

Summary of Roundtable Conversation

Responses to Katarina Schuth and Chester Gillis began with observations about the ways that technology both heightens awareness of cultural differences and provides resources to address them, even among college faculty members who, on the whole, may not be culturally diverse.

Students interested in cultural difference now have so many resources, but one challenge is their tendency toward cultural tourism and a kind of “rootless cosmopolitanism,” as one participant named it. There is a related issue of sustainability in international travel. We want students to have substantial encounters with others, but many choose comfortable study abroad experiences in English-speaking contexts, or in places where they will not experience socioeconomic differences. In a word, it is good for students to be uncomfortable, said one participant, whether that be in an American inner city or in a developing country.

Another participant noted that there was a shift from Schuth’s focus on the Church’s mission to Gillis’s attention to the question of religious pluralism. In response, Gillis noted the difference between sharing Christianity and engaging in interreligious conversation, and Schuth observed that many students on Catholic campuses are either not Catholic or are non-practicing Catholics. For them, the question of the Church’s mission is thus not a central one, leading another participant to note that it is therefore all the more important to develop meaningful models of friendship that allow for substantial conversation. Yet another participant pointed to shared charitable work as one foundation for such a model of friendship.

Reflecting on this thread of conversation, another participant suggested that the danger of tourism and rootless conversation points to the need for a grounding in the particularity of Catholic faith, especially the practice of the Eucharist. Not discounting that suggestion, another participant pointed to something more basic, namely ordinary human relationships, and cultural encounters as particularly privileged places of learning about them. A third participant pointed to the relationship between the Church and the world that was emerging in the Second Vatican Council, the documents of which turned the Church’s attention outward to consider questions of poverty. Later documents such as the 1968 gathering of Latin American bishops in Medellín emphasized the need to attend to the poverty of millions in the Church instead of overemphasizing the outward signs of piety.

Recent years, a participant noted, have seen an increase in the Church's awareness of global economic realities. The explosive growth of Catholicism in Africa has meant a rise in the number of vowed religious and priests studying in the United States and influencing other students. Among other things, this awareness has raised questions about what a truly Catholic university ought to look like, especially if it were rooted in places like sub-Saharan Africa. No culture is without its biases; the Church is in a unique place to engage in critical appreciation of different cultures while critiquing corrosive elements such as tribalism, which are corrosive. Universities, said another participant, can sometimes broker friendships among members of rival cultures and promote better intercultural understanding.

A key point, said a participant, is drawing from the rich tradition of reflection and contemplation in Christian spirituality, predicated on humility. Such an emphasis on humility, he said, acts as a check to students accustomed to privilege. He pointed to a compassion inventory his campus undertakes: an effort to track the way that student experiences on campus influence the development of compassion and the reduction of narcissism. When pressed on the question of the model of student transformation, his answer was the gospel, and commented further that Jon Sobrino's image of "taking crucified people down from their crosses"¹ was a helpful image. Students need experiential models of what transformation looks like, and colleges can influence what models they emulate. Transformation is necessary, said a participant, precisely because narcissism is becoming the norm. He pointed to the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), which in preliminary documents had pulled "narcissism" from the list of psychiatric diagnoses, presumably because it had become so common. But research has pointed to compelling evidence of its increase in this "selfie culture." Perhaps we begin with students interested in tourism—in "rootless cosmopolitanism"—but our hope is that we can take this interest and encourage their travel to take on elements of pilgrimage, of willing encounter with the other that they begin to perceive as holy ground.

1 See Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).