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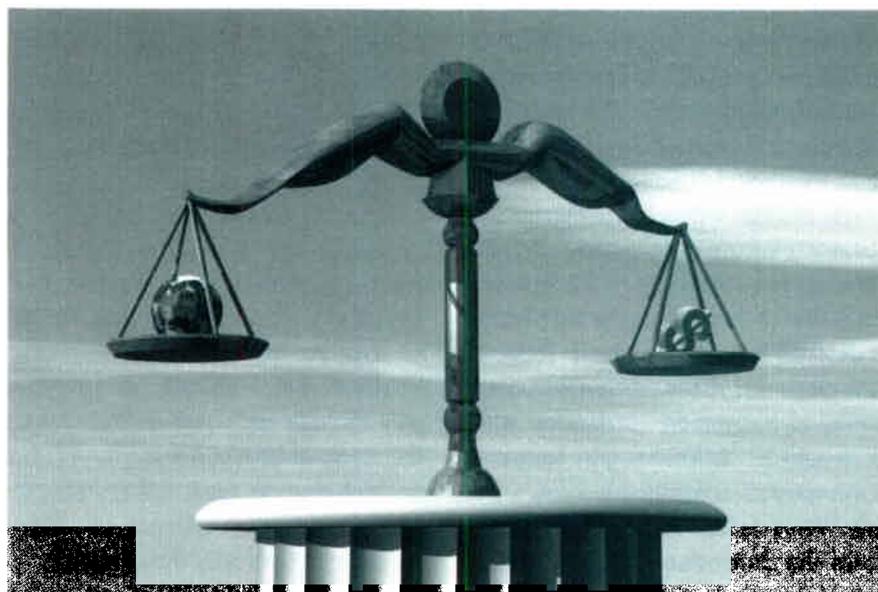
Are Jesuit Institutions Practicing Justice?

JOSEPH H. WESSLING



In addressing the East Coast Conference on Religious Education, the late Francis P. Murphy, Auxiliary Bishop of Baltimore, observed: "Anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their own ways" (Zapor 4). The bishop's observation is significant, not because it is original, but because of the continuing need to point out so obvious a truth. It is as though familiarity with a truth breeds a lack of interest in it. Though Bishop Murphy was speaking specifically of the Catholic Church, his words have broad application, and those of us in Jesuit higher education might consider how our institutions stack up.

Is the virtue of justice, repeatedly proclaimed by our Jesuit colleges and universities, lived out in the practice of these institutions? In many ways, it is. In my experience, I have found that faculty tend to be fair in their grading, and that most (if not all) institutions have a grade grievance procedure to rectify any unfairness. There are usually mechanisms in place to maximize fairness in tenure and promotion decisions and to protect student rights and faculty rights, such as the right of academic freedom. The curriculum usually includes courses in ethics or courses with an ethics component. Opportunities may be provided for students and faculty to become involved in social justice issues and activities. One could go on at length showing the ways in which our Jesuit colleges and universities are practicing what they preach.

I would like to focus, however, on three areas in which our institutions might be falling short: compensation of full-time staff (in such areas as food services and maintenance, as well as in academics), contracting out for services (for janitorial work, for example), and compensation and treatment of adjunct faculty.

Certainly the "preferential option for the poor" presumes a commitment to pay a "living wage." That term is not so easy to pin down as it once was. In earlier times

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the man of the house was the "breadwinner," and a living wage was a wage sufficient for him to adequately support himself, his wife, and his children. Today we live in a very different world of two-income households with, on average, fewer children than before. Many people work two jobs in pursuit of affluence. For these and many other reasons it has become very difficult to say what constitutes a living wage, who is entitled to it, and what other than salary must be included. Pension plan? Perhaps. Health insurance? Almost certainly. Other variables need also to be thrown into the mix, such as regional cost of living and indirect compensation in the form of tuition waivers for employees and dependents.

So, the question of a living wage is complicated, and I shall not attempt to answer it here. That task is better left to socially concerned economists, of which a Jesuit university should have at least a few. But the issue must be confronted. In an article in the *New York Times Magazine* titled "Where's the Outrage?" (June 7, 1998), Michael Kazin laments the lack of interest of the many "haves" of our society in the plight of the "have-nots":

> A century ago many prosperous Americans at least felt a twinge of guilt about the gap between their swelling bank accounts and the single-digit daily wages paid to manual workers. Today that twinge is gone. Few rich Americans seem troubled that their pile rests on the hard, anonymous labor of thousands of people, here and abroad. (79)

Even the moderately well-off seem little troubled by such an inequity. I'm reminded of the dictum of one of my former colleagues in the field of management: "Staff employees should be paid the going rate." The going rate is the way of the world. Are Jesuit institutions to fall in line or to be a leaven in the society?

Second, consider the practice of contracting for services. There can be good practical reasons for contracting with a janitorial service, for example. Some university work may be seasonal; outside contracting diminishes vulnerability to work stoppages; manpower needs can be met more flexibly. But too often outside contractors employ workers at low pay with few benefits or none. Consider Laro Systems, an entrepreneurial "success story" started in 1981 by Robert Bertuglia, Jr., and now one of the largest providers of cleaning services. Michael Winerip, writing in the *New York Times Magazine* (June 7, 1998), comments, "About the only people Laro has not been good for are its cleaners—who account for 1500 of Laro's 1800 employees and typically earn $5.80 to $7.00 an hour" (75). That is considerably less than the $10 per hour average of union cleaners back in 1980. Cleaners' wages have declined dramatically because of strike breaking by non-union companies such as Laro and cut-throat bidding for cleaning contracts. Writes Winerip: "Laro's sales force works on commission and bids low to win jobs; then [Lou] Vacca [Laro's vice president] must figure out ways to squeeze the cleaners . . . it's like wringing blood from a stone" (75).

Obviously, Jesuit institutions should not be benefiting from squeezing the cleaners. But what is an institution to do when a) having its own in-house cleaners is not the best arrangement, b) the only cleaning contractors available are low-wage, low-benefit operations, and c) outside cleaning companies may even do a better job than in-house crews? One solution might be to join with other Jesuit and non-Jesuit institutions to establish, promote, and pledge to use services that measure up to specific guidelines on worker compensation and treatment. If such services do not exist, could they not be created, and could not socially conscious institutions provide them with a market? Such a solution would no doubt add to an institution's operational cost, but it would make the institution's promotion of justice more credible.

Finally, there is the employment of adjunct faculty. Let it be noted that some of these are financially well off and teach, not for the money, but for the contacts teaching affords, for the institutional affiliation, for the joy of teaching, or as a voluntary contribution to Jesuit education. There are other adjuncts, however, who are trying to earn a living through multiple part-time assignments at two, three, and even four institutions. Typically, such an adjunct has no significant benefits, no office, no voice in departmental or university affairs, and a meager stipend which amounts to a very small fraction of the tuition generated by his or her course. Those who have characterized them as the migrant workers of academe are making a largely valid analogy. These adjuncts suffer not only economic deprivation but a form of homelessness. And for what? Some honesty and even some bluntness is in order here: Courses taught by adjuncts are usually money makers, generating support for the rest of the university, including support for the salaries of regular faculty and administrators. Let's do a hypothetical computation. If the tuition is $300 per semester hour

and there are twenty students in a three-hour course, the course is generating $900 x 20 or $18,000. If the adjunct is paid $2000 (the pay is often less), the ratio of income to instructional cost is nine to one. Clearly, adjunct-taught courses can be very profitable, and they enable the university better to compete for regular faculty, to upgrade facilities, and to hold down tuition—all noble ends. But do the ends justify the means?

There is the further issue of the second class (servant class?) status of the adjuncts, who are always "temporary" help even if they have been serving the institution for a decade or more. They may not have even shared office space, are rarely invited to department meetings, and are generally treated as little more than a pool of cheap labor. Can we really defend an upstairs-downstairs situation that apes the class structure of the most class-conscious societies? James Sledd, Professor Emeritus at the University of Texas at Austin, puts it more strongly: "It's an academic plantation" (Schneider A14). The analogy may be hyperbolic, but many would witness to the essential validity of Sledd's criticism.

CAN WE REALLY DEFEND AN UPSTAIRS-DOWNSTAIRS SITUATION THAT APES THE CLASS STRUCTURE OF THE MOST CLASS-CONSCIOUS SOCIETIES?

Why has so little criticism of the compensation and treatment of adjuncts come from Jesuit (or, more broadly, Catholic) sources? We seek to be a moral leaven in society, but many secular institutions seem to be ahead of us on this one. Katherine Kolb, writing in the Modern Language Association's *Profession 97* observes, "For one category of professors to exploit another is not to set a good example to legislatures and private donors of how the profession as a whole should be treated." Kolb, an adjunct at the University of Minnesota, speaks as one of the exploited—out of the depths she cries to us. But her complaint is recognized and set before us, not in a religious publication, but in one of the most respected journals in her profession. Or take the long article "Life as a Ph.D. Trapped in a Pool of Cheap Labor" that appeared in the *New York Times* (March 8, 1998). The article is anecdotal, focusing on individual migrant teachers of composition, but for academics in the field, their stories sound familiar themes: low-pay, insecurity, underappreciation, and exhaustion.

Who is to blame? Just as I do not single out any university for criticism, so I do not want to lay the blame on any one segment within the university, such as the administration. Robert Scholes, a distinguished professor of humanities at Brown University, indicts faculty, much as Kolb does: "What really stinks is that literature scholars have no incentive to improve the situation . . . . The more economically you can teach those writing courses—which is to say, the more students you can cram into them and the worse you can pay the teachers—the better off the literature faculty is" (Schneider A14).

Are we as regular faculty tacitly condoning inequities and indignities from which we benefit? I have tried not to overlook complicating factors which may preclude easy solutions to what would seem to be moral issues. Perhaps the most serious of these complicating factors is that many universities have become financially dependent upon the exploitation of cheap labor. It should be pointed out, however, that such dependence was one of the defenses of slavery in the ante-bellum South. One may acknowledge such dependence as a difficulty, but one must never accept it as a defense. Regarding the several issues outlined in this paper, the first step would seem to be an examination of the facts within a given institution. Not every contracting out for services is exploitation. Not every low paid adjunct is being taken advantage of. But what injustice there may be must be recognized and

dealt with in as short a time frame as possible. Dealing with economic injustice may be difficult, especially in the short run. Tight budgets may be strained by pressures from many sides—by a backlog of deferred maintenance, by a need for new equipment, by declining enrollment, and by many other things. But, in a Jesuit university, economic justice must also be seen as a need, not as an ideal to be compromised. Our development offices solicit funds for many things: new buildings, renovations, scholarships, endowed chairs. Why not for internal economic justice?

Has such an appeal ever been made? It would be an interesting experiment for some Jesuit institution to have a fund drive for just compensation within the walls. The experiment and even the results might merit national attention and be a leaven for a more just society.

Then there are the non-economic issues. What can be done and how far can we go to minimize class divisions and accord some degree of dignity to adjuncts, to temporary hires, and to support staff? We would probably all agree that people in those categories should not be involved in issues of tenure and promotion, but should they not have a voice in matters that concern them and matters on which their input could be valuable? Should their participation in departmental and university governance not be maximized rather than minimized within the necessary constraints? Could not adjuncts be allotted at least some shared office space? Would some regular faculty be willing to set aside some hours when adjuncts might be welcome to use their offices?

And what is being done to incorporate adjuncts and temporary instructors into the mission of a Jesuit university? What about staff personnel? Are they merely hired hands or are they to be consciously involved in the Jesuit mission? At Xavier University, the office of Ignatian Programs, under the direction of Father George Traub, S. J., includes staff personnel along with faculty and administrators as equal participants in explorations of the Jesuit identity and in discussions of the Xavier experience. Should such inclusiveness in itself be a part of the Jesuit mission?

It is common on Jesuit campuses to be concerned about justice in Central America, Haiti, Indonesia, and many other places. Such concern—often a very active concern—is one of the glories of American Jesuit education. But, if charity should begin at home (as it should), then justice too should begin at home, though neither justice nor charity should end there. St. Paul was concerned that "after having preached to others I myself should be rejected" (1 Corinthians 9:27). Jesuit institutions are not likely to be rejected, but our credibility and integrity may be at stake. Some self-examination is in order.

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