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Teaching Christian Ethics in a Jesuit University

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I have had the good fortune to teach Christian ethics at institutions of higher learning in the Jesuit tradition on four different levels: undergraduates, graduate students preparing for ministry, doctoral students, and mid-life students changing or updating their careers. The first and fourth categories are now my primary focus at Santa Clara University.

Their unique social location sets today's undergraduates apart from Catholics in the other three groups. Age is not the primary difference; instead, the novel experience they have had of the American church distinguishes Catholics of the college generation. Santa Clara's population is mostly 18 to 22 years old and from 60% to 70% have a Catholic background. Close to 40% of the students come from minority groups: Asian, Hispanic and African American, in that order. The students support the contention of Archbishop Weakland of Milwaukee that United States Catholics have moved in the past generation from being cultural outsiders to insiders. They are young Americans first, a generation steeped in the values of an anxious, economically mobile, and fragmenting technological culture. Most do not have a place to stand apart from the mainstream to cast a critical eye upon it. They are Catholics or Christians second: many have had a rather loose connection with the Christian tradition or with the formative experience of Catholic parish life that stamped their parents' identities.

Young American Catholics an-

swer moral questions by appealing to "conscience first, and tradition second." As sociologist Patrick MacNamara pointed out in his book of that title, their consciences tend to be highly individualistic. Issues of social equality are live moral questions for most; justice questions arise most often when the students integrate their ethics studies with work in disadvantaged areas of Silicon Valley. Sexuality is generally a personal issue but not a moral concern. Minority students especially bring a sense of responsibility to help their extended families and communities, which can challenge the careerism of their mainstream peers. A global religious tradition can pose significant questions to American assumptions about economic privilege, individualism, and a sense of entitlement about using disproportionate amounts of the world's resources.

The most distinctively Christian undergraduates I teach are evangelicals, both Latinos and Anglos. They come from closely knit church communities who encourage an experience of religious conversion and frame life in biblical terms. Although these churches teach them that Christians are out of the mainstream secular culture, many of their aspirations are not very countercultural. Unlike their Catholic classmates, they do not seem poised to embark on an extended holiday from the Christian community.

How can one be a Christian and an American? Or, more directly, since we are American, what difference would being a Christian make? I try to pose these questions in courses on Christian ethics. An intelligible answer should be sought in our own cultural resources

rather than in restorationist European Catholicism or in the attractive but exotic challenge of Latin American liberation theology. I believe that the profile of a distinctive American Christianity stands out in figures like Jonathan Edwards, William James, Josiah Royce and Dorothy Day. It is experiential, affective, pragmatic and

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socially transformative. These qualities can also be found in Ignatian spirituality where personal conversion comes through imaginative engagement with the story of Christ and equips the character to discern a practical moral response. Putting the two traditions together could help students integrate a vital, practical faith with a critical American identity.

Although previous generations of Jesuit educators like John Courtney Murray relied on the natural law tradition to give Catholic outsiders some common ground with the rest of American culture, the challenge for today's insiders is to discover Christian resources that can withstand the homogenizing pressures of secular culture and offer it a vision of justice and human integrity.