

Summary of Roundtable Conversation

Like the previous conversations on the theme of the environment and the human person at this semester's Roundtable, responses to Cyril Opeil and Laura Leming's papers addressed questions of discernment in the face of competing personal and social desires. One respondent asked the broad question of how different disciplines might effect change in the world—that is, effect a change in the hearts of students that they might come to see the world differently. Another suggested that the challenge was similar to fly fishing: a teacher constantly casting ideas in the hope that students might eventually make one his or her own. An example was helping a student move from immediate questions of care for the environment to a more fundamental desire to care for our common home, rooted in a reverence for creation as a gift of God.

The difficulty, several participants observed, is that in some ways the contemporary university allows for a “smorgasbord” approach to learning, leaving students to find connections between the various subjects they study. However, the Catholic approach, one person suggested, is more developmental: we hope students grow over an integrated approach to their education. In the face of competition, Catholic universities find themselves pressed to compromise that developmental model in favor of mirroring the approaches of other universities. We lose our distinctiveness in the process, our emphasis on the care of souls. Catholic university programs need to emphasize their distinctiveness, their drive for integration.

Focusing squarely on the theme of Ignatian discernment, one participant asked whether we sometimes sell students short. We are usually comfortable talking about differences between good and bad (or fruitful and unfruitful) desires, but he suggested that perhaps reality itself corrects desire; that encounters with reality can disabuse people of falsehoods. Reality, in other words, can help students come to a fuller appreciation of who they are and what they are able to do with their talents. Another participant echoed this sentiment, wondering what it might mean for our teaching: whether we aim to engage an entire class, or speak perhaps more directly to a smaller percentage of students who have come to desire the sort of change suggested by the course material.

One participant shared an example of a student for whom the course material on energy really came alive. She was a pre-medical student, but her project focused on energy use, specifically on boilers. She did great, imaginative research and learned a great deal about energy efficiency because she was offered the freedom to explore. Her

research, while likely unrelated to her professional work, will make her a better person and more able to see connections between energy efficiency and the environment. The participant went on to suggest how this kind of work might allow the student to see connections to the poor—the bottom billion that Laura Leming referenced in her paper.

Another participant pointed to the complexity of the kind of educational project that Opeil and Leming's papers suggest. Given different learning styles, not to mention the different curricular models abroad in contemporary universities, one would be hard-pressed to suggest a one-size-fits-all model of how to spark a change of heart among students. It is important to cultivate spirituality, convey content, invite reflection on sustainability, and so on. It is important, then, to assess teaching and learning. But in the end, will students demonstrate a change of heart? For her, such questions point to the need for many different approaches to learning, both inside and outside the classroom. Another participant echoed these observations, pointing to the necessity of witness outside the classroom—that is, seeing professors and other mentors living out the implications of the need for sustainable practices, whether through lifestyle choices or social advocacy.

In response, one person noted that there can be unintended side effects to attempts at social change. He used the example of one organization's attempts to address diversity in hiring, which ended up creating parallel systems that favored different racial groups. His question, then, was what unintended consequences to climate change advocacy might arise. Another participant echoed this concern, pointing to campus activism about divestment as an example. The difficulty, he averred, is that it is not yet clear what the consequences of such action might be; yet student activists can lose hope by not seeing progress in what they advocate for.

A participant shared the example of Martin Luther King, cited by a climate change researcher as an example of how to lead social change with vision—a dream, rather than a nightmare. Social change cannot thrive with a nightmarish vision, but can grow by sharing a dream. It can grow, said another participant, by providing an answer to the question of what is worth fighting for. Education, for him, is helping sustain the dream even in the face of hopelessness, especially since young people are sometimes naïve about the scope of a problem.

On the issue of fossil fuels, a participant observed that it is simply impossible to imagine eliminating their use in the near or even somewhat distant future unless we halved the population and lived in grass huts. The point, then, is not to undercut hope, but rather to educate in a way that shapes what is worth hoping for. Another participant pointed to *Laudato Si'*, and Pope Francis's insistence that we must see things in a broader perspective. The role of the teacher, he suggested, is to move students toward that kind of perspective, to connect disparate bits of knowledge. The contemporary university runs the risk of perpetuating disconnections, though, so we must talk about shared goals and dreams that help in the connections. The issue of the environment, said one participant, is of such gravity that it demands such connections. Another suggested inviting students

to consider the environment not only in the abstract but also as a source of moral demand: would you be willing to give up your phone to help the environment? This kind of thinking moves us closer to inviting students into practices of discernment.

