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Winston Tellis

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Voices at Fairfield Conference Echo David Hollenbach's "Intellectual Tradition" Themes

By Winston Tellis

The Conference on "Commitment to Justice in Jesuit Higher Education" was held at Fairfield University in June 2009. Almost 300 people attended the conference from the Jesuit institutions in the U.S. and some developing countries. The number of attendees, despite economic constraints in most institutions, indicates the importance of this gathering, the fourth for our AJCU schools, beginning with the assembly at Santa Clara in 2000, and followed by one at Loyola University Chicago, and one at John Carroll University.

The Fall 2009 issue of *Conversations* arrived soon after the conference, and included an article by David Hollenbach S.J. on "The Catholic Intellectual Tradition, Social Justice, and the University". I was struck by how many of the sessions at this Conference confirmed Hollenbach's theme, beginning with Richard Ryscavage S.J.'s plenary talk, "Catholic Social Teaching and the Jesuit Promotion of Justice" and continuing in papers and discussions on the aca-

demical aspects and the practical applications of social justice.

Jesuit institutions are actively engaged in the discussion of issues of justice along the lines of the Hollenbach's suggestions. The Justice discussion continues its vibrant role in Jesuit schools, evidenced by strong institutional support for periodic conferences like this one.

Hollenbach points out that the Christian intellectual tradition has a long history that could teach us how to "grapple nonviolently with pluralism and intercultural interaction." Universities are a prime location at which to discuss pluralism, and perhaps Jesuit universities might lead the way. Clearly, our universities are much more diverse now — even Catholic students are perhaps not as grounded in their faith as their earlier counterparts were. At the conference, John Carroll University described a course on the link between the Sacraments and justice, asserting that all the Sacraments explicitly relate to justice. Thus, today's students might be reached through their concern about conditions in deprived areas, as they become aware of

the effects of poverty and injustice in countries not far from our shores. This often awakens their latent faith, as they see their role in addressing the injustices they witness. Students who travel to villages in Nicaragua witness first-hand the threat that *CAFTA* poses to the crop of beans on which some of the poor farmers rely for their daily subsistence— a reality of globalization of which Hollenbach wrote. A session at the conference examining the structural inequality of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation was a mirror of Hollenbach's observation that those discussions have deep roots in the Catholic intellectual tradition.

The conference heard powerful voices from the developing world whose first-hand narrative resonated with the audience. Father Oduke S.J., described the consequences for his family of his outspoken criticism of local leaders in his native Kenya. His

Winston Tellis teaches information systems and operations management at Fairfield University.

Talking Back



Statue of Saint Ignatius, Saint Louis University.

personal experience was riveting and left his audience aghast at a situation about which one normally merely reads. José Rocha from the UCA in Managua presented his research on the treatment of Nicaraguan illegal immigrants to Costa Rica, in contrast with those to the U.S., suggesting that human dignity is preserved and respected in Costa Rica, but not comparably in the U.S. He and the audience wondered why that would be; in the Ignatian tradition, perhaps in time, some of them will take action. M.K. George S.J., from India presented contrasting views of India, from the technological hub – which is a fraction of the country – to the vast countryside, which is still poor and largely undereducated. The thrust of numerous presentations at the conference could be summarized as: **engaged scholarship** to transform research, teaching, community relations, and **service learning**, by looking at the structures of inequality and injustice.

Hollenbach concludes with an assertion that the Catholic tradition claims that a compassionate God who understands and shares human suffering, is a source of hope and courage for the world. As the conference participants returned to their daily lives, perhaps the consistency of the message from the sessions, did indeed convey precisely what Hollenbach suggested: Catholic universities by their course offerings and social action agenda bring hope and solidarity to suffering people in countries where poverty stifles every glimmer of hope. Jesuit institutions through their service trips to poor countries around the world can bring hope informed by scholarship. ■