

The Freedom to Learn: Adult Students in the Catholic University

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"The freedom and right of the adult student to learn, to weigh, to analyze, to accept or reject, to consider or dismiss, to embrace or discard, is at the heart of adult learning and education and is implicitly and explicitly found in a full understanding of academic freedom."

Hoftstader Metzger, 1955

"The Catholic University and Academic Freedom," a seminar held during the summer of 1997 at the University of St. Thomas, provided rich opportunities for learning, growth, and discussion. As an administrator with specific concern for non-traditional students, I was particularly interested in how the issue of academic freedom manifests itself in relation to this population, which is highly diverse and often misunderstood.

One of the most common misconceptions expressed in regard to the adult student is that his or her needs are virtually identical to those of the traditional student. The President of the University of St. Thomas, Rev. Dennis Dease, addressed this misconception in a recent academic convocation by stating the importance of recognizing "the uniqueness of the adult, part-time undergraduate student; these are not simply 'older college students.' They differ significantly both in their educational needs as well as in the way they are prepared to learn" (University of St. Thomas *Bulletin*, p. 9).

Adult students desire to enter into a communal exchange with those judged expert in a given domain. But they are often dismayed by those instructors who parade their expertise in an authoritarian and dogmatic way, leaving no room for an honest exchange of opinion (Vigilanti, 1992). Adult students, far more than traditional students, come to the university community with a complement of life experience that has enabled them to begin asking larger questions, to synthesize and draw conclusions from widely diverse life situations and events, and to think in a global manner. They are far more likely to question and challenge prevailing opinions, to seek out answers independently, and to take responsibility for their decisions. These and other characteristics have caused the adult learner to be seen both as a problem and as a refreshing challenge.

During the seminar, I gave a great deal of thought as to what the term "academic freedom" means from a student perspective. As an undergraduate student, the academic freedom of my instructors was something I took for granted, if I thought about it at all. Nor did I give much thought to student academic freedom... it seemed, in the mid-70s,

that those of us who attended secular liberal arts colleges were granted a great deal of freedom indeed. It was not until I enrolled in a graduate program as an adult student that I became aware of the personal necessity of what has been referred to historically as *Lernfreiheit*, or learning freedom, as well as that of *Lehrfreiheit*, the freedom to teach what one chooses.

A personal example is not sufficient evidence to claim that academic freedom—that is, the freedom to learn—is critically important to the adult student. Recent research on adult learning, however, is overwhelming in its insistence on autonomy and self-direction as a necessary component of any successful adult learning program (Brookfield, 1968; Knowles, 1980; Mezirow, 1981; and others).

Though adult learning theory is not new, programs for adult students have been implemented slowly. Until recently, the undergraduate adult population on university campuses in this country was generally a small one. Adults were expected to adapt to an environment and culture which had been designed for 18-22 year olds. With the current and projected growth in the adult student population, college and university campuses are looking more closely at meeting the unique learning needs of adults. Meanwhile, in Church documents relating to Catholic education, direct attention to this population is rare.

The documents of Vatican II barely introduced the theme of adult education, so new was the concept to a Church more versed in dealing with the schooling and education of the young. The *General Catechetical Directory* (United States Catholic Conference, 1971), was the first publication to mark the Church's foray into adult education in earnest. In 1973, *To Teach as Jesus Did* (USCC, 1973) included a section on the Church's educational ministry to adults, in which it recognized that learning is a lifelong experience. In discussing the planning of programs for adults, *To Teach as Jesus Did* stressed the importance of recognizing adult learning styles and the special needs of adult learners:

"Those who teach in the name of the Church do not simply instruct adults, but also learn from them; they will only be heard by adults if they listen to them. For this reason adult programs must be planned and conducted in ways that emphasize self-direction, dialogue, and mutual responsibility" (p. 12).

Though still in its early stages, the study of the process toward Christian adulthood has revealed a noteworthy tension between authority and freedom, hierarchy and community, teaching and learning. This tension has been played out in many areas of concern to the Church since Vatican II, but none is perhaps more notable than the university. While developments in the administration and organization of Catholic institutions of higher learning have once again raised the issue of the academic freedom of the professor or institution, it seems critical that the Church should also examine the academic freedom of the mature adults who populate many of these institutions. Given the self-directed and inquiring nature of autonomous adulthood, it appears essential that the issues of right and

freedom to know and learn be an integral part of the discussion of academic freedom in Catholic university culture. Indeed, Schaefer (1982) addressed the conflictual results which emerge when the autonomous adult encounters an ecclesial expression of authority more intent on indoctrination than dialogue. As he stated the dilemma: "the question is whether the Roman Catholic Church, with its rightful concern for the object of Christian faith, can tolerate heuristic believers" (p. 21). Other writers have noted that there exists an innate tension between a tradition of Church authority rooted in the Council of Trent and Vatican I, on the one hand, and those principles of adult learning which stress experience, self-direction, dialogue, and autonomy, on the other.

The Land O' Lakes statement on the nature of the contemporary Catholic university appears to be the first serious attempt made after Vatican II to arrive at a synthesis of the philosophy and mode of Catholic higher education. In addressing the Catholic community of learners, the statement provided support and encouragement which respected the adult's autonomy, freedom, and collaborative contribution to the learning process:

"Within the university community the student should be able not simply to study theology and Christianity, but should find himself in a social situation in which he can express his Christianity in a variety of ways and live it experientially and experimentally. The student and faculty can explore together new forms of Christian living, of Christian witness, and of Christian service" (cited in McCluskey, 1970).

In 1968, one year after Land O'Lakes, the representatives of Catholic universities throughout the world gathered in Kinshasa, Zaire, to address the role of the Catholic university in the modern world. They acknowledged that the Catholic university community must be an "academic institution, a community of scholars, in which Catholicism is present and operative" (p. 343). The Kinshasa statement called for

"respect for students' freedom during their formative years [and the creation of] a Christian community [where] non-Catholics as well as Catholics may participate and cooperate thus bringing to the Catholic university the ideas and values of many traditions" (p. 344).

It seemed that the Land O'Lakes and Kinshasa statements, in their allowance for and encouragement of student freedom and collaborative participation, permitted a variety of organizational and administrative possibilities that maintained the intellectual, reflective, and research integrity of the university and, at the same time, rendered it a center for the development and diffusion of an authentic Christian culture (Vigilanti, p. 138).

In 1985, the *Proposed Schema for a Pontifical Document on Catholic Universities* was issued (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1986). To its credit, the document recognized that the university should create an environment where all participated freely in the lifelong dialogue between faith and science and faith and culture. Yet the document failed to take into account the presence of so many non-Catholics in Catholic institutions, requiring not only respect for religious pluralism but also the exploration and

understanding of religious experience and doctrinal adherence among diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural groups (1990; Wister, 1990). Such an exercise requires dialogue, freedom, respect for persons, collaboration, and openness: characteristics often applied to adult learning and education.

The most disappointing aspect of the document, from an adult learning perspective, was its neglect of the role of the student. The active, mature contribution of students in the teaching-learning experience was neither recognized nor explicitly encouraged.

In 1988, the Congregation for Catholic Education issued a revised draft of the proposed document on Catholic education. The revision took into account many of the suggestions offered by Catholic educators, professional societies, and institutions. Many improvements and clarifications were incorporated into the revised draft, including true development in the document's view of the student, although the changing profile of the student in the American institutions of higher learning was not taken into account. In addition, no attention was paid to the role of the adult in the universities, to say nothing of adult learning characteristics. Nevertheless, the revised document did encourage Catholic institutions to offer an education which would enable students to "become critical and independent seekers of the truth, conscious of the rights of others within the university" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, p. 460).

On September 25, 1990, the Vatican released the Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (Pope John Paul II, 1990). While the Constitution addressed issues such as the mission and identity of Catholic universities, it also addressed the needs of students:

"Most especially, they are challenged to continue the search for truth and for meaning through their lives, since the human spirit must be cultivated in such a way that there results a growth in its ability to wonder, to understand, to contemplate, to make personal judgments and to develop a religious, moral and social sense" (p. 270).

This short statement accurately reflects the situation of the adult learner and the characteristics of adult learning as reflected in recent research. In this way, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* supports the student's continued search for meaning and truth, and the freedom necessary for the search.

Even with the Church's recognition of the importance of academic freedom, there undeniably exists a potentially disruptive tension between authority and freedom, scholar and dogma, hierarchy and laity. Within the Church documents, there is a call for Catholic institutions to operate as true universities, covering a broad range of disciplines. However, within official Church statements, certain limitations are imposed. As Vigilanti notes, "a rigorous and probing theological exercise, expected and common in the academic arena, is tempered by and held hostage to catechetical considerations" (p. 155).

When consideration is given to today's nontraditional student body, the issue becomes more complex. The adult learning style is characterized by an interactive pattern which

draws upon the experiences adults bring to the classroom. Adults seeks to participate as equals in the teaching-learning process.

Each time an adult student in a Catholic university challenges a specific Church teaching, doubts a given doctrine, or subscribes to an opinion at variance with the commonly accepted tradition of the Church or its teachings, the freedom to learn is exercised:

"If those who facilitate adult theological learning in Catholic institutions of higher learning have a broader vision of their mission than simply transmitting facts, doctrines, and beliefs, then the academic freedom of the student affords both teacher and student the opportunity to relate to each other, and to the subject matter, in an authentic human manner where conversation, dialogue, and discussion are marked by genuine and truthful sharing" (p. 156).

If we accept the fact that adult undergraduate students, both Catholic and non-Catholic, will continue to enroll in Catholic institutions of higher education in ever-growing numbers, we must also face the reality of the challenges they will present. As the University of St. Thomas encourages diversity among its students, faculty, and staff, the university must be prepared for the diverse beliefs, learning styles, and cultural orientations represented in its nontraditional student body. To this end, Ong (1990) offered some recommendations for the future of Catholic higher education in this country. Using an analysis drawn from the parable of the yeast in St. Matthew's Gospel, Ong states that the history of theology has shown that St. Augustine learned from pagan rhetoric, as St. Thomas learned from the pagan philosopher Aristotle. Pope John Paul II has learned from personalist philosophy. "From its beginning, Catholic teaching has learned by contact with what is not itself and even what is opposed to itself" (p. 349).

Schaefer has coupled his view on doctrinal development with a Christian world-view of personhood that accents the creative freedom of the individual. When one considers, in addition, the contribution of adult learning theorists who call for individual and institutional goals to be negotiated by all participants in an adult educational setting, then

"...it is possible for the Roman Catholic Church to tolerate the emergence of mature believers. But that possibility requires holding in tension an organic theory of doctrinal development, a cocreational understanding of personhood, and a willingness to negotiate learning needs" (Schaefer, p. 26).

The adult undergraduate students that I work with at St. Thomas are, by and large, not Catholic. They have chosen to attend the university because of its reputation, its location, or its major field offerings. For these students, the requirement that they take three theology and two philosophy classes (thereby adding approximately one year to the time they spend here) often causes concern.

I find it interesting that these same students, nearing graduation, will tell me that the most engaging, challenging and fulfilling classes they have taken are those offered through the theology and philosophy departments. They describe classes in which they have been

encouraged to explore, to synthesize, to draw their own conclusions and speak in their own voices. They talk of the fascination they feel at encountering the Catholic faith tradition, as well as the interest that is awakened by exploring their own ideas and belief systems. However much they initially dislike the idea, the exploration of the fields of philosophy and theology appear to be an enriching experience for adult students.

I believe this is because, in many of St. Thomas' philosophy and theology classes, adult students encounter fields where the principles of adult learning are naturally applied. Self-direction, synthesis, personal decision-making, and the free exchange of ideas seem to be inherent in the structure and expectation of most of these classes.

The university will continue to see the growth of its adult undergraduate student population. As part of this growth process, challenges will undoubtedly arise as we struggle to meet the needs of a diverse and rapidly changing student body that values autonomy, diversity, critical thinking, and synthesis. We as a university community must continuously strive to ensure the freedom and right of the adult student to learn, to weigh, to analyze, to accept or reject, to embrace or discard. These rights are essentials of adult learning and education and are implicitly and explicitly found in a full understanding of academic freedom (Hofstadter Metzger, 1955). To develop a learning atmosphere which encompasses these rights is to give our adult students an engagement with the lifelong learning process, a thirst for greater knowledge, and a respect for the rich history and tradition of Catholic higher education.

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