

Summary of Roundtable Conversation

Following Burt Howell's remarks, several people commented on the notes of realism he struck, particularly that regarding the loneliness that faculty and students can feel in their academic lives. One participant reflected on graduate students in particular, feeling panicked as they consider whether or not they will get jobs upon graduation. Market forces can be harsh. Even for junior faculty members, he said, the tenure process can be stressful in ways that compromise their willingness and ability to engage meaningfully in institutional mission. The system does not foster engagement with questions of meaning, passion, or vocation, but rather elicits attention to professional demands. Many voiced their agreement with Howell's point that Catholic colleges and universities must aspire to the same *cura personalis* (care for the person) for faculty and staff that we speak about in reference to students.

The overarching questions that both Tait and Howell surfaced regarding Catholic mission in higher education were repeated and reflected on in different ways among participants. One asked a question this way: how can both the Catholic identity and the particular flavors of Catholic identity help us dialogue and create something richer and better in the world of higher education? He noted that as a journal editor, he often sends rejection letters to people, as the journal's rejection rate is over 90%. In a profession where rejection is the norm, he wondered, how might a Catholic college or university offer solace and support? In a similar vein, another participant observed the "decided lack of joy" in her department, wondering how the experience of working at a Catholic college or university might more fully be an experience of joy.

Another participant considered the nature of peer review in the tenure process, wondering how it might be possible to transform the process in ways that are more reflective of Catholic mission and care of persons. She suggested that joy can emerge with the infusion of faith into intellectual work: allowing people to exercise creativity of thought, and greater care in teaching and mentoring students. The existing metrics compromise creativity, she noted. Another participant agreed: she pointed to Alasdair MacIntyre's distinction between internal and external goods, suggesting that too often tenure reviews focus on external goods, particularly the opinions of peers and refereed journal editors. These external goods, she argued, take us away from the internal goods of study and teaching: "the joy of coming closer to the things we're pursuing through our studies and trying to share with our students."

Several people picked up on this thread regarding the distinction between internal and external goods. One person lamented the current state of affairs in academia: she sees so many institutions concerned with rankings and metrics, and wishes that Catholic institutions would have “the courage of their convictions to say we can define excellence on our own terms.” She pointed specifically to formation processes which at present do not often count for tenure. Later, another person suggested that it is possible for senior leaders to make a significant change in university culture. At present, there is too much emphasis on publication; participation in a pilgrimage, developing a serious conversation between research and one’s teaching, or working in an interdisciplinary way with other professors are irrelevant to professional advancement. He too expressed the wish that these goods which actually contribute to classroom excellence—not to mention personal growth and greater participation in the mission of an institution—be regarded as important for promotion and tenure. A third participant asked a pointed question: why pursue an illusory goal, like comparing ourselves to prestigious institutions, when we are called to be the most excellent version of ourselves?

A number of participants commented on the theme of toxicity within academic culture. One pointed out that academic life is “situated to be critical,” and that it can become destructive. In response, another recalled the advice of a mentor who insisted that criticism begins with gratitude. There is a certain spirituality of academic life: how can an institution foster an attitude of thankfulness toward others’ work in ways that also prod them toward greater clarity and understanding? At present, noted another participant, gatherings of academic vice presidents often yield complaints about faculty; they lament that faculty are too hard to manage and are never happy. Another person observed that in a toxic milieu, people are not likely to do their best work. They hide behind what is safe to think or say and are unable to aspire to the truth.

There are signs of hope, though. One woman pointed to her early professional life, when she had few mentors, but suggested that she saw changes in attitudes of support for younger scholars. Another described the attempts on her campus to implement a new policy of hiring for Catholic mission, which received a great deal of criticism focused around the fear that it would limit applicants. Instead, she said, the new policy yielded the best possible candidates for people in the sciences, business, and other fields. Their application numbers were high, and all applied precisely because of the commitment to mission. The influx of new people attracted to mission, she said, had changed the campus climate within a few months.

For a culture change to occur, one participant suggested, faculty members will need to have the courage to acknowledge the limits of prestige. Perhaps a life-changing article appeared in a less prestigious journal, or perhaps the most important vocational call in one’s professional life falls outside of the usual metrics for success. Another person offered that institutions “have souls of a sort”—institutional cultures that reflect the values held by the members of the community. Having the courage to articulate values that are reflective of a spirituality of *cura personalis*, among others, might help a college

or university push back against toxic elements in the culture, and perhaps even develop new metrics more reflective of a mission rooted in the gospel.

