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# Beyond the

# CORE WARS

## Intellectual charity and knowledge as ecstasy

By **Brian D. Robinette**

**W**ith all the uncertainty and impassioned disagreement generated by the current discussion over the core curriculum in our Jesuit colleges and universities – our so-called “core wars” – it may seem the height of naiveté (or worse, sentimentality) to invoke the theological virtue of *love* as an essential element for its enrichment and advance-

ment. How does love have anything to do with our common academic enterprise as reflected in the core curriculum, and what role could it possibly serve in our continuing struggle to shape it?

Much risk attends the very suggestion, I realize. One can almost see the bewildered looks at the mere thought of its mention in a faculty assembly or core curriculum committee meeting. And one can well imagine how abstract (and perhaps paternalistic) the notion might sound

to students, not least because students are generally given few opportunities to participate in the discussions rumbling from seemingly remote regions of the university. Puzzled reactions are especially likely given the strongly romantic associations to which the word “love” is prone, at least in our contemporary culture. Yet, for all that, there is a critical and theologically articulate understanding of love that bears upon how we might envision the role of the core curriculum in our colleges and universities, one that is just as attentive to diversity as it is to unity.

My own thinking on the matter was recently stimulated by Pope Benedict XVI’s message to Catholic educators in the United States in April 2008. As those paying attention at the time will recall, much speculation preceded the papal visit. Many wondered whether the current pope (and former Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) would focus on matters of doctrinal compliance in his address. Benedict did indeed speak critically of positions contrary to the faith of the Catholic Church that “obstruct or even betray the university’s identity and mission.” He also affirmed that, because of its connection to the mission of the Church, the Catholic university is “a place to encounter the living God who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth.” But such a mission, he declared in the same breath, is not at odds with the “great value of academic freedom,” which in fact it underwrites. Actually, the address did not linger over abstract (and highly neuralgic) considerations of authority and freedom, but instead outlined a vision of what Benedict called “intellectual charity.” It is a vision far more challenging and embracing than might first appear.

Harkening to previous works and addresses, as well as other papal encyclicals, most notably Pope John Paul II’s *Fides et Ratio*, Benedict observes that the search for truth – the deepest and most personal yearning for human beings – has been significantly hampered by the fragmentation and instrumentalization of knowledge in the modern age. Although nowhere mourning a golden era of education to which we must return, the pope paints a picture in which the search for truth has lost much of its sapiential and life-changing character.

As our intellectual traditions have undergone a process of dramatic secularization, the search for truth – to the extent such a search even gets discussed – has lost much of its transcendent orientation and holistic scope. We increasingly tend to asso-

ciate “truth” with the aggregation of “information.” We have become marvelously proficient at expanding areas of specialization, but fare poorly at integrating these areas into mutually enriching wholes. Inquiry may spread out horizontally to cover more and more surface, but so little of it seeps underground to find common roots and depth.

Benedict appears particularly concerned with a view of knowledge based upon function. The subjection of knowledge to “cold pragmatic calculations of utility” threatens to extract the most important considerations from the educational enterprise, namely, the dignity

*the “cold pragmatic calculations of utility”*

of the human person and the pursuit of the common good. It would be wrong, if convenient, for us to imagine that such calculative thinking is primarily an issue for fields outside of the humanities. It has become a dominant style of learning in *all* fields – the disengagement of the knower from the content of learning. When Benedict declares that “truth speaks to the individual in his or her entirety, inviting us to respond with our whole being,” he is naming and challenging the cool objectivity which may pass as academic professionalism, but which frequently inhibits the kind of self-involvement both teachers and learners must risk in entertaining ultimate questions in the classroom.

In a striking way, Benedict urges educators to take up the challenge of fostering intellectual charity. There are several facets to this challenge, as I see it. The first is that, as a good Augustinian, Benedict espouses a view of knowing as a way of loving. The reason we pursue knowledge at all is because of a desire that draws us *beyond* ourselves. Every particular act of knowing, no matter how local and concrete, is in fact a kind of ecstasy: an expression of an inner dynamism that impels us onward toward richer and more comprehensive dimensions of meaning and connectivity. We seek to know as a way of enacting our very being; and this enactment is motivated by love, even if we are reticent to name it as such. Benedict’s characterization of knowing as “passion,” “awakening,” “relishing,” and “adventure” is telling. There is a particular *eros* entailed in this view of learning: it is that the human person is drawn by something other than the self in a movement of transcendence, one that makes learning as much about being “in love” as being “in the know.”



Creighton University theology professor the Rev. Dick Hauser, S.J., chats with students in the Jesuit Gardens on campus.

The anthropology this vision assumes is hardly exclusive to a particular creed or discipline. It is generous and instinctively cross-disciplinary.

It contends that the often inarticulate sense of aspiration that drives the molecular biologist to understand the various systems of a cell is akin to the delight experienced by the linguist who comes to grasp the inner structure of a complex utterance. It wagers that the physicist's impassioned search for new clues about the initial conditions of the big bang is related to the historian's hunt for a long-forgotten document that might

shed new light on a critical turning point in history. It presumes that what most deeply motivates the student who chooses to major in urban studies shares an inner affiliation

with the student of religious studies who also wishes to understand something about the worlds, whether geographical or symbolic, we inhabit. This vision in no way collapses these diverse disciplines, but

discerns the inner dynamism they share: the desire to understand something about the truth of our lives and the worlds in which they are formed, and to do so precisely as an expression of a love for this life and what it might become.

There is an unmistakable confidence to this view of learning, too: a trust that the search for truth is animated by something real, by something that elicits from us the fullest scope of our capacities and passions. Although we cannot predetermine what shape any person's search for truth will take, so long as it is allowed to take place, and so long as it is nourished through appropriate instruction, encouragement, and, above all, modeling, the risks undertaken to arrive at it will be richly rewarded.

If this is true, then it is also true that educators ought to be motivated by love for their students. This means something more than the love of our respective fields. No doubt many educators exhibit enthusiasm for their areas of study, which can be infectious. But an educa-

*We must love our students*



tor's love can hardly be equated with displays of excitement. The real measure of an educator's love is found in the willingness to impart the desire for the truth to students, and to assist in the conditions that make it possible to flourish. Benedict appropriately calls this an "act of love." Those of us who are educators may not be accustomed to thinking of our relationship with students in this way, but we should. We should appreciate how our role in awakening and cultivating a love of learning among students is love for our students. "The dignity of education," remarks the pope, "lies in fostering the true perfection and happiness of those to be educated." It is a view that all of us, no matter our area of expertise, and no matter our personal affiliation with the mission of the Catholic Church, can own and cultivate. But let us observe what else it entails.

Practicing intellectual charity means working to bring forth unity where there is diffusion, concision where there is fragmentation. The fundamental intuition with which Benedict operates is that truth forms a unity. Now, such a unity does not mean uniformity. Love, in fact, presupposes difference. Love does not seek to dominate or manipulate, but seeks the integrity of what is and remains *other*. And yet, the integrity of the other is only more fully realized to the extent that it continually discovers and enacts its deepest impulse for filiation. Intellectual charity operates with the basic presupposition that knowledge in one region of human inquiry is fundamentally related to knowledge in all others, and that therefore among the most important tasks a learner (especially a learning community) can work towards is to make these relationships explicit.

**W**hich brings us to the core. Although the above considerations cannot produce specific prescriptions concerning what subjects must be included in the core, or how many credit hours the core should require, it does underwrite a very strong commitment to the liberal arts vision of the core because of its focus on the formation of the *whole* human person. Such a charge has long been the explicit goal of our Jesuit institutions, of course, but there is presently a great danger that its basic elements are being chipped away by the pressures to make the college experience more and more about the utility of landing the job or getting placed in professional schools. Certainly we have obligations for preparing our students for these outcomes. It would be unconscionable not to, considering the enormous investment (and debt) that going to college now demands. But precisely because of this investment – not despite it – we should work hard to remind ourselves constantly of the core's inestimable value, which is found in its ability to expose students to the

## Which brings us to...

extraordinary *diversity* of subjects while giving them the opportunity to discover their *unity*. A strong core implies the *communion of knowing*: it invites those who undertake its itinerary a profounder sense of very dynamism of knowing that may be sustained and widened the rest of their lives.

If such a life-long process is to be a remote possibility, it will mean much more than settling on a fair and sensible proportioning of requirements in science, language, literature, history, philosophy, and theology. As important as that conversation is, the deeper conversation requires working from *within* each discipline to cross its own boundaries in order to make explicit connections with others.

In my numerous conversations with students about their college experience, I have grown disconcertingly aware of just how much the burden for bringing about any formal integration in their studies depends almost entirely upon them. Students are simply without many models for seeing *how* such integration might be achieved. What this suggests to me is that as much energy we pour into debates about the core in terms of its constitutive elements, we should be just as prepared to help students bring those elements into new and creative relationships. A host of pedagogical practices come to mind that seem indispensable to this task, including efforts in team-teaching, the expansion of learning communities, resources and time devoted to service-learning, capstone projects that make inter-disciplinary work a priority, symposia that create space for sharing excellence across all fields, and, perhaps most importantly, explicit attempts within each core course to directly engage a different dimension of the core. This latter practice simply asks those of us who teach our core courses to be drawn outside of our expertise to integrate, however experimentally and tentatively, the richness of another.

While practices of intellectual charity like these may not put an end to our "core wars," they can certainly help us look beyond them by entering into them more deliberately and fully. And with a robust commitment to the liberal arts foundation of the core, our Jesuit colleges and universities can continue performing a prophetic work in an age of growing fragmentation. This is a work of love.

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