

## CONTENT AND CONTEXT: DISCERNMENT FOR A TIME OF CHANGE

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The series of lectures and discussions which this presentation and discussion conclude has been concerned with the issues and questions on characteristics of Jesuit higher education presented by the Jesuit Conference in its pamphlet, *Communal Reflection on the Jesuit Mission in Higher Education: a Way of Proceeding*. The five categories identified there can be considered in relation to many components of a university's life. I will address the five categories specifically as they related to curriculum, knowing that you are working on the reshaping of your curricular design for undergraduate education, and that your aim is to do this in the Ignatian tradition of education, in the context of today's world and academic requirements. But first let me share with you in this essay what I mean by content and context.

### CONTENT

The text from the Jesuit Conference implicitly defines the content of higher education with reference to the traditional Jesuit humanism (see especially the conclusion). I take this to mean an enthusiastic approach to learning and understanding what God has created in the world: its natural resources with all their possibilities of development; human persons and the ways in which they have worked to modify and develop the world, the ways they have structured their relationships economically and politically; all the intellectual, moral and aesthetic dimensions of human experience and human culture; the inner and outer reaches of the human spirit in its many expressions all over the world and all through time. The humanism born of the Renaissance offers exploration and creative participation in any of these aspects, seeing them all as a meaningful whole, and such integration is certainly at the core of the heritage of Ignatian education.

This confidence about the integration of many dimensions of knowledge and experience is grounded in the vision of faith that sees the one Creator God calling forth all things wisely and benignly with the intention of harmony and of the creatures' enjoyment of their existence and their world. The confidence of Christian humanism is also grounded in the understanding that this creating process is not simply in the past but in the continuing present. Moreover, in its unfinished character it is entrusted to the human community for further development and exploration. This calls in the first place for a human response of wonder, gratitude and curiosity. Beyond this it calls for human collaboration with the Creator in drawing out the seemingly endless potential of the ongoing creation, especially where this serves human need and the wellbeing and harmony of all creation.

This is certainly the spirit and direction in which we want to educate. Ideally, learning and work should carry the zest and sense of adventure found in play.

Characteristic of play is spontaneity and the extent consequently to which it generates its own energy and motivation. This is what we would like our students to experience as the quality of their college education. It is enhanced to the extent that they experience learning as personal exploration and discovery, and can find that learning not only increases what they know and can do, but also in various ways increases what and who they are. On the other hand, what we would like our students to experience is diminished and to some extent corrupted by everything that is not evidently related to their real-life interests, and that consequently reduces their learning to drudgery.

I am distinguishing drudgery from hard work, even very hard work, even exhausting work, because all of us embrace such hard work with enthusiasm when it is intrinsically related to a goal we very much want to reach. There is a difference in slogging through turgid text only because it is required to pass the examination, and on the other hand putting out every effort to concentrate and understand such a poorly written and cumbersome text because one passionately wants to know what it says. The disconnect that transforms hard work into drudgery happens particularly when courses are required in various fields, but are loosely assembled without much relationship to one another, and from the student's perspective seem to end without getting anywhere. There is bound to be a sense of fatigue when the plurality of courses and disciplines is primarily a matter of amassing the required credits in the required distribution.

I believe it is the genius of the education arising out of Christian humanism that it is planned in a coherent progression to get to the integration sought by the "Renaissance person." The calm acceptance in contemporary academia of the disappearance of the "Renaissance person" seems to me to be one of the major disasters of higher education in our time. This (now gender inclusive) Renaissance person was never one who knew everything in all fields, but rather one whose learning was open in all directions and who relished the task of integrating it, and who set about that with great confidence.

As you probably know, the many small ventures in alternative Catholic higher education, enthusiastically welcomed by the American Association of Liberal Education, though also characterized by a certain ultra-conservative mode of Catholicism, are aimed primarily at a better integration of learning, often offering a "great books" style of education in which much of the initiative is left to the students after the initial determination of the reading matter. What accords less with Ignatian humanism in the curricula of most of these schools is a tendency to focus heavily on the appreciation of lost values of the past in social structures, art and music, literature and religious life, with less appreciation of contemporary knowledge, the social sciences, advances in natural sciences, and the art and culture of our times.

The content question as I see it is whether we are creative and enterprising enough to attempt in our various curricula to relate and span the disciplines in all their contemporary complexity. Ignatius himself certainly appreciated order. He preferred Paris over his university experiences in Spain because, among other things the courses were structured in a coherent sequence that made sense to the student and enabled him to build up his understanding in an integrating way. (This he owed largely to Thomas

Aquinas who himself had come to Paris and been horrified at the way disputations and lectures were thrown at the students helter-skelter without progression or integration, and who wrote his *Summa theologiae* as a demonstration of how instruction should proceed in an orderly way).

But besides the requirement of orderly progress, Ignatius also left a legacy that called for creativity and risk-taking in mapping out new programs and ways of doing things in education. Through the ages Jesuits were risk-takers, and that gave some support to the US Jesuits in education when, early in the twentieth century, they took a radical departure from the traditional European standard curriculum, adapting their American schools to the American structure of schools and curricula. It should be noted that at that time, the standard curriculum of the American undergraduate college was still of a strongly humanistic kind, though less tied to the ancient classical languages, philosophies, and literature. It had not yet acquired the large burden of technological and highly specialized, quantitatively assessed material, or the early occupational specializations that accrued later.

Given the developments of the intervening century, it seems to be time for Jesuit schools to take stock again, and ask in what ways it would be appropriate to adapt and improve upon current American assumptions about undergraduate curricula. There is no doubt that the current scatter of choices for the so-called liberal arts core, offered in most schools in the first two years, is not best suited to give students either that joy in learning mentioned above, nor an experience of the integration of knowledge drawn from many sources. There are simply too many unrelated tracks of discovery, all dealt with somewhat too briefly, and at the second level there is in each field no common content known by all participant students, on which a second level of understanding can really be built.

The original logic of these wide choices, as I remember its being propounded in the 1960s, is that students would be more motivated and enthusiastic if they had more freedom to choose, and that it was really only necessary that they have a taste of many fields than that any particular content should be covered. I also remember that we then entered into the era of intense professorial competition for course enrollments, and that in the process of this the courses acquired all kind of flashy and enticing titles. Those teaching the natural sciences and fields such as mathematics or statistics had a particularly hard challenge in this competition to enroll more students in their introductory courses.

It seems clear that three aspects need attention in curriculum review if a contemporary Christian humanism is to inform undergraduate education. First, there need to be sequences of courses in which each can build on what was learned in the one before. Secondly, there needs to be collaborative planning and structuring among the disciplines. And thirdly, but by no means least, there must be an adequate philosophical and theological foundation on which a Christian humanism can be developed. We need to discover the curricular structure that can support a contemporary Christian humanistic experience of higher learning such as can move smoothly into professional preparation without a jarring disconnect.

The first thing that becomes clear when we speak of integration of disciplines in higher education is that it means that professors need to give considerable time and energy to collaboration both within and across disciplines. They need to think about their own particular discipline with appreciation for the implications it has for practice and understanding in other fields, and also in the lives and society of their students and graduates. The second thing that becomes clear is that a new approach is required in the way content is organized and presented, and the heart of that new approach is experience personally acquired and experience expanded by crossing bridges of empathy and imagination into other lives, other times, other cultures.

The third thing that becomes clear is that more initiative must be drawn forth from the students than they are accustomed to exercise. Quantitative assessment, so-called objective tests, standardized texts and programs-- complete with Cliff Notes in the bookstore-- have all contributed to a prevailing passivity in students. The fourth thing to note is that to regain the humanistic dimension we professors will need to re-educate ourselves to a different way of relating to one another, a different way of teaching, and a different pattern of priorities in the way we use our time, less time spent preparing lectures, and more time selecting readings and other input from primary sources, and formulating the prompting questions.

It is, of course, true that besides integration higher education calls for focus to move deeper into a chosen field. We all know the difference between the physicist, or the engineer, business man, surgeon or lawyer, who engages thoughtfully in conversations on public policy, enjoys music and novels with his or her friends, and talks as easily with children and janitors as with colleagues, compared with those in these professions whose terms of intellectual engagement are strictly within their own specialization. The focus that goes deeper into a particular field of knowledge and competence needs to be supported by the broader, integrating approach to knowledge and skill acquired by encountering early in undergraduate life a truly humanistic approach to learning and discovery.

This asks for a content that is planned to be both interdisciplinary in its broad base and humanistic in its concentration on a specialized field. It need not be said that this is not customary in education today where it is almost a by-word that there is no such thing as integration of knowledge in the modern world, and especially in the so-called "post-modern" era. To plan content this way requires great creativity, much conversation and exchange of experience and view points, courage in risk-taking, and above all much patience in staying with the project.

## CONTEXT

All that has been said so far has to do with content, but any discernment always has to deal both with content and context, because context is also always constitutive of the moral and practical quality of decisions and actions. From a Christian perspective we know that both in ourselves and in our world we are not simply placed in God's good

creation, but in a rather more muddled situation. In the world we have all the wonders of human collaboration with the Creator, in directing natural forces to serve the human community, in constantly advancing technology and constantly advancing human culture, reaching over a long span of time into the continuing present. But we also have the heritage of violent, greedy and selfish deeds, many of which have had and continue to have long term and wide-ranging consequences that are corrupting, oppressive and deceptive. In ourselves we have a deepening of human capacity and a development and growth of the human spirit living by the breath of the Creator. But in ourselves we also have components of distortion that no human being can by-pass entirely, given that our consciousness and understanding, our goals and values, are shaped by that muddled world long before we are able to make judgments and choices of our own.

Clearly this means that we are pursuing an ideal in education, as in all else in life, in a less than perfect situation. While it is native in the human person to explore and learn with enthusiasm, we may have students who come to us as freshmen with a certain discouragement and even disgust about their prior experience of schooling, seeing it as basically oppressive but a necessary evil. They may hope, justifiably, that it will all be different in college. We may have students glad to escape from high school and come to college to “party.” We may have students who have not developed any attraction for hard work because they cannot distinguish it from drudgery. Or they may have a deeply held conviction that hard work is appropriate to the generation of their parents and professors but not to their own generation. It is our business of course to seduce them into enjoying themselves in the very act of studying and learning, and this sometimes takes a great deal of energy, leaving little impetus for reshaping curricula creatively.

Moreover, it is also true that given the less than ideal situation in which we ourselves have grown up, studied, and competed for a place in our profession, we may be less than enthusiastic about curriculum review and restructuring. It may seem like just one more way for the administration to put burdens on the faculty. It may even be true that some of us have settled into a fairly comfortable rut and do not care to be harried and hassled out of it. Or we may like the sound of our own voices in sonorous lectures, or the ease of moving with a tried and true textbook. We may be bored by the conversation of some of our colleagues in other fields, or timid about a venture that seems daring and may not be successful. Or we may quite honestly not be able to see how to cover the required material to move students on in our field once “they” start tampering with the curriculum.

But there is more to the context of distortion than this. There is more than its effects on the way individuals see and experience changes. There is the challenge presented by existing assumptions and expectations in the larger world of higher education and scholarship, in the way much of our undergraduate educational activity is dictated by professional school and graduate school expectations, and also by the requirements of accreditations in specific fields, not to mention the ways that most of us have been trained in our fields and expect our graduates to be trained in the larger secular universities that set the tone.

Taking an even wider horizon in looking at the context, we are just emerging from a national election that was both scandalous and diagnostic in what it revealed of the shallow character of the national debate on political options. There was little attention to the fact that these options can shape the lives of people here and abroad in ways that could save many lives or destroy them, could keep people in abject poverty or help them out of it, could spread lethal epidemics further or contain and reduce them, and so forth. Many of those who spoke and debated political platforms and options were Catholics or educated in Catholic colleges. There were few voices of considered reason on behalf of the human race and its less powerful members. In two years' time there will be new opportunities, and in four years' time very big stakes again. Religious values have been invoked in a thoughtless and thoroughly reductionist, but evidently consequential, way. In a large and powerful nation this is very dangerous for the future of the world, and the educated ought to see it and respond creatively out of well-formed humanist convictions.

To put it more sharply, the context in which we live calls urgently for an undergraduate education that looks more deeply into the large issues and decisions that shape the lives of millions, including ourselves. Contextually, we need to shape curricula that prompt and educate informed and critical thinking about human affairs and about priorities in human values. And this calls for a new and critical look, and for new and creatively courageous initiatives. We have long understood that a true humanism is built on deeply reflective understanding of the human situation, learned from history, from literature, from the study of philosophy and of the religious experience of the human race in all its aspects and expressions. The contemporary context adds to that what we know of the structures and dynamics of human society and human interaction through psychology and physiology, through economics and statistical studies, through political science and the descriptive study of governmental structures, through sociology and cultural anthropology. But the contemporary context also adds to what we know in exponentially expanding exploration in the physical sciences, and consequent similarly exponential expansion of technical skill in mastering and manipulating natural forces.

It is not surprising that this explosive increase in knowledge has created smaller and sharper specializations, with their own methods of inquiry, their own specialized vocabulary, their own lore of acquired knowledge, and their own rules of proceeding. All this makes the quest for interdisciplinary collaboration and for the integration of learning in the style of Christian humanism an overwhelming challenge, carrying a temptation to depression and lethargy. But there is also something more cheerful to be said about the context viewed from a Christian perspective. And this is that we are not simply adrift in a sea of competing values and goals, or lost in a downward spiral of loss of confidence in over-arching meaning, in the possibility of integration, or in the accessibility of truth, goodness and beauty. We know that we are in a history of revelation and redemption that makes the human project possible no matter what distortions have been introduced.

As a matter of fact, there is a widespread dissatisfaction with the currently prevailing scatter-shot assembling of the first two year of undergraduate education in the American colleges. There is the realization that European universities do it differently.

The universities assume a background that has already provided a broad humanistic foundation before matriculation. Gymnasium, lycee, or sixth form college is assumed to have provided the transition for moving into a specialization that can still be humanistic in its approach without covering many distinct disciplines. One of the reasons for this is traditionally that there is less lecturing and more time for students to read and to shape their use of time than there is in the American college. It is this idea especially that has been taken up by the experimental colleges based on the “great books” seminar pattern. It is also this idea that makes possible a tradition to a more integrated curriculum, because the demands made on the faculty for inter-disciplinary collaboration are off-set by the time freed from lecturing and from the stress of days that are constantly chopped up by so many deadlines. There really are some possibilities of either a modest reshaping of curriculum or even a quite drastic one, if the support of the faculty can be obtained.

### SOME POSSIBLE CURRICULA

The pamphlet from the Jesuit Conference identifies five characteristics that should particularly inform Jesuit higher education. You will recall that these are the following:

- Dedication to Human Dignity from a Catholic/Jesuit Faith Perspective
- Reverence for and Ongoing Reflection on Human Experience
- Creative Companionship among Colleagues
- Focused Care for Students (*cura personalis*)
- Well-Educated Justice and Solidarity

Common to all of these characteristics is concern with what is truly human, what is good, and what is truly practical – a true Christian humanism.

Looking at the above reflections on content and context in the light of these characteristics, one can arrive at a few non-negotiables and many desirables, among the latter some more readily practicable than others. I will set out my non-negotiables and you may argue with them.

In the first place, to achieve a Christian humanism in college education, there really must be resources that make Christian faith and life intellectually, experientially, and affectively accessible both to faculty and to students. It need not be said that we are in a phase of the history of the Church in which not only college students, but often faculty, and sometimes administrators of our institutions come to the enterprise with very little knowledge of, or actual acquaintance with, the wisdom tradition that is Catholicism. This is a challenge that the alternative schools have acknowledged and responded to, though not necessarily in the way that would be appropriate in a Jesuit college.

In the Ignatian tradition the teaching of the Church can certainly be taught, but faith is not something that can be taught or imposed from outside. It is coaxed forth from deeper reflection on experience in many dimensions, because it arises out of the inner freedom of the person, and indeed is the liberation or becoming fully free of the potential inner freedom of the person. This means that requiring professions of faith, or assent to

beliefs, or religious performances never really achieves its intended purpose. Yet the lived and deeply reflected reality of the faith must be expressed and experienced on the campus in order that it may be component of the experience on which students are drawn to reflect. We have perhaps failed in recent decades in two ways. In the first place we have relied too much on the presence of Jesuits and campus ministry programs to supply what ought to be the culture of the whole. In the second place we have been too reticent in passing on the intellectual heritage of Catholicism beginning with its theological and philosophical traditions. I find the presence of Catholic philosophical and theological components in the curriculum non-negotiable.

Let me say quickly, that I am not unaware that we have large numbers of students and faculty on our campuses who are not Catholic, and many who are not Christian but of other traditions. For the same reason that I find the presence of theological and philosophical components non-negotiable in the curriculum, namely the reasons provided by all five of the Jesuit Conference's five characteristics, I find that the spiritual journey to a deeper and better informed faith applies equally to those of other traditions within their own traditions. This must be reckoned with and provided for. There is also a large range of traditional reflection on ultimate meaning, basic values, practices of religion and spirituality, that offers common ground for conversation and mutual enlightenment among those of differing faiths.

My second non-negotiable is that there be an established list (which could be reviewed and perhaps partly changed from time to time) of classic texts and broad facts of history and geography that are read by all students, so that they have a common background of references and memories which can become a supporting foundation for conversation. Such texts should come of course not only from literature, but from biography, the social sciences, philosophy and religious thought. I leave it to like-minded scientists in the physical sciences to consider in what ways a common basis could be provided for all students in an understanding of human knowledge of our universe.

Beyond these non-negotiables, my desirables in new and creative curricula are as follows. Students learn best when seldom lectured at, but given time and responsibility to read and discover for themselves, supplied with prompting questions, drawn into conversation in small groups about their reading, and required from time to time to put their thoughts into coherent written prose, which they read to one another and one or more of their professors for discussion. One of my desirables, therefore, is a tutorial system in which there is a great deal of discussion of what has been read.

Also desirable is that such tutorial groups involve professors from various disciplines, and that the discussion be steered into questions and reflections that cross disciplinary boundaries. This has been done in a number of our Catholic colleges, but generally only for an elite group of specially selected gifted and particularly studious students. At Georgetown University, for instance, some first year students are offered the option of an integrated seminar in which professors in history, theology, literature and philosophy structure the readings and discussions that will in the course of the year take the place of four separate one year courses in the four disciplines that are normally part of

the requirements for the freshman year. A number of the smaller schools have such a seminar arrangement for all students in one integrating “base” course in the freshman year, and again for all students in one “capstone” course in the senior year. These courses cut across disciplines with discussion of major human issues, and are taught or rather directed, by faculty from all disciplines. The Champion Colleges (which are two-year colleges) do a similar seminar-style program for all students for their entire first two year college experience, which has wonderful depth and continuity, but has the disadvantage that students do not meet the natural sciences until they transfer in their junior year.

In all the cases mentioned so far there is an innovative initiative inserted in an otherwise quite conventional curriculum. That is, of course, one option, and the more cautious one. A more radical transformation would be one that integrates all, or almost all, fields of instruction into the inter-disciplinary seminar style. A cautious experimental approach to that would be to begin with two closely related disciplines at a time in courses that clearly lend themselves to such a project, extending this gradually.

One of the more interesting options that I have observed in my visits to campuses of our Association (the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities) is the one in place at the College of Saint Joseph in Rensselaer, IN, run by the Precious Blood Fathers. For some thirty years the liberal core component of this curriculum has not been concentrated into the first two years of undergraduate studies, but has been the integrating component through all four years. Taking various periods of human history, one at a time, the integrating seminar approaches the human experience of that time in terms of social, political and economic organization, conditions of civic participation of the people in governance and structures of society, the literature and religious legacy of the time, the art and music, the technology of building, food production, transport, etc. Professors from various fields collaborate in this, and learn in the process all sorts of things they did not know before preparing the course, and which turn out to be fascinating. The original architect of the program, Professor John Nichols, will be at ACCU’s Annual meeting this winter, in Washington, DC, January 29- 31, and will be describing and demonstrating the program.

A final comment about curriculum review and reshaping is that it always has aspects unique to the institution, the time, the resources, and the players. In the end the latter have to make the decisions. I wish you well with your curriculum review and restructuring.