

Putting Cultural Trends in Context: Teaching Values in Universities

Presented at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the Society for Values in Higher Education, Elmhurst College (IL), by Mary Beth Yount, Duquesne University

Given the task of preparing students for the workforce, universities may be tempted to concentrate on communicating “practical knowledge”—skills that will help students find an occupation. But, who, then, will teach them to be good citizens, committed community members, and stewards of the environment? Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to avoid the exaltation of the practical to the exclusion of a higher knowledge. As Cardinal John Henry Newman said, in universities the ideal is that “A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom.” Universities must empower students to make solid choices for the common good. Bernard Lonergan outlines the components of this “human good,” and *Ex corde Ecclesiae* (“From the Heart of the Church,” Pope John Paul II’s 1990 apostolic constitution on Catholic universities) provides practical strategies for balancing cultural expectations on the one hand and the teaching of values in institutions of higher learning on the other.

Through these insights university administrators and faculty members will be able to develop some strategies for setting up the university environment in such a way that institutions of higher education can form the moral sense of young adults, allowing them to learn how to concentrate on discerning what is truly meaningful—i.e., on finding those things which are of enduring importance and worthy of the investment of a lifetime.

* * *

Our postmodern milieu is overflowing with messages about what will lead to a well-lived life, and this is increasingly true as communication technology advances. Institutions of higher education are in a unique position to teach students to discern the common good and act on it. Instead of simply teaching them what they should do in select situations, educators should guide students in the development of the capacity for moral judgment. This will enable the learners to take steps to resolve the numerous dilemmas they will face in the future.

The theorists that we will be looking at in this paper believe that teaching values is a large part of a university's job. John Henry Cardinal Newman believes that teaching values and other higher knowledge (including theology) is what makes a university a university—it is the defining trait that distinguishes it from other teaching institutions.

John Henry Cardinal Newman on Values and Universities

John Henry Cardinal Newman lived from 1801-1890. He was a convert to Roman Catholicism from Anglicanism (1845) and, prior to that, he played an important role in the Oxford Movement, attempting to bring Anglicanism back to its Catholic roots. He wrote a number of works throughout his life, including *Via Media*, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, *Grammar of Assent*, and the one we draw from in this paper: *The Idea of a University*.

For John Henry Cardinal Newman, a university is certainly much more than teaching students a skill or a profession. In fact, he distinguishes between speaking of a

university as a place of education and calling it a place of instruction: “We are instructed, for instance, in manual exercises, in the fine and useful arts, in trades, and in ways of business....But education is a higher word; it implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of a character; it is something individual and permanent, and is commonly spoken of in connexion with religion and virtue.” The knowledge that is communicated through education is “a state or condition of mind,” the cultivation of which is “worth seeking for its own sake.”¹ Newman also describes this type of knowledge as (and notice the similarities to the traditional descriptions of virtue!): an “acquired illumination...a habit.”²

In fact, Newman draws from the popular usage of the term “university” that “a University should teach universal knowledge.” He even goes so far as to say that “universality is considered by writers on the subject to be the very characteristic of a University, as contrasted with other seats of learning” (e.g., the academy)³

The advantage of a university education, to Newman, is “the culture of the intellect.”⁴ The goal of this education is not necessarily polish and manners, but “the force, the steadiness, the comprehensiveness and the versatility of intellect, the command over our own powers, the instinctive just estimate of things as they pass before us, which sometimes indeed is a natural gift, but commonly is not gained without much effort and the exercise of years.”⁵

¹ Newman, John Henry. *The Idea of a University*. 1852. 3rd ed. (1873). Ed. Martin J. Svaglic. Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1982, 86.

² *Ibid.*, 85.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xlii.

⁵ *Ibid.*

A cultivated intellect is a good in itself, one that makes us more productive and enriches the practice of a profession, bringing “power and a grace to every work and occupation.” Furthermore, this cultivation of mind, and the exercise of it, is a fulfillment of a duty that we have to our societies (nations, neighborhoods, relatives, and acquaintances).⁶ A university education “aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life.”⁷

For these transformations to occur, teaching this “higher” education must be an integral part of a university’s culture. The beliefs of college and university faculty members strongly influence (and often set) institutional priorities. Faculty certainly have a responsibility to help institute their employing university’s mission and priorities. What are faculty and student perceptions of whether or not, and how often, values are addressed in the college classroom?

Faculty and Student Perceptions of Values in the Classroom

What faculty focus on will in part be determined by their perceptions of the employing institution’s priorities. In the 2001 HERI (Higher Education Research Institute) Faculty Survey, full-time faculty members were asked to rate the priority level their institution puts on helping undergraduate students examine and understand their

⁶ Ibid., 126.

⁷ Ibid., 135.

personal values. Three-quarters of faculty at religiously affiliated institutions felt that their establishment placed high priority on this goal. Similarly, roughly two-thirds of faculty indicated high institutional priority at private colleges/universities and at historically black colleges and universities. In contrast, less than half of two-year college and public college faculty and just one-third of public university faculty indicated the same.

In a student survey conducted by the same group in 2004, the College Students' Beliefs and Values (CSBV) Survey, only 8 percent of students said their professors "frequently" provide opportunities to discuss the purpose and meaning of life. Conversely, fifty six percent of students reported that their professors never provide opportunities to discuss the purpose and meaning of life.⁸

These numbers are rather discouraging. But when we compare the HERI data for 2004 and 2008, we can see distinct increases in faculty emphasis on the teaching of values to students.⁹ The research summary of the most recent survey compares the 2004 and 2008 survey results. It concludes:

There were increases in faculty support of students' personal and psychosocial development as important goals for undergraduate education, including efforts to 'help students develop personal values' (66.1 percent, an increase of 15.3 percentage points over 2004–05), 'enhance students' self-understanding' (71.8 percent, a 13.4 percentage-point increase),

⁸ Lindholm, Jennifer A. "The Role of Faculty in Students' Spiritual Development," Keynote Address Presented at the 14th Annual Institute on College Student Values, February 7, 2004, <<http://www.collegevalues.org/proceedings.cfm?ID=64>>. Accessed March 3, 2009.

⁹ Higher Education Research Institute. *The American College Teacher: National Norms for 2008 For the HERI Faculty Survey*. Qtd from the research briefs:

‘develop moral character’ (70.2 percent, a 13.1 percentage-point increase) and ‘provide for students’ emotional development’ (48.1 percent, a 12.9 percentage-point increase).

Additionally, 36.4 percent of faculty respondents in the 2004 survey classified the task of “Instill[ing] in students a commitment to community service” as “Very Important” or “Essential”—but by 2007 this had increased to 55.5 percent.¹⁰

Whether or not this changing emphasis on the importance of teaching values will be adequately reflected in classroom practices remains to be seen. Now that the first step of increased acknowledgment of the need for teaching values has been taken, the task of supporting faculty in implementing this change remains. In order for this to happen, faculty members themselves need to have some guidelines for determining values. In this paper I am avoiding religious bases for values—not because I do not find them valuable (on the contrary!), but because religious foundations often cannot be passed on to students in public universities. Instead, I am proposing a framework for morality that is based on a theory of the common good that can be useful to faculty members in all of the different settings of higher education.

The Foundation: Lonergan’s “Human Good”

<<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/pr-display.php?prQry=40>> &
<<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/PDFs/pubs/briefs/brief-pr030508-08faculty.pdf>>.

¹⁰ Ibid. N.B.: The personal goals of faculty in the 2008 HERI survey also demonstrated faculty recognition of the importance of values in the lives of said faculty members. Most regard “as ‘very important’ or ‘essential’ developing a meaningful philosophy of life (72.5 percent), raising a family (69.2 percent), helping others who are in difficulty (65.2 percent) and integrating spirituality into their lives (47.5 percent).”

Bernard Lonergan, SJ, lived from 1904-1984. He was a Jesuit priest and a Thomist philosopher/theologian. He was also an economist, and his writings continue to influence all three fields. He taught at Loyola College in Montreal (now Concordia University), Regis College (now part of the University of Toronto), the Pontifical Gregorian University, and Boston College. Many of these (and other) universities have Lonergan institutes that are dedicated to exploring and passing on his thought. He is the author of *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* and *Method in Theology*. In addition to these larger works, the University of Toronto Press has undertaken a projected 25-volume collection of his other works (including letters, papers, and lectures).

Bernard Lonergan's theory of the human good, which can be achieved by "cooperative choices made by people," is a dynamic, emerging good; it is the correlative of living a good life. This notion of good is more than an aggregate of individual goods. Instead, the human good according to Lonergan comes from specific goods of order (patterns of cooperation amongst persons) and goods of value (which form the basis for the choice of what goods of order should be implemented).

Lonergan explains how we discern the human good: as human knowing rises through three levels, so does our perception of the good. Knowing begins with an experiential component, the data of sense and consciousness; knowing then goes through an intellectual component, insights and perception of unities, definitions, etc; and finally it involves a reflective component, "constituted by the weighing of evidence and the rational utterance of judgment."¹¹

¹¹ Lonergan, Bernard. *The Role of a Catholic University in the Modern World*, original typescript scan preserved and accessible in the Lonergan Archives <<http://www.bernardlonergan.com/index.php>> (© Robert M. Doran, 2009), archive #:

At the first level, the data of sense and consciousness, we perceive the good spontaneously as an object of desire. Then, at the second level, where we make definitions and perceive patterns, we “grasp and formulate technological devices, economic arrangements, political structures,” etc. These higher syntheses of the good “harmonize and maximize the satisfactions of individual desires.” Intellectually, then, the good is that of order, human order. At the third level, that of reflection, practical deliberation about possible courses of action culminate in judgments of value and in choices. The result is, as Lonergan says, “judgments of value set the good of order above private advantage, subordinate technology to economics, refer economics to social welfare, and generally, mete out to every finite good both appreciation and criticism.”¹²

Thus, in Lonergan’s thought, level one, spontaneous desires, is less important than level two, the good of order. How can we pass this recognition on to our students? Lonergan tells us that one way is to avoid the tendency to “develop ‘realist’ views in which theory is adjusted to practice and practice means whatever happens to be done.”¹³ In this type of a setting, innovation and reflection will not occur. Conversely, universities should want to foster innovation and reflection by teaching students how to think critically, apply historical events to present situations, and so on.

People are necessarily communal, and they communicate in the pursuit of the good. Consequently, three levels of community flow from the three components of knowing and of the good.

At the first level, corresponding to experience and desire, there is “inter-

24520DTE050 / A2452 (entitled “Role of Catholic University Typescript” in the archive), 278.

¹² Ibid., 279.

¹³ Ibid., 280.

subjective” community, a spontaneous “feeling of belonging together” which includes the family, the clan, the tribe, and the nation. Only at the second level, corresponding to intellectual insights and the good of order, does civil community appear; it is “a complex product embracing and harmonizing material techniques, economic arrangements, and political structures.” At the third level is “Cosmopolis,” a cultural community that transcends the borders of states and the ages of history. It is, in Lonergan’s words, “the field of communication and the influence of artists, scientists, and philosophers. It is the bar of enlightened public opinion to which naked power can be driven to submit. It is the tribunal of history that may expose successful charlatans and may restore to honor the prophets stoned by their contemporaries.”¹⁴

There can be civil and cultural development and decline, and either one of these trends can be perpetuated by assumptions, philosophies, habits, hopes, fears, etc. Development is proportional to the degree to which we are able to “comprehend what [we have] not understood, to criticize what [we have] valued blindly, to do what [we have] neglected to do”—these abilities can transform what might be a crisis into simply a reason to take appropriate action.¹⁵ Additionally, they can help us as individuals and as a collective to move forward. Clearly we will want to foster these strengths in our students.

A university helps cultures and communities to progress. As Lonergan says, “A university is a reproductive organ of cultural community. Its constitutive endowment lies not in buildings or equipment, civil status or revenues, but in the intellectual life of its professors. Its central function is the communication of intellectual development.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., 279.

¹⁵ Ibid., 280.

¹⁶ Ibid., 280.

In the early 1970s, Lonergan pointed to the Catholic university (and to theology within it) as a “mediatrix” between the cultural tradition received and the cultural tradition to evolve.¹⁷ In his view culture is the meaning underlying a way of life (which is necessarily social), and this meaning is embedded in several aspects of the life of the people: “intellectual and moral habits”; reflective forms, artistic and other; and the “existential history” and memories of the members.¹⁸

Since human cultures are constantly evolving and are made by the members, they can be changed, and universities play a central role in the transmission and development of a culture. Universities, after all, are not only important because of the teachings they pass on, but can strongly impact a culture’s elaboration of meanings and discernment of values.

Keeping in mind that university education for a student is a dynamic process of receiving from others (the tradition) and appropriating and developing wisdom oneself (which will be passed on in turn), the challenge to us becomes: “How can we, as university administrators and faculty members, foster the reception and development of wisdom (and, specific to the topic of this paper, the reception and development of values)?” How can we go beyond a functional view of universities as developing “professions” to viewing university education as a part of human transformation (and thus also engaging in cultural transformation)?

The Practical: Achieving Cultural and Human Transformation

¹⁷ Lonergan, Bernard. *Method in Theology*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1972, (opening words).

¹⁸ Lonergan, Bernard. *Topics in Education*. Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 10. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993, 262 (n. 13).

Ex corde Ecclesiae, John Paul II's "Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities," provides us with both a theoretical framework and some practical strategies to accomplish this horizon shift. In this document the pope was specifically addressing Catholic universities, but many of his insights can be applied generally to teaching values in all universities. A university, according to *Ex corde*, is: "an academic community which, in a rigorous and critical fashion, assists in the protection and advancement of human dignity and of a cultural heritage through research, teaching and various services offered to the local, national and international communities."¹⁹

John Paul II tells us that students in universities should be challenged to "continue the search for truth and for meaning throughout their lives, since 'the human spirit must be cultivated in such a way that there results a growth in its ability to wonder, to understand, to contemplate, to make personal judgments, and to develop a religious, moral, and social sense.'"²⁰

Universities must all impartially search for, and impart, the truth—in this context, according to *Ex corde*, "the relationship between faith and reason is brought to light and meaning."²¹ In these dynamics of truth, Pope John Paul II tells us, "What is at stake is the *very meaning of scientific and technological research, of social life and of culture*, but,

¹⁹ Pope John Paul II, August 15, 1990
<http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae_en.html>, (§12). (The document cites *The Magna Carta of the European Universities*, Bologna, Italy, 18 September 1988, "Fundamental Principles" for this definition).

²⁰ Ibid., §23, quoting Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* §59.

²¹ Ibid., §5.

on an even more profound level, what is at stake is *the very meaning of the human person.*”²²

These words undoubtedly resound within many of us who have been teaching for several years. For me they call to mind the many students who are at a critical point during their college years, exploring questions such as: “Who am I? What do I hope to accomplish? Why am I here? What should I concentrate my energies on in life?” The answers to these questions vary to some extent from person to person; but if we set up the university environment in a way that it supports the exploration of answers to these questions, we will enable students to develop values and discern their own particular gifts and paths to living out these values.

I think that we can agree that most of the above ideals are goals, or should be goals, of most universities. We all think it is important to help our culture endure through passing on our rich history; we also want to help improve the culture through helping raise empowered, critical, moral, and service-oriented citizens; and we all want to extend our students’ engagement beyond dialogue within our culture to relations with the larger world.

These goals, if kept in mind, can help us teach students how to pursue what is important in life. Once we know our objectives, we can ensure that we plan ways to reach them. Additionally, *Ex corde Ecclesiae* gives us some concrete ways to foster this environment of a search for truth and the teaching of values. *University teachers*, it says, should “seek to improve their competence and endeavour to set the content, objectives, methods, and results of research in an individual discipline within the framework of a

²² Ibid., §5.

coherent world vision.”²³ Directors and administrators are to “promote the constant growth of the University and its community through a *leadership* of service.”²⁴ Likewise, non-academic staff members in a university play a critical role in fostering a university’s identity.

Lonergan made it clear that universities are also to dialogue with culture and help form it. *Ex corde Ecclesiae* says this as well, but emphasizes that universities can help ensure that the culture is growing in the right direction and that the members are using their growth wisely: “Scientific and technological discoveries create an enormous economic and industrial growth, but they also inescapably require the correspondingly necessary *search for meaning* in order to guarantee that the new discoveries be used for the authentic good of individuals and of human society as a whole.”²⁵

Pope John Paul II can also help us to flesh out Lonergan’s notion of the university as mediatrix between tradition and contemporary cultural trends. He tells us that a university “is immersed in human society” and so is called to “become an ever more effective instrument of cultural progress for individuals as well as for society.” One way to do this is to study “*serious contemporary problems* in areas such as the dignity of human life, the promotion of justice for all, the quality of personal and family life, the protection of nature, the search for peace and political stability, a more just sharing in the world’s resources, and a new economic and political order that will better serve the human community at a national and international level.”²⁶ Universities are also to

²³ *Ibid.*, §22.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, §24, emphasis added.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, §7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, §32.

provide the service of “*proclaiming the meaning of truth*, that fundamental value without which freedom, justice and human dignity are extinguished.”²⁷

* * *

In conclusion, we have seen that college and university faculties have increasingly seen the need to teach values to students. The sources we have considered, Newman, Lonergan, and John Paul II in *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, all pointed to the need for values in university settings, and the latter two posited suggestions for how to accomplish this teaching. They challenge university administrators, faculty, and staff to go beyond the practical/occupational realms of universities and to bring about the deeper mission of higher education: to perpetuate and form cultures according to values that are based on the human good. Lonergan’s thought and the ideals outlined in *Ex corde Ecclesiae* help us both to understand more clearly, and accomplish, the role of a university in the teaching of values in education.

²⁷ Ibid., §4.

Works Cited

Higher Education Research Institute. *The American College Teacher: National Norms for 2008 For the HERI Faculty Survey*. Qtd from the research briefs:

<<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/pr-display.php?prQry=40>> &
<<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/PDFs/pubs/briefs/brief-pr030508-08faculty.pdf>>.

Lindholm, Jennifer A. "The Role of Faculty in Students' Spiritual Development,"
Keynote Address Presented at the 14th Annual Institute on College Student
Values, February 7, 2004,
<<http://www.collegevalues.org/proceedings.cfm?ID=64>>. Accessed March 3,
2009.

Lonergan, Bernard. *The Role of a Catholic University in the Modern World*, original
typescript scan preserved and accessible in the Lonergan Archives
<<http://www.bernardlonergan.com/index.php>> (© Robert M. Doran, 2009),
archive #: 24520DTE050 / A2452 (entitled "Role of Catholic University
Typescript" in the archive), 278.

_____, Bernard. *Topics in Education*. Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 10.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993, 262 (n. 13).

_____. Bernard. *Method in Theology*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1972, (opening
words).

Newman, John Henry. *The Idea of a University*. 1852. 3rd ed. (1873). Ed. Martin J.
Svaglic. Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1982, 86.

Pope John Paul II, *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, "Apostolic Constitution on Catholic
Universities," August 15, 1990.
<http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae_en.html>