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Social Justice and Sexuality

By Donna Freitas

One of the great, distinguishing features of the Catholic university is that a commitment to social justice lies at its heart. This commitment is layered throughout every facet of university life, from the classroom to the residence halls to the offices and departments, evidenced by what might seem like minor details – the oft-spoken word “community,” as one example. Social justice seeps into you from simply being around a Catholic campus, which means that words like “community” and “dignity” and even “solidarity” in speech might be written off as insincere or well-meaning but uninformed. Yet, this shared language should not be dismissed as lip service. It has tremendous potential for responding to sexual assault and consent. But I will come back to this.

The most important feature of this commitment to social justice is that *students at Catholic institutions care about social justice*. As a rule. Many students care so deeply they dedicate endless hours to service and even the pursuit of a vocation that is centered on social justice. Of course, plenty of students know very little about social justice and will agree with certain concepts without any idea what they really mean. When I ask social-justice-fueled questions at lectures on Catholic campuses, a kind of peer pressure ripples across the room among students to care, or at least, to appear to care, about subjects like human dignity and our responsibility to attend the suffering of others. I can’t think of a single student in over a decade of speaking who’s shrugged at a topic like human dignity.

Isn’t that the best kind of peer pressure? The pressure to show you care about the option for the poor, the dignity of all persons, respect for one’s neighbor, justice within community? What an extraordinary seed to have planted throughout the soil of our campus cultures; what potential for us to harness with pa-

tience and hope. How could we not take advantage of this potential?

This pressure among students to be on board with social justice is the great pride of the Catholic university, the most astounding place to begin to tackle sexual assault and consent on campus, an incredible foundation for addressing one of the most urgent conversations pressing on today’s university. Yet we rarely call upon it in the service of conversations about student drinking, partying, and everything that goes with it, including sexual assault. We rarely turn these tenets on ourselves, instead exporting human dignity and solidarity as activities we do off-campus at soup kitchens and on spring break service trips.

Likewise, the great shame of the Catholic university is the fear around matters related to sex, including assault, which, as with social justice, permeates our campuses. It can infect the community like a terrible virus, preventing many of us from taking up these topics as though the very identity of our Catholic institution depends upon our doing this – when honestly, I believe it does.

For schools where staff and faculty feel empowered to program and teach about sex, there is a sense of pride about this, accompanied by the idea that this is happening despite and apart from the university’s Catholic identity. There exists a belief that on an institutional level we are somehow going against the Catholic tradition to deliver essential information to the young people who need it. To deal with sex at all is understood as a transgressive act. And after 46 visits to Catholic schools, countless confessional car rides, dinners, warnings before lectures, jokes about how we hope the local bishop won’t find out I’m visiting, listening to worries about what a change in bishop might do to programming, the eternal exile of

the vagina monologues, and hearing about so many conflicts and anxieties people face as they program about sex in a Catholic setting, it is clear that even the best, most liberal campuses and individuals still feel vulnerable to certain factions and power-players. I'm so aware of this risk I am reluctant to publicly name colleges where I've witnessed extraordinary educational work around sex. I do not want to unwittingly hand over such information to a conservative board member, trustee, bishop, or any person with enough power and motivation to threaten the university and the individuals responsible for education on campus. At Catholic institutions there are always people who believe that this programming is a public admission that students are having sex, which diminishes and damages the Catholic reputation and identity of the college. If those individuals are powerful enough, programming around sexual assault can become treacherous.

This, in my opinion, is truly shameful. And it is no wonder that these worries and anxieties, this sense of sex as threatening, even unspeakable, and wholly disconnected from our tradition, gets passed on to our students. The widespread student attempt to appear on board with social justice teachings is so very unlike the eye-rolling, the sarcastic commentary, the bitter laughter that many of these same students display when asked what they have learned from the Catholic tradition about sex. To most Catholic college students, the tradition seems extremely rigid on this issue, and in its rigidity Catholicism becomes brittle. It creates contempt. Our youth feel shackled by what seem like unforgiving legislations around sex, and many of us feel shackled by these as well, obliged to obey on the surface while discussing the real issues in hushed whispers and underground conversations.

And yet to talk of social justice creates the opposite effect. Everyone perks up. People listen more closely. A door opens and beckons: come in, come in, there is a place in this tradition that fights for justice for everyone. Certain corners of Catholicism may indeed alienate and silence, but it is an amazingly myriad place. It does not have to be so brittle and unyielding. It is a tradition that has fought for workers, for rights, to alleviate the suffering of the poor. More than anything, it is a tradition designed to accommodate our humanity in all of its messiness, big and diverse enough to accommodate the

very human subjects of sexual diversity, intimacy, and, of course, consent. If we allow it to.

The need to educate our communities about consent is likewise a call for us to make a change in the ways we draw on our tradition to minister to students, to change our attitude about the ways that sex on campus in all its forms and challenges fits into the identity of the Catholic university – and to do so on an institutional level. It involves facing a truth, which is that the Catholic identity of a college *does not and should not rest* on trivialities like whether or not we sell condoms. We must stop wasting our time on matters which weaken our identity, which mock and disrespect it, because on our campuses students have suffered because the institutions where we work prefer to force them into silence and shame about situations as grave as assault.

We are dishonest if we do not contend with the fact that Catholic teachings around sex are roadblocks to effective and potentially transformative conversations with our students, that the best possible move in the face of such roadblocks is to go around them. Pope Francis is a wonderful example of this sidestepping. He answers people made nervous by his actions – people worried about enforcing the purity of the Catholic tradition – by evoking mercy. Mercy, mercy, *mercy*, he reminds us, for those who are suffering, for our neighbors. Pope Francis has accomplished much by a simple but effective choice to enter the tradition through a different doorway, through the doorway of social justice, of concern for the poor.

Well, so can we.

Simone Weil has particular instruction for us here. In *Waiting for God*, she speaks of *creative attention*, which draws once hidden suffering into the light. We cannot heal what we refuse to see, what we walk by as if it is not there, what we deny exists. But this kind of attention requires setting aside agendas, be they personal or political, which blind us to the needs of the suffering.

"The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: 'What are you going through?'" Weil writes. "It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, [and] for this reason it is enough.... The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth. Only he who is capable of attention can do this."

Weil is speaking of the sidestepping I mention above, to address the needs of the people before us. To retreat into Catholic teachings about sex as an excuse for why we can't deal directly and effectively with sexual assault and consent on campus – as so many institutions have done – is to fail at social justice. It is to be incapable of attention in the face of suffering, at being a good neighbor, a Good Samaritan. Our student populations are suffering because of the high rates of sexual assault, most of which go unreported. They are trying to navigate one of the most difficult aspects of our humanity and also one of the most joyful, yet in a climate that condemns their actions and often abandons them to figure things out on their own. This is unacceptable. To make staff and faculty nervous, even threatened, about taking on this topic is also unacceptable. This is a tradition where we take the Eucharist to remind ourselves we are all of one body, that if a part of our body is sick, then we must heal it. The prevalence of sexual assault is a sickness in the soul of our campuses, and at the heart of our tradition is the call to heal that sickness, because it is part of our body, and we are one body with it.

Consent is about so much more than telling our students *yes means yes*, and *no means no*. So many universities employ lawyerly language in definitions of consent out of fear of scandal and lawsuits, as though young adults are negotiating a contract when they enter into a relationship of sexual intimacy, and the university can prove they did their duty: they gave out the info, they rewrote the handbook language, now it's up to the student to follow through.

As Catholic communities, if we make our conversation around consent and assault about yes and no, legalities, and the potential for scandal, we not only fail our students but we fail as Catholic institutions. If we justify our efforts through the sheer existence of Title IX, we ignore what our tradition demands in response to a gross injustice committed upon the very sacred and vulnerable bodies in our midst. Catholic institutions, as leaders in the pursuit of social justice, must likewise become leaders on consent and sexual assault, and not communities that cower in the face of it.

At the heart of a conversation about consent are the core priorities of our tradition – regard for the dignity of one's partners, the compulsion to alleviate suffering and not create and perpetuate it, the acknowledgment that as communities we must respect

all persons, that community extends into the bedrooms, bathrooms, the parties where people hookup, drink, and engage in sexual intimacy. We must admit to ourselves and our students that social justice teachings should not and do not stop once the kegs start flowing on a Friday, that they extend into the wee hours of the morning, to the drunkenness, to our partners with whom we want to have sex. To teach consent is social justice work. Period. It is to practice this part of our tradition in the most urgent and hidden corners of our campuses. It is to ensure that members of a Catholic community learn respect for the dignity, bodily and emotional well-being of our partners, their agency, their right to agree or disagree with engaging in sexual intimacy, to understand that these things are expressions of Catholic social teaching, that consent is far more than persuading someone to say yes and proving this so you don't end up in trouble. It is about who you are as a person, as a member of a community, who, at least on the surface, appears to care about social justice and all that goes with it.

To teach consent in this way is to honor the Catholic identity of a university and all the students who reside within it. It is to anchor Catholic identity into something real and central to our students' lives. It is to show students that their tradition is capable of *seeing* them, attending them, and pulling their concerns, struggles, sufferings into the very heart of its mission.

We have arrived at a place of great opportunity on campus and for the nature and identity of the Catholic university. We have the chance to become leaders of this national conversation on consent and sexual assault. We have the possibility of taking the beautiful passion of our students about social justice and turning it into a tremendous resource in our effort to deal with and educate around sexual assault and consent. All we need to do is pivot.

Donna Freitas is the author of Sex and the Soul, Updated Edition: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance and Religion on America's College Campuses (Oxford, 2015) and The Happiness Effect: How Social Media is Driving a Generation to Appear Perfect at Any Cost (forthcoming from Oxford, January 2017), both based on a decade of research about college students and campus life; she also teaches in the Honors College at Hofstra University in New York.