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Matthew Bender

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Finding God in Every Classroom

By Matthew Bender

We all know that American Jesuit higher education is in a period of transition. In the past benefited from experience with Jesuits as professors, administrators, and the president; now the average student has very little contact with these men. We can either bemoan the lack of vocations to the Society of Jesus or recognize this as an invitation by the Spirit to breathe new life into Ignatius' vision. That must be cultivated through a commitment by the laity to the mission of the Society. The faculty must be the primary guardians and translators of this heritage.

This past summer, I participated in Saint Joseph's University's summer scholars program which allowed me to conduct research with Dr. Gerald Beyer of the theology department and Fr. Daniel Joyce, S.J., of the office of mission and identity. My project, "The History and Future of the Laity in Fulfilling the Jesuit Mission in Higher Education" examined the history of the Society as well as current practice in cooperation with the laity in mission.

My experiences have allowed me to come in contact with many professors. As a history major and theology minor for quite some time I saw the humanities, as the traditional clearing-houses of mission and identity, as the only way to truly understand our Catholic, Jesuit tradition. My views changed when I read a passage from an address given by Fr. Gregory Konz, S.J., at the Jesuit Education 21 Conference in 1999. Commenting that for many students, the humanities do not provide the appropriate framework for a interaction with God, he said, "If Jesuit education were restricted to the liberal arts, then these students are lost...If I take the Contemplation to Attain Divine Love in the *Spiritual Exercises* seriously, I must help them find God in their lives."

This idea radically changed my perspective on where God can be found. God was no longer confined, in my mind, to the ivory tower of the humanities, but was allowed

to expand into every discipline. I began to notice Him in unexpected places. Dr. Peter Norberg of the English department has helped to make room for God through his Ignatian pedagogy program. Gathering nearly two dozen professors from all disciplines and faith traditions, he takes them through a formation program through which they learn about Ignatian spirituality and pedagogy. The goal of the sessions is to develop lessons that incorporate the three aspects of the Ignatian Paradigm: experience, reflection, and action. Physics professor Dr. Douglas Kurtze, a Bahá'í, teaches my course on "energy: problems and promises." In addition to teaching about the conservation of energy and how to convert to Joules to BTUs, he examines how policy decisions affect not only the environment, but also the poorest of the poor, thus connecting my studies to people. I have been challenged to consider the ethical dimensions of cap-and-trade, carbon taxing, and policy options.

God in all places.

The management department has taken several steps to ensure faithfulness to our Jesuit heritage. Two new majors were introduced: leadership, ethics, and organizational sustainability (LEO) and managing human capital. The objective of the LEO major is to "develop leaders whose goal is to lead and work for the greater good. This includes several components, including leadership, social responsibility, ethics, and justice." Dr. Eric

Patton, a graduate of Dr. Norberg's Ignatian pedagogy program, incorporates his Catholic background into the managing human capital major, which he directs.

Our Ignatian tradition says we should find God in all things. He is present in all places on campus, in every discipline in the classroom. The challenge is, faculty need to make room for God in their courses. But for every Dr. Kurtze or Dr. Patton, there

are so many others who avoid it like the plague. They see God as solely in the realm of the theology faculty and campus ministry. The word "God" is never mentioned, either out of sensitivity for non-Catholics, an inability to see connections to their field, or apprehension at their lack of theological training. Students are responsive, however, to practical issues and their ethical implications. We want to engage the world, because when we experience injustice and suffering, God is there. Matters of faith do not scare us. They may make us uncomfortable, but that is what faith should do. ■

Matthew Bender is a junior history major and theology and faith-justice studies double minor at Saint Joseph's University.

