

Summary of Roundtable Conversation

Members of the Roundtable responded enthusiastically to Laura Leming's call for attention to the ways Catholic colleges and universities set the table for students to engage in dialogue and encounters, particularly in light of the current national and geopolitical climate. A first question addressed the ways that faculty can properly prepare such encounters such that they do not collapse into various forms of tourism. As one participant noted, it's not unlike being in a shared physical space: On one level, faculty want to broker introductions to people that students may not yet have met. But on another level, she noted, introductions may not be enough to overcome students' desire to do something exotic.

Another participant highlighted the challenge of inviting students into real encounters with persons rather than abstract ideas. Discourses, he said, don't move anyone; relationships do. And some of those relationships unfold by chance—though it may yet be possible to offer students opportunities that heighten the chance, for example, of meeting a person of a different race or class. He recalled Pope Francis's charge to go to the peripheries of society, whether that be in one's own city or another country.¹ In response, another participant suggested that it was still important to attend to discourse as such, taking responsibility for one's ideas. Returning to the work of Jürgen Habermas, she talked about the ideal speech situation that enables real discourse. Much of social media, she noted, is “jabber,” and that is the world many students inhabit. Being able to raise important questions with students takes careful effort.

Another participant raised a question about mission discourse specifically, wondering whether others found it easier to invite conversation among colleagues, as she did, by invoking the charism of a founding order rather than the Catholic tradition broadly. Another participant answered affirmatively, saying that it's easier to draw others to share in the community of those who founded the institution, but lamented that the disconnect with Catholic tradition was disconcerting.

One participant pointed to Benedict XVI's encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, and specifically to his assertion that Christianity is not fundamentally about morals but about

¹ See Gerard O'Connell's summary of Pope Francis's exhortation to go to the peripheries in his article “Reaching the Peripheries,” *America* February, 23, 2015, <http://americamagazine.org/issue/reaching-peripheries>.

encounter with a person.² Accordingly, he suggested, the key mission question is not about doctrines but rather about sharing a coherent notion of the person in our pedagogy. Teaching is, then, not first about passing along knowledge but rather about what kind of imaginative work reading requires of students, and what kind of person it requires them to become. It requires that they come to understand themselves even in the process of coming to understand the other. But he expressed a concern: namely, that in increasingly secular institutions—even those that are historically Catholic—the notion that we find our humanity in the model of Christ is becoming increasingly isolated and marginalized.

For another participant, examples of disruptive discourses over the course of the past year—regarding issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement, the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and the unionization of adjunct faculty—were important teaching moments. For these very live issues pointed to the way that at a university we mustn't pretend to have all the answers but rather be willing to ask the hard questions in the face of mystery. Our opportunity, he said, is to accompany young people as they navigate hard questions, even as we who have more experience wrestle with them ourselves.

Picking up this theme of wrestling with mystery, another participant said that her teaching is about an encounter with our own past, and specifically our 2,000 years of failure. She echoed Cyril Opeil's observation about the importance of creating a psychologically comfortable place for experiencing failure as an important step in the process of learning. In response, another participant called to mind the tendency to desire victory in debates, such as one might see online; he shared his concern about the ways social media can become echo chambers, and suggested that it was possible to require students to engage online in positive ways with people with whom they had disagreements. A third participant noted that social psychology research shows that it's relatively easy to manipulate identity within groups, and that it is possible to leverage the tendency to identify within groups by practicing a hospitality rooted in virtues such as compassion.

2 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), online at www.vatican.va. He writes, "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (1).