

Mission Day Panel, January 30, 2008

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Thank Patrick McCormick—taught his excellent texts *CCC/FEI* for about eleven semesters and counting here...so he's been educating LMU students about connecting faith to justice long before this afternoon

I'd like to thank Professor Steinfels for her inspiring address this morning, and I want to simply add my own reflections on three points that resonated with my experience of LMU's service of faith:

First her insight that **Catholic identity is not a strait jacket, but an opportunity;**

Second, her call for more ongoing “**briefing and debriefing of participants**” on immersions;

Finally, her apt signal to “**justice within the university's own walls** and the surrounding community.”

“**Catholic identity is not a strait jacket, but an opportunity.**”

Prof. Steinfels' articulation well reflects my own understanding of Catholic

theology as engaging the “growing edges” of a deep and wide tradition, but it is also useful in considering the ways that the service of faith cuts across the diversity of university life. The legacy of Vatican II that understands work on behalf of justice as a requirement of faith, moves the church into active, dynamic engagement with difference. This understanding rejects strategies of Catholic control or Catholic enclaves, and embraces intellectual and interreligious solidarity as the implication of Christian faith and of the co-humanity of Christians and non-Christians. Hence in contrast to suspicion or mere tolerance of difference, Catholic intellectual solidarity affirms deep roots of its vision of the good life in the gospel AND the possibility of bringing convictions about this common good into fruitful engagement with others’ conceptions. As I told my undergraduates yesterday, at Vatican II the church changes from saying “We have all the answers, now by the way what were your questions?” to actually starting with the concrete experiences of humanity. Attention to the experiences of those on the underside of history constitutes a key starting point for this give-and-take; we evoke and pursue outgoing Jesuit Superior General Kolvenbach’s promotion of justice as a “concrete, radical, but proportionate response to an unjustly suffering world.”

Hence freed from a straitjacket, the service of faith need not be apologetic or agnostic amid pluralism, but rather our institution's embodiment of work for justice is necessarily infused with and propelled by its faith tradition. So if the way we live—from the questions we pursue in the classroom to the way we treat one another in dorm life—implicitly embodies a tradition, how do we fare at LMU?

“What about the briefing and debriefing of participants” on immersions to El Salvador or SOA?

In terms of educating students for solidarity, LMU's growing commitment to community-based learning is one way we extend such “briefing/debriefing” of “immersion experiences.” Community-Based Learning combines *organized service activities with guided reflection* and *critical analysis* to enhance both the academic objectives of the curriculum and the social needs of the larger community. CBL is one particularly useful method for letting “the gritty reality of this world into students' lives,” in Kolvenbach's words.

Throughout the various CBL courses I've taught, my students' experiences with former gang members in East LA or grade-schoolers in Watts have prompted them to challenge unexamined assumptions about the

causes of poverty, migration or even “criminal activity.” Three years ago on this same occasion Dean Brackley termed these opportunities to “act ourselves into new ways of thinking,” *cognitive hygiene*, emphasizing that “we must be engaged at the level of experience and practice in a way that challenges our intellectual and moral commitments.” CBL drives home the urgency of reflection (and action) on contemporary social issues, for building relationships makes it harder to generalize about groups of people. Accompanying undocumented immigrants facing daunting language barriers or recognizing the same homeless week after week at Bread & Roses impacts students’ thinking on structural dimensions of justice.

Beyond the “paradigm subverting” purposes they may accomplish, I find these praxis opportunities lead students to reflection beyond the scope of my courses, often prompting them to reconsider their own priorities or vocation. A few examples from a core class I teach on Catholic social teaching: one recent graduate was hired at her service placement, Good Shepherd Battered Women’s Shelter, after graduation; another student stayed on as a case worker at St Joseph’s homeless service center; yet another began offering weekly ESL classes at GHP after the course “requirement” concluded. In a majors’ seminar on Christian ethics and HIV/AIDS, one student’s service placement in a Latino AIDS outreach

program prompted sincere faith exploration outside of the classroom-- actively wrestling with the impact and adequacy of a tradition can lead to a deeper and more mature faith.

Finally CBL has led to *new perspectives on other disciplines and links* between disciplines; my students' placement experiences raise questions that draw on their work in economics classes, psychology, political science—crucial to a comprehensive approach to issues of injustice. This tendency also sheds light on how this “justice aspect” of the service of faith remains genuinely interdisciplinary and hardly the province of Catholic studies or theological studies alone. In recent years LMU has offered CBL courses in management, Spanish, philosophy, visual arts, screenwriting—most if not all of which pursue questions of justice proper to their own discipline. LMU course development grants and the work of the Center for Service and Action significantly support the growth of this pedagogy here. We can also do better: link up concentrated immersion experiences to ongoing reflection and education experiences—whether connecting them to courses, using alternative break participants to peer educate, engaging more faculty in pre-briefing about relevant contexts; and offer immersion opportunities for staff, administrators and faculty in terms of formation for mission.

“What about justice within the university’s own walls and the surrounding community?”

Honestly addressing questions of institutional embodiment of these values we espouse is crucial. To begin with signs of hope: I have witnessed incremental commitment to fairly traded merchandise during my brief time at LMU: increasing options for Fair Trade coffee, and I understand ASLMU has now implemented a requirement that to receive SRB funding, clubs must utilize American Apparel.

Personnel policies and work life issues should also be included in a consideration of justice within university walls. For example, given the Catholic affirmation of women’s equal dignity and the significant role of the family in society, our universities are particularly obligated to support parents as a matter of justice. Different coalitions’ work on leave procedures recently culminated in a just faculty maternity leave policy, just as staff and faculty’s tireless work over recent decades led to the creation of an on-campus Center offering quality child care. Particularly in light of studies making clear the “baby gap” among women who earn tenure and promotion, these constitute matters of justice, not simply job perk’s.

LMU also recently produced a campus climate report that identified the largely invisible yet detrimental impact of disproportionate service work

and informal advising among faculty of color and women; the report suggested concrete strategies for creating a climate in which all faculty can thrive. Steps like these toward modeling mutuality reflect the institution's promotion of justice and service of faith.

Yet I think Prof. Steinfels' question should challenge us to more adequately embody this aspect of our mission, in terms of the treatment of all employees; how we make institutional decisions about whose services we contract; who can afford to attend LMU; what values we promote in our new core and in the climate of student life once students are here; and how connected and committed we remain to justice in our surrounding communities. This array of internal justice questions offers only a starting point for pursuing the maxim that those who venture to speak about justice must first be just.