

Sparks and Bridges: Catalysts of a Catholic Higher Education that Works

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What are some of the qualities of a Catholic higher education that “works”? It should connect concrete solutions with real problems that we are facing today. It should have an eye out for ways to help students face the challenges they will soon encounter in their professional lives. If I had to put my finger on the single biggest challenge in developing an approach to Catholic higher education in the United States that works, I would point to the difficulty of navigating between two poles that seem to be in constant tension: on one side, Catholic identity, and on the other, dialogue in a pluralistic culture.

Catholic identity includes literacy in tradition, in all of its rich and varied dimensions, from doctrine and dogma, to liturgical life and art, to ministry and spirituality. How can we maintain and transmit these treasures to the next generation? Dialogue, especially in pluralistic educational environments, raises its own set of questions. How can we translate the values we hold dear for a broad spectrum of people who may not share the tradition? How can we avoid alienating triumphalism, or simply being tossed aside as irrelevant?

When the Dimensions of Identity and Dialogue Do Not Cohere

While teaching a legal ethics class at Fordham Law School, I set out a problem based, in part, on what went wrong with the legal advice given to the Enron Corporation: You are a lawyer working for a law firm and have been on the job for only about six months. Your supervisor, a partner in the firm, says there seems to be an ethical question of whether the firm can take the case, but it would be very good for business if you could figure out a way around that question. You do the research and conclude that in your judgment there is indeed an insurmountable conflict of interest. What determines the contours of your research re-

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port to the partner—your own judgment or what the partner wants? Approximately 85 percent of the class chose “what the partner wants.”

Many graduate students have no confidence in making judgment calls that implicate values. During class discussions, they work very hard to avoid definitions of justice that might generate conflict. They are often paralyzed with fear at the mere thought of stepping off the beaten path. My concern is this: Even if students were “literate” in Catholic—or any other—tradition, it might not make a difference, because they have not figured out how to connect their personal identity with their contribution to a work environment.¹

Or, they swing in another equally problematic direction. For many, the proverbial “wall” of separation between church and state functions as a powerful metaphor. As the United States Supreme Court opinion *Lemon v. Kurtzman* noted, “The Constitution decrees that religion must be a private matter for the individual, the family, and institutions of private choice.”² Technically, the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause, and therefore the wall metaphor, should be applied only to government action, leaving plenty of room for expression of religious identity in most professional environments. Nonetheless, the wall metaphor permeates perceptions of what expression is appropriate or allowed in the “work” sphere. Through this lens, religiously grounded value systems seem to create insurmountable conflict, and many believe that they should be banned from the contours of public and professional life.

I remember another exchange with a student during a legal ethics class dedicated to the idea of “religious lawyering.” She had rejected the idea outright, arguing that bringing religious values to bear on one’s decisions necessarily leads to unacceptable bias, prejudice, and a kind of moralizing completely inappropriate for a professional setting. I chal-

¹ In a series of law review essays, I have been working toward solutions to the particular problems that law students and younger lawyers encounter when educational and professional environments do little to help them foster the development of their own moral voice and judgment.

See Amelia J. Uelmen, *The Evils of ‘Elasticity’: Reflections on the Rhetoric of Professionalism and the Part-Time Paradox in Large Firm Practice*, 33 Fordham Urb. L.J. 81 (2005); Amelia J. Uelmen, *An Explicit Connection Between Faith and Justice in Catholic Legal Education: Why Rock the Boat?*, 81 U. Det. Mercy L. Rev. 921 (2004); Amelia J. Uelmen, *Can a Religious Person Be a Big Firm Litigator?*, 26 Fordham Urb. L.J. 1069 (1999).

² *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602, 625 (1971).

lenged her, asking, "So are you telling me that all lawyers must be pressed into and cut from the same cookie-cutter mold?" She answered, "Yes."

What is at the root of each of these problems? I believe it is often a lack of personal integration, combined with a tremendous fear and insecurity that a religious message will create division. Catholic education that "works" needs to recognize that the challenge is not only to strengthen identity or to navigate the contours of pluralism. The core of the project is to link the two. Students need to see how a strong sense of Catholic identity, of being grounded in the tradition, does not necessarily generate entrenched polarization. They must experience how the openness of dialogue does not necessarily melt into vague and meaningless platitudes.

Sparks and Bridges

How can our institutions nurture this connection? My concrete suggestions revolve around recognizing the need for two types of equally important players in a given department or school that I will call sparks and bridges. Sparks are people who have the background and capacity to draw out the connections between their academic discipline and their faith, and who have the job security and sense of identity to be able to apply these connections in practice. Bridges are people who have the imagination and sensitivity to perceive how identity questions might sit with others who have a different background or perspective. By intuiting what the concerns and fears might be, they are able to build relationships of trust that open the door to genuine communication about identity questions.³

If there is not a single spark in any given department, then that is a real problem. If bias against faith perspectives has so permeated hiring that it has left faculties with no one who has the interest, background, capacity, or courage to draw the connections, then this bias needs to be faced and addressed. However, we must pay the same level of attention to bridges. Through this lens, a bridge is a "mission" hire in a substantial way, because the real headway is made when sparks and bridges team up. This synergy tends to create a fabric in which principles of

³ In developing the "sparks and bridges" methodology, I am personally indebted to the Focolare Movement's spirituality of unity. This spirituality helps Catholics and many others to live integrated lives of faith that are, at the same time, open to fruitful dialogue with people of other faith traditions and cultures.

For an overview of this approach, see Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings* 337-344 (New City Press 2007).

religious traditions come alive and become accessible, able to inform our relationships and approaches to institutional conversations.

For example, my colleague, Russ Pearce, the founder of the Institute that I direct, is Jewish. Our perspectives on many topics are very different. But we have agreed to focus together on a principle that is common to our traditions, love of neighbor, and to help each other live this principle in our daily interactions. Last spring, I had a misunderstanding with another colleague that left me feeling slighted and down. There was a faculty function, and I was tempted to close in on myself and not attend. I was moping at my desk when Russ called and asked if I was coming. When I declined, he said, “People are fragile. You have to love your neighbor. I’ll save you a seat.” The event turned out to be an opportunity not only to patch things up, but also to find a deeper understanding with my colleague.

I am a cradle Catholic with a strong background in the tradition. I run Fordham’s Catholic Lawyer’s Program and I teach the seminars in Catholic Social Thought and the Law. But I can honestly say that I am more who I am and I am more able to live my Catholic faith thanks to the help and encouragement of my Jewish colleague.⁴

This basic sense of openness and gratitude permeates our approach to mission conversations with the faculty. For the past six years, our Institute has coordinated a faculty colloquium on religion and the law school. Participation is voluntary, but we have the clear support and active participation of the dean. Each year, it tends to attract about 25 percent of the full-time faculty. The “sparks and bridges” synergy informs all dimensions of the conversation. We start each academic year with a brainstorming session, which ensures that the faculty’s actual interests and concerns shape the year’s agenda and that faculty members maintain control. The initiative and leadership of non-Catholic faculty has been essential for breaking down barriers of suspicion and fear. Year after year, this approach has generated openness to learning more about the Catholic tradition. We are now at the point where several non-Catholic faculty members are discovering the connections

⁴ Our stories and an overview of our work at Fordham’s Institute on Religion, Law & Lawyer’s Work are included in Russell G. Pearce & Amelia J. Uelmen, *Religious Lawyering in a Liberal Democracy*, 55 Case Western Reserve L. Rev. 127 (2004); Russell G. Pearce & Amelia J. Uelmen, *Religious Lawyering’s Second Wave*, 21 J. L. & Religion 269 (2005-2006). The Institute’s website is available at <http://law.fordham.edu/lawreligion>.

between Catholic values and what they are already doing; some would like to begin to integrate the tradition into their scholarship and teaching.

The “sparks and bridges” methodology can also help to create a space to challenge students to grow. For example, in my seminar on Catholic Social Thought and the Law, I ask the “sparks” to think more about how the principles might play out in a pluralistic society. I also challenge those most concerned about these tensions to put on a “comparative law” hat and work to understand the framework, even if they ultimately may disagree with it. Through their encounter with each other in class discussions, I sense that they catch a glimpse of a profession that has room for more than “what the partner wants” or “cookie-cutter” lawyers.

Ultimately, why do I believe that this approach, even lifestyle, is possible? In the encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, Pope John Paul II located the heart of a “missionary” spirituality in St. Paul’s description of what it means to have Christ’s own attitude: “. . . though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.’ (Phil 2:5-8).”⁵

When John Paul was asked to articulate a spirituality not of mission, but of dialogue, he grounded it in the same core, the humility of Jesus in his *kenosis*. He wrote, “It is in the measure that, like Christ, we empty ourselves that we shall truly be able to open our hearts to others and walk with them as fellow pilgrims towards the destiny that God has prepared for us.”⁶

For John Paul, the starting point, the method, and even the goal of both mission and dialogue was conformity to Christ, precisely in Christ’s capacity to empty himself out of love and as an expression of love. In this love is the promise of the deepest sense of personal integration and identity. As Pope Benedict described in the encyclical *Deus caritas est*: Love is “a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed

⁵ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* ¶ 88 (1990).

⁶ John Paul II, *The Spirituality of Interreligious Dialogue*, 31 *Origins* 404 (November 22, 2001).

inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God.”⁷

How might this be applied? In interactions with students in my seminar, I see it first as an invitation to make space within myself, to let go of my own perspective and agenda, or perhaps mere busyness and distraction, so that I can enter into their perspectives—in how I listen, in how I react to their reaction papers, and in how I thread their suggestions and concerns into the material to cover in class. And once there is a certain level of trust, this *kenotic* space has also become the ground to help students face even what is painful in their professional journey, expressed at times in a lack of values orientation or in the insecurity of extreme competition with others. I often remember that wonderful line from the *Lion King*, when Mufasa’s ghost reminds Simba, “Look inside yourself, you are more than what you have become.” At times this kind of *kenotic* space creates relationships where that message can come to the fore.⁸

In all of my work, with students, with faculty, with the university administration, and with lawyers in the community, I see in a love modeled on Jesus’ own self-emptying the promise not of a relativistic void, but a creative space for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is then the one to suggest vehicles to preserve the Catholic tradition and to share it with others. And the Holy Spirit is also a guide to discover and appreciate the manifold ways in which God is already at work in our students, our colleagues, and our institutions as a whole. In this kind of love I see the promise of a Catholic higher education that truly “works.”

⁷ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est* ¶ 6 (2006). Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio Ineunte* ¶ 43 (2001) (“A spirituality of communion means . . . knowing how to ‘make room’ for our brothers and sisters, bearing ‘each other’s burdens.’”) (quoting *Galatians* 6:2).

For an extended analysis of the “hard questions” in reconciling identity, mission, and interfaith dialogue, see Amelia J. Uelmen, *Reconciling Evangelization and Dialogue through Love of Neighbor*, 52 Villanova L. Rev. 303 (2007).

⁸ For a discussion of how Jesus, who cries out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Mt 27:46, Mk 15:34), can serve as a model for educators, see Lubich, *supra* note 3, at 221-222.