

Catholic Theological Education at the Margins

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Catholic Theological Union has a diverse student population. Students in my classes this semester alone who have asked for prayers daily include a priest from the Philippines in close contact with his community who are still evacuated due to the Taal Volcano eruption; a young nun from India attentive to the needs of her aging parents during the coronavirus outbreak; another nun from Australia asking for prayers as the forest fires devastated her country; a lay youth minister from the Chicago suburbs praying for her teens who struggle with anxiety and depression; and priesthood candidates from Ghana, Pakistan, Vietnam, and New York all balancing the theology in their classrooms while being acutely aware of their responsibilities as ministers in varied contexts both near and far. This is a microcosm of the church as a whole and the particular context for this essay on Catholic theological education.

In his book *The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church*, John L. Allen Jr. has identified two particular themes that have implications for the future of Catholic theological education. They reflect the reality of my classroom as well as the present and future church. Allen proposes that the centers of power in the Catholic Church are shifting away from the west toward communities in the Global South. Humility is the appropriate response to that shift. A second trend Allen notes is the

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“escalation of globalization” that increases the inherent disparity between rich and poor. Both of these trends generate critical questions that will determine how and why future priests and lay ministers are formed.

- Will moving away from the centers of power and privilege lead the Church to stand faithfully with those at the margins?
- Is what we teach and how we teach it appropriately attentive to this global context?
- How do we recognize the church as it is lived out in vastly diverse ways throughout the world?
- How are students formed for authentic relationship and maybe even solidarity with the poor and the marginalized?

Being able to stand with the poor and people on the margins must be a key competency of all aspects of Catholic theological education and formation in the future.

THE OPTION FOR THE POOR AND MINISTERIAL FORMATION

The commitment to working with and for the poor and the marginalized is a central theme in various documents in what is commonly known as Catholic social teaching. The phrase “option for the poor” first appeared in a 1968 document issued in Medellin, Colombia, by the Latin American bishops. This idea has since been recognized as a constitutive element of the Catholic faith. In 1971, the World Synod of Roman Catholic Bishops issued the document *Justice in the World*, which stated: “Listening to the cry of those who suffer violence and are oppressed by unjust systems and structures . . . the Church’s vocation [is] to be present in the heart of the world by proclaiming the Good News to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, and joy to the afflicted.”¹ The 1986 document *Economic Justice for All* from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops added, “The obligation to provide justice for all means that the poor have the single most urgent economic claim on the conscience of the nation.”² These official church guidelines inform preparation for both ordained and lay ministries.

Three documents explicitly connect the formation of priests and lay ministers to working in proximity to the poor or marginalized. In the *Program for Priestly Formation*, field education has the responsibility to “provide the seminarians with experience in working with and for the poor.”³ *The Gift of Priestly Formation* states that “priestly formation must be permeated

by a pastoral spirit. It will make them able to demonstrate that same compassion, generosity, love for all, especially the poor, and zeal for the Kingdom that characterized the public ministry of the son of God. This can be summed up as pastoral charity.⁴ This same theme is articulated eloquently in the 2005 document *Co-Workers in the Vineyard*. Ministerial formation needs to prepare students with an incarnational spirituality of presence and love that willingly enters into the “joys and hopes, the grief and anguish”⁵ of the people of our time. These documents provide a vision and a clear mandate that the formation of Catholic ministers should include proximity to the poor and should cultivate “an incarnational spirituality of presence” and pastoral charity with people at the margins.

The explicit mention of being shaped by the poor or entering willingly into the grief and anguish of the marginalized people of our time is a call for solidarity that cannot be sidelined. Pope Francis has challenged this aspect of priestly formation in a graphic way: students for ministry in the church must be nurtured to “smell like the sheep” in order to relate more effectively to their people. This graphic way of describing the intimacy of pastoral work mandates forming future ministers with the desire and ability to be near to people in their joy and sorrow.

INTEGRATING FORMATION

Theological education needs to include integration that happens between the head and the hands and the heart. We spend much of our time training students to think theologically, to know the Scriptures, doctrine, and ethics, all of which are exercises in the head. Knowing the right theology is necessary but not enough. In addition to its focus on *orthodoxy*, theological education needs to foster capacities for *orthopraxis* and what Edward Foley calls *orthokardia*. Foley describes *orthodoxy* as right thinking, *orthopraxis* as right doing, and *orthokardia* as having the right heart in tune to the needs of the world. He writes, “The work of *orthokardia* demands more. This moral sensitivity, grounded in humility, tunes us to the dignity of all people and the potential for good that resides in every heart.”⁶ In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Pope Francis articulates this integrated vision with a particular emphasis on the human dimension: “Affective maturity, which is the result of an education in true and responsible love, is a significant and decisive factor in the formation of candidates for priesthood.”⁷ If it is done well, supervised

ministry with coordinated theological reflection is the best context for students to shape their *orthokardia* or evolving 'heart' identity as a minister.

I have found throughout my years in ministry and theological education that the best route to *orthokardia* or 'heart identity' occurs when theological praxis is integrated in close proximity to the lives, hopes, and dreams of the people of God who stand the farthest from the centers of power. If we can agree that standing in relationship to and in solidarity with those on the margins is a key competency for theological education and formation, then *being in proximity* is an essential focus. In order to prepare ourselves and our students for the shifting landscapes of ministry, one underlying question needs to be asked of every aspect of the theological curriculum: what will prepare people to minister in proximity to the poor and the marginalized?

PROXIMITY CULTIVATES THE HEART

Being in proximity to those who suffer cultivates the heart toward solidarity with those who are marginalized. I am using the word *proximity* in the dictionary sense of "being near." Proximity occurs when we locate ourselves as ministers in the midst of and in the presence of the ordinary or extraordinary lives of the people for whom we care. It is not possible to be compassionate from afar. *Being in proximity* is about getting close enough to the poor and marginalized to see clearly and be moved by their suffering. Nearness makes the difference.

The incarnation is the theological foundation for this perspective on nearness in pastoral relationships. Pope Francis has articulated this vision in *The Joy of the Gospel*: "The church which "goes forth" is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step . . . gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others."⁸ Embodying this vision is a critical challenge for theological seminaries in the Roman Catholic tradition.

When being in proximity is central to our *orthopraxis*, it has the potential to lead to solidarity with the poor and *orthokardia* for those suffering. We cannot assume solidarity is reached until the voices of those at the margins are able to validate this shared relationship and mutual respect. Because it is seldom easy to be in the presence of suffering, students need to be encouraged to seek applied learning in proximity to those farthest from the centers

of power. When we have effectively fostered being in proximity, then students will be more prepared to adapt to the various contextual ministerial settings we cannot yet imagine.

Proximity to the marginalized makes it possible to engage deeply, to see clearly, and to be ever alert to the issues of poverty and injustice and how they impact the community as well as individuals. Proximity means being present in a community in such a way that we can bear witness to people expressing their deepest longings and fears. It means learning to companion people and articulate to them the ways we are ready to assist and walk with them rather than assuming they will come to us when they need the help. The image from Pope Francis of the church as a field hospital is the inspiration for my emphasis on ministry as being in proximity and locating theological education at the margins

PREPARING MINISTERS FOR THE FIELD HOSPITAL

Pope Francis introduced his image of the church as a field hospital in an interview with Anthony Spadaro, SJ, in *America Magazine*. “The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital.”⁹ Moreover, as Pope Francis notes in that same interview, ministers must “know how to descend with [the faithful] and not get lost.” The aim of Catholic theological education is to form future ministers (lay and clergy) who can go with people to the depths of their despair or fear or woundedness with a compassionate heart without being consumed by their suffering. This focus on mercy before judgment becomes an invitation to create a space in which vulnerabilities can be shared and communion is built on shared trust.

Pope Francis also maintained that the church and her ministers should be “able to accompany the flock that has a flair for finding new paths.”¹⁰ This perspective on accompaniment is an invitation to trust the authority and creativity of people and celebrate journeying together with them in faith. Unless we are open to the God of surprises, we might not recognize and delight in the path someone is taking. Ministers must be ready to respond not only with mercy and compassion but also with joy and celebration.

A few years after this interview with Pope Francis, Chicago’s Cardinal Cupich invited the church to consider this image again. He expanded on

the image by stating that we are to “take up the work of healing by sharing in the sufferings of others.”¹¹ Later he noted: “That is Christ’s challenge for the church today: to be a field hospital for the needy. To bring those glad tidings, not to sit back and wait for those who need them to ask. To go out, to travel to the peripheries where the oppressed reside.”¹² This image asks the church (including theological seminaries) to take on the heart of a missionary—to willingly enter into the lives of God’s people to journey together, to encourage and honor all people as reflections of the image of God. It presupposes the willingness to risk being in proximity. When we meet people where they are, we enter a sacred space that allows us to hear their stories of death and resurrection.

How should this vision of church and ministry inform seminary preparation? In order to form priests and lay ministers who embody this vision of mercy and compassion, I propose that seminaries themselves must resemble a field hospital by creating space in which students share their vulnerabilities, trusting that they will not be ostracized or judged harshly, experiencing through others the love of Christ suffering with them. The teaching practice creates a space that honors the authority of the students’ own experiences from the margins and provides them with wholistic formation that is adaptable for the diverse contexts of their lives and ministries. To shift the locus of theological education to the margins, we also need to refocus the purpose and content of theological education so that attending to the poor and the marginalized is central in forming our *orthodoxy*, our *orthopraxis*, and our *orthokardia* in an integrated way.

CATHOLIC MINISTRY FORMATION: FOUR PILLARS

Since the 1992 statement by Pope John Paul II entitled *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, priestly formation (and subsequent lay ministry formation) contains four integrated foci or pillars: the human dimension, the spiritual dimension, the intellectual dimension, and the pastoral dimension. Rather than confining ministerial education toward *proximity* and *solidarity* with the poor and marginalized to the pastoral area of formation, it is important to look at how each of these four pillars of formation within theological education could engage the questions around being in proximity.

Because the human dimension is regarded as foundational for everything else, their own experiences of marginalization and poverty (or their

absence) is the place to begin with students preparing for ministry. When students are aware of the lenses out of which they operate or the levels of privilege they benefit from, their focus on their own human assessment is clearer. This self-awareness is critical in formation. Because people who are poor or live at the margins are regularly overlooked, it is important that the minister (clergy or lay) be able to be vulnerable enough to be “a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ.”¹³

Being in proximity to those on the margins has a surprising relevance for spiritual formation. Pope Francis, in a homily on October 14, 2013, said God is a God of surprises. He went on to note that we have to be open to the transformative journey we take when we are surprised by God’s invitation. Students who take the risk of being in proximity with people on the margins begin to cultivate a heart open to God’s surprising invitation. In turn, they build relationships there and experience firsthand in themselves and in those with whom they journey God’s compassion and love. In these moments, students often find a “back door” into their faith. Ronald Rolheiser states it this way: “Long before we do anything explicitly religious at all, we have to do something about the fire that burns within us. What we do with that fire, how we channel it is our spirituality.”¹⁴ This fire or passion or experience of God magnifies students’ search for understanding. An important consideration is how we, as theological schools and the church as a whole, embody the surprising invitation to move our spiritual center of gravity to the margins of power and privilege.

Asking theological questions is a critical thinking skill that is fostered by being in proximity to others’ perspectives and practices. It is from these experiences that students turn to their intellectual formation to form the language and meaning-making systems to make sense of what is happening in their hearts. One student returning from a pastoral immersion year admitted, “Now I know the questions to ask in my classes!” Carving out the space for students’ own case studies to be brought for discussion during classes in theology, in particular, is an important pedagogical response that fosters integrated intellectual formation.

A WORD OF CAUTION ABOUT PROXIMITY

Although theological education focused on the practice of being in proximity to the poor and marginalized is both a theological value and an

essential characteristic of pastoral formation, there are three cautions worth noting.

(1) How do we encourage the practice of proximity in ministry while at the same time growing in awareness of the power and privilege imbalance that inevitably accompanies anyone representing the church or an educational institution? The only way to transcend this power inequity is to foster in the student abundant humility and a constant awareness of privilege.

(2) In contextual education, students are encouraged to risk being in proximity and developing relationships of trust with people at the margins, but students often step into positions of privilege in trusted relationships they did not build. The prestige of an institution may also provide students an immediate level of respect or trust. Students need to be encouraged not to squander that trust built over time. Moreover, the student's gender or ethnicity or simply their role as a future minister adds another layer of complexity to being in proximity to people on the margins who have no status or privilege. One task is to help them to name and evaluate their privileged position and its influence. Educational institutions that have worked hard to build trusting and collaborative community relationships risk losing that trust if a student's being in proximity is inappropriate in any way.

(3) The third caution is the most complex. Being in proximity, especially with a person who is poor or on the margins, is a wager on friendship. Even if we mean well by addressing that person as a friend, it is usually not friendship in the ordinary reciprocal sense. When a friendship with someone quite different in privilege and power is genuine, what can we do to maintain the friendship with integrity? In their book *Friendship at the Margins*, Christopher L. Heuertz and Christine D. Pohl offer a critical question: "If we are persuaded that these friendships are what God desires from us, and that they are mutually helpful to us and our friends, what can we do to make sure that our friendships are more than occasional forays into another world?"¹⁵ At a minimum, the core competencies needed to avoid "occasional forays into another world" are humility and the willingness to collaborate when we are in proximity to the marginalized.

In my experience, the disciplines of missiology, community organizing, and praxis education have contributed useful ways to strengthen experiences of being in proximity constructively and authentically with the poor and marginalized. I turn to these three areas of expertise for insights.

LESSONS FROM MISSIONARY MINISTERS

Missiology colleagues at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago have expertise in missionary training, interculturality, and interreligious dialogue that has informed my approach to being in proximity to the poor and marginalized.¹⁶ Mission work, they say, is like entering an unknown garden, not knowing what is edible and what are weeds. Humility is the necessary virtue in order to learn from the gardener what to eat and what grows in the particular soil and climate. Being on the margins is also like being a guest in another's house. We need to be aware that hospitality is expressed in different ways. When we present ourselves as guests with meekness, we demonstrate that we are willing to be led to what is important for the host. By doing this, suggests Anthony Gittens, missionaries are "able to indicate their openness, integrity, and willingness to engage in relationship."¹⁷ Recognizing and respecting the other as host is one way that being in proximity with persons at the margins will more likely be an authentic meeting.

Every encounter with someone at the margins, like being a missionary in a strange culture, is marked by uncertainty and powerlessness and risk. The idea of "mission-in-reverse" developed by Claude Marie Barbour is helpful. We enter a relationship with those who are marginalized with the expectation that we will be taught or even changed by the encounter. This approach also depends on listening carefully to mentors who help contextualize their stories and identify our prejudices when we blunder.

Each of these different images for missionary work relies on humility and the willingness to learn and even be transformed by the other. Similarly, ministry at the margins allows one to move from the center of church influence toward an authentic and humble witness of the movement of the Holy Spirit in and among the people of God. As Gittens states, "Authentic mission is a movement from the center to the margin. . . . Mission is centrifugal movement but it is also encounter."¹⁸ This is an important disposition for being in proximity. Teaching this in the classrooms needs to happen in a variety of ways so that students step into ministry with humility.

WISDOM FROM COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Community organizing is a second resource for moving theological education to the margins. Vincent Lloyd's essay titled "Organizing Race: Taking Race Seriously in Faith-Based Community Organizing"¹⁹ is a helpful

guide to teaching how to be in proximity. Lloyd insists that we begin by assuming that networks already exist in the community long before we arrive. Teaching how to be in proximity means encouraging students to realize that networks and key figures are already in place. Our task is to tune into the wisdom of those networks as we learn about and from the community.

The role women play building a community based on relationships of trust is, Lloyd observes, still much too frequently underestimated. Women build informal networks that have profound influence on the life of a community. Historians have uncovered the role of women as organizers and the religious values that guided women organizers of earlier generations. There are critical gaps, Lloyd observes, in the historical narrative of the Civil Rights era; the focus “on top-down leadership of charismatic figures much loved by the media” overlooks grassroots leadership that existed before the media arrived for the march.²⁰ This network of relationships carved by women in connection with other women as a literal safety net in faith-based communities and in community organizing models. Valuing the role of women as wisdom figures and community leaders is critical to being in proximity at the margins.

PEDAGOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Katherine Turpin, in her article “Disrupting the Luxury of Despair: Justice and Peace Education in Contexts of Relative Privilege,” suggests using social analysis tools to help students make a critical assessment of their own position in relation to a situation of marginality. She also suggests that we need to encourage risk tolerance in students for that experience. “An important element of agency is student movement from maintaining ideological purity to understanding the necessity of political compromise and risking failure in engaging work for social justice.”²¹ Helping students analyze their own stance and ensuring an analysis of motivations and a willingness to not be in control are additional skills.

At the beginning of each year, I encourage students to generate a thick description of their ministry site using social analysis questions.²² We revisit these thick descriptions after several months. The comparison of their initial assumptions with their understanding after some exposure is a way to invite their awareness of their social location, dismantle their own lenses, and trace the ways they have built relationships on authenticity. This is

one pedagogical tool for teaching being in proximity that helps students to examine their lenses and understand the factors that shape how they learn about a community.

CONCLUSION

I have explored Catholic theological education and ministerial formation around the practice of being in proximity with the poor and marginalized. The preferential option for the poor, central in Roman Catholic social teaching, has been amplified by Pope Francis in his writings about the missionary transformation of the Church. "All of us are asked to obey [Jesus Christ's] call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel."²³ In accord with this mandate, I propose that future Catholic theological education needs to include an integrated emphasis on *practicing proximity at the peripheries*. Teaching how to minister at the margins will lead to new questions that are at once theological and pedagogical. Each setting and each student are a new challenge for teaching how to be in proximity. Moreover, because the movement from proximity to solidarity happens within the heart of each student, our pedagogy can only take people so far. We can only hope that being in proximity with people at the margins will foster a longing for the good news in our students.

The growing gap between rich and poor and the continuing marginalization of people for reasons of ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion are critical issues affecting the future of the church and theological education. I have proposed a focus on practicing proximity as one way to prepare future priests and lay ministers for ministry at the margins. This goal depends on the integration of *orthodoxy* with *orthopraxis* and *orthokardia* and needs to occur in every aspect of theological education. It also raises institutional questions to ponder. How does a seminary practice its own proximity to the peripheries? Have we developed friendships with a broad range of agencies, places of worship, and other institutions that also call our zip code home? The future of Catholic theological education will be shaped by how seminaries respond to these questions.

NOTES

- 1 World Synod of Catholic Bishops, *Justice in the World* (1971), para. 5, Catholic Charities, Twin Cities, accessed March 23, 2020, <https://www.cctwincities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Justicia-in-Mundo.pdf>.
- 2 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, para. 86, accessed March 23, 2020, http://www.usccb.org/upload/economic_justice_for_all.pdf.
- 3 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Program of Priestly Formation," para. 251, accessed March 23, 2020, <http://www.usccb.org/upload/program-priestly-formation-fifth-edition.pdf>.
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- 6 Edward Foley, *Theological Reflection across Religious Traditions: The Turn to Reflective Believing* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 76.
- 7 Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), para. 44, accessed March 23, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis.html.
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- 13 Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 43.
- 14 Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Image, 2014), 7.
- 15 Christopher L. Heuertz and Christine D. Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), 120.
- 16 Roger Schroeder, SVD, Anthony Gittins, CSSp, and Rev. Claude Marie Barbour have all shaped Catholic Theological Union's missionary and intercultural curriculum.
- 17 Anthony J. Gittins, *Gifts and Strangers: Meeting the Challenge of Inculturation* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 132.

- 18 Anthony J. Gittins, *Ministry at the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), xi.
- 19 Vincent Lloyd, "Organizing Race: Taking Race Seriously in Faith-Based Community Organizing," *Journal of Religious Ethics* (2014): 640–60.
- 20 Lloyd, "Organizing Race," 642.
- 21 Katherine Turpin, "Disrupting the Luxury of Despair: Justice and Peace Education in Contexts of Relative Privilege," *Teaching Theology and Religion* (July 2008): 150.
- 22 For more on social analysis questions, see Maria Cimperman, *Social Analysis for the 21st Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), esp. 99–110.
- 23 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, para. 20.