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A LEGACY OF MERCY

Lois Eveleth, Ph.D., Professor of Philosophy

Having a legacy is having a past that matters to you. If Salve Regina's past has emerged from the heart of the Church, it has emerged also from the heart of Catherine McAuley. That we should be able to comprehend all at once and clearly the past that we have inherited, the past that has shaped us, is, however, doubtful. Rather, our understanding and insight come gradually, not only because we are human and often distracted and forgetful of the past, but also because the heritage itself undergoes some changes. All human and living entities must change. So it is with a legacy. It is contextually defined, in that it must derive some of its traits from the time, place, and circumstances of each embodiment, even while the cultural landscape keeps changing. Each generation, while reflecting on its past, adds one more reiteration of that past. Each reiteration through the years broadens that legacy, adding nuances that earlier generations might not, or could not, have suspected or anticipated.

There are two parts to my reflections today. First, I offer a perspective into a most important element of our legacy, i.e. the concept of mercy. Then I offer a translation of this concept into goals for our colleges and universities.

Consider the parable of the Good Samaritan. Typically the priest and the Levite get bad press, but they are essential to our legacy and deserve better of us. Insert into your consideration of the parable all the prescriptions scattered throughout Deuteronomy, Leviticus and Numbers regarding contact with corpses and contact with blood and with bodily discharges. Were the priest and the Levite to help this poor wretch lying in the road they would be ritually unclean and forbidden from entering the temple. The procedures for purification were lengthy and often onerous, and the two men would be prevented from fulfilling their obligations during that time. When they walked around him at a safe distance, they were obeying the law; they were men of justice, men of the law. They present an image of justice, of correct process.

The parable was an answer to the question "Who is my neighbor?" We would expect the answer, now and as well as back then, to be family, tribe, friends,

those in physical proximity. By placing a Samaritan into his parable, Christ is negating all those usual criteria of ‘neighbor.’ We might have answered, “If so-and-so is my neighbor, then I should care about his well being.” The parable exactly reverses this relationship: “If I care about so-and-so, then he is my neighbor.” Neighbors, then, are not genetic or geographic accidents. Neighbors are not found, they are formed; they are among the best of human achievements. We humans ‘create’ our neighbors by establishing this caring relationship. The number of neighbors, then, is virtually infinite. No one need be excluded.

While the priest and the Levite are images of justice, the Samaritan is an image of mercy. Justice is concerned with form, procedure, and process, but mercy is concerned with outcomes. The priest and Levite were doing their duty, but the Samaritan went far beyond any possible duty into the realm of the heroic. Justice is defined by the boundaries of one’s community. It is like a blank check on which each age, each polis, each tribe, or each nation fills in the amount it needs, at that time and in that place. In justice, one’s neighborliness has clear boundaries; it is a closed system of discourse and values. Justice is a minimum requirement and can be enforced. Humans, though, usually need far more than the minimum; and mercy, being a move into the heroic, cannot be required or enforced.

Mercy is a creating of neighbors, as if there were no boundaries of any kind – not wealth, nor status, nor ethnic, tribal, or national identity, not political power, not educational attainments – none of these. The beat-up wretch lying in the road is my neighbor if and only if I care about his well-being, care about the outcomes and realities of his life. This creation is heroic, given our natural propensity to self-absorption and our American predilection for rugged individualism.

Though justice and mercy are distinct, they are not separate and they do indeed need each other. If justice is a framework of the body politic, mercy is its soul. If justice is the form, mercy is the dynamism. Neither justice nor mercy is sufficient for human well-being, but both are necessary and, when joined, they are together sufficient for this well-being.

Because mercy is a form of heroism, it springs from the agent’s generosity and creativity. It cannot be required but moves beyond what is required, beyond law, beyond public policy, and beyond duty. Mercy has the same positive, life-affirming goals as justice; it lies on the same scale of value as justice. But those who are merciful stand at the growing edge of what the

community sees as good, the point beyond which justice need not go, the point at which the creativity of mercy envisions that, yes, more is still possible. Mercy, in short, “pushes the envelope” of society’s values.

I said earlier that a legacy is contextually defined and that it derives some of its traits from the circumstances of each embodiment. Consider Mercy colleges and universities as one such embodiment. I find that our Catholic/Mercy legacy shapes our academic goals in at least two significant ways and turn now to each of these.¹

FAITH IS INTEGRATED WITH LEARNING

Usually the word ‘faith’ is confined to its theological connotations. A faith in Christ and His church, though, is not confined to Christ and His church but is even more generic. It will also be a faith in larger realities, such as the perfectibility of a human being, a faith in the possibility of transforming both persons and nature, and a faith, especially, in ideals.

Who told us, after all, to have faith in ideals such as peace, equality, and liberty? To be hopeful that humans can achieve these at all? Where are there societies in history that achieved peace, equality, and liberty for all their citizens? Such dreams are a matter of faith. We must have faith not only in, for instance, the Trinity, but also in our ideals, whether for the working women of nineteenth-century Dublin or the poor of Newport, Rhode Island. Such faith will hold that humans themselves are a work in progress; it will be optimism that people can be liberated from whatever chains, real or metaphorical, hold them back. It will “push the envelope” of society’s values.

A Catholic intellectual tradition may or may not have any one trait that is absolutely distinctive and unprecedented. Non-sectarian colleges, after all, also urge their students to work for social justice; they too offer courses and establish internships in community agencies. We have no monopoly on social justice. With us, however, such commitments are not recent or trendy or politically correct. What is different, I suggest, is the willingness and determination to see every task, every subject, and every discipline through the lens of faith. Faith is not merely an assent to creedal statements; it is, rather a deliberate stand, a permeating optimism, an embrace of every iota of creation as God’s own work. And we too say, with the Creator in Genesis 1, “It is good.” We engage and apprehend this creation. We create knowledge of it – creating knowledge is surely part of our cosmic homework, in this garden of ours. This knowledge and this faith must cooperate; they must be on speaking terms, at

least. And we will someday, each in his or her own appointed time, bring this knowledge of creation with us when we at last “shuffle off this mortal coil.”

WE CAN IDENTIFY MORAL QUESTIONS

Those who are part of a Catholic and Mercy university will recognize moral questions and moral dimensions within complex issues. There is nothing neutral or one-dimensional about education. Those who try to present life, knowledge, or education as value-free perform a peculiar kind of reductionism, one that cheats and misleads our students. An education that is Catholic and Mercy should lead the student to see the moral significance of social realities. Nothing important is morally neutral; only trivia are so. We cannot improve human lives if we foster the myth of value-free knowledge and value-free education. Reform becomes impossible. How can we achieve the best, if the best does not exist?

We want to think that graduates of our universities know that realities like poverty, ignorance, lack of opportunity, the unequal distribution of resources, and powerlessness do have moral relevance. Such realities are not morally neutral; they are not inevitable and unavoidable by-products of social evolution. We want to think that our graduates realize that people are responsible for their inaction as well as their action. If there are human causes to a problem, there will be human solutions. We hope that our graduates know all this.

It is surely a truism that our understanding of our legacy is influenced by the concerns and issues of our own epoch and its circumstances. The concerns and issues of higher education must be the object of our most enlightened efforts. Our students are not usually lying beaten and bloodied on the road, but I think that the challenges of their generation are in many ways more intractable than a straightforward case of assault and battery and robbery.

In conclusion, there are the two traits of our legacy that are very important: that faith is integrated with learning and that we can identify and engage in moral questions. They are not sufficient, but they are necessary. We retain a faith in ideals, no matter how quixotic the striving may seem at times. We have faith in knowledge itself, in the goodness of knowledge. We hold on to an enthusiasm for it, as well as a hope that we will be wise enough to use it well. I suspect that Catherine McAuley would have recognized and approved of this reiteration of her ideals.

¹ I am indebted here to Stephen Trainor, who first identified such goals. See his “A Delicate Balance: The Catholic College in America” *Change*, Vol.38, No.2 (March/April 2006): 14-21.