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# JUST LISTEN: JESUIT HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE SITUATION OF WOMEN

By Barbara J. Busse

**T**he conventional wisdom of the Tower of Babel story is that the collapse was a misfortune. That it was the distraction or the weight of many languages that precipitated the tower's failed architecture. That one monolithic language would have expedited the building, and heaven would have been reached. Whose heaven, she wonders? And what kind? Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet. Complicated, demanding, yes, but a view of heaven as life; not heaven as post-life...

Toni Morrison, excerpt from Nobel Prize speech, "Reach Toward the Ineffable"

Toni Morrison wisely places listening at the center of the quest for heaven on earth, since listening provides opportunities to understand how other persons make sense of life. Similarly, Jesuit apostolates are grounded in the deepest forms of listening to and understanding others in order to develop solidarity with them. This Jesuit orientation requires listening with openness, insight, and compassion to the lived experience of other persons, especially the oppressed and needy.

In Jesuit universities, this means listening to women we encounter each day in our work whose marginality may not appear as serious as other forms of oppression, but is undeniable and has harmful consequences. This brief essay is premised on the simple notion that it is impossible to listen to those not present and/or whose voices are muted by their position in the larger group. It proposes two ways to make listening more likely and more productive: First, assure that women are equitably represented in significant conversations at Jesuit universities. Second, create a learning environ-

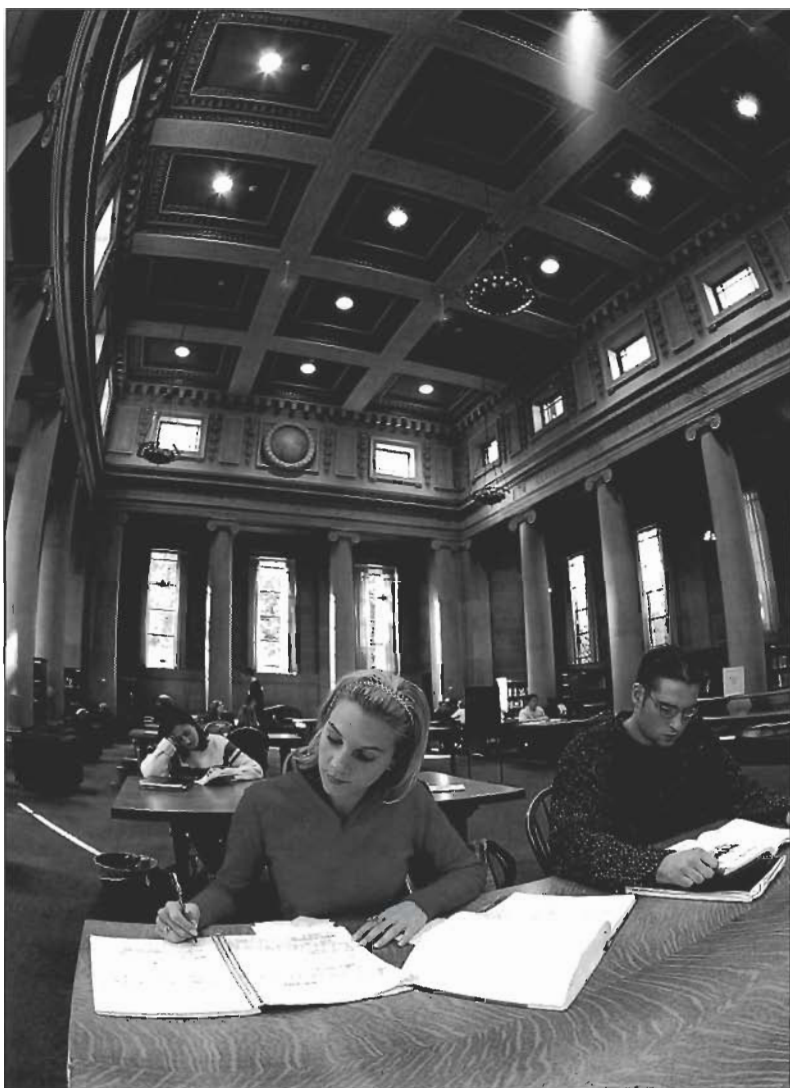
ment that directly addresses the situation of women as a central educational objective of Jesuit higher education.

Systematic inquiry into the situation of women was encouraged by the Jesuits during General Congregation 34 (*Documents, Decree 14, 1995*). The Jesuit's decree addressed the "universal reality" of discrimination against women, specifically acknowledging the "feminine face of oppression" and the "feminization of poverty" as the result of a "legacy of systematic discrimination against women" that is "embedded within the economic, social, political, religious, and even linguistic structures of our societies" (*Documents, 1995*). Evidence of this discrimination is amply present throughout the world as well as within our universities.

The Jesuits' agenda for addressing this universal reality identified two phases, the former foundational for the latter: "We invite all Jesuits to listen carefully and courageously to the experience of women. Listening, in a spirit of partnership and equality, is the most practical response we can make and is the foundation for our mutual partnership to reform unjust structures." (*Documents, 1995*). This listening is essential since women's "universal reality" to some degree affects, and, in its most serious forms, risks the lives, physical and emotional health, education, material well-being, and spiritual welfare of half of the world's people. Since oppression dehumanizes the oppressor as well as the oppressed, discrimination against women is not a "women's issue," but of deep concern for all persons.

Professor Lisa Cahill cogently summarized Fr. Kolvenbach's intent in a *Conversations* article in Fall 1993:

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Holy Cross.

“‘preferential love for the poor’ must be ‘operative’ in all Jesuit institutions,” “the criterion for every significant decision” and “not ‘exclusivist,’ i.e., not limited only to one economic class” but inclusive of “groups which are marginalized on the basis of other than purely economic criteria, such as race or sex.” Loyola Marymount University may provide an illustrative example of both how far we have come and how far we have to go to become authentically inclusive universities.

Loyola Marymount University’s experience may stimulate conversation about these issues on other campuses. LMU was formed by the merger in 1973 of a Jesuit university, Loyola University of Los Angeles, which primarily educated men, and Marymount College, whose Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary and St. Joseph’s of Orange sisters primarily educated women. Having lived through the pre-merger affiliation and the ultimate merger and based on years of observation, I am confident that asking the Jesuits and others to listen courageously to the situation of women is made more challenging when women’s voices are

marginalized on campus. Can one authentically listen to the *situation* of another without listening to the other directly? Perhaps so, but it is more complex and problematic. The clearest progress in women’s representation at LMU is evident in the student body; however, the faculty, administration, and governing and advisory boards are all predominantly male more than 30 years after the merger.

**N**o one who lived through the experience of the affiliation and ultimate merger of Loyola and Marymount could claim with credibility that the era was absent significant struggle and dislocation for women and men. We struggled over large issues as well as inconsequential ones. Where on the official seal should the two names be located? Should we challenge the abbreviated “Loyola” in conversations? How could we coherently communicate the sacred stories of separate traditions? The spirit of the times was reflected in students’ gendered antagonisms as well. The Loyola yearbook in 1969 accompanied a four-page spread of Marymount coed photos with these quotations: “A real woman —now listen to this and I hope it helps you — gets more out of the pleasure she gives than the pleasure she takes from a man.” (Zorba), and “The head monkey at Paris puts on a traveler’s cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same” (Thoreau).

A number of women faculty from the Marymount side lost positions in the merger in order to “balance” departments; not a single male faculty member found himself in this position. Among those whose positions were eliminated, I recall being told by a Loyola dean that while the decision in no way represented a dismissal nor did it reflect dissatisfaction with my work (I had been promoted in the previous year), “my little family would be taken care of,” i.e., my husband would be allowed to retain his faculty position at Loyola.

These were not easy times for women at the newly formed LMU. When my previous position was re-established and I returned seven years later, I was understandably concerned about whether LMU would be a supportive place for women. Progress for women, then as now, was mixed. For example, I served on the university’s first committee to establish a campus child care center while pregnant with the oldest of our five children, a son who is now a father himself. The LMU Children’s Center was established 30 years later by President Robert B. Lawton. In deference to his predecessors, the cultural shift toward more dual career families made the case more compelling each year. Significant change occurs when leaders want to create a more inclusive community. We are witnessing those changes now at LMU, and the pace is accelerating.

Nevertheless, as Sr. Maureen Fay, O.P., reported to

JASPA in 1999, "It's not enough to open the door...without being prepared to make changes that indicate a welcome, a sensitivity, a recognition not only of presence, but also of the contribution that their experiences can add to the texture of academic life."

Decades ago, LMU created the position of provost, dedicated to a woman who would be especially attentive to the situation of women at LMU. This position was abandoned eventually, arguably because it had no functional organizational power. LMU's upper administration for many years was exclusively male. Current Vice President for Student Affairs Lane Bove (Marymount '68) broke through the vice presidential glass ceiling in 1987. Lynne Scarborough joined her on the president's six-person cabinet just a few years ago. Two of the six academic deans at LMU are women. Three of these four women administrators were appointed by LMU's current president, Fr. Lawton.

He also has implemented an ambitious initiative to hire one hundred new faculty and appointed Dr. Abbie Robinson-Armstrong, assistant to the president for intercultural affairs, to work alongside Fr. Robert Caro, S.J., assistant to the president for mission and identity on our hiring for mission, diversity and gender balance workshop series. Major positions once held by men are now held by women. It is clear that LMU has made significant progress, especially under Fr. Lawton's leadership, but gender parity remains an elusive goal. We still discuss how to appoint women for significant leadership positions on the faculty, administration and boards.

**T**en years beyond the decree on the situation of women and twelve years after Alice Hayes predicted (*Conversations*, Fall, 1993) that "women will have an increasing influence on the future of our universities," gender inequities persist beyond the representation issue. The study of gender discrimination is often sequestered instead of being given curricular pride of place. Since women's oppression is among the more prominent and persistent examples of injustice, this is inexcusable in Jesuit universities committed to care about the dignity of the human person. If we are serious about "mutual partnership to reform unjust structures," we must put our own privileged houses in order, remaining mindful of discrimination against women throughout the world, and become places where scholars and teachers focus on gender issues. Mutuality is a false promise if we do not affirm the value of scholarly discourse about women, and model in our universities the conditions we wish to create beyond our campuses. We must be first and foremost places where learning about gender discrimination is a central educational objective of Jesuit universities.

Exploring the ways that social injustice may be

perpetuated, intentionally or unintentionally, by the complex web of gendered meanings and expectations embedded in our own attitudes, shaped by the dominant male culture and, at times, reinforced by our own institutions, is essential. Focused critical inquiry, systematic investigation and research, exploration of phenomena through the production of creative work would sharpen our ability to "hear" women's stories. Acknowledging our best understanding of service, we cannot respond to women's needs without aligning ourselves with women. In the context of a Jesuit university this expansive and deep form of "listening" to the situation of women complements Ignatian spirituality, stressing daily, systematic reflection on lived experience as a precursor to the transformative changes we consider apostolic.

**E**xpanding the commitment to gender scholarship from a variety of disciplinary orientations would be a practical way for Jesuit universities to demonstrate our commitment to transformative changes in response to women's oppression, while simultaneously affirming the significant role that women scholars play in providing important insights into human experience. At LMU, we are making some progress in this direction; however, it would not be accurate to say that gender studies are fully incorporated into the curriculum in a way that assures the exposure of each student.

Since women's perspectives often challenge privileged, biased, and nonrepresentative views of human experience, listening to women's voices produces a different kind of conversation, more layered and complex, more complicated and difficult, richer. Jesuit universities could do more to stimulate this conversation: sponsor conferences, exhibitions, performances, and fund research that reflect an institutional willingness to place women's issues at the forefront of Jesuit higher education. In these ways, our universities could become models of comprehensive humanism, revealing how educational institutions could promote understanding and dismantle the structural and attitudinal underpinnings of injustice.

Responding insightfully and courageously to the situation of women will enable us to imagine and enact societies in which all persons share a common dignity and are able to assume individual responsibility for the world's good. That vision sounds a great deal like Morrison's view of heaven as life, and closely mirrors the Jesuit and Marymount traditions we prize at LMU. ■