

April 1998

Is Tolerance Enough? The Catholic University and the Common Good

David Hollenbach, S.J.

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

Recommended Citation

Hollenbach, S.J., David (1998) "Is Tolerance Enough? The Catholic University and the Common Good," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 13, Article 3.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol13/iss1/3>

Is Tolerance Enough? The Catholic University and the Common Good

DAVID HOLLENBACH, S.J.

Catholic and Jesuit higher education today faces a major challenge: how to retain and strengthen its distinctive religious identity while educating students for life in a world increasingly aware of its pluralism. This challenge reflects the more general contemporary problem of how Western culture can retain its commitment to reasoned efforts to understand what is truly human while grappling in an equally serious way with the different ways of thinking and living of our world. Jesuit colleges and universities, in other words, are sharply confronted with the tension between their commitment to sustain and advance the Catholic tradition's understanding of the human good and their efforts to serve the common good of our diverse world.

Catholic thought has long held that the common good is the overarching end to be pursued in social and cultural life. Since education is the activity through which culture is sustained and developed, the success or failure of a society to realize its common good will be largely dependent on its educational endeavors. But that is the rub. A pluralist society, by definition, is one in which there is disagreement about the meaning of

the human good. This leads some to conclude that the idea of the common good and the reality of pluralist diversity are utterly incompatible. In such a context, the pursuit of the common good and the existence of educational institutions committed to particularistic traditions may seem self-contradictory. The corollary for Jesuit education is an apparently stark choice: either remain rooted in the Catholic tradition and abandon efforts to serve the larger good of our diverse world, or intensify efforts to address the demands of diversity and abandon the Catholic tradition.

For two reasons, however, I will argue that this is a false dilemma. The time is opportune for an important contribution to the advancement of the common good of a deeply pluralistic world by education rooted in the Catholic tradition. First, some of the most urgent contemporary cultural and social problems we face today are immune to solutions built on individualistic

David Hollenbach, S.J., is Margaret O'Brien Flatley Professor of Catholic Theology at Boston College.

presuppositions that downplay the importance of the notion of the common good because of perceived diversity. The need for stronger bonds of social solidarity across cultures and for efforts to attain a greater degree of shared moral vision is increasingly evident in our world today. Second, the Roman Catholic tradition possesses some distinctive resources that can be brought to bear on these challenges.

The Problem: Pluralism or Social Conflict?

Today we face an array of issues that make the need to address the interdependence of persons on one another increasingly evident. A very partial list of such issues would include the following: the continuing crisis in American life evident in even a cursory look at the statistics on the growth of economic inequality; the chaos in family life and sexual relationships in an age of single parenthood and of AIDS; the obstacles posed to the reform in the provision of health-care by business-as-usual, interest-group politics; the serious dangers posed by environmental degradation regionally and globally; the clashes of "identity politics" within the United States and the rising national and cultural conflicts that have led to the tragedy in Bosnia and the genocide in Rwanda; the lack of even an approximation of economic justice in a world where the very notion of a domestic economy seems anachronistic.

In the background of these pragmatic social issues stands the deeper cultural question of whether we can achieve even a minimal consensus on the values that might enable us to address such pressing problems in a positive way. Many students today seem to have abandoned all expectation that such consensus is possible. This is evident in the often observed hesitancy of contemporary undergraduates to make value judgments that go beyond the expression of personal preference or choice. Much literary, political, and philosophical theory rightly supports such reticence by pointing out how strong claims to know what is good for all people often mask the privileged power and desire for domination of those who make such claims.

The elusiveness of such a consensus on values goes very deep. Today many Americans recognize that they *cannot go it alone* in the *face of the complexities* of contemporary life. We know we need a connection to others if we are to find meaning and a sense of direction in life. But this quest for community can have

TODAY MANY AMERICANS
RECOGNIZE THAT THEY
CANNOT GO IT ALONE
IN THE FACE OF THE
COMPLEXITIES OF
CONTEMPORARY LIFE.

pathological results if misdirected. For example, Robert Bellah has argued that among upper-middle class suburbanites it often leads to the development of what he calls “lifestyle enclaves.” People in such enclaves find and express their identities through “shared patterns of appearance, consumption, or leisure activities.” These relationships are based on sharing some feature of private rather than public life. People in such enclaves act as friends together in a kind of club, not as fellow citizens sharing a common fate with people who are different.¹ So they are not likely to translate their need for community into ways of thinking and acting that address issues such as the divisions between core cities and suburbs or between clashing religio-cultural identities in international politics. In fact the need for community, when expressed in lifestyle enclaves, can lead to the construction of walls and moats, in the form of bigger and better malls and tougher zoning ordinances that strengthen the locks that protect the privileged from those who are different. The adoption of a similar enclave strategy by those who seek to enhance the religious identity of Catholic higher education is equally dangerous.

Such an enclave is very different from the stronger community described by Aristotle as the *polis*, or by Cicero as the *res publica*, which can be translated the “public thing,” the “commonwealth,” the “commonweal,” or simply a “republic.” These stronger communities are places where people are truly interdependent on each other through their participation in, discussion concerning, and decision-making about their common purpose. Such strong communities are, therefore, political communities, where people make decisions together about the kind of society they want to live in together.

In the United States today, citizenship has itself become a problematic concept and we are experiencing an “eclipse of citizenship.”² The low percentage of Americans who exercise their right to vote and the slogan “no new taxes” are visible evidences for this. This situation, I think, is caused largely by a lack of confidence that individual people can have any meaningful influence in a political society as vast as the United States in the complex context of today’s global scene. Many people, including many in the middle class, feel politically powerless. E. J. Dionne, in a book tellingly titled *Why Americans Hate Politics*, argues that this alienation from citizenship results from the fact that current political discourse does not address the real needs of communities.³ This failure is itself partly the result of

the fact that interest-group politics is frequently incapable of even naming the social bonds that destine us to share either a common good or a “common bad.” Politics is perceived as a contest among groups with little or no concern for the wider society and its problems, for example suburbanites versus the urban “underclass,” or American workers versus the poor who labor in Mexican or against El Salvadoran *maquilladoras*. Lifestyle enclaves seem the only form of communal connection realistically available.

This tendency was discussed at some length in the United States Catholic bishops’ 1986 pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*. The bishops noted the deep structural causes for the contemporary devaluation of citizenship. Modern societies are characterized by a division of labor into highly specialized jobs and professions. Individual lives are further fragmented by the way family life, the world of work, networks of friendship, and religious community are so often lived out in separate compartments.⁴ It is increasingly difficult to see how our chopped-up segments of experience fit together in anything like a meaningful whole.⁵ This makes it very difficult see how the kinds of lives we lead really make any difference for the common good of the whole community. The resulting lack of public discussion of the common good in turn generates a heightened sense that individuals are powerless over larger social forces. It also helps explain the prevalence of single-issue styles of political action.

¹ Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1985), p. 335.

² The phrase is from Robert J. Pranger, *The Eclipse of Citizenship: Power and Participation in Contemporary Politics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968). See also Michael Walzer, “The Problem of Citizenship,” in *Obligations: Essays on Disobedience, War, and Citizenship* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 203-228.

³ E. J. Dionne, Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

⁴ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1986), no. 22.

⁵ See Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart*, p. 277.

Tolerance as Alienation?

The standard response to the diversity of groups and value systems in Western political culture has long been an appeal to the virtue of tolerance. Tolerance is a live-and-let-live attitude that avoids introducing conceptions of the full human good into political discourse. This is the prescription of the eminent political theorist and moral philosopher, John Rawls. Rawls recommends that we deal with the fact of value-pluralism by what he calls “the method of avoidance.” By this he means that in political life “we try, so far as we can, neither to assert nor to deny any religious, philosophical or moral views, or their associated philosophical accounts of truth and the status of values.”⁶ This appeal hopes to neutralize potential conflicts and to promote democratic social harmony. But if my analysis is correct, it actually further threatens democracy by deepening alienation and anomie. A principled commitment to avoiding sustained discourse about the common good can produce a downward spiral in which shared meaning, understanding, and community become even harder to achieve in practice. Or, more ominously, when the pluralism of diverse groups veers toward a state of group conflict with racial or class or religious dimensions, pure tolerance can become a strategy like that of the ostrich with its head in the sand.

In my view, this is just what we do not need. The basis of a functioning democracy is not the autonomy of individuals who agree to leave each other alone by “avoiding” the question of the good they share in common or the “bad” that jointly threatens them all. The exercise of real freedom in society depends on the strength of the communal relationships that give persons a measure of real power to shape their environment, including their political environment.⁷ Solitary individuals, especially solitary individuals motivated solely by self-interest and the protection of their rights to privacy, will be incapable of democratic self-government. Democracy requires more than this. It requires the virtues of mutual cooperation, mutual responsibility, and what Aristotle called civic friendship and concord.⁸

Of course Aristotle knew that there were limits to how wide a circle of friends one might have, as he knew there were limits to the size of a city-state. Today we are acutely aware that a nation as vast and diverse as the United States cannot hope to achieve the kind of social unity that might have been possible in the Athenian polis. While the virtues of mutual cooperation, responsibility, and friendship can exert positive influence in

small communities governed by town meetings, we hardly expect this to occur on a national—much less an international—scale.

But here our social situation reveals its paradoxical nature. As the scale and diversity of society tempts us to conclude that community is achievable only in private enclaves of the like-minded, *de facto* technological, political, and economic interdependence grows stronger each year, indeed each day. For example, the notion of a “domestic economy” is virtually obsolete and a technological tool in use on virtually all American campuses is called the World Wide Web. These realities cry out for conscious acknowledgment and for a renewed commitment to our *moral* interdependence. Stress on the importance of the local, the small-scale, and the particular must be complemented by a kind of solidarity that is more universal in scope. This wider solidarity is essential if the quest for community is to avoid becoming a source of increased conflict in a world already riven by narrowness of vision. Commitment to communities with particular ways of life must be complemented by a sense of the national and the global common good and the need for a vision shaped by hospitable encounter with traditions and peoples that are different from ourselves.

The Catholic Tradition of the Common Good

The tradition of Catholic social thought, especially as it has developed over the past century, is positioned to make a significant contribution to the recognition of the importance of both small-scale and wider forms of community. It is particularly noteworthy that several commentators from outside the Catholic tradition have commented upon this. For example, William Lee Miller suggests that the Catholic tradition’s commitment to the idea of human interdependence in community can contribute resources that both Protestantism and secular liberalism lack to the complex and uncertain future of the American republic.

⁶ John Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 7 (1987), pp. 12-13.

⁷ John A. Coleman, “Religious Liberty in America and Mediating Structures,” in his *An American Strategic Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 226.

⁸ See *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1167a,b.

THE BIBLICAL
UNDERSTANDING OF
FREEDOM, PORTRAYED IN
THE ACCOUNT OF THE
EXODUS, IS NOT
SIMPLY FREEDOM
FROM CONSTRAINT
BUT FREEDOM
FOR PARTICIPATION
IN THE SHARED LIFE
OF A PEOPLE.

He calls this solidaristic vision of interdependence “personalist communitarianism”: “Something like such a personalist communitarianism is the necessary base for a true republic in the interdependent world of the third century of this nation’s existence. And the Roman Catholic community is the most likely single source of it—the largest and intellectually and spiritually most potent institution that is the bearer of such ideas.”⁹

This personalistic communitarianism is based on the recognition that the dignity of human persons is achieved only in community with others. To paraphrase John Donne’s words, no person is an island. This understanding of the human has biblical roots in the notion of covenant—the fact that God called Israel precisely as a *people*, not as individuals one at a time. It also has Greek roots in Aristotle’s understanding that the human being is a social or political animal (*zoon politikon*), whose good is essentially bound up with the good of the polis. This understanding of the person has direct implications for the way freedom is understood. Freedom’s most important meaning is *positive*, the ability to shape one’s life and environment in an active and creative way, rather than the negative state of privacy or being left alone by others. For the ancient Greeks, privacy was a state of deprivation, a fact echoed in the etymological link of privacy and privation. Similarly, the biblical understanding of freedom, portrayed in the account of the Exodus, is not simply freedom *from constraint* but freedom *for participation* in the shared life of a people. Liberation is *from bondage into* community.¹⁰ To be sure, freedom from oppression demands that persons’ dignity and rights be protected

⁹ William Lee Miller, *The First Liberty: Religion and the American Republic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), pp. 288-89. For other perspectives along these lines by non-Catholic thinkers see also R. Bruce Douglass, “First Things First: The Letter and the Common Good Tradition,” in Douglass, ed., *The Deeper Meaning of Economic Life* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1986); Charles R. Strain, ed., *Prophetic Visions and Economic Realities: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics Confront the Bishops’ Letter on the Economy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989); Charles Lutz, ed., *God, Goods, and the Common Good* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg 1986); Thomas Gannon, ed., *The Catholic Challenge to the American Economy* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), esp. essays by Ronald Green and Norman Birnbaum; Michael Katz, *The Undeserving Poor* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), pp. 180-84.

¹⁰ See National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, no. 36.

from infringement by other people, by society, or by the state. Freedom in its most basic form is freedom from oppression. But freedom will be understood in a truncated way if its meaning is understood only as the negative immunity that protects one from interference by others. Individualistic isolation is finally a prison, not a liberation.

Pope John Paul II has stressed this social dimension of freedom in his frequent discussions of the moral basis of democracy. Catholicism, of course, has often been regarded with justifiable suspicion in discussions of democracy because of its history of opposition to democratic movements in the modern era. Since the Second Vatican Council, however, the Catholic church has become one of the strongest advocates and agents of democratization visible on the global stage today.¹¹ In his role as advocate of democratic government, John Paul II has been critical of ideas of democracy based on individualism and on strictly negative understandings of freedom. His analysis echoes some of the founders of the American experiment in its insistence that the success of democracy over the long haul is dependent on the virtues present in the citizenry and the link between the life of virtue and commitment to the common good.

This is most evident in John Paul's discussion of what he calls "the virtue of solidarity." This virtue will not be found on the classical lists that include prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. Nevertheless, the fact that it belongs there is evident from the Pope's definition. He calls solidarity "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual."¹² For Christians, such a commitment is rooted in the commandment of love of neighbor. Thus "Solidarity is undoubtedly a Christian virtue. . . . [There are] many points of contact between solidarity and charity, which is the distinguishing mark of Christ's disciples (cf. Jn 13:35)." It is a recognition of one's neighbors as fundamentally equal because they are "living images of God, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and placed under the permanent action of the Holy Spirit."¹³ The promotion of the common good therefore flows from the heart of Christian faith.

At the same time, solidarity as the Pope understands it is not far removed from the virtue that Aristotle called "civic friendship" or "civic concord."¹⁴ Precisely as commitment to the common good, the virtue of solidarity ought to link Catholic Christians with the larger community of non-Catholics, non-Christians, and non-

THE PROMOTION OF
THE COMMON GOOD
FLOWS FROM THE HEART
OF CHRISTIAN FAITH.

¹¹ For a discussion of the transformation of the role of the Catholic church in efforts to secure democratic forms of government since Vatican II, see Samuel P. Huntington, "Religion and the Third Wave," *National Interest* 24 (Summer, 1991): 29-42.

¹² John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, in David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), no. 38.

¹³ *Ibid.*, no. 40.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1167 a,b.

believers. Indeed, John Paul II expresses the hope that all people, “whether or not they are inspired by religious faith, will become fully aware of the urgent need to *change the spiritual attitudes* which define each individual’s relationship with self, with neighbor, with even the remotest human communities, and with nature itself.” Such a change in attitudes arises from a recognition of “higher values such the *common good*.”¹⁵ Thus the effort to nurture this virtue of solidarity not only has distinctively Christian warrant in theology but is also proposed as a worthy and in fact essential task in a secular, pluralistic context.

Justice: Prerequisite for a Good That is Common

The linkage of solidarity with the demands of Christian charity should not be mistaken as limiting this virtue to the domain of affectivity. Commitment to the common good requires a hard-nosed recognition of the reality of human interdependence, “sensed as a *system determining* relationships in the contemporary world.”¹⁶ This puts solidarity in continuity with Thomas Aquinas’s claim that all virtues are oriented to the promotion of justice.

For Aquinas, the premier moral virtue is justice, which directs a person’s actions toward the good of fellow human beings. Because all people are both individuals and also participants in the common life of the civil community, virtuous citizens must seek not only their private good but the good of the community as well. Thomas Aquinas calls such concern for the common good of the community “general justice.” He contrasts it with “particular justice,” the virtue that specifies obligations to individuals, for example the obligations of parents to their children or the duties of employers to pay their employees a just wage. These latter concerns are of course indispensable in any life that is virtuous. But they are not the whole of virtue, just as the duties of justice toward one’s children or employees are not the whole of justice. When one possesses the virtue of general justice one’s actions will be habitually directed toward the good of the more encompassing community of one’s fellow human beings. Justice, therefore, is the virtue of good citizens. In Thomas’s words, “the virtue of a good citizen is general justice, whereby a person is directed to the common good.”¹⁷ The achievement of the common good requires a citizenry nurtured in ways that enable them

both to understand the meaning of justice in society and to work for its achievement in the systemic patterns of social organization that shape common life in our cities, in the United States as a whole, and globally.

Thus it should come as no surprise that John Paul II states that solidarity is a moral bond or responsibility of more influential persons for those who are weaker. It is a bond that links the poor with each other in asserting their needs and rights in the face of the inefficiency or corruption of public officials. It is opposed to every form of imperialism, hegemony, greed, or unrestrained quest for power. It is the path to both peace and genuine economic development.¹⁸ This strong language is intensified when the Pope lists manifestations of human sinfulness that are directly opposed to solidarity. These include trampling upon the basic rights of the human person; attacks and pressures against the freedom of individuals and groups; racial, cultural, and religious discrimination; violence and terrorism; torture and repression; arms races and military spending that divert funds that could be used to alleviate misery; and the increasing inequality of the rich and poor. All of these phenomena divide persons and communities from each other and undermine human solidarity on a social, structural level. In the Pope’s words, they shatter the world to “its very foundations.”¹⁹

An adequate discussion of the full meaning of justice is impossible here. The task can be simplified, however, by noting the United States Catholic Bishops 1986 description of the bottom-line demands of justice. They said “*Basic justice demands the establishment of minimum levels of participation in the life of the human community for all persons.*” Put negatively, “The ultimate injustice is for a person or group to be treated actively or abandoned passively as if they were nonmembers of the human race.”²⁰ The United States Bishops call this exclusion “marginalization”—exclusion from social life and from participation in the common good of the human community.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, no. 38, emphasis in the original.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 38, emphasis in the original.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 58, art. 6.

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, nos. 38-39.

¹⁹ John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation on Reconciliation and Penance*, Dec. 11, 1984, in *Origins* 14 (1984) 432-58, no. 2.

²⁰ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, no. 77.

Unjust exclusion can take many forms, as justice can take many forms. There is political marginalization: the denial of the vote, restriction of free speech, the tyrannical concentration of power in the hands of a ruling elite, or straightforward totalitarianism. It can also be economic in nature. Where persons are unable to find work even after searching for many months or where they are thrown out of work by decisions they are powerless to influence, they are effectively marginalized. They are implicitly told by the community: we don't need your talent, we don't need your initiative, we don't need you.²¹

When citizens acquiesce in such situations when remedial steps could be taken, they promote injustice. One can hardly think of a more effective way to deny people any active participation in the economic life of society than to cause or allow them to remain unemployed. Similarly, persons who face hunger, homelessness, and the extremes of poverty when society possesses the resources to meet their needs are treated as non-members. Citizens who permit or abet such conditions when effective action could be taken to change them for the better fail to exercise their responsibility toward the common good. As Michael Walzer puts it with respect to meeting the basic material needs of the poor: "Men and women who appropriate vast sums of money for themselves, while needs are unmet, act like tyrants, dominating and distorting the distribution of security and welfare."²² In the same way, the United States bishops state that the hungry and homeless people in this nation today are no part of anything worthy of being called a commonwealth. The extent of their suffering shows how far we are from being a community of persons. The willingness of citizens to tolerate such conditions and even to take action to perpetuate them shows how far we are from an effective commitment to the common good in this nation.

Against the background of this normative understanding of justice and the common good, the fear that introducing substantive notions of the human good into our public life will be divisive and lead to intolerance seems rather quaint. We live in a dangerously divided nation and world. If we are to begin the task of securing even minimal justice, we need to confront these divisions, not "avoid" or "tolerate" them. The root of many of the conflicts dividing the nation today is not the different conceptions Americans have of what makes for full happiness or what private "life-plans" are worth pursuing. The problem is that many would prefer not to reflect on what it means to say that poor and

marginalized people are members of the human community and that we have a duty to treat them as such.

Consequences for Education

The difficulty of specifying how citizens might respond to this duty is obvious. Individuals, at least when acting one at a time, are simply incapable of shaping the quality of community life on such a vast scale, ranging from the nearest of our neighbors to persons half way around the globe. Rather, whatever the more specific duties of civic virtue or solidarity may be, they are necessarily mediated and specified through our roles as citizens, our roles as economic agents, our positions of responsibility on the job, the location that we have within a particular geography, and so on. One of the most important roles through which this responsibility is exercised is the role of individuals and the community at large in the sphere of education.

The links among education, virtue, and the common good were made explicit in the writing of one of the most influential representatives of the Catholic tradition a generation ago. In the 1950's, John Courtney Murray argued that concern for the common good translates directly into concern for the moral substance of public affairs. The relevance of this concern to education is clear from the fact that, in its many forms and dimensions, education shapes the values that become operative in a republic by helping to shape the virtues and character of its citizenry. As Murray put it, "the great 'affair' of the commonwealth is, of course, education."²³ Put negatively, worries about the quality of public life in a democracy lead directly to worries about the whole process by which each generation prepares its progeny to assume their responsibilities as citizens. This is the entire undertaking of education broadly conceived. Education in virtue is education that guides the development of students in ways that enable them to

²¹ See the documentation provided in National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, chap. 3. The bishops' numbers are for 1986, but the situation is very similar today.

²² Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 76.

²³ John Courtney Murray, *We Hold these Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), p. 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

become good citizens, men and women dedicated to the service of the common good.

Education in virtue might sound like a rather antiquated phrase to describe the task of the contemporary university. I agree that the days when the university functioned *in loco parentis* in a moralistic way are over. However, the long tradition of Catholicism possesses some distinctive *intellectual* resources that are much needed on the American university scene today. Let me call the chief of these resources a commitment to intellectual solidarity. By *intellectual solidarity* I mean a willingness to take other persons seriously enough to engage them in conversation and debate about what makes life worth living, including what will make for the good of our deeply interdependent public life. Such a spirit includes, but goes well beyond, an appeal to tolerance. Tolerance is a strategy of non-interference with the beliefs and ways of life of those who are different. The spirit of intellectual solidarity is similar to tolerance in that it recognizes and respects these differences. It does not seek to eliminate pluralism through coercion. But it differs radically from pure tolerance by seeking positive engagement with the other through both listening and speaking. It is rooted in a hope that understanding might replace incomprehension and that perhaps even agreement could result. Where such engaged conversation about the good life begins and develops, a *community* of freedom begins to exist.

The history of Catholic tradition provides some noteworthy evidence that discourse across the boundaries of diverse communities is both possible and potentially fruitful. This tradition, in its better moments, *has experienced considerable success* in efforts to bridge the divisions that have separated it from other communities with other understandings of the good life. In the first and second centuries, the early Christian community moved from being a small Palestinian sect to active encounter with the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. In the fourth century, Augustine brought biblical faith into dialogue with Stoic and Neoplatonic thought. His efforts profoundly transformed both Christian and Graeco-Roman thought and practice. In the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas once again transformed Western Christianity by appropriating ideas of Aristotle he had learned from Arab Muslims and from Jews. And though the church resisted the liberal discovery of modern freedoms through much of the modern period, affirmation of these freedoms has been transforming Catholicism once again

BY INTELLECTUAL
SOLIDARITY I MEAN A
WILLINGNESS TO TAKE
OTHER PERSONS SERIOUSLY
ENOUGH TO ENGAGE
THEM IN CONVERSATION
AND DEBATE ABOUT WHAT
MAKES LIFE WORTH LIVING.

through the last half of our own century. The memory of these events in social and intellectual history as well as the experience of the Catholic church since the Second Vatican Council leads me to the hope that communities holding different visions of the good life can get somewhere if they are willing to risk serious conversation and sustained argument about these visions. Injecting such hope back into the public life of the United States would be a signal achievement.

What might such public discourse look like? Broadly speaking, it will be conversation and argument about the shape of the culture the participants either share through their common traditions or could share in the future through the understanding of each other they seek to achieve. The forum for such discussion is not, in the first instance, the legislative chamber or the court of law. It is the university and all the other venues where thoughtful men and women undertake the tasks of retrieving, criticizing, and reconstructing understandings of the human good from the historical past and transmitting them to the future through education. It occurs as well wherever people bring their received historical traditions on the meaning of the good life into intelligent and critical encounter with understandings of this good held by other peoples with other traditions. It occurs, in short, wherever education about and serious inquiry into the meaning of the good life takes place.

Further, the achievement of such a truly free dialogue about the meaning of the good life has direct implications for the role of religion in the university. Our culture needs much more conversation about the visions of the human good held by diverse religious communities and real intellectual engagement with these religious visions. The Catholic tradition and many Protestant traditions as well reject the notion that religious faith must be irrational and, therefore, out of bounds within the intellectual forum of the university. In both the Catholic and Calvinist views of the matter, faith and understanding are not adversarial but reciprocally illuminating. This invites those outside the church to place their self-understanding at risk by serious conversation with religious traditions. At the same time, the believer's self-understanding will be challenged to development or even fundamental change by dialogue with the other—whether this other be a secular agnostic, a Christian from another tradition, a Jew, a Muslim, or a Buddhist.²⁵

Serious dialogue is risky business. At least some religious believers have been willing to take the risk.

The future of the common good in our society could be considerably enhanced by the willingness of a considerably larger number of people to take this risk of cultural dialogue and intellectual solidarity, whether they begin as fundamentalists convinced of their certitudes or agnostics convinced of their doubts. Our society needs more imagination about how to deal creatively with its problems than it appears to possess today. Religious traditions and communities are among the principal bearers of such imaginative sources for our understanding of the human. They can evoke not only private self-understanding but public vision as well. Both believers and unbelievers alike have reason to risk considering what contribution religious traditions might make to our understanding of the public good. For a society to try to exclude religious narratives and symbols from its public culture solely because they are identified with religion would be to impoverish itself intellectually and culturally. This would deprive society of one of its most important resources for a more publicly shared cultural self-understanding. Religious communities make perhaps their most important contribution to public life through this contribution to the formation of culture. If they seek to make this contribution through a dialogue of mutual listening and speaking with others, it will be fully congruent with the life of a free society. The principal place where this can happen is the university, as the Catholic tradition has long known. Today, the Catholic university ought to embody such dialogue in a preeminent way. Were it to fail to do so it would betray its identity both as university and as Catholic.

Finally this intellectual solidarity must be accompanied by a *social solidarity* that opens the minds of the students and faculty of the university to the reality of human suffering in a world marred by the grinding poverty of so many in the world, by lack of health insurance for large numbers of Americans, by the attempts at genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda, by the fate of refugees throughout the world—to name only

²⁵ See Michael J. Perry, *Love and Power: The Role of Religion and Morality in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). See also Robin Lovin, "Perry, Naturalism, and Religion in Public," *Tulane Law Review* 63 (1989): 1517-39. Both Perry's earlier work and Lovin's theological reflection on it are discussed in my "Religion and Political Life," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 87-106.

SERIOUS DIALOGUE
IS RISKY BUSINESS.
AT LEAST SOME RELIGIOUS
BELIEVERS HAVE BEEN
WILLING TO TAKE THE RISK.

a few of the most obvious manifestations of the long history of human beings' sinful propensity to treat each other in inhuman ways. As Michael Buckley has noted, the origins of the Catholic university in the Middle Ages and its development by the Jesuits and other religious communities at the dawn of the modern period were manifestations of the conviction that a Christian humanism is both possible and required by the dynamic of Christian faith itself. The challenge of Christian humanism remains central to the identity of Catholic universities. But today that humanism must be a social humanism, a humanism with a deep appreciation not only for the heights to which human culture can rise but also for the depths of suffering to which societies can descend.²⁶ There are strong currents in American life today that insulate both professors and students from experience of and academic reflection on these sufferings. A university that aspires both to be Catholic and to serve the common good must do more than include nods to the importance of social solidarity in its mission statement. It must translate this into teaching and research priorities, and actualize these priorities in day-to-day activities in classroom and library. This will take both the courage and the humility that the privileged learn only when they encounter the reality of poverty and other forms of suffering.

The virtue of solidarity as commitment to the common good, therefore, has both intellectual and social dimensions. Indeed, these intellectual and social dimensions are profoundly interconnected—neither is possible without the other. Both raise significant challenges in the life of the university today. Both hold out opportunities for the university that are worthy of our deepest aspirations. Both intellectual and social solidarity can give new life to the identity of colleges and universities that are both Catholic and Jesuit by tradition and that seek to be so in the future.²⁷

²⁶ See Buckley, "The University and the Concern for Justice: The Search for a New Humanism," *Thought* 57 (1982): 219-33, and "Christian Humanism and Human Misery: A Challenge to the Jesuit University," in Michael J. Buckley, *et al.*, eds., *Faith, Discovery, Service: Perspectives on Jesuit Education*, (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1992), 77-105.

²⁷ An earlier version of this article appeared in *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education* 16 (Summer 1995): 3-15. *Conversations* is grateful to the editors of that publication for permission to reprint Fr. Hollenbach's work.