

Summary of Roundtable Conversation

The Roundtable participants responded positively to Kristin Heyer's reflections on interdisciplinarity and the common good. One person underscored the great promise of a Catholic university, where the different methods of knowing might together contribute to a broad understanding of the good that transcends any single disciplinary approach. In anticipation of the difficulties that such a project might engender, the participant asked simply "what if we saw this as an opportunity rather than an insurmountable challenge?" She noted that there can be many subconscious factors which shape people's world views, but wondered aloud how engagement with people who think differently about the world might help challenge biases.

Another participant observed that language about the common good, while central to Catholic social ethics, is not always common among academics. Many people, he observed, approach social questions in a broadly utilitarian way, and that Catholic social ethics provide a compelling alternative. Another participant echoed this observation, highlighting the need to answer what she called "imperialistic notions of the good"—might makes right—by appealing to the thick descriptions of the good that have emerged in Catholic social thought. For while there have been some notions of the good that emphasize tolerance, for example, she noted that many current social problems cannot be adequately addressed by an appeal to tolerance. What is needed, she suggested, is sustained, difficult conversation about modern social problems by inviting people with different disciplinary lenses.

There is a difficulty to this proposal, though. Another participant described the place of ethics at the university, noting the different approaches of Christian ethicists and philosophical ethicists. Ethics is in an uncertain place in the academy, having been carved out of various disciplines—business and medicine come to mind—rather than staying within the disciplines of philosophy or theology. So even ethicists have developed different vocabularies and methodologies. And what has perhaps complicated this situation is the fact that many colleges and universities describe learning objectives in the core curriculum that include practical, ethical action. For many faculty, that objective is frightening, for their training in a particular discipline often did not include ethics. They prefer to rely on philosophers or theologians to teach ethics to satisfy the learning objective. The difficulty that universities face is to encourage reflection on the ways that their teaching already reflects Catholic social

teaching, but also to encourage sustained conversations that help them understand it more deeply.

One participant described a theologian's proposal that university faculty read together Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* over the course of a year. That effort, sparked in part by Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*, took time to unfold, but was fruitful. She described it as an incredibly difficult conversation, since faculty approached the conversation from so many different angles, illustrating how fragmented academic conversation had become. But she noted that after many months of conversation, the participants were just starting to trust one another, learning from one another how the conversation might impact teaching and learning and the goals of the university as a whole.

Echoing this point, another participant observed how important it was for a Catholic university to model civil conversation. She noted that the topic of climate has become the *de facto* shared reality which demands conversation about the common good. Especially in this political season, another participant observed, it is imperative to restore talk about the common good to political discourse. A third participant noted that it is important to help restore imagination about the common good—and about human persons—among citizens of the United States. With Heyer, he called for aesthetic education in order to attend to the shaping of imagination in various curricula, if only to push back against the instrumentalization and commodification of education. He called classrooms “ground zero for reimagining what it means to be human.”

One participant used the analogy of the cell with a permeable membrane to describe a conception of the common good within Catholic social thought. The understanding of the good must develop in an organic way, he said, which involves taking in some materials from the edges of the membrane—but not all. Similarly, our understanding must grow, with discernment that enables us to take in some things while rejecting others. For another participant, that analogy suggested something of what discernment looks like: we must witness against a culture of consumerism, but yet be ready to admit that our grasp of the fullness of truth is partial and in need of many disciplinary approaches.

There is a human side to the demand for interdisciplinarity, though: it requires risk-taking in the face of intradisciplinary pressures. On the other hand, failure to engage in interdisciplinary ways may contribute to the lack of civil discourse, for it can promote a limitation in willingness to engage beyond intellectual comfort zones. One participant pointed out that in the current election cycle, there appears to be a strong tendency for voters to act not on reasoned deliberation about the common good but rather on heightened emotion, especially fear. Failure to engage interdisciplinary discourse may contribute to a diminished civic lexicon.

The great challenge for a Catholic university, said one participant, is to root conversation about the human person and human flourishing within a theological framework—a framework which, he averred, would make some colleagues uncomfortable. Among other things, another remarked, that framework points to a model of student

formation that is not exclusively intellectual. So much of graduate-level formation aims for professionalization, whereas the undergraduate formation to which Catholic universities ought to aspire must be more broad and deep. Conversations around the core curriculum are especially difficult for that reason. Ruminations about the common good, said another, are not merely procedural, i.e., making sure everyone has a voice. They are also substantive: they must reflect something of the wisdom about the human person that has emerged as a middle ground between radical individualism and the radical communitarianism which can deny the value of the person. Still another pointed to a comment by Pope Paul VI that modern people do not listen to teachers unless they are also witnesses.¹ Faculty, he said, must remember that they are not only conveying information to students, they are engaging in dialogue with persons who have complex lives and desires for meaning. For another participant, that meant building trust and practicing care for people, even at the institutional level.

¹ Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), 41: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." Online at www.vatican.va.