

Justice Conference

Opening Session: *Thursday, October 5th, 2000*

William Spohn

1. Gratitude I first want to extend a welcome to all of you for coming to participate in this conference. It is a great sign of hope that there is such interest in education for justice among the American Jesuit colleges and universities. A special welcome to those who have come from other countries to be with us: we need your wisdom.

A word of thanks to the three Presidents who inspired the process which has led to this national conference, Maureen Fay of University Detroit Mercy, Bill Leahy of Boston College and Paul Locatelli of Santa Clara. Their guidance has been just as important as their funding.

Thanks also to the National Planning Committee to whom they handed this project and who guided the Campus Assessments of Justice, the regional conferences and this meeting: Patrick Byrne and Dave McMenamain of Boston College, Kathleen Maas Weigert of Georgetown, and Jesuits Pat Howell of Seattle University and Jerry Cavanagh of Detroit Mercy. Special remembrance is due to our final member, Art McGovern, a great Jesuit and sterling human being who was vitally committed to faith and justice for 30 years at Detroit-Mercy. He is with us in spirit tonight, courtesy of the communion of saints.

I am thanking these people at the beginning, not the end, because from now on, our work on this conference is done. It now belongs to you. Let me explain what sort of conference we are embarking on.

They say there are three types of conferences:

1. The first is the activist conference, like a national political convention. Its purpose is to gather the faithful, fire them up and inspire them to work for the common cause.
2. The second is the academic conference which is structured around presenting and discussing papers. It has several purposes: to produce knowledge, to receive feedback from fellow specialists, to get your name on the program in order to get tenure, and possibly to be published in the association's journal.
3. The third variety is the strategic conference. This is not a hybrid of the first two, some sort of cross between analysis and cheerleading. The strategic conference has a distinct purpose. It intends to set out problems in clear terms, learn what resources are available, and determine practical strategies for the local situation. This is the model for this weekend. Every session to the time on Sunday morning when each university's delegation and administrators will meet to plan a strategy for justice education for their own campus. We have assembled scholars and practitioners to discover what has worked at other institutions so you can decide what can be started and improved in your unique context. That is why this conference belongs to you: many of you will help present this collective wisdom, all of us will hear it, and we hope everyone will select some practical step that can shape education for justice at Canisius, St. Peter's, Loyola New Orleans or Regis.

Our keynote speakers will set the real world context for our strategic thinking. Father Kolvenbach brings the wisdom of the worldwide Jesuit experience in integrating committed faith and work for justice over the past twenty-five years. Leon Panetta has taken his Jesuit education into the highest positions of service in both the legislative and executive branches of the Federal Government. President Claire Gaudiani is nationally recognized for bringing Connecticut College into the civic life of New London. They are well educated people of faith whose commitment to justice has made a significant difference in the world.

Jesuit colleges and universities ought to educate for justice in a distinctive way. Jesuit spirituality prizes an engagement in the world, convinced that God is not found on the mountaintop or in the desert but in the marketplace, the classroom, the hospital, even in City Hall.

A Jesuit Catholic university should welcome the full range of voices on justice and what should be done with our world, but it should also stand for something. No genuine university can mandate a single theoretical framework for discussion or advocate an ideology to guide practice. Yet if a Jesuit Catholic university is only a marketplace for ideas, a forum for discourse without end and without consequence, has it not failed in its mission?

Within such a university, a cogent case should be made for examining the world from a moral viewpoint, namely from the viewpoint of human life and community. Our religious heritage makes it clear that every individual has dignity before God, but that we flourish in a just community where the common good is the condition of individual fulfillment. A Jesuit, Catholic university ought to listen to the voices of the marginal, since they are the test of how genuine a community we have. It ought to provide space to push questions of value to the full extent, namely to the level of basic convictions that underlie those positions. In other words, it should be a place where conversations about justice go deep enough to be conversations about faith. A genuine university will, of course, have many other voices in the conversation; but a Jesuit and Catholic university in its curriculum and programs and policies needs to stand for the truth that human beings are radically interdependent and that the flourishing of anyone of us depends upon the flourishing of all of us.

The purpose of this conference is to discover what strategies will foster that sort of curriculum and research in your community. What works at Le Moyne in Syracuse might not work at Spring Hill in Mobile, but with a little imagination both institutions can learn from each other.

Let me end with two examples that display our challenge this weekend:

1. My Jesuit friend and colleague, Paul Fitzgerald, teaches a course on "Faith, Justice and Poverty" to juniors and seniors. As part of the course, the students work in placements among the poor and marginal through Santa Clara's Eastside Project. Some are apprehensive about spending a few hours a week in the other side of Silicon Valley, but they bring their fears and insights back into the classroom for discussion. Paul has them do three page writing assignments.

On the first page the students describe their placement, whether it be tutoring children of undocumented immigrants or working with women fleeing abusive homes. He has them describe the problems that these people face, their struggles to maintain dignity and live a decent life. On the second page, Paul asks the students to write what ought to be done to change the situation.

The students usually do not have much trouble writing these two pages. They see what living in poverty and on the margins of society does to families, children and the elderly. Intuitively, they often see what should be done to change things, even though their solutions tend to be more individual than systemic.

On the third page, Paul asks them to give reasons for their intuitions, to present moral principles and values which provide the rationale for their compassionate observations. Unlike the first two pages, they find it very difficult to write this page. They have learned a lot from the communities they are exposed to and respond generously, but they falter when they have to translate their good intuitions into rational public discourse. Without the language of moral principles and the values of faith, how can they convey what they have experienced to those who have not been there? More fundamentally, some of the students presume that moral values and faith commitments cannot be expressed rationally because they are inherently private and personal. Since they can't be expressed in public language, they are immune from being evaluated or criticized. It isn't that they can't write that third page; they are convinced that it is impossible to do so. That's where Paul Fitzgerald's work begins!

Education for justice in the university cannot end at compassionate involvement nor even at the intuitions that come from generous and dedicated service. It has to demand critical evaluation of good intentions and make a public, rational case for action. Unless community-based learning inculcates skills of reflection and communication, it will not go beyond volunteerism to genuine education for justice.

2. The second story deals with the neuralgic issue that often sabotages faculty discussions of justice in the university. We discover that there are such different notions of justice and such contradictory assessments of society that the safest course is simply to avoid the whole area.

What happens when those who see the problem frame it in conflicting ways? Discussing justice in higher education can be a contentious enterprise, as became clear in a recent panel we had here. A member of the Department of Management had written a provocative essay for our local publication entitled: "The Quest for Justice as a Source of Evil." He argued that most of the great evils of the twentieth century have been perpetrated under the name of social justice – from Lenin in Russia to Milosevic in Bosnia and Kosovo to the killing fields of Cambodia and Rwanda. He was joined on the panel by a libertarian economist who also criticized social justice initiatives for undermining morality. Another economist took the opposite view, arguing that justice demanded that government address wage disparity. The university's director of service learning argued that compassion was a necessary component of the virtue of justice.

"Justice" meant something different to each panelist. The original author defined justice as the redress of grievances; as such, it often led to retaliatory vengeance and unchecked cruelty. The libertarian defined justice as fair dealings based upon the freedom to enter into contracts. Under this definition, any limits placed by government on the freedom to contract were immoral impositions. Consequently, "social justice" was an oxymoron. The other economist defined justice primarily in terms of equality, which meant that justice mandated policies and laws that would moderate glaring social inequity, even to the point of redistributing economic resources. Finally, the service learning director spoke of justice as a quality of character that is evoked by

directly experiencing the plight of the poor and striving to remedy it, much like the Good Samaritan did in the Gospel of Luke. Full justice for her meant going beyond being a good citizen to becoming an involved good neighbor.

After a lively discussion, the panelists had not budged on their positions, but at least the lines of disagreement had become clear. The author of the original piece was especially pleased by the exchange and thanked us for the panel, saying "this is exactly what should go on at a university." He relished what the State Department calls "frank and open exchange," which means total disagreement that stops short of gunshots. Surely something of this sort should go on at a university: bringing together people from different disciplines with conflicting notions of justice, buttressed by competing readings of recent history, to state their positions with as much honesty and civility as possible.

Even as fractious a panel as this departed from the academy's usual polite isolation of disciplines and discreet silence about moral issues. Tolerance is often a polite way to screen out disagreement. Genuine dialogue would take a lot more time and effort to get beyond the initial positions, build mutual respect, find common ground, and even change one's own position. The panel provides a vignette about why education for justice is such a loaded topic in Jesuit higher education: conflicting definitions of justice based on competing analyses lead to contradictory moral claims. In this, of course, we are a microcosm of American society at large.

The panel also shows that education for justice must involve serious dialogue among faculty, a process that is likely to take patience and sustained effort. Unless the panelists were willing to pursue these more fundamental issues over a period of time, they would never break their intellectual gridlock. Our specialized graduate training does not equip most of us to discuss underlying assumptions and convictions. We rarely articulate them to ourselves, let alone others. Those of us from religious traditions may be unsure that faith convictions belong in public discussions, or we may fear that our selective appropriation of faith traditions will not be acceptable to those who are more orthodox. Those who do not find religious traditions meaningful might wonder whether their secularity is welcome in an institution which emphasizes its Jesuit, Catholic roots.