

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 40 *Re-creating Jesuit Higher Education: The General's Challenge*

Article 4

9-1-2011

Calling Faith Out of Service

Dan Pearson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Pearson, Dan (2011) "Calling Faith Out of Service," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 40, Article 4.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol40/iss1/4>

Calling Faith Out Of Service

By Dan Pearson

Faith life at Seattle University thrives in the students and community members that I served in the Chapel of St. Ignatius. For three and a half years of my undergraduate education, I had the privilege of being a student sacristan for the University sacred spaces, a position which centered me in the beating heart of spiritual vitality shelters itself from the Seattle rain in the arching white walls of the Chapel of St. Ignatius.

Step outside of the Chapel's cedar doors, however, and faith life needed to hustle back on defense. Seattle is among the most agnostic and religiously unaffiliated areas of the United States, and the student body at Seattle University reflects this demographic. Discussions of spirituality on campus were all too often swept under the rug. Many students at SU were disinclined to discuss God or religion, even if only to entertain the idea academically.

Student disengagement with faith often stifles the academic possibilities for theological study. I cannot blame my peers who had no prior theological education causing many classes to start with the very basics of theological methodologies. General apathy towards the course material, which is a phenomenon that transcends the boundaries of course and subject, was not even especially detrimental to the academic environment. The problem arose when students showed outright hostility towards the prospect of engaging in discussions of God or faith based reasoning, a trend which I only experienced in theology classes. Most students were at least willing to entertain the principles of utilitarianism in philosophy courses for the sake of academic study, and I did not witness anyone making a fuss about behaviorism in my psychology courses. Comparatively, I regularly found the atmosphere in theology courses very tense because individuals were opposed to engaging in theological inquiry on the basis of its relationship to faith.



However, students were not opposed to the work of justice. Students at SU spent their time volunteering sorting clothes, serving food, or being an attentive ear. Students embrace the homeless, the prisoner, the hungry, and the sick through work in organizations which seek to provide services to the vulnerable. It is here that I see faith inspired education brought to life; it is here that students grow in love for their neighbor and vigor to change the world.

Fr. Adolfo Nicolás' Mexico City address from April 23, 2010 charged Jesuit institutions with the task of cultivating the educational environment necessary for students to construct "a more humane, just, sustainable, and faith-filled world." He stressed the importance of cultivating the creative imagination to meet the new challenges of globalized higher education. Fr. Nicolás' words echo the mission of Seattle University, which is "dedicated to educating the whole person, to professional formation, and to empowering leaders for a just and humane world." The Jesuit mission which is inexorably linked to faith is not lost on students who do not claim faith or religious practice. Seattle U students hold promise for praxis of a faith that does justice, despite apprehension about identifying with religion, through dedication to service adopting global education. The SU student body embraces this mission, is fecund with a true fervor for service, and is committed to imaginative solutions to systemic problems of injustice.

I witnessed the mission in action as my professors in the theology and religious studies department attempted to overcome the difficulties of teaching in the secular Pacific Northwest. They addressed issues in organized religion and calling upon students to become the face of change. Students are often disenchanted by a church that, in their eyes, is perpetuating injustice. Why be a part of an institution which excludes women and teaches against the loving relationships of same sex individuals? What they are not disenchanted with are the good fruits of service called out of the university mission. In true Jesuit form, the best professors at SU respond by challenging students to explore the religious structures which perpetuate injustice and address them using feminist or liberation theologies, as well as the hermeneutics of peace and justice. It is the Jesuit university which fosters theological dialogue into action, embraces the mission Fr. Nicolás set before all Jesuit educated individuals, and embodies the possibility of a just and faith-filled world. ■

Daniel Pearson graduated as member of Seattle University's class of 2011 with a degree in theology and religious studies. He is currently a patient care volunteer with Providence Hospice of Seattle.