

Education's Highest Aim

Teaching and Learning
through a Spirituality
of Communion

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Finally, one aspect of the Focolare spirituality is “learning to lose” one’s ideas for what in the end turns out to be the will of God. Though it was very difficult for me, the decision to transfer one of the program’s key programs to another university worked out for the best. The university set up a team approach to running the program that makes it so robust that the team has been able to expand the program to a point where it can have nationwide impact through multi-year initiatives in developing countries. It now seems that the program will be able to achieve its potential for the good of our country and the world.

STRENGTHENING THE IDENTITY OF RELIGIOUSLY AFFILIATED INSTITUTIONS IN A PLURALISTIC ENVIRONMENT³

One of the challenges for religiously affiliated educational institutions is figuring out how to navigate between two poles that seem to be in constant tension: on one side, the institution’s religious identity, and on the other, dialogue in a pluralistic culture. Those concerned about identity tend to focus on the issue of how to foster literacy in the tradition and transmit the religious identity to the next generation. Those concerned about dialogue, especially in pluralistic educational environments, tend to worry about the extent to which transmission of the religious traditions might alienate those who do not share the tradition.

In her contact with students at Fordham Law School, a Catholic Jesuit institution, Amy Uelmen realized what happens in students when these two dimensions do not cohere. She presented her legal ethics students with this problem:

You are a lawyer working for a law firm, only about six months on the job. Your supervisor, a partner in the firm, says there seems to be an ethics question about whether we can take this case, but it would be

3. A version of this narrative was previously published under the title “Sparks and Bridges: Catalysts of a Catholic Higher Education that Works,” in *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education* 26 (2007): 59–64.

very good for business if we could figure out a way around that. You do the research, and conclude that in your judgment there is indeed an insurmountable conflict of interest. What determines your approach to your research report to the partner — your own judgment, or what the partner wants?

About 85 percent of the class raised their hands: “what the partner wants.”

The class reflected the general trajectory of graduate students who express little confidence in making judgment calls that implicate values, and who are paralyzed with fear at the thought of stepping off the beaten path. In class they work very hard to avoid discussions in which definitions of justice might conflict. Uelmen’s primary concern was that even if they were “literate” in the Catholic or in any other religious tradition, it might not make a difference because they have not figured out how to connect their personal identity with their contribution to a work environment.

Or she observes an equally problematic swing in the other direction. Many graduate students believe that religiously grounded values systems create insurmountable conflict and should thus be avoided within the boundaries of public and professional life. In a class where Uelmen had presented the idea of “religious lawyering,” one student rejected the idea outright, arguing that bringing religious values to bear on one’s decisions necessarily leads to unacceptable bias, prejudice, and a kind of moralizing completely inappropriate for a professional setting. Uelmen pressed her: “So are you telling me that all lawyers must be cut from the same cookie cutter mold?” She answered, “Yes.”

In this context, Uelmen realized that the task was not only to strengthen religious identity, or simply to navigate the challenges of pluralism, but that the core of the project was to link the two. Students need to see how a strong sense of Catholic identity, of being grounded in the tradition, does not necessarily generate entrenched polarization. And they need to experience how the openness of dialogue does not necessarily melt into vague and meaningless platitudes.

Grounded in the Focolare spirituality since her childhood, with extensive exposure to the Focolare's methods for fostering interreligious dialogue, Uelmen had already experienced in her own life and in Focolare activities how the dimensions of her own Catholic identity might correspond with a broad openness to the religious identity of people of other traditions. For this reason, she decided to map out her work as the director of Fordham's Institute on Religion, Law & Lawyer's Work along this dual trajectory. On the one hand, in her own scholarship, teaching, and in the programs that the study center sustained, strong, clear and unapologetic depth in her own Catholic tradition. On the other hand, she set out to build substantial bonds of friendship, openness and trust with her colleagues from other religious traditions. In her approach to the study center's programming, cooperating with a colleague who happened to be Jewish, she set out to create an open and respectful space for people to explore how their own non-Catholic religious traditions might serve as a resource for their approach to the law and legal practice.

What gradually emerged were two types of equally important "players," which they termed "sparks" and "bridges." "Sparks" are people who have the background and capacity to draw out the connections between their academic discipline and their faith, as well as the job security and sense of identity to actually accomplish it. "Bridges" are people who have the imagination and sensitivity to perceive how identity questions might sit with others from a different background or perspective. Intuiting what the concerns and fears might be, they are able to build relationships of trust that open the door to genuine communication about identity questions. In Uelmen's experience, both are essential, because real headway is made when sparks and bridges team up. The synergy tends to create a context in which principles of religious traditions come alive and become accessible, able to inform relationships and approaches to institutional conversations.

As a result of the dynamic, colleagues with whom she has been able to share something about the principles of the "Art of Loving" have felt not only free but also co-responsible for bringing a spirit of love to their interactions with students,

other colleagues, and to their administrative duties. And Uelmen herself has been sustained by her colleagues' commitments and creativity. For example, one day a misunderstanding with another colleague had left her feeling slighted. Instead of attending a scheduled faculty function, she was tempted to remain by herself in her office. She was moping at her desk when a Jewish colleague called to ask, "Are you coming?"

"No, I don't feel like it."

He responded, "People are fragile. You have to love your neighbor. I'll save you a seat." What could she say to that? The event presented the opportunity not only to patch things up, but to find a deeper understanding with the colleague with whom she had the falling-out.

On another occasion she was at an administrative staff meeting seated next to another Jewish colleague who was also in on the agreement to find ways to let the principle of love permeate the school environment. At a certain point he leaned over and whispered, "We're not loving enough." This insight became the springboard for the two to work together with the administration to propose a creative solution for at least a part of the problem, and to offer help to implement the plan with a spirit of love and service.

The "sparks and bridges" synergy has also informed this little team's approach to faculty discussions about religious identity, in which over time about 25 percent of the faculty have participated. Uelmen has seen that the initiative and leadership of non-Catholic faculty has been essential for breaking down barriers of suspicion and fear. Each academic year begins with a "brainstorming" session to determine an annual focus. This approach from the ground up insures that the agenda is shaped by the faculty's actual interests, questions, and concerns, and that faculty members maintain control. This capacity to "let go" and leave space for everyone to express themselves has in turn generated profound openness to learning more about the Catholic tradition. Additional "sparks" and "bridges" have emerged. Several non-Catholic faculty members who have begun to discover the connections between Catholic values and what they are already doing

would like to begin to integrate the tradition into their scholarship and teaching.

The “sparks and bridges” methodology has also helped to create a space to challenge students to grow. In her elective seminar, *Catholic Social Thought and the Law*, Uelmen challenges, the “sparks,” those with a deeper sense of the tradition, to focus on how the principles play out in a pluralistic society, to keep an eye on how those tensions might change their perspective. She urges those concerned with the dilemmas of applying the principles in a pluralistic society to sit a little longer with the principles, to put on a “comparative law” hat so as to absorb and understand the principles, even if ultimately they may disagree with the framework.

Their encounters with each other in class discussions do allow them to catch a glimpse of what it means to move beyond the conviction or fear that the profession leaves room only for “what the partner wants,” or for lawyers cut from the same “cookie-cutter mold.”

Lubich’s explanation of Jesus Forsaken on the cross, precisely in his capacity to empty himself out of love and as an expression of love, informs all of Uelmen’s work. In her experience, this kind of love generates not a relativistic void but a creative space for the Holy Spirit to act and speak. This, she believes, is the source of light to understand how to preserve the religious identity of the institution, yet at the same time to appreciate the manifold ways in which God is already at work in students and colleagues of other religious traditions.

ESTABLISHING EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS THROUGH A SPIRITUALITY OF COMMUNION

From the perspective of a spirituality of communion, the highest goal of education is unity — within the individual, within the community, within academic disciplines, within human nature itself. Such fragmentation manifests itself in the tension between “the dialogical, interactive foundations of the Deweyan vision of learning” (see p. 20) and the necessary emphasis upon the individual in the world of education. Enlightened theory and best practice can address such