

# Wisdom, Dignity, and Justice

## Higher Education as a Work of Mercy

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**M**y focus in this essay both is on the particularity of a Mercy charism in higher education and also on the way in which this charism belongs to the whole church. Since this is an abridged version of an original paper delivered at a conference on Mercy Higher Education, some of what I say will not be backed by the analysis that I initially tried to provide. Yet my analysis and argument are contained elliptically in my title: "Wisdom, Dignity, and Justice: Higher Education as a Work of Mercy." What I will try to show is the following: (1) Wisdom involves many things, but central to it is a recognition of the dignity of human persons and the value of all creation. (2) Genuine recognition of the dignity of all persons, along with insight into the treasures of the rest of creation, yields imperatives of justice. (3) Justice both calls for and makes possible relationships of compassion or mercy. (4) At its best, higher education aims at wisdom. Along the way, wisdom may be awakened and challenged by the claims of mercy and justice. When wisdom, dignity, justice, and mercy are held together, then higher education can be a work of mercy.

### **Wisdom**

The more skeptical among us might raise our eyebrows at the statement that the central goal of higher education is to grow in wisdom. In a time and society marked by narrow specialization of disciplines, economic pressures, desires not only for survival, but for upward mobility, what even counts as "wisdom"? When trends in higher education seek to accommodate not only new forms of learning but also new challenges to *any* learning that aims at universal theorizing, what might "wisdom" mean? When departments are more and more isolated from one another in colleges and universities, and scholars find it difficult to understand the

world through one another's lenses, what kind of "wisdom" might we search for or expect?

I take such questions seriously, but I do not think they undermine a goal of wisdom in higher education. Insofar as the questions reflect extreme forms of deconstruction and distorted desires shaped by multiple culturally hidden forces, they do seem to be conversation stoppers and to render moot any longing for wisdom on which we might base our educational goals. But questions like these may also be a starting point in a search for understanding and wisdom. If, for example, educating in a postmodern world allows us to deconstruct inadequate theoretical idols and illusions of isolated individuality, if it brings us to an appreciation of diversity, engagement with the Other, and humility in the face of the partiality of knowledge, then it may still be education that begins in and aims toward wisdom.

Whatever its ultimate goals, all higher education has importantly to do with the initiation of new generations of persons into a civilization, a culture in which or against which they must find their way. The Greeks educated for virtue and for freedom of intellectual inquiry; the humanists of the Renaissance educated for the reform of society and for individual self-fulfillment; Christians have educated persons in the workings of the world and in the

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relationship of the world to God. None of these educational traditions, nor any combination of them, has ever been divorced from preparing persons to make a living, to enter a career, to advance the skills and services that a society needs.<sup>1</sup> Both theoretically and practically, both individually and communally, higher education has sought to initiate persons into a civilization and a culture through some form of expansion of mind, social analysis, development of skills, experience of relationships, and capacity building for freedom of choice guided by some form of wisdom.

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The goals of higher education today, insofar as they are adequate, take into account not only relativity in physics, but the culture-bound perspectives of history, literature, psychology and sociology, philosophy and theology. We have learned to value pluralism when it does not mean that “anything goes.” We have learned to welcome diversity (or at least we have learned that we ought to welcome it) and to see the possibilities of unity within it. We have learned to value community and the freedom it nurtures. We have experienced the necessity of interdisciplinary study, but also the humility it requires as we realize that everyone knows something that others do not know; and that we will all know more only if we are willing to share our knowledge and our methods.

Real wisdom in every respect comes from learning—through whatever process or with whatever resources—about the interrelationships of all beings and the dignity at the heart of every person. Much of higher education through long centuries

of its development has been an attempt to learn just this, but to learn it primarily by studying human achievements—in science, the arts, politics, architecture, the winning of wars and the conquering of territories, the possession of land and the fruits of human labor on the land. Yet as Michael Buckley pointed out in the early 1980s, what was missing from these studies, from this education, was an encounter with human suffering.<sup>2</sup> Learning of human successes without learning of human pain, or learning about conquerors without learning about the exploited and the conquered, learning about the leaders and their ideas without learning about the marginalized and the poor, led and still may lead to the estrangement of an educated elite from the lives of the desperate and from the worldwide phenomenon of human misery.

This has changed (to some extent) in higher education generally since the early '80s, and certainly (again, to some extent) in Catholic higher education. Most colleges and universities at least offer possibilities of community service, urban immersion, and travel that is not only to learn of the glories of human achievement but the need for solidarity between persons in diverse cultures with diverse hopes and needs. Moreover, renewed studies of, for example, the classic content of the humanities, empirical research by social sciences, and humanitarian goals of many of the sciences, open the eyes of students not only to human impoverishment and injustice but to the mystery of the human person—to the dignity, the beauty, and the basic needs of all persons.

### **Dignity**

The Catholic tradition stands out among the multiple traditions of Christianity in that it has sustained a kind of optimism about learning. Unlike other strands of Christianity, it has continued to believe in the basic intelligibility of creation and in the basic capacity of the human mind to understand what is revealed in creation. Although the Catholic tradition, like others, has taken seriously the “human condition” limited by human nature and damaged by human sin, it has never thought that humans are either so limited or so injured and incapacitated that they cannot learn (however partially) about the universe and about humanity itself. Not only the

Bible, but creation itself has been considered a revelatory text.

This learning, the study of this text, is not simple, however. Think of the ways we try to understand the cosmos, the universe, the planet Earth. Think of the academic disciplines we have developed in order to understand the worth of every creature—not only their instrumental worth but their worth in themselves. The motivations for such study may be multiple, but in Catholic education they can include the sort of inquiry that once motivated St. Augustine. Searching for God, Augustine described his questioning of the earth: “What is this God whom I love?” and “Tell me about God, you who are not God.” All things on the earth answered him, he said, from the “sea and the deeps and the creeping things with living souls,” to the “blowing breezes and the universal air with all its inhabitants,” to the “sun, the moon, the stars.” “They cried out in a loud voice: ‘God made us.’” My question, Augustine said, “was in my contemplation of them, and their answer was in their beauty.”<sup>3</sup>

But if study of the world is complex and ongoing, think of the study of ourselves. Discipline after discipline seeks to probe the meaning of the human species and of each human person. The concrete reality of human persons includes multiple elements and dimensions.<sup>4</sup> At least sometimes in our own experience and in our academic explorations, we have glimpsed a core value at the heart of each person, a value that grounds a claim that all of us are ends in ourselves. In this recognition rises the further claim that we are to be treated as ends, not only as means. There are multiple warrants for these claims. One of them is our capacity for free choice. By our freedom, we possess ourselves; our selves and our actions are in an important sense our own. By our freedom, we can determine the meaning of our own lives and, within limits, our destiny.

We are also terminal centers, ends in ourselves, because of what today we call our relationality. We possess ourselves and transcend ourselves not only by our freedom but by our capacities to know and be known, love and be loved. We belong to ourselves yet we belong to others; we are centered both within and without. Each of us is a whole world in herself, yet our world is in what we love.

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ships make freedom of self-determination possible (for without them we cannot grow in freedom); but freedom is ultimately for the sake of choosing relationships—of choosing what and how to love. Herein lies the basis of human dignity and the requirement to grow in wisdom regarding what humans need. Out of wisdom about all the creatures of the world, and especially about human dignity, arise imperatives of human justice.

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The threads of ideas that I have been trying to identify may now be ready for weaving into a fabric whose background is Catholic and Mercy higher education and whose central design is justice and mercy. Let me come now to the threads of justice.

Justice of course can mean many things. One of the tasks of higher education in initiating persons into civilization and culture is to test the multiple theories of justice that have been proposed through many centuries and in many different cultures. Some of these will prove to have been inadequate, and some of them simply wrong. Some will be more adequate than others.

Examples of theories of justice that cannot be adequate for our society or our church today are theories that accommodate human slavery (a seemingly obvious example), or theories that assume a basic inequality among persons on the basis of race or gender (an example apparently not yet so obvious to everyone).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, we judge such theories to be not only inadequate but wrong. In the past, there were no doubt cultural reasons why such theories were not questioned, but today we (or at least most of us) condemn them as distortions of justice, as theories that actually support and reinforce systemic injustice. When we ask how such views of justice could have held sway for so many centuries and

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in so many cultures, the only answer can be that the dominant culture found reasons to avert its eyes from the dignity of some human individuals and groups, thereby not recognizing them as human, or at least not fully human. And despite long struggles for a better recognition of this dignity, we, too, still fail in practice if not in theory to oppose and remedy attitudes of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and cultural imperialism—attitudes that continue to exist in societies and in the hearts of countless people, including ourselves.

No one expects higher education to be the sole solution to failures in wisdom and justice. It has not been so in the past, nor is it in the present. Indeed, institutions of higher learning are vulnerable like all institutions to the culture blindness that is endemic to any given society. Yet, higher education is surely that realm of society where primary challenges to failures and distortions of thought ought to be taken seriously. It may even be that realm of society where critical challenges can be formulated for the moral failures that abet distortions of thought (moral failures such as greed, complacency, or the desire for power). Higher education functions, after all, not only to initiate persons into a culture that is already made, but thereby to influence the culture for better or for worse.

Wisdom, human dignity, and justice, therefore, remain not only relevant but crucial to the shaping of higher education. Lest this stand as a platitudinous assertion, let me try a quick thought experiment. Suppose we here today were in a position to found a new college or university; and suppose we knew that our own children or some particular individuals close to us would be the first students in this institution of higher education. What would we want to provide for these students, from their first day of matriculation to their last day before graduation? I will speak for myself, readers can test the plausibility and desirability of what I propose.

I would want these students, my children or my friends, to find first of all an institution that is itself marked by justice. I would want a community of learning in which students could trust the competence of teachers, the care and commitment of teachers, and the extraordinary wisdom of at least some teachers. I would want a college or university in which members of the administration and the staff work together for the same goals and are committed to adjudicating disagreements in ways marked by fairness and due process. I would want an institution in which just wages are paid to everyone, so that faculty, administration, and staff can be free and happy to work for more than their monetary wages. I would want an institution where interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary teaching and learning are rewarded, so that junior faculty will not be penalized for it nor will any student who appreciates its value be deprived of it. I would want an institution in which the students experience harmony, though not necessarily always agreement, among faculty and between faculty and administration; where faculty can recognize administrators as their advocates, not their adversaries; and where administrators can trust faculty, even when they are frustrated by them.

Above all, I would want this institution to be just toward its students. It would give them the education they need and deserve. It would respect and even reverence them—in their diversity, their uniqueness, their plurality of gifts and possibilities. It would therefore aim in its policies, its actions, and its ethos, to nurture the capacities in the students for freedom and for relationship. It would not fear, but rather cultivate, students' possibilities for self-determination and for discerning their responsibilities. It would awaken their desires for union, through knowledge and love, with more and more of what can be learned about the vast reaches of the universe, the microscopic smallness of the tiniest of creatures, the diversity of human cultures and occupations, and human persons as embodied spirits. Each student would be able to encounter at least one teacher who might change their lives, not through indoctrination, but inspiration.

The students would not be living in a paradise, isolated from human misery and pain. No matter how just the institution in which they studied, they would have opportunities to learn to accept human

frailty, and to learn about forgiveness and patience. They would learn, and co-learn, about human sufferings that are a part of embodied life—such as natural disasters, illness, limitations great and small. They would be given the tools to recognize that the future of all of creation is in some way dependent on them—whether in terms of Earth’s environment, the intrinsic worth of every being, or the survival of the human species. They would have at least encouragement to learn to see the gem of dignity in each human person, no matter how different from themselves, no matter how challenged in abilities, no matter even how wicked. They would begin to understand that some sufferings do not have to be; that some sufferings ought not end in either dominance or death, but in change. They would have possibilities to discern whether and what actions they may and must take to make the world more just, and to make their countries, families, churches, sexual partnerships, and future occupations and professions more just. They would have ample opportunity to discover their own limitations, frailties, and powerlessness; but they would also learn of their own dignity.

These students would also have lives outside of their community of learning. They would, like students everywhere, have to engage in their own education in spite of economic constraints and pressures. They would have to make decisions in terms of their relationships with the ordinary political, social, ecclesiastical spheres of the wider world. They would bring all of their experiences to their learning—with no questions ruled out, no methods dismissed as not worth a try, no voices silenced because of their backgrounds.

And since this institution that I am imagining for my children and my friends would be Catholic and Mercy, it would foster an ethos, and have at least some participants, to witness to students that their freedom is ultimately a capacity to decide for or against what they believe is ultimate; that their capacity for relation stretches even to the infinite; that they may dare to hope in an unlimited future.

I have seen colleges and at least parts of universities where this kind of wisdom and justice is possible and even present. Yes, of course, there are serious obstacles and genuine limitations on what any form of higher education can provide. Not all students are ready to take advantage of the possibil-

ities I describe. And despite their own preferences, there are many students who cannot take the time for a full college experience, who must therefore learn piecemeal and against great odds (though all the while meshing their learning with their everyday experience). Institutions, too, have fiscal limits, the kind of limits that threaten to turn decisions about faculty, programs, and equipment into sheer business matters. I have known colleges, universities, and students with all of these difficulties. No matter what, however, I would want to argue that no institution of higher education can be justified if its structures, its internal relationships, and its provisions for its students are unjust—which is to say, if they are unsuited to the pursuit of wisdom or respect for human dignity.

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### **Mercy**

Mercy both requires justice and makes it possible. How does it require justice? Mercy, like love (of which it is a form), can be helpful or harmful, wise or foolish, inaccurate or true, creative or destructive. Mercy, like love, must therefore have standards, criteria, measures, whereby it is good or wise or true. At the risk of being too brief and hence too blunt, let me simply say that the fundamental norm (measure, standard) for a right and good love, and a right and good mercy, is the concrete reality of the beloved.<sup>6</sup> If this is missed, mercy will miss its mark; it will harm rather than help. As examples: If I love and am “merciful” toward persons as if they are things, or things as if they are persons, I love them both unjustly. If I love and care for my stu-

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dents only as supporters of my reputation or fulfillers of my (or my institution's) ambitions, they will be right to say that I do not really love them but only myself. Or if I do in fact love them for themselves, but I am obtuse when it comes to understanding their genuine needs, I may injure them when I offer them what I have imagined they need or wanted them to need. If education leads anyone to judge persons from a false bias, to interpret situations naively, it will not lead to genuine mercy. This, then, is how mercy requires justice. Or better, the requirement for true mercy is, therefore, the wisdom to understand well—insofar as we can—concrete realities, contexts, relationships, and the claims they make on us in justice.

But mercy also makes justice possible. Mercy enhances the knowledge that is needed for justice, and it motivates actions that respond to the claims of justice. Mercy (or compassion) adds to love an element of stronger affective response and an assumption of more acute access to knowledge of the concrete reality of others. Love is a response to persons as lovable, as valuable; mercy is this same response with the added notion of "suffering with."<sup>7</sup> Precisely because mercy involves beholding the value of others and suffering with them in their need, it opens reality to the beholder; it offers a way of "seeing" that evokes a moral response—to alleviate pain, provide assistance in need, support in wellbeing. Mercy therefore illuminates justice and propels it to action.

To appeal to a Christian theological perspective: It is our belief that the mercy of God is

intended to flow not only into and upon us but through us, one to the other. By God's grace, we are to understand one another's and the whole world's need for beauty as well as for bread, for companionship as well as for peace, for mutual respect and mutual strengthening of our loves, our justice, and our hopes. This is why we participate in higher education (whatever our role or position) as co-learners. Do we not grow in wisdom through the mutuality of our efforts—administrators, staff, students, faculty? Do we not gain clarity about the demands of justice through the challenges of one another? Is not this kind of receiving and giving a whole work of mercy whereby we at least try to advance human knowledge and wisdom, affirm freedom and dignity in a cherished universe, make choices about our loves, and strive to mend the world with justice?



## Notes

- 1 See Christopher F. Mooney, *Boundaries Dimly Perceived: Law, Religion, Education, and the Common Good* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), part 3.
- 2 Michael Buckley, "The University and the Concern for Justice: The Search for a New Humanism," *Thought* 57 (June, 1982): 219–33.
- 3 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. Warner (New York: New American Library, 1963), 10.6.
- 4 I have treated these elements of human reality in a number of other writings, most recently in *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), chapter 6.
- 5 For a remarkable study of the long centuries in which Christians accepted slavery, see John T. Noonan, *A Church Which Can and Cannot Change* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005). For the failure of church and society to recognize the equality of women and man, see Farley, *Just Love*, passim.
- 6 In the original version of this paper, I provided more extended examples of this. Here I only refer the reader to my *Compassionate Respect: A Feminist Approach to Medical Ethics and Other Questions* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), esp. 3–20. See also *Just Love*, 196–206.
- 7 See *Compassionate Respect*, 39–43, 72–79.