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Imagining How to Be Christ-Like Together

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ABSTRACT

Catholic colleges and universities wrestle with how to keep the vision and charisms of their founding orders vibrant in the face of shrinking numbers of vowed religious on campuses. The Center described in this paper offers a replicable set of strategies for inculcating Catholic mission and identity across disciplines and throughout the institution: structured social events, strong sense of sacramental imagination infusing the work, and priority given to developing deliberate collegial relationships outside the usual locations of Catholic identity (theology and philosophy): sciences, arts and humanities.

Our work follows from the following premises. First, to be Catholic is to aspire to be Christ-like. To be Christ-like requires evidence of what Christ is like. Therefore, Catholics habitually seek evidences, instances, or presences of Christ to inspire and inform their efforts to be like him. Catholic convictions about the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist have accustomed them to expect to encounter the presence of Christ by means of their senses in other contexts. This Catholic expectation has given rise to a characteristically Catholic sacramental imagination. Our work at the Garaventa Center for Catholic Intellectual Life and American Culture at the University of Portland is essentially an ongoing effort to promote, facilitate and cultivate this sacramental imagination.

The center serves a number of constituencies. As regards our service to our own university community, we use sacramental imagination to empower lay people to be the generative successors of our founding religious community, the Congregation of Holy Cross. We do not see our efforts primarily as a response to the declining number of Holy Cross religious at our university. We are not crafting a "second best" alternative to the way things were done in the "good old days." On the contrary, we believe our work is integral to the Holy Cross mission, as it has always been lived. We are doing what Holy Cross has always done. We have no ambition to impose anything upon anyone. Rather, we seek to unfold the manner in which sacramental imagination animates the spiritual and professional aspirations of our colleagues. Rather than preach Christ to them, we seek to discover and celebrate Christ in them. Building relationships is essential to our success.

In this paper, we offer instances of how we have built upon these premises. We believe these illustrations will prove portable to other contexts. From the outset we aver that "small is good"; it may even be crucial. One of us recently heard a campus tour guide assuring an audience that "because we are Catholic we don't…." But, of course, Catholicism is not best understood as a list of strictures to which we submit. We advocate a more expansive conception of Catholicism—not just to prospective students, but for those who have staked their professional lives with us. As Catholics we maintain that there is nothing that does not have the potential to reveal an aspect of Christ. As Dante held, God is even in Hell, loving the damned. What is required is the sacramental imagination to perceive Christ and the grace to embrace him. Sacramental imagination is earthly, tangible—employing all the senses. Our infinite God provides avenues to be known in an infinite number of ways. While there is no such thing as Catholic chemistry or Catholic physics, a Catholic approach to these and other academic disciplines is to cultivate senses attuned to the Sacred Mystery whom Catholics know as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We have found this to be an effective starting point for engagement with those who may not see a natural link between their professional fields and the Holy Cross mission of our university.

Note that we refer specifically to a Holy Cross mission. We are convinced that our endeavors will fail if they are, or are perceived to be, attempts to "do Catholicism" in the abstract. All Christians are called to be Christ-like in this world, but not on their own—not alone. We pray the "Our Father," not the "My Father." Catholicism gives particular emphasis to the communal dimension of the life of faith. We are one body, one spirit, in Christ. Canonized saints afford examples of how to be Christ-like under the particular circumstances of their lives. They offer us valuable examples to draw upon as we strive to work out how to be Christ-like in our own individual existential situation. But, again, we do not merely stand alone before God. Religious communities—orders, congregations, dioceses, their histories often replete with saints and blesseds and venerables of their own—testify to how to be Christ-like *together*.

A religious community and its traditions constitute a distinctive path to communal Christlikeness. A religious community's spiritual disciplines, its customs and quirks, its habitual ways of being in the world, taken in their entirety, are a way to be holy together. To participate in the mission of a Catholic college is to situate one's professional endeavors in the context of a specific tradition. This is true whether or not one is Catholic or a believer of any sort. One of us has a physicist friend who remarked jokingly after long association with the Collegium program, "I used to be a Jewish atheist. Now I'm a Catholic atheist." This is something like what we mean, though without implying that it is necessary to renounce one's own spiritual heritage. The idea is that to participate in the mission of a particular Catholic college is to be in some sense a Franciscan Catholic or a Benedictine Baptist or a Jewish Jesuit. In fact, there is a further distinction to be drawn. Each institution has its own history of the engagement of its founding charism with a particular, evolving, social and cultural context. Local ways of doing things have their own

validity. So, for example, after more than a century in both places, our way of being Holy Cross in Portland, Oregon differs legitimately from the way they do it in South Bend, Indiana.

Sometimes, for example in the case of Jesuit or Benedictine institutions, the founding spiritual and educational traditions have long been set out explicitly in written form. Other times they have to be teased out by careful observation of the way they have been, and are being, lived. Let us again take Holy Cross as an example. Our Congregation was founded to help revive the ravaged Church of post-revolutionary, post-Napoleonic France. Born to address an acute crisis, Holy Cross had little opportunity at the outset to elaborate a formal spirituality or educational philosophy. It was necessary to plunge immediately into the work. With too few religious and inadequate resources, there was no choice but to rely upon divine providence and boundless zeal. A line from a letter by our founder, Blessed Basil Moreau, expresses the urgency of the situation: "Let us hurry, to be about the work of the Resurrection." We have been hurrying ever since, with, until recently, little time or inclination for self-definition. But over the years a distinctive Holy Cross way has emerged from the crucible of our lived experience. The zeal and trust in divine providence remain. The fact that there have never been enough of us to do the work has spared us the illusion that the work is ours alone. From the beginning, lay collaborators have been integral to the mission. They *are* we. Long service to the Church in the United States has inculcated in Holy Cross religious an informality that is characteristically American. At some point we learned that it is not necessary to stand on one's dignity in order to have dignity. We let people into our lives, so that it becomes evident to them that we are flawed, sometimes idiosyncratic, human beings. Along the way we have become known for hospitality. These and other traits constitute the particular Holy Cross manner of being like Christ. They find expression in the lives and work of those who share in the Holy Cross mission today. We imagine that something like this situation prevails at other Catholic educational institutions where the founding community's way of being like Christ has not found comprehensive expression in writing. It is learned by being lived. And where the founding community has been inarticulate in giving systematic expression to its way of life, their lay collaborators can employ the tools of their own academic disciplines to do the job. We turn our attention now to the practicalities of that endeavor.

Relationships are Paramount

Let's take a look at the Emmaus story (Luke 24:13–35). It had been a rough few days for the disciples; their hopes and dreams had just been crushed. But rather than stay home and draw sustenance from their core support system, Cleopas and Peter were seven miles *away* from Jerusalem. Jesus, his identity still veiled to their dejected eyes, drew their sad story from them with the most understated invitation imaginable ("What things?"), then ignited their hope and conviction at table in Emmaus, as he broke bread and shared it with them. In that moment, the

audacious miracle of Christ's resurrection was illuminated for them and they hurried back to Jerusalem, ready to get to work spreading the Gospel. It was the twin actions of listening to the stories and sharing a meal that made the dazzling light turn on for them, and we argue that this same pairing is the pulsing heart of inspiring colleagues in professional programs to take on the charge of implementing their institution's Catholic mission.

How does the Emmaus story map onto a college's professional programs in this regard? In an era of fierce competition for shrinking financial and human resources, academic silos might feel like the solution for keeping individual interests secure. It's every department and professor for themselves in the battle for tuition dollars, grant monies, institutional influence. That is just at the department and division levels; individual professors clamor equally for position and the safety of tenure and increasing rank. We tend to stack our scholarly work into piles of "Least Publishable Units," increasingly esoteric and specialized in our studies. Even as we bemoan our students' obsession with grades, to the detriment of their education, we don't appear to be very far behind them in narrowing our scopes of investigation, curiosity and wonder to the products most likely to result in securing tenure and making us promotable. The walls between the English or Philosophy departments and schools of Nursing, Engineering, and Education, even on small college campuses, appear impermeable as professors and programs become more specialized. This is exacerbated by the relentless demands of professional accreditation cycles, with their insatiable appetite for data and documentation of minutiae that seem so far away from the actual practice of teaching, nursing, or creating water filtration systems. Professors, chairs, and deans look every bit as downcast as those two disciples headed toward Emmaus, away from the community that could be offering a haven, a place to integrate the disparate elements of days that are frenetic without being truly productive.

The silos that have come to feel inevitable on our campuses may not be necessary, and we might look to a dimension of the recent past—the presence of large numbers of religious men and women of our institutions' founding orders—as a model for "de-siloing." When those priests, brothers, or sisters lived in community, academic silos were obviated by the very nature of members' shared lives. In their common life, theologians dined at the same table as mathematicians and nurses and philosophers, as a matter of course. The interdisciplinary discourse that we so value these days that we will pay to attend national conferences to engage in it was just "dinner conversation" not too long ago. Not only did the religious community members take part in talk that meandered among all the disciplines, but because these men and women shared, for example, their Benedictine, Norbertine, or Holy Cross heritage, each of their disciplines was naturally refracted through the lenses of the religious, sacramental imaginations at the heart of those communities. Beyond these quotidian interdisciplinary encounters making it habitual for economists to know what was going on in psychology, the visible presence of religious men and women on campuses served to transmute the abstraction of Catholic mission and identity into something concrete: the

attractive, approachable, ultimately human face of Christ. And as they did their work, teaching, uncovering truth and revealing beauty to their students and to their lay colleagues, religious did not just look like Christ, they acted as Christ in the worlds of their campuses.

Of course, this sketch could be dismissed as nostalgic, even sentimental. We do not mean to suggest that if we could all just increase the numbers of vowed religious on our campuses, questions of Catholic mission and identity would be resolved. That is magical thinking. However, we do assert that the common table, shared meals and listening deeply to one another's stories—the very elements that catalyzed the dejected disciples into exuberant evangelists—are not the exclusive domain of the religious orders that founded our institutions. They are, in fact, absolutely replicable, portable constructs available to all of us, regardless of our station in life, who answer the call to live the Catholic missions of our institutions: to be Christ-like, to inculcate in one another and in our students a sacramental imagination. And it makes a virtue of the small size of many of our campuses, where it is actually possible for all faculty to know each other, given the right circumstances. Let us turn now to the logistical aspects of that proposition.

There is no such thing as a "faculty dining room" at the University of Portland. The Holy Cross priests and brothers open their communal dining hall to every employee, staff and faculty alike. Financially, it's the best deal for a full meal on campus, and all are welcome to bring their own brown-bag lunch as well. This echoes the insistence of their founder, Blessed Basil Moreau, on hospitality as a defining charism of his young religious community. Holy Cross staff and faculty mingle with their lay collaborators at each table, lingering over conversations that touch upon every dimension of the intellectual life and popular culture. For those raised in another or in no faith tradition, and even for cradle Catholics who might harbor dusty ideas about the exotic, distant lives of priests and brothers, these daily instantiations of the charisms of Holy Cross are not threatening or even very remarkable most of the time. The straightforward daily interaction of breaking bread at a shared table and taking in one another's answers to the question "how is your day going?" allow lay staff and faculty to see Holy Cross life not as a set of constraints, but as what it is to the priests and brothers who live it: a way to be Christ-like as they live the life of the mind. The same life of the mind, in all its variety among the disciplines and professions, unfolds even when there are no Holy Cross present, illuminating English professors about life as a nursing preceptor and the view from the perch of a student teacher supervisor. Once again, we note that this part of the model leverages the fact that so many of our campuses have under three hundred faculty members.

Two Telling Vignettes

So embedded is the Holy Cross charism of hospitality into campus life that it dictated the first official act in our tenure as directors of our Center for Catholic Intellectual Life and American

Culture. While we were settling into our new office on a Friday morning in mid-August, unpacking boxes lost its luster. We had also noticed a certain ennui among the few people who had not escaped campus for a last respite before the onslaught of meetings, orientations, and classes. We pooled the cash in our wallets, made a quick trip to a discount store for wine and cheese and sent an email blast to all faculty and staff to drop what they were doing that afternoon to stop by and see our new digs. Again, our small size makes such an endeavor manageable. The monthly ritual of "Thirst Fridays" was born that day: a time for any adult on campus to come by for ten or ninety minutes of simple refreshments, convivial conversations with people whose paths they would ordinarily never intersect … a gentle destruction of silos as French professors chat with Residence Life staff, the Provost with the grounds crew, nurses with engineers. A ceramic bowl with the plaintive sign "Please help save us from boxed wine" generates enough funds to replenish the board each month. We have been, as Jesus suggested, "as cunning as serpents and as gentle as doves" (Matthew 10:16) in creating this space for generating agenda-free interdisciplinary conversations: we've lined the walls with sticky notes of potential program ideas, laid out colleagues' recent publications and watched these small tendrils blossom from mere conversation-starters into fruitful cross-divisional collaborations. We continue to imitate Jesus' temperate, invitational example from his walk to Emmaus with his two despairing friends: "tell me about your day" is a no-cost, no-risk, thoroughly Catholic strategy for creating buy-in to the mission of a place. Breaking bread and enjoying wine together, even day-old bread and bargain-basement wine, elevates it to the sacramental. For those whose work demands that they think in terms of "deliverables," three specific programs whose geneses were conversations at a Thirst Friday illustrate the potential of this simple campus rite.

First, the Faith and Intellectual Life Discussion Group (FILDG) is an endeavor that has done as much as anything to promote the role of Catholic intellectual tradition and identity among staff and faculty from every unit on campus. Two professors—one Catholic, the other non-religious—reflected that many academics came into higher education because they love the life of the mind, savoring and mucking about with the world of words and ideas, and yet the demands of teaching and research seem to preclude intellectual playfulness. They were also interested in contributing to the Catholic mission in the Holy Cross tradition. They tapped the power of the personal invitation and rounded up a cadre of colleagues who committed to two gatherings each semester to read and discuss an article or a chapter of general interest, accessible to people from any discipline. The meetings are held Friday afternoons and always include wine and cheese, thanks to a small annual budget from the Provost's Office. Readings have addressed everything from sacramental imagination to environmental politics to the slowness movement. One member of the group has appointed himself the official "poetry hound" and finds a thematically related poem to accompany each reading, along with a piece of art to have on the screen during the discussions, as ways of honoring multiple ways of revealing truth. Anyone who has ever attended even one

gathering receives a personal "Save the Dates" bookmark invitation in summer, to ensure that FILDG makes it onto people's calendars before the deluge of other responsibilities. That simple personalized appeal has proven pivotal in nurturing the sense of community among the three dozen regulars, who come from every academic and professional program among faculty and staff. Carving out this time and making the commitment to listen deeply and respond sincerely to one another is another example of Holy Cross and their lay collaborators heeding the exhortation of their founder, Blessed Basil Moreau, to "take care, lest you speak least about what matters most."

Another example of a signature mission-related endeavor that was born out of a Thirst Friday conversation is our "Pre-Play Primer" series, a collaboration between the professional theater program and multiple academic units on campus. "What shows will you be doing this year?"—an obvious dialogue opener—yielded a slate of lesser-known plays. A professor of Greek philosophy sidled into the conversation and noted that he might have some things to say about their production of Euripides' *Alkestis*. The head of the Feminist Discussion Group on campus also noted the potential for illuminating dimensions of that play and another on the slate, Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*. The shows' costume designer wanted a platform to showcase the conceptual framework of the colors and lines he had selected for the productions. And so it came to pass that before the Saturday performance of each main-stage show, a trio of experts from a range of disciplines provides a taut series of eight-minute talks affording insights to the audience that open their eyes and ears to a richer experience of the play than they would have had unaided. Wine and cheese are provided with funds from the departments involved. All this happens under the aegis of our Center for Catholic Intellectual Life and American Culture, quite possibly the *last* campus unit with which the head of the Feminist Discussion Group or the Professional Theater Program's head of costuming might have expected to find themselves collaborating. Not only has this opened up the intellectual dramatic experience afforded to theater patrons (eminently consistent with the objectives of any endeavor on a campus animated by two millennia of Catholic intellectual tradition), but it has re-shaped the Professional Theater Department's way of thinking about its potential material. Prior to these collaborations, discussions of their season's slates might have echoed the young tour guide's assertion, "well, we can't do that play, because we're on a Catholic campus." Now, when selecting plays to perform, the Theater Department gives consideration to shows that lend themselves to several intellectually fruitful lenses, anticipating which campus experts they might tap to illuminate various facets of whatever they select.

A final case that illustrates the combined powers of the personal invitation and of breaking bread together is the growing collaboration between our center and the Office of Residential Life. All adults from any profession are welcome at Thirst Fridays. Residence hall staff were eager early adopters of this policy, and we soon found out that a principal reason for their avid attendance was the opportunity it afforded them to speak with people over the age of twenty-one about a host of engaging topics. On the one hand, they were intellectually lonely, and this monthly ritual gave

them a way to engage with the academic mission of the university. On the other hand, the presence of residence hall staff at Thirst Fridays allowed professors to put a face to a side of student life of which they had little direct experience. Rather than volleying email blasts between unknown busy hall directors and unknown busy faculty members, Beth was able to call Kate directly to pitch an idea. She wanted to share her professional interest in the Camino de Santiago with residents in Beth's hall for whom she was responsible for creating mission-related programming. Chris got Karen to give a talk on opportunities for post-graduation service programs in education after they uncovered a shared interest in that subject one Thirst Friday. A successful large grant application to cultivate initiative among student leaders began with a simple back-and-forth one Thirst Friday among faculty and staff members from five different buildings on campus.

These three programs are snapshots capturing the essence of our principal argument for how Catholic colleges, especially small ones, can successfully promulgate their mission into diverse academic and professional programs: eat together, draw out people's stories and listen deeply to them. However, as fundamental as genuine hospitality is to our endeavor, we will fail if we are not intellectually credible. The work demands that its practitioners be intellectually nimble, curious enough about all the units on their campuses to see and to forge connections among them. They must be willing and able to engage with anyone about any discipline if they are to undermine silos. Our center, like its analogues on other campuses, enjoys the advantage of a "bird's-eye view" of academic disciplines and professional programs throughout the institution. We have gifted colleagues, alongside whom we have toiled to satisfy accreditation requirements, make good departmental hiring decisions and meet the diverse needs of millennial students. The same intellectual instruments that they (and we) have honed in pursuing our individual disciplines are the ones we can enlist to develop programming, publications and grant projects that promote our Catholic mission and identity. The key to doing this is, again, to foster amenable humane relationships in which, taking the risen Christ as our model, we walk with our weary colleagues and draw out their stories. We break bread and pour wine with them, reflecting back what they have told us, and then, more often than not, good fruit comes forth: new courses, articles, collaborations, even just renewed zeal for the work already in front of us all.

If we could offer a final bit of insight from lessons we have learned in this work, it would be to emphasize the need to consider who the most unlikely collaborators for our work are and draw them into the heart of it. Engineers, dramaturges, and nurses historically had no natural connection with the Center for Catholic Intellectual Life before they started intersecting informally at Thirst Fridays. The Feminist Discussion Group and Play Selection Committee might in the past have chafed against the constraints—real or perceived—placed on their flourishing by virtue of being housed in a small Catholic university. Targeting those unlikely collaborators was among our best investments of imagination. Why? Because their presence at the heart of our work provoked a lot of curiosity among their skeptical colleagues, and the full, appreciative audiences that have

emerged for their work as a result of our partnerships have removed traces of a perceived "Catholic curse." Artists in particular seek the transcendent in their work. They tend to work at this publicly, and so a public showcase such as the Pre-Play Primers and all the conversations leading up to the implementation of that program is a cogent example of an instance when a function of art overlaps naturally with a consequence of the Catholic sacramental imagination. What's needed is to elucidate and celebrate that overlap. In short, that is the charge of a center such as ours: not to create new work for people, but to illuminate and enliven that which is always present but often overlooked: grace already happening in our midst.

Combatting Gnostic heresies in the second century AD, Irenaeus wrote "the glory of God is man fully alive" (*Adversus Haereses* 4.20). This is a fitting assertion on which to conclude. No college president, dean or chair worthy of their title could want anything less than for their faculty to fully flourish, bringing all their gifts to bear on the work of educating the young men and women who fill our classrooms. We contend that Catholic colleges come closest to doing this, and therefore are closest to revealing God's glory, when faculty walk, talk and eat together. What's needed are imagination and courage to animate those three simple actions.