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Between Image and Audience

Sacred Conversations and Mission Integration

By Michael F. Tunney, S.J.

Sacra conversazione, from the Italian meaning holy conversation, is a theme that flourished in 15th- and 16th-century European art. Saints are depicted around the central Virgin and Child, meditating, reading, and, increasingly, in conversation with one another. Typically, one figure looks out to viewers inviting our participation in the scene. Sacred conversation became my organizing concept when I applied for the mission & identity position here at Canisius. Three years on, it reminds me how I want to engage students, colleagues, and all Canisius College's constituents.

Of course, long before there was an office for mission, mission was alive and well on campus. So what is my task? In light of Canisius's strategic plan and the goals and objectives of the mission office, one action item is particularly suited to using the arts in the service of mission: "Communicate our Roman Catholic, Jesuit identity via multimedia visuals at campus crossroads." In academic year 2012-13 campus ministry, student affairs, and the M&I office led the *Cura Personalis* Project. Among a host of second semester related activities and programs, we organized a black and white photo show where students, faculty, and staff wrote inspirational messages on their bodies. In the 2013-14 school year these same

offices invited our campus community to engage the *myMAGIS* Project, black and white photos and 250-300 word reflections on living *magis* in our daily lives at Canisius. This time our work expanded into both the Advent and the Lent/Easter seasons. As was our hope, both projects have people talking in more conscious and thoughtful ways about our shared labors and values.

Both projects debuted on the college's internal portal pages. For years the top right corner of the portal has hosted the Ignatian Moment, a daily quote from a saint, wisdom figure, or current personality in the media. In Advent and Lent/Easter we use the spot for campus-specific reflection features. It was an obvious place to launch these two photo projects. The works then migrate outward to features on the college external webpage, spin-off bulletin boards in residence halls, an article in the alumni magazine, and prints now hanging in campus public spaces.

People by and large enjoyed the visual surprise and creativity of the *Cura Personalis* show, inspired by the earlier work of Robert Fogarty, a photographer working with the citizens of New Orleans and the Gulf area following hurricane Katrina. Messages by Canisius students and staff such as "Respect Me," "Building Up the Body of Christ," and "Fearfully and Wonderfully Made," written on one or more subjects – office staff, classes, and sports teams – sparked comments and provoked thoughts on how we see and relate to one another on campus. The *myMAGIS* Project, conceived as *Cura Personalis* 2.0, brings a deeper consideration from both participants and viewers on this central Ignatian ideal lived in our midst.

Apart from the public conversations that the works produce, there is often a private realization within the participants as they write reflections and pose for their photos. More than a few have noted how good it was to slow down and reflect, perhaps more than they are used to doing, on themselves. Defining experiences, treasured moments and times of testing, life among their families, reflections on classroom teaching and learning, all these surface in the course of writing. Oftentimes participants are startled by the challenge of self-reflection. And they are uniformly grateful for the opportunity to write down and share forward their insights with the Canisius community.

The creative teams producing the two photo shows have the gifts to make these photo meditations happen. Thomas A. Wolf, our longtime adjunct photography professor, brings his passion and professional experience to bear as he selects and guides the student-photographers taking the majority of the photos. Allina Santiago, newly graduated and working in a home for adults with disabili-

ties, shot all 45 of the *Cura Personalis* photos. Time and again I watched her personal warmth set her uncertain Canisius subjects at ease. Though they were to arrive with a clear message ready-to-write on their faces or hands, they often arrived willing but unable to decide what to communicate. Allina's gentle conversational manner guided a brainstorming session in real time until a singular personal message was crafted and the best placement of it on their faces, hands, or sometimes lips or fingertips was found.

Katrina Cosgrove, our *myMAGIS* photographer and double major in religious studies & theology and communications, had plenty of experience shooting weddings, receptions, and street photography. The studio setup was a new site for her learning. She finds the question, "What did you write about in your *magis* reflection?" to be the perfect point of departure for each photo session. Katie takes the reflection and experience each person brings to the studio and personalizes it in her photos.

It is not lost on people, admirers and critics alike, that these photo projects may not always deepen beyond the slogan, nor affect one's understanding and integration of our religious and Ignatian values. Nor do they always speak to anything particularly Catholic in our intellectual tradition. Perhaps. Perhaps not. Images attract the eye even on the hundredth pass. What the retina glimpses the mind ponders and the soul finds a home. Catholicism's rich visual history across the millennia continually invites our own aesthetic engagement with our human experiences of the sacred and the ordinary. These two projects are our responses to this invitation. My belief is that the projects not only delight and instruct but also offer us fresh insights into our diversity as well as our shared values.

Across our AJCU institutions we are becoming more and more aware of mission and its presence in every area of our shared labors. We see and live it in our respect for one another, in our organizational planning, budget decisions, academic instruction, student life integration, and engagements with our alumni across generations. In the midst of myriad institutional challenges surrounding us, our mission, collective and individual, emerges as the vital reference point of conversation, goal setting, and accomplishments. Using the arts at Canisius to advance our mission goals is one way of shaping our students and entire community in a 21st-century sacred conversation on our Catholic and Jesuit educational ideals. ■

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