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Modeling Dialogue: Honest, Authentic Encounters

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“Do I always feel included here at Loyola? Sometimes, yes. Like today. Today, we are intentionally coming together and remembering our highest ideals. This is mission in action.”

“But sometimes, no. Such as when I ask whether my husband is invited to an event. I can’t be certain; that nagging insecurity points to something. Or, when I encounter an anti-gay slur scrawled on a restroom wall or uttered casually by passing students in conversation. Or, when I feel the professional need to take extra care when discussing LGBTQ literature in a course to help students see how such intellectual engagement with the world is not only consistent with our values, but even perhaps called for by that educational mission. Or, when I joined with colleagues – many in the audience today – to secure access to healthcare for legally domiciled adults. Or, when I joined again with colleagues to work for 12 months to secure gender-inclusive restroom signs so that our campus is more welcoming of transgender individuals. That work continues.”

“So, today let’s turn inward to ask not just ourselves but also our neighbors if they feel welcome. If they experience inclusion in their everyday lives here at Loyola. Inclusion is our institutional policy and it is part of the Ignatian call to affirm human dignity, but

what does that look like in our everyday lives? Let’s not prematurely celebrate unity. Let’s work together to achieve it.

“As black feminist Pat Parker said in 1980: Revolution is not neat or pretty or quick. Today, we are living in a revolution begun generations ago. Let’s resolve to learn about who we have to thank for this world today. And how to continue their work.”

Later, at a reflection session in the campus ministry lounge, the director reminded us that the WBC rose to prominence by protesting the funeral of Matthew Shepherd following his brutal anti-gay murder in Wyoming. At the trials the following year, counterdemonstrators constructed giant angel wings to block the perimeter. It was an act of astonishing creativity and care as they created a space of grief and dignity for the family of the slain son.

What is the equivalent today at a Jesuit university seeking to engage a diverse world? What kind of intellectual community can we build now that has the capacity to imagine such beautiful acts of defiance later, when they are necessary? And what kind of grief and community work within our own perimeters must we make space for? I do not know the answers. But I know some of the questions.

Brian Norman is associate vice president for Faculty Affairs and Diversity and a professor of English, Loyola University Maryland.

Modeling Dialogue

Honest, Authentic Encounters

By Paul K. Alexander

Jesuit Catholic universities are uniquely poised to lead our communities and our world in transformational dialogue. The values and fundamental teachings within our Ignatian way of proceeding and Catholic social thought can build honest and authentic encounters with others.

Father Michael Sheeran, S.J., former president of Regis University and current president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities drew from these

core principles when he founded the Institute on the Common Good in 1997. We begin with Ignatius’ admonition to believe in the “right intention” of every human being. If the world is fundamentally good, then we must trust that every human acts from a place of good. We do not seek to beat down but rather raise up what is sacred in the other’s position, interest, or belief. We ask “what is the guiding good here?” We insist on participation and subsidiarity. The members of a com-

munity have the right and responsibility to participate in decisions that impact their lives and the lives of their families. “Who needs to be at the table and who should decide?” We focus on maintaining and ensuring that all are treated with dignity. The outcomes of our dialogues must create conditions which allow each individual to reach his or her full potential and fulfillment (“*Gaudium et Spes*”), “Does each participant feel respected and empowered to use their gifts?” Finally, we listen with Ignatius’ “holy indifference” to maintain the detachment that keeps us open to alternative solutions.

In the 20 years that the institute has practiced dialogue and public deliberation, we have found that our Ignatian and Catholic grounding enables us to reframe conversations in a powerful way.

First, dialogue can heal the deep wounds that our individual and collective past actions have inflicted on each other and on ourselves. This is best accomplished by letting each individual and group tell their own story. We should not shy away, for example, from holding our own “truth and reconciliation” conversations on campus, allowing our students and faculty of color to be heard. Transformation comes through the sharing of our lives. As part of a lesbian graduate student’s dissertation, the institute hosted the “Straight Talk Dialogues” for heterosexuals to share their experience with gay children and friends. A dialogue process for a local, dysfunctional city council enabled members to speak honestly with one another about past hurts and betrayals, thereby opening up space for renewed communication.

Second, dialogue allows us to bring reality to light and communities to take power from the sensationalism of media and embedded power structures. As Jesuit theologian Ignacio Ellacuria of El Salvador said, our purpose is to focus on the “social reality” of the world. A simple example of this occurred in the early years of the institute. Two students, one Asian and one Latino, were caught fighting in a local high school. Newspapers and rumor spoke of racial tensions between the two communities. Seeing the need for proactive responses, activist leaders within the communities of color asked the institute to host a yearlong series

of off-the-record dialogues to build trust among their leadership. Over the years, we have held similar conversations shedding light on regional water dialogues, immigration, homelessness, interfaith conflict, LGBT issues, and education.

Finally, our universities must speak our own truth and model how we can believe strongly while holding the space for others to share their values. Once we do this, we can take the lead on finding common ground. To pretend to be neutral betrays the teachings of the Society of Jesus and of the church and frequently the precepts of our academic disciplines. Not to be open to alternative viewpoints betrays the essential nature of the university. We often fail at both, trying to live in a limbo that satisfies no one and is fundamentally inauthentic. As Catholic universities we must state our preferential option for the poor and uphold the sanctity of life. Preferential option for the poor helps us communicate why we must first fight for “black lives matter” before “all lives matter.” Sanctity of life coupled with human dignity requires us to uphold the rights of the unborn while at the same time demanding that we build up the economic and educational status of women and families. Who better to invite groups like the pro-choice NARAL and Planned Parenthood onto our campuses to work together to reduce the need for abortions? Who better to invite the police, the black ministerial alliance, and the N.R.A. into the same room to work to minimize gun violence and the incarceration of people of color? This fall, voters in Colorado approved a “medical aid in dying” bill. Regis’s president issued a statement in opposition to the bill. At the same time, he asked us to host a dialogue to explore the underlying issues behind the bill and to give voice to those who seek release from the pain of terminal illness.

By being fully Jesuit and fully Catholic we can be a model for the much needed difficult conversations that are essential for creating a peaceful and sustainable future.

Paul Alexander is director of the Institute on the Common Good at Regis University.