

A Celebration of Teaching

Today's event is, for me, an opportunity to celebrate the profession of teaching itself. I know that the Distinguished Teaching Award was created to highlight the importance of excellent teaching at this University; we who have won the award are merely the occasion to appreciate the reality and the process of teaching and to recommit ourselves to it. I have always relished the fact that it is the only profession in which we have the repeated opportunity for a fresh start. Each semester gives us the chance to start over with a clean slate, as it were. I hope today that we can all begin anew with enthusiasm and hope. My few and brief remarks today will center on three simple ideas taken necessarily from my own experience: creating the climate for learning, doing theology within the University core and focussing on the real students who sit before us.

Creating a Climate for Learning

The first day that I stepped into a classroom as a teacher I had an experience that significantly shaped my teaching philosophy. I was very young and in a teacher training class, sent to an eighth grade class to give a reading lesson. My master teacher handed me a seating chart, introduced me to the class and left, going to the principal's office where, unbeknownst to me, she monitored my progress through the intercom. Shortly into the lesson, I called on a student to read and suddenly the tension in the room was palpable. The student

began and it was clear that he was virtually illiterate. I helped him get through one sentence, telling him word after word without comment, and, then, quietly called on someone else. As I did so, the class expended a collective sigh of released tension and suddenly everyone's hand was up, everyone wanted to contribute. The cooperation continued right through the reading and subsequent lively discussion.

I learned that day that students learn best when they take an active part in their own learning and that they are only free to do that in a context of mutual respect, encouragement and challenge as well as good humor. Since then, I have endeavored to stand with my students within the circle of learning, leading and encouraging them, letting them see me learn, listening to their insights and interpretations, correcting and soliciting. It is important to create a climate of acceptance and success. I expect my students to succeed; I try to set them hard tasks (so that when they achieve them, they experience the joy of accomplishment) and I try to give them the strategies and skills to achieve the task.

For me, creating a climate for learning involves seeing students outside of the classroom. Because a teacher must necessarily be demanding of her students, must regularly judge their work and, often, point out deficiencies, it is important, I think, that I see my students when they are succeeding at something that they value and love. They see me this way in the classroom: doing something I love and work hard at; I want to be able to appreciate their successes in other situations than the

classroom. Therefore, I attend their games, musical and dramatic performances whenever possible so that I can speak specifically to them about their successes. An early mentor told me that in education, "nothing succeeds like success." I have tried to live by this adage in all my involvements with students.

Theology and the University Core

The fact that most of my teaching is done within the University's core curriculum shapes my goals in the classroom. This accords well with my own vision of theology itself--not exclusively a body of knowledge separate from other such bodies, but methods and principles of interpretation that view all of life as a whole. Primary among my goals, then, is the development of skills and attitudes that will facilitate learning across the curriculum and for the rest of life.

I work to show the interconnectedness of knowledge and experience. My own education has been broad and eclectic; it allows me to bring into my teaching of theology examples from literature, from history, from science, from art. Additionally, examples from athletics, from the newspaper, from the financial world also turn up in my lectures.

Doing theology from an historical perspective means working with texts, with the Scriptures and with the classical texts of the Christian tradition. For me, the truth of the Incarnation, that the Word becomes flesh, means that I will take both flesh and words with utter seriousness and with great delight. I use

primary texts a great deal in my classes. I hope to communicate a love for texts, to develop skills for reading texts deeply and critically, to encourage a love for language and for its power to move us, its power to make things happen. I challenge students to master English as a powerful and flexible tool of human communication. Etymologies are all over my blackboard; the mastery of precise and accurate theological vocabulary is a standing expectation.

I try to model for my students a habit of theological reflection that is both empathetic and critical. I insist that students get inside the experience of others before judging it and that they examine, judge and refine their own reflections. I want them to eschew easy theological answers and will not accept "pious platitudes" in place of disciplined thinking. I repeat (ad nauseam perhaps) that a precise, pertinent question is a harder achievement and a more valuable acquisition than a facile answer. Recently I have worked to broaden the cultural context of my own theological reflection and teaching. Together my students and I are learning to reflect empathetically on the way different cultures have appropriated, modified or rejected the Christian tradition; together we critique our own traditions in the light of cross-cultural insights.

Teaching Students

Creating a climate, having some goals; all that is further needed for the reality of teaching is some students. Because the Word of God takes on human flesh, the fleshly reality of my

students, their concrete particularity is absolutely important to me. This is the twentieth time that I begin a Fall semester here at LMU. A full generation of students has come and gone. Each year I hear how students "aren't like they used to be." Their skills have deteriorated, their lethargy is apparent. Oscar Wilde once said that the younger generation is always going to rack and ruin without ever quite getting there; from many of our conversations as teachers I would have to conclude that in-coming students are only one step away from mindless ignorance while in May we acknowledge that at least some of the out-going students have much to offer the world. We teachers wear many hats; sometimes our participation in faculty governance requires us to make critical judgments about entrance standards so that we can be faithful to the mission of the University. But when we step into the classroom, let us be sure our teaching hat is firmly in place. It comes with powerful lenses that enable us to see, not just the limitations of the students before us, but their potential, their gifts, and their absolute right, whatever their initial preparation, to our most careful, thoughtful and imaginative efforts.

What we teach is students not subject-matter. For me the Catholic character of LMU means holding as a motto over all of our educational activities that quotation from Irenaeus, the second-century bishop of Lyons. Irenaeus said that " the glory of God is the human person, fully alive." Doing theology in this Catholic University means working to stay alive myself, amidst the inevitable tedium of meetings and paper-grading. It means

helping my friends and colleagues to stay alive and lively also, since good teaching is never done in a vacuum, but in the context of conversations that happen between and among dedicated peers and colleagues. Most of all, it means helping students grasp the importance of absolutely everything that makes us more fully human, stimulating their natural hunger to be truly alive and more and more filled with human truth, beauty and goodness.

Let me end with a biblical quote. In Daniel 12:3, we read that "those who instruct others unto justice will shine like the stars for ever and ever." This is, of course, bad news as well as good; it reminds us that the rewards for teaching are never immediate, always deferred. We can't expect the glitter of gold filling our coffers today; we can only hope for the burnished joy that comes in the future (though the small light bulbs that go on over our students' heads when we are particularly successful keep that hope alive). Daniel's words also remind us that good teaching must, in many small ways, lead others to justice. The knowledge we seek to impart must lead to wisdom; the individual gifts we nurture in each student are meant, finally, to be transformed into resources for the common good. Those who can do this great and important work, teach; those who cannot, must be satisfied with something less than stars in their future.

Thank you.