

# Women's Centers as Unruly Places

by Brenda J. Powell  
English Department

The mission of the Luann Dummer Center for Women is to foster the intellectual, spiritual, and personal development of women at the university. The Center's educational programs, activities, and resources are available to students, faculty, and staff of the university and are intended to promote a more open and diverse environment. Although the Center is dedicated especially to women, it is committed to the service of the entire campus community within the context of its mission.

The Center is designed:

- to serve as a meeting place for women where they can share their expertise and experience
- to provide programs which help women develop their intellectual ability and achieve their potential
- to collaborate with the Women's Studies Program and the University Committee on Women
- to provide opportunities for students to learn about the achievements of women and to interact with women role models
- to offer a supportive environment in which issues of equity and diversity can be explored by the university community in a spirit of respect and understanding
- to sponsor the Luann Dummer Lecture Series which features distinguished women speakers

*"Moreover, universities since their founding in the Middle Ages have always been unruly places, almost by nature, since the university is the place where young people come of age—an often unruly process—places where the really important problems are freely discussed with all manner of solutions proposed, places where all the burning issues of the day are ventilated, even with hurricane winds at times. Again, by nature, the university—even, or perhaps especially the Catholic university—has always been dedicated uniquely to criticism of itself and everything else, of those things held most dear." (Hesburgh 5)*

I begin with these two lengthy quotes—one, the mission of our Women's Center, and the other from Fr. Hesburgh—because together they point to both the value and the problem of women's centers at Catholic universities. Their strength is what they proffer to

contribute to the university community; their challenge is that, given the present state of tension between some women's concerns and some traditional Roman Catholic teachings, they will inevitably find themselves functioning as lightning rods for controversy as they try to fulfill their mission within that university community.

Fr. Hesburgh's use of the term "unruly" to describe Catholic universities is particularly serendipitous in considering the roles of women's centers, for associations of women with unruliness are commonplace in western society; more particularly, "unruly" is precisely the term frequently applied to women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance who questioned or challenged prevailing notions of their nature and their place in society. So perhaps it is only to be expected that women's centers will inevitably be "unruly places, almost by nature." And within Catholic universities, the perception that women's questions make them "unruly" and, occasionally, a conviction that when that unruliness confronts Catholic teaching it ought not be tolerated, intensifies the perceived danger of women's centers as spaces within the Catholic university "where the really important problems are freely discussed with all manner of solutions proposed... even with hurricane winds at times."

Within a women's center, what qualifies as a "really important problem" is determined by women: women students who are frustrated because issues that they care about either are not being raised in class or are being addressed in a manner that they perceive is not open to their questions and concerns; women faculty who, for a variety of reasons, wonder just how far the protection of academic freedom extends; women staff who report a myriad of ways in which they feel that fundamental human respect is not being granted them, perhaps in part because of their sex. Women name the issues, and bring them to the Center because they sense—rightly or wrongly—that it is not safe for them to raise these issues within the larger university community. And because within a women's center there is no power of a course grade or an employee's evaluation, a sense of safety should ensue that will likely lead to discussions that are "unruly" in the sense that apparently outlandish ideas are put forth.

It is ironic yet accurate that this unruly space is safe precisely because it tolerates unruly behavior: challenging, testing, experimenting, even crying out in frustration. And out of this tolerance grows a sense of community. This apparently unruly behavior is one phase of the critical work of the Women's Center: the work of developing a sense of dignity and mutual support among women, work that can only be accomplished when there is no fear of reprisal. Yet paradoxically, this place that needs to be a safe haven for issues thought to be too volatile for open discussion is not covered by the AAUP's descriptions of "academic freedom."<sup>1</sup>

So the question arises as to what particular freedoms and responsibilities a women's center does have as it pursues its mission. It may be fruitful initially to separate the activities of a women's center into two kinds: its functions as a resource, both in terms of providing printed and other materials and in terms of informal discussions, and its function as a sponsor of major speakers for the larger university community (for example, in its mission "to sponsor the Luann Dummer Lecture Series"). Though similar

"hurricane winds" may be stirred by both sets of activities, because the audiences and the contexts differ, so may considerations of freedoms and responsibilities.

The Center's resource activities—"to serve as a meeting place... to provide opportunities for students to learn... and to interact\_ to offer a supportive environment"—are those that respond most directly to the needs and concerns of the women within the university community. This safe space must make resources available to all as they search for ideas and information that will help them grapple with their concerns, and it must create opportunities for dialogue around these concerns. For many, if not most of these concerns, the resources and programming offered by a women's center at a Catholic university may not differ significantly from those at a non-sectarian university; our information on violence against women, or on scholarship opportunities for women in the sciences, or on the history of the women's movement is likely to be similar to that found at many other institutions, for example. Likewise, the vast majority of programs sponsored by the Women's Center feature topics and speakers one could find at women's centers across the country.

But women at Catholic universities are likely also to raise issues that may receive less attention in women's centers at non-sectarian universities. These issues tend to focus on tensions between some aspects of Catholic teaching and some important feminist scholarship: inclusive language, priestly ordination, scriptural interpretation, and reproductive concerns, for example. Yet, paradoxically, the very Catholic identity of the university that increases the likelihood that such issues will be raised in a women's center is also the source of increased anxiety about the appropriateness of women's centers addressing these issues. And as the interest level increases, so does the level of controversy, and so does the perception that the Women's Center is an unruly space.

Difficult as it may be, women's centers need to be sites on Catholic campuses where such issues can be studied and discussed, for these issues are symptoms of a more profound conundrum: how are we to understand the nature and place of women, and what are the implications of those understandings for how we function together within a university. For example, in acknowledging her sense that as "a practicing Roman Catholic feminist, female, full professor in psychology" (199) she finds herself at the margin of a Catholic university, Naomi Meara asks us to think about "the case of women":

If one has a restricted role, an added or special responsibility, or a position for which she is not eligible, then de facto there is not equality of opportunity. Roman Catholic women meet every one of these conditions. Their church holds them primarily responsible for the success of family life, the moral virtues of their children, and the welfare of their spouses. Ambition in many domains, particularly in service for the church as priests, is seen by many in official positions at best as untoward and at worst sinful. If these official church views are correct and necessary for the perpetuation of the culture or of the faith, then we should be educating women very differently than we are here at Notre Dame. If these views are incorrect, maybe the way we are educating women and men here together at Notre Dame is on the right track. But of course that puts us in conflict with a large segment of the church's teaching authority. (203)

And, indeed, the question of how we are educating women goes to the heart of the climate issues to which women's centers are often specifically charged or implicitly expected to attend.

A discussion about Catholic views of women's nature and of the implications of those views for the education of women might fruitfully begin by examining precisely what those views are. For example, is it appropriate to claim that the church denies women equal opportunity because it "holds [women] primarily responsible for the success of family life"? How does this square with statements in *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women* by John Paul II such as, "both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree" (22) and "The woman cannot become the 'object' of 'domination' and male 'possession' " (38). Clearly, a denial of "equal opportunity" is not what he has in mind. Yet the quotation marks around "object," "domination," and "possessions," have intriguing rhetorical implications, especially when taken in conjunction with the later concern that "In the name of liberation from male 'domination,' women must not appropriate to themselves male characteristics contrary to their own feminine 'originality'" (40). What practical applications might one derive from these assertions regarding the various roles of women as learners and as workers in the academy?

If, in fact, Meara has accurately described the "added or special responsibilities" attributed to women by Roman Catholicism as a form of inequality of opportunity, how ought a women's center in a Catholic university respond? If, in fact, the Catholic church holds that the dignity and vocation of women, while not *lesser* than those of men, are inherently *different* from those of men, ought the education of women, as well as expectations of women faculty and staff, differ fundamentally from those of men? And how ought a women's center exercise institutional leadership regarding the climate for women if, in fact, elements of Catholic teaching encourage faculty to view women students differently from how they view men students, and encourage students to attempt to relate to female faculty members primarily as mothers, given the teaching that "Motherhood is linked to the personal structure of the woman" (*Dignity and Vocation* 64), and encourage all to expect a particular element of "receptivity" or a "naturally spousal predisposition of the feminine personality" (*Dignity and Vocation* 73) in their dealings with women staff? Are such attitudes the result of misunderstandings or misappropriations of the teachings?<sup>2</sup> And, if so, how should a women's center contribute to a fuller or more accurate understanding, one that also recognizes the social justice dimensions of Catholic teachings about women?<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, a women's center in a Catholic university needs to address these issues, along with all of the issues that typically comprise a women's center's programming. The question of the significance of biological differences between women and men is, of course, an enormously complex one, one that has important implications for all of the other, apparently less controversial issues (such as teaching math and science to women) that women's centers address, and one that both feminists and Catholics have long explored and continue to discuss. Which may be why it makes more sense to take smaller bites out of this apple, and focus more narrowly and more serially on issues, such as the second example that Meara cites, the ineligibility of women for the priesthood.

In my experience, both Catholic and non-Catholic women on Catholic university campuses have deep intellectual curiosity (and sometimes strong passions) about both the reasons behind and the implications of the Magisterium's teachings on the ordination of women as priests. To fulfill its mission, a women's center at a Catholic university must serve as a resource around this issue, ensuring that interested individuals have access to the various official documents pertaining to this issue.<sup>4</sup> But in providing access to these documents, we must also anticipate that students who are engaged in developing critical thinking skills are likely to grapple with the tone, and indeed with the entire question of authority, reflected in phrases such as "... the nonadmission of women to priestly ordination *cannot mean* that women are of lesser dignity *nor can it be construed* as discrimination against them" ("Ordinatio Sacerdotalis" 51; emphasis added). Unruly as it may be, thoughtful individuals, especially those who genuinely seek to understand an argument, are likely to resist such interpretive restrictions. And if, in fact, this teaching "requires definitive assent" ("Response to a 'Dubium'") by the faithful, that resistance will need to play itself out.

Certainly, as *Ex corde Ecclesiae* repeatedly points out, all members of the Catholic university community must respect the Catholic identity of the university. But such respect is not derived from a silencing of questions or of divergent views. Rather, respect is increased as the result of productive dialogue. Two of the "Working Principles for Dialogue" from the Catholic Common Ground Initiative may be particularly helpful in this context:

We should presume that those with whom we differ are acting in good faith. They deserve civility, charity, and a good-faith effort to understand their concerns. We should not substitute labels, abstractions, or blanketing terms—'radical feminism,' 'the hierarchy,' 'the Vatican'—for living, complicated realities.

We should put the best possible construction on differing positions, addressing their strongest points rather than seizing upon the most vulnerable aspects in order to discredit them. We should detect the valid insights and legitimate worries that may underlie even questionable arguments.

Genuine respect—for the Catholic identity of the university, for the power of words and ideas, and for the dignity of every participant in the discussion—respect, but not necessarily agreement, is the prerequisite for dialogue, especially within an educational institution. Then, within a framework that is "ruled" by responsibilities to respect one another, an "unruliness" of ideas can unfold. A Catholic university can permit such unruliness because of a confidence in the ultimate reasonableness of the Catholic faith. And a women's center can sponsor such unruliness because, on balance, a women's center's mission is educational and intellectual rather than primarily spiritual and formative (though clearly no absolute distinction can be made here). It therefore is obligated to make available the full range of the most recent scholarship on the topic, regardless of the position to which that scholarship ultimately tends. This is simply good academic practice and a responsible contribution to the university community. As Nel Noddings observes, if we seek to educate for intelligent belief, we cannot fear including

in discussions ideas that challenge belief. The criterion for inclusion as a resource in a women's center must be the academic quality of a work, not its doctrinal position. And as a women's center strives constantly to achieve intellectual integrity, it will necessarily find that unruliness and respect go hand in hand.

Of course, the criterion of academic quality, especially applied to texts that diverge from Catholic teachings, is not as clear cut as one might wish. The difficulty in applying it becomes especially evident as we shift attention from resources and informal discussions within a women's center to public speakers sponsored by the women's center. It is only natural that there is a lower threshold for concern about speakers who will be addressing the wider university and non-university communities than for individual materials on a center's shelf. Yet here, again, I would argue that the single most important criterion must always be the quality of the speaker's mind, not a position on a specific issue. The concern is sometimes expressed that people will infer from the women's center's sponsorship of a speaker that the women's center is endorsing everything that speaker says, or has ever said. Such observations offer a vital teachable moment.

First, it must be made clear that no one speaker can ever be said to represent the position of a unit such as the women's center for the simple reason that the women's center is a space, not an individual. Indeed, because the mission of the women's center is to serve all of the individuals who frequent, contribute to, advise, and lead the women's center, it necessarily encompasses a multiplicity of beliefs and judgments.<sup>5</sup> Second, it is a crucial developmental step to distinguish between finding a speaker's ideas intriguing and worth reflecting upon, and agreeing with those ideas. Exploring an idea is different from advocating an idea. If we cannot learn how to learn from people with whom we partially disagree—even if what we learn is how to reflect more clearly and critically on our positions on those points of disagreement—then we deprive ourselves of large segments of an education.

An insistence on the value of intellectual exploration also serves to remind those still anxious about the effects of controversial speakers that individual speakers contribute to a whole educational process, one intended to help students and other listeners become intelligent, thoughtful members of their parishes (or other religious communities) and their world. Students, in particular, do not hear speakers in isolation; they presumably are also engaging in discussions in their classes, in other fora, and with their peers. (Indeed, I would argue that if a student hears only one speaker in her or his college career, then there are far more serious pedagogical issues at stake than the identity of that one speaker.) Within this educational process, the women's center is one contributor to the university's hosting a range of speakers.

Two sets of threads comprise the fabric of what it means for the women's center to help ensure that a range of perspectives is part of the university culture. The weft may be that the women's center should support the efforts of other units to bring speakers to campus, for each academic unit has an expertise that enables it to discern what women speakers are foremost in its field. But the warp is that the women's center is particularly charged to complement the speakers being brought in by other units. In order not to be redundant in

the university community, a women's center must look around, see what ideas and views are already being offered elsewhere on campus, and identify its particular contribution. However, because this process of complementing may appear to set the center against the agenda of other units within the university, it may be seen as provocative or even un-Catholic. And once again the women's center becomes "unruly."

Perceptions that a women's center is unruly for sponsoring a given speaker quickly embroil the center in controversy. One potential source of such controversy is that what some individuals judge to be a mainstream scholarly position, others judge to be provocative and even dangerous.<sup>6</sup> An additional complication arises from the fact that there are two potential sites of controversy: the subject matter of the lecture, and the reputation of the person who is speaking. Objections to speakers may arise from one or the other or both of these sites. In the first case, a title of a talk may spark controversy if it arouses concerns that aspects of the presentation may draw listeners' attention to questions about specific teachings of the Catholic magisterium. Yet a Catholic university needs to be able to tolerate such apparently unruly questioning among members of its community, both for its own sake as a university and for the Church's sake. The history of Catholicism includes instances where adjustments and clarifications have been made in recognition of new understandings and interpretations. If those within the church are not allowed to raise questions, such valuable developments are likely to be inhibited.<sup>7</sup>

The second case—where it is primarily the speaker, regardless of the subject on which she is speaking, that individuals find objectionable—gives rise to a somewhat different set of concerns. Here we need to be particularly vigilant not to impose litmus tests of orthodoxy. For while it is important not to deny the interconnectedness of any speaker's perspectives, it is entirely possible for an individual to have valuable intellectual insights in a particular academic area while still holding personal views contrary to Catholic teaching. And it is intellectually and morally reprehensible to reduce a complex human person to a position on one issue; a process of demonization has no place on a Catholic university campus. Should such a process begin to take place, the Women's Center can and should respond by articulating how the speaker meets the primary criterion that led to the invitation being issued: the speaker's quality of the mind.

Of course, claiming as a matter of principle the obligation to bring in speakers who may be viewed as controversial because of their analysis of complex, sometimes sensitive issues, carries with it the responsibility to ensure that the focus of the visit remains educational. Among ways of meeting that responsibility are providing the speaker in advance with information about her audience and its likely assumptions and expectations; having reading/discussion groups prior to the visit so that there is on campus a significant number of individuals who have actually read the speaker's works, and can speak to the specific strengths and weaknesses of that work when others may simply be responding to a speaker's reputation within a specific circle; ensuring ample opportunity for individuals and small groups to meet with the speaker both before and after the main presentation; sponsoring follow-up events to ensure that the conversation does not end with the speaker's comments, but continues as an integral part of the university community's discourse; and creating a strategic plan for publicizing the presentation, in coordination

with the university's office of public relations, so as to address in advance potential public relations problems. As was mentioned in the seminar, public relations problems are real, but they are just that—public relations issues—and ought not drive the academic mission of the university.

And, finally, as we consider the mission of the Catholic university and the Women's Center, it is critical that we not lose sight of their common ground. In addition to sharing a commitment to education, both are committed to issues of inclusion and of justice. And these are key areas where the analytical tools of feminism and Catholicism can profitably be used each by the other.

A women's center in a Catholic university is uniquely positioned to use Catholic social teachings to lend urgency as well as substantial analytical material to discussions of traditionally feminist issues such as pay equity for women staff and faculty, a child care center on campus, and family leave. So, for example, Catholics and feminists alike are called to respond to issues of economic class that may be damaging members of the university community. One of the great gifts that women staff at St. Thomas have given me is a window into their deep pain over how poorly respected they sometimes feel, how hurt they sometimes are by assumptions made about their educational backgrounds and intelligence and professionalism, and how dismissively they feel they are frequently treated. Such treatment must not go unchallenged, particularly at a Catholic university. And the ways in which salary differentials may contribute to this problem should remind us equally of the powerful Catholic teachings on work and economic justice for all, and of the results of a recent national survey called "Ask a Working Woman", in which "A full 94 percent of women questioned identified 'equal pay for equal work' as 'very important' [and] over a third said it wasn't currently provided in their jobs" (Goodman 9A). Certainly when a large number of women at a university experience poor treatment, the Women's Center needs to use its resources to help address how the intersections of issues of economic class and sex may be contributing to a chilly climate for this large segment.

While such concerns within Catholic universities ought not be the exclusive province of women's centers, they also ought not be the concerns of women's centers only at Catholic universities. In fact, this may be an area where women's centers at Catholic universities can make a particular contribution to the visions of women's centers nationally. Indeed, this example offers the valuable suggestion that perhaps there should be less anxiety about what makes Catholic universities different or unique in the sense of setting Catholic universities over and against other universities, and more attention to how Catholic universities can make particular contributions to both the church and higher education. It is only by being in constant dialogue with both institutions that we can bring to bear on each the most valuable insights of the other. Perhaps, then, the element that most clearly defines the Catholic university is paradoxically those spaces—like the women's center—that appear to be most unruly, because those are the spaces in which academia and Catholicism confront one another most directly, "even with hurricane winds."

## Notes

1. -This is one of the reasons why the Director of the Luann Dummer Center for Women is a tenured faculty member; though the Center is not covered by academic freedom, its director is, which provides certain protections that a staff member in the same situation would not have.
2. "-Of course, such attitudes exist in many areas of society, not just within the Catholic university, and specifically Catholic teaching on the nature of women can account for only a portion of the mistreatment that women at Catholic universities report. I do not maintain that there is more sexist treatment on Catholic universities, but that the church teachings may provide an assumption of authority and justification on the part of those engaging in sexist behaviors. Whether such attitudes are justified or not by church teachings, certain church teachings undoubtedly complicate efforts to address such behaviors.
3. -Chittister recently argued that regardless of how this issue may be resolved, the need for change within Roman Catholicism remains the same: "We can't have it both ways. Either women are different and must, therefore, be heard from out of their own experience, as subjects, not objects, as moral agents, not as moral minors. Or women have the same human, moral and intellectual acumen as men and, therefore, hearing from them is to be taken for granted" (10).
4. -Among the documents that might be available for study and reflection on this issue are "The Ordination of Women: An Exchange of Letters Between Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Donald Coggan of Canterbury" *Origins* 6:9, 1977), "Declaration on the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood, by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith" *Origins* 6:33, 1977), "Apostolic Letter on Ordination and Women" *Origins* 24:4, 1994), "Response to a 'Dubium' on Ordaining Women to the Ministerial Priesthood, by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith" *Origins* 25:24, 1995), and the Catholic Theological Society of America's Resolution regarding that "Responsum" *Origins* 27:5, 1997).
5. -One of the great pleasures I have as director is working with the Center's advisory board. These women represent a wonderful range of perspectives, and provide a constant mechanism for ensuring that the Center does not become excessively narrow in its programming.
6. -The case of Fr. Charles Curran provides an example of such divergent judgments. While the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith found Fr. Curran to hold positions "which violate the conditions necessary for a professor to be called a Catholic theologian" (AAUP 30), the Catholic Theological Society of America in December 1986 wrote that "On the spectrum of theological opinion today, Charles Curran's positions even regarding the points under dispute are found in the middle; moderate, nuanced, shared by a majority of well-known scholarly moral theologians" (AAUP 34). While it is

certainly possible for these statements to be true simultaneously, they do point out that the same scholarly work can be viewed by different groups as either unacceptable dissent or "responsible theological dissent" (AAUP 28).

7. -So, for example, Karol Wojtyla, before becoming John Paul II, wrote that "the structure, and beyond it the system of communities of a given society must be such as to allow the opposition that emerges from the soil of solidarity not only to express itself within the framework of the given community but also to operate for its benefit. The structure of a human community is correct only if it admits not just the presence of a justified opposition but also that practical effectiveness of opposition required by the common good and the right of participation" (286-87).

### Works Cited

AAUP Investigating Committee. "Academic Freedom and Tenure. The Catholic University of America." *Academe* Sept.-Oct. 1989:27-40.

Chittister, Joan, O.S.B. "Pentecost papacy would listen to women." *National Catholic Reporter*. Oct. 10, 1997. p. 10.

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Response to a 'Dubium' on Ordaining Women to the Ministerial Priesthood." *Origins* 25:401, 403.

Goodman, Ellen. "Equal pay tops work concerns of U.S. women" St. Paul Pioneer Press. Sept. 13, 1997. 9A.

Hesburgh, Theodore M., C.S.C. "Introduction: The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University." *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University*. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1994. pp. 1-12.

John Paul II. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. *Origins* 20:265-276.

———. "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis." *Origins* 24:49-52.

———. *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women*. Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1988.

Meara, Naomi M. "Diversity and Change: A View from the Margin." *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University*. Ed. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1994. pp. 199-208.

Noddings, Nel. *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Non-Belief*. NY: Teacher's College P, 1993.

Schuth, Katarina O.S.F. "Working Principles for Dialogue." For the Catholic Common Ground Initiative. Oct. 23, 1996.

Wojtyla, Karol. *The Acting Person*. (1969) Trans. Andrzej Potocki. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Pub., 1979.