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Robert J. Parmach

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DOING WHAT'S RIGHT

The Value of the Other Half: Qualifying *Cura Personalis*

By Robert J. Parmach

The term *cura personalis* is as well-known in Jesuit schools as the term *super-sized* at McDonald's, *401(k)* in human resources, or *anytime minutes* for loquacious cell phone users. The problem arises when *cura personalis* is used for merely half its worth – when its only connections to life are the self-evident, nice and neat congratulatory ones. We're all guilty of this periodic offense. I say this not to berate the laudable and transforming work accomplished by hundreds of thousands of students, administrators, faculty, staff, and alumni of Jesuit schools. I say it because we can benefit from a gentle reminder to apply the other half of *cura personalis* – critical scrutiny coupled with respect – in order to bring forth transformation. This is the half we need to confront in academic integrity violation meetings, one-on-one freshman advising sessions, and spiritual counseling. For purposes of academic clarity, it's easy to acknowledge the antiseptic value of “care of the whole person” where theory need not clash with concrete particulars. The Platonist cheers, but Aristotle and Ignatius of Loyola offer a resounding “boo”...and rightfully so. The lingering question remains: what about the value of the other half? That's where the rubber meets the road. That's where *transformation* happens.

What “whole person” means

To do the term justice, care of the whole person means just that. Consider an example. In *Euthyphro*, Plato's dialogue concerning the search for an unequivocal definition of holiness, Socrates makes a careful distinction: we do not disagree *that* the

wrongdoer should be punished; we disagree *who* is classified as the wrongdoer. We now see the need to develop and apply sound criteria held under critical scrutiny in order to alleviate speculation and moral relativism, not merely that we simply congratulate the “ethical” man in theory alone. We knew that already. When a student routinely sees her professor during office hours, studies hard, and earns an “A” on the paper, we applaud them both for seizing *cura personalis* to its fullest. True, but the value of *cura personalis* is obvious in this case. What about the student who intentionally deceives her professor or residence hall director and makes rash, emotionally charged decisions based on speculation and prejudice? What about the faculty member who assertively barks that *cura personalis* translates into the reason why his (unmerited) request should be honored if “our Jesuit, Catholic institution and its mission of (*insert favorite Latin phrase*) really cared about its professors”? What about the helicopter parent whose offensive verbal assault is rooted in conjecture, misplaced anger, and simply void of facts?

It is unlikely that these individuals will learn a better and more Ignatian way of proceeding if we do not employ the other half of *cura personalis* – critical scrutiny coupled with respect. That is, we respect the individual so much that we really care for the person's whole development beyond the visible surface. Appreciating a girlfriend when she makes you happy is nice. Appreciating her when she works to

Robert J. Parmach, is freshman dean of Fordham College at Rose Hill and teaches philosophy and theology in the College's Manresa scholars program.

make you a better person is even better. That's the transforming half. Given today's growing expectation that colleges should succumb to a service industry model of giving the customer (student and paying parents) what they request, the value of tactfully applying the other half of *cura personalis* is that much more important. Without a doubt, it is also more challenging and difficult to uphold, but our commitment to its value requires our diligence.

In practical terms, it means that we spend the extra time crafting a pointed, accurate, and prudent email response, instead of surrendering to what our impulsive fingers really want to type. It means using the humble arsenal of personal mistakes we've made ourselves, in order to showcase and challenge a different perspective for our students to reflect upon. *Cura personalis* does not mean to simply render what someone wants or expects to hear, but rather what he *needs* to hear – what is right and good and just, even if it's an uncomfortable conversation. This is the transformation Ignatius teaches, and it requires the key ingredients of respect, patience, and tact for all parties involved.

A former student, Mike C., phoned me yesterday to share his gratitude that Fordham didn't relent on teaching him that character formation matters. Though it took him five years post graduation to internalize this lesson, Mike commented that he "really understands it now" and that Fordham cared enough about him to risk offending his ego while tactfully calling him to task on his tendencies to evade accountability. Mike comments that he's a more professional, ethical, and faith-filled alumnus today because of that lesson – resurfacing the often forgotten half of *cura personalis*. I think that quality, spunky Jesuit education respectfully, intellectually, and ethically annoys us in small dosages for the right reasons – not to berate, dismiss, or judge, but rather to build up and transform. Thanks Mike C. Your phone call and reminder made this teacher's day. Truth be told, I made a similar call to my former professor eight years ago. By the way, Mike C., I'm curious...did you finally cut that long hair or what? Send me a current picture for my office wall of photos. ■



Hands on the statue of Saint Ignatius Loyola, Regis University.