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Response to Laura Leming

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Laura Leming's paper tackles several important issues in contemporary Catholic higher education and offers insight on how both encounter and discourse are a valued part of our present and future opportunity in university leadership, scholarship, teaching, and education. In responding to this paper, I want to begin by echoing Dr. Leming's reflection on the mission statements of several institutions of Catholic higher learning. They represent the ideal of what universities desire to achieve: the growth of the individual human person while simultaneously developing a humane community and a just society in which to live. Although these mission statements may grow from the diverse stock of Dominican, Benedictine, Jesuit, or Marianist roots, they all seem to reach for the light of truth and knowledge that make women and men free. It is a type of freedom and growth that potentially benefits families, communities, and society at every level. It is a type of freedom that unlocks hidden potentials of the human person. Some aspects of the experience of a university education can be joyfully simple like discovering the sprung rhythm of a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem, or they can be practical such as research toward the destruction of amyloid plaques associated with Alzheimer's disease. Education can liberate us to the point where we can discover that love is real and possible in a very broken world. One just has to imagine the countless alumni and alumnae whose personal journeys have been molded and influenced from the mission of education in the Catholic tradition.

Dr. Leming touches briefly on the notion of the common good that is found in the works of Aquinas but has much older roots in Greek culture and philosophy. Indeed, the notion of the common good has been around for a long time. It originated over 2,000 years ago in Plato's *Republic*, developed further in Aristotle with his *Nicomachean Ethics*, and found refinement in the works of Cicero. David Hollenbach translates a part of Cicero in his book *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*.

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Cicero (see: *De Re Publica*) defined the commonwealth as a thing of the people. But a people is not any collection of human beings brought together in any sort of way, but an assemblage of people in large number associated in agreement with respect to justice and a partnership for the common good.¹

The common good, then, consists primarily of having the social systems, institutions, and environments on which we all depend work in a manner that benefits all people. This only works when people are personally free to participate in such an endeavor. Dr. Leming argues that the dynamics of encounter and discourse are constitutive of the particular common good associated with Catholic higher education. Both encounter and discourse can lead many to move from identification of some need in the community, to a sense of urgency, to a capacity for agency or action in creating educational communities that lead to knowledge about and action for the common good. This is the appropriation of the common good found in ancient Greek culture that is seen through the lens of the Christian hermeneutic and narrative in the gospel.

As part of this study, Dr. Leming takes a brief look at the history of Catholic higher education (CHE) in America. In the Colonial era, higher education was rare in the general population and especially rare for Catholics. General poverty, the relatively high cost of education, and the separation of Protestant and Catholic social strata or cultures contributed much to this phenomenon. Most American colleges were unwelcome places for Catholics, from the founding of Harvard College in 1693 until the founding of Georgetown College in 1789. However, only following the American Revolution did Catholic higher education begin in earnest. Only a few years after the end of the Revolutionary War in 1791, the ratification of the Bill of Rights, guaranteeing freedom of religion, helped Catholics to cement their place in the new country. The first school west of the Mississippi was St. Louis University, St. Louis, Missouri, founded in 1818. The huge influx of European immigrants precipitated further expansion of Catholic education with the founding of Fordham University, Bronx, New York, in 1841; the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, in 1842; the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1843; University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio, in 1850; and St. Mary's College, San Antonio, Texas, in 1852; These institutions were just the start of a long list of colleges and universities that were able to fill the demands of education by a largely immigrant Catholic population. It is very likely the economic situation of explosive industrial growth that provided the wealth and opportunity for the sons and daughters of immigrants to finally get their chance at higher education.

Eventually the assimilation and integration of immigrant populations, combined with the experiences of two world wars and the GI Bill, have brought American Catholics an overabundance of collegiate opportunity. Catholic universities now compete for elite students. As the playing field of supply and demand has changed, other elements or questions arise that create new challenges. Those challenges include new players in the

1 David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

educational industry: online colleges like the University of Phoenix, where a collegiate experience is accomplished with a computer screen and mouse. A second challenge, greater than online courses, is the ever-rising cost of education. A fundamental question can be raised about the access of Catholics or the poor to CHE if costs exclude people from such an opportunity. The explosive cost of higher education and online colleges will eventually have a serious impact on those universities that cannot or refuse to adapt to the changing marketplace or the laws of supply and demand.

Encounter and Discourse

Dr. Leming notes that CHE is an apt vehicle for introducing students into the rich history of Catholic social teaching and praxis. The recent contemporary examples of *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si'* by Pope Francis include an invitation for both Catholics and all people to seek common ground by encountering each other as human beings. Furthermore, Pope Francis exhorts Christians to a personal encounter with Christ by living as disciples in contact with the poor and marginalized. Discipleship cannot be lived in a vacuum, but builds community and the opportunity for sharing in a humane conversation. While many university programs focus on research and teaching, Leming notes that giving students an opportunity to have contact with people of different cultures and their poverty can be a powerful methodology of opening hearts and minds. Courses which prepare students for some type of immersion experience and a guided reflection after such experiences can bring people to a new sense of gratitude of their own gifts and a challenge of how those gifts can be used for both their own personal good as well as the common good. These immersion experiences include local, national, and international programs depending on student need and opportunities within an institution. As faculties become more diverse at Catholic institutions, one of the challenges for CHE today is the openness for faculty to be conversant and ready to promote what Catholic social teaching (CST) offers to the university and world.

As a researcher in the physical sciences, I see few opportunities in a science curriculum for involving students in discussion about CST or the needs of the marginalized in society and culture. Science curricula are almost entirely dedicated to methodology, information gathering, advancing technology, and the broad pursuit of knowledge. Professors and students engaged in such an endeavor rarely discuss the broader impacts or consider the *telos* of a particular form of research. Scientists and science research are driven by funding and often linked with a Darwinian strategy where the successful survive. The opportunity that Dr. Leming points out for educators in CHE, but particularly for scientists, is the priority to introduce some element of CST into all disciplines. In particular, *Laudato Si'* is addressed to all people who share in the environment and are part of an economic system. Pope Francis challenges all "to protect our common home" (*Laudato Si'*, 13) because the earth is our only home and its sustainability affects both our common good and humanity's future. Questions about how our interactions affect the environment and how we determine a just distribution of material goods will no doubt lead to much fruitful discussion and encounter in any classroom.

Finally, it is important to note that all CST and its discourse are linked in some way to the Gospel narrative. From the perspective of a scientist, the characters in the Gospel are engaged in a great experiment concerning faith. Some experiments succeed (Peter, Mt. 16:16 and Martha, Jn. 11:27) while others seem to fail (the Rich Young Man, Mt. 19:22); yet the whole narrative inspires people toward faith and action. Not all experiments in CHE will be successful but their success or failure should not deter us from continuing to live the narrative. As we continue on our pilgrimage in CHE, no small amount of courage and creativity will be necessary to meet the challenges ahead.