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Spirituality and Higher Education: Perspectives from Service-Learning

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Prophecy and solidarity: a Franciscan perspective

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The Way of the Franciscans: A Prayer Journey Through Lent (2021).

8. PROPHECY AND SOLIDARIETY: A FRANCISCAN PERSPECTIVE¹⁷

Daniel Horan, OFM

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Introduction

What is it that we offer our students when we offer them a Franciscan education? Recently the trend has been to respond to that question with an eye toward integration of service-learning based pedagogy with core curricular goals and objectives.¹⁸ This, in itself, is an admirable and important component to a well-rounded undergraduate education and should be supported and encouraged. However, service learning, as such, is not Franciscan.¹⁹ Many colleges and universities associated with varying religious congregations or traditions emphasize the importance of service to the community as a constitutive element of a contemporary liberal arts education. To suggest that service is a core pillar of Franciscan education is to posit a false monopoly in the market of effective undergraduate curricula.²⁰ The suggestion that service learning is not exclusively Franciscan is not to undermine the significance of its role in today's integrated educational programs. Rather, the question raised in noting this observation is: What about service-learning as it is done at explicitly Franciscan schools - member institutions of the AFCU, for example - makes it Franciscan? Or, to put it yet another way, and perhaps more realistically: What can be done to make such programs more Franciscan?

Academic community engagement: from service to solidarity

Academic community engagement, a phrase I prefer to service-learning, denotes a programmatic effort to introduce students to a new way of conceptualizing the educational experience that moves them beyond the classroom and into local and global com-

17 This paper is an extract from: Daniel P. Horan (2011). Profit or Prophet? A Franciscan Challenge to Millennials in Higher Education. *The AFCU Journal*, 8, 59-73.

18 Past several volumes of the *AFCU Journal* offer perspectives along these lines. For a sampling, see: Godfrey & Cockrum (2006, 2007, 2008, 2010); Coughlin (2010); Sills & Johnson (2010); Coate & Palmer (2008); Spies (2007).

19 For an overview of early adaptation and development of so-called 'service-learning' programs at a variety of undergraduate institutions, see Astin, Sax & Avalos (1999); and, while specifically geared toward undergraduate education majors, the following study provides insightful commentary on general community-engagement and service curricula: Vickers, Harris & McCarthy (2004).

20 One study (see Reed-Bouley, 2008) suggests service as a means for effectively introducing students to Catholic Social Teaching, thereby transcending charismatic delimitations in an effort to highlight the more genus-like mission and identity of all Catholic institutions of higher education. Likewise, Paulli's article in the *NCEA Journal* suggests that what distinguishes service-learning at so-called secular institutions from that of Catholic ones is precisely the Catholicity present within the founding tradition of the school (see Paulli, 2010).

munities. In so doing, students are introduced to a new medium of educational content. Whereas educational content is largely associated with text in most liberal arts curricula, the experience of academic community engagement provides students (and instructors) with a new form of learning. As such, academic community engagement becomes a new text, a new lesson plan. In considering community engagement, or service learning, as text, traditionally conceived content-based emphases are de-centered to open a space for creative learning and holistic experiences of education.

By refocusing the curriculum to more comprehensively shape academic community engagement to exhibit the values inherent in the Franciscan intellectual and spiritual tradition, AFCU institutions might better distinguish their programs as “Franciscan.”

I believe that academic community engagement provides a unique opportunity for Franciscan colleges and universities to integrate the explicitly Franciscan dimensions of the various institutions’ founding charism into the educational experience

of their undergraduates. By refocusing the curriculum to more comprehensively shape academic community engagement to exhibit the values inherent in the Franciscan intellectual and spiritual tradition, AFCU institutions might better distinguish their programs as “Franciscan.” This can be done in a number of ways, but I will offer two suggestions for consideration. The first is the challenge of changing the pedagogical grammar of academic community engagement from conceptions resembling civic responsibility, charity, service, and so on, to a more exclusive notion of solidarity. As it will be presented below, solidarity provides the framework for reconsidering one’s stance in the world. The intentional self-subordination exhibited in the life and rules (*regula*) of Francis of Assisi provides a model for an authentically Christian posture or *vita evangelica*. While institutions representing religious traditions of all sorts and even secular or state universities can provide programs and curricula aimed at instilling civic responsibility, philanthropic interest and community building values in today’s young adults, the Franciscan approach to academic community engagement should be less generic in its charge, moving more toward modeling and encouraging lives of Christian discipleship after the example of Francis and Clare of Assisi.

The second suggestion flows from this first consideration of solidarity as a constitutive element of the Franciscan tradition. Namely, one challenge that the Franciscan tradition should pose to Millennials in higher education is whether these students want to appropriate the increasingly common social norms that support ungoverned desire for social mobility and the accumulation of wealth or do they want to stand apart from such materi-

alistic teleology, instead working toward an ever more integrated sense of prophetic call to live as Christian disciples according to the Franciscan tradition. The meaning of prophecy can vary largely from one authority to the next; therefore, it seems fitting to look within the Franciscan tradition for guidance in explicating its meaning. St. Bonaventure provides us with a helpful theology of prophecy in his *Legenda Major*, in which he draws on the life of Francis to serve as the hagiographical context from within which Bonaventure presents his understanding.

A generation of young people committed to service, not out of a sense of philanthropy or condescending self-gratification, but out of identification of injustice in the world that calls for protest and committed engagement. That our students become prophets, living the Word of God in such a way that they see the world anew and speak the truth to power, is both what follows from a life of solidarity and sustains Christian living.

These two suggestions, the emphasis on solidarity in shaping academic community engagement opportunities and the promotion of graduates of Franciscan institutions of higher education as prophets according to the theology of Bonaventure, draw on the call to reach into the rich tradition latent in the very establishment of the AFCU-member colleges and universities (for a good overview of this task, see Carney, 2005). To di-

rect academic community engagement in a manner that seeks to form prophetic graduates whose stance in the world is one of solidarity is not extrinsic to the founding charism, but instead flows from the Franciscan tradition.

Francis's conversion to a life of solidarity with the poor, marginalized and abused exemplifies the type of lifestyle we most desire for the next generation of college graduates. A generation of young people committed to service, not out of a sense of philanthropy or condescending self-gratification, but out of identification of injustice in the world that calls for protest and committed engagement. That our students become prophets, living the Word of God in such a way that they see the world anew and speak the truth to power, is both what follows from a life of solidarity and sustains Christian living. When we offer Millennials the challenge of "profit or prophet?" we invite the next generation to transcend the limited and self-centered strictures of a profit-driven culture to enter a community of meaning rooted in the narrative of Christianity modeled in the particular life of Francis of Assisi.²¹

21 For more on the formation of a moral and ethical decision-making in light of the Christian narrative, see

Final remarks

Service in a generic sense, admirable as it may be, is but an action extrinsic to any faith commitment or exclusively Christian understanding of valued living. While one cannot expect all students to accept the challenge, live in solidarity and become people of scripture and therefore prophets, the issue for us to consider is whether or not the curriculum even provides the condition for the possibility of such conversion. The Franciscan tradition that serves as the founding charism of the AFCU institutions of higher education offers a timely and unique approach to holistic education for today's young adults. Already predisposed to service as they are, Millennials are particularly positioned to be formed in a tradition that moves beyond the concept of service toward a posture of solidarity. Encouraging community service as a component of integrated learning is not the challenge Millennials need, especially from Franciscan colleges and universities. Instead, Millennials should be challenged to move toward stepping outside the systemic structures of injustice motivated so often by profit and upward social mobility and instead position themselves in a place of solidarity. Keeping in mind that evangelical poverty is not the same as abject poverty, today's young adults should be encouraged to look at the model of Francis of Assisi and re-appropriate his way of life for contemporary living. To sustain this way of Christian living and to learn to see the world anew, Millennials should be open to the Word of God and live it in such a way as to speak the truth that comes with the call of the prophet.

Students may respond to this notion with varying degrees of enthusiasm (see Horan, 2010), but the condition for the possibility of some response - namely the shift in administrative discourse of service to solidarity and the challenge to be contemporary Christian prophets - should be a goal of Franciscan institutions of higher education. To integrate programs whose aim is precisely this might better enable AFCU institutions to offer a particularly

The ongoing evaluation and (re)development of curricula and educational programs is nothing foreign to the Franciscan tradition. For Francis himself, shortly before his death, is remembered to have said, "Let us begin, brothers, to serve the Lord God, for up until now we have done little or nothing".

Franciscan education to their students. The ongoing evaluation and (re)development of curricula and educational programs is nothing foreign to the Franciscan tradition. For Francis himself, shortly before his death, is remembered to have said, "Let us begin, brothers, to serve

Hauerwas (1981). What I have envisioned here is a particularly Franciscan-Christian notion of ethical formation rooted in a curriculum and educational environment shaped by explicit reflection on the life and influence of Francis of Assisi and the subsequent Franciscan tradition.

the Lord God, for up until now we have done little or nothing" (from Thomas of Celano, Ch. VI, v. 103). Hopefully a renewed emphasis on solidarity and prophecy as constitutive elements of a Franciscan education might contribute to the shaping of the next generation of young adults into integrated members of the Christian and global community.

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Uniservitate is a global programme for the promotion of service-learning in Catholic Higher Education. Its objective is to generate a systemic change in Catholic Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs) through the institutionalisation of service-learning (SL) as a tool to achieve its mission of offering an integral education and training of agents of change committed to their community.

“We will not change the world, if we do not change education”

Pope Francis

3 Spirituality and Higher Education: Perspectives from Service-Learning

A research topic that is increasingly attracting the attention of the academic world is the link between teaching and spirituality, understood in its broadest sense. This will be the focus of the volume that we present to our readers today. The aim is to provide, both for Catholic Institutions of Higher Education and universities at large, a space for reflection in their itinerary of discernment about their identity and specific mission.

This book, the third of the Uniservitate collection, explores these topics, bringing together research and experiences of international scope, from the Catholic university world as well as of other creeds and non-religious convictions, which delve into service-learning from the ethics of care and fraternity.

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