

Summary of Roundtable Conversation

Michael Pratt's exploration of meaningfulness in work elicited from the Roundtable participants reflection on teaching, and the goals of undergraduate and graduate education. The first respondent observed a tendency toward fragmentation in students' thinking, as well as in the thinking of faculty, such that work is seen not as an expression of an integrated self but rather as one form of experience out of many others in a busy life. He raised a question about whether meaning is assigned or discovered, arguing that if one accepts a theological view of work it means that one discovers meaning in dialogue with Christ. He pointed to an experience of a retreat at a Benedictine monastery, where he met a monk who spent days and days digging a tree root out with a shovel. The monk's refusal to use a machine to do the work suggested to him that the monk had discovered a meaning to the work as a kind of contemplation. For him, that experience pointed to discovering meaning in work rather than assigning to the work a particular meaning.

Another participant drew a connection to the theme of the Roundtable meeting, namely the common good, suggesting that work can gain meaning if it is a contribution to that good. Responding to that point, another participant reflected that this more positive view of work is a contrast to what had been a theme related to the Genesis account of work as a result of the Fall. More recently, she pointed out, Pope John Paul II drew from the Solidarity movement in Poland to suggest that through work we communicate with wider society, and so through work come to grow the common good. That idea may provide, she suggested, a corrective to students' views of work as a way to make ends meet or to pay tuition bills. At the same time, though, she pointed out that many work against their wills and experience financial stress which saps them of their sense of self-worth.

In practice, argued another participant, work does not always align with a higher value; it serves important utilitarian ends but may in itself lack a transcendent meaning. What the Church can offer, he said, is a value that work cannot give to itself by tying it to transcendence and to the common good. Taking up this point, another participant pointed to the language of passion, saying that loving one's work is for those with privilege. Part of our task as teachers, she continued, is to help bring awareness to structures of privilege in the world. She recalled Laura Leming's paper (in *Integritas* 7.2), suggesting that creating real encounters with others who do not have privilege can help students understand meaning in work, particularly for those who do not get to choose

their passion. She used the example of coming to know the people who clean their residence halls as an exercise to help students experience this kind of encounter. It's that kind of experience, she argued, that ought to set apart Catholic universities from secular ones, resisting an institutional isomorphism rooted in a business model of education.

One participant was particularly moved by this observation about institutional isomorphism, pointing out that passion toward work is often a kind of psychobabble rooted in pleasure rather than meaning. Much of work is not fun—he pointed to grading 50 papers at a time—but it can still be meaningful if connected to a larger understanding of its value. More problematic, he argued, was the fact that our colleges and universities are “embedded and invested in economies that are exploitive and deeply problematic.” He pointed to the cost of intercollegiate athletics as one example, and in particular the economics of Division I sports. As another example, he pointed to the fact that all the trustees on his institution's board that were not members of the founding religious order were leaders of corporate empires, and raised a question about what the board makeup suggests about an institution's values.

Turning to students, another participant observed that this, the 9/11 and 2008 crash generation, was fueled by economic insecurity. He wondered how colleges and universities might promote the humanities in a proactive way, connecting not only the financial value of a degree but also the more transcendent value of the liberal arts in the formation of a whole person. In a related vein, another participant reflected on an experience of teaching an English class to nurses, and related how in that class there was an openness to beauty and a willingness to ask how beauty touches the human heart. The experience helped him to name something distinctive about a Catholic education as a series of experiences that help a person get to the heart of reality, recognize that it is larger than oneself, and discover a place within it. He opined that it is important for faculty to remember this fundamental mode of discovery and not get lost in metadiscourse: “you got into this because you loved to read.”

One participant shared the example of going with students on a retreat where they had the freedom to ask the big questions about how their college experiences helped them to think broadly about their lives. Such an experience, he suggested, as well as others that enabled students to practice encounters with others facing economic or social challenges, can help students to understand their privilege and their responsibility toward the common good. He shared another experience of serving at a women's homeless shelter, where he met a man he later learned was the editor of a prominent magazine who related that the work he did at the shelter was for the sake of remembering who he was. For the faculty member, that self-understanding showed recognition of the ways that even menial work at a homeless shelter can be imbued with meaning to the extent that it is a form of real encounter.

The conversation turned to questions regarding faculty, staff, and graduate students, and how they experience meaning in their work on campus. One person reflected on the ways that faculty are trained to be autonomous agents within their departments,

and sometimes fail to find kinship with others in the university. She mentioned a research study that showed a key difference between faculty and staff: the staff were fully in support of the mission statement, whereas the faculty in some cases were not. Another participant noted that there can be a hierarchy within the faculty ranks, especially in relation to staff, but that working with staff on mission-related questions can be rewarding. Graduate students, remarked another participant, imbibe a sense of narrow professionalism, especially watching older faculty who seek releases from teaching in order to pursue research interests. He related a story from a few years ago about a meeting with graduate students in his department, at which faculty wished to share ideas about what to teach in introductory courses. Among the graduate students, he said, “there was a kind of revolt, in the name of teaching what supports our research.” He expressed astonishment that someone at the age of 23 should think that way.

The conversation ended on a positive note, with a participant observing with pride that the many different religious orders and dioceses that have founded colleges and universities have a panoply of stories to tell about why they began the ministry of higher education. He suggested that it would be beneficial to articulate the differences among these stories so that students might have a better grasp of the diversity that exists within a Catholic approach to education.