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CONFRONTING THE OBVIOUS: The Mission, Social Justice, and Humanism

Alfred North Whitehead once wrote that undertaking an analysis of the obvious is a difficult task.[1] Today I would like to invite you to the difficult task of exploring what we at Loyola often think of as obvious. If one walks around campus one will see in banners, photos, and sweatshirts phrases like "Catholic Humanism" and "Social Justice." In meetings I attend or in letters I receive, the phrase "social justice" used as if it were a self-evident truth. Humanism and social justice are phrases that are understood to be part of the life of Loyola University New Orleans.

But these experiences lead me to worry. Worry is part of my new job. I worry because one of the most fundamental responsibilities of a president is to articulate a vision for a university and then move to make the vision a reality. This responsibility has grown in importance today as there are many different ideas in our society about what it is to be a university.[2] This afternoon we celebrate examples of leadership among our faculty for teaching and research: the core of our existence. Today I would like to invite this community to a continuing and very fundamental reflection about these two key elements of our identity and mission. One might ask about "critical thinking." I would argue that critical thinking ought to be part of every university. The elements of Catholic humanism and social justice shape the heart of our knowledge and the substance of our critical thinking. The University is at a crucial moment in its history. Last Spring, the Board of Trustees adopted a new statement of our mission.[3] We are now working to shape the academic and student affairs agendas into a strategic plan in light

of our mission. So this seems to be an opportune moment for us to reflect on these most fundamental elements of Loyola's identity. I also think that the process of re-accreditation, which invites us to examine the outcomes for our students, is an examination that ought to take place in light of our mission.

Today I would like to begin by returning briefly to the theme of Catholic humanism. It is a rich theme that we at Loyola take to be a central hallmark of a Loyola education. It is a theme that has been central to the educational mission of the Society of Jesus. Indeed this semester I hope you will join in a lecture series that will examine aspects of humanism and Jesuit education. In our polarized society the term 'humanism' is often misunderstood and draws a variety of reactions. The humanistic tradition that guides us is set in the Christian faith. As such, this humanistic tradition forms a middle ground between Christian fundamentalism (Catholic or Protestant), which has no place for reason, and secular humanism, which allows no voice for religion. We are in the middle of center field.

Let me be clear that I do not think for a moment that I have *the* definitive views on issues of social justice or humanism. While I do have definite views, I think these are very rich topics. And, I do think it is important for me to raise these themes and questions as part of effort to maintain integrity in our institutional identity.

I. Catholic Humanism

To move forward to the theme of social justice I must first look to the idea of humanism. It is impossible to understand social justice, at least in the traditional intellectual life of Catholicism,

without rooting it in humanism. The language of justice can be confusing. It is used in many different contexts and the term can be interpreted in different ways. That is why I think it is important to situate the term "justice" within the broader context of humanism. Our understanding of humanism helps to clarify our use of the language of justice.

A central challenge to using the term humanism is that it can be specified in radically different ways. There are alternative humanistic traditions. They range from Catholic humanism to secular humanism, from the theistic humanism of the renaissance to the humanism of the Enlightenment which understood itself grounded in reason alone.[4] Because there are different ways to frame our understanding of humanism, opposing sets of views can validly claim to be humanistic. The fact that so many different and opposing views can claim to be humanistic leads to confusion in public discourse. It is why many people often assume a conflict between "secular humanism" and religious faith. It is, I think, one of the reasons that religious discourse in public life is often becomes fundamentalistic. The diversity of ways in which humanism can be understood often makes it incumbent on us to be clear about the humanistic tradition we, at Loyola, identify with.

The humanistic tradition, as it emerged in the Renaissance, began in distinction from the scholastic studies of theology. Humanism began as the study to ancient culture with a particular focus on literature. It also focused on the education of the whole person with the aim of promoting lives of civic virtue. Renaissance humanism was grounded in a positive view of human dignity and freedom, and these views were tied to the Christian, especially the Catholic, faith.

Loyola University's humanistic tradition is rooted in the Jesuit understanding that developed out of this renaissance humanism. We are shaped by a commitment to human dignity and a concern for the whole person. We are shaped by a moral inspiration of this humanistic tradition. We are, in the words of Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., concerned with what our students become and how they act.[5] This is a vision of the human that recognizes the power, and the limits, of the human intellect. Unlike many fundamentalist religious traditions this humanistic tradition is one that holds that reason and faith are not incompatible, because God is revealed in both creation and revelation. It is a humanistic tradition that recognizes the richness of human experience (cultures) so that no set of categories exhausts the mystery of the human.

It is not hard to understand why Jesuits would feel at home with this renaissance humanism. In a Jesuit vision, which emphasizes that God can be found in all things, the range of cultures and religious traditions become places where God can be found and where we can discover more about the mystery of what it is to be human. Ignatian humanism is grounded in a theocentric view of the world and understands that being human is more than being a rational maximizer or a tool maker. This is a view of the human that argues, as Karl Rahner did, that the human can only be properly understood in light of the infinite. It is a view of God and the human that is rooted in freedom. When God creates, God freely and God creates the human as a free being who can reject God. The Jesuit humanistic tradition understands the challenges of what it is to be a free being.[6]

If one begins by exploring the concept of humanism, soon one will be speaking the language of justice. Any humanistic tradition raises fundamental questions about how people

ought to live together. Theories of justice will vary based on the assumptions made about what it is to be human. A Marxist view of the human will lead to a very different theory of justice than a view of the human that begins with and emphasizes human individuality and liberty. So too a Catholic humanism will become the foundation to a view of justice. As we, at Loyola, think about measuring the outcomes of education, the words of Father Kolvenbach are helpful. He has been clear that to educate the "whole person" in the Jesuit tradition of humanism, is to educate them with an awareness of society and culture. The Jesuit graduate ought to have a well educated solidarity with the surrounding world.[7]

II. Justice

Often when people start to speak the language of justice I am reminded of the story of the Tower of Babel. Justice can be used by lawyers, philosophers, theologians with very different assumptions. Even as a formal idea, justice can be defined in different ways. For Aristotle justice meant treating equals equally.[8] (The difficulty lies in determining what aspect is being considered.) For Justinian the formal idea of justice consisted in giving each person what was due to them.[9] Despite these formal differences one thing is clear. When the language of justice is deployed we are not talking about the language of charity. We are talking about what is owed to someone or what can be claimed by them. The claim is based not on the kindness, or the largesse of others but on one's status –as owner, as citizen, as human being.

The complications with the language of justice do not end with the formal concept of justice itself. Beyond the formal concept there are different species of justice. We speak of

commutative justice, the justice between persons, when we talk about instruments such as contracts or agreements. We speak of criminal justice when we talk of the justice between society and those who harm it. There is administrative or general justice in how a society is organized. From the view point of general justice we would say that it was unjust to deny the vote to citizens simply because of race or sexuality. And we speak of distributive justice when we address how commonly owned resources are to be distributed within a group. Not only are there these different species of justice there are also different ways that each can be specified. (E.g., distributive justice). It is no wonder that the justice language, when used, can become complicated and confusing.

III. Social Justice in the Catholic Tradition:

The language of justice in the Catholic tradition is founded on a notion of the dignity of the human person. The human person is the fundamental object of concern in the tradition of Catholic Social thought.[10] In this tradition the language of the human person and human dignity is fundamentally tied to the idea of community. And so the language of justice is inextricably bound the language of community and the dignity of the person. (This tradition of justice will be distinct from atomistic accounts of many modern philosophers.)

Why is this tradition so tied to the relationship of human person, human dignity, and community? The fundamental assumption is that the human person is made in the image of God (imago dei). This language, based in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, was developed by theologians and philosophers in the early Church and through the middle ages.[11] One theme that

runs through the development of the language of the *imago dei* is a Trinitarian understanding of God.[12] As God is fundamentally communal in God's own nature, so too human life, made in the image of God, is communal.

The notion of the *imago dei* is a link between the ideas of the humanities and social justice. This communitarian view of reality –God and the human – then leads this tradition to examine the political, social, and economic structures of our lives together. Embedded in the concepts of the imago dei and human dignity is the concept of the common good.

How so? The language of common good is also slippery. Most Americans would understand common good to mean the good of the majority (the will of the majority). But that interpretation would be incorrect in this tradition. The notion of common good refers to those conditions that are necessary for human flourishing. Pope John XXIII defined the common good as "the sum total of conditions of social living, whereby persons are enabled more fully and readily to achieve their own perfection."[13] Social justice represents a concern that a society be organized in such a way that enables its members to have access to these basic conditions.[14] In *Pacem et Terris* John XXIII said that "in our time the common good is chiefly guaranteed when personal rights and duties are maintained."[15] The idea of social justice is a cross, one could argue, between general justice and distributive justice. The object of social justice is how a society is organized with respect to the common good. The language of common good tries to focus on those conditions that human beings need to flourish as human beings. One key concern is that people have access to these basic conditions of human flourishing. So when we use the language of social justice, we are, in a sense, using some idea of distributive justice. But, we are

also using ideas of administrative justice insofar as every member of a society has access to these basic goods.

It should also be noted that the language of social justice, indeed the whole of the Catholic Social tradition, does not hold that there is any one way that societies should be organized. It is open to different cultures and histories. But, it does argue that we should be asking the questions and having arguments about how to affect a social order that meets these basic needs.

IV. Implications for Loyola

What do these fundamental themes of our identity – humanism and social justice – mean for those of us who are at Loyola University today? I think first and foremost we must live these questions. (It is actually less important than answering them.) If one uses these questions as lenses to see the world then it is clear that the world will be far from clear. People may share commitments to human dignity, and ask questions of social justice, but arrive at very different views/judgments on what should be done when addressing any problem. I think that it is fundamental for living our identity that Loyola be a place where these questions can be asked and argued. This commitment also means that our students can expect opportunities not only to become involved in the world and its moral issues but they can also expect opportunities to reflect and argue about what they encounter and what they think. Third, these commitments would invite/encourage faculty teaching and research that addresses some of the pressing problems of our day –e.g., environmental studies, commitments of the Law School.

A fourth implication for Loyola is to ask how do these commitments to humanism and justice affect the way the University proceeds internally as well as shape the way Loyola impacts the society around us. For a university the commitment to humanism and justice ought to lead to several elements in its culture. As a university we will have, on every question, a range of opinions and views. The commitment to humanism and justice means, I think, that we can assume that we will proceed with civility as a minimum and we will hold out charity as a goal. We believe in argument and disagreement. We have an opportunity to be a model for a society that seems to have lost its sense of civility and disagreement. Fifth, the commitment to justice also means, I think, that we will proceed by acting transparently. That is, we will be public about rules and procedures and operate according to them. To use an analogy, we will have rules of the game and we will live by them. We may not like all the rules of the game, but we will live by them and if we change them, which we surely will as we evolve, we will vet the changes publically.

I want to be very clear that the argument I am making firmly roots the concept of social justice in the tradition of humanism. Social justice, in our tradition, ought not be reduced to social service outreach. It poses a set of questions and sensibilities that are to be explored and argued about. We must also remember that this tradition of social justice is grounded in a view of the human which invites to explore every aspect of human life. Social justice is rooted in a sense of human solidarity which touches all the dimensions of our lives –the glorious and the tragic– and invites reflection and celebration on every dimension the human experience. In the intellectual tradition that shapes Loyola University the work to create a more just society does not

only happen through organizations like the Gillis-Long Center, or the Boggs Center. Our reflections on the questions of justice and humanism are deepened by our studies of the arts, music, and the sciences. They help us to better experience and know the human condition and to imagine a world different from the one we inhabit. The work of justice is part of a wider project of creating a world more humane and more just. In the tradition of our mission, the intellectual engagement with justice is an engagement with all that is human and the engagement of the human is an engagement of the divine. It is why the Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote:

...the just man justices;

Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;

Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –

Christ– for Christ plays in ten thousand places,

Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his

To the Father through the features of our faces."[16]

As we begin a new semester, we renew the great work of this University. It is a work that involved all of us – in the classroom, in our research, in our work that supports and makes possible the conditions for teaching and research to take place. We are all involved –faculty, staff, and administrators– in the work of ideas. Ideas help to shape our students, ourselves, and our society. As we live in a world that knows for too much horror and devastation I can think of few more exciting and important places to be. A place where we can argue and think about a world more humane. A world more divine.

Thank you.

NOTES

1. "Familiar things happen, and mankind does not bother about them. It requires a very unusual mind to undertake an analysis of the obvious." A. N. Whitehead

2. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

3. See http://www.loyno.edu/welcome/mission.html

4. Ronald Modras, *Ignatian Humanism,* (Chicago: Loyola University Press), p. xv

5. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., "The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education", Santa Clara University, 6 October 2000, #III.

6. John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

7. Kolvenbach, III (a)

8. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1129a.

9. *The Institutes of Justinian*, trans. Thomas Sandars (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970) 1.1., p. 5.

10. Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, #76.

11. See John XXIII, *Mater et Magister* #65; Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,* # 26.

12.Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, # 12.

13. *Mater et Magister* # 65.

14. Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris*, March 19, 1937, #51.

15. John XXIII, *Pacem et Terris* #60.

16. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire"