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Risking Dialogue

ELIZABETH MURRAY MORELLI

Recently I attended a national, ecumenical conference of the Lilly Fellows Program, “The City of God Revisited: Church and State in the Twenty-first Century,” hosted by Baylor University. One of the major speakers, James Dunn, director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, made the provocative statement: “One cannot be a good Christian unless one is a good citizen.” This led one participant to ask in subsequent discussion whether Jesus Christ was a good Christian. The broader question is what does it mean for a Christian or for any person with a religious orientation to be a good citizen. One can answer this question tautologically—that any walk of life or project undertaken by a good Christian is by definition what it means to be a good citizen. Thus, a Christian life of contemplative prayer, artistic creativity, or scientific inquiry, no matter how non-political in the ordinary sense, still counts as a life of good citizenship. One could also answer that any politically related action or project undertaken by a good Christian is necessarily good citizenship, including acts of civil disobedience or revolution. But such answers do not help us to determine what is concretely

required of us as persons of faith, as Christians, as Catholics, as educators in Jesuit universities.

David Hollenbach’s article articulates a concrete answer to this question through the objectification of the proper *telos* of both Catholic life and citizenship, the achievement and advancement of the common good. This is not a simple answer, although it may be stated simply; nor is the problem we face simple. Hollenbach has described the fragmentation and alienation of our present pluralistic society, and he has reminded us of distinctive elements in the Catholic tradition that enable us to meet the challenges we face. I would like to comment on two of the many issues he raises in his complex and richly nuanced account: the problem of the notion of a “common” good in a pluralistic, post-enlightenment society; and the notion of “intellectual solidarity.”

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The fragmentation and alienation of human society is not endemic to our age, nor is it necessarily an ill to be overcome. The introduction of even the most primitive technological innovations, like the fish hook and the spear, result in a division of labor. Wherever there is a division of labor a basic "othering" ensues. The differentiated groups in a society can still form a community as long as a common end is recognized. The problem of our post-enlightenment situation is not so much the differentiation of occupations and ways of life made possible by technological innovations, but the pluralism that threatens to undermine the recognition and pursuit of a common end. If we attempt, even in the United States let alone in the global context, to articulate the content of a common good, we confront the reality of a pluralism of religious and moral standpoints. We could attempt to establish a common ground by abstracting from any religious or moral content in our political discussions, or we could attempt to find a common ground by bringing our "private" values to the public forum and seeing whether there is any overlap. I concur with Hollenbach that the former course would most likely exacerbate the problem or at least forestall any real solution. I also fear that to try to settle which moral principles and values all can accept would lead to a minimalist vision of the human good. Perhaps, today, Americans of all religious faiths, as well as agnostics and atheists, might agree unanimously on the value of a low cholesterol diet and moderate exercise. Even if there is no longer any agreement on questions of God, truth, rationality, art, the family, sexuality, and the like, there seems to be common consensus today on the value of health.

The direction taken by Professor Hollenbach in addressing the problem of the common good is much more fruitful. Rather than attempt to specify the content of the common good, he points to the kind of transformation required of the subject. Rather than list the values and principles that might constitute our common good, he points heuristically to the virtues that must be fostered if the common good is to be attained. He calls us to concern with and commitment to the common good, to an orientation that requires each of us to go beyond self-absorption. With St. Thomas he calls for the cultivation of the virtue of general justice, "whereby a person is directed to the common good"; and with John Paul II he calls for the cultivation of the virtue of solidarity: "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good." The specific demands of self-transcending com-

mitment to “the good of all and of each” will be determined by one’s role, one’s talents, one’s immediate and historical situation. Nevertheless, the virtuous transformation of subjectivity is itself constitutive of the common good.

Professor Hollenbach extends John Paul II’s idea of the virtue of solidarity by developing a notion of “intellectual solidarity.” He means by intellectual solidarity “a willingness to take other persons seriously enough to engage them in conversation and debate.” He distinguishes this virtue from the mere tolerance advocated by liberalism: “It differs radically from pure tolerance by seeking positive engagement with the other through both listening and speaking.” Intellectual solidarity is not content to avoid confrontation with others through mute toleration, nor is it intent on eliminating a plurality of views by coercion. It is rooted in the hope that, through engagement in open dialogue, understanding and agreement might be reached.

The promotion of pluralistic dialogue grounded in the hope of arriving at mutual understanding is central to the tradition of Catholic education, and we should continue to foster it. But if pluralistic dialogue is to be fruitful, we need to bring to it more than hope for understanding and a commitment to the common good. If our conversations are to be more than exercises in polite civility or mere exchanges of information, we should bring to them an awareness that specific types of difference may underlie pluralism. I will point to just two basic types of difference in standpoint—developmental and dialectical. There is a real distinction to be made, for example, between a mythic standpoint and a theoretical standpoint. There is also a real distinction to be made between a world-immanent standpoint and one that is oriented toward a transcendent reality. Dialogue between individuals who are at completely different developmental stages of consciousness, or who maintain fundamentally different convictions about what is real or what is truly good, is destined to collapse into mutual incomprehension, as long as these differences in standpoint are not acknowledged. If the hope of intellectual solidarity is not to be dashed when serious differences of opinion emerge, we should equip ourselves with the critical tools that will enable us to identify basic differences as developmental or dialectical.

Finally, it is not sufficient simply to identify the ground of differences in pluralistic dialogue. We should follow Professor Hollenbach’s lead in working out both affective and intellectual ways to bridge such differ-

ences. As he states, “Serious dialogue is a risky business.” It is a risk we must be willing as citizens and as faculty at Catholic universities to take, and it is a risk we must prepare our students to take as well.