

Living Life to the Full: The Service of Faith in Everyday Experiences

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The service of faith: what an important and courageous topic for Loyola Marymount, and indeed, all Catholic universities, to consider. It is an honor to engage this conversation with you, and I'm looking forward to what we will learn from one another about serving faith in the co-curriculum.

In preparation for this talk, I had many false starts. There were so many possible directions, and to choose just one or two proved to be difficult. In the end, it was a dream I had that became the spring board for this talk. I dreamt that we were all together in room full of comfy couches talking about our work with students. There was a lot of camaraderie and laughter among us until I asked this question: what does service of faith mean to you? Suddenly everyone became stiff and uncomfortable. The conversation that had been so easy just a few minutes prior stopped cold, and we were all just staring at one another in utter silence. Then a pack of dogs ran through the room.

Dogs notwithstanding, this dream was actually very helpful to me. Everything about it was instructive: that we easily talked together of our work with students—what we find useful, inspiring, humorous, or even frustrating—and that the room became silent when the subject turned to faith. All of this was instructive—especially the silence.

In her keynote address, Margaret Steinfels offered several explanations for why we become dumbstruck at the term “service of faith.” Perhaps the silence comes from reticence to speak about the deeply personal, perhaps from a lack of knowledge, perhaps from general discomfort or unfamiliarity. Any of these reasons for silence about faith may ring true. But one thing is for sure: if we cannot talk about the service of faith, we cannot, in good faith, fulfill the mission of this university, or of any Catholic institution, for that matter. So let's change that. Let's talk about the service of faith but let's begin elsewhere.

One quick caveat before we dive in: although the context for our conversation is most definitely Catholic, what we discuss here is not limited to Catholics. Indeed, people of all faith traditions, and non-believers alike, should be able to identify themselves within our institutions.

So let's begin. Let's begin with the purpose of Catholic higher education. What is the purpose of Catholic higher education? How is it different from education at state institutions or even at other privates?..If pressed for an answer, I would say that paramount to developing intellectual rigor and career preparation the purpose of Catholic higher education is formation of young people—the integration of faith, reason, and personal/social development—that they might become the people God intended them to be, that they might do good in this world that they might develop an adult relationship with God. In short, I might say that the purpose of Catholic higher education is that students might have life and live it to the full (John 10:10). (I use this reference from John's Gospel intentionally as it is echoed in the spiritual tradition of the Religious of the

Sacred Heart of Mary.) Whether we, or our students, are Catholic or not, we all participate in this fundamental purpose, and our work in student development is central to this purpose. If we can agree on this purpose, we have a place to begin discussing the points where faith and the co-curriculum meet.

The marriage of faith and reason is not just an intellectual sport, and faithful devotions are not limited to weekend worship. It is in the co-curriculum that students can learn to live life to the full in their everyday activities—it is in the co-curriculum where we find the service of faith in everyday life. Academics provide the intersection of faith and reason and are the home of intellectual rigor on our campuses. The activities of Campus Ministry lay the foundation for the deep expression of institutional faith. Through liturgies, devotions, and sacraments LMU's Campus Ministry offers a rich atmosphere for faith expression that many schools, including my own, strive to emulate. The co-curriculum, however, is an altogether different beast: it's not purely academic nor is it expressly religious like the programs through Campus Ministry. Instead it is the place where these come together. The co-curriculum is translator of the intellectual and devotional aspects of faith to students' daily lives.

The residence halls are the perfect learning lab for putting into practice Catholic social thought—that each one has a responsibility for the well being of all. Through the efforts of our multicultural affairs offices, students find real-world application for the teaching that all human beings have equal value because all have been created in God's image and have been imbued by their Creator with innate dignity. Recreational sports and athletics provide natural fodder for lessons in leadership and teamwork, but what about using students' involvement with sports to cultivate humility and a spirit of generosity? And who among us hasn't used the judicial hearing as an opportunity to dialogue with students about respecting self and others? These moments, if we are courageous enough to make them so, can be life changing for students.

If we are intentional about our programming, the environment we create through the co-curriculum can help students incorporate what they learn in their courses and what they hear and experience in their faith devotions into their every day lives. Through the co-curriculum students can practice the disposition of faith: love, hope, and gratitude. The co-curriculum is what helps students integrate faith, reason, and devotion into the everyday—their interactions with others, their habits, their choices. For me, this is where the co-curriculum can really shine as a beacon for the service of faith.

Keeping in mind that issues of faith are deeply personal, I offer you a few examples of serving faith while meeting the students where they are.

Just about every student I've ever encountered has spent some time during the undergraduate (or even graduate) years wondering, "What am I going to do with the rest of my life?" We can expect, and almost guarantee, that all of our students at one time or another is going to ask this question. But unlike some of our secular counterparts, we have tremendous resources at our disposal to help students meet the challenge of deciding career paths in a powerful and life-giving way. By using spiritual tools like reflection, discernment, and prayer, we can turn a career counseling session into a journey of vocational discernment. Instead of feeling like they are stumbling into a career choice, students begin to see themselves as uniquely gifted and called to serve.

I met a young woman who attended Boston College. Her entire family was made of teachers and social workers. Her family experiences had socialized her into viewing service to the community in a narrow way. She began her college career as an education major but was surprised that she did not share the same fulfillment in that path as her family members. Her frustration grew into question, and here's where the little miracle occurred. She met a wise professional who asked her to reflect, journal, and even pray about her gifts and where she did feel fulfilled. The result was very clear—her talent was artistic, and her love was jewelry. When asked to imagine a fulfilling career choice using her talents, she was very clear again—if given the opportunity to do anything, she would choose to be a jewelry buyer. Her frustration yielded to this clarity of insight, and what ensued was a spiritual quest—a deepening of her relationship with God as she became more and more clear that God had gifted her in a special way and that it was up to her to use these gifts. Her conclusion was that helping her clients express deep emotion—whether love or gratitude or appreciation—through jewelry can be a significant gift to those individuals.

I share this specific story because the two people in it turned an everyday occurrence—making career choices—into a conversation with God. All it took was an earnest professional to ask courageous questions and invite this student to a deeper understanding of herself. The bonus here, of course, is that by using the tools of discernment, this professional also invited the student into a deeper understanding of Jesuit spirituality and of the order that founded her university.

Faith can be served simply by encouraging dialogue and walking with students as they live into the questions of their lives. Without being expressly Catholic, we find expressions of faith in the most ordinary moments of everyday: opportunities for patience, generosity, and compassion. To help students develop these traits is to help them discover who it is they are meant to be. It is to help them live life to the full.

The service of faith through the co-curriculum is not limited to deep, probing dialogue. Sometimes fairly innocuous tweaks to regular programming can do the trick. At Loyola College I directed a leadership development program for sophomores. Because effective leaders take time to reflect on their actions, we took the first five minutes of our weekly meetings to observe our consolations and our desolations—the things for which we were most grateful and the things for which we had the most regret. In effect, we were doing the Jesuit *Examen*, a practice of noticing the places where God is gracing and calling versus the places where we blunder. At the end of each semester I asked the students to review their *Examens* and note any patterns. On their own, they came to monumental conclusions based on the data of their lives: some decided to change major, others realized they had been spending too much time partying, some realized their friendships were dragging them down, and one even realized she should transfer to another institution. This exercise took five minutes each week—minimal investment, maximum return—and can be done anywhere: in the residence halls, with student groups, in individual meetings. What a simple way to help students develop a habit of paying attention to their thoughts and actions and then resolve to make amendments along the way.

The co-curriculum has so much hidden potential for the service of faith. Engaging students along this journey means that we have to allow ourselves to be vulnerable and honest in our own

questions and search for meaning. In some instances it also means that we have to be reasonably knowledgeable about the institutional Church. This, of course, is another point where the rubber hits the road and a potential source of conflict,

A Catholic university is the place where the institutional church meets the culture, and sometimes these meetings are not very pleasant at all. At my own institution we've had three minor blowups in the past year—all revolving around the dreaded 'S' word: Sex. One student group petitioned to make condoms available on campus, another student group arranged a volunteer outing with Planned Parenthood, and several others wanted to sponsor a so-called 'sexpert' as a featured speaker. In all, none of these incidents were particularly earth shattering or even unexpected, but we could have avoided a lot of needless anxiety, frustration, and pain if our staff members were better versed in the university's stance vis-à-vis the teachings of the Church regarding sex and abortion and what-not.

Without the basic information, very well-intentioned staff members mistook Church teachings as archaic rules or naive political statements to be easily cast aside. Some made the mistake of simply reiterating the rules of 'thou shalt not.' Too few people were knowledgeable enough to diffuse the situation by engaging the adult conversation of why and why not. And isn't this what our students deserve? This was the shame of missed and misguided opportunity. And not providing staff, who interact most with students, some basic information about the faith that animates the university was a shameful oversight. Hopefully we've taken appropriate steps to guard against this friction in the future. For the first time, we are truly exploring what it means that we are at a Catholic institution. Student Development directors are engaging in conversation with our partners in Mission and Ministry, an opportunity to ask questions and lean on one another's expertise. Together we are reviewing the new Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs in Catholic Higher Education and figuring out what this document means for our work with students. All of us recognize our own need for education, so we can be responsible stewards of the institution and intelligently guide students, so they can live into the questions, so they can develop an adult relationship with their Creator, so they can live life to the full.

We all chose to work in Jesuit-Catholic higher education, and in some cases, the institution chose us. Whatever our reasons for being here, our work is to serve the mission of our institutions through our work with students that they might become more fully who they are intended to be. My hope is that in guiding our students, we, too, might live life to the full, finding the service of faith in our everyday experiences.

Thank you for inviting me to engage this conversation. I am grateful for the opportunity to grow and enter into this dialogue that is so central to the missions of our Jesuit institutions.