

The Idea of a Social Work Department Within a Catholic University

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What is the idea of a Catholic university in the very best sense of the word? At the University of St. Thomas the Statement of Purpose indicates:

The University of St. Thomas is a comprehensive, co-educational, Catholic university. It seeks to develop morally responsible individuals who combine career competency with cultural awareness and intellectual curiosity Throughout, the university fosters in the student a tradition of service to the public welfare and an energetic, thoughtful approach to the challenges of contemporary life.

From the early history of the Catholic university there is a dual focus upon the desire to "help souls" and the desire to produce "good priests, good civic officials and good citizens" (O'Malley, 1993). In 1852 Newman stated that the essence of a university is the teaching and diffusion of universal knowledge and that the Church is necessary for its integrity. Newman indicates that the object of training students is that they may fulfill their positions in society as intelligent, capable, active members. The fruits of the teachers' labors are described as the educated person, characterized by the attributes of freedom, calmness, moderation and wisdom (Newman, [Clarendon Edition] 1976).

A Christian education further challenges us to go beyond intelligence and sophisticated reason to enter the real world of family love, friendship, respect, and civic responsibility (Hassel, 1983). This theme is repeated in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*:

The Christian spirit of service to others for the promotion of social justice is of particular importance for each Catholic university, to be shared by its teachers and developed in its students. The Church is firmly committed to the integral growth of all men and women. The Gospel, interpreted in the social teachings of the Church, is an urgent call to promote the development of those peoples who are striving to escape from hunger, misery, endemic diseases and ignorance

The Catholic university in the very best sense of the word then seems to include the joint products of disseminating universal knowledge and encouraging Christian responsibility. With this image of the Catholic university it becomes clear how the Social Work Department complements and fulfills a very important part of the university mission. Social work builds upon the liberal arts education to educate students to minister to the needs of individuals as they experience life's challenges.

Brian E. Daley, S.J., professor of theology at Weston School of Theology, states:

The work of a Catholic university, it seems to me, must be in large part a concern for the human implications of the knowledge acquired, for the relevance of teaching and study and research to the building of a more just and more unified human society ... a public commitment to "service," especially service of the poorest and most marginalized members of society; a programmatic interest in engaging faculty, students and staff both in a personal ethical conversion and in the "pastoral" work of social transformation.

The work of social transformation has great meaning as we face the problems of contemporary society. The Catholic university seeks to play a part in determining the solutions to life's greatest problems within the context of Christian teachings. Unfortunately, the need for transformation is becoming only too clear as people experience the devastation of violence in our communities. The social problems seem to be out of control. At this time it is crucial that universities educate individuals to address more competently the ills of our society.

With the goal of providing educated professionals, where do we begin? A basic principle of social work would indicate that rather than plan our own agenda we start where the student is, understanding their developmental needs. A social work educator at Catholic University, Sister M. Vincentia Joseph, has written extensively about the developmental needs that college students are facing while entering their university years (Joseph, 1987). The questioning of the young adult regarding identity and commitment to lifestyle and beliefs comes at a time when they have the opportunity to study philosophy and theology where the questioning is seen as a universal and normal part of becoming an educated adult. Timothy S. Healy, S.J., states that students come to us with two purposes, that is, "to learn and to grow." The special opportunities afforded the student within the Catholic university include the liberal arts education with special emphasis upon multiple courses in theology and philosophy.

The student entering the university with the goal of becoming a social worker fares well in the Catholic university. This is an ideal place of liberal and professional learning for the aspiring social work student to deal with her own spiritual issues and in so doing to be better prepared to deal with the complex spiritual issues of clients. This is true at both the undergraduate and M.S.W., levels; for example, the following serves as the mission statement of the M.S.W., program:

Through the teaching of social work knowledge and practice, the Master of Social Work program at The College of St. Catherine and the University of St. Thomas will prepare individuals to actualize the Judeo-Christian concept of social caring, to demonstrate the belief in the intrinsic value of all humankind, to serve those in need, and to act with conviction in advancing the principle of social justice and human rights.

Within the University of St. Thomas students are challenged to combine basic principles of social work with the spiritual dimension within themselves for the mutual benefit of the student and future clients.

The profession of social work is taking a new interest in spirituality. Arguments have long been made that spirituality should be included in social work education (Dudley and Helfgott, 1990; Joseph, 1988). Practicing social workers indicate that spiritual concerns often arise with clients, and they feel the need to help address these concerns (Joseph, 1988). Unfortunately, most report that they receive little or no education regarding spiritual and religious issues. It seems important to recognize these issues and to incorporate a spiritual orientation to supplement the bio-psycho-social model traditionally used in social work practice (Cornett, 1992).

Current literature indicates several implications for social work education, including the need for learning regarding the spiritual dimension of human behavior, religious diversity, practice applications and policy (Sheridan, et al., 1992; Netting, Thibault, and Ellor, 1990). The new "Curriculum Policy Statement of the Council on Social Work Education" (CSWE, 1992) requires that content on spirituality be included in practice courses and religion be included as an aspect of diversity in all social work courses. The Catholic university can be the model for the inclusion of spirituality and religion in social work education.

"The social work profession has strenuously avoided engaging religion as a part of the ubiquitous, cultural response to the human condition; but this avoidance has handicapped our effectiveness and compromised our ethics" (Hemert, 1994). Hemert states that to be effective social workers we must keep current in the disciplines of philosophy, literature, ethics, and religious studies, including pastoral counseling. There is much fear regarding the appropriate approach to helping clients deal with the spiritual dimension. Social workers may avoid this area because of their concerns regarding lack of comfort. Building upon the students' experience within their own theology education is a natural beginning.

The Department of Social Work at the University of St. Thomas is currently evaluating the option of developing a course titled "Social Work, Spirituality, and Religion" to more fully integrate this content into the curriculum. Several components are proposed by Dr. Kendra Garrett for inclusion within the course. These include, first, the view that spirituality and religion are human diversity issues and as such can be examined through ethnography assignments. Second, spirituality can be studied from a life-span development perspective as students study faith development. Third, spirituality and religion may be addressed as practice issues involving helping clients rediscover meaning in their lives. Fourth, spirituality and religion may be studied as social and political issues, understanding the values and beliefs of agencies with a religious base. Last, spirituality and religion can be seen as a self-awareness issue, so that social workers remain objective and nonjudgmental (Garrett, 1993).

Social work involves helping clients to make ethical decisions in their lives. All students have studied ethical principles as applied to decision making in philosophy and ethics class as well as "The Christian Theological Tradition." Building on the liberal arts education of students involves helping them further develop critical thinking skills as applied to client issues. Furthermore, students who strive to understand more fully the

options from the client's perspective will ask questions about how religion plays a part in the client's decision making process. Religion and cultural diversity have a major role in determining client's ethical principles and it is therefore important that these issues are discussed openly within the professional relationship.

Preparing students to address competently the complex questions of our times as professional social workers involves

self-awareness and an in-depth understanding of perspectives divergent from one's own. The Catholic university, with the commitment to Christian love and understanding, can provide excellent opportunities for this most important educational process. In *Journey Toward Fulfillment*, Joseph Connors states:

But what will matter most in the long run, as in every educational endeavor, is the sheer quality of the individual teachers and administrators the student encounters. Whether faculty members like it or not, they are role models, and their attitudes and values are powerfully influential, just as their professional skills are.

Those of us who have the privilege of teaching within the Catholic university have a tremendous responsibility to be role models for the new generation. It is a supreme act of hope:

Teaching is an act of giving intellectual birth, and through that act all of us acknowledge that the young are ours in trust but also that the future they represent is worth living and having, even though we will not share it. Students are to universities what children are to families, a gift on God's part and an act of hope on ours (Healy).

The hope that these students represent in a world that is greatly in need of transformation is further examined by Joseph Connors:

The many new programs that St. Thomas has developed in its last quarter-century, and particularly in its last dozen years, have of course enabled it to become involved in the life of the community more effectively than ever before. But throughout the College's history, men — and of late, women — trained in its classrooms have been bringing Christian teachings into the world, proving their love for it and rendering it a service.

Each discipline within the university seeks to educate students to be both more reasoned thinkers and responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to the larger community.

It seems clear that the place of a social work department within a Catholic university is a very dynamic conversation regarding knowledge and Christian responsibility. It would be the best of a Catholic university education that students are sent forth with knowledge and determination to make a difference in the lives of those less fortunate, working toward real society transformation. n

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