

“Go Forth to Teach All Nations: A Catholic Imperative”

Remarks for the Faculty of Bishop O’Connell High School, Arlington, VA

January 19, 2011

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Catholic schools face in an increasingly diverse community of learners. Catholic social justice teachings provide an organizing framework for developing multicultural perspectives in the high school curriculum and co-curricular programming.



We live in a moment of tremendous social and cultural challenge. We can resist these times, rail against the tide, seek revenge on those whose ideas are different from our own. That’s how so much of the rest of the world seems to be handling this moment. Or, we can be open to the grace of God’s plan for the citizens of the earth, in all of its vexing complexity and puzzling contrariness at times.

Over the course of the last three decades at Trinity, we have experienced the kind of demographic and social transformation that is truly a microcosm of the changes taking place in the larger society. Increased diversity is at the heart of this change, and I can tell you from personal experience that managing diversity is quite challenging.

A faculty experiencing great change in the student body also experiences tremendous stress. I found that the first task was to recognize and embrace change, greet diversity as an exciting new dimension of our lives, and accept the fact that educating an increasingly diverse population of students successfully was our life’s work.

I also found it was extremely important to locate this transformation in the context of recognizable religious and academic foundations, including the Catholic social justice teachings.

Diversity is part of God’s plan for creation, and perhaps no dimension of creation poses more spiritual and pragmatic challenges than the diversity of all of God’s children. Human history can be read as one long war for domination of one tribe over the other, one religion or culture or political belief system or race or language or economic status. Even our games reflect the conflict inherent in human diversity -- whether we cheer for the Jets or Packers, we’re essentially seeking dominance of one life form over another --- Cheeseheads over Broadway, Heartland over Coast, Red over Blue.

Sometime soon, in the next several decades, by 2050 or earlier, this nation will face its greatest diversity test yet: the white population will no longer be the majority as a surge in the Hispanic population changes the demographic balance of the nation. The efforts to setup roadblocks to the inevitability of sociology are obvious: the debates over immigration reform are a veil through which we can see the sense of threat and even fear that some people have for others.

The children we teach today will be the leaders of society by the time this change is in full flower. How are we preparing them for their new responsibilities as citizens and leaders of a very different society than even we have known up til now?

Will they be open to others, generous in their view of our diverse society's participants, able to ensure the ongoing expansion of civil and human rights for future generations?

Or, will they turn out to be members of that small-minded cloud of bigots that hovers over our hopes and dreams for a good society, darkly raining poisonous bias and shards of hatred that encourage conflict and discrimination?

What we teach them today will have a very large impact on the kind of citizens and leaders they will turn out to be in the future.

What is the particular responsibility of Catholic educators to prepare leaders of charity and justice, hope and faith in the divine plan for human society?

I will discuss that question today in the context of the Church's social justice teachings, focusing on the seven themes of social justice that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops have identified as the organizing framework for Catholic education's work in social justice.¹ I think this framework is especially useful to help us think about education for diversity and multiculturalism as a Gospel imperative, not just something nice to do during Black History Month.

Let me also note that the very first responsibility we have is to be sure that our students don't skip class on the day we teach social justice, unlike some Catholics of prior generations who seem to view these principles as part of some left-wing plot to subvert "real" religion. I've heard them say, "What's all this talk about 'justice'" said with a sneer. Well, it's not the same as that cowboy notion of "bring 'em to justice" that we hear so much today, nor is it the selfish notion of "getting mine, too!" Gospel justice is truly about what we owe to God for the gift of our lives, measured in the service we render to his creation. There's nothing triumphal about true Gospel justice; rather, it is a calling to humility, service and stewardship.

So, let's think about diversity and multicultural education in the context of the seven themes of Catholic social justice;

1. Life and Dignity of the Human Person

The right to life is the bedrock of Catholic teaching, but too often, this theme gets lost and twisted in the secular political wars and we lose its full meaning. Too often in recent years, the scope of this

¹ The seven social justice themes cited in this paper and more general context may be found in documents on the website of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. See <http://www.nccbuscc.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching/excerpt.shtml> See also *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1998) and *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003). Many additional resources are available through the USCCB website, and many websites devoted to social justice. A good compendium of links to the foundation documents is available on the social justice website of the Diocese of St. Paul/Minneapolis at http://www.osjspm.org/social_teaching_documents.aspx

teaching has been reduced to sides in the political abortion debate, and the moral vision is obscured. In fact, if we understand the right to life and the dignity of the human person in all of its fullness, we must become more effective advocates for those who are living as well as for those not yet born, and this includes advocacy on behalf of people who are not like us.

With the right to life march coming up next week, this seems like a good time to plan some lessons around the right to life with a diversity twist: what do we know about the teachings of other religions on the right to life? An exploration of comparative religious teachings on this issue would help students to see that concern for the human person is shared by many people of different faiths.

How do different cultural communities deal with issues of life and human dignity?

The American civil rights movement would never have occurred without the very strong faith of the Black churches acting in solidarity for the rights and dignity of all people. Dr. Martin Luther King pursued his work as a moral cause, not merely a political movement. Whether Ghandi's advocacy for the rights of his people in India, or Mandela's courage in South Africa, or the witness of the Dalai Lama to the struggle of the people in Tibet for human freedom, these are all manifestations of the intersection of religion and culture in the promotion of human life and dignity.

2. Call to Family, Community, and Participation

So many students today do not have good experiences of family, are disconnected from lifegiving communities, are disconnected from meaningful participation in the means to create the good society of our best hopes.

We can no longer assume that when we say "family" every student will have the same idea. Diversity today extends to forms of family within our communities.

Our teaching about this principle of justice needs to start with an exploration of the experience of families and communities among our students, and learning about differences in family structures. Students can be extremely judgmental about how other people live --- they may get this from their parents. Students may also need assurance that their families are just fine.

At Trinity, for example, we have a large number of students who are the children of young single mothers, and some of these students are also single mothers. We know from all of our studies and experiences that poverty and discrimination and violence in the urban core have had a particularly devastating impact on the shape of the Black family, and in particular, that the presence of male role models is infrequent. Rather than positing an impossible Ozzie and Harriett stereotype for good families (and the Nelsons, it turns out, certainly had their issues, too!) we have the challenge of encouraging and helping young mothers to become more independent, self-sufficient, economically secure and able to create more positive environments for their children.

Your families might not be quite like mine, but I suspect you have students for whom the definition of family is not some 1950's ideal, but rather, something quite different. We need to work with the model of families we have today, we need to create within our students the ability to know the gifts of love, care, discipline, security and faith that characterize good families.

3. Rights and Responsibilities

This principle of social justice means that we can't just wrap ourselves in the cloak of righteousness and say, well, we're doing it all right, the heck with everyone else! This principle says that we have the responsibility to engage with protecting human rights.

How do you teach your students about advocacy on behalf of others? What is your expectation for engagement in the civic processes that create and protect civil and human rights?

How do we teach our students to analyze the great social issues of the day through the prism of social justice? This is not about dictating political answers, but rather, creating a framework for analyzing policy issues that brings the force of Catholic teaching to the discussion, not in some rote automaton response but in a truly reasoned discourse.

Students learn the habits of good citizenship starting in school, especially here in high school, and the exercise of their civic responsibilities is a vital part of teaching about social justice. Lessons on citizenship in a diverse community might include taking up any number of contemporary policy issues --- health care reform, immigration reform, national security --- and teaching students to analyze them through the framework of social justice: what are the human life issues at stake, how do these policies affect families, what is the impact on the poor?

4. Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

How we care for the poorest of the poor among us is a window into the fundamental morality of the society. Poverty is as much a diversity issue as race or gender or disability. Social class is a more subtle, powerful, damning wedge in some communities than skin color or accent. I know plenty of people who say, good heavens, I'm eager for my children to have Black friends --- even as they moved away from the city and those 'bad' neighborhoods.

Many Catholic schools --- and I'm sure this is true of Bishop O'Connell --- have extensive service programs to educate your students about the imperative of service to the poor of our communities. Take the message one step further to link community service to policy considerations: what can this community do to reduce poverty, to increase empowerment, to provide greater economic security among the most vulnerable people here? Who are those people, do we even truly understand the poor among us?

5. The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

This tenet of Catholic social teaching always calls to mind that Gospel about the laborers in the vineyard. You know the one --- where the guys who came at dawn and worked all day wound up getting paid less than the ones who wandered in late in the day and worked very little. Jesus's response to the critics was that of a good manager: don't tell me how to make contracts with my employees, but expect me to live up to every contract.

Can high school students really understand this part of the social justice teachings? Of course! They are preparing to work, many are already working, and they certainly know or should know some of the critical issues around employment opportunities in this community. Diversity considerations obviously come to the fore in any conversation about the rights of workers --- how does the ability to work thread through the other social justice tenets? Is there good work or bad work? Are some kinds of work in greater need of moral protection than others? How do your students, as future managers of workers, form their moral frameworks about how to treat the people who will work for them?

6. Solidarity

This social justice tenet says that we are all in this life together, and that we must stand up for each other and our neighbors in demanding justice and working for peace. This is the principle that says that rather than seeing diversity as something that divides us from each other, we need to appreciate diversity as the many threads that strengthen the fabric of our communities. We experience conflict and division --- a rending of the garment --- if we keep tugging at those threads, removing them randomly as we slowly unravel our peace.

What are the lessons of solidarity for your students?

7. Care for God's Creation

The final tenet of social justice is care for God's creation. Does this have anything to do with diversity? Of course!! On the one hand, the beauty of the natural world reveals God's delight with diversity across the full range of species of plant, animal and mineral life. If your students find it's too hard to discuss their own diversity, consider lessons on birds to start thinking about diversity.

But more directly in consideration of the human condition, the relationship between human diversity and environmental stewardship is urgent and clear. What is the environmental impact of economic and social development, or the lack thereof? As we consider the diversity of our population, can we also identify different kinds of environmental threats and opportunities related to economic levels, cultural choices, power relationships? Why are some communities going "green" with broad consensus while others seem content to live with dangerous pollution? Why does the Church believe that the present generation has responsibility to address environmental concerns as a matter of human life?

Obviously, such a long list of potential lessons also tells us that we can't possibly 'cover the material' in one forum, an extra class, or a special committee or Task Force. The real message here is that education for diversity, in the context of the social justice teachings, should be an integral part of the academic and co-curricular life of the school. We cannot be effective teaching about diversity as an exceptional topic --- the topic is profoundly about human life and God's plan for his creation. We teachers need to think deeply and even prophetically about how to educate the students who will, we pray, be forces for good, for progress, for justice in the communities they lead in the future. Those communities and this nation will be even more diverse than what we experience today. The effectiveness of your teaching today will ensure their success tomorrow.

Thanks for listening!