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Urgent Values

Sustaining a Very Fine Balance

By Eileen C. Burke-Sullivan

A few weeks after I became the Mission Officer for Creighton University, a group of young women undergraduates asked for an appointment. At issue was their common hope that they could be given academic credit for internships served in marketing efforts for an area abortion clinic. Their argument was that as a Jesuit, Catholic university we did not live up to the description of the value of care for the whole person (*cura personalis*) by denying them this opportunity for becoming professionals in the business of marketing.

Only weeks later, the chancery called to express dismay that the university was sponsoring an international speaker who has spent his entire life battling the disease of AIDS in Africa. The challenge arose because the speaker had strongly endorsed the necessity for the use of condoms to slow the disease's infections among young mothers and their infant children.

On the same day that the chancery officer called, a large student and faculty group was planning for a "Black Lives Matter" prayer and solidarity event at the fountain on the plaza in front of St. John's Church. Hundreds participated, while a small fringe group protested that we were supporting violence.

Ironically and sadly, within a few more weeks we were carrying the body of a local police officer across the same plaza space toward her funeral Mass. The officer was shot to death by a gang member just blocks from campus.

In every one of these instances and many, many more with similar resonances, there were rancorous conversations about whether we should be doing and saying what the university was doing and saying. Many of these conversations arose within the university community and many arose from those on the outside judging whether this institution lives up to its self-stated mission, either as Catholic or as a university.

As a representative for the Catholic, Jesuit character of the mission of higher education in many of these conversations, I have found that it is urgent to stay faithful to at least six basic Catholic and Ignatian values and behaviors that speak to practicing what we preach:

- Only in God is all truth found. No person or institution, embedded in the limitations of historical finitude, is capable of naming all truth about any person, discipline, principle, idea, or other created reality, much less about God.
- What truth we can know is best discovered in dialogue with persons we don't necessarily agree with, persons who have had very different life/cultural experiences than we have, and persons who have an investment in a specific issue that I might not have. Persons of color in the United States have much different experiences of acceptability than do white persons. Men have to dialogue with women. Straight and LGBTQ persons have to attend to each other, as do old and young, those with disabilities and those with no evident disability. No person of privilege understands oppression unless they share in the experience by what Fr. Gregory Boyle, S.J., calls "kinship" with the oppressed. Material wealth, the accident of skin color, educational level, and gender all establish privilege in various cultures.
- Truth and facticity are not the same. Genuine truth can be known only in the context of love. To speak (or shout, or snarl) "truth" hatefully or with indifference to another may have some content facticity, but it is not truth and is often not helpful for the university engaged in the pursuit of truth.

- Ignatius posited that in order to eventually arrive at common understanding of the truth we must first interpret what the other is saying in the best light possible. This is not Pollyannaish. It is rather the principle of attempting to hear beyond our own biases to the possibility of a greater truth we have never allowed ourselves to consider.
- While words are very important, sometimes words are so limited they prevent us from reaching mutual respect. In such case, silence – especially the silence of attentive consideration – or beauty or humor may lift us beyond the limitedness of the words.
- Difficult conversations are most productive (that is, bring about positive human relationships and mutual enlightenment) when they are carried on respectfully, reflectively, and with an ear to discerning the Spirit of God or spirits of the dark at work.

I draw this last point from the work of sharing the Spiritual Exercises. An effective guide (or conversationalist) has minimally opened his heart to understanding and recognizing the spirits that often affect him while he is in a difficult conversation. A guide who is more effective listens with a heart available not only to her own spirits but at the same time to those moving the other. St. Peter Faber spoke about the dark spirit within himself being attracted to action by the dark spirit in the other – and these spirits collude to destroy the possibility of discovering what it is that God would have us know. It is easy in highly contentious situations to feel defensive. Knowing intuitively that the best defense is a good offense, we risk attacking the other when our own real desire would be to listen attentively and without defensiveness.

Sometimes it is obvious ahead of time that a conversation is going to be difficult. Difficult perhaps because it is fraught with probable disagreement, tension, insecurity, new and dangerous information, or challenge (especially challenge to the status quo and its comfortable stability). Or difficult because we identify or challenge others' fears, limits, hopes, or expectations. In either case I find it crucial to prepare with prayer and every effort to stay attentive to the

content of the conversation along with my own affective and intellectual responses to it. Further, it is important to provide time and space to attend to the others in the conversation.

All too often, however, ordinary meetings or conversations turn “difficult” without warning. For administrators at a Jesuit university this suggests that openness to God's activities in our hearts as well as awareness of our limited human abilities recommends that we develop habits of reflectivity and graciousness. A daily practice of the Ignatian examen of consciousness becomes the most effective tool which supports those habits.

The Catholic and Jesuit character of the mission of higher education is ill served if it is described or applied in “one-size-fits-all” terms. Frequent oversimplification of complex principles to banner or bumper-sticker value slogans, while useful in one-hour orientation sessions, are not ultimately helpful in making clear the very complex challenges of living toward the reign of God on earth, especially in a broader culture of increasingly insistent, secular fundamentalism.

Universities assert that they must be absolute practitioners of “academic freedom,” and none of us in the academy can eschew that fundamental value. In light of our Catholic, Jesuit heritage, however, we can require more clarity about what is meant by freedom, and whose freedom we are protecting. If the university's ultimate purpose is the pursuit of truth, then academic freedom must serve that truth – in the breadth and depth of the search, in the dynamic of disclosure, and in reflection on the consequences of its exercise.

Finally, it is important to state that difficult conversations, even well conducted with all the grace that God sends, will not necessarily bring agreement of purpose or practice. Living with polarities is the essential character of Christianity. All Christian doctrine is a series of ideas in tension – insisting on the both/and rather than the either/or. In practice we can't always do both/and, but it is worth pursuing the possibilities and finding the ground of – *at least* – mutual respect.

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