

Faculty as Moral Gardeners: Formation Rooted in the Catholic Social Tradition

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In his introduction, Bernard Prusak has crafted a clear, yet challenging, synopsis of the recent development of moral education, and raised the question of whether moral formation can occur in the typically brief, but intensive, college educational experience. It's my intent to argue here that (1) moral formation can occur through the modeling of ethical behavior by faculty and (2) the Catholic Social Tradition offers a framework for modeling ethical behavior and moral decisions, but (3) the fruits of seeds planted during the college years may not be harvested for years to come. It is the hopefulness of teaching in the context of Catholic higher education, however, that enables faculty both to offer our students an invitation to a life of moral deliberation and to accept delayed gratification in witnessing the fruits of our labors.

Much has been written about the rightful place of moral formation in higher education. Admittedly, I am in the camp that believes moral formation *can* occur in a college environment and, even more so, that colleges and universities have an obligation to assist students with their ethical development. If we do not, educators in colleges and universities create negative externalities by sending students into the worlds of business, government, and other professions without adequate moral preparation, resulting in poor moral decisions that have far-reaching consequences and impose high costs on the rest of society. Though the model presented below is primarily focused on the undergraduate experience, it should so permeate the institution to impact all areas.

Taking for granted that we in higher education have an obligation to teach students how to think ethically and make sound moral judgments, what then is the most effective way to help students learn this skill? With a few exceptions, much of the pedagogy employed in higher education involves modeling preferred behavior. Whether it be a model essay that demonstrates the quality of work the instructor expects, the articulation of the correct pronunciation of Spanish words, or a mathematical problem solved on the board in the most effective way, faculty often demonstrate by

their own example what they want students to achieve. Accordingly, it seems appropriate and quite familiar to adopt a “pedagogy of example” in the realm of moral formation, though a question remains about how such a pedagogy should be implemented.

In a recent lecture at King’s College, the philosopher Heather Reid made the common observation that “ethics must be learned in practice.” She further contended, however, that students learn to treat others ethically by being treated ethically themselves.¹ Clearly, the latter point gives some guidance to faculty on how to approach the moral development of students. If the faculty treat all students fairly, applying the same grading standards to all, making the same accommodations for students in need, or adhering to (or relaxing) due dates and assignment requirements for *all* students, then they are demonstrating a fundamental moral principle of fairness that students generally recognize, expect, and tend to embrace. That said, there are more challenging aspects of moral formation that students may be reluctant to embrace, such as moral courage, and here too faculty have a role to play in helping students through example.

Take, for instance, faculty who have the courage to challenge mainstream or majority thinking on social issues. While there is general consensus in the academy, evident in faculty handbooks,² that a faculty member should not use the classroom as a platform for political or religious proselytizing, it is incumbent upon faculty concerned about student moral formation to raise questions of social and economic justice in the classroom. In his 1982 commencement address at Santa Clara University, Salvadoran Jesuit Ignacio Ellacuría made a similar claim when he spoke to the fundamental role of the university in society:

There are two aspects to every university. The first and most evident is that it deals with culture, with knowledge, the use of the intellect. The second, and not so evident, is that it must be concerned with the social reality—precisely because a university is inescapably a social force: it must transform and enlighten the society in which it lives. But how does it do that? How does a university transform the social reality of which it is so much a part?³

The transformation of society begins with moral courage. Given that most students already have exposure to mainstream thinking on issues of social and economic justice, the faculty member who offers students an alternative view, particularly on a sensitive topic, demonstrates a certain level

of moral courage to students. The lesson is even more significant when the faculty member challenges the mainstream view in more public contexts, perhaps through a talk to the college community, an article in the campus or community newspaper, or even by participating in a public demonstration or protest on behalf of the poor and vulnerable.

Surely there is an opportunity cost to faculty's not raising justice issues in the curriculum of a Catholic college. Not only would most students remain ignorant of social realities (as Ellacuría implicitly cautioned), but they also would likely conclude that the sole concerns of an educated person should be abstract ideas or self-reflection. Those students who did become aware of economic inequalities and racial injustices outside the academic environment would likely tend towards cynicism and pessimism in the absence of faculty attention to the issues. "How can we solve society's problems when the most educated among us don't even acknowledge their importance?" they might wonder.

With the nature of the classroom itself changing from a place where information is presented to a setting for analyzing, critiquing, and even rejecting information, it seems even more appropriate to challenge students to delve into economic and social justice issues in their courses. By not addressing social realities, faculty short-change students and are derelict in their responsibility to help students grow in all facets of their lives, particularly their moral development.

Concretely, a faculty member can aid student moral formation by assigning a learning activity that brings students into direct contact with ethical issues. This can be through a research project or, often more effectively, through a service-learning requirement. In guiding students through the ethical issue, a faculty member helps students to think beyond themselves and to develop some empathy for those directly impacted by social or economic injustice, particularly when students are able to ascribe a name and face to the injustice.

A week of working with students at André House of Hospitality in Phoenix, Arizona reinforced my conviction that educating the whole person means nurturing the seeds planted in course readings through immersion experiences of encounter, especially encounters with those whom society has pushed to the sidelines. I have had few deeper experiences of what it means to be human than teaming with students to engage with hundreds of people who are experiencing homelessness, each with her or his own story. Seeing students open their hearts and their hands to help those with mental illness, addiction, trauma, and most often no social network other than the

community they have formed on the streets and in shelters, offered me a glimpse into what is possible for students' moral and spiritual formation.

Though professional staff and administrators of community outreach and service-learning offices possess the expertise to develop and oversee the logistics of these encounters, faculty participation models for students both lived faith and a commitment to reasoned scholarly efforts that can make a difference in people's lives. Meeting those without a home can tug at students' hearts, but we can show students that the mind must also play a role in in order to understand why people experience homelessness and the types of policies or programs that can assist them and prevent homelessness to begin with.

Beyond individual commitments to modeling engagement in ethical issues, faculty can contribute to an institutional culture in which they, along with staff, alumni, and even upper-class students, mentor undergraduates on issues of ethics and social responsibility. Such mentoring typically takes place outside the classroom setting, but under the aegis of the college. Vibrant residential programs provide fertile ground for this type of mentoring, be it through an informal discussion with a faculty member in the residence hall, or an ongoing commitment by a group of residents to a local or far away person or community in need. Alumni, whom many institutions now recruit for career mentoring, can also be engaged in the moral development of current undergraduates, as alumni have the benefit of experience in a professional setting and can share concrete examples of right and wrong decision-making at work and among stakeholders.

Student leaders, typically juniors and seniors, bring their own gifts to the moral formation of younger students, having already encountered some of the ethical pests facing new students in the garden of character-building. Those students who lead service or justice-related organizations and those who head alternative-break programs seem particularly disposed to moving newer students beyond discussion of personal moral decisions (plagiarism is wrong; don't steal from your roommate) towards more challenging social questions (Should U.S.-based firms pay workers in southeast Asia less than a dollar a day? Should our college buy electricity from a fossil-fuel-burning electric generation plant?). With faculty and staff guidance, student leaders may become effective agents of moral formation. For, when students are engaged in ethical practice, they not only are learning about ethics; one could add, they also are teaching other students about ethics.

While some students, alumni, staff, and faculty may have an inclination to contribute to the moral formation of undergraduates, they may be unable to identify an appropriate framework

within which to discuss both individual and broader social moral questions. The Catholic Social Tradition (CST) provides such a model, particularly though not exclusively for faculty, staff, alumni, and students at Catholic colleges and universities. One aspect of CST that makes it attractive to those seeking a structure for discussion of moral issues is that it is rooted in a tradition that has spoken out on injustices for over two millennia. The theologian Obery Hendricks points out in the introduction to his book *The Politics of Jesus* that radical social change that lifts up those at the lowest rungs of society is an essential component of Jesus' message and that commands to be attentive to the needs of the poor are found throughout the Bible.⁴ Notwithstanding the Church's own history of injustices, modern CST has articulated clear positions on the preferential option for the poor, as well as the rights of workers and, most recently with Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the human obligation to protect the natural environment and those most negatively impacted by climate change.

Another reason CST provides a valuable framework for moral formation is that its key principles resonate with so many people, regardless of religious identity, in the context of contemporary moral challenges. For example, the Sustainable Development Goals approved by the United Nations General Assembly on September 25, 2015 identify poverty as a diminution of human dignity.⁵ In the national context, Chicago-based Interfaith Worker Justice speaks with a similar vocabulary to what one finds in CST, invoking solidarity when organizing actions to end wage theft and other abusive labor practices around the United States.⁶ In brief, CST offers students a lens for examining social conditions, a vocabulary for articulating what they see, a structure for judging the morality of observed conditions, and a moral imperative to act to dismantle injustices and build up a more just world.

On a recent visit to northeastern Pennsylvania, Martha Hennessy, granddaughter of Servant of God and Catholic Worker co-founder Dorothy Day, shared some related thoughts on how faculty and staff can help students integrate Catholic Worker principles. According to Hennessy, we can engage students in Catholic Worker principles (and, by extension, CST principles) without living in a Catholic Worker house so long as we demonstrate how we integrate faith and reason in our own lives.⁷ The merging of reason and faith calls faculty to be present at lectures, as well as at liturgies, and to ask the "tough" questions at campus events, both small discussions and large gatherings, especially when students are present. Faculty can teach students habits of hospitality by demonstrating them ourselves—by making our tone and language respectful, inclusive, and

indicative of a willingness to engage in constructive debate. Finally, we can show students the union of contemplation and action by inviting them to join us in both—in and outside of the classroom, perhaps through activities offered by campus ministry.

Though faculty often require patience to see it happen, they can witness tremendous growth in students through immersion experiences, particularly when students are adequately prepared and given sufficient opportunities for reflection. Engagement with CST can be an integral part of this process. Ideally, students would prepare for their experience with some acquisition of the vocabulary of CST—solidarity, preferential option for the poor, dignity of the human person, the right to work—then be reminded of it while on site, and finally be asked to use it during reflection at the end of the day, or back on campus.

While the principles of CST and their application to contemporary social and economic issues are by no means foreign to my own courses in economics, I lack the assurance that their presence has resulted in the type of moral formation I hope for my students. Yet, like other faculty members who consciously integrate CST into their courses, I don't despair, because we recognize that the fruits of these labors are yet to be seen at the end of four years. We do hope, however, that blossoms start to form in that time frame. At a minimum, we can hope a critical mass of students has acquired some fluency in the language of CST. We trust that exposure to the principles of CST in their college years will yield ripened fruits that are visible in mature alumni buffeted by the sometimes difficult realities of family and work life.

On this last point, it has become common practice at most American colleges and universities to engage alumni in more than sporting events, social occasions, and fundraising. Many institutions encourage alumni to organize or participate in group service activities, request that they speak to classes and conferences about careers and technical topics, or ask them to serve as professional mentors to current students, either online or in person. These are excellent occasions to invite alumni to share how the seeds of their moral formation, planted during their college experience, have germinated in the meantime. Alumni generally like to interact with students about their career paths. Why not ask them to share as well their moral struggles and growth? In the spirit of assessment, also ask them what was missing from their college experience. For what moral circumstance were they not prepared? If they are unable to participate in person and on campus, alumni could connect with students through social media, a blog, or a webpage developed for this specific purpose.

One particularly valuable alumni subset for a moral formation project consists of those who have done a year or two of service, such as in the Peace Corps, Americorps, Jesuit Volunteer Corps, Mercy Volunteer Corps, or similar organizations. Catholic colleges and universities might invite these graduates back to campus and ask them to reflect on CST, where they saw the principles applied, where they saw them trampled upon, and how those experiences impacted their own moral formation. It is difficult to articulate the intense pride and sense of accomplishment experienced by a faculty member who hears her former student speak of solidarity, justice, and the dignity of each person with facility and conviction after eighteen months of serving those who are experiencing homelessness. A strictly academic education could never effect transformation and maturation of this kind. Educational institutions benefit when morally mature alumni return, both to inspire others, not least faculty, and to serve as models of what moral formation rooted in the Catholic Social tradition can yield.

Notes

1. Reid 2015.
2. See, for example, the King's College Full-Time Faculty Handbook 2015, 47.
3. Ellacuría 1982.
4. Hendricks 2007, 5–6 and 199.
5. United Nations 2015.
6. Valente 2015.
7. Hennessy 2015.

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