

My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 29

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July 21, 2021



The radical insight of monastic tradition, in thought and practice, has been that no aspect of our lives can be separated from our search for God. Everything relates to our spiritual lives, no exception. Thus, the monastic schedule of work, study, and prayer lived by the Desert Fathers and Mothers, memorialized in Cassian's "Institutes," and formalized in the Rule of St. Benedict, sought to strip away all distractions so that the individual soul could focus on the works of salvation. Over the centuries, the great monastic centers built libraries that became institutions of learning for the transmission of accumulated knowledge, eventually giving rise to universities.

My approach to teaching derived from my monastic formation, my Catholic education, and my years on MFT. I could not separate my call to teach from my call to restore God's sons and daughters, and in this unity of purpose, the Catholic educational tradition supported me. Moreover, "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses," I felt constant and active spiritual assistance. I always found myself thrust into the center of the action. On that note, I need to jump ahead in the story before I return to my chronological narrative. Forgive me while I digress...

After I had been teaching for several years, I had been made Co-Chair of the English Department with Dr. Berry, and sat on the Board as the Faculty Representative, serving on its "Catholic Identity and Mission" Committee. In this capacity, I was drafted by the Newman Board to rewrite the school's Mission Statement, which the school then adopted:

Cardinal Newman is a Catholic, college preparatory high school. Our mission is to educate our students in the wholeness of mind, body, and spirit through the teachings of Jesus Christ as proclaimed by the Catholic Church. Our students learn to apply leadership skills and talents in service to others. We challenge each student to work to his or her highest potential in the lifelong pursuit of learning and excellence.

"God shall call on me and I will hear the Lord"
John Henry Cardinal Newman 1801-1890

The faculty then needed to translate the Mission Statement into action within our own departments. As one of the Chairs, I was asked to flesh out how we as English teachers could meet the imperatives of our Mission Statement. I began by raising the following four questions:

If the person is the message, as teachers, how do we embody and model the spiritual imperatives that define our institution?

It is often said that Catholic education ought to be countercultural. What does that mean? Are we, in fact, countercultural?

How does curriculum enter into the equation? Are we both Catholic and academically challenging?

Do we have a driving spiritual theme? If so, what is it? How does it align with John Henry Newman's "great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end"?

Which I then answered:

We can embody the spiritual imperatives found in Cardinal Newman's Mission Statement through a sincere commitment to conversion of heart. This requires our personal vulnerability as we each open ourselves to God, our colleagues, and students, daily practicing *cor ad cor loquitur*, by means of our prayer, activities, community and curriculum. By walking the path, we model the way.

Popular culture exercises a powerful influence on our students. Aspects of this culture neglect spiritual values and devalue the human person. There is an absolute need to familiarize our students with the breadth and depth of popular culture. Attacking the culture "head-on" is counter-productive, as students feel personally attacked and reflexively tune out the criticism. Therefore, how can we be countercultural and pedagogically effective? Our obligation as educators is to model the spiritual values we proclaim by creating a community alive with unconditional love, rooted in an ethic of sacrifice and service. To the extent we create an authentic experience of Christian community, to that extent our students' affections will be shaped by their daily immersion in these waters of love and spiritual life. According to Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine, the education of the affections is the first aim of the teacher. At root, the education of affections entails a conversion of heart. This can only occur in an environment fostering student safety and trust, an environment in which the student feels unconditional acceptance and love.

The university system grew out of the Catholic intellectual tradition. Our patron, the Blessed John Henry Newman, emerged in the 19th century as the authoritative Catholic voice of that tradition with his work, *The Idea of a University*, in which he envisioned education as "the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end." In order to affect the culture and direction of secular society, Newman emphasized the liberal arts and sciences, as well as theology. He recognized the importance of a Catholic laity, broadly educated in order to be an effective advocate for Christian ethics in society. In particular, literature represents an intergenerational exploration of human purpose and meaning. Thus, as teachers of literature, we are obligated to engage and challenge our students with a variety of literature, drawn from different times and literary traditions. In the smaller world of the 21st century, we must be catholic in order to be Catholic. Moreover, our schools, according to Canon Law, must provide "instruction which...is at least as academically distinguished as that in the other schools of the area" (806, s.2).

Cardinal Newman's spiritual theme can best be seen through Community Based Service Learning-- sacrifice and service. Along with a broad education, CBSL is the "great but ordinary means" by which we

introduce our students to a Christian way of life.

In essence, this was my educational philosophy. In particular, I designed my curriculum with the idea in mind that literature was an ongoing conversation which explored human meaning and into which we were inviting our students. Thus, we needed to engage the recorded voices of the past in order to understand the course of the conversation and the questions of the moment, to bridge the great abyss between the ideal and reality. In a high school, as in the world, this can take unexpected twists and turns, as each moment provides its own pedagogical opportunity. The trick in teaching today is being able to convey serious ideas in a post-modern cultural milieu, which in T.S. Eliot's fine phrase is "distracted from distraction by distraction." In other words, how does one capture the attention and awaken the original mind in teenagers swept up in the supercharged world of peer relations and raging hormones?

For instance, as a new teacher I felt utterly serious but overly sensitive about my daily lesson plan and the materials I covered. My students rarely shared the same level of enthusiasm, especially as the advertising for a major dance like Homecoming heated up. The drama surrounding such a social event became more oppressive as the date approached, and much more distracting. The 2001 Homecoming was my very first experience of this since becoming a teacher and I had developed little skill in preventing the usurpation of my classroom. That semester, along with my Sophomore Honors, I taught four Junior English classes, of which three were co-ed.

One fine Fall morning, my first class was co-ed. Utterly fatigued by the lead up to Homecoming, I asked my students in a very general fashion, why they were wasting so much energy, time, and money on a dance - young men renting tuxedos and limos, then buying flowers and dinner; while the young women spent small fortunes on dresses, did their hair and nails, and expended so much energy and effort just to be asked! I couldn't conceal my exasperation. Resident in that class was the Newman varsity fullback, truly a celebrity in the hallways, every bit as handsome as he was athletic. He raised his hand and shouted out the answer before I could even call on him, "We want to get laid!" The usually quiet, lovely young woman he asked to the dance sat across the class from him. Outraged, she shouted, "You bastard!" The class was in an uproar and about to explode into a battle of the sexes. Here was a teaching moment....

I calmed the class down and said, "Let's talk about this." We did for the full hour. The young women were very honest about the pressures they felt to have sex, even if they were disinclined. The money spent on them, the male expectation, the cultural message that sex was ok, the peer pressure from more experienced girl friends. Some of the young men were defensive and asserted their motives were pure; others sought refuge in silence, not wanting to blow their game plans. At the end of the class, trying to put trading dinner and flowers for sex in perspective, I presented a rhetorical question: What's the difference between that and prostitution?

By the time my next class had arrived, the final question had been recast as a statement, "Mr. Scharfen says Homecoming is prostitution!" And so went my day. The conversation about Homecoming consumed every class. Was it time well spent? Absolutely. The translation of our ideals into reality happens in the trenches of daily life, at the intersection of conscience and desire.

As my teaching experience deepened, I became more adept at raising those questions and working toward meaningful answers my students could grasp.