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Book Review: A Call to Create a Culture of Ethics in Colleges and Universities: University Ethics: How Colleges Can Build and Benefit from a Culture of Ethics by James F. Keenan, S.J.

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into areas they can relate to and explore in their own experience.

The review of authors and theories in Part One is followed by the “Excavations” of Part Two, a critique of positions described and a preparation of the ground on which Part Three will build. Fr. Voiss moves to what he calls “a more phenomenologically governed excavation of the experience of forgiveness” (145). The underlying question is what people are doing when they undertake to forgive. Central to Part Two and to the whole work is the author’s analysis of how the self is constituted and the role of meaning in constructing a sense of self. Injury attacks the structure of meaning through which each one constructs his or her sense of self. Fr. Voiss gives a helpful example from his own experience of reinterpreting his sense of self after the turbulent divorce of his parents when he was a young boy.

Only in Part Three, after considering forgiveness as “a human enactment” (Chapter 6), does Fr. Voiss begin to consider forgiveness in a religious context. As he did in the consideration of philosophical positions, he chooses authors with whom to dialogue as he develops his own position. His conclusions can be sketched simply. Forgiveness is Christian when it takes place in the context of the Gospel narrative. Christian forgiveness resolves the questions raised earlier based on the pattern of God’s forgiveness in Christ. It does not require prior repentance. Forgiveness, in fact, makes repentance possible. It is freely given – no repayment expected. It is unconditional. It is sacramental, that is, mediated by our engagement with the world around us (363). Finally, Christian forgiveness comes after conversion and a long period of personal development. We grow into it.

Fr. Voiss has produced an impressive work. It demands a committed reader. Some familiarity with the terrain helps too. Readers who persevere will find themselves well rewarded for the effort. ■

A Call to Create a Culture of Ethics in Colleges and Universities

University Ethics: How Colleges Can Build and Benefit from a Culture of Ethics,

By James F. Keenan, S.J.

Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015 281 pages

Reviewed by Kate Ward

Educators view their colleges and universities as communities of learning, with their own unique strengths, priorities, and cultural practices. But James F. Keenan, a theological ethicist and Canisius Professor at Boston College, argues in a new book that colleges and universities lack one fundamental requirement of a true community: a culture of ethics.

In *University Ethics: How Colleges Can Build and Benefit from a Culture of Ethics*, Fr. Keenan finds that while universities instruct future doctors, lawyers, and journalists in the ethical practice of each profession, faculty and other shapers of university culture do not “practice what they teach.” The university’s fragmented governance structure, with its silos or fiefdoms,

hampers the creation of a university-wide culture of ethics. Fr. Keenan points out that almost by design faculty know nothing about their students’ lives outside the classroom, just as other staff do not know students’ academic experience. Even among the faculty, ethical understandings and practices can differ wildly from department to department.

The book centers on several case studies drawn from news reports and from scholarly research into issues affecting higher education, in the surprisingly rare cases where such research exists. The cases include labor justice for adjunct faculty; aca-

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demic cheating; undergraduates behaving badly (hazing, racist party themes, and rape); gender; diversity, and race; and the commoditization of higher education. The author recommends two major ethical arenas for future study: college sports and socio-economic class at the university. These wide-ranging issues are critical for university ethics.

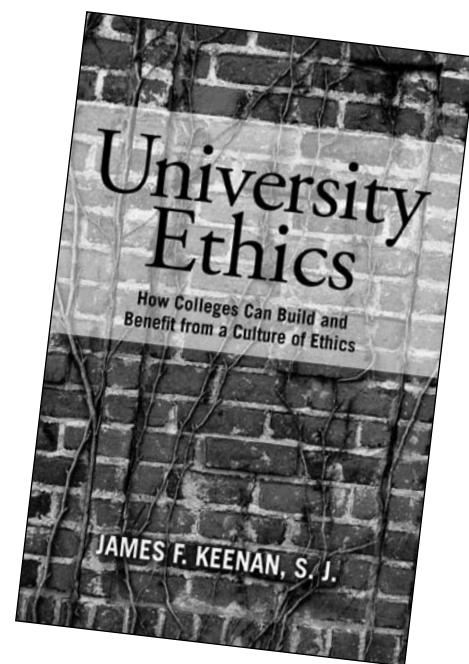
Fr. Keenan does not explore these case studies primarily to provide answers to their challenges, and even less so to mope over an imagined halcyon past in higher education, which he convincingly shows never existed. Rather, the case studies provide lenses on the success, failure, or complete absence of attempts to address ethical issues at the university. For example, Fr. Keenan finds hope in the fact that the status of women at colleges and universities has improved in response to persistent, systematic, cross-constituency efforts at change. In contrast, on race and diversity, widespread cultural bias interferes with progress. On adjunct justice, the silence is deafening. Cheating illustrates the significant role of university culture in addressing ethical lapses. It tends to be less common in the face of broad institutional opposition. In

contrast, where cheating is ignored or wished away, it flourishes.

As a virtue ethicist, Fr. Keenan insists that the lack of university ethics can be addressed only by changing practices: “Making ethics means making community” (217). He proposes that each college and university appoint an ethics committee composed of diverse representatives from the tenured and adjunct faculty, administration, campus ministry, and the student body. Although he believes all stakeholders are responsible for working towards an ethical culture at colleges and universities, he pointedly chides faculty in particular for failing to do so. Tenured faculty, who enjoy considerable speech protection, bear a particular responsibility.

Educators at Jesuit colleges and universities will feel compelled to wrestle with this author’s questions. At institutions advocating *cura personalis*, do faculty know anything about students’ lives outside the classroom? At universities striving to shape men and women for others, do students graduate less concerned about racial justice than they were when they arrived?

The book is accessibly written, and university stakeholders including facul-



ty, members of the administration, donors, students, and their parents will find food for thought. I can’t wait to discuss the chapters on cheating and “Undergraduates Behaving Badly” with my own students.

Throughout, the author suggests that a major barrier to university ethics is that the university lacks an overarching ethos. When it encounters well-organized and self-perpetuating cultures, like fraternities, or ideologies, like market commoditization, the university finds itself unable to articulate how these groups or ideologies threaten the university’s values and its functioning. Jesuit colleges and universities, which champion their roots in the Catholic, Jesuit spiritual and ethical tradition, should not need to struggle to articulate the values that promote their continued existence and to name the aspects of contemporary life that enhance or threaten those values. But putting those ethics into practice is not so easy. This book encourages us all to create and sustain practices that help our institutions function according to their values – hard work, but eminently necessary. ■

