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Higher Education, Justice, and the Church

Social Justice at Home in the Education Community

By Margaret Farley

Persons from every area of Jesuit higher education gather this month for an annual conference on commitment to justice. We are challenged by the title of this year's conference: "On Fire at the Frontiers." We focus on social justice from the vantage point of encounters with others, "contact points," insofar as the many dimensions of our work bring us to "engage with someone, something, or someplace else." Social justice, after all, refers to justice in relation to others—whether

as individuals or as groups, families, nations, churches, or institutions of higher learning. It encompasses systems, strategies, interpersonal and social goals and norms, struggles for mutual acceptance, hope for a common good, and clear-sighted development of criteria for what counts as justice in blending our lives together in the real world. In this conference about frontiers, concepts of social justice must attend to and in some way cross over borders of culture,

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age, gender, geography, religious beliefs, and social and economic exigencies. Such encounters require openness to what is new. This is why higher education is a way to social justice, and social justice is essential within the fabric of the task of higher education.

We might first consider the ways in which social justice “begins at home”—that is, in the institutions of higher education themselves. The “other” is always before us. A just community of learning, for example, is one in which students can trust the competence, care, and justice of their teachers, and teachers can trust the genuine goals of learning among their students. It is one in which members of administration and staff work together for similar goals, and sustain or correct structures that are fair and marked by due process in the adjudication of disagreements and diverse approaches. A community of learning marked by justice can be expected to respect and even reverence students, administrators, and co-workers—in their diversity, their uniqueness, their plurality of gifts and possibilities. It can thereby cultivate, and not fear, students’ possibilities for self-determination, awakening their desires for union through knowledge and love with what can be learned about the vast reaches of the universe and the microscopic dimensions of the tiniest of creatures. Such a community, at its best, can create an ethos which kindles curiosity, energizes its participants beyond what is taken for granted, advances interdisciplinary and cross-cultural, inter-religious explorations that open new horizons for growth in understanding and even wisdom. Real learning—through whatever processes or with whatever resources—yields insights about the interrelationships of all beings and the dignity in the heart of every person.

I cannot, in this short essay, detail further what is realistically as well as “devoutly” to be wished regarding social justice within our particular institutions of higher learning. I turn, rather, to consider a more general, overarching, way of thinking about human interrelatedness and social justice. More than thirty years ago, Michael Buckley, S.J., pointed out that most higher education (including Catholic higher education) had for centuries been focused on studying human achievements—in science, the arts, politics, architecture, the winning of wars and conquering of territories—without paying attention in any major way to vast experiences of human suffering. Learning of human successes without learning of human pain; or learning of conquerors without examining the devastation and exploitation of the conquered; learning

about the ideas of thinkers and leaders in dominant classes without a concern for the societally marginalized and the poor led and may still lead to the estrangement of an educated elite from the lives of the desperate and from world-wide phenomena of human misery.

This has changed, of course, with movements in Catholic (and other) colleges and universities to require student community service and to provide opportunities for urban immersion as well as global travel seminars for local students aimed at experiences around the world. These movements have made it possible for ordinary students to relativize their perspectives on learning and on the peoples and nations they study. Out of such a new and renewed context for higher education have emerged radically expanded insights about humanity and the world which it shapes and by which it is shaped.

Two theological concepts are consonant with a concern for human suffering, and also help to broaden, sustain, and anchor this concern within Christian and Catholic higher education. They are “world church” and its correlative, Jesus’s query to his disciples, “Can you drink the cup that I will drink?” They echo, I believe, profoundly humanistic concepts of responsibilities of humans for all humanity, and even a kind of natural sisterhood and brotherhood among us all. But they focus a particularly Christian imagination as well as universal Christian imperatives to care for one another and for all neighbors near and far. I came to understand the power of these concepts and their potential for holding together human interrelatedness and social justice while partnering with Catholic African women in responding to the HIV and AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa. Since then, these two concepts have seemed to me particularly apt for interpreting our interrelatedness with one another, with the whole Body of Christ, and with all creation.

World Church and Its Meanings

Many Christians think that Christianity as “world church” means that the Christian gospel has been taken to the far corners of the world. But ours is a time when the concept of “world church” can be given a radically new content. Articulated by theologians like Karl Rahner in the wake of Vatican II, understanding “world church” requires a recognition that the Christian gospel was never meant to be only or even primarily a Western European or North American gospel exported like the rest of Western culture to other parts of the world. We

now realize that this gospel (or God's self-revelation in this way) cannot only be received in every language and culture, but it can be given, spoken out of, every language and culture. It belongs to every culture and generation; it is significantly shaped by the cultural diversity of those who are open to it and believe it. As Rahner insisted, we stifle its possibilities when any one culture claims nearly total control over its forms. Here, then, is an overarching task and possibility: to come to know and understand how a universal church is alive in particular times and places, and how we must learn to relate with co-believers everywhere.

At least two consequences follow from such a concept of world church. The first follows from the fact that the church has not always thought about itself in this way. In the past, for example, Western Christianity exported teachings regarding the status of women and about sexuality that have become part of the problem with HIV and AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. Imposition of attitudes and practices shaped by Western culture destabilized traditional African cultures. To understand the breadth of this problem, and its nature in terms of justice and injustice, critique or affirmation, requires understanding cultural traditions and the people who stand in them.

The second consequence of a new concept of world church is the realization that we are all—whether in Australia or Africa or China—all equal sharers in the one life of the church, partakers in the one life of the Spirit of God. We are all therefore called to bear the burdens of one another when the church in one part of the world is in special need. If HIV/AIDS or poverty or oppressions of any kind are problems for the churches of Africa (or India or the U.S.), they are problems for us all. No one in the “world church” can look upon such situations as simply “their” problem, or conversely only “our” problem. The gospel that comes to all of us calls us not only to assist one another but to stand in solidarity with all, especially those who suffer the most.

If religious traditions have anything at all to say to situations like a pandemic, they must speak of God and of human responsibilities to one another in relation to God. Words of hope and possibility, and deeds of love, will be true insofar as they are shaped by accurate understandings of situations and plausible identification

of claims of justice. Great human goals of mutual respect, solidarity, fairness, and compassion come slowly. Yet we must labor together—to overcome our ignorances, temper our biases, and stretch our hearts and actions so that the challenge, “See how they love one another,” becomes more and more possible. Only thus will we not only resist injustices, but we will learn how to accept others and how with God to mend the world. Catholic and Jesuit forms of higher education are not removed from these imperatives.

Can You Drink the Cup?

Every major religious tradition has had something to say in response to the large questions of people's lives—questions about God, about human destiny, about the heights and depths of creation, and about how to make sense of human suffering. Insofar as we stand in the tradition of Jesus Christ or other world religions (or perhaps any other world religious tradition), we must remember the meaning of what has been revealed to us and experienced by us. Not every aspect of higher education is theological in substance, but it can be open to the transcendent. It can be part of the great search for new discoveries, further understandings of earth and its inhabitants and the stars beyond. Higher education is a place where we “study” these questions and ponder glimpses of their answers.

Suffering, both human and nonhuman, is perhaps the deepest mystery of all for us. If we wonder what God is doing in both the creation of joy and the allowance of pain and if we wonder what God asks of us in the face of so great a challenge as an AIDS pandemic, there may be clues in a story told in the gospel of Mark (as well as Matthew). We know the story: James and John come forward out of the group of disciples to press Jesus to do for them whatever they ask. Jesus responds, “What is it you want me to do for you?” They say they want to sit at his right and left hands when he comes into glory. Jesus gives them another question: “Can you drink the cup that I will drink?” They answer, “We can.” Of course they did not “get the point” of Jesus' question to them; nor would they even begin to understand it until the final terrible day of Jesus' life.

In retrospect, we recognize the mistake James and John made, yet we may have difficulties ourselves in understanding what Jesus meant. We know the “cup” to



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be a symbol of the cross, which in turn symbolizes for us the suffering that Jesus was to undergo. But what does it mean for any of us to drink this cup, or to be called to this cross? I hazard the following interpretation: When we encounter suffering that is like the pain and fear of death at the heart of the AIDS pandemic, we know that its meaning cannot be simply a kind of test, or a deserved punishment, or something that is intrinsically good for us. What AIDS (or homelessness, oppression, rejection) brings to us is so profound a suffering that it would be blasphemy to say that God allows it for any of these reasons—reasons disproportionate to the suffering itself. Rather, what Jesus tried to reveal to his disciples, and to us, was not only that they must be willing to endure a suffering that might be like his own, but that they must “drink the cup *that I must drink.*” The cup to be shared was and is the cup of Jesus Christ. But what do we know now about this cup? We know that it is the cup of the suffering of all persons. If we are to drink this

cup, we are to partake in the sufferings of everyone else. It must therefore signify suffering in forms of sickness and tragic accident, human limitation, natural disasters—catastrophes great and small. Yet something in particular characterizes some of the sufferings signified. Given the context and nature of the final sufferings of Jesus, we cannot fail to see that his suffering is the consequence of injustice that is somehow central to the cup. This is suffering that does not have to be, suffering that results from destitution, abuse, violence, and cruel abandonment. Here is the suffering that cries out for an end not in death but in change.

Human relatedness and social justice: We need practical ways to understand these, to hold them together, to drink of the cup that is also a cup of love, a cup of covenant, a cup of transformation. The way we both encounter and think about such matters may both motivate and strengthen our pursuits of open paths in higher education that are paths to justice. ■