing number of adjuncts earn so little that they qualify for public assistance. According to the 2014 House Committee on Education and the Workforce study “The Just-In-Time Professor,” many adjuncts reported earnings from \$15,000 to \$20,000. Given that the federal poverty line for a family of three is \$19,530 and \$23,550 for a family of four, many contingent faculty members live at the “edge of poverty.”

Some Catholic institutions pay significantly above the national median per course, but the pay rate for most adjuncts on our campuses mostly mirrors national trends. Moreover, the fact that Catholic universities employ academics as temp workers as opposed to full-time workers with decent benefits and job security is inexcusable – even if they try to justify it with a utilitarian logic alien to Catholic social teaching. Saving costs on the backs of adjuncts to keep tuition down while spending money on highly paid administrators, athletics coaches, expensive athletics facilities, stadiums, and luxury dorms runs afoul of the church's “preferential option for the poor.” To add insult to injury, several Catholic university administrations have blocked the efforts of adjuncts to unionize, thereby stripping them of what John Paul II deemed an indispensable “mouthpiece in the struggle for social justice.” Using legal recourse to

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*Gerald J. Beyer is associate professor of Christian ethics at Villanova University; this piece draws on his lengthier article “Labor Unions, Adjuncts, and the Mission and Identity of Catholic Universities,” Horizons: The Journal of the College Theology Society, Vol. 43, No 1 (2015).*

challenge union elections mandated by the National Labor Relations Board on the grounds of religious freedom appears cynical. If excessive government intrusion were really their fear, Catholic universities could simply allow a free and fair union election without NLRB involvement, which Section 9 (a) of the NLRA permits. Moreover, as the USCCB has articulated in *Respecting the Just Rights of Workers*, management at Catholic institutions may never usurp the right to unionization.

As students begin to increasingly realize that the situation of adjuncts glaringly contrasts with the Ignatian and Catholic vision for communities of higher learning, they will inevitably sour on the mission of our colleges and universities. As Rick Malloy, S.J., of Scranton University has contended, if we fail to model the values

of the Gospel, “We will be subtly communicating to our students that it makes more sense to ‘Look out for Number One,’ ‘Grab All the Gusto You Can’ and forget the poor and oppressed of our world.”

Resolving the issues will not be easy, especially as Catholic institutions seek to remain buoyant in a highly competitive market. Nonetheless, ignoring the unjust situation of adjuncts cannot be justified. Moreover, the mounting pressure for Catholic institutions to live up to Catholic principles and values in the treatment of their employees – including but not limited to adjunct faculty – will not likely dissipate. It is time for all Jesuit universities to follow Georgetown’s lead and adopt a just employment policy (see <http://www.justemployment-policy.org/jesuit/>). ■

## A Letter from Patrick Howell, S.J.

Dear Colleagues in Jesuit Education,

Six months ago we launched our first, interactive website for *Conversations* magazine. It enables much more flexibility for us to publish your contributions and, we hope, stimulates greater intercollegiate conversations about key issues and opportunities in Jesuit higher education. See <http://conversationsmagazine.org/>

Let me assure you we will still publish our regular print editions of approximately 48 pages at the beginning of each semester – January and August. But we will have additional articles on the website, which we previously could not accommodate because of space and cost limitations. A *Conversations* Newsletter will be sent to subscribers to alert you to new editions on our website. If you wish to be included please send a quick note by email to [conversamagsubscription@gmail.com](mailto:conversamagsubscription@gmail.com)

Another fruitful initiative is that we now collaborate with all the Jesuit

mission and identity officers to determine the most pertinent themes for the magazine and to share strategies for its use on each of your campuses.

The National Seminar board rotates membership on a three-year basis so it’s always a combination of gratitude and sorrow when we say goodbye to our “veterans.” This year Diana Owen (Georgetown); Laurie Ann Britt-Smith (University of Detroit Mercy), and Sherilyn Smith (Le Moyne) with our gratitude earned the distinction of “Conversations-emeriti.” And Kristen Heyer of Santa Clara leaves the board after two years as she moves to a new position “in the Jesuit family” at Boston College.

Thank you for your interest and support,

Patrick Howell, S.J., chair  
National Seminar on Jesuit  
Higher Education

