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"What is Justice at Fairfield?"

Joy Gordon

Fairfield has seen a great deal of activity on the social justice front in the last two years. Although Campus Ministry has long been active--in the neighboring city of Bridgeport, and in their Mission Volunteer trips to Latin America--I am most familiar with the recent work of faculty and students.

Fairfield found itself receiving national attention the year before last, when a group of students and faculty protested very vigorously the university's policies regarding our custodial workers, and the workers' treatment by the company with which Fairfield contracted for these services. The students leading the "Justice for Janitors" movement were among the brightest and most thoughtful students on our campus, and at each juncture their work and their discussions were shaped by Catholic social teachings, as well as by works on non-violent social change, in particular those of Dr. Martin Luther King and Gandhi. As the student actions became increasingly visible, the administration agreed to consider a code of conduct for contractors, which was adopted by the board of trustees the following fall.

Alongside of a core of activist students, many of the faculty at Fairfield have long reflected an interest in and commitment to social justice issues, in their academic work as well as their lives. Let me describe just a few of them. A member of the nursing faculty teaches a course on health care and rural poverty, and brings the whole class to work with her in Appalachia over spring break. Faculty in the school of business have been working with microcredit projects in Haiti and Nicaragua. In the school of education, there is a strong program in multicultural education, led by a faculty member who conducts research both locally (in Bridgeport) and internationally (in Belfast), and who has published extensively on strategies to address issues of race and cultural diversity in elementary education.

For those of us who attended the conferences at Boston College or Santa Clara, there was a wealth of ideas to take back. At Boston College, I was most struck by two things: in his keynote address, Fr. Bryan Hehir spoke of the need to see justice as integrated throughout the university, rather than as a kind of spo-

radic or extracurricular activity--the "crew team" model. I was also struck by the Fordham group's presentation on the notion of the institution as bearing prophetic witness (in the case of Fordham, this was manifested in part by the university's commitment to build housing for the low-income community). Although I am not religious, I understood "bearing prophetic witness" to mean that the university must be more than a venue for the teaching and discussion of questions of justice. It must also, itself, be an exemplar

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of just conduct. Father Kolvenbach's discussion of the need for the Jesuit university to commit itself to justice in all aspects of its work reiterated and expanded on this principle.

Last March, I was joined by eight other faculty members over spring break on a trip to Nicaragua, where we met with health-care professionals, political leaders, and educators. We also visited microcredit projects, urban planning agencies, rural communities, and innovative agricultural projects. We were treated to Nicaraguan art and music and talked at some length with a survivor of the mudslide at Posoltega, which wiped out nearly three thousand people. We toured as well the city garbage dump in Managua, in which the inhabitants' makeshift shelters and cooking fires are interspersed among the mountains of garbage. When we returned to Fairfield, we immediately began developing a series of projects that would integrate the needs and the opportunities of Latin America with the resources and educational strategies of Fairfield. The first of those will come to fruition next semester: an interdisciplinary course on Latin America, health, environment, education, politics, history, culture, and economic development, in which the two faculty leading the course will join the students in spending spring break in Nicaragua, where each student will spend a week researching and experiencing first-hand the living reality of what they have learned in the classroom.

But we also felt it was important to do more than simply generate projects. So we invited all the deans and the academic vice-president to meet with our group, where we presented a much more far-reaching proposal. "This was our experience in Nicaragua," we said, "and here are the projects we'll be doing next. But these are not enough. It is possible for these kinds of things to occur in every area in the university, and in every area of the curriculum. What is needed at Fairfield is a commitment to justice across the curriculum, and justice throughout the university."

Our proposal identified areas which we felt called for a commitment to justice:

- racial justice
- equality of women
- labor and the rights of workers
- poverty and the inequities in the distribution of wealth, property, and knowledge
- globalization and its impact upon the Third World

- environmental responsibility
- warfare and its victims
- access to education and health care

We then proposed that a commitment to justice must be manifested in two domains. The university must be a venue for teaching and discussion. But there must also be a commitment to justice in the practices and policies of the institution itself. These policies and practices include: achievement of racial and economic diversity in our student body; our environmental practices; the management of the university's endowment; our labor practices (for both direct and indirect employees); and our relation to Bridgeport, the city next door to Fairfield, which has a high minority population, as well as considerable poverty.

Last fall, we asked the Academic Council, our faculty governance body, to establish an ad hoc faculty committee on justice initiatives at Fairfield. This group has begun to re-think many of the justice issues at Fairfield. What exactly is the significance of our activities in Bridgeport? Are we doing justice, or is it charity? The injustices with which we are concerned are structural in nature. But if that is the case, then how do we assess many of Fairfield's current projects, which are modest in scope, and somewhat piecemeal? Our student body has very few students of color. What does it mean for Fairfield to say that "we are committed to racial equality," if the reality of our situation is that we reproduce the same de facto racial segregation that characterizes much of our society? If our mission, in whole or even in part, is to serve and educate the poor, what do we make of the fact that our student body is almost entirely middle- and upper-middle class? And what do we *do* about it, given that we are a tuition-driven institution?

The first step is to identify the very real tensions and conflicting interests that underlie these questions. But how will these tensions be resolved? Neither faith, nor good intentions, nor sincere efforts are enough; all of these have characterized much of the Fairfield community for many years, and they have not resulted in a diverse student body, a portfolio managed in accordance with principles of social responsibility, fair wages for our custodial workers... or even a functional recycling program!

Injustice is perpetuated in part through the exclusion or marginalization of those whose criticisms and

accusations are uncomfortable to hear. As the Jesuit universities take on the ambitious task of effectuating a collective, institutional commitment to justice, it will be important to see who will participate in shaping the policies intended to redress injustices... and who will be kept at arm's length, or excluded altogether. On our own campus, as the justice initiatives take on greater visibility, we have already begun to struggle with this question. The committee charged with the strategic planning of Fairfield's justice initiatives, appointed by our administration, contained no persons of color; no one who has been active on the labor issues on our campus; none of the faculty who have been teaching, doing research, or operating programs in Bridgeport, or in areas of rural poverty; no one with expertise in environmental issues; and none of the many faculty on our campus with specializations in civil rights, human rights, globalization, racism, economic development, labor, or warfare and peace initiatives. Most striking was the failure to include the director of Fairfield's Peace and Justice Program. As Fairfield's team for the Santa Clara conference was chosen, the faculty most active and knowledgeable in these areas were again excluded. After vocal protests by their colleagues, a few of those directly active on justice issues were finally invited to attend. The director of the Peace and Justice Program, who had given a paper at the Boston College justice conference, critical of the administration on the campus labor issues, was again excluded.

I mention these internal matters not to cause embarrassment to our university's administration, but as a reminder to all of us that if we are truly committed to justice, we must do more than discuss these questions among the groups with which we are most comfortable, which are the most familiar to us. The challenge for an institution committed to justice is that the institution itself must undergo a radical transformation, and those who have been marginalized must themselves become parties to, and shapers of, the new commitment, at the most concrete level. It is not enough, it seems to me, for our institutions to assert their commitment to justice, or even to solicit comments by those who have been marginalized by virtue of their race, their gender, their social class, their sexual orientation, or their political views. What policies will we put in place to address Fairfield's long-standing failure to achieve racial diversity? If persons of color are not invited to actually shape those policies, how

much enduring progress will be made? What is the place of gays and lesbians at a Catholic institution? Will they be invited to participate in shaping the university's policy to treat its community members with dignity and respect, or will they again be marginalized? Who will shape and monitor mechanisms to ensure that all of our employees, direct and indirect, are paid fair wages? If those who have advocated most energetically on behalf of the workers, and the workers themselves, are not included, how fair or effective will such a mechanism be? What is the place of those whose commitment to justice is not rooted in faith, but simply in the moral commitment to live in accordance with principles of conscience? Is faith the prerequisite for shaping a Jesuit institution's commitment to justice or to acts of justice?

I expect that as Fairfield undertakes its own discussions of what justice can mean on our campus, these and many other questions like them will challenge all of us.



Photo by: John Quinn, S.J.