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Making Interfaith Conversations Central to Our Jesuit Mission: Why and How to Get Started

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Why and How to Get Started

By Russell C. D. Arnold

Are we in Jesuit colleges and universities ensuring that such encounters happen on our campuses and that students are getting the most from these encounters? Are we equipping our students to become interfaith leaders who, “through addressing diverse faith identities in interaction, strengthen a religiously diverse democracy” (Eboo Patel, *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer*, 6).

When I came to Regis three years ago, one of the statements I heard repeatedly was that “our goal is not to make you a Catholic, we want you to be a better ‘whatever you are.’” This statement aspires beyond tolerance of diversity toward a transformative encounter with the religious other. Are our institutions committed to making this aspiration a cornerstone of our culture and practice as Jesuit, Catholic universities? The question is whether we see the development of interfaith leaders as central or peripheral to our mission.

The Vatican II document on interfaith relationships, *Nostra Aetate*, exhorts Catholics to engage in “dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions” in order to “preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among” such people,

promoting “for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.”

Similarly, the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus articulates the centrality of interfaith to the mission of the Society, recognizing that “[t]o be religious today is to be interreligious in the sense that a positive relationship with believers of other faiths is a requirement in a world of religious pluralism.” We must recognize that this call to “be interreligious” is not for clergy and the professionally religious alone. Rather, interfaith leaders are necessary in every office, every classroom, every workplace, and every neighborhood.

Our mission calls us to train effective interfaith leaders. This work is not optional, but an obligation across the curriculum and across campus. Here are

A nationwide study of students in their first year of college called IDEALS, initiated by Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) and led by researchers at North Carolina State University, indicates the following about students enrolled in Catholic colleges and universities:

- 89% expect a welcoming environment for people of diverse religious or nonreligious perspectives
- 77% expect opportunities to get to know students of other religious/worldview traditions
- 78% expect service opportunities with students of other religious/worldview traditions
- 72% expect to have classes or educational programs designed to help learn about different religious traditions

three principles that can help us create rich spaces for interfaith dialogue and engagement: identity as a process, encounter, and generous translation.

Identity as Process

Most people think of interfaith dialogue as a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim on a panel talking about each religion’s views about prayer or God or justice. This model communicates that interfaith dialogue is only for those whose religious identity is strong and fits securely within the boundaries of a single tradition. This is simply not the experience of a growing percentage of our students. By defining “faith” not as a label identifying which religion I belong to but rather as my dynamic relationship with the religion(s)/world-

view(s) that shape my life, I am no longer required to fit my experience into a box. "Interfaith" then encapsulates the ways our complex relationships with our tradition(s) affect how we interact with others and how our encounters with others affect the way we relate to our tradition(s) (see Patel, p. 15). By this definition, religious and nonreligious people are all invited equally to the interfaith table, able to bring their whole, complex, unfinished selves to each encounter.

Encounter

As a Jew teaching Interfaith Studies at a Jesuit university, my core principle derives from an oft-quoted passage translated in *The Study Quran* as: "O Mankind, Truly We created you from a male and a female, and We made you peoples and tribes that you may come to know one another" (49:13). These

truths, that humans were created to be richly diverse and that our basic purpose is to know each other, are foundational to the dialogue of encounter. My primary goal in this encounter is not to know about a religion but to come to know you, your life, and your faith. When my colleague and I invite guests to our Interfaith Dialogue course, they don't represent their religion, they each sit with small groups of four or five students and tell their stories, speak their truths, and engage with students about their lives. Both guests and students are invited to be the experts of their own experiences and connect with each other as individuals, building relationships that will enrich their lives.

Generous Translation

The skill of generous translation helps us hold the tension between understanding and connection. In each en-

counter, we listen deeply for what the other person means, asking questions to understand the other's meaning on her or his own terms. As we acknowledge the other's faith as different from ours, we seek commonality by translating the other's experience in terms that are meaningful to us. We do this generously when we resist collapsing the differences between us and instead appreciate the value of the other as other, recognizing that we benefit from considering how another's truth relates to our own truth.

Embodying such principles on our campuses will develop us and our students into the interfaith leaders our society needs today. It will also become a cornerstone of our efforts to live out our Jesuit, Catholic mission.

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We're All Dying

So Let's Talk About It

By Michael Pagano

I grew up in a three-bedroom house in Oklahoma, where my mother was Irish and my father was Italian. As the oldest of four, I was told about my paternal grandparents, who died before I was born, and how they had spent the last weeks of their lives in my bedroom. Thus it was not surprising that when my mom's parents and siblings, as well as my dad's sisters, were dying,

the bedroom that my brothers and I shared became the family hospice. Over the years, numerous relatives took over our room and we moved to couches while they spent their final time on earth with us. My mom would cook and care for them and we would come home from school and sit and talk to them about our day – their deaths were part of our lives.

Coupled with my career choices (combat medic in Vietnam and an emergency room physician assistant), my experiences have been almost as much about dying as about living. But that is not the 21st-century norm and this reality creates problems when teaching health communication. Repeatedly, regardless of whether they hail from communication, health studies, or professional fields (e.g., M.D., R.N., P.A., etc.), students will say the same thing: "I haven't talked with people who are dying."

For adolescents and young adults whose next 40-50 years will likely include the deaths of countless family and friends, students need to be effective end-of-life communicators. Fortu-