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## What's This? Pray in Class?

By Kelli Gardner

t was the last class I would take as an undergraduate and I felt little of the usual first-class-of-the-semester apprehension that normally flutters through me as I step into the classroom. This was my 43rd time walking into a new class at Canisius College, and I felt that there was very little I could not handle.

Then I met the Jesuit who was teaching the course. He rolled in at least five minutes late to class, and announced that his only rules were first, you were late if he beat you to class; second, that everyone must cover his or her mouth when vawning. Oddly funny, I thought. Then he announced that he begins all his classes with silent prayer followed by an "Our Father" recited in unison. Suddenly, it was no longer funny. I looked around at the other students with an, "Is he serious?" expression on my face. But it seemed that I was the only person who was unfamiliar with his teaching style. Most heads were already bowed in prayer. Conforming, I also bowed my head, but I was extremely uncomfortable with this directive.

There is something about praying in class that felt wrong. I could not help but think, "This is a classroom! This is a time for learning, thinking, and discussing!" Even within our Catholic school, there is a large variation of belief. In the classroom everyone should feel that they are among equals. Would not prayer alienate individuals even before the class begins? Shouldn't university

education be rooted in an impartial inquiry rather than overt dogma?

While everyone else was silently praying, I was getting huffy at the injustice of it all, but even more so, I was wrestling with why it was that I found praying in the classroom so unnerving. As a practicing Catholic, I certainly pray and I think prayer is very important. I spent my first nine years of formal education in a parochial school, where we prayed at least three times a day and went to mass every Friday. But now as I complete my senior year, I am distressed when I encounter prayer in my classroom. Is this a failure or a triumph of a Catholic and Jesuit education? Is my dis-ease with classroom prayer a sign that we have traded our unique religious identity for the neutrality of secular education? Or, on the other hand, does prayer in the classroom prove that a valuesbased education and unbiased instruction do not have to be mutually exclusive?

Perhaps my discomfort with this situation is a positive aspect of my Jesuit education. The education I have received at Canisius has trained me to critically evaluate situations with an open mind and because of it I have slowly come to understand my role as a woman for, and with, others. Jesuit educators want to create students who think, evaluate, and question practices, traditions, and ideas. They have a dedication to fostering excellence in their classrooms as well as in their students, and they will not easily sacrifice this



for the sake of promoting or practicing a religion. Moreover, I have always liked the fact that students at Canisius can freely choose to participate in religious or spiritual activities without feeling pressured to do so. Still, part of me wonders if this has taken away a crucial part of our Catholic identity. Is my discomfort with prayer in class an indication that Jesuit education has strayed too far from its Catholic roots? Perhaps there is something to be said for the simple practice of beginning class with prayer to remind us that we are a part of something uniquely different from a typical American University.

Our professor ends our silent prayer by lifting his head and leading us all in the "Our Father." A minute later, our books are open and a lively discussion has begun on whether it is possible to study religion from a completely secular point of view. Both sides of the argument are represented and every student is engaged. I leave the class nearly an hour and half later feeling annoyed, challenged, and confused about what Jesuit Catholic education is supposed to be.

Kelli Gardner is a recent graduate of Canisius College.