



**The Role of the University in Fostering the Vocation of Peace building:
Remarks for *Pacem in Terris* Conference at Catholic University
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“That’s all nice, but can they get jobs?”

I’ve heard comments like this too often in recent years when the subject of the purpose of a college education comes up. Dismissing the liberal art as insufficiently utilitarian seems to be the constant theme of critical commentaries about higher education today. In state after state, we are seeing an increasingly worrisome trend of legislatures and governors pushing legislation that requires universities to report their outcomes in the form of the starting salaries of graduates --- great for schools that produce a lot of computer scientists and engineers, but potentially life-threatening for colleges that educate teachers, social workers, counselors, philosophers and theologians. The increasing trend toward monetization of the value of higher learning as the primary, if not the only, measure assessing the worth of college is quite pernicious in the way it diminishes and undermines the moral and intellectual values at stake in higher education.

No wonder, then, that we don’t hear very much about how universities prepare their graduates to be agents of peace. Oh, sure, there are a few modest efforts ---- the [Washington Monthly](#) has a ranking that includes the number of Peace Corps graduates, for *example, but on the rankings that gain far more public notoriety* --- U.S. News and World Report, for example --- what really counts is money. Make no mistake about it, the true worth of college in the political and secular arenas today is mostly about money, fame and the production of workers for corporate America.

Some legislators might even see an agenda to promote the vocation of peace building as some kind of leftist plot. Consider this: just last week, in a related move, the U.S. Senate took action (the [Coburn Amendment](#)) to prohibit federal funding for political science research *that does not explicitly promote "national security or the economic interests of the United States"*. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/04/20134265610113939.html>

During the last decade, I have found myself wondering why the university community in general was so silent on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, why we have stood idly by while civil liberties were severely curtailed in the wake of 9/11, why universities retreated from our once-relentless concern for the common good, for civil rights, for justice and peace, for care for the least and left out among us.

We suffered exhaustion, intimidation, frustration and discouragement in pursuing an agenda of moral value. We were accused of *political correctness* for standing up for the right things.

And maybe, just maybe, we bought into the shifting attitudes toward “liberal” causes; we grabbed hold of the pendulum and swung with it toward the center, if not the right, because it felt pretty lonely out there along the edges of left field increasingly occupied by people even the more liberal among us might regard as fringe. Howard Dean, Michael Moore, Cindy Sheehan --- somehow they seemed dangerous without the glamorous anti-establishment *frisson* of the Berrigan Brothers or Abbie Hoffman. We grew up and packed up our copies of *Letters from the Birmingham Jail* along with our college papers on disarmament. So long ago, it seems, all that idealistic and passionate concern for peace and justice we had as college kids.

The 50th Anniversary of [*Pacem in Terris*](#) comes at just the right moment to rescue us from the moral confusion, activist ennui and secular utilitarian demands placed upon the modern university. This moment calls us to become re-acquainted with the more fundamental purpose of the university, which is to serve as the intellectual counterweight to government, a place for rational exploration and debate about the shape of society, the purpose of the economy, the role of leaders, the dimensions of public policy, the rights of citizens and the necessary place for considerations of defense.

Pacem in Terris might be read as the manifesto for the Good Society, the framework for an entire curriculum on social justice and enlightened human community. Its themes are worthy of its own major, themes that should course through virtually all academic disciplines: *(numbers in parentheses are references to paragraphs in the encyclical)*

- For the theologians, the encyclical is a clear statement on the dialogue of faith and reason, in the acknowledgement of progress in science and technology as also showing the “infinite greatness of God;” (3)
- Lawyers can find much instruction in the text: the role of law in establishing a community that honors the common good is a clear theme; (7 and many more...)
- Budding public policymakers, politicians and leaders of public interest groups can find much to instruct them in this document that recognizes that the right to life (11) includes the means to ensure “proper development of life...food, clothing, shelter, medical care and finally the necessary social services. Therefore a human being also has the right to security in cases of sickness, inability to work, widowhood and old age, unemployment or in any other case in which he is deprived of the means of subsistence through no fault of his own.” (11) --- and don’t we wish that we could do a dramatic reading of this passage on the floor of Congress!
- The document extols Freedom of speech and expression (12), religion (14), families (15 and 16), workers (18-20), property (20-21), and for the educators among us, we are overjoyed to read about the right to “...a basic education and to technical and professional training Every effort should be made to ensure that persons be enabled, on the basis of merit, to go on to higher studies so that, as far as possible, they may occupy posts and take on responsibilities in human society....” (13)

For the sociologists, political scientists and women's studies specialists, the document recognizes the

- progression of working classes (40)
- increased role of women (41)
- end of empires and rise of independent nation states (42)

For the public administrators: Civil authority must serve the common good and protect human rights. (60 and throughout)

For the engineers: Public works (roads, transportation, etc.) are part of the social and economic progress of citizens. (64)

Heck, there's even a part for the actuaries pointing to the need for access to insurance. (64)

And of course, for the international affairs and diplomacy specialists on campus, the entire encyclical, particularly its last sections, is a roadmap for leaders of nation states to act morally and with a large sense of justice, to pursue global cooperation through the United Nations and to work together for disarmament and peace.

The document challenges universities to teach our students how to participate as free citizens and effective leaders in a society for the common good; to understand and promote the cause of just governance; to promote racial justice.

The encyclical closes with the idea that the task of peace building has only begun --- and that was in 1963 in the age of atomic fear and nation-state wars. How much more we have to do today, when our own nation now takes a highly aggressive posture in starting pre-emptive war and using drones to hunt down and kill terrorists, when North Korea rattles nuclear sabers and we worry that the next terrorist incident might be sitting in the window seat next to you. We're in an age where citizens have become complicit in the surrender of civil liberties for the sake of security, and yet, we often feel less safe than even in those far-away days when we drilled for bombs by cowering under our first grade desks.

We huddle shoeless and suspect on the tarmac, abjectly powerless in the face of inchoate fear. We surrender freedom for security rather than challenging ourselves and the authorities we elect to work cooperatively to forge peaceful and just solutions to the dangers of modern life.

In this environment, what is the role of universities in fostering a "vocation of peace building" among our students?

My response is far less lofty than the encyclical, but an effort to reflect its challenges to this modern age and to the capacity of higher education to respond to the call to be stewards of the common good and peace.

Let me suggest just five essential responses for higher education today:

1. A university education is not about job training. At its best, higher learning's real purpose is to shape the philosophy and perspectives of the future citizen leaders of the global village, premised on the broad theories of general learning refined and tested through the deep disciplinary dives of the major programs. This is not a morally neutral adventure. The formation of moral sensibilities is an essential part of all education, and we universities --- whether Catholic or secular, public or private --- need to be far more confident and adamant about the need to engage students in moral reasoning. The broad education of the liberal arts, in particular, cultivates respect for human life and human rights, curiosity about the diversity of human life and appreciation for the broad scope of human belief and expression, all of which contribute to the formation of leaders who are capable of promoting the habits of justice and peace in all of their endeavors. The broad list of the rights and concerns for human life that we find in *Pacem in Terris* requires the large perspectives of liberal learning for full implementation of its expectations. The outcomes assessment is not about what jobs our students have at any given moment, but about how they contribute to the peaceful and productive advancement of the human community.

2. Exposure to the diversity of the human condition: in this age that indulges quite serious ideological assaults on the idea of diversity in higher education ---- particularly repeated challenges to the social construction of community that affirmative action makes possible on some university campuses --- we must assert the essential role of exposure to diversity as a vital dimension of shaping the vocation of peace building. In numerous places, *Pacem in Terris* condemns racism and speaks to the rights of women and those who are minorities. We know from our practice in the academy that one of the most effective means of educating leaders for the changing demographics of our society is to create classrooms and faculties that mirror the diversity of the society.

I am particularly proud of the way that Trinity lives the commitment to build community amid great diversity each day. The Sisters of Notre Dame have been our driving inspiration as we welcome and teach students of many different races and backgrounds, all of whom have the capacity to be peace builders in their families and communities.

3. Ensuring campus practices that foster peaceful communities within the college: too many students today start college with somewhat fierce tendencies to fight, to establish respect for themselves or their friends through violent words and threats, to promote the protection of the tribe over the good of the community, to view the peaceful resolution of disputes as somehow weak. This is not just a problem for students from Belfast and Dublin --- our students from Brentwood and Edgewood, Mount Pleasant and Adams Morgan struggle with the instinct to violence every single day. With more students from diverse backgrounds coming into college, and particularly students from low income neighborhoods where violence and self-protection have been a way of life --- even among girls --- the need to start peace education by teaching students how to live non-violent lives is very clear.

Getting students outside of themselves and their own cultural contexts is another important method for preparing students for more serious study of peace building. For many American students from impoverished neighborhoods, it's often a long journey simply to come across the river and live among people who are not like them. But taking the next step --- getting

students with parochial world views to go out into the world both domestically and internationally is another vital component of a complete educational program for peace.

At Trinity, our Campus Minister Sr. Mary Ellen Dow, SND, leads a group of students to Selma, Alabama during spring break each year. This may seem like a small step toward global understanding, but for students who may not have ever set foot outside of the Washington region, it's a global adventure of learning and shaping new perspectives on the human condition.

4. Cultivating the habits of peace building among students through service and opportunities for advocacy:

Engaging students in the field is the obvious first step toward cultivating the vocation of peace building. From the simple volunteer community service program --- tutoring children or helping the homeless --- to more sophisticated service learning, the work in the field helps to enlarge the student's frame of reference, move beyond self-preoccupation and begin to develop both empathy and real concern for the conditions of other lives. Service learning is one of those places where students with limited experience outside of their own neighborhoods can begin to see the world through different eyes.

But we should not stop with service alone. Advocacy is how students learn to change policies and systems, and we should be less afraid of engaging students in advocacy projects related to justice, peace and nonviolence, particularly as those values can be related immediately to the lives of our students and families.

So, for example, it's almost impossible to teach about peace and non-violence when our students and teachers live in fear of the next madman with an assault rifle turning the classroom into carnage. Advocacy for an end to gun violence is central to the creation of classrooms and campuses where students can learn the vocation of peace building.

Inequality in educational opportunity fosters the cycles of poverty and violence in too many neighborhoods where young people are repeatedly betrayed in their hopes for improvement. The cynicism that festers as a result of failed lower education grows into rage and despair over time, devaluing life itself so that life is easily blown away. Advocacy for education reform and improvement in public schools is part of the vocation of peace building.

Our advocacy must extend to federal policies on poverty and the ways in which care for the elderly, children and the poor are endangered in new budget proposals. Immigration reform is also an urgent priority for justice and peace.

5. Faculty development for peace education:

We have a very large challenge to think about this as the baby boomers begin to retire. We're on the verge of a massive generational change in the professoriate, and the rising generations come with different experiences of war and peace, national security and defense, civil and human rights. We are increasingly distant from the days when faculty members, themselves, marched on the front lines and spent late nights

hatching the next protest plot. How do we engage new generations of faculty across many disciplines in the peace and justice curriculum?

The excellent peace studies programs at Notre Dame, San Diego, here at Catholic University and other campuses are a great start to this effort. But our work is only beginning, and the world needs us to move even faster and more affirmatively. The large agenda of *Pacem in Terris* is the work of generations. Let us be glad for our part in this astonishing moral quest, and let us do all that we can to ensure a good roadmap for those who will come after us.