

Summary of Roundtable Conversation

Roundtable participants responded to Jeffrey Bloechl's paper with stories of their own experience of negotiating the balance between commitment to transcendent truth, on the one hand, and openness to the different philosophical and theological presumptions they find among colleagues at the university. One person noted, for example, that some colleagues associated religious belief with anti-intellectualism—that faith is *de facto* contrary to the type of openness to truth that is a prerequisite for authentic intellectual life.

Bloechl returned to his thesis that a certain kind of conversation unfolds at a Catholic university, a conversation that is informed by theology. Theological commitments allow for the unfolding of a quality of conversation that cannot unfold where those theological commitments are lacking. Such conversations, though, will take place only when there are people interested in furthering them, and so he raised the practical question of how many willing partners in conversation are there on our campuses. He surfaced the question of hiring practices, and the related question of what practices, attitudes, and prejudices enter the university when people are hired. The larger issue, though, is the way that the university community engages in theologically committed conversations, and invites all members to contribute to them regardless of their religious convictions. The conversations, he suggested, don't have to be metaphysical or cosmological; they can be anthropological, meaning that they can engage all people around basic questions of what it means to be human. In any case, the point is that Catholic universities are committed to larger conversations beyond the narrow research interests of the scholar.

The conversation moved toward analysis of Bloechl's focus on value. One person asked for clarification of Christian value, and specifically the theme of love. He suggested that a common grammar among people is their humanity, but that the experience of love is difficult to name. Love, he suggested, is possible only as a consequence of first being loved, and that value emerges as the consequence of being loved and being capable of loving. Bloechl responded with a pithy definition of Christian value as a sense of the transcendent goodness of all things ensured by a loving God. The participant pointed to experiences he'd had at another university, a secular institution where his colleagues loved to argue. The argument, he said, was rather like a sport, done for its own sake rather than for any particular effort at achieving a higher synthesis. The contrast for him is that at a Catholic university, love transforms everything by adding a particular value to

each human being and each person's efforts at achieving truth. Each person is loved as he or she is. In the course of this thread of conversation, what emerged was the sense that there has to be a transparency in the Catholic university's commitment to love as having its origin in the Incarnation. While it does not mean a call to everyone to become Catholic necessarily, it does mean on the one hand having a commitment to the value of persons as loved by God, and on the other hand being honest about that commitment being grounded in the theological assertion that the Incarnation of Jesus is the starting point for Christian reflection on love and its consequence in value.

Another participant picked up on the call for a broad, theologically informed conversation at the university. He noted the difficulty of drawing some faculty into these broader conversations in light of the demands for disciplinary specialization. He agreed that mission is the responsibility of all university employees, but shared an experience about how mission language seems utterly foreign to those who seek employment as faculty in the sciences. His department had gone through a failed search because applicants simply could not reflect critically on mission, even though they were good scientists. He underscored Bloechl's distinction between the academy and the university, agreeing that the very idea of a university requires a certain commitment, and at a Catholic university that commitment is fundamentally theological—seeking God in all things and through all methods of inquiry. That commitment matters most fundamentally in the ways we care about people.

In response, another participant highlighted how important it was to have a shared commitment to being a university, in the specific sense that Bloechl described. She agreed that it was not fundamentally about ensuring that everyone was Catholic, but she did suggest that it meant that everyone shared the willingness to ask the large questions that Catholics ask. Yet she probed further, saying that in her experience as a convert to Catholicism it was difficult to find space to engage the grammar of Catholic faith even at a Catholic university. A recent conversation with a student who wanted to share Catholic social thought with others in a service learning experience, for example, elicited accusations of being exclusionary. She expressed a concern for preserving space where the deepest concerns of Catholics might be brought into conversation with research and academic pursuits.

Another participant shared his observation that many faculty carry a very poor understanding of Catholic mission in education, and that this misunderstanding can sometimes stand in stark contrast to a person's otherwise very nuanced approach to intellectual life. It can be difficult to overcome prejudices, but the observation would seem to suggest a call for some kind of regular conversation—perhaps a required faculty seminar grounded in the kind of theological commitment proper to a Catholic university. Perhaps it is possible to push back on the claim that Catholic teaching is exclusionary. In response, another participant focused on the issue of listening, pointing to the great difficulty in trying to elicit a change of mind or heart in another person. What, she asked, is the "magic moment" that elicits change in a person? How, she asked, can we culti-

vate spaces where listening might lead to conversion? Still another observed that some faculty have deeply entrenched negative attitudes toward university mission, sometimes rooted in personal experiences.

Another participant shared his experience of welcoming new hires at his university. There is clear language about the institution and its traditions, but there is also the opportunity for new hires to name what they love and to reflect on how their passions lead them to the world beyond themselves. These moves toward transcendence offer new members of the community ways forward in an ongoing conversation grounded in a theology. Still another shared his experience of being in a reading group at his institution. The group members took turns recommending a reading, and what came out of conversations was what the members loved.

While such efforts are good, one person noted, it is important not to overlook the fact that the current structures of the university can work against the goal of developing broad conversations. Departments hold sway over the definitions of excellence, and tenure processes generally do not reward inter-disciplinarity. Another noted that talking about teaching can be a way to draw different faculty into shared conversation, but not all. A third observed that institutions are moving toward greater specialization and research, rather than greater conversation and teaching.

There is a tension and a balance to be struck, observed participants, between commitment to Catholic theological commitments and an expansive welcome to all regardless of their faith. The tension is manifest, for example, in controversies over speakers invited to campus, and the demand for rights that broken conversations lead to. It is therefore important to find proactive ways to cultivate shared ownership of the university project, which can be extraordinarily difficult. The great challenge is finding places of real encounter between people who disagree. But the university must be the kind of island within a culture of sound bites where real conversation—and real listening that leads to conversion—takes place.

