

Summary of Roundtable Conversation

The responses to the papers given by J. Steven Brown and Mark Bosco focused in large part on the theme of receptivity as a corollary to Brown's invocation of the "anthropology of gift" so prominent in Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'*. One participant noted greater attention to gratitude in the field of psychology, for example, while others pointed to philosophical and theological explorations of the topic. Several commented on the relationship between receptivity and meaning, lamenting the way that technocracy strips things and people of their capacity as signs, and renders them into raw material to be manipulated. Pointing to literature, one participant underscored students' tendencies to seek simple answers to questions about what a text might mean, instead (he suggested) of asking what kind of imaginative work the text might be asking us to undertake.

Several noted the importance of a posture of wonder toward the world—not seeking to explain all things, but being willing to ask all questions. Such a posture impacts our interactions with all people, including students, placing ourselves alongside them as people who share a fundamental reverence for reality. It impacts the way we raise questions about the world, too, providing a springboard for shared inquiry, perhaps more open to collaboration with others in contrast to a desire to corner a market.

One participant paid particular attention to critiques of the market in the work of Popes Benedict XVI and Francis, focusing on the theme of mercy in an "economy of communion." She raised questions about ascetic practices that move people out of their thrall to a competitive economic system, but then acknowledged that there is real difficulty in moving to a more fundamental concern with persons. How, she asked, does one balance this ideal with the reality of having to be distracted from work by thoughtless students?

In response, another participant cited the example of Pope Francis when he embraced and kissed Vinicio Riva, who suffers with disfigurement from neurofibromatosis.¹ His simple action impacted Riva profoundly, leading Riva to comment on how the pope had changed his life. The participant noted that such an action, simple in itself, is possible only in a world charged with meaning. So too with students: simple actions become profound when they are windows to the world of meaning. Others agreed with this insight, pointing to examples of similar simple interactions that carried great meaning.

1 See Ben Wedeman, "Meet the Disfigured Man Whose Embrace with Pope Francis Warmed Hearts," <http://www.cnn.com/2013/11/26/world/europe/pope-francis-disfigured-man/>.

In the end, one participant noted, what students will observe is whether you really care about them—whether, in a word, you love them.

The challenge, another participant noted, is that university structures can often be fragmenting instead of unifying, diffusing rather than consolidating meaning. Many students will not automatically put God at the center of their search for meaning. Some today may put the environment at the center, seeing it as a profound ethical concern, and perhaps that offers an opportunity for faculty to help them probe deeper questions of meaning. Recalling Pope Francis's observation that there can be no ecology without adequate anthropology, another participant suggested the opportunity to help students draw that kind of connection.

There is an important challenge, though, observed one participant: encounter with the poor who often lack the luxury of developing a long-term, nuanced anthropology in the face of needing to survive. Recycling water bottles is not likely to be at the top of their ethical concerns. More broadly, the great challenge is that developing an adequate anthropology will have to move through sincere encounter with many who think about the human condition and the world very differently. Our campuses are becoming diverse in many new ways. Another participant cited the example of the growing number of students from China, often from very wealthy backgrounds and whose interest may be primarily about prestige rather than ethical transformation. Considering the vast disparities between the very poor and the very rich suggests the difficulty of developing such an anthropology.

The point of departure, for Christians, is the Cross, said one participant. We step out of the world of economic gain long enough to consider those hurt by our economic and social systems, rooting ourselves in a receptivity to divine grace that enables us to see the world through the lens of wonder. We take suffering seriously, but lean into it, not offering easy answers but helping students to love the questions about suffering. And we turn to the deep questions, the perennial questions, elicited by texts ancient and modern, pointing to meaning and friendship, justice and beauty. We recognize that different cultures treat these things differently, but remind ourselves that we find new connections when we raise these kinds of questions together. One participant pointed to the example of a psychologist who had accompanied thousands of people over his career to their deaths, recalling that none had ever wished to make more money or get better recognition at work. They had wished for better relationships.

A participant noted that our students are fundamentally relativists until we drive it out of them, showing why some things matter and are worth being passionate about. What we hope for is that our students will draw connections between the problems of the world—both anthropological and ecological—and be willing to make changes in their own lives so these problems are no longer merely abstractions. Certainly, she said, they will see that a large proportion of the population will not really care. But our hope is that they will develop relations that help them see that their actions are not fundamentally about abstract ideas, but people whom they love.