

ST. THOMAS UNIVERSITY

A TREASURE BURIED: CATHOLIC COLLEGE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF
CATHOLIC IDENTITY

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BY

ANGELIQUE MONTGOMERY GOODNOUGH

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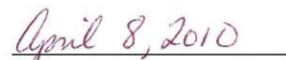
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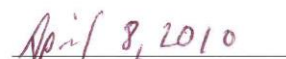
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Date


Bryan T. Froehle, Dissertation Committee Chair


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To Amanda and Chad

Abstract

For almost one million college students in the United States, the Catholic university is Church. This study describes the experience of students at three Catholic universities. A work of Practical Theology, these reflections offer an opportunity for examination of the ecclesiology of the university not only in the liturgical sense but in the relational sense as a community of the faithful. It contains a full explication of Catholic and non-Catholic students' description of their experience of Catholic identity at three metropolitan Catholic universities, how that experience was evoked in the process of interpretive theological reflection, and the themes that have emerged from those reflections. The themes most emphatically expressed on all three campuses were community, relationship, and service. The students describe their experiences in the chapel, the classroom, the dormitory, and the offices of administration and financial aid.

Students in this reflection expressed an expectation that their personal interactions with faculty, staff, and administration, as well as their prayer and worship practices, would be different at a Catholic university. When these interactions did not meet their expectations, it was the university *as Catholic* that had failed. The failure was, in student Rachel's words because "you can't just call yourself Catholic and not do anything about it." For these students, *everyone* on the university campus is seen as a part of the university's Catholic identity because for them *the university is Church*, both in the liturgical and ecclesial sense. The insights gained have value for Catholic institutions committed to an ongoing conversation on what it means to be Catholic.

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Chapter One

A Treasure Buried

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field... Then every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old.¹

There are currently over two hundred Catholic colleges and universities in the United States with a combined enrollment of over nine hundred thousand students². Of the total, approximately sixty percent self-identify as Catholic, leaving almost four hundred thousand full-time non-Catholic students on American Catholic university campuses.³ The changes in the religious make-up of Catholic university students are just one of the factors stimulating a continued discussion of the nature of Catholic identity in on Catholic college campuses.

Recent discussions of Catholic identity have centered on the contested nature of orthodoxy in Catholic higher education in terms of beliefs, practices and the teaching and implementation of doctrine in a university setting.⁴ These qualities are ones that could be

¹ New American Bible, *Catholic Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). Matthew 14:44, 52.

² The term “universities” will be used throughout to indicate both colleges and universities. Enrollment and demographic statistics are based on the 2007-2008 academic year according to the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU).

³ ACCU.

⁴ Referring specifically here to the work of Phillip Gleason, P. Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). and also Melanie Morey and John Piderit, Melanie M. Morey and J. Piderit, *Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). but also more recent controversies such as Notre Dame’s invitation to President Obama as commencement speaker.

called “extrinsic” as they are the public and visible identity of the university as Catholic.⁵ As important as these discussions are, there is another, discussion that is needed. Much of the discussion of “what makes us Catholic” has been a top-down analysis attempting to evaluate and measure catholicity in terms of the universities adherence to prescribed norms.⁶ Pope John Paul II’s “*Ex corde ecclesiae*” and the United States Bishop’s “Application of *Ex corde ecclesiae*” were promulgated in part to clarify those norms.⁷

These documents do more than clarify the actions or extrinsics of a Catholic university; they also identify the intrinsic relationship between the Catholic university and the Church. Although much of the language is directed to the institutional identity of the university, the documents also speak to the relationship of the Church to the individual members of the university community, including the students. Based on a tracing of the relationship from Church to university to student, it can be concluded that the students are included in the “campus-wide conversation” of renewal of the university and the Church called for by these documents.⁸

If there is a treasure buried in the field of Catholic identity, the treasure is in the voice of the student experience. It is the work of this project to illuminate the student’s contribution to this conversation by describing the Catholic and non-Catholic student’s experience of the Catholic identity at three metropolitan Catholic universities. The goal is not to measure or evaluate the school’s catholicity, but to describe it in terms of the student’s lived experience. The purpose is not to determine what the students know

⁵ John C. Haughey, *Where Is Knowing Going? The Horizons of the Knowing Subject*. (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009).

⁶ Morey & Piderit.

⁷ Pope John Paul II, “Ex Corde Ecclesiae,” in *From the Heart of the Church* (Rome: Vatican, 1990). United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “The Application of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* for the United States,” (Washington DC: USCCB, 1999).

⁸ Ibid.

about Catholic doctrine, but to attempt to understand how Catholicism is “vital and operative” in the student’s university experience; viewing Catholic identity through the lens of student experience and bringing together both the old and the new.

The student’s description of their experience of Catholic identity includes those extrinsic beliefs and practices that are traditionally a part of a Catholic university and are a part of what has been termed the “transferability” or “inheritability” of the Catholic experience.⁹ While these extrinsics are critical to the on-going tradition, they do not tell the whole story of the student experience.¹⁰ As Cardinal Francis George recently pointed out, these practices do not always mean the same thing to one generation as they do to another and “When [younger Catholics] use those symbols, they don’t bring the history in the same way, they just use the symbols as markers.”¹¹ He goes on to say that: “You have to ask them, ‘What does it mean to you?’ Usually you’ll get something that’s quite personal, something that falls outside of the liberal/conservative framework.”¹²

It is precisely this question: “What does it mean to you?” that was asked in the process of a series of theological reflections at three Catholic campuses. The answers were, as Cardinal George predicted, quite personal and sometimes outside of the expected categories. The students often focused away from the extrinsics, those public and private expressions of Catholicism, and honed in on the relationships and operative structures of the university itself. The student’s reflection on their experience at a Catholic university

⁹ Gleason, 10.

¹⁰ Michele Dillon, *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹¹ John L. Jr. Allen, “Cardinal George's Plan to Evangelize America,” *National Catholic Reporter* (2009). 8.

¹² *Ibid.* 9.

was less about what they observed as Catholic and more about *how they were treated as persons*.

These students expressed an expectation that their personal interactions, whether with faculty, staff, administration or other students, would be somehow different at a Catholic university. When those interactions fell short of their expectations they framed it as a failure or a disconnect between the school and its Catholic identity. As one student, Rachel, put it: “you can’t just call yourself Catholic and not do anything about it.” These students saw Catholic identity not only in campus ministry or Sunday liturgy, although they were certainly aware of these practices; they saw the schools’ Catholicism through the lens of their lived experience in the classroom, in the registration process, in the attempt to apply for and receive financial aid and in the dormitory.

For these students, the standard of a Catholic identity went far beyond the symbols and doctrine and penetrated into the most intimate spaces of their daily life. They expected this standard of care and concern to be evident, not only in those in campus ministry but to the person answering the telephone in the Registrar’s office and in the emails they received from administration. They expected an integrated “Catholic” approach that Rachel described in the most rudimentary terms:¹³

Yeah and you can take my money. You will do that and you will do that very quickly, but you won’t care that I’m unhappy. You won’t care that I feel, like, deserted here. And then, it’s a private school and it’s a small school and it’s a Catholic school. But yet there’s no type of help, no type of community. So, what’s Catholic in that? So when you ask, ‘what’s Catholic about the University,’

¹³ All student names have been changed to protect their anonymity. Past tense is used to indicate student responses as an experience in context.

I guess, that we have a Chapel and that we can talk about God. But I don't see it in any action.

Their words are sometimes harsh and irreverent and they often express a deep frustration and disappointment with their experience. But there was conflict and contradiction in their words as well as in this observation from Irene:

But at the same time, I love how the teachers associate with the students. They have that close relationship; they help you, choosing your courses. Help you to go on the right path to whatever career you want to take up in the future. So that is good. I would not trade that for any other school.

Some students responded positively to those extrinsic practices that are exclusively Catholic, such as the Mass of the Holy Spirit at one campus:

Even though I am a non-Catholic student, all of the elements of the Chapel...make it easy to praise the Lord and listen to the word of God. I had a great experience at the Mass of the Holy Spirit listening to the word of God and being blessed as a student athlete. It was a beautiful experience as the sun shone through the stained-glass windows and how most of the student body was brought together to one place to praise the Lord.

The theme of community and the lack of community was expressed throughout the student encounters. Another recurring theme was relationship; between students and faculty in particular as Paula explained:

I am extremely glad that I decided to come to a Catholic university. This university helps me to feel like I am a part of a huge family that goes out of its way to help each other...I know that I can go to any of my teachers or fellow students and have support...

Daniel, a non-Catholic student observed:

During the Mass of the Holy Spirit I was able to witness as well as analyze how important religion can be for many people [at this university]. Even though I was just an 'observer' I saw how many people had a religious experience when taking communion. It was not only eating bread and drinking wine but it went much deeper than that.

Many of the students expressed a hunger for the type of connection that they experienced during the Mass of the Holy Spirit:

I really enjoyed seeing students and faculty give each other a hug or a hand shake in the show of peace. I myself gave a few hugs to complete strangers and that's when you realize that religion is a great way to love our neighbors.¹⁴

¹⁴ This comment was from a Catholic student raised in a practicing Catholic family who regularly attends Sunday liturgy off campus with his family. His description of his experience at the Sign of Peace in the university liturgy seems to be a new experience for him and it points out the power of the university community to renew the religious experience for Catholic students.

What the students seem to be asking for, what they describe as their expectation of a Catholic university is an integration of the experience of the Mass of the Holy Spirit with the treatment they receive in the office of financial aid, for example. This need was expressed by Catholic and non-Catholic students alike.

These expressions of the student's lived experience call for a deeper understanding of the nature of the university as "from the heart of the Church."¹⁵ These expressions call for a re-examination of how the university lives out its mission *within* its own community and as ministers to the students, Catholic and non-Catholic, that are a part of that community. It calls for a re-examination of the university as Church. This is an examination of the ecclesiology of the university not only in the liturgical sense, but in the relational sense as a community of the faithful. Before a university can be Catholic to its various constituents outside of the institution, it must examine how it is catholic to those within it. And, in the words of one of the students: "it's easier said than done."

What follows is a full explication of the student's description of their experience of Catholic identity at three urban Catholic universities, how that experience was evoked in the process of interpretive theological reflection and the themes that have emerged from those reflections. The insights gained through these often raw and challenging revelations will have value for Catholic institutions committed to an ongoing conversation on what it means to be Catholic.

¹⁵*Ex corde ecclesiae*, 1.

Chapter Two

The critical research in Catholic identity has centered on attempts to define and measure identity from the administrative and faculty perspective. Students as subjects in dialogue with tradition or culture have not been examined in the student's own language or experience or in a manner that facilitates a theological reflection with implications to present or future praxis.

From the Heart of the Church

“The Catholic university is a vital institution in the communion of the Church and is a primary and privileged place for a fruitful dialogue between the Gospel and culture.”¹⁶

The Catholic university plays a unique role among the various institutions of the Church. By virtue of its communion with the Church, and as an extension of the teaching authority of the Bishops, the entire university community is a part of the universal life of the Church and an extension of the Church's evangelical mission.¹⁷ Students, faculty, staff and administrators are participants in the dialogue which takes place between the Church, the faithful and the whole human family.¹⁸ This special relationship also grants responsibilities to the university community to “continuous renewal, both as

¹⁶ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), “The Application of *Ex corde Ecclesiae* for the United States,” (Nov. 1999), Washington: USCCB, 2.

¹⁷ USCCB, 3, and *Ex corde ecclesiae*, 4.

¹⁸ USCCB, 2.

‘universities’ and as ‘Catholic.’”¹⁹ The Church teaching on the theological concepts of ‘communion’ and *sensus fidelium*, are applied to the university in the documents *Ex corde ecclesiae* (From the heart of the Church), the United States Bishops Application of *Ex corde ecclesiae* for the United States, and *Lumen Gentium*. They establish an implied ecclesiology of the university as Church and students (and other members of the university community) as participants in the community of the faithful.²⁰

In some ways students may be considered members of the Church both as students at the university and as members of the faithful by virtue of their membership in the ecclesial communion of the university and the Church. This statement may be contested by the fact that approximately 40% of students at Catholic universities are neither Catholic or perhaps religious at all. The pluralism inherent in Catholic campuses does not negate the implied ecclesiology of the university, however, but holds it to a higher scrutiny in light of non-Catholic or non-Christian students in attendance, if the university is also viewed as a place for dialogue with other cultures and faiths as anticipated by *Ex corde ecclesiae*:

Besides cultural dialogue, a Catholic university, in accordance with its specific ends, and keeping in mind the various religious-cultural contexts, following the directives promulgated by competent ecclesiastical authority, can offer a contribution to ecumenical dialogue. It does so to further the search for unity

¹⁹ USCCB, 2.

²⁰ Pope John Paul II, "Ex Corde Ecclesiae," in *From the Heart of the Church* (Rome: Vatican, 1990). and United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), "The Application of *Ex corde Ecclesiae* for the United States", (Nov. 1999), Washington: USCCB, 2. and Pope Paul VI, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: *Lumen Gentium*," (Rome: Vatican, 1964).

among all Christians. In inter religious dialogue it will assist in discerning the spiritual values that are present in different religions.²¹

As a place for discernment, the university may offer an opportunity for internal discernment and conversation, among its students, as well as a dialogue with the broader society outside the university. By describing students as “members of the faithful” the intent is not to bind the student to a Catholic practice so much as respect the obligation of the university to provide the privilege place for dialogue and to include the students in that dialogue whether they be Catholic or non-Catholic. According to the Bishops application of *Ex corde*, the students are also called to participate in the dialogue of renewal with the Church, the university administration and staff, and the Bishop, “all of whom share responsibility for the character of Catholic higher education.”²²

This chain of communion from Church to Bishop to university to student is what differentiates the relationship of the Catholic university to its students from other places of higher education. According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, this communal relationship with its students is part of the university’s distinct Catholic identity and as such should be “characterized by a manifest openness to a further analysis and local appropriation of” that identity.²³ The Bishops go on to state that this “continuing dialogue” should arise in the context of “campus-wide conversations” with “a conviction that conversation can develop and sustain relationships.”²⁴ The concepts of

²¹ *Ex corde ecclesiae*, 47.

²² USCCB, 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

communion and *sensus fidelium* illumine this conversation and contribute to the evangelical mission of the university as from “the heart of the Church.”²⁵

Communion

The Catholic university has a unique role to play within the life of the Church and, as such, has a “special bond with the Holy See.”²⁶ The Bishops of the United States defined this bond as an ecclesial relationship with the Church made possible by the theological concept of communion.²⁷ This concept, used earlier by John Henry Newman, was restated in *Lumen Gentium* as a belief in the participation by all persons in the mystical body of Christ in whom: “by communicating His Spirit . . . made His brothers, called together from all nations, mystically the components of His own body.”²⁸ While the concept of communion is often defined in terms of those faithful to Christ, the document is clear that all persons: “are called to be part of this catholic unity of the people of God . . . and there belong to or are related to it in various ways, the Catholic faithful, all who believe in Christ, and indeed the whole of mankind, for all men are called by the grace of God to salvation.”²⁹

²⁵ *Ex corde ecclesiae*, 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:27.

²⁷ USCCB, 2.

²⁸ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, (Nov. 1964), 7. [Note: Inclusive language is used throughout with the exception of direct quotes in which a more inclusive translation was unavailable.]

²⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, 13.

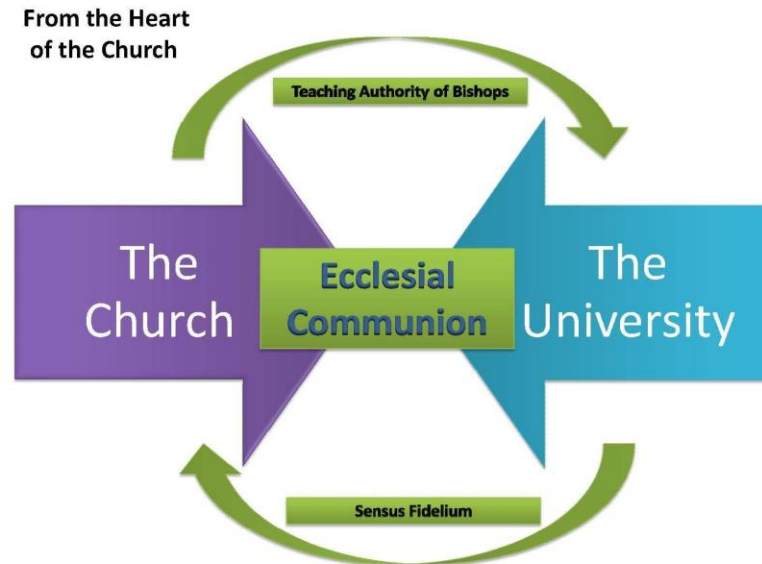


Figure 1

Students, by virtue of their participation in the ecclesial communion of the Church and the Catholic university, share in this catholic unity, regardless of their faith affiliation or lack thereof. As such they have an opportunity to participate in the “campus-wide conversation” anticipated by the Bishops that renews the university and the Church.

Sensus Fidelium

One of the ways that the students participate in the ecclesial communion of the university and the Church is by taking part in the dialogue with culture, tradition and experience, within the “privileged place” that is the Catholic university. The dialogue which takes place within the university, as a community of the faithful, also carries with

it the responsibility to critically communicate on matters of faith. The *sensus fidelium* or “sense of the faithful” extends to the students in Catholic universities so that their contributions to the dialogue become a part of their “prophetic office” when “‘from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful’ they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals.”³⁰

In James and Evelyn Whitehead’s work on theological reflection, they describe *sensus fidelium* as “the overlap of tradition and experience” where two become “conversation partners.”³¹ This conversation is critical to the ongoing development of the Church for in their view “a religious heritage only survives by being engaged and embraced in each new generation.”³² For the Whiteheads, this viewing of tradition through the lens of experience requires an on-going reflection in the faith community that not only “clings” to what it has received but “demands the courage to *penetrate* this ongoing experience of faith anew and the audacity to *apply* its new awareness in contemporary life.”³³ For the Whiteheads, this action of penetration and application is the essence of what constitutes theological reflection in ministry.³⁴ They assert that a “revitalized *sensus fidelium*” is needed in order to develop the skills “through which a

³⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, 12. In further discussion of this concept, Richard McBrien (*Catholicism*, San Francisco: Harper, 1994, 24) also uses a discussion from *Dei Verbum (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation)* on the relationship between “sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church...” (10), stating that “what ultimately holds them all together is the Holy Spirit; what immediately holds them all together is the *sensus fidelium*, the sense of faith that the People of God share among themselves...[which] ‘cannot err in matters of belief.’”

³¹ James and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 1995), 10. Note regarding citations of this work: References to the “Whiteheads” or “Whitehead” do not differentiate between the authors since the book was jointly written and the authors do not identify themselves individually throughout the work.

³² Whitehead & Whitehead, 10.

³³ *Ibid.*, 11. The Whiteheads emphasis on the words “cling”, “penetrate” and “apply” references the use of these terms in *Lumen Gentium* to describe the dynamics of the action of the *sensus fidelium*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

faith community witnesses to the larger church.”³⁵ They urge the development of methods “by which a community can become more critically conscious of its own experience...and how its limited insights can be part of the on-going purification of the tradition itself.”³⁶

Richard Osmer describes this process as part of the “priestly listening” that is part of his “descriptive empirical task” of Practical Theology.³⁷ What the Church describes as the sense of the faithful, Osmer terms the “community of interpretation” and speaks specifically of its use as a tool of reflection with youth in “facilitating a dialogue between the congregation’s shared life and mission and the normative sources of Christian faith.”³⁸ Within this context, the theological reflection takes on both a dialogical and ministerial character.

Students, as a part of the community of the university, are called to participate in this conversation in a way that allows them to be more critically conscious of their own experience for the purpose of participating in the on-going renewal of the university and the Church to which it is bound.

At times their cultural expression may seem at odds with or disrespectful of the tradition in ways that Tom Beaudoin has referred to as “*sensus infidelium*” or sense of the “unfaithful” to underscore the irreverent nature of some expressions from popular culture.³⁹ Their irreverence does not render them irrelevant, however, for as Beaudoin states: “their religious ‘sense’ may challenge and helpfully criticize the ‘sense’ of those

³⁵ Ibid., 51.

³⁶ Ibid., 51.

³⁷ Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008). 38-41.

³⁸ Ibid. 41.

³⁹ Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 33-34.

who call themselves ‘faithful.’”⁴⁰ For Catholicism to be vital and operative in the lives of students at Catholic universities, their lived experience, their “sense of the faithful” should be accurately described and used to inform the institutional life and identity of the university.

If there is a pearl of great price in Catholic identity in higher education, it is buried in the student experience. Through theological reflection, and through the use of contemporary culture to access tradition and experience, this treasure can be brought forth to inform and transform.

Background of Institutional Identity

Contending with Modernity

Phillip Gleason in *Contending with Modernity* traces the history of Catholic universities in the United States from the late 19th century until 1960, which marks, according to Gleason, the “end of an era”.⁴¹ Gleason credits the Second Vatican Council with leaving Catholic universities with an uncertain identity based on an acceptance of modernity and “secular as secular” epitomized by the document *Gaudium et Spes* and the increasing influx of the laity on university boards, faculty and administration.

⁴⁰ Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, 34. The comparison of the Whiteheads use of *sensus fidelium* with Tom Beaudoin’s concept of *sensus infidelium* is not meant to imply that there is complete consistency between Whiteheads’ and Beaudoin’s use of these terms, but rather to illustrate the possible contribution of students voices as “voices from below,” a concept explored in more depth in Chapter 3.

⁴¹ Phillip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford, 1999).

Alice Gallin picks up the history of Catholic identity in higher education in 1960 and traces the developments through 1999 from both a historical perspective and her particular view from twelve years as executive director of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. The short title of her work, *Negotiating Identity*, foreshadows the on-going nature of the identity issue. Her focus is on the institutional hurdles of state and federal government coupled with the requirements of the Holy See. Gallin's view, as of the year 2000, is that this identity negotiation is on-going, but the partners have shifted from the Church and the government to the pluralism that exists in the academy and in society. She sees pluralism and tolerance as the major challenges to Catholic identity today and views that "institutions of Catholic higher education around the world provides a laboratory for exploring the ways in which the faith tradition is mediated to a new generation within the context of different cultures."⁴²

Gleason sees the university's Catholic identity threatened by secularism. Gallin sees the threat to identity coming in the form of religious pluralism. In both cases the author's maintain that the university's identity is in flux. Gleason would have the Church play a larger role in the life of the academy in the form of more clerical influence in university boards, faculty and administration. Gallin advocates for the university as a context for exploring its own identity crisis as a "laboratory" for exploring differences. Haughey has drawn a similar conclusion in his work with both Catholic and non-Catholic faculty at Catholic universities. The concept of a laboratory where faith tradition is mediated and in a multi-cultural context implies more of a dialogic process in Gallin than is implied by Gleason. Gallin and Haughey seem to anticipate a conversation with

⁴² Alice Gallin, *Negotiating Identity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000) 175.

between culture and faith rather than an opposition between them. This work facilitating student experience in theological reflection on their experience of Catholic identity draws more from Gallin and Haughey's vision of the role of the university than Gleason's. The assumption is that listening to students experience will contribute to the "negotiation" of Catholic identity that Gallin describes.

Watershed

Ex corde ecclesiae, promulgated by John Paul II in 1990, was a watershed in the arena of Catholic identity since it delineated concrete expectations for Catholic universities in the modern era.⁴³ While *Ex corde ecclesiae* was a watershed in the institutional relationship between the Catholic university and the Church, most of the focus of the research on this document was on the issues of academic freedom and the requirements regarding Catholic faculty and the mandatum, and paid little attention to the student experience. The attention of administration was turned to attempts to define and measure Catholic identity in policy and curriculum and led to a defensive, if not adversarial relationship between the university and the Church.⁴⁴

Ex corde ecclesiae explicitly spells out the unique role of the Catholic university being "from the heart of the Church". It has a "special bond with the Holy See" which is a "privileged place for a fruitful dialogue between the Gospel and culture." Along with the university's mission of service, cultural dialogue and pastoral ministry is the

⁴³ While the entire background of the Catholic university has been reviewed for purposes of this study, the primary focus has been on significant works since 1990.

⁴⁴ Gallin, 180.

university's role in evangelization as a "living witness to Christ." This is a role given to the university alone and a role that is played by no other institution in society outside of the Church itself.

Contending with Culture

Melanie Morey and John Piderit released their work on Catholic higher education in 2006 sounding the alarm again for "a culture in crisis."⁴⁵ Their book attempts to classify Catholic culture and identity based on core curriculum, percentage of Catholic students and faculty, residence life and religious activities. The conclusions are based on in-depth interviews with administrators (primarily presidents) of 33 Catholic universities. Their work focuses on the tensions and contradictions that squeeze administrators financially and doctrinally and is primarily a summary of the impressions that these administrators have about the nature of their school. This is the most comprehensive work of its kind in recent years and has received much attention from the academic community but the work is most striking in what it does not provide and that is any attempt to describe or understand the student experience of identity. To their credit, the authors acknowledge this shortcoming numerous times throughout the work and call for further research in this area in almost every chapter for example:

⁴⁵ Melanie M. Morey and John J. Piderit, *Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis* (New York: Oxford, 2006).

- “Many administrators believe students are ill-informed about the Catholic tradition...There is actually some evidence that supports that belief, but not nearly enough.”⁴⁶
- “faculty and administrators need to determine what constitutes the important religious knowledge students should have...Only when that information is made available can strategies be crafted.”⁴⁷
- “the actual program launched by the university must have traction with the students...the benefits have to be clear to the students and not lie in the too-distant future.”⁴⁸
- “the creation of effective tools to measure the religious performance of Catholic colleges and universities is the most important policy change necessary to strengthen and monitor Catholic culture on campus.”⁴⁹
- “Since most Catholic universities do not currently collect much data pertinent to their Catholic culture, identifying useful data points and then agreeing on parameters for their collection will be an important way in which data partners work together.”⁵⁰
- “Although these Catholic colleges distinguish themselves as religious institutions and believe their educational programs are transformative...they seldom, if ever, seek the data that would legitimate their claims.”⁵¹

⁴⁶ Morey & Piderit, 149.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 301.

⁵⁰ Morey & Piderit, 303.

⁵¹ Ibid., 310.

- “almost all Catholic colleges and universities...would benefit from collecting data about student outcomes with respect to Catholic knowledge and practice...”⁵²

Morey & Piderit definitely lean toward measurement versus a descriptive account of student religious experience. In some ways their argument is similar to that of Gleason in that the university is in “crisis” because it does not align itself with established norms. The position of this work on student experience does not attempt to support nor deny Morey & Piderit’s claim. The point taken from their work that is relevant here is that Catholic institutions and their leaders are making policy decisions without one critical piece of data: the student experience.

From I to We

Against the backdrop of the 20th century challenges to the Catholic identity of universities, Pope Benedict XVI offered a new perspective to the university presidents in the United States in April of 2008. Received initially with some trepidation on the part of administrators who had only recently begun to heal the wounds of the struggle with *Ex Corde ecclesiae*, Benedict’s address with met with favor on the part of most. In an address lasting less than 15 minutes in which he never referenced the 1990 document, Benedict acknowledged that “some today question the Church’s involvement in education, wondering whether her resources might be placed elsewhere.”⁵³ He described the role of the Christian community as “a move from ‘I’ to ‘we’” in a dynamic of

⁵² Ibid., 311.

⁵³ Benedict XVI, Address to Presidents of Catholic Colleges in the United States, 2008.

communal identity. In a strike against previous attempts to measure religiosity he stated: “Catholic identity is not dependent upon statistics. Neither can it be equated simply with orthodoxy of course content. It demands and inspires much more: namely that each and every aspect of your learning communities reverberates within the ecclesial life of faith.”⁵⁴

By drawing the student into the “we” of the communal relationship, this life of faith can be experienced and shared. In closing, Benedict called educators to the urgency of “intellectual charity” and “the profound responsibility to lead the young to truth [as] nothing less than an act of love.”⁵⁵

Benedict’s remarks appeared to retreat from the norms of *Ex corde ecclesiae* and move towards a more student-centered approach to Catholic identity. He exhorted the educators listening not to abandon their vocation to education, especially to the poor. For university presidents who expected to be taken to task on issues of institutional orthodoxy, his remarks came as somewhat of a relief.⁵⁶ Benedict’s words reiterated the need for a vibrant faith life on Catholic campuses, but they also stressed the importance of students as a part of the “we” of that life.

The research in Catholic identity since 1990 is distinctive in that it is purely research. Although the topic concerns the Church and religiosity and some of the researchers are themselves vowed religious, the fact remains that none of these projects are in themselves theological. A different approach of theological reflection on the student’s experience of Catholic identity can emerge as a work of practical theology with

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Franklyn Casale, President, St. Thomas University, Miami Gardens, Florida in remarks to the community following Benedict’s address, May 2008.

the student as *agent-subject-in relationship*.⁵⁷ Both liberative and interpretive, these results can inform theological praxis as well as institutional policy. The reflection's purpose is three-fold: the framing of student experience of Catholic identity in the student's own terms; representing texts and tradition using contemporary symbols such as music and film; in a theological reflection that is attentive to the dynamics of power in the intersubjective relationship.

Tradition, Experience, Culture

Practical Theology can be described as the use of experience to inform theological praxis and thereby transform both. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat have described Practical Theology as a process in which the theologian employing social science research methods to describe experience in a theological framework.⁵⁸ This approach is useful, but may not adequately fulfill the promise of Practical Theology as it remains more or less a partner with social science in a dichotomy of faith and reason. To move beyond this duality, this study uses the model of theological reflection of James and Evelyn Whitehead in conjunction with the interpretive focus group (IFG) approach of Patricia Leavy to interview student groups at three metropolitan Catholic universities.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Groome, 1991.

⁵⁸ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, (London: SCM Press, 2006).

⁵⁹ Patricia Leavy, "The Practice of Feminist Oral History and Focus Group Interviews," in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2007) and Whitehead, 1995. A definition of the metropolitan university can be found in *Metropolitan Universities: An Emerging Model in American Education*, Daniel M. Johnson and David A. Bell, eds. (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1995).

Tradition

The tradition which serves as the backdrop for this conversation is set forth in the document *Ex corde ecclesiae*, in Benedict XVI's address to the presidents of Catholic Universities in the United States and in the mission and identity statements of the Catholic universities in which the students subjects are enrolled. These texts represent the "old" in the tradition which is passed on in a university where Catholicism is called to be "vitaly present and operative."⁶⁰ For the purpose of theological reflection, these texts are used to reflect Catholic culture, but not to measure it. They are placed in conversation with experience, in a work of what Benedict XVI called "intellectual charity." These texts are reference points for the development of the discussion questions for the "attending" phase of the theological reflection. The intent is to represent the texts symbolically through the use of contemporary music, film and images which are familiar to the students.

Experience

The Whitehead model's contribution to theological reflection is primarily to incorporate "culture" into the conversation between the "experience" and "tradition" correlation of Don Browning.⁶¹ The addition of Leavy's work to the design is not merely a substitution of the focus group for some other data gathering method but rather it becomes the method of both "attending" and "assertion" in the Whitehead design and provides the opportunity for transformation. Her use of the focus group in feminist

⁶⁰ *Ex corde ecclesiae*.

⁶¹ Robert Kinast, *What Are They Saying About Theological Reflection?* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2000).

research is for the purpose of reinforcing previously diminished, disenfranchised or subjugated voices.⁶² This approach is particularly appropriate for student groups because the voice of the student experience of Catholic identity in Catholic universities has been similarly dismissed or at least minimized and over-looked, as Morey and Piderit have pointed out.

The Interpretive Focus Group envisioned by Leavy assumes that the group is in some way marginalized or disenfranchised, which is largely the case with a student population when it comes to university policy and practice. The focus group interview relies on interaction within the group and helps to clarify key terms.⁶³ The group becomes the unit of analysis.⁶⁴ This is particularly important in identifying and clarifying student's perception of Catholic identity. In addition to clarification this research strategy "allows the exhibition of a struggle for understanding how others interpret key terms and their agreement or disagreements with the issues raised."⁶⁵ The primary difference between a traditional focus group and an *interpretive* focus group as described by Leavy is the participation of the subjects in determining the direction and content of the discussion.⁶⁶ The interaction with the subjects extends to actual review and interpretation of the transcripts and inclusion in what Leavy calls the "intellectual moment" of the process.⁶⁷

Leavy's use of subject interaction is consonant with the Whiteheads' description of assertion as "bringing the perspectives gathered...into a lively dialogue of mutual

⁶² Leavy, 173.

⁶³ Krueger, 2000.

⁶⁴ Mertens, 2005.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Leavy, 180.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

clarification to expand and enrich religious insight. Having the courage to share our convictions and the willingness to be challenged.”⁶⁸ This “crucible of understanding” as the Whiteheads call it, becomes theological when the voice of tradition is engaged. Social science research alone is not theological: “a reflection that limits the dialogue to cultural information and individual experience is not explicitly Christian.”⁶⁹

The Authority of Experience

The need for balance in theological reflection notwithstanding, the element or movement most lacking in the student experience is the experience itself. In *Method in Ministry* the Whiteheads discuss the role of experience in theological reflection and its “proper influence.”⁷⁰ Recalling that Scripture is the “record of people’s experience of God’s presence among them,” the religious authority of the current lived experience is “rooted in recognition of God’s continuing, disturbing presence among us.”⁷¹

The reflection on the lived experience of God’s presence can reveal insights into a person’s beliefs and can also inform the belief’s and practices of the Church both formally (as in the case of *sensus fidelium*) and informally in the mode of congregational work or reflection groups within the student community of a Catholic university. The emphasis on experience is necessary partly due to the fact that “the more frequent

⁶⁸ Whitehead & Whitehead, *Method*, 43.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 82. The term “explicitly Christian” used in this context seems to imply a reflection that is theological, using Christian texts, primarily scripture. The alternative would be a reflection that draws only from sources other than Christian texts. There are limitations in the use of the Whiteheads’ work in conjunction with Leavy’s interpretive method in that the Whiteheads’ methodology is explicitly Christian, while Leavy’s work does not imply any theological grounding. Rather than conflate the two approaches, the attempt is to draw from the parallels where appropriate. This process receives additional development in Chapter 3.

⁷⁰ Whitehead & Whitehead, *Method*, 44.

⁷¹ Ibid., 45.

temptation for many people is to ignore or deny their experience.”⁷² If participants have been previously excluded from the conversation, or have fears associated with participation in it, those participants may benefit from methods that tend to encourage their participation and the inclusion of otherwise “missing voices.”⁷³ Students may minimize or even deny their experiences as in this example:

The talk of religion is taboo and stuff like that. And you’ve got to be careful because they are going to laugh at you. You’ve got to be careful of who is going to get angry. You’ve got to be careful, if, gosh, this person is going to tell me that I am going to go to hell because [of] what I am.⁷⁴

Sharon Dodson and Leah Schmalzbauer’s work was specifically designed to draw out this “indigenous knowledge” in terms that privilege the lived-experience and terms of expression of the subjects.⁷⁵ Leavy calls this authority of experience the willingness to listen to “the wisdom of others,” in which case “others” may represent those whose wisdom is not previously been sought or whose experience has not been richly

⁷² Ibid., 46.

⁷³ Ibid., 48.

⁷⁴ Alyssa Bryant, et al., “Developing an Assessment of College Student’s Spiritual Experiences: The Collegiate Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey.” (*Journal of College & Character*, X, No. 6, Sept. 2009), 7.

⁷⁵ Sharon Dodson and Leah Schmalzbauer, “Poor Mothers and Habits of Hiding: Participatory Methods in Poverty Research” (2005), *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, 949-959. For an extended discussion of “indigenous knowledge” see also: T. Prych & M.T. Castillo, (2001), “The sights and sounds of indigenous knowledge,” in P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (379-385). Thousand Oaks: Sage, and Roy Ellen & Holly Harris (1996), “Concepts of indigenous environmental knowledge in scientific and developmental studies literature: A critical assessment,” East-West Environmental Linkages Workshop 3, University of Kent, Canterbury. Ellen & Harris describe 10 criteria for the term “indigenous knowledge” and relate how it can be applied to local knowledge in the West.

described.⁷⁶ These “others” may also represent Beaudoin’s *sensus “infidelium”* or what Foucault calls “the insurrection of subjugated knowledges” or “naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.”⁷⁷ Groome goes on to state that this “insurrection” forges “fundamental changes in who participates, what counts as knowledge, and how it emerges.”⁷⁸

Three Cultures

Catholic

Ex corde and the Bishop’s application of it sets out the Catholic university as a “privileged place for a fruitful dialogue between the Gospel and culture,” but what is the “culture” to which the document refers?⁷⁹ Throughout *Ex corde* “culture” is reference in the context of society and as “human culture” or “cultures of the world.”⁸⁰ In most cases, the document references culture in opposition to Church in a “cultural dialogue.”⁸¹ This dialogue is acknowledged and necessary unless the Church be placed “on the margin of what is human.”⁸² Not only does the document acknowledge the dialogue between Church and culture, it places the Catholic university in a “privileged place” for this dialogue to occur and charges that the Catholic university become “more attentive to the cultures of the world of today.”⁸³

⁷⁶ Leavy, 180.

⁷⁷ Foucault in Groome *Shared Praxis*, 83.

⁷⁸ Groome, 83.

⁷⁹ USCCB, 2.

⁸⁰ *Ex corde ecclesiae*, 43-47. See also discussion in Chapter 3.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 44.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 45.

College students on Catholic campuses are immersed in at least three “cultures:” the academic culture of the higher education; Catholic culture or tradition as it may be expressed in that setting; and popular culture or society expressed apart from and in conjunction with the other two.

Culture could be described, as Groome does, as “everything that human beings create...in order to express themselves and to make the world a more habitable and hospitable place.”⁸⁴ Culture could also be described as in the terms of the councilor document, *Gaudium et Spes*, as “the world” as in “the presence and activity of the Church in the world today.”⁸⁵ The Whiteheads reject this dichotomy and prefer instead to pursue “a richer interaction between faith and culture.”⁸⁶ Their method of reflection focuses on the belief that more explicit attention to culture in theological reflection “encourages communities to explore cultural resources that can enrich their faith life.”⁸⁷

Catholic culture or Catholic identity also has a broad band of possible definitions. *Ex corde ecclesiae* delineates specific norms that must be met in order for an institution to be Catholic. These norms range from the general nature of the institution: “distinguished by its free search for the whole truth about nature, man and God,” and “fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church;” to the narrow: “the number of non-Catholic teachers should not be allowed to constitute a majority within the institution, which is and must remain Catholic.”⁸⁸ This document repeatedly

⁸⁴ Groome, 1991, 98-99.

⁸⁵ Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, (1965), 2.

⁸⁶ Whitehead & Whitehead, *Method*, 54.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ *Ex corde*, 1:13:[3] and 4:3.

refers to the nature of Catholic identity in the university, without specifically defining the term, except as stated in the General Norms. The direction of *Ex corde ecclesiae* is to align the Catholic university with the teachings of the Church so as to produce an academic institution “in which Catholicism is vitally present and operative.”⁸⁹

Morey and Piderit focus on the “distinguishability” of a Catholic university as represented by the “practice of faith.”⁹⁰ These faith practices include Mass attendance, praying the rosary, Stations of the Cross, taking courses or engaging in conversations about the Catholic faith.⁹¹ These practices are part of what they define as “Catholic culture,” but do not in of themselves constitute an institution’s Catholic identity (for purposes of establishing distinguishability) unless the practice or activity is “central to the core activity of the university” and is frequent and well-attended.⁹² Along with a distinctiveness of practice, they also posit the necessity of “inheritability” of the culture or the positive reception by the next generation of students and faculty of practices and activities that are initiated or modified.⁹³

Michele Dillon, in her book *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith and Power*, concluded that “unlike earlier understandings of identity as fixed and immutable, there is increasing awareness today that identity is an evolving process of ‘becoming’ rather than simply ‘being.’”⁹⁴ Dillon does not discount the importance of practices in this process of becoming and states that:

⁸⁹ Ibid., 1:14

⁹⁰ Morey & Piderit, 34.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Morey & Piderit, 34-35.

⁹³ Ibid., 38.

⁹⁴ Michele Dillon, *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith and Power*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 250.

...the Catholic doctrinal tradition is not something that is uncritically taken for granted. Its symbols and meanings are not “naturally” and invisibly reproduced transgenerationally, but are evaluated and recast by Catholics themselves to ensure their ethical-practical relevance. Since these symbols have their visibility in Catholic sacramental rituals and theology, it is evident that if the vibrancy of the tradition is to be sustained, each generation of Catholics must discover Catholicism by experiencing the rituals and knowing the multifaceted doctrine.⁹⁵

The importance of doctrine and ritual is balanced against the transgenerational appropriation of the Catholic tradition in both Morey and Piderit and Dillon’s assessment of identity. The difference between them is that Morey and Piderit view the inheritance as fixed and quantifiable while Dillon asserts that the receiving culture may play a role in determining their own interpretation of the practices based on their own critique. There is a tension between a concept of identity as given or inherited, put forth by Morey and Piderit versus one that is received, evaluated and recast as Dillon suggests. These differences may represent some of the tension in the contested nature of orthodoxy. The work of listening to student reflections on their experience is more closely aligned with Dillon’s argument than Morey and Piderit’s, in that the purpose of the reflection is to listen to the students’ experience in the process of “becoming” as Dillon says and to acknowledge that they have something to say to tradition.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Ibid., 253.

⁹⁶ There are other substantive differences between the arguments offered by Morey and Piderit and Dillon that are not developed fully in the context of this work. Dillon’s work argues for a “balance” of faith, reason and power that allows marginalized Catholics to remain within the tradition. Morey and Piderit stake out a position that privileges tradition. The authors are used here to illustrate that while they assume divergent positions in many cases, they share, in some respects the value of an inherited tradition in the generation that includes the students in this reflection.

For the purposes of this reflection, Catholic identity has been presented in the form of Scripture and text both from *Ex corde ecclesiae* and each university's own statement of Catholic identity or mission. The students critique and comments on these texts form the basis of their expression of their own appropriation of Catholic identity in the university. In addition the students' own contribution to the texts were used in the reflection in the form of music and expressions from popular culture. These contributions may in some ways reflect the type of critique that Dillon anticipates.

Academic

Academic culture makes use of specific resources within academic disciplines to increase the body of learning. But within this exercise, there lies embedded an academic community that generates its own "culture" its own specific beliefs, customs and practices that function within the academy. Haughey sees the framework of these academic cultures through "shared meanings" in the scholarly work and the motivation to engage in an academic endeavor.⁹⁷ In a Catholic university this layering of cultures, academic, religious and ecclesial, tends to either blur the distinctions or cause conflicts when they are not realized as being formed from different cultural bases.⁹⁸ Sharon Daloz Parks describes culture in higher education as a "community of imagination" for

⁹⁷ Haughey, 21. Haughey also points out that these shared meanings may only be shared in the sense that they are common to many or most of the community, not that the individuals "share" or discuss these meanings. Haughey's work centers largely on his attempt to tease out meanings shared in common in the academic community and hold these up for reflection and interpretation by that community.

⁹⁸ As for example in the case of President Obama being invited to give the commencement address at Notre Dame as a part of the academic community coming into conflict with a perceived doctrinal identity.

young adults.⁹⁹ Parks posits that the academic culture plays a distinctive role in the mentoring of students. In this regard Parks speaks to an apparent conflict in academic culture. Parks describes the academy:

As a place for the formation of faith, this may appear to run counter to the commitments of the academy... Yet if we recognize faith as meaning-making in its most comprehensive dimensions, higher education inevitably functions, at least to some degree, as a mentoring community for those who are young adults in faith (at whatever age), if only by default. ... Thus every institution of higher education serves in at least some measure as a community of imagination in which every professor is potentially a spiritual guide and every syllabus a confession of faith.¹⁰⁰

Parks work supports Haughey's claim about the opportunity for academic culture as a spiritual meeting ground as well as an educational one.

Popular

Within the broader definitions of culture are contained the expressions of culture which can be described as "popular." Popular culture is distinct from either academic or Church culture in that it is typically defined as an expression arising organically and "in

⁹⁹ Sharon Daloz Parks. *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 158.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 159.

contrast to other conceptual categories.”¹⁰¹ These categories which are “other” than popular include:

1. popular culture as an opposing cultural form to *high culture* or *the avant-garde*;
2. popular culture as a category that is defined in relation to both *high culture* and *folk culture*, or which is seen as displacing *folk culture*;
3. popular culture as a form of social and cultural resistance against *dominant culture* or *mass culture*.¹⁰²

It is in this third category, that which acts in resistance to the dominant or mass culture, that most popular culture appealing to the students participating in this reflection resides.

Music in Religious Expression

The “resistance” aspect of popular culture is especially relevant with regard to music in the “hip hop” genre used for the purposes of the theological reflection undertaken here. In the first theological reflection one of the students, Richard, suggested using a popular music video as another expression of the Gospel message in John 8, the woman caught in adultery. When asked to elaborate on why this might be appropriate another student, Irene, replied: “they don’t understand, music is our culture...this is how we do, we use music, we use music for everything.”

This statement resonates with Robin Sylvan’s claim in *Traces of the Spirit* that “the religious impulse has simply migrated to another section of culture.”¹⁰³ She goes on

¹⁰¹ Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 3.

¹⁰² Lynch, 3.

¹⁰³ Robin Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 3.

to say that this is largely a result of the fact that for “today’s young people—the traditional religious institutions do not meet their spiritual needs.”¹⁰⁴ Beaudoin agrees that a deep immersion in popular culture has “usurped the role institutional religion played for previous generations.”¹⁰⁵

A Dialogic Genre

The specific attributes of the hip-hop genre, suggested by the students in this reflection, add an element of the dialogic to the experience of music in culture. Hip hop is a development of African American rap music developed in the urban ghetto and a history, according to Sylvan, that dates to the African slave experience.¹⁰⁶ Hip hop imitates the “call and response” style of African American preaching. Efreem Smith and Phil Jackson in *The Hip Hop Church*, refer to it as “a culture of send and receive.”¹⁰⁷ In this expression, spoken word artists call out to listeners (and society) with a message and seek a response. Often the message is confrontational; what Sylvan calls a “combative spirituality” drawn from the experiences of a marginalized culture producing “a religious sensibility that reflects the particularities and contradictions of their historical circumstances.”¹⁰⁸ But this foundational aspect of hip hop has been transposed to urban

¹⁰⁴ Sylvan, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 21.

¹⁰⁶ A complete background on the development of rap and hip hop is found in Sylvan’s work but also in Michael Eric Dyson, *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop*, (New York: Civitas, 2007). These works are referenced here only as they relate to the use of the genre in some forms of religious expression and theological reflections, especially with students and young persons.

¹⁰⁷ Efreem Smith and Phil Jackson, *The Hip-hop Church*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

¹⁰⁸ Sylvan, 2002, 192.

and suburban youth “more reflective of contemporary circumstances.”¹⁰⁹ The style of hip hop, both the beat and the lyrics consist of “flow, layering and rupture.”¹¹⁰ The rupture to which Sylvan refers is both musical and social as a “blueprint for social resistance and affirmation.”¹¹¹ The music video that the students chose for this reflection, “Jesus Walks” by artist Kanye West, is illustrative of these elements:

We at war with terrorism, racism, and most of all we at war with ourselves.

Jesus walks.

God show me the way because the Devil trying to break me down.

Jesus walks with me, with me, with me.¹¹²

The “rupture” the constant driving beat of the words “Jesus walks” is an affirmation of the Gospel message to the adulterous woman, “neither do I condemn you,” as the students interpreted it. The music and the images display graphic depictions of “sinners” in various stages of redemption against a backdrop of urban decay. The language is visceral:

You know what the Midwest is?

Young and restless

Where restless (Niggas) might snatch your necklace

And next these (Niggas) might jack your Lexus

...I walk through the valley of the shadow of death

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 211.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Sylvan.

¹¹² Kanye West, “Jesus Walks” on “Drop Out” album, (Rock-a-fella Records, 2004).

The song is an appeal to a Jesus who could save the singer from this situation and even from himself along with the “hustlers, killers, murderers, drug dealers, even us cripples.”¹¹³ The singer recognizes that his message (Jesus walks) might not be well-received in his community:

They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus
That means guns, sex, lies, video tapes
But if I talk about God my record won't get played, huh?¹¹⁴

In fact his record did get played, sold millions, won a Grammy award and was reproduced in three different versions; further testimony to the power of popular culture and this genre in particular. “Jesus Walks” was considered a “mainstream” video, not a part of the Gospel or “Christian hip hop” genre; a point that the students in this reflection emphasized. For them, West’s music was “real” and derived directly from his lived experience. This contrasted with the students’ experience with religious institutions as one student, Richard, explained:

This song has really helped me a lot. Helped me to realize that Jesus is here for sinners. This is the problem I have with going to church. They want you to be all “pure” and holy before you go. Well, how come you go to church if you have to be perfect before you can go?

The authentic experience expressed by the lyrics resonated with the students in a way that the reading from John did not, perhaps because of the contemporary setting, perhaps because of the lyrics, or perhaps because it was presented within the popular culture with which the students were familiar and comfortable. Again, Richard:

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ West.

They see hip hop with images like the ones in the first video, of Christ with blood on his face, or a burning cross [and] they think its being disrespectful. Well its not, it's being respectful. But this is how we do it in our culture, we use music, we use music for everything. It's just a part of life.

In order to discover the “hidden” aspects of the treasure of student experience, aspects of popular culture can used to evoke expressions of student experience, taking the form of music, music videos, film and photographic images as well as texts. In this example, the students themselves have offered their experience in the form of selections from popular culture.

Chapter Three

Practical Theological Framework

Why is understanding the student experience of Catholic identity a work of Practical Theology and not the outcome of a type of social science research? The context of the reflection, the Catholic university, grants this endeavor the *opportunity* to be a theological reflection. The unique context of the university alone would not accomplish this. There are four primary reasons that support this as a work of theological reflection and they are: 1) the nature of the subjects themselves; 2) the nature of the experience they are describing; 3) the nature of the activity or process that takes place during the theological reflection; and 4) the role of the facilitator.

The students of a Catholic university are the direct recipients of the evangelical mission of the university and can also become a part of that evangelization into the world.¹¹⁵ This is in part because of the nature of the Catholic university as *from the heart*

¹¹⁵ “Every Catholic university is to maintain communion with the universal Church and the Holy See...a Catholic university will contribute to the Church’s work of evangelization.” *Ex corde ecclesiae, Article 5, I.* And: “By its very nature, each Catholic university makes an important contribution to the Church’s work of evangelization. It is a question not only of preaching the Gospel in every wider geographic areas or to

of the Church, and the specific mission to which the Catholic university is called.¹¹⁶ And how can Catholicism possibly be understood as either vital or operative (as called for in *Ex corde*) without also understanding the experience of the students who participate in the academy and are, in fact, the primary reason for its existence? We can employ the tools of science to describe, in science's own terms, this experience. But this will not get to the heart of either the student experience or Catholic identity. To explore "vitality" (that is to say "life force") a relationship must be established between the student and the tradition that allows a reflection on culture. According to *Ex corde* "a Catholic university...is also a primary and privileged place for a fruitful dialogue between the Gospel and culture."¹¹⁷

The third justification for a theological framework is that the subject under consideration is the student's experience of Catholic identity in the Catholic university. While this exploration might be undertaken as a fact-finding activity, the potential for a much richer discussion and reflection grounded in students' religious and spiritual experiences is compelling, especially since it is rare. Placing the discussion in the context of a theological reflection opens the door to spiritual discernment and insight which could be enlightening for the students or even transformational.

Because of the potential vulnerability and opportunity inherent in theological reflection of this type, it calls the facilitator to a higher ethic of care, to a kind of pastoral

ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and , as it were, upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, humanity's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation." *Ex corde ecclesiae*, Article 4, 48-49.

¹¹⁶ "Every Catholic university, without ceasing to be a university, has a relationship to the Church that is essential to its Catholic identity...each institution contributes to the life and the mission of the universal Church, assuming consequently a special bond with the Holy See by reason of the service to unity which it is called to render to the whole Church." *Ex corde ecclesiae*, Article 3, 27.

¹¹⁷ *Ex corde ecclesiae*, Article 3, 43.

or ministerial role. This does not necessarily imply a hierarchical superiority or a theological one, but merely an increased vigilance and concern for the sacredness of the subjects and the journey they are undertaking. Beaudoin states that we cannot, as educators, abdicate the power dynamic between professor and student. In the theological reflection anticipated here, that dynamic will be explicit, transparent and ultimately, shared with the subjects in the same way that Christians are called to share in the body of Christ.¹¹⁸ Leavy and Dodson's have expressed considerable concerns about their personal role as "privileged outsiders" in the process. To be the scribe entrusted to bring forth from the storeroom both the old and new, is to assume a sacred trust with both the tradition and the experiences of the participants. Leavy puts it this way: "I will forever struggle with the dilemmas of [working] within a community to which I cannot claim membership. [It] keeps me in touch with the vulnerability and risk that are implicit in my research."¹¹⁹ Dodson was "confronted with the practical and emotional challenges related to [her] status" and gained "a deeper understanding of the implicit influence my...status had in my communication with respondents."¹²⁰

So how then is this influence, this inherent inequality in status between the "scribe", the educator, the facilitator and the people of God, the participants, the students to be bridged, or can it be bridged at all? Beaudoin says that "this is not a demand for the 'relinquishing' of power on the part of the teacher, which is impossible anyway. It is rather seeking to keep the dynamic of shared study open for unendingly reshareable circuits of power..."¹²¹ Foucault speaks not to surrendering the dynamics of power but

¹¹⁸ Beaudoin, *Witness*, 10.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹²¹ Beaudoin, 2008, 10.

to making them visible; to “reveal relations of power is...to put them back in the hands of those who exercise them.”¹²² So then, transparency, shared study, co-analysis, collaboration--all features of the Interpretive Focus Group--will serve to mitigate, at best, the inherent inequalities in the process.

These are all structural safeguards against the misuse of power before and after the fact. But it is *during* the IFG itself that the real power dynamics and potential are revealed when there is a true “power shift” in the process and “community members [take] on the role of analytical experts and [the facilitator] step[s] back into the role of student.”¹²³ Leavy says that this “group effect” challenges beliefs and assumptions and allows for the expansion of roles “beyond the strict separation between ‘interviewer’ and ‘interviewee’”. It is the facilitators willingness to become vulnerable to the “wisdom of others” and the respect for the subject-in-relationship that allows this “happening” to occur. It is more than a promise of individual confidentiality; it is an honoring of the process and the participants as in a sacred trust.

Practical Theology begins in experience in light of tradition to influence on-going praxis. Practical Theology has a bias to action, to transformation. Practical Theology describes not only what the reign of God is but also “that which ought to be.”¹²⁴ The purpose of examining the college student experience of Catholic identity is to inform the theological and educational practices of Catholic universities *in order to transform them*, to more closely align them with the Gospel message they are mandated to carry out.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Dodson, 178.

¹²⁴ Karl Rahner, “Practical Theology within the Totality of Theological Disciplines,” *Theological Investigations*, 9:104, as quoted by Terry Veling in *Practical Theology: On Earth as it is in Heaven*, (New York: Orbis, 2005), 19.

Nesting Theological Reflection and Inquiry

This work weaves together three streams of inquiry: focus groups; feminist inquiry in the form of interpretive focus groups; and theological reflection for ministry as elucidated by James Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead to create a unique prism from which to observe the student experience. By synthesizing these approaches under a practical theological framework, the student experience emerges from the process as something more than mere “data” and the process itself offers opportunities for the students to gain insight into their own experiences, resulting in an ever deepening expression with the group and one which may reverberate outside the limited group reflection.

The opportunity for deeper insight into the student experience is the qualitative dimension of the project. The opportunity for student collaboration and interpretation in the project is the constructivist or liberationist dimension of the work. The opportunity, under the facilitator as a ministerial guide, for personal transformation of the student participants, as well as those exposed to it, is the theological dimension of the work.

In *The Promise of Partnership: A Model for Collaborative Ministry*, James and Evelyn Whitehead describe collaboration as “laboring together” for a common goal.¹²⁵ Diversity in style can foster greater collaboration, according to the Whiteheads. Being willing to accept the use of different terms and language contributes to the groups growth

¹²⁵ Evelyn Eaton Whitehead & James D. Whitehead, *The Promise of Partnership: A Model for Collaborative Ministry* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse.com, 2000), 52.

towards interdependence and the ability to move towards interdependence.¹²⁶ This interdependence assists the group in sharing power, a goal of the Interpretive Focus Group as well. What the Whiteheads call “partnership in power” enables the group to realize that “when we work together, your power does not diminish me or replace my own. Rather, the power we share increases and enhances my strength.”¹²⁷

By combining the elements of an established means of theological reflection with tools from media and popular culture, new insights are revealed in precisely the way that the scribe, coming forth from the storeroom with both the new and the old, is revelatory of the kingdom of God.¹²⁸

Bringing Forth the Old and the New

There are at least two possible approaches to use in attempting to frame the student experience of Catholic identity at a Catholic university. Making use of quantitative measures, such as surveys, is the most used and possibly the most readily accepted approach because it mimics the scientific world in ways that the academy has endorsed and been able to fund in other disciplines.¹²⁹ This is the method primarily used by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) study on student spirituality and also the primary method outlined in Smith’s *Soul Searching*.¹³⁰ In fact, most research on

¹²⁶Ibid., 53.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 121.

¹²⁸ Matthew 14:52.

¹²⁹ Bent Flyvberg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹³⁰ Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, (New York: Oxford, 1993), 67. A.W. Astin, *The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose*. (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, 2004).

student attitudes toward religion and spirituality have used surveys to quantify expressions of student religiosity partly because they can reflect information on large populations which can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Such approaches to student experience depend on questions framed by others which may leave little room for clarification, nuance or context in the response. For a group whose experiences are already underrepresented in the literature, using a positivist framework would further diminish the opportunity for an expression of experience that is outside the questioner's frame of reference. This shortcoming was acknowledged by Smith who himself noted that "surveys cannot tell us everything or perhaps even the most important and interesting things there are to know about people and their lives. Surveys have real limits...perhaps especially about the lives of adolescents and perhaps especially about faith and spiritual practices."¹³¹

Other approaches for understanding student experience include qualitative methods, in particular document reviews, personal interviews (and their variant, focus groups). In-depth personal interviews have long been used to explore personal spiritual and religious experience. Fowler's *Stage of Faith* is one of many such studies grounded in interviews of this type.¹³²

Focus groups, a form of "group interview," developed as a way to receive input from a number of individuals at one setting. Initially focus groups were used primarily for program or product evaluation and consisted of several subjects with a common

¹³¹ Christian Smith, 67. This is not intended as a full critique or examination of the use of surveys with college students but rather to illustrate that 1) surveys have been used extensively in recent models of college student spirituality and that 2) other methods can be used to illicit information that may be more appropriate, in-depth or open to student language and forms of expression.

¹³² James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*, (San Francisco: Harper), 1995.

experience who either volunteered or were compensated for participating in the focus group. A facilitator or team asks predetermined introductory, topical and follow up questions to the group. The group responses are analyzed for themes and specific input and then summarized for presentation to the stakeholders who are not, in most cases, the subjects or participants.

According to Marcy Bullock, “focus groups in ...academic environments...illustrate the group dynamic at work and produce data and insights which would be less accessible without the interaction of the group.”¹³³ The advantage of focus groups over personal interviews is that they give us “a deeper understanding of the phenomenon” since “attitudes and opinions are socially formed: focus groups provide a social environment in which to articulate them.”¹³⁴ In focus groups, the group is the unit of measure, resulting in “a multivocal narrative larger than the sum of its parts.”¹³⁵ To their disadvantage, focus groups can be expensive and time consuming; selecting participants can be biased; the reliability of thematic analysis can be questionable; the group is sometimes subject to dominant or coercive participants; and they may be context specific and not fully generalizable.¹³⁶ Others make a strong case that most of these objections can be overcome with comparisons and multiple group experiences.¹³⁷

¹³³ Marcy Bullock, “Beyond Surveys: Using focus groups to evaluate university career services,” *Journal of Career Planning and Employment*, 59(4), 1.

¹³⁴ R.L. Breen, “A Practical Guide to Focus-Group Research,” *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 30, no. 3, (2006): 463-475 and R.A. Krueger, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (London: Sage, 2000).

¹³⁵ Patricia Leavy, “The Practice of Feminist Oral History and Focus Group Interviews,” in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, ed. S. Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2007) and Donna Mertens, *Research and Evaluation in Education and Psychology*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005).

¹³⁶ Breen, 467.

¹³⁷ Leavy, 180.

Subjugated Voices

Partly in response to these concerns, and more importantly, out of a need to elicit responses for otherwise marginalized or disenfranchised groups, Patricia Leavy expanded on this framework by using an approach she describes as Interpretive Focus Groups (IFG), for working with “populations that have been ignored by the larger research community” representing “subjugated voices,” particularly those for whom speaking out could be difficult or even dangerous.¹³⁸ This identification with the marginalized is appropriate for examination of the student experience due to the parallels between disenfranchised groups and student groups. In reality, an undergraduate college student has little or no power over the academic structure, the curriculum, the grading rubrics, the services offered students, or often, the courses and instructors they are required to complete. This population has been largely ignored by the research community, in the lack of literature addressing the student experience *from the student perspective*. Due to the inherent and unequal power dynamic present in the academic setting, students may be intimidated about speaking of their experience, especially if their experience would be perceived as critical by the very faculty and administration that would receive it. Such a power dynamic alone qualifies the student experience as a “subjugated voice” within the academic community.

Subject-centered

¹³⁸ Leavy, 175.

Leavy and her associates Lisa Dodson and Leah Schmalzbauer worked with poor and immigrant families who were stigmatized and often unwilling to speak openly about their social realities. Their approach combines subject collaboration in the content as well as the interpretation of the discussions conducted with these groups. The goal of the IFG is to keep the discussion “subject-centered” and describe the experience from the perspective of the participants and in their own “language and concepts, their frameworks for understanding the world.”¹³⁹ This emphasis on using the participant’s language and concepts is particularly relevant to the student experience which may be expressed in “languages” such as music, graffiti, blogs, clothing and tattoos; frameworks that may not appear in a traditional questionnaire or even focus groups if the subject perspective is not central.

Collaborative

In Leavy and Dodson’s work, the participants collaborated in the development, conduct and interpretation of the discussions, focusing primarily on the interpretive stage as “the research moment that generally excludes community members.”¹⁴⁰ This action is key in shifting the power dynamic and allowing for what Foucault calls the “insurrection of subjugated voices.”¹⁴¹ Dodson goes on to state that “we sought co-analysis, not confirmation of the data previously gathered.”¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Leavy, 175.

¹⁴⁰ Lisa Dodson and Leah Schmalzbauer, “Poor Mothers and Habits of Hiding: Participatory Methods in Poverty Research,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67, no. 4 (November 2005).

¹⁴¹ Beaudoin, *Witness*, 26.

¹⁴² Dodson, 954.

Dynamic

This willingness to surrender authority to the participants is partly responsible for the opening of the process to a “happening” or a conversation that “while prearranged and ‘focused’...remains a dynamic narrative process.”¹⁴³ According to Dodson, this open-endedness confounds some in the social science research community who are not as comfortable working with a process that is less structured. The process contains elements of “methodological spontaneity” which may seem hard to replicate in “neat or precise steps.”¹⁴⁴ On this basis the process is allowed to progress in new and previously unanticipated directions based on the input of the participants.

The wisdom of others

By respecting the participants conceptual frameworks, IFG also gives priority to a “respondent’s hierarchy of importance” which is part of the concept of “indigenous knowledge” Central to IFG’s.¹⁴⁵ IFG acknowledges that “the group happening” can be a “productive knowledge-building path” for the participants as well as the larger community. By using a group as the focal point of discussion, the “collective testimonies foster more speaking up” on the part of the participants.¹⁴⁶ The participant’s “everyday ways of knowing” are revealed in the “sharing or comparing of experiences.” The IFG’s

¹⁴³ Leavy, 173

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 180.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 952.

“treat lived experience as central to building knowledge” and “acknowledge the participants as knowing bodies.”¹⁴⁷

Transformative

Leavy and Dodson’s goal for IFG’s is more than descriptive. The goal of the focus groups is to “break the silence” of the social reality of these families as well as to empower the participants. They “shift power by making collaboration a core element” and they integrate community members into the process as “experts at the interpretive stage.”¹⁴⁸ By allowing the participants visibility to the core of the experience as well as the “intellectual moments” they open the process to critique and enhancement, allowing it to be guided and directed by the participants. The facilitators become “more than just a mouthpiece” because the process impacts and changes the participants as it examines their experiences. They avoid the “indignity of speaking for others” as the interpretive process allows the community to find its own voice.¹⁴⁹ This dynamic of shared power sets the stage for the possibility that the narrative is more than the sum of the voices and is actually a transformational act. This surrendering of authority can be a challenge to “conventional lines of authority” in the way that social phenomena are interpreted and can “contribute to transforming how a society is ‘known.’”¹⁵⁰

Theological Reflection Reinterpreted

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 174.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 180.

¹⁴⁹ Beaudoin, *Witness*, 11.

¹⁵⁰ Leavy, 180.

Through a dynamic, subject-centered collaboration, Leavy and Dodson have developed a process of sharing and comparing experiences that can be used as a tool for theological reflection on student experience. Interpretive focus groups are not, as they stand, a theological tool in themselves, but merely an approach to a new way of using an older model of theological reflection first developed by James and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead in their book *Method in Ministry*, in 1980.¹⁵¹ The Whiteheads present a method within a model that can act as a structural and theological framework in which some of the technical aspects of the Interpretive Focus Group can be applied resulting in something that is new and particularly appropriate for gaining a deeper understanding of the college student experience of Catholic identity.

Method in Ministry

The Whiteheads' approach to theological reflection is based on the need they saw for a contemporary ministerial process that was portable, performable and communal. Their approach is portable, in that it could be used in the context of daily life. It is performable in that it was "simple and straightforward enough to lead to practical action."¹⁵² Finally it is communal in that it was a "shared strategy" meant for communities of faithful.¹⁵³ Robert Kinast points out the practical theological aspect of the Whiteheads approach in that it carries: "an appreciation for the role that the sense of

¹⁵¹ James and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 1995).

¹⁵² Whitehead & Whitehead, *Method*, 3.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

the faithful has played in history [which] encourages contemporary communities of faith to engage their tradition actively rather than submissively as they respond to current challenges.”¹⁵⁴

The Whiteheads envisioned the ministerial role in the reflection to be accessible to “the minister who is neither exclusively an activist nor a professional theologian.”¹⁵⁵ They understand theological reflection as a “corporate task” which understands “the community of faith as the locus of theological and pastoral reflection.”¹⁵⁶

The Whiteheads envision the reflection to surround a “pastoral question” of interest to the faith community, which requires a “pastoral response” based in practical action with and for the community. The model for the reflection is a *conversation* between three sources of information on the pastoral question: tradition, experience and culture.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Robert Kinast, *What are They Saying about Theological Reflection*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 8.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, xiii.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁵⁷ The term “conversation” in reference to the Whitehead’s method of theological reflection is used as a metaphor for the interaction between the three sources: tradition, experience and culture. Their use of “conversation” also refers to “how the different participants in the dialogue present their case, engage one another, and move toward a practical response.” Finally the term is used to be a reminder that the reflection is a communal process and that “if only one person’s voice is heard...there is no conversation.” Whitehead, 4.

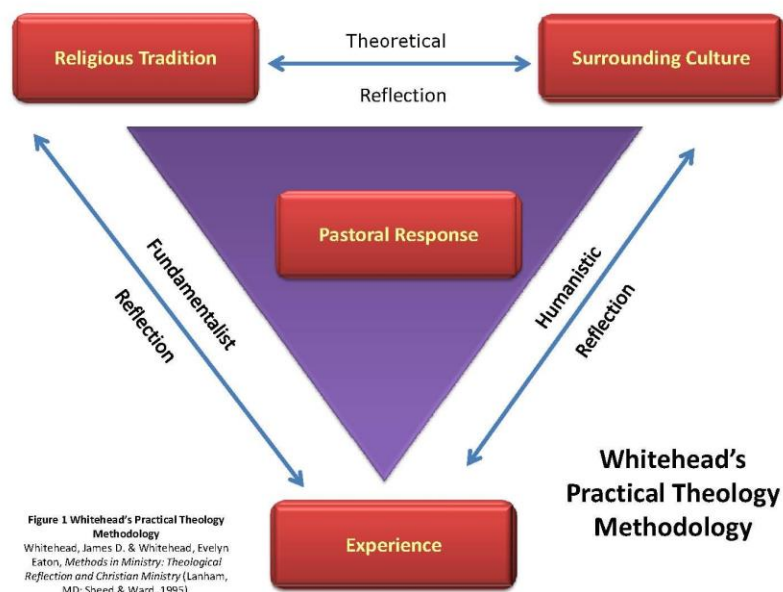


Figure 2

Tradition, in the Whitehead's model, is the Christian tradition in conversation with the personal experience of the individual Christians and the "collective experience of faith communities." Culture, in the conversation, is represented by the "convictions, values and biases that form the social setting" in addition to the "formative symbols and on-going interpretations that shape" the world view of the community.

The three movements within the model are *attending* or listening to the sources, *assertion* or the conversation between the sources, and *response* or the conclusions and actions which come from the reflection. Thomas Groome likens their model to his method of "shared Christian praxis" and describes it as a way for a community to "do theology together."¹⁵⁸ A closer look at each of these movements will enhance the

¹⁵⁸ Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 152. These movements also resonate with Richard Osmer's "four tasks of practical theology" in *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

understanding of how this model can serve as the framework or vehicle under which the components of the IFG nest. It is this framework that gives the reflection its theological locus.

Attending

The method of the reflection is the dynamic process that allows the conversation to proceed, first by *attending* or listening to the information available from tradition, experience and culture. Attending involves preparing and, more importantly, listening deeply to each of the sources. Listening is more than just hearing, it is listening with a willingness to “suspend premature judgment”¹⁵⁹ on the part of the participants. This type of listening offers a safe space for expression by acknowledging in advance that no harm will come to the participant by virtue of their participation. By withholding judgment, the participant is granted the dignity of full expression of their ideas and experiences in their own terms. It is a listening that “hears the religious themes imbedded in the secular vocabulary of the age” and is tuned to the implicit “assumptions and presuppositions that lie behind the religious programs and pastoral decisions” of the past, which are sometimes painful to hear.¹⁶⁰ Finally, it is listening with an ear to what could or should be changed; a “critical examination of the current ‘established’ shape” of decisions or policy. By listening carefully, the leaders or facilitators acknowledge that “their role is not only to direct the community of faith, but to learn from it.”¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Whitehead & Whitehead, *Method*, 14.

¹⁶⁰ Whitehead & Whitehead, *Method*, 72.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 14, 72-73.

Attending, in this model, is more than listening; it is the beginning of the process of spiritual discernment.¹⁶² The minister must first be willing to acknowledge the gaps and ambiguities in the minister's own faith experience. This self-awareness and possible vulnerability leaves the minister open to understand the doubt and pain of others from the inside out. It involves a willingness to empty oneself of the role of the expert or even teacher and accept the opportunity to hear the expressions of those who may use terms or theologies that appear less sophisticated, but are in fact based in the authentic experiences of the faithful, not unlike Dodson's "wisdom of others."¹⁶³

These expressions represent sources for reflection in tradition, experience and culture. The minister must resist the temptation to challenge or question these expressions and have the patience and discipline to allow them to be fully *heard*. By virtue of the inclusion of culture and experience in the conversation, the space is created for context as well as text to emerge and expressions may take forms of popular culture, music and art as well as everyday speech. As the Whiteheads reiterate, some of these expression may emerge from "earlier theologies," and the important step here is not to criticize or correct but to allow the message, values or presuppositions behind the words to be revealed.¹⁶⁴

Finally, the deep listening of attending also reveals the ways in which new directions and changes are indicated. Attending is receptive listening but it is also critical listening, open to exploration of "the new forms of Christian action that may be demanded as the church moves into its future."¹⁶⁵ This interpretation is not carried out in

¹⁶² Ibid., 70.

¹⁶³ Leavy, 180.

¹⁶⁴ Whitehead & Whitehead, *Method*, 72-74.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., *Method*, 73.

a vacuum, however, but through the process of communal discernment and shared responsibility. Whitehead calls for a level of maturity and asceticism on the part of the minister in this reflection, a self-emptying of preconceived solutions and judgments of what is needed. This kenosis suggests a parallel with Leavy and Dodson's experience as facilitators from whom the power shifts as they become learners as well as teachers in a shared experience of expression, interpretation and action.

Poured into a Single Container: The Crucible of Assertion

One major difference between listening in IFG and in the Whitehead's process is that in the theological reflection the discernment process is specifically, explicitly open to the Spirit of God moving and working within the group. The profound activity of communal discernment most often takes place in the movement that the Whiteheads call *the crucible of assertion*, in which each party to the reflection expresses their own unique perspective without the need to persuade or justify their position. Tensions may develop as differences are expressed. The critical need at this stage is to create a "holding environment," a place where "it is safe to admit our doubts and to acknowledge our differences."¹⁶⁶ To create this atmosphere among the disenfranchised is challenging and requires a thoughtful approach to the process, the participants, the setting and the dynamics which may take place. Again, maturity on the part of the minister or facilitator is a prerequisite to the process of assertion. We are required to engage our beliefs, religious or otherwise at a deeper level, acknowledging the failures as well as the

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 76.

strengths and possibilities of the institutions and policies upon which we reflect. Being open to such contradictions and inconsistencies can, according to Whitehead, result in a “deeper appreciation of the tradition’s vitality and its continuing contribution to the human community.”¹⁶⁷

This stage of reflection is called a *crucible* because it is the point at which “the diverse information is poured into a single container.”¹⁶⁸ This metaphor also acknowledges the volatility of such an endeavor if transformation is to occur. Such is the knowledge and skill required of the scribe or the head of the household who “brings forth from the storeroom both the new and the old.”¹⁶⁹ The crucible of assertion is volatile because it contains desperate perspectives of tradition, experience and culture. It is volatile because of the potential for conflict between the sources as well as the expressions of the individuals. The “pastoral challenge” in this stage of assertion is to maintain the “holding environment” intrapersonally as well as interpersonally. Premature intervention on the part of the minister will circumvent the process and curtail discussion. If participants turn to the pastoral leader for “the answer” the opportunity for reconciliation and transformation will be lost or at least significantly diminished. Instead, a lively exchange between tradition, experience and culture opens the reflection to the possibilities inherent in diversity and apparent contradiction. Here the skill and preparation of the minister is critical, but so is the commitment to the process itself, especially when it becomes uncomfortably conflictual. Whitehead asserts that the value

¹⁶⁷ Whitehead & Whitehead, *Method*, 78. Note: Here there is a departure from the goals of IFG. In Method in Ministry the source of tradition is scripture, teaching and sense of the faithful, which are presumed to contain some valuable element of truth, though the expression of said truth may be flawed and in need of correction. In IFG the source of what could be called “tradition” are laws and policies which are presupposed to be discriminatory or unfairly imposed on the participants.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁶⁹ Matthew 13:52.

of the conflict itself must be embraced, just as the conflicts between persons must be held in “an honorable embrace,” reminiscent of Jacob wrestling with an unseen God through the dark night and emerging transformed.¹⁷⁰

Balance between the voices of tradition, culture and experience is required for the movement of assertion to be fruitful. The reasons require a lengthy quotation from

Method in Ministry:

A reflection in which tradition simply interprets experience, without consideration of cultural information (whether through neglect of the exegetical sciences on the interpretation of Scripture or psychological understanding of the human person) leads us toward fundamentalism. A reflection that limits the dialogue to cultural information and individual experience is not explicitly Christian. Finally, a reflection which is essentially a dialogue between the Christian tradition and cultural information (whether philosophy, philology, or science), to the neglect of personal experience, tends to yield conclusions of a more theoretical nature. Since the experience of participants is overlooked, the pastoral conclusions arising from such a reflection are often abstract or simply irrelevant.¹⁷¹

A lack of balance in reflecting on these sources of information results in a broken dialogue and the reflection fails and loses its transformational potential. The pastoral challenge is to orchestrate a conversation in which each partner is respected, acknowledged and considered in the process of arriving at the final movement: *response*.

¹⁷⁰ Whitehead & Whitehead, *Method*, 78.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

Response

The pastoral response in Whitehead's model is the actions which result from the insights gained during the reflection or the fruit of the reflection. For the reflection to be successful, the response must be corporate, shared, and communal. It must represent, if not a consensus, at least be the best efforts of the group to discern the actions to be taken. In the Whiteheads examples the pastoral response is used to give input to others, sometimes during the reflection and sometimes as a product of the reflection. In the pastoral response, the transformative power of the theological reflection is acknowledged. More than just giving voice to the communal effort, the participants are *changed* by the experience of their sharing. This transformative shift may occur during any or all of the three movements, but should be evident by the point of the response in a fruitful reflection. As a work of Practical Theology, the response should initiate action that will speak to the tradition critically as well as transforming the participants. It is the outcome of the conversation, and the ensuing conflicts that irrupt, that change is possible by virtue of the reflection. According to the Whiteheads: "often it is in conflict, even by means of conflict, that the future is revealed."¹⁷² But this conflict can be uncomfortable for both the ministers and the participants as they struggle to remain in conversation with the tradition in light of contradictions that may arise from their experience. Or as Raymond Brown put it: "there have been many times when it was not easy to decide whether for

¹⁷² Whitehead & Whitehead, *Method*, 93.

the sake of the Gospel one should split from the establishment or should stay and work stubbornly within it, striving for change.”¹⁷³

The content of the pastoral response may be expressed during the reflection or subsequent to it, but it should authentically represent the outcome of the theological reflection. Here the IFG has a more nuanced approach to shared interpretation and is more explicit in the way this happens as a part of the process. This is one of the advantages of enhancing the Whiteheads work with the IFG and one of the reasons that these two approaches can be so complementary.

But how is the pastoral response different from a conventional focus group or even an Interpretive Focus Group in the resultant response? While both focus groups and IFGs acknowledge the possibility of a transforming experience for the participants, the pastoral response *anticipates and expects transformation*. By invoking the power and the mystery of the Spirit in the process the participants acknowledge that they are greater than the sum of their parts not only by virtue of their sharing with each other, but also by the working of the God of creation in their midst. The participants in an IFG are working for a greater good for the participants. The participants in Whitehead’s theological reflection are also working for a greater good and in so doing they are acknowledging the operation of the *source of all good*. Both groups work for an improved life experience for their participants. The theological reflection works for an improved experience and a transformed community which, through the *sensus fidelium*, has the potential to speak to the tradition with the authority of experience in ways that impact the theology and the tradition itself.

¹⁷³ Brown, 73.

Culture and Experience in Listening to Students

There are several well-established methods of theological reflection that might be used for describing the student experience at a Catholic university. Four reasons may be identified as to why an adapted version of the Whiteheads' method is most suited to doing theological work on students' experience. The method is portable, thus allowing for use in a variety of settings. At the same time, the method is adaptable, in the sense that it lends itself to use by congregations as well as other groups considering a pastoral question or issue. In addition, by raising up experience and culture as equal partners with tradition, it allows for a discussion that is balanced and sensitive to the participant's lives and cultural context while staying within the bounds of the tradition. Finally, this method is remarkably effective for work with groups, thus lending itself to the task of the practical theological interpretation of focus group interactions.

The inclusion of culture in the Whitehead model is especially germane to student subjects since their experience is unique to the subject of Catholic identity and they are overwhelmed with a cultural context that is both academic and popular.¹⁷⁴ If tradition is a whisper in the students' ear, popular culture is a scream, often transmitted through earplugs to the exclusion of all other input or interaction. For this reason, any approach that does not take culture into careful consideration would not be able to reflect the full range and scope of student experience.

¹⁷⁴ Robert Kinast, *What Are They Saying About Theological Reflection?*(2000), Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 8.

According to Kinast "The inclusion of the resources of culture is one of the distinctive contributions that the Whiteheads have made to the general form of theological reflection."

The attention to experience in the Whiteheads' method is equally critical since the student experience of Catholic identity has not been lifted up, in the students' own voice and terms, in previous considerations of this topic. The Whiteheads speak of the "authority of experience" as an equal partner in the conversation with tradition and culture.¹⁷⁵ They speak of the "missing voices" in theological reflection and the need to privilege the experience of the dispossessed.¹⁷⁶ The justification for the authority of experience comes from scripture in that: "the Bible turns again and again to the oppressed in their struggle for justice...the anawim--...in whom Yahweh takes special interest."¹⁷⁷ Reinforcing the value of experience in scripture is the teaching of the Church in that same regard. The *sensus fidelium* on which the Whiteheads also focus, grants an authority to the student experience as a part of the faithful body of Christ.¹⁷⁸

Early on the Whiteheads' method was compelling for use with students, but I anticipated using it in some type of one-on-one interview. My fear was that students would be reluctant to speak about religious or spiritual experiences in a group setting, especially if their experience might be construed as negative or critical.

Nesting IFG into Whitehead

The goal of the Interpretive Theological Reflection (ITR) is to extract all the elements of an Interpretive Focus Group and nest them securely into a method of theological reflection in which they are fully compatible. The result is a method of theological reflection particularly sensitive to the needs and experiences of students in a

¹⁷⁵ Whitehead & Whitehead, *Methods*, 44.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

university setting. The features of the IFG that are central to this process are that it is subject-centered, collaborative and communal, dynamic, transformative, and, sensitive to subjugated voices. These features intersect with the strengths of the theological reflection described by the Whiteheads' as follows:

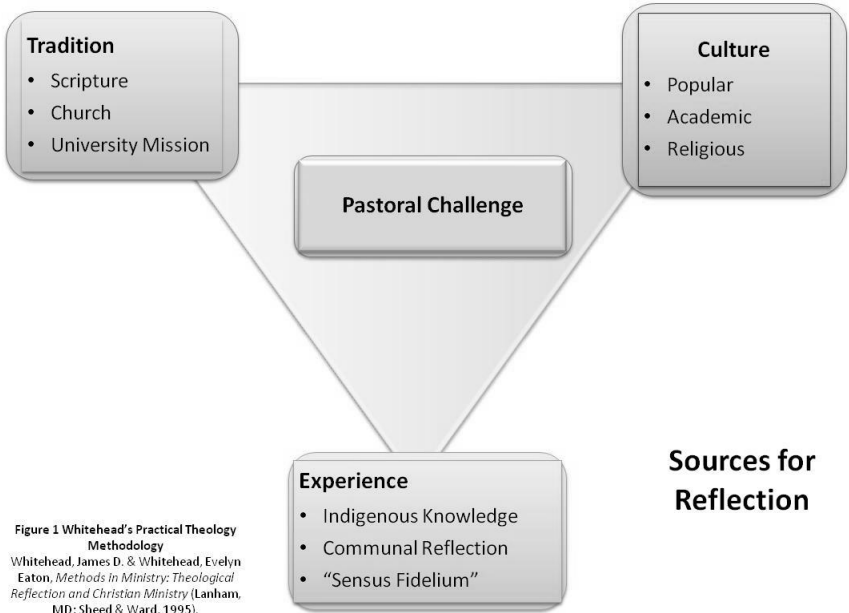


Figure 3

Within the three movements of the theological reflection, the particular skills and sensitivities of the Interpretive Focus Group are used to bring about a fuller, deeper insight into the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the participants. Schematically it would look like this:

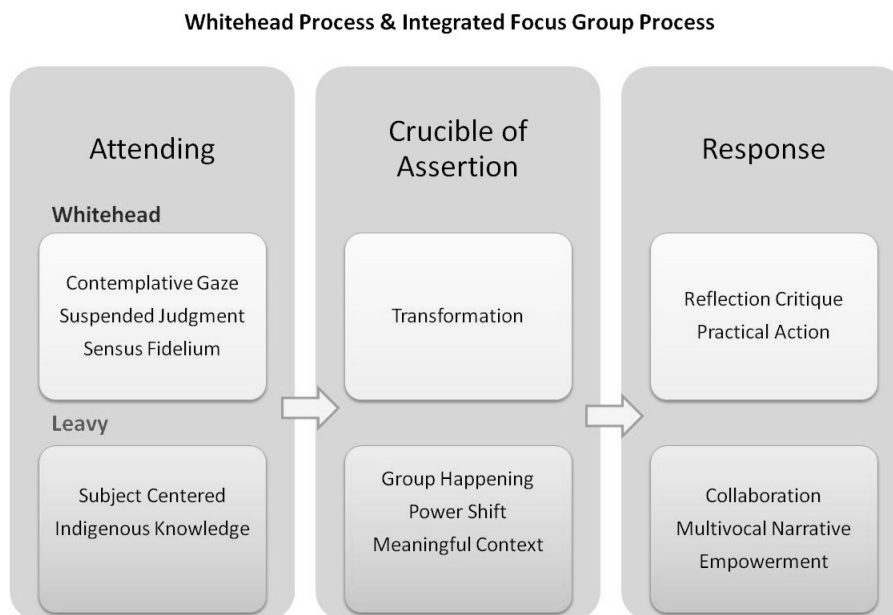


Figure 4

By using the Interpretive Theological Reflection, the student-subjects are recognized as disenfranchised voices and their experience understood as subjugated, within the context of the academic community. Additionally, the need for the students to express their own experience *in their own terms and language* is emphasized. The *interpretive* piece of this theological reflection is the conscious move to transparency of the process. This transparency includes revealing the “intellectual moments” that determine the direction of the reflection such as how and which sources are chosen and what questions are asked. Finally, the inclusion of the Interpretive Focus Group features allows for collaboration in interpretation as well as the response. The student-subjects are co-interpreters of the fruit of the reflection and the authority of their experience is respected and acknowledged throughout the process.

The refinements to the Whiteheads’ method enhance the quality of the experience for the participants by increasing the visibility of the process and therefore the possibility that the participants will be not only formed and informed, but also transformed, by the

experience. Finally, what the literature describes as the “group effect” of this kind of reflection may also be seen as the fulfillment of the scriptural promise that “wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I will be in the midst of them.”¹⁷⁹ While the Whitehead method does not explicitly focus on empowerment, neither does the Interpretive Focus Group method explicitly acknowledge a spiritual basis for transformation. Uniting the two approaches into one cohesive, theological reflection model allows all of the spiritual gifts to be used and acknowledged to lift up the experience of the student.

Chapter Four

Three Metropolitan Universities

¹⁷⁹ Matthew 18:20.

In determining the context for student interpretive theological reflection, the concept of the “metropolitan university” is an important common thread.¹⁸⁰ The metropolitan university is an emerging model in higher education that is distinguished less by its urban location than by the diversity of student body in terms of race, ethnicity, age and socioeconomic background. Metropolitan universities typically serve a non-resident student who works either part or full-time. Many students at metropolitan universities are first generation college students or adults returning to college after a period of work and child-rearing. This student profile presents unique challenges to Catholic and non-Catholic universities alike, but are especially appropriate for a model of interpretive theological reflection that proposes to give expression to an underserved population. The Catholic university in the metropolitan context can be a representation of the “preferential option for the poor” expressed in Catholic social teaching. The Catholic campuses chosen for this project represented a significant population of students who meet the statistical definition of poverty for their metropolitan area.¹⁸¹ In addition, the schools chosen are all located in areas that have experienced increased immigration from outside the United States resulting in many first and second generation college students. The three universities were all originally founded by religious orders, however only one remains under this sponsorship today.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Daniel M. Johnson and David A Bell, *Metropolitan Universities: An Emerging Model in American Education*, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1995).

¹⁸¹ The socioeconomic status of the students at these universities was determined by the percentage of undergraduate students who qualified for the federal Pell Grant, a college subsidy based on a family income that is below the median for the area based on household size.

¹⁸² St. Mary’s University is sponsored by the Marianists, St. Thomas University is sponsored by the Archdiocese of Miami, and St. Edward’s University is an independent Catholic institution, according to the Catholic identity or mission statements of each school. An analysis of the differences and similarities of the student’s experience of Catholic identity at these universities based on their sponsorship was not within the scope of this study, but would be a valuable addition in future research.

Three Catholic university campuses were chosen for student interpretive theological reflection: St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas, St. Thomas University in Miami Florida and St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas.

St. Thomas University

"We, the community of St. Thomas University, believe that the hallmark of a Catholic university is the intellectual pursuit of a Gospel value system based on the community's dialogue with culture."¹⁸³

St. Thomas University's history is inextricably bound in a conversation with culture: the culture of Cuba, South Florida and the Archdiocese of Miami. The University began its life as the Universidad de Santo Tomas de Villanueva in Havana, Cuba, in 1946. After being ejected from the country by the Castro regime, the founding Augustinians took refuge in Miami and reopened the school in 1961 as Biscayne College. Biscayne College was renamed St. Thomas University in 1984, to reflect its Cuban heritage.¹⁸⁴ The school underwent another evolution in the 1988 when the Augustinian community elected to withdraw its sponsorship and the school came under the sponsorship of the Archdiocese of Miami making it one of 11 universities in the United States sponsored by an archdiocese and the only one in Florida.¹⁸⁵ Although one Augustinian priest remains as

¹⁸³ St. Thomas University's Statement of Catholic Identity (1996) 3.

¹⁸⁴ St. Thomas University Factbook 2009-2009, Office of Institutional Research, vii

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, vii., and Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, "U.S. Catholic Colleges and Universities with Bishop(s) as Board Members," (accunet.org/files/public/Bishops_on_Boards), July, 31, 2009.

a member of the faculty and several retired priests reside in a small friary on campus, the religious identity of the school has been consistently defined as “archdiocesan.”

The relationship between the Archdiocese and St. Thomas is of particular concern to the institution for reasons of support for the institution and its Catholic identity.

Although the Archdiocese of Miami technically “owns” the institution, it does not govern it directly, as the governance of the university is vested in the Board of Trustees.¹⁸⁶ The Archbishop has reserve power over institutional decisions regarding sale or transfer of property and major changes in policy and any modifications to the by-laws. The Archbishop also approves the selection or removal of Trustees and the President of the university. The Archbishop attends annual meetings of the Trustees and presides over official ceremonies such as graduations, dedications and major speaker visits. The Archbishop meets informally with the President on a quarterly basis and participates in fund-raising efforts for the university. In 2005 the Archdiocese participated in raising \$5 million for a scholarship endowment for Florida Catholic high school graduates attending a Catholic university. Finally, the Archdiocese provides loan guarantees for the institution and participation in the diocesan insurance program for employees and property.¹⁸⁷

In addition to the formal governance and financial relationship, the University serves as a part of the teaching mission of the Archdiocese. At St. Thomas this has taken the form of the University providing facilities and speakers for periodic conferences to

¹⁸⁶ St. Thomas University Articles of Incorporation (Amended Spring 1993) and Bylaws of St. Thomas University (revised October 2008).

¹⁸⁷ Franklyn Casale, Presentation at Loras College conference: “Weaving Dynamic Relationships: The Diocesan College/University Serving the Church and the World” (May 28, 2008).

serve the Archdiocese. Through its School of Theology and Ministry, St. Thomas also serves as a training ground for the lay apostolate in programs in Campus Ministry, Pastoral Ministry (including Deaf Ministry), and Practical Theology. The School provides non-degree seeking certificate programs in Spiritual Direction, Catholic Biblical Studies and Spirituality.

Diversity and Challenge

The student body of St. Thomas University represents the ethnic and cultural mix of South Florida and an emerging first and second generation immigrant population. This cultural and ethnic milieu represents a profile that is evolving in a number of major metropolitan areas in the U.S. and is particularly evident in the Miami-Dade area in which St. Thomas is located. The 2008-2009 undergraduate student demographics reveal a “majority/minority” make up with 40% Hispanic, 25% Black, 20% Non-Hispanic White and 15% Other and Foreign Born. Almost 90% of the students receive some kind of financial assistance, with 38% of the 2008-2009 undergraduates qualified for a Pell Grant meaning that total annual family income was less than \$20,000 for some and less than \$50,000 for others depending on household size.¹⁸⁸ The average financial assistance received by an undergraduate at St. Thomas in 2008-2009 was \$12, 643. Full-time tuition for that same period was \$20, 332.¹⁸⁹ Many of the students are first generation college students and many of those who are U.S. born have parents who

¹⁸⁸ St. Thomas Factbook 2008-2009. Note: the median household income for Miami-Dade County in 2007 was \$43, 650 putting most of the Pell Grant qualified students below the median income for the area.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 18.

continue to reside out of the US on a part or full time basis.¹⁹⁰ Most of the undergraduate students (55%) at St. Thomas report their primary or family residence as within Miami-Dade or Broward County, consistent with the pattern of a Metropolitan University.¹⁹¹

The academic profile of St. Thomas students reveals that the average high school GPA of incoming freshman for 2008 was 2.96 and the SAT scores for incoming freshmen for the same year fell below both the Florida and the national average in every category.¹⁹²

In responding to religious affiliation, 70% of the students at St. Thomas do not specify a denomination or faith. Of those who do identify a religious preference, 61% identify Catholic, 28% non-Catholic Christian and 11% as "Other."¹⁹³

In summary, the students of St. Thomas University could be described as “underserved” in the scope of higher education in that they are *predominantly* ethnic minorities from poor to lower middle class families who finished high school in the lower academic levels. While these categories exist at most if not all colleges and universities, they are the dominant demographic at St. Thomas, presenting unique challenges for faculty and staff and well as unique opportunities for serving and shaping the Catholic higher education experience. While these characteristics are not the majority demographic at most universities today, they are the emerging trend for urban areas of high immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean. The study of the student

¹⁹⁰ This statistic is not maintained by St. Thomas University and this statement is based on interviews with over 100 undergraduate students and discussions with other professors between July 2006 and December 2009.

¹⁹¹ St. Thomas Department of Institutional Research, response from Jerry Weinberg, Director (September 2009).

¹⁹² St. Thomas Factbook, 11.

¹⁹³ St. Thomas Department of Institutional Research, response from Jerry Weinberg, (August, 2009).

experience of Catholic identity at St. Thomas University may reveal insights into the opportunities and challenges in the coming years at Catholic and non-Catholic universities in areas undergoing similar demographic migrations.¹⁹⁴ The students are also “a treasure buried”, in that they are not the typical student profile sought or recruited by institutions of higher learning.¹⁹⁵ Whether this is by design of the University or *de facto* by its location and history, St. Thomas is clearly challenged by its student profile as evidenced by its 2nd year retention rate (in 2004) of 51% and its 4 year graduation rate (2004) of 25%. The 2nd year retention rate fell to 39% in 2006, the last year for which this statistic is available.¹⁹⁶

While these statistics are distressing to the faculty and administration of the University, they also represent an opportunity for a direct response to the Catholic social teaching which advocates a preferential option for the poor. St. Thomas acknowledges this call and “has been recognized for providing opportunity and support for highly motivated students and those whose access to higher education is restricted by social, cultural, and economic conditions.”¹⁹⁷ Rather than lament this turn of events, the school has opted to embrace it and attempt to provide “a support system so that [the students] are not discouraged by the university experience.”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁴ For example, the City of Hollywood, Florida in Broward County (approximately 12 miles from the St. Thomas campus) was given the 2007 designation as the “All-American City” since the 2007 population demographics of Hollywood were the same as those projected for the entire United States in 2025, based on US census data and projections.

¹⁹⁵ Matthew 14: 44.

¹⁹⁶ St. Thomas Factbook, 39.

¹⁹⁷ St. Thomas University’s Catholic Identity, 10.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

St. Mary's University

“St. Mary’s University, as a Catholic Marianist University, fosters the formation of people in faith and educates leaders for the common good through community, integrated liberal arts and professional education, and academic excellence.”¹⁹⁹

St. Mary’s University, is located in the center of San Antonio, Texas and is the oldest institution of higher learning in San Antonio and the oldest Catholic university in Texas and in the Southwest. St. Mary’s is sponsored by the Marianists and retains a strong identity with the founding religious order, with several Marianist priests and brothers in leadership and faculty positions. . St. Mary’s President, Charles L. Cotrell, is the first lay president since the schools founding in 1852.²⁰⁰

The student population is 67% non-white, predominantly Hispanic. Of those who expressed a religious preference, 66% of the students indicated Catholic. The undergraduate enrollment for the 2008-2009 academic year was 2,197 with total enrollment of 3, 889. Over half of the students reside in the surrounding county. The first year retention rate for the 2007 cohort is 80% and the four-year graduation rate (2001) is 36%. Incoming students (2008) have an average high school GPA of 3.42. The number of undergraduate students receiving need-based financial aid is 75% and 45% of

¹⁹⁹ St. Mary’s University, “About St. Mary’s,” St. Mary’s University, <http://www.stmarytx.edu/about.php> [accessed November 11, 2009].

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

the students qualified for Pell Grants (2008).²⁰¹ The average financial assistance received by undergraduates in 2008 was \$18, 793 and full-time tuition for that period was \$21, 320.²⁰²

St. Edward's University

“St. Edward’s expresses its Catholic identity by communicating the dignity of the human person as created in the image of God, by stressing the obligation of all people to pursue a more just world, and by providing opportunities for Religious Studies and participation in campus ministry... St. Edward’s seeks to provide an environment in which freely chosen beliefs can be deepened and expressed.”²⁰³

St. Edward’s University, located in Austin, Texas was founded by the Congregation of Holy Cross in 1885. The University became an independent Catholic University in the 1980’s and hired its first lay and first woman President, Patricia Hayes, in 1984. Although St. Edward’s is structurally an independent Catholic university, the founding Holy Cross order retains a prominent presence on the campus in Campus Ministry and faculty. The Holy Cross Institute, housed at St. Edward’s University was founded in 2006 as a national resource for educators at Holy Cross schools to continue the “unique educational legacy” of the Holy Cross tradition.²⁰⁴

St. Edward’s current enrollment (2008) is 5,317 with undergraduate enrollment of 3,431, making it the largest of the three universities in this study. The student population is 45% non-white of which 29% of the students are Hispanic. In 2008, 87% of St.

²⁰¹ St. Mary’s University, “Common Data Set,”

http://www.stmarytx.edu/profile/pdf/Common_Data_Set_2008.pdf, [accessed February 17, 2010].

²⁰² David R. Krause, Director, Office of Financial Assistance, St. Mary’s University San Antonio, Texas, interview by author, January 25, 2010.

²⁰³ St. Edward’s University, “Mission Statement,” <http://www.stedwards.edu/about/missionstatement.htm>, [accessed September 15, 2009].

²⁰⁴ St. Edward’s University, “The Holy Cross Institute at St. Edward’s University,” <http://www.holycrossinstitute.org>, accessed February 17, 2010.

Edward's students received financial aid, and 28% of them were qualified to receive the Pell Grant. In 2009 the average aid awarded to undergraduates was \$14, 447 against a tuition cost of \$22, 150. Over one-half of the incoming freshmen at St. Edward's rank in the top quarter of their high school class. St. Edward's has been listed every year since 2002 in the *U.S. News & World Reports* "America's Best Colleges."²⁰⁵

Summary of Three Catholic universities

The three Catholic universities chosen for this research are all located in cities in the southern United States that have received a large influx of immigrants from Mexico, Central and South America. St. Edward's, St. Mary's and St. Thomas Universities all have a similar undergraduate demographic profile in that they have a high percentage of non-White, mostly Hispanic students, many of whom are first generation college students. Almost half of the students at all three schools come from poor families, based on their qualifications for Federal Pell Grants.

The schools do differ in some important ways, however including incoming student academic qualifications, size, age of institution and sponsorship. Of the three schools, St. Thomas ranks third in terms of academic achievement of incoming freshmen, and size of the institution. It is also the newest, less than 50 years old versus over 125 years for both St. Mary's and St. Edward's Universities. St. Thomas is also the only Archdiocesan institution and although St. Edward's is an independent university, the

²⁰⁵ St. Edward's University, "Experience St. Edward's," <http://www.stedwards.edu/aboutus/experience.htm>, [accessed February 17, 2010] and email communication with Danica D. Frampton, Research Associate, Department of Institutional Research, St. Edward's University, February 17, 2010

sponsoring religious order still has roots on the campus. How these roots affect St. Edward's and St. Mary's, their traditions, scholarship funding, enrollment and endowment are not the subject of this study, however, the differences may be reflected in some of the student discussions and therefore are necessary to acknowledge.²⁰⁶

The Goal

The goal of the interpretive theological reflection process is to allow the students themselves to describe their experience of Catholic identity at a Catholic university. The student reflection groups at the three schools participated in the reflections in different ways. The students at St. Thomas University were engaged for several weeks in continuing reflection as a part of a scheduled class group of which the reflections were a part. The student groups at St. Mary's University and St. Edward's University participated as co-researchers and co-analysts of the findings from the group at St. Thomas.²⁰⁷ Themes and quotations from the St. Thomas group were presented to student groups at the two other schools and asked a series of questions relating to the themes and quotes to determine if these responses were representative of their experience of Catholic identity. They were asked to describe how their experience differed from that of the first group of students. They were free to agree, disagree or comment on the material or to

²⁰⁶ Other demographic differences may exist between the Hispanic students at the three universities such as country of origin, race, and length of time living in the U.S. No attempt has been made to determine how these differences may have influenced the student's comments, however, this could be an important consideration for future research into the demographic changes occurring at Catholic universities due to immigration.

²⁰⁷ The students in the second set were not told where the first set of responses originated, whether from their own university or another university, only that they were direct quotes from students at a Catholic university.

offer their own observations. This method of interpretive reflection is consistent with Leavy's use of Interpretive Focus Groups in what she calls the "early and latter" stages of the process, utilizing community groups to gain further insight into the comments made by earlier groups.²⁰⁸ Although there are some differences in the size, location and academic level of each of the universities, the students were strikingly similar in age, ethnicity and religious identification.

Although some of the findings herein express a negative experience at a particular university, the purpose and hope of this reflection is to lift up and identify those areas in need of change and affirm those areas that offer hope and success, according to the student population speaking here. As one of the students stated: "You have a responsibility as a Catholic university to uphold those virtues. You can't just call yourself Catholic and not do anything about it."

The Students

Students at St. Thomas University were selected for participation in the Interpretive Theological Reflection based on their enrollment in an upper level English class entitled: "The Bible as Literature" offered during the first summer session of 2009. The class was scheduled to meet twice per week for six weeks from 9am until 1pm. This particular class was selected for the ITR because it had the potential to represent students who:

- Had at least two semesters of experience with the specific university environment

²⁰⁸ Leavy, 178.

- Where not necessarily attracted to the class based on a “Catholic” or religious component.²⁰⁹

This course was chosen for the structural basis of the reflection because:

- The course description permitted a broad interpretation to allow the introduction of various themes and questions relevant to the reflection and created opportunities to introduce popular culture as well as tradition and scripture into the reflection. According to Whitehead: “the best context for assisting adults to think theologically is a group which meets regularly for theological reflection over an extended period of time.”²¹⁰
- The course meeting time and duration were conducive to facilitating uninterrupted discussion.
- The course duration allowed time for students to become familiar with each other and to build a sense of community within the classroom conducive to theological reflection.²¹¹
- The course structure facilitated the interpretive aspects of the theological reflection by providing multiple opportunities to present the themes and reflections from previous discussions for clarification and deeper exploration.²¹²
- Course enrollment was 10 students creating an optimum size for interpretive reflection in a group setting.²¹³

²⁰⁹ Although it is important to note that this class does carry a “C” designation, indicating that it fulfills a required “Catholic Identity” component of the general education core curriculum. This designation signifies that the course content includes elements of Catholic teaching with reference to the specific subject under study.

²¹⁰ Leavy, 178

²¹¹ Whitehead & Whitehead, *Method*, 104.

²¹² Leavy, 178.

²¹³ Bullock, 1. Not all of the criteria used for the students in Phase 1 were replicated in Phase 2, most notably, the extended number of reflections. However, Leavy notes that subsequent groups used to

- Students did not volunteer for this reflection, nor did they have any knowledge of it beforehand. This effectively eliminated any students who joined the class because of a favorable or unfavorable experience.²¹⁴

One disadvantage of this process was that the specific demographics of the students could not be determined in advance. However, this did provide the opportunity for a truly random group of participants, given that they met the prerequisites for the course. The goal here was to facilitate an interpretive theological reflection based on the student's own experience without regard to their pre-existing religious or theological perspectives. The "treasure" to be discovered was the student experience and the unit of measure of the experience is the group reflection. Any inherent differences of the individuals added to the richness of the experience of the group with the common denominator being that they were all students sharing, at some level, a similar experience. As it turned out, the ethnic makeup of the students in the study was quite consistent with the undergraduate population as a whole with 50% Hispanic, 25% Non-Hispanic White, and 25% Black. Of the total, 25% were international students, and of the total 40% were male.

The students were also diverse in their description of their faith tradition or preference. Of the group, 4 identified as Catholic, 1 as Non-denominational Protestant, 1 as Atheist, 1 with no affiliation (but not Atheist) and 1 who self-identified as "my father is Muslim and my mother is Catholic... I don't consider myself anything," although this student consistently identified with statements for and against a Catholic perspective. Of

interpret earlier findings need not be identical to the original group in scope or composition for their interpretation to be valid.

²¹⁴ Bullock, 3.

the four Catholics, only two acknowledged any regular religious practice and one of these two was actively exploring other faiths and participating in a Protestant bible study group.

Stakeholders?

Aside from the initial issues with selection, another concern was that the students would have no real stake in the outcome of the reflection and this was a serious consideration. If the students were not volunteers then how could they be compelled to care one way or another and even participate in the reflection? The simple answer is that they could not. This raised a number of ethical (as well as practical) issues with the format. Students were permitted to opt out of the discussion before, during or after any or all of the reflections and were fully apprised of the nature of the reflection. They were invited to participate in formulating the questions as well as the responses. None of the students elected to opt out of the reflections

Students were given excerpts from the transcripts of the sessions for correction, elaboration and comment. Student's confidentiality was protected throughout the process, again, with the group as the defining unit of measure rather than the individuals. Much consideration was given to the quality of the learning experience for the participants. According to Breen "for some people, sharing experiences with others is a rewarding and therapeutic experience in itself."²¹⁵ This reflection also presented the students with an opportunity to enter into a conversation that has largely excluded them

²¹⁵ Rosanna Breen, "A Practical Guide to Focus Group Research," *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* (2006): 468.

in the past. When the educator, according to Bullock, “must consciously shift from educator to a listener role” the student also shifts from object to subject.²¹⁶ The listener’s role then shifts to one, according to Whitehead, “not only to direct the community of faith but to learn from it.”²¹⁷ In effect, the relevance to the stakeholder is established “through the activity of generating and sharing ideas.”²¹⁸ In social science research, any one of these criteria might invalidate the reflection process. In a theological endeavor, however, the areas that are not subject to direct control by the facilitator are areas that are open to engage the Holy Spirit and allow that great mystery to bring together the participants in a unique and insightful experience which holds the possibility of transformation. Prayer was used throughout the preparation for this project as an essential part of the process throughout each step in the reflection, interpretation and response.

Power and Theological Reflection

One of the considerations for someone leading an interpretive theological discussion is the issue of power and how and when it is operative. This is also an issue in any classroom but particularly so in discussions of an ethical, moral or religious nature. So how does the facilitator “step outside” of the power domain in this case, especially in light of the fact that these students may have taken classes with the facilitator before and may do so again? According to Beaudoin, you cannot.²¹⁹ In the light of the potential for use or misuse of the power dynamic in the reflection, it becomes more important to be

²¹⁶ Bullock, 3.

²¹⁷ Whitehead & Whitehead, *Method*, 14.

²¹⁸ Bullock, 473.

²¹⁹ Beaudoin, *Witness*, 10.

seen as a theological practice with ministerial implications for the facilitator. The ethic of care goes beyond an accumulation of data and cuts to the heart of the possibility for reflection of this type and that is *transformation*. The students become subjects in relationship and the facilitator becomes a listener as well as a participant in this process. If it is not possible to relinquish power, then at least it becomes possible to share it. It is this possibility that is humbling and challenging since can make “us vulnerable to our students, and that it suddenly puts us on a kind of equal terrain with them.”²²⁰

²²⁰ Ibid.

Chapter Five

The Student Encounter

Phase One – The Reflection

St. Thomas University

The first few classes were used to help the students begin to know each other and to create a comfortable environment: The classroom tables and chairs were arranged into a rectangle to simulate an open and sharing configuration. Bibles and textbooks were dispersed at each seat. A votive candle was in the center of the table. On a side table were a variety of granola bars and some individual juices. The goal here was to create an atmosphere that was more like an upper level seminar, but welcoming and somewhat different from other classes, for the purpose of building rapport as well as attracting interest.

Introductions and background were given, then the students introduced themselves and described their personal background, academic program and classification. They were also asked to address why they took this course, what other religion courses they had taken, and what the Bible is to them as a way of introducing themes of scriptural tradition and establishing the background for their reflections in the future.

Raul, age 24, is a senior graduating in the fall. He is an English major who plans to teach. He took one class in religion, “Catholicism”. Raul believes that the Bible is the “story of Jesus that, when the followers realized that he was no longer physically present, they

wrote it down, the facts of his life.” He went on to say: “I am an atheist, I want to be up-front about that, but also realize that religion and the Bible are part of life and culture and I want to be well-rounded so I need to understand these things”. Raul was raised in Columbia until early adolescence and attended Catholic school but neither he nor his parents consider themselves practicing Catholics.

Susan, age 22, is Jamaican and a Biology major. She needed an upper division English class, but also stated that “the Bible is my daily bread. It’s where I go for nourishment”. Susan also says “I am a born-again Christian”.

Richard is a Literature major who transferred from community college last year. He is a fan of the “Dolphins, Marlins, and Heat”. He is “skeptical about the Bible, I don’t believe 85% of what’s in it. Also, Christianity let me down at one point.” Richard is of Hispanic descent, though he corrected the official class roll by telling me that “no one calls me *Ricardo*.”

Linda is a freshman in International Business having completed 3 semesters. She needed the course and had a friend who took it last year and recommended it because it was fun and interesting.

Carmen, 22, is a senior, of Puerto Rican descent and was born in Chicago. She took the course because I’m teaching it and she knew me. Also, she needs it for graduation. She has taken “Catholicism” and “Marriage and Family”. She is a political science major

who observes that “a lot of nations use the Bible and religion to suppress people.” She “strayed from Catholicism due to disappointment with the faith, became a practicing Buddhist but has now returned to Catholicism and was confirmed this past Easter [April 2009] at the St. Thomas Chapel”.

Rachel is a senior. She is from Washington DC, an English major, who needed the class. She has taken “Catholicism” and “Marriage and Family”. Rachel is very focused on “just getting my degree and getting out of this place.” Her mother is Muslim and her father is Catholic though neither are observant. Rachel says she is “nothing”, meaning that she is not self-identified with a faith or denomination but was quick to say that: “I went to Catholic school, so it would be very weird for me to go to a public university or a public high school and not be able to talk about God, because I just think that it’s a major factor in the way that you think and they way that you see things. Your spirituality kind of molds the way you see things.”

Maria transferred to St. Thomas from Miami-Dade College majoring in Education in her third year.

Pierre is from Haiti, identifies as Catholic, and went to Catholic school. “I go to the chapel every day to pray.” Pierre is an older student in his second year at St. Thomas.

Irene is African-American, a senior and she has a 5-year-old daughter. She is majoring in English/Communication Arts/Theology. She has taken most of the classes offered in

Theology and Ministry (Marriage and Family, Peacemaking, Religion in America, Introduction to Religious Studies, Sacraments, Prayer and Spirituality. “I was raised in the church, raised Baptist, but at 16 I stopped going. I know the Bible, I’ve read the Bible. The most I’ve read it is since I’ve come to this University. I love the Bible...everyone should have one.”

Two of the students had taken classes together before, but the rest were unknown to each other. The diverse background of the students is reflective of the diversity of South Florida in general and St. Thomas in particular, but the richness of both culture and faith traditions in the class was a pleasant surprise. Beginning from this diversity of perspective it was particularly gratifying to observe the coalescence of the group around the various discussion topics. Coalescence does not imply agreement, however. The core identification of the group became their common experience as *students*, even though they expressed this experience differently. As the group progressed over time, the similarities became more pronounced and each assertion called forth a new, similar or forgotten experience by another with the exchanges building in enthusiasm or frustration depending on the topic being expressed. What Leavy describes as a “group happening” or spontaneous discussion occurred early on in the process.²²¹

Sources: Tradition, Culture, Experience

Tradition

²²¹ Leavy, 199.

For the first reflection, tradition was drawn from John 8:1-12, the woman caught in adultery. Students read the passage silently and then aloud and were asked to reflect on any part that was meaningful for them. I also showed a clip of the scene from this passage in the movie “Jesus of Nazareth.”

Culture

In the “attending” movement, students were asked to identify examples of the Bible or religion in popular culture. One student brought a dollar bill and briefly discussed the words “In God we Trust” and the controversy over religion in public life. Several students played film trailers including “Bruce Almighty”, “The Prophecy”, “The Passion of the Christ” and “2012.” The last student presented a music video entitled “Jesus Walks” by hip hop artist, Kanye West. This triggered what Leavy refers to as a “group happening” or a spontaneous discussion and reflection on the religious themes in music and how they can be controversial.²²² This particular video had caused criticism due, not only to some of the lyrics, but also to the images in the original. So much controversy, in fact, that West released two additional and progressively less controversial versions of the video. The lyrics portray black youth at war: “We at war with terrorism, racism, and most of all we at war with ourselves.”²²³ These images and

²²² Leavy, 173.

²²³ West.

lyrics are alternated with the background phrase “Jesus Walks” and “Jesus Walks with Me” with various images of young blacks being arrested, homeless persons and drug traffickers, and a young woman dressed as a prostitute. Throughout the song these individuals are walking towards a church aided by a variety of unlikely angels in the guise of the handicapped and small children. West’s message is to the “hustlers, killers, murderers, drug dealers even us cripples” that Jesus in fact walks with them. In one version an apparent Ku Klux Klan member is eventually consumed by the flames from his own burning cross and water is poured down from “heaven” to extinguish the fire. The message is clear, as in the passage from John, Jesus does not condemn the sinner, and Jesus walks with them.

Experience

At this point a spontaneous discussion broke out. I was aware that the students were engaged with each other and speaking to each other as well as to me. I really wanted to turn on the voice recorder to capture the comments, but I felt that if I did I would have to announce this and it would stop the discussion. I felt that if I said or did *anything*, even take notes, I would risk stopping the discussion. So, I sat quietly, not speaking at all for approximately 20 minutes of active discussion, trying to be fully present, aware that I would not be able to remember it all, and also aware that something very important was happening, something very special that I was privileged to be a part of and I didn’t dare risk breaking the spell.

Students discussed the various versions of this piece and why they thought it was offensive to some. Richard made the point that the song was about the fact that Jesus walked with prostitutes and drug dealers and users. He said: “This song has really helped me a lot. Helped me to realize that Jesus is here for sinners. This is the problem I have with going to church. They want you to be all ‘pure’ and holy before you go. Well, how come you go to church if you have to be perfect before you can go?”

Irene: That’s why I quit going when I was 16. You had to dress a certain way. You couldn’t wear pants, you had to be dressed all up, you couldn’t just go as you were.²²⁴

Facilitator (F)²²⁵: Why do you think some people find this video offensive?

Irene: “Because they don’t understand that music is our culture. They see hip-hop with images like the ones in the first video, of Christ with blood on his face, or a burning cross they think its being disrespectful. Well its not, it being respectful. But this is how we do in our culture, we use music, we use music for everything, it’s just a part of life.”

Richard: Yeah and we don’t have like, music for church and music for everything else. Have you heard Christian Hip-Hop?

Irene: Yeah and it’s just so, I don’t know, there’s no real feeling there.

Richard: “Its not real music, you know, it’s not real.”

²²⁴ Note on format: double-spacing is used for block quotes of dialogue to maintain consistency within the speaker’s exchanges of varying lengths.

²²⁵ The author is the Facilitator in all reflection sessions.

Rachel: “That’s the whole problem, trying to keep God in church. I don’t think that’s where God is. Church isn’t so important, well, it is important, there is that communal aspect, and that’s important, but it doesn’t end there...it’s an everyday thing.”

This was a breakthrough discussion. The whole development seemed to underscore several concepts such as Beaudoin’s comments in “Virtual Faith” that popular culture, especially music videos can be a religious expression, not only on the part of the artist, but also on the part of the audience.²²⁶ In this case the lyrics were as important as the images and the music itself. Even when the images were changed or “sanitized” the students still felt the message was clear for them: Jesus loves sinners. They found this as a comfort and an encouragement in a world where formal religion rejects sinners and (perhaps) rejects them based on appearances (not dressing in your Sunday best, for example) as well as behavior.

This discussion also affirmed the concept of using popular culture as a catalyst for discussion. In this case, the example was a video that the students themselves selected, of which I had no prior knowledge. It also showed that some degree of trust was being developed in the classroom environment. Afterwards I struggled with how to bring the discussion to a narrower focus, from “Where is God” in general to “Where is God at St. Thomas” and “What is Catholic about it?”

²²⁶ Beaudoin, Tom. *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*. (New York: Jossey-Bass, 1998) 14.

The themes from this discussion: Jesus' love for sinners, God as an everyday thing and the apparent disconnect between student expressions of religious experience and traditional expectations were to be repeated in each of the proceeding reflections. In each case, the student experience became sharper, more specific and more intense as the reflections, and the apparent contradictions, began to arise in the Assertion movements.

For the next reflection I summarized this discussion and offered the summary to the students with a request to revise or elaborate on any statements that did not accurately reflect their experience in the previous session. There was a protracted discussion of hip hop and how Christian hip hop may or may not represent the authentic hip hop experience. Richard summarized it this way:

The things they say [in Christian hip hop], not that its judgmental, but its not, like too accepting of other people, you know what I mean? And most churches are kind of like that and Kanye, the reason I think this song is successful, is because, like he's cursing on it, number one, so like he relates to us more and he's saying: 'people aren't perfect' and 'people are gonna make mistakes'. But that's not what religion is about in the first place. You know what I mean? And you have to forgive people and Jesus forgives them, so forgive them. Stop being so uptight, you know what I mean?

This comment lead to a discussion of hypocrisy and judgment in religion, another theme that emerges throughout the reflection. Again, Richard:

The reason I don't like church is because, I went to a church before, well, like I used to go to like a Christian church before and people were like that. Like if you

dressed a certain way, you spoke a certain way, if you had done certain things, they say that they're there for you and they give you hugs and they tell you this and they tell you that, but they're talking behind your back.

Another student, Carmen, in talking about her experience of "church" replied: "for me church has always been just like a building. Church is really the people who go there."

Moving from a concept of "church" to one of Catholic identity, I asked about St. Thomas University: "what's Catholic about it."

The first response was from Rachel:

We talk about religion. I don't know if, in other universities they have, such a...you know we talk about spirituality and we talk about God and how we feel about God and in religion courses we talk about it all the time. I went to Catholic school, so it would be very weird for me to go to a public university or a public high school and not be able to talk about God, because I just think that's it a major factor in the way that you think and the way that you see things. Your spirituality kind of molds and shapes the way that you see the world.

To the question "Is it important to be able to talk about God in university?" Rachel replied: "I think it offers a lot of insight into just all of us have different perceptions of what God is and what spirituality is, but, you learn so much about your own faith when its challenged by another person."

Carmen added: “being able to interact with people from other religions and being able to talk about it, like at least intellectually, makes you a better person. It’s not only an emotional aspect, but religion is in history and in every subject that you touch, religion has something to do with it.”

Trying to return to the issue of Catholic identity I asked, “So, how is this Catholic, what’s Catholic about it?” and Richard replied: “Just the traditions, you know what I mean. Just the traditions. Which is basically what Jesus was trying to get away from. You know what I mean? It’s just the fact (pointing to the wall) that we’ve got a cross up there.”

Carmen: “And a chapel.”

Richard: “Yeah, and a chapel.”

Carmen added:

I don’t know what makes it Catholic, what makes it a Catholic university because for me, it’s just a university. People here that share different experiences and you learn from one another, you don’t see nuns walking around teaching the classes. We have priest here, some priests do teach classes, we have a monastery, is it a monastery that Fr. ____...lives in? So I’m not sure what really makes it Catholic. There is campus ministry, maybe? It’s like having a counseling office there. It’s almost the same thing. I mean we have counselors, but to talk to a campus minister, I think maybe it’s a different experience. I think that’s what maybe the difference is.

Rachel: Everyone is just different and you have the ability to talk about how everyone’s different. You’ve got courses that are specifically group discussions

and you talk about your own personal experience. I think that's what makes it Catholic. I don't think its Catholic with a big 'c' I think it's Catholic with a little 'c'.

At this point the students are basically differentiating a "Catholic" experience at St. Thomas as one where there is a chapel, crosses on the wall, campus ministry and freedom of religious expression and discussion. The students have all expressed these ideas and symbols as positive to their "Catholic" experience at St. Thomas. Susan, an international student and non-Catholic elaborates:

Um, let's see. When I speak about coming here, I came here because of the scholarship and because of the small university size and small class size.

Catholic, I grew up like in a Church of God, and uh, at first, it was like, it's gonna be a new experience, you know. I don't know much about the Catholic, should I say, lifestyle. I thought the school would be very strict. But when I came here it was totally different. It was open to other religions and they weren't so judgmental. At the same time you had that level of freedom to do what you wanted to do, but at the same time, in some manner or respect the Catholic symbol, at St. Thomas.

Then the question was asked: "So what do you need here that you are not getting?" At this point the discussion began to turn to faculty and remained, on the whole, positive. Even though the question was about perceived deficiencies in the experience, the examples were all of open discussions in the classroom, so I asked:

“Some faculty would say: ‘I don’t want to talk about my beliefs to my students because that would be imposing my beliefs on them.’ Do you agree?”

Irene said: See I think that’s important. I think it’s necessary to a certain extent.

Carmen: It leaves the class open to discussion. For me to actually sit in a circle and talk to one another and engage in a real intellectual conversation and learn from one another allows for...you ask questions, you’re questioning your own beliefs, your questioning in order to strengthen you own.

Carmen offered that even when the professor is offering opinions, students were free to “combat with one another in a safe environment. And everybody got something out of it.” Then Carmen changed the tenor of the whole discussion when she said:

Something that just came to mind right now when you were talking about, what do you think is lacking from this university. For me personally, I think it was community. I mean there is a lot of students here and like you said, there’s not a lot of students at Mass. For me it was community and though we have a lot of events like the Mass of the Holy Spirit and everybody goes, a lot of professors give incentives. Like you get extra credit if you go even if you’re not Catholic. Or ‘you have to go for my class because it counts as attendance.’ For any university, for any school, I think community is important. To be able to have a relationship with a large number of students. I think it needs to expand outside of the classroom and we need to have more events that bring people together. I know we have a lot of commuter students that just come to class and then leave and I know they have other things to do but I know if the university was more

open to have things like that, it would be able to build the community, build the university.

From that point on, the rest of the discussion focused on “community” at St. Thomas or the lack of it and students experiences both positive and negative. The diversity that the University celebrates is also a source of challenge. Examples began to flow as the “power shifted” in the room and students became their own subjects and I was left to listen and observe. As the discussion intensified Susan offered:

I don't think I'm getting the support that I need here. I know I'm a good student. I don't need to justify that so much. I think that for such a diverse campus, the school needs to do more to help international students. And campus life is boring. I live on campus and I see the same people everyday, I go to the same places everyday and at the same time, as international students you feel stranded if you don't have...transportation. Then you have to rely on people and then you know after a while you kind of feel parasitic in a sense. You just don't know anything much of Florida. You just know St. Thomas University and it's in a very bad community.

But, reflecting on her relationship with her professors she countered:

But at the same time, I love how the teachers associate with the students. They have that close relationship, they help you, choosing your courses. Help you to go on the right path to whatever career you want to take up in the future. So that is good. I would not trade that for any other school.

Community and Relationships as Catholic Identity

Two themes began to emerge and resonate with the group: community and relationships. In fact, the whole concept of Catholic identity for this group of students began to be defined in terms of community and relationships and how, or how not, they are being addressed in the context of St. Thomas University. At this point no attempt to discuss Catholic intellectual tradition (in the form of campus lectures and programs) or Catholic social teaching (in the form of outreach and immersion experiences) could outweigh, in these students' experience, the importance of building, nurturing and caring for relationships within the community of St. Thomas University. Carmen gave examples of relationships that included her Resident Assistants in the residence halls:

...my freshman year the RA always had her door open. Anything you needed, she was there, tried to accommodate things. If you went out at night she'd be like: 'I don't care what time you get home, just let me know that you're in so I can sleep better. I don't care if you wake me up, if anything happens, let me know.' And that was just awesome for me because being an out-of-state student... you're starting to leave your parents and trying to be independent and to have somebody there that isn't a parent but is like a parent is important.

There were also times when the community of the University was not effective in supporting the students. Again Carmen:

I think the roughest thing for me was going through a hurricane. I had never been through a hurricane before and that was the season we had Wilma and Rita. For me, I felt like the University wasn't prepared for that. We had no back up generators in the residence halls, we had no shutters that were on the windows and it was very difficult and it was very scary. For me not to have someone to be there and to [say]: 'well this is what is going to happen during a hurricane' and have like a lecture and like a power point and show...

Rachel: I had the same experience.

Carmen: It was rough. My RA was the only one who was there for our hall and was actually there for a lot of other halls too. It was just mind boggling how someone couldn't be there and how someone couldn't really talk to anyone about it.

But how, it was asked, is this relevant to Catholic identity? Rachel struggled to explain: "I'd also say community. I lived on campus. I hated it. Every minute of it and I had to move off campus." She continued:

Yeah and you can take my money. You will do that and you will do that very quickly, but you won't care that I'm unhappy. You won't care that I feel, like, deserted here. And then, it's a private school and it's a small school and it's a Catholic school. But yet there's no type of help, no type of community. So, what's Catholic in that? So when you ask, what's Catholic about the University, I

guess, that we have a Chapel and that we can talk about God. But I don't see it in any action.

When pressed on the experience she explained that she felt she did not get competent advice and guidance in the area of financial aid and she saw that as a failure of care, not just an administrative issue. A failure on the part of the school to administer their programs or their living accommodations adequately was interpreted as a failure of the school to live out their Catholic identity, in the words of these students. The students expressed their frustration in terms of a “disconnect” between their expectations of what a Catholic university is and their current experience. This was seldom expressed in terms of academics; it was most frequently expressed in terms of relationships with faculty, staff and administration and a sense of community or lack thereof. Raul commented: “We all feel that same feeling of displacement.” The financial pressures the students were feeling added to the frustration, according to Rachel:

Where everyone just feels kind of turned away. You know? Why am I paying extra money for a private university? I could go to a public university and yeah, I'd be treated differently, but I'd get my money's worth. I'd get what I pay for. I'm not getting what I pay for here.

In a short few minutes the expression of experience shifted from one of satisfaction with the faculty and class size to one of anger and disappointment with how they felt they were treated in times of stress, such as during and after a hurricane and when seeking financial aid. The lack of community in campus life did little to mitigate

the frustration for most students. The students also expressed frustration with annual increases in tuition without some form of an explanation as to why the increases were necessary.

Most of the students chose the school due to its small size relative to their other choices and expected this to translate to a more intimate experience both inside and outside of the classroom. When this intimacy failed to develop into adequate concern for their needs, they felt the university had failed to deliver for them. The relationships they had with professors and Resident Assistants became their lifeline and the most, and in some cases, only, positive experience. The fact that the student's comments were in response to questions of Catholic identity only serves to reinforce the additional responsibility that being a Catholic university may carry. These students definitely expected more from their St. Thomas University experience than they felt they were getting, not only because of its size and cost, but because it was Catholic.

Response

Leading into the Response phase of the reflection the students began to describe their experiences as they were, but also as they could or should be. Whitehead acknowledges that the fruit of the pastoral response can occur during the reflection or as a product of it. As a work of practical theology, the student's participation had undergone a transformational shift and they had begun to initiate action in the reflection process that spoke critically to the tradition of the University and their understanding of its identity as Catholic. To help the students clarify and elaborate on this theme we began with

statements of Tradition, in the form of the Mission and Vision of the University, as well as excerpts from scripture and from *Ex Corde*, a copy of which follows:

Catholic University - Tradition Statements

...every Catholic university, as Catholic must...be an academic institution in which Catholicism is vitally present and operative.

-John Paul II, *Ex corde ecclesiae*-From the heart of the Church, 1990

.....
....

...at St. Thomas University, while teaching intellectual and practical skills, we initiate our students into personal, social and ecological relationships that make these values visible in the wider culture.

- Catholics do not seek to impose values on others, but do want to expose the truth of their faith and morals, i.e., they want the university to be Catholic.
- This university has taken on an extra task by reaching out to under-prepared students. The university provides a support system so that they are not discouraged by the university experience but rather grow and learn within the academic environment.
- ...the administration must seek sources to fund students who are capable of university study but who are financially unable to pay for it. This is a particularly pressing area of service in Miami today, where youth are in real and constant danger.
- Faculty should provide a model of service to their students within the classroom and beyond it.
- ...the guiding vision for the relationship within and beyond St. Thomas University should be the Gospel mandate of love which challenges us to serve.”

-St. Thomas University's Catholic Identity Statement, 2004

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“The only obligation you have is to love one another. Whoever does this has obeyed the law.”

Paul’s letter to the Romans 13:10, as quoted in STU Catholic Identity Statement

Some things are easier said than done

The students’ reaction to the Tradition statements was not immediate. After a long pause one student offered:

Rachel: It’s funny.

F: Amusing? Funny ha-ha or funny ironic?

Rachel: Both.

Carmen: Ironic.

Rachel: Some things are easier said than done.

A discussion ensued about the programs that St. Thomas is involved in such as Environmental Jurisprudence, immersion experiences in Haiti, and with farm workers in Central Florida and whether or not this represented an expression of the school’s Catholic identity. Carmen replied:

I think for me it’s important, but it would be more important if we were outreaching to the community around St. Thomas University...showing an even larger community and ‘love thy neighbor’. You know, the neighbors of St. Thomas University is the people who live outside the gates. I mean, we’re doing a global thing by [speaking out against] human trafficking and the Haiti stuff and

that's wonderful, but I think it needs to start here also, like in the community of St Thomas.

The "gates" the student referred to are the security gates and fences that surround the university and require identification to cross. This is designed to protect the campus from the crime-ridden community in which it is embedded. The reality of this physical separation is not lost on these students who are reaching to connect their experiences, first with each other, then with the academic community as a whole and subsequently, with the neighborhood immediately adjacent to the University. The students clearly see this in context of a gospel mandate of love of neighbor.²²⁷

The Internet is my religion

From the community, the students returned to relationships within the University. One of the most striking exchanges concerned communication within the campus between administration, staff and students. This comment set the tone:

Richard: With me, I check my email religiously every single day.

F: Religiously? [laughter]

Richard: Internet is 'my religion', that is what I follow. So many emails, so many things going on and you look at them and they are not even interesting. Half of the flyers look like crap. I could do something better in photo shop in 20 minutes and I'm not really artistically talented. There are so many grammar errors in some

²²⁷ In fact the University is involved in local community justice issues through an organization called People Acting in Community Together (PACT which appears to be unknown to this group of students).

of these things that it's...okay this is the time that you are putting into promoting this event and this is what you are giving me. Why would I really care? So I usually delete most of the emails I get.

For this student for whom the internet is a “religion,” the quality of the University’s electronic communication does not measure up. He deletes emails regarding events that might be opportunities to build or participate in community. For the school, this is a loss and for the student, a source of derision and disrespect towards the University. These students take electronic communication very, very seriously. It can be as important as face-to-face contact and can definitely bridge the communication gap when personal contact is not possible, as this student’s experience reveals:

Raul: When I got accepted here, the person who contacted me, she was good up until the point when I went to her office and she decided, okay, you’re accepted and everything’s set. You’re fine, these are your classes and everything. But then from there on out, I never heard from her again. And the school is so small that it doesn’t take her that much to go through all the people that she accepted, that she herself sat with and chose classes and write an email like three or four weeks into the semester and say: ‘how are your classes doing, how are you liking St. Thomas?’ She could copy and paste the same message to a mass email.

F: Would that have made a difference to you?

Raul: Yes, it would. I would have felt that somebody cared for me.

Even something that this student readily acknowledges as a “mass email” would have been an indication of care, important enough to him to be remembered and recommended in this reflection. Instead, he continues to receive emails encouraging him to apply to the University, long after he has already begun as a student. For Raul, this disregard for the follow up and inappropriate continued contact “makes me feel like she doesn’t care. Like I’m just a number, they’re trying to get my money.”

It is striking that so many of the negative experiences that students describe occurred very early in their contact with the school and yet they are vividly recalled months or years later.

The students are calling for connections between University communications and classroom involvement on the part of the faculty. The students don’t seem to know if the faculty participates or endorses any of the activities that are potential community builders. There seems to be a missed opportunity to make the connection between academic life, residence life, campus organizations and local community outreach. The students are asking for connections through electronic communications but also through evidence of faculty involvement and support. The need for integration is highlighted in the St. Thomas Catholic identity statement: “Faculty should provide a model of service to their students within the classroom and beyond it. Service to the university community is contractual, as is community service.”²²⁸ And this mandate is not limited to faculty: “Students must learn to see their careers not only as a way to financial rewards, but also as a vocation, a calling to serve the needs of the world in a way that will also bring them joy.”²²⁹

²²⁸ St. Thomas University’s Catholic Identity, 1994, 12.

²²⁹ Ibid., 13.

The students in this reflection made a number of practical suggestions including: better training and qualification of Residence Life personnel, better training of administrative staff, especially in the area of financial aid and recruitment, more personal communication with new students and better communication of institutional goals and activities. All of their recommendations are based on personal experiences in which they did not feel that they were well-served or appreciated as students or as human persons. They called out these deficiencies in response to examples of scripture and Church and institutional tradition statements regarding the gospel message of love of neighbor and intimacy with sinners. These students did not come to complain and were not chosen because of any predetermination of the nature of their experience at the University. No one had previously asked them to describe or evaluate their experience at St. Thomas in this way. Their voices had been hidden until this time, even to themselves. It was only in the context of the interpretive theological reflection that they began to identify and describe the frustration and isolation they were feeling. Their participation in this process was not without some pain. When asked, “do you feel better or worse about your experience here after participating in this reflection?” Carmen responded: “At the moment I feel more frustrated, because I didn’t know this many people felt this way.”

They also expressed hope and felt that they had a stake in the outcome of the reflection as evidenced by Raul’s recommendation:

In my opinion the school is so small that adding to the Catholic experience of this university could be so easily done because the school is so small. You could do something that would encompass all the students at once as opposed to being in a

larger school where not everybody is around at the same time and it would be harder to get everybody together. All the classes pretty much take place in the morning, like the undergrad classes, take place in the morning. So it would be so much easier to get everybody together and do something communal that would address the whole issue of Catholic identity in the school.

The students were willing to take responsibility for initiating actions in this regard as evidenced by Richard's response to a recommendation that the University should do more in the way of student events:

I disagree with the fact that it needs to start with the school, I think it needs to start with the students. I think it has to start somewhere and if enough students rally together and say, hey this school is boring and we need to do something about it, that there might actually be something on campus that's traditional and that happens every year and that everybody would love to go to and everybody looks forward to going to. I think that's where it needs to start.

Carmen agreed:

I would like to see it start from the bottom, start with students who are actually involved on campus or have been here for four years that have actually done stuff. Give the tours and okay, be honest, like this is what is actually going on and this is what you might have a hard time with and you know, we will try to help you out. These are the people you might want to speak to, to help you out. And I believe that if it starts with the small stuff, since it is an incremental process and it is a

small school, that something will get done.

Raul agreed, but recognized that the connections have to originate with the older, more experienced students:

It's the older students that need to make an impact on the students who are coming in, incoming freshmen now for the fall. We, all of us, except for the ones who are transferring out, could make an impact on the ones who are coming in and try to encourage them to stay here and try to make connections with them in order to better the school. Because I felt for my first semester here for the spring, I felt like nobody tried to connect with me. All the relationships that I have now, all the friendships that I have are me going out of my way and talking to people.

Healing

At the conclusion of the reflection the students were asked if there was anything that could be said or done that would be healing for them, prompting the following exchange:

Carmen: That everybody shares the same concerns. That's the most healing thing for me.

Linda: Not alone.

Carmen: Yeah, knowing that I'm not alone. That somebody else lives on campus and has the same exact thing as people that don't live on campus. They have the exact same concerns as I do.

Maria: I'd be pissed.

Carmen: All different levels of education, all different majors. It's not just, 'well I have a problem with the Education Department'. Everybody has a problem with everything.

F: So one positive outcome is that it's not just you. You are not alone.

Rachel: That's also a negative outcome.

Carmen: Yeah, it is.

The students had bonded over shared experience and expressed that experience in their own terms using music, scripture, video, institutional publications, and their own words. They had identified areas of frustration and also pointed out opportunities for improvement and ways that they could participate in the process. All of their expressions were presented from within a context of their lived experience of Catholic identity within a Catholic university. That their experiences were not necessarily religious or even spiritual does not negate the religious implications of their remarks, however. These students were framing their experience in response to the gospel mandate of love of neighbor, the example of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery; and the music video extolling the fact that "Jesus Walks" with sinners and statements of Mission and Vision of their institution and the Catholic Church.

The fact that their responses, after many hours of discussion, kept returning to and revolving around these practical concerns may shed a different light on the whole discussion of Catholic identity in the university from the standpoint that, for these students, it did not begin with liturgy or doctrine but with the simple treatment that they received on a day to day basis. Their experience of identity was built upon the

relationships that did or did not satisfy their basic needs and the community within the academy that did or did not coalesce. For these students, the idea of religious identity never fully matured beyond these basic needs in part because of a perceived failure, on the part of some, to relate to them as persons. The lack of sensitivity to what they identified as the most basic of gospel values, love of neighbor, deflected any attempt to superimpose a less generic Christianity or Catholicism in the academic environment.

Phase Two-Interpreting the Reflection

St. Mary's University and St. Edward's University

To begin the interpretive stage at both St. Mary's and St. Edward's Universities, students were given a selection from their university's mission statement along with three quotes from the earlier reflection sessions at St. Thomas University.

The quotations were selected to represent the major themes that had emerged from the St. Thomas reflection of community, relationships and identity. Students were lead through the prompts one at a time, with extended discussion following each prompt. The order and content of the prompts are as follows:

Mission Statement Excerpt St. Mary's:

“St. Mary's University, as a Catholic Marianist University, fosters the formation of people in faith and educates leaders for the common good through community, integrated liberal arts and professional education, and academic excellence.”

Mission Statement Excerpt St. Edwards:

“St. Edward’s expresses its Catholic identity by communicating the dignity of the human person as created in the image of God, by stressing the obligation of all people to pursue a more just world, and by providing opportunities for Religious Studies and participation in campus ministry... St. Edward’s seeks to provide an environment in which freely chosen beliefs can be deepened and expressed.”

First Student Quotation:

“During the Mass...I was able to witness as well as analyze how important religion can be for many people [at this university]. Even though I was just an ‘observer’ [non-Catholic] I saw how many people had a religious experience when taking communion. It was not only eating bread and drinking wine but it went much deeper than that.”

Second Student Quotation:

“I am extremely glad that I decided to come to a Catholic university. This university makes me feel like I am a part of a huge family that goes out of its way to help each other. I know that I can go to any of my teachers or fellow students and have support...”

Third Student Quotation:

“Yeah and you can take my money. You will do that and you will do that very quickly, but you won’t care that I’m unhappy. You won’t care that I feel, like, deserted here. And then, it’s a private school and it’s a small school and it’s a Catholic school. But yet there’s no type of help, no type of community. So, what’s Catholic in that? So when you ask, ‘what’s Catholic about the University’, I guess, that we have a Chapel and that we can talk about God. But I don’t see it in any action.”

Students at in both Phase Two groups were asked to respond to each statement as to whether or not it reflected their experience at their university. Students at both St. Mary’s and St. Edward’s reflected positively on their university’s mission statement in their lived experience. Julie, a senior, said: “I think a phrase that’s used a lot is ‘educating the whole person.’ And so at St. Mary’s everyone here strives to educate us in our faith and in service as well as academically.”

The St. Edward’s students emphasized the pluralist reference in their mission statement regarding “freely chosen beliefs” being expressed. Janet added: “I am not very religious at all and so I definitely think the last part is true. Yes, you go to a Catholic university, but they don’t force you to do anything...I like that a lot.”

Sarah expanded on Janet’s statement:

I have participated in stuff through campus ministry before, like I’ve done various mission projects and stuff because for one of my classes we had to do mission work. Since I’m not religious I thought that would be kind of weird at first, but it turned out that they were like super grateful just to have people helping out and it

was a very interesting experience. It wasn't so much that you were Catholic, but that you were willing to help others.

The discussion of mission at St. Mary's quickly turned to the theme of community beginning with this statement by Tomas: "I think community is emphasized a lot on campus. It's one of the biggest things I noticed coming here in my freshman year is that community is over and over, it's just repeated. It's emphasized a lot. It's a good thing...I think the big thing is that it's developed through doing service with each other."

In both St. Mary's and St. Edward's groups, the theme of community and service seemed to go hand in hand. Sarah from St. Edward's, who described herself as non-religious, explained:

A big part of that Holy Cross identity from what I've learned and understood is the service aspect. That's a big a part of their mission to serve others, and pursue social justice. From what I've been involved in and the stuff I've done, I've definitely seen that. In our learning community we have to do a certain amount of service projects and that's all through campus ministry.

Amanda at St. Mary's went on to connect service and community with the statement: "So, not only do our professors and other advisors push for it [service projects], but most of your friends are going to be there on Saturday morning so you might as well go too and kind of get fellowship out of that."

For the second prompt, the quotation regarding attendance at liturgy, both student groups

expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to participate. This was true for non-religious and non-Catholic as well as Catholic students at St. Mary's and St. Edward's, much as it was for the St. Thomas student who was quoted. Brad at St. Mary's did not feel that the student liturgy was fulfilling for him stating:

I have a really hard time with the Masses here just because I don't think they are very reverent...Like here, our Mass today was 25 minutes and it just seemed like something that we needed to get done rather than an experience. And I find that a lot with just about every Mass I have been to here...It just seems like there is not much contemplative spirit for prayer.

Tomas offered this response to Brad's concern:

I would say that the [late Mass] is shaped more toward the Protestant faith. I think they want to appear to be more fair or open to other religions because instead of kneeling during Communion or anything like that, everybody stands. And the [early Mass] everybody kneels. But the late Mass is shaped more towards just getting people to come, I think. Its comfort for the people instead of traditions, in my opinion.

David disagreed:

I had the opportunity to hear the class discussing Vatican II in the later half of my freshman year and I actually go to both Masses on Sunday because I am part of the choir. Over the years I have really come to appreciate kind of the difference between the community here and normal parishes outside of [this university]. I feel

like a real strong sense of community and identity, especially as a Catholic here [at this university] as opposed to regular parishes where I feel like I'm kind of there for no reason. Because I don't know anybody and I can't really have an experience, a Christian experience if I don't know any Christians. So I've had like, especially at the late Mass, I really appreciate kind of the enlived spirit of it.

Sylvia at St. Edwards talked about the feeling of being a part of the community as a non-Catholic:

I actually went to that Mass my freshman year. It was the first Catholic Mass I ever went to and I thought, well I'm going to a Catholic university I might as well go to the Mass. I was really surprised by it because I didn't understand that they stood so much and stuff like that and that they hold each other...

[Laughter.]

I was like 'Catholics don't do that.' And then I got blessed and I thought that was a really cool experience. Because Presbyterians, even though you don't have to be baptized or anything and you don't have to be Presbyterian to take communion, but I know you have to be Catholic to take communion at the church but I got blessed and so I felt like that even though I wasn't taking communion and participating in that part I was still interacting in the service.

Cristina at St. Mary's brought together the theme of community for Catholics and inclusion for non-religious students with her insight:

These past two years I've lived on campus and I started going to the late Mass and at first it was kind of like culture shock because I was so used to the conservativeness of my parish. I guess my first reaction was to kind of detract from it. But then I kept going because I think I recognized that there were people going to the late Mass that I've heard from personal experience by talking to some of them, that they don't usually go to Mass. Or they have been away from their faith for a long time and they came back because they felt a little more...they felt that community and they felt a little more comfortable at that late Mass. And I started to appreciate that. And then when I learned more about Church history and about how we used to stand during the Eucharist in the early time of the Church, and that kneeling is like only a kind of a new thing. I was just kind of learning more. I'm not detracting from the late Mass, I actually really like going, and also I think the bilingual part of it is a big reason why people like going to it too. I like the biculturalness of it. That's my take on the late Mass in a nutshell.

The third prompt relates to the theme of relationships and specifically talks about the ability to rely on faculty and others for support. The reaction of both St. Mary's and St. Edward's student groups was positive as this quote related to their experience especially concerning their relationship with faculty. Julie at St. Mary's explained: "I know all my professors and they know me." Sarah at St. Edward's stated: "I agree that with faculty, I've had my writing professor last semester at the end of the semester he was like: 'if you guys need any help with anything ever you can come by my office and talk to me about anything.' I think that's a big reflection of how the faculty here is."

When asked if this had anything to do with St. Edward's being a Catholic university she added: "I think they actually really, really care. They want to get to know you."

Martha at St. Mary's added: "I had my biology professor and advisor when I was a freshman [go] looking for me in my dorm just because I was sick and I did miss class and he was wondering what was wrong."

Liliana felt that this was intentional on the part of St. Mary's in that:

I think that goes with, like, the professors they get in here, like the tuition bill is kind of bigger so they do make sure they get the right people in. And once you have those people, like everybody here has their doctorate degree and it shows their experience. They go through a selecting process of who gets here. And not so much your qualifications and your degrees but your persona itself. That's the value of what we're getting. This school is picking them out for us but they're good, they're good people.

Continuing on the theme of relationships students discussed the role of members of the university staff other than faculty in their experience. At St. Mary's Liliana expressed it this way:

My reason for coming here is a little bit different. I am the first generation here in the States and when we were in the process of legalizing everything, we honestly didn't have the means to do it, and we had someone here from the Justice Services help us. Thanks to that, I'm here in the States and I've got my education. I got accepted to Baylor and different schools too, but to me I'm like: dude, I'm

here because of them. That made an impact and that goes back to them helping the community which really brought me back to them in the long run.

The connection between faculty, staff and alumni was also important to students at St. Mary's. Julie stated:

I think the networking here, between the students and the alumni, there is always a constant presence. For example, in the History department, if there is something the professors can't help us with or even our chair, they know somebody outside, that they're like, hey, ok, contact this person, do this, this and this. They will pretty much walk you through it. At least for my department and then they will say, ok did you do this? Did you get a hold of this person? I know one of our advisors, there would be times when she would find out about a scholarship and it would be due in like two days and you had to have all of these things and she would do a majority of the footwork and say like: "you work on the paper and let's do this" and like everyone in the History department would be like "pull this and pull that" just to get those packets ready for those five students that were submitting or whatever. The networking is just...you feel that they don't leave you hanging.

When pressed to identify how much of these relationships were unique to the Catholic university experience, students had difficulty, as in this exchange at St. Mary's following Julie's comment:

F: How much of that is because this is a Catholic university? How much of it is because of the Marianist influence, and how much of it is just this university itself, apart from its religious institution?

[Silence]

F: Is it possible to separate?

[Several] Not really. [Laughter].

F: When you think of this school do you think of it as Marianist or do you think of it as Catholic?

[Several] Catholic. Both.

Students at all three schools talked about the relationship and community within their life in the dormitory. The relationships with Resident Assistants (RA) was both a source of support and, sometimes, a source of disappointment. The RA's are an intimate part of the student experience according to this exchange between students at St.

Edward's:

Katia: I actually get along great with my RA's, they are so helpful. If you just go see any of them, or anybody on the floor.

Jennifer: I lived in a really good dorm last year and every single person, I could call them today and they would be there to help me. We had a really good bond, it was really community-based.

Sarah: I'm in a living-learning community, which basically means that I take a class and live with 23 people so we all live in the same hallway in our dorm and we all take a class together, well we take two classes together, so four hours a

week. And that has been a really interesting experience for me because it's kind of like a microcosm of the university as a whole. I would definitely say that we have built a super, very strong community because we have been around each other so much, so I feel like those people if I needed anything I could go to immediately. Of course living with people there are definitely some issues, but as a whole I think it's helped build a community.

At St. Mary's Martha described a time when the interaction with the RA wasn't helpful:

I had a friend who [had] swine flu and she's from [out of the country] and so she has no family here and it was over the weekend and she was in the dorm. She had gone to the health center and they told her to basically sleep it off, cause they weren't sure if it was swine flu or not and she spent the whole weekend by herself because no one really knew. And we had to take her to the hospital on Monday. That was just one incident.

F: Is that common to have something like that happen?

Martha: No, not that I have heard of.

F: Kind of an isolated incident? What about Res Life? Would they not normally respond to that? Or somebody check on you?

Martha: Your Hall Director is supposed to. And we were told, cause we were like taking care of her, and we told one of the Hall Directors and he said they were supposed to go and check on you and take you food, and he said he was going to

do it and no one showed up. And she was calling us so we were going back and forth bringing her stuff.

This incident touched on another theme that was expressed at all three universities: the students' own responsibility for creating community for themselves and for each other. In the above example, the students in Martha's dorm took care of their ailing dorm-mate in the absence of help from staff. In the last quotation that the students were asked to consider, the prompt presents a student's rather bitter assessment of her college experience. When presented with this quote at St. Mary's students were silent for a long time and then Tomas spoke: "That last statement is kind of selfish hearing them say that to me. Because it's not the university's job to make sure you have community. It's your job. So there's things you can do even if the university is not very good at it. You can make it better."

At St. Edward's, in response to the same prompt, Janet said:

I don't agree with what they are saying but I definitely do feel that if like someone did feel that way they would feel that way because they were not embracing everything the university had to offer. I know some friends who actually felt this way, just because they were not going out for anything or they were too scared to embrace it all, or they were just unhappy with themselves so they took it out on wherever they were.

Roger, at St. Mary's stated: "I would say that [this university] does a good job of providing opportunities for the students, but no matter what, it's the students that are

going to build it. That are gonna comprise that community and if the students aren't willing to do it then it's just not going to happen."

In that regard, the students at all three universities cited the lack of what they called "school spirit," especially when it came to athletic events.

Marcia at St. Edward's explained:

Because listening to us it sounds like we are all prideful and we love going here. But when you walk around campus and you go to sporting events and you go to student organizations and fairs, there's really, in my opinion not that much student involvement. Most people don't really put that much effort into being involved and into school spirit. Because you walk around and everyone is wearing University of Texas stuff, supporting other schools and its really frustrating because you want to have everyone excited to go here.

Roger at St. Mary's set off a similar discussion that initially revolved around tuition:

They're building a new athletic complex which is why they are leaving the roads this way. It would be nice if, in the biology department, we didn't have to go running for beakers all the time. Just little things, this is the biggest department and I feel like we don't have adequate supplies, adequate equipment to be able to compete with many of the larger universities. Like athletics. Nobody even goes to the sporting events and they are trying to foster that kind of school spirit. Like we are here for an education too and I don't see the spirit coming.

Brad: That's one problem. We don't really have school colors, we don't have the school spirit in the sense that some of the larger schools do.

David: Is it blue or yellow or gold?

F: I hear a conflict though, because I hear a lot about community being strong and then I hear, well maybe not.

Martha: Just in athletics. I remember our freshman year they had hall competition and in our dorm we just went crazy, we went all out. When it came to sporting events, our Hall Director, he would set up for our dorm to go to this event on this date and wear your school colors. So it just depends on the different people.

F: So for some people athletics is important?

Tomas: For fewer and fewer.

During a reflection at St. Thomas University, Raul (who described himself as an atheist) spoke about the need for doing "something communal that would address the whole issue of Catholic identity in the school." For students at St. Mary's, prayer in the classroom was discussed as an important part of their experience. Amanda started the discussion:

Amanda: I have this professor for English, and every day before class we said a prayer and that's how we started class, every class. And she always said that you don't have to do this with us. If you don't want to it's not something that I am making you do. She said, if you don't want to pray, let me pray for you. That's what she would say every day. And I thought that was really amazing. That was like one of the biggest things, when I came to [orientation] and the class we had to

go to the next day, it was a priest teaching and I didn't know. I was like, wow, that was kind of what sold me too.

F: Do you have other classes where you start class with a prayer? Is that an exception?

Brad: I've had one in four years and I wish it was more.

David: I've had one where we started class with a prayer everyday and then I had one this semester who said: 'a lot of people don't do this anymore, but we are going to say a prayer to start this semester.' And from what I've heard he prays to finish the semester. I'd prefer we just did it every day.

F: Do you feel that you could say that?

David: Yes, I actually talked with another student and we were talking about approaching him and saying why don't we...

F: Is that a theology class?

David: It's an English class.

Brad: I write it on every evaluation.

Amanda: Well really then it doesn't have to be a theology class. I know my marketing professor at the beginning of the semester he made a point like, at the start of this semester we did a small prayer. Before the evaluations were turned in, he wrote like a saying, a quote from the Bible and we read it and he said: 'may this carry on for the rest of your life.' Just here and there he would make little prayers for us. It wasn't a theology professor. It was just a professor. And it was really neat because it was really insightful and it just made me feel like, that much more meaningful, like, he cares.

At St. Edward's the discussion about prayer revolved around the need to be open to people

of different beliefs. The question opened the discussion further:

F: Do you think what you are describing as an openness towards non-Catholic beliefs is that because of this university or is that a part of its Catholic identity?

Marcia: I would kind of think that its probably this university.

[Several agreeing]

Marcia: I grew up going to Mass every Sunday and it seems like as I have gotten older, my dad is a Methodist, and so looking back at his experience it seems like the Catholic Church is kind of closed-minded. They want everyone to be uniform. So I was a little surprised.

Gloria: I think it can go both ways because a big part of our religion is the love that you are supposed to spread to all people, not just the people in your group. So I think if its utilizing that aspect of Catholicism then it is being true to its Catholic roots because that is a big part. Our professor was saying that the two biggest commandments were like 'love God' and 'love each other' and so like that, is like what this University is doing by accepting everybody.

F: So you are saying it is a Catholic value.

Gloria: Yeah.

The students at St. Mary's responded to a final question that echoed one of the statements made by a St. Thomas student about the nature of the responsibility of a Catholic university:

F: Do you think that a Catholic university has a different responsibility to you as a student than a public university?

[Several] Yes.

F: And is that your expectation, then. So you are setting the bar higher for a Catholic university?

Martha: Exactly.

Crisitina: I think if they are going to call themselves Catholic then they need to live it out. They need to show it. And if they don't, then they are doing a disservice to not just the students but to the whole Catholic Church and the whole world.

Chapter 6

Bringing Forth the New and the Old

“Then every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings forth from his storeroom both the new and the old.”²³⁰

In this parable from Matthew, Jesus likens the scribe to a teacher who knows both his teaching (the new) and the law and the prophets (the old). It comes after two other parables which describe the kingdom of heaven as a treasure buried, a pearl of great price and a net which collects fish of every kind. This study has been an attempt to discover the pearl of great price, the experience of students at Catholic universities. The goal has been to uncover the student experience through a series of theological reflections at three Catholic universities so as to “bring forth” the student voice in the context of the Catholic university. As a work of Practical Theology, these reflections offer an opportunity for analysis, but also for transformation in practice and in how we view the university as Church.

The purpose has not been to measure the university’s catholicity or to evaluate the student’s knowledge of the Catholic Church but to allow the student’s to describe, as Francis Cardinal George put it, what it means to them. As George predicted, the answers do not always travel along expected paths of liturgy and doctrine. The themes that emerged from these reflections have as much to do with how the students were treated as

²³⁰ Matthew 14:52.

persons as with any other issue. By integrating these themes with the Church documents, such as *Ex corde ecclesiae*, describing the nature of a Catholic university, an ecclesiology of the university has begun to emerge.

The method used to illicit the student experience was a method of theological reflection described by James and Evelyn Whitehead that was enhanced and broadened with the use of the interpretive focus group model of Patricia Leavy, in two phases covering three metropolitan universities. The first phase of the reflections took place over a period of weeks at St. Thomas University in Miami Gardens, Florida. The participants were a part of a course, *The Bible as Literature*, in which the reflections were embedded. The students were given a number of texts from Scripture and the University mission statement and were asked to reflect on those texts in light of their own experience at the University. At the very first session the students offered a music video as a specific expression of their experience, moving the reflection into the type of interpretive interaction anticipated by Leavy's research method. Using this selection from popular culture as a catalyst the students participated in a wide-ranging discussion of their experiences at a Catholic university and how those experiences were related to the university's Catholic identity.

In the second phase of the study, students at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas and St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas reflected on comments from the first series of reflections at St. Thomas. These students also discussed their own experiences at their respective campuses in light of the mission and Catholic identity of their university.

Dillon, in *Negotiating Identity*, speaks of the need for the symbols and meanings of Catholic doctrinal tradition to be “evaluated and recast by Catholics themselves to ensure their ethical-practical relevance.”²³¹ The students in this reflection evaluated, sometimes in harsh terms, their experience of doctrine and practice at their universities. They expressed an expectation that their personal interactions with faculty, staff and other students, as well as their prayer and worship practices, would be different at a Catholic university. When these interactions did not meet their expectations, it was the university *as Catholic* that had failed. The failure was, in student Rachel’s words because “you can’t just call yourself Catholic and not do anything about it.”

The themes that emerged from the reflections at St. Thomas University were reinforced and, in some cases, challenged at St. Mary’s and St. Edward’s. The themes that were most emphatically expressed on all three campuses as it relates to the student’s experience of Catholic identity were community, relationship and service. Embedded within these three over-arching themes the students expressed themselves regarding prayer, worship, and inclusivity. These themes were lived out in the student’s description of their experiences in the classroom, the dormitory and the offices of administration and financial aid.

There are two important points to note that were common to all three student reflections. First, the most vividly recalled experiences, both positive and negative for the students occurred in their first hours, days, and weeks on campus. The whole experience of being recruited, accepted, applying for financial aid, moving in, finding classes, and being advised were often the ones that stood out most for the students, even

²³¹ Dillon, 253.

years later. Second, the role of administrative personnel as well as faculty was often the most important contact that the students described.

The implication here is that *everyone* on the university campus is seen as a part of the university's Catholic identity to these students. Those most intimately involved with the students, such as Resident Assistants in the dorms, clerical personnel, and financial aid advisors are often the first contact and make a lasting impression on these students. Most students do not become aware of Campus Ministry personnel, faculty advisors or counselors until much later in their university experience. Every contact that a student has, including email and telephone conversations, is viewed as a communication of the university's concern for them as persons at a time when many of them feel the most vulnerable.

Community

Students at all three universities expressed that community or a lack of community was at the basis of what they felt was a "catholic" experience. Examples of community included prayer and worship events, such as the Mass of the Holy Spirit at two of the universities, but didn't end there. Community in campus housing was very important to these students. Some of the strongest testimony regarding positive and negative experiences revolved around interaction with Resident Assistants in their dormitory. Whether it was reacting to a major crisis like a hurricane, or monitoring a sick student over the weekend, the Resident Assistants (most often students themselves) were an important link in the chain of community.

Student organizations like the Black Student Union or Student Government were often mentioned as sources of community builders on campus. They were also sometimes a source of disappointment when participation was low or there was little support for these organizations from faculty or administration. The most positive experiences involving student organizations resulted when action was initiated by students (such as a response at St. Mary's to the Haiti earthquake) and supported and facilitated by faculty and staff.

Students at all three universities were disappointed in what they called "school spirit" most often revolving around athletic events. None of the students felt that these events were adequately promoted or supported by students, in spite of what the students felt was a significant financial investment in these events. They were less a source of pride than of embarrassment and did not serve as an effective source of community building except for the students who were actually athletes themselves.

Some students thought that it was the responsibility of the university to offer opportunities to build community. Other felt it was up to the students themselves, especially the older students who recognized that they had a responsibility to help the newer students to become involved. The relative small size of all three schools was important to the students in building relationships in and out of the classroom. Students at all three schools expressed that the small size of their school was an important factor in their choice of a school, as important as the school being Catholic.

Relationship

Faculty at all three campuses represented the most important relationships in these students' experience. Faculty interactions had the most positive expression from every school and rarely a negative one. Students feel most cared for and cared about as persons and as students by their professors. They also care what their professors think and believe and do not feel threatened by a faculty member who expresses a spiritual or religious belief in class. Most students saw this as one of the major benefits of the Catholic identity of their university, whether or not they were Catholic (or even religious) and whether or not their professor was Catholic. They felt that their professors knew them as persons and took an interest in their academic progress. This was, for all students, the major advantage of their university and what most satisfied them as students there. Something as small as a professor knowing a student's name or greeting them on campus was an important part of their experience at a Catholic university. Although students often related this to the small size of their college, they also tied it to a Gospel value, love of neighbor, as exemplified by the faculty. As one student at St. Mary's explained: "they [our professors] are just good people."

Relationships with staff and administration also weighed heavily on these students' experience and most from very early in their awareness of the university. How they were recruited, admitted and approved for financial aid proved to be both a blessing and a curse for some students. For those for whom it was a positive experience, it became the defining experience for the university. For those, like Rachel, for whom it was negative it translated to "they don't care about you...and what's Catholic in that?"

Relationships and friendships with other students was mentioned, but it was never as highly praised or rejected as the relationships with adults that are a part of the

university. Even in cases where friendships were described, they were usually in the context of the description of a sponsored event or on-campus activity.

Service

Students related to community internally, but also externally, to the surrounding community of the university and to the outside world. Many students spoke of campus ministry in the context of service projects rather than worship and prayer opportunities. Service projects that were curriculum-based were often described as a part of the Catholic experience. Students, Catholic and non-Catholic and non-religious all related to the service aspect of Catholic social teaching at their university. Some related to it as a part of their founding order charism. Others as a part of the Gospel mandate to love one another. When service was curriculum-based and supported by faculty and campus ministry, the connection was complete. Students looked for these integrated opportunities and described them as the best reflection of their university's Catholic identity.

Some students felt that their university should be more involved in matters outside the university proper and become more visible in the local community. This was particularly true at St. Thomas University where the surrounding community is seen as poor and as an opportunity for service-oriented projects. Students were most responsive to service projects that faculty spoke of and supported in the classroom, even if they were not a part of the course curriculum.

Catholic Identity

So what is the summary of these students' experience of Catholic identity on these three Catholic universities? For these students it is very simply the Gospel mandate of love of neighbor, in the context of the university. For these students, *the university is Church*, both in the liturgical sense and in the ecclesial one. It is where they worship, pray, serve, relate to others and learn. This is true for Catholic and non-Catholic students. Even non-religious students have found some measure of spirituality and connection with the Catholic liturgy and an even greater connection with the opportunity to serve others and be a part of the community.

These students expressed that being Catholic holds the university to a higher standard of practice, both in and out of the classroom. They believe that actions are important, both symbolic actions in worship and prayer and small interactions in the day-to-day lives of the students. They expect that everyone on the campus is responsible for internalizing and living out the university's Catholic identity.

Many discussions of Catholic identity focus on Catholic social teaching and service or community-based learning as a common denominator to rally round. These activities are seen as something that students, faculty and administration can understand and embrace and form a basis for some type of common ground in the identity of Catholic social teaching. However, these students are highlighting relationships and interactions that often occur *before* any outside or community-based focus has begun. Is it possible that, in the effort to be of service outside the academy, the needs of those within it are overlooked? Perhaps it is because these very students, at least a large

portion of them, are the underserved, that they yearn so for care and appreciation and support.

Recommendations

For the three universities whose students participated in the reflections, faculty and administration would benefit from a reading of these findings and transcripts. Additional interpretive theological reflections with groups of faculty, campus ministry, university mission and Catholic identity committee members would produce further insights into the student experience. Discussion of these findings in those groups would also help to reinforce the immensely positive role that faculty plays in building relationships and community at their universities. These groups should not be limited to faculty who are Catholic or even religious, as the students have reiterated that all faculty, staff and administration are representatives of the university's Catholic identity.

Additional suggestions arising from the student reflections:

- Raise the awareness among all university personnel of their value to the university's Catholic identity, especially those who have early contact with incoming students.
- Raise awareness of faculty role in Catholic identity.

- Conduct faculty reflections utilizing statements of student experience.
- Educate faculty on Catholic social teaching and other areas that can be incorporated into course work.
- Coordinate service projects campus-wide with faculty input.
- Review all initial contacts with students for attention to the student's value as a person. This should include email, websites, letters and telephone contacts as well as face-to-face interactions.
- Recognize the critical nature of Residence Life staff in the student contact continuum and improve the training and qualifications.
- Conduct student/faculty/ "Listening Sessions" to promote dialogue on important issues.
- Look for opportunities to integrate faith and service:
 - In course curricula
 - Between course work and campus ministry
 - On social justice issues in current events

Regarding student liturgies:

- Integrate students in planning, preparation and implementation of liturgies.
- Use liturgy as an opportunity for catechesis.
- Use dialogical homilies that allow students to engage the scripture.
- Make liturgies "inclusive"
 - Bi-lingual where appropriate
 - Provide for participation/blessings for non-Catholics

- Increase the number of “special” liturgies which encourage Catholic and non-Catholic student attendance such as:
 - Mass of the Holy Spirit, beginning and ending semesters
 - Blessings for academic achievements or challenges, such as final exams.
 - Special Masses acknowledging developments in current events affecting the students or the community.

Further Research

The promise of theological reflection cannot be realized without an appropriate response arising from it. The students’ reflections themselves provide one level of an opportunity for response in that the students have had the chance to express themselves in their own language and terms. They have also had the opportunity to participate in a conversation within their own campus and across two other campuses in the process of this study. However, the opportunity to impact future praxis will not be realized unless this conversation continues with faculty, staff and administration of Catholic universities.

Using these reflections as a beginning, the theological reflection should be carried to the next level, not only within the three participating universities, but on other Catholic campuses as well. The reflection method developed here could also be used to include a wider group of students within the participating schools to further develop and deepen the insights. A reading of these findings will benefit offices of mission and campus ministry, but should have a wider circulation among all faculty in some format to effectively affirm their critical role in their students’ personal, academic and spiritual development.

The concept of the Catholic university as Church is an area that could be developed in significantly more depth than was possible in the scope of this work. As a site for fruitful dialogue, the Catholic university's role could be make a significant contribution to inter-faith and ecumenical development within each respective university community that would contribute to the wider conversation with the Church. The university's relationship within its local community and as a part of the local Church was a frequent concern of the students in this reflection and should also be explored more deeply with input from Catholic university students as well as faculty and staff. The university as an extension of the teaching authority of the Bishops should be further developed as a method to facilitate better communication and collaboration between Bishops and the university in dialogue on issues of contention in the wider culture. The university may be the best place for this type of conversation because it can provide an atmosphere of "intellectual charity" among the participants and provide a basis for a respectful dialogue.

The use of popular culture in theological reflection is another area which could be developed more fully and serve as a catalyst for deeper reflection and insight with university students. Using interpretive focus groups as a source for theological reflection may produce additional sources from popular culture that could be used effectively with groups in addition to the musical genres used in this reflection.

Conclusion

For almost one million students at Catholic universities in the United States, the Catholic university is Church. Many of these students could qualify under the social teaching mandate of the “preferential option for the poor.” Our students are struggling to gain the credentials and the skills to thrive and be of service to the world. They have come to a Catholic university to accomplish this and we have the responsibility and the honor as Catholic educators to serve them. For these students, the issue of whether we are Catholic does not come down to a discussion of doctrine but to an application of the Gospel, by every person on our campus to every other person. It is a tall order, but a much simpler one than we might have thought. If we fail to embrace this responsibility for whatever the reason: lack of funding, lack of consensus or just our own discomfort with the application of Church doctrine, then we will have failed, in student Cristina’s words: “the students...the whole Catholic Church and the whole world.” In the words of Benedict the XVI, it will be a failure of “intellectual charity” or a failure to lead our students to truth, a failure to love.

Appendix
Student Consent Form

Research Participant Information and Consent Form

Title of the Study: Catholic Identity Reflection

Principal Investigator: Dr. Bryan Froehle, (email: bfroehle@stu.edu) **Student Researcher:** Angelique Montgomery-Goodnough (email: amontgomery@stu.edu phone: 305-725-9034)

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH You are invited to participate in a focus group research study about your experience as a student at a Catholic university. You have been asked to participate because you are currently a student at a Catholic University and there is no requirement that you are Catholic, or that you practice any particular religious tradition. The purpose of the research is to describe the student experience at a Catholic university in the student's own language and terms.

The focus group will be completed in one hour or less.

WHAT WILL MY PARTICIPATION INVOLVE? If you decide to participate in this research you will be asked to participate in a discussion of a student experience at a Catholic university.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO ME? We don't anticipate any risks to you from participation in this study.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO ME? There is no compensation to you for participating in this study.

HOW WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED? While there will probably be publications as a result of this study, your name will not be used. Only group characteristics will be published.

WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS? You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions about the research after you leave today you should contact the Principal Investigator Dr. Bryan Froehle at bfroehle@stu.edu . You may also call the student researcher, Angelique Montgomery-Goodnough at 305-725-9034. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject you should contact the St. Thomas University IRB at (305) 628-6900.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide not to participate or to withdraw from the study it will have no effect on any services you are currently receiving nor will it obligate you for any future services. Your signature indicates that you have read this consent form, had an opportunity to ask any questions about your participation in this research and voluntarily consent to participate. You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Name of Participant (please print): _____

 Signature

 Date

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