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Must faculty who pursue justice “pay the price”?

Men and Women for Others across the Disciplines

By Mary Beth Combs

Late one Friday evening about seven years ago I was riding intercampus transportation and I overheard a conversation between two students. One, a pre-med major, was telling the other about a recent conversation that he had had with a woman at a health clinic in the city. He was taking a break, and the woman, a prostitute, asked him for a cigarette. When he noted this, a few riders in the van snickered and one made a teasing comment from the backseat. Other riders were having conversations of their own and initially were oblivious to his story. As is typical on a late weekend evening, the energy in the van was boisterous and the travelers noisy.

He continued, “When I first started talking to her, all I could think was, ‘Man! I can’t believe that I am talking to a prostitute!’ But then we started talking about her life; about where she grew up, and about what her family was like.” As he continued, some of the side conversations in the van ceased and many riders quieted and began to listen to his story. “She told me about her childhood, about how she became a prostitute, and about her hopes for her life in the future. By the end of three hours of conversation, I realized that I wasn’t talking ‘to a prostitute,’ I was simply talking with another human being.” All fifteen passengers in the van were silent. The silence held until we arrived at campus ten minutes later.

The impact of one student’s narrative on a somewhat random sample of students with a possibly diverse set of interests and majors has stayed with me over the years. It serves as synecdoche for the idea that the Jesuit mission of being present to the poor, giving preferential option to the poor, and working as men and women for and in solidarity with others is not confined to one place in the university, such as campus ministry, or even to a sub-set of departments, such as philosophy or theology. Exemplars do exist outside of these sub-sets of university life in the teaching,

service, and policy-related research of faculty in the sciences, humanities, liberal arts, and professional programs across the Jesuit network of universities. What follows is a summary celebration of a small fraction of this work:

Coffee and Justice: Since 2003 a team of scientists and engineers from Seattle University, the University of Central America, Managua, and the University of Washington Bothell have been working with a group of student scientists, Catholic Relief Services/Nicaragua (CRS/Ni), and Nicaraguan coffee producer families and their cooperatives to respond to the requests of the artisan coffee farmers to help them improve coffee quality and market access. Susan Jackels, Michael Marsolek, Charles Jackels, and Carlos Vallejos applied the group’s scientific and engineering expertise to assist the farmers in their goal to gain access to the organic and Fair Trade specialty coffee market.

The project, which received funding and research support from all three universities as well as from CRS/Ni, is described in detail in their fascinating essay, “Coffee for Justice: Chemistry and Engineering in Service to the Jesuit Mission with Small-holder Coffee Farmers of Nicaragua,” forthcoming in *Being Transformed/Transforming the World: Justice in Jesuit Higher Education* (Fordham University Press). The project, which has had transformative results for

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all involved has continued to evolve and broaden: Some student researchers returned to Nicaragua after graduation to study and work with the Nicaraguan people, a team of student engineers designed an ecological coffee processing mill, and the coffee farmers have seen a marked improvement in the quality of their coffee and their sales contracts, and an increase in their quality of life.

Departmental Transformations:

The faculty of political science at Le Moyne College transformed their entire departmental curriculum to one that is directly informed by the Jesuit mission of service and that seeks to educate for participatory citizenship and to teach for social justice in the real world. In an insightful and challenging essay, “An Uncertain Journey: Adopting the Mission of Social Justice in A Political Science Department,” also forthcoming in *Being Transformed/Transforming the World*, John Freie and Susan

Behuniak explain that their departmental goal of helping students to become active democratic citizens required the department to reevaluate their pedagogy and examine student culture; moreover, their findings raise important questions about power in the classroom as well as in society. Freie and Behuniak note that the process was not easy but the outcome has been well worth the effort: “The curriculum, course content, pedagogies, requirements, and student programming have noticeably moved away from disjointed individual endeavors toward a shared mission underpinned by Jesuit educational philosophy.” Freie and Behuniak also note that their students speak in terms of how they will use their skills to be valuable in society: they consider themselves to be engaged citizens who are confident enough to articulate their views, defend them, and work for social justice.

Discernment and the law: David Koelsch, director of the Immigration Law Clinic at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law, has integrated reflective practices into the law curriculum using the Spiritual Exercises as the model for instruction. In an engaging essay, “Doing Well by Doing Good: The Application of Ignatian Principles to Legal Education,” also forthcoming in *Being Transformed/Transforming the World*, Koelsch explains that students enrolled in the Immigration Law Clinic prepare for each class and client interaction with instruction centered on the Spiritual Exercises, and learn that a just result is not only one in which the exploitation of one person by another may



Staffers in Loyola University New Orleans’ Office of Student Affairs traded their office holiday party for a day of volunteering with the St. Bernard Project, a non-profit that rebuilds homes for Hurricane Katrina survivors.

be ended or averted but also one in which both parties feel they were respected in the process. The goal is to help the students maintain their personal integrity and morale, while becoming ethical and moral law students and lawyers who embrace the responsibility to seek justice and serve others.

Disability and Poverty: Sophie Mitra and Brandon Vick, economists at Fordham University, and Aleksandra Posarac, economist at the World Bank, studied the working age disabled population in fifteen developing countries and compared economic well-being indicators, including education, employment, living conditions, household expenditures, and healthcare expenditures. They find that in developing countries’ disability is often associated with poverty; however, there is not one specific economic well-being indicator that directly links disability and poverty in all the countries. These findings are essential to inform international aid programs and domestic policies on poverty; they indicate that one singular policy to aid the disabled population would not be effective in every country and thus effective policies would need to be country-specific.

Solidarity and Literacy: Betsy Bowen, professor of English at Fairfield University has spent more than ten years connecting her research, teaching, and service with the work of the Mercy Learning Center, a literacy center for low-literate, low-income women in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Working in close collaboration with the staff of the center to determine where the needs

of the center intersected with Fairfield's capacity, and with research support from a sabbatical and support from Fairfield's office of service learning, Professor Bowen developed a service learning course called "Literacy and Learning." Students in the course assisted in the early education program, gaining first-hand experience with children's literacy while providing needed volunteer help for children whose mothers were students at the center. The partnership that Professor Bowen developed with Mercy spread to other parts of the university as well: Students in international studies and the School of Nursing also have worked with the center, and another faculty member now sits on the board at Mercy Learning Center. Through their involvement with Mercy Learning Center, Fairfield's students learn—about literacy, immigration, community health care—while they meet pressing needs in the community.

* * *

As noted earlier, some of the above celebrated exemplars are highlighted in a forthcoming publication, *Being Transformed/Transforming the World: Justice in Jesuit Higher Education*, a direct response to Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach's address at Santa Clara in 2000. It is the first attempt to formally recognize, in print, the strides that Jesuit colleges and universities have made in responding to Fr. Kolvenbach's address, as well as to highlight the challenges that the academic community at Jesuit institutions continue to face in responding to his call, and the areas in which we still need to give greater focused attention.

One challenge that continually arises in discussions of how faculty might respond to Fr. Kolvenbach's call is the inherent disincentive in doing so: Faculty may desire to respond to Fr. Kolvenbach's call, but in order to do so, they may need to expand or even step outside of their area(s) of research expertise. All of the exemplars highlighted above required the teacher/researcher/scholar to push beyond the boundaries of his or her area of expertise in some way. All of the scholars discussed above noted that the support of their colleagues, departments, and universities were integral to the accomplishment of this important justice-related work.

Others at Jesuit institutions do not feel as well supported

Others at Jesuit institutions do not feel as well-supported, and it is this point that highlights a second challenge that arises in discussions of how faculty might respond to Fr. Kolvenbach's call: the risk that their colleagues, departments, or administrators may not recognize, support, reward (or worse—might punish them for) research that is outside their primary fields and thus may not contribute positively to department or university national rankings. Like the student in the opening story of this essay who took a risk by giving

witness to his experience before of a group of co-travelers who initially were not receptive, and one of whom even mocked him, faculty who pursue Jesuit mission-related research at institutions or in departments which do not promote or reward faculty involvement in the community also face potential rejection.

As Fr. Kolvenbach observed in his Santa Clara address, for a professor "to make such an explicit option and speak out about it is obviously not easy; it entails risks." In "An Uncertain Journey," Freie and Behuniak highlight some of the risks when they note that "a department that is willing to dramatically change its theme, its course offerings, its pedagogy, and its connection to student life, must find that this effort is supported and reinforced across the college, rather than find itself isolated, disparaged or even punished." Jeannine Hill Fletcher echoes this sentiment when she astutely observes in her essay, "Companions, Prophets, Martyrs: Jesuit Education as Justice Education" (also forthcoming in *Being Transformed/Transforming the World*), that "in institutions which fail to provide institutional supports and affirming rewards, faculty who pursue justice education will find that their energies are exhausted and their efforts life-draining."

Solidarity with the poor and with each other

Yet this need not be so: In *Ex corde ecclesiae*, John Paul II prioritizes university research that seeks "to discover the roots and causes of the serious problems of our time" (no. 32). In his Santa Clara address, Fr. Kolvenbach notes that to carry out this research and to "make sure that the real concerns of the poor find their place in research, faculty members need an organic collaboration with those who work among and for the poor and actively seek justice. They should be involved together in all aspects: presence among the poor, designing research, gathering data, thinking through problems, planning and action, doing evaluation." This type of collaborative research carried on in solidarity with the poor requires the kind of institutional support that is called for by *Gaudium et spes*, which informs citizens, and thus the university *qua* citizen, that "those who hold back their unproductive resources or who deprive their community of the material or spiritual aid that it needs... gravely endanger the common good" (65). To do this work, the university and its students and faculty must necessarily work in solidarity with the poor *and each other* in the way that Fr. Kolvenbach calls for in his Santa Clara address; allowing the "gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering, and engage it constructively." This work necessarily involves the kind of faculty support at the university level that makes it clear that the university is in solidarity with the justice work of its faculty as well as its students. And that support, Paul VI suggests, can foster significant justice in the world (and in the university). ■