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Cultivating Sacramentality through Administrative Work: Guidance from St. Benedict on Being a Catholic Department Chair

Rodger Narloch, Ph.D.

Abstract

One dilemma encountered by department chairs and administrators at Catholic colleges and universities is how to respect the pluralistic religious views of the faculty while being faithful to one's own and the institution's Catholic tradition. The Rule of St. Benedict offers guidance that can result in deepening the respect for all individuals by welcoming all as Christ, adapting to the temperament of the individual, and listening with the ear of one's heart. Through these practices one may cultivate a sacramental vision of the world in oneself and within the academic culture of the department or institution, creating an environment in which all can feel valued.

What does a Catholic department chair look like? When I was appointed chair of the psychology department at my institution, I was initially overwhelmed with all of the pragmatic elements of the job: setting department meeting agendas, crafting course schedules, reviewing the ubiquitous paperwork, etc. I am a lifelong Catholic and I work at a Catholic university, but those personal characteristics did not seem particularly relevant to the pressing departmental tasks at hand. My job was to help make the department run as smoothly as possible. However, it began to occur to me that my Catholic beliefs and the Catholic tradition of my institution should not be irrelevant to my service as department chair. Yet I was uncertain how to integrate them.

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The Culture

The field of psychology has a long history of not being particularly friendly to religion and spirituality. For example, Freud thought of religion as means by which people avoided the anxiety of death.¹ Later, B. F. Skinner and the behavioral psychologists disregarded anything other than observable behavior as a reliable component of psychology worthy of study, leaving the spiritual realm as irrelevant.² Although some notable psychologists such as Jung³ and Maslow⁴ certainly incorporated spiritual elements into their theories, the spiritual elements of these and other theories were not well-accepted within the field because of psychology's emphasis on gaining knowledge through the scientific method. Therefore, even when religion and spirituality are studied within psychology, they are typically studied as objects, as phenomena that may help explain behavior, but there is often either an explicit or implicit suggestion that these religious or spiritual elements are not themselves "real." Instead, they are viewed as a concoction that can motivate people to behave in certain ways, perhaps ways that seem counter to common sense.

Given this historical lack of friendliness between religion and my discipline of psychology, I suspect that most professionals educated in graduate psychology departments (a) were drawn to the field because it does not rely on or even pay much credence to religious or spiritual matters; (b) lost their faith as a result of the culture within the field; or (c) learned that, if they retained their faith, it ought not be expressed or applied to their professional work. As a result, in my experience, it is not uncommon for academic psychologists to be atheist or agnostic, even within religiously affiliated institutions. For those who do subscribe to religious beliefs, it can be difficult to fully embody and live out one's beliefs in a culture that marginalizes their relevance.

¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961; original work published 1927).

² B. F. Skinner, *About Behaviorism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976; original work published 1974).

³ Claire Dunne, *Carl Jung: Wounded Healer of the Soul: An Illustrated Biography* (London: Parabola Books, 2000).

⁴ Abraham Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964).

The Task

Given this academic context, I did not see the relevance of my Catholic faith for my role as department chair. Although I maintained deeply held religious beliefs, I knew the culture of my academic discipline would suggest compartmentalizing those beliefs. In fact, I often joked that when the day came that I no longer wished to be department chair I could simply suggest beginning our department meeting with a prayer; then I would soon be ousted from my position by my colleagues—and perhaps rightfully so, given such an overt and potentially alienating act. So if being overtly Catholic would be unproductive (or even damaging), how was I to honestly live out my Catholic worldview within this role?

What I have come to learn is not how to be a *Catholic department chair*, a phrase that suggests one ought to implement overtly Catholic policies or practices in the department. Such a view may very well require opening department meetings with a prayer or forcing things Catholic into the department and the discipline. To me, this way never felt right as it smacked of imposition and alienation, thereby disrespecting both the culture of my discipline and the personal views of my non-Catholic departmental colleagues (of which there are many). At first, the alternative to this approach was to simply ignore my Catholic beliefs while in this role.

Instead, I have learned a manner of integration that allows me not just to respect, but also to learn from, the diversity of individuals and ideas in my discipline. In short, I have learned how to *be a department chair as a Catholic*, approaching the position by using my Catholic worldview to guide how I interact with my departmental colleagues. I have learned that chairing is much less about tasks and procedures than it is about being in relationship with one another. This relates to the platitude, “Everyone has a story.” There is something completely unique and completely precious about each person’s story because it is, in fact, solely that person’s. Principles of Catholicism have helped me both see and act upon this idea. Thus, rather than checking my beliefs at the door of the departmental world and thereby living a masquerade, I have been able to live out my beliefs more genuinely and cultivate relationships with my colleagues that are based on a sincere wholeness of myself, and an honest respect of their wholeness. Therefore, my Catholic beliefs have been an indispensable source of strength and guidance, particularly and especially within my role as department chair, not apart from it.

But what about Catholicism provided such guidance? In a faith rich with axioms, principles, commandments, and so forth, the ones I have found most helpful come from the Benedictine tradition, the religious

order that founded the educational institution at which I work. Written in the sixth century by St. Benedict, the 73-chapter Rule of St. Benedict reads as a manual for establishing and running monasteries, with chapters on topics such as “Summoning the Brothers for Counsel,” “Distribution of Goods According to Need,” and “Community Rank.”⁵ Beyond the concrete practicalities, however, there is a particular spirituality implicit in the Rule which has defined the central values of the Benedictine order for centuries, values such as hospitality, community, and stability. Yet the Rule can also provide guidance for how all people can live in and sustain a community in Christ. There are three particular elements of the Rule upon which I, as department chair, have attempted to ground my relationships with my colleagues.

1. Welcome all as Christ.

The first guidance comes from Chapter 53 of the Rule, which states, “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me’ (Matt 25:35).”⁶ This statement is often used as the basis for Benedictine hospitality. Yet it also helps remind us of the sacramental vision of Catholicism, that each person is a manifestation of God’s love. According to St. Benedict, we are to see each guest or each stranger as if they were Christ and treat them accordingly. At first glance, this statement is more about how to interact with people we do not know rather than with the colleagues in our department with whom we are quite familiar. However, in my experience, the message of this statement is probably more pertinent for those already in our acquaintance. When we meet a stranger, we have little information upon which to base the character or nature of that individual. Perhaps we may be a bit swayed by our own biases based on gender, age, or race, for instance, but by and large, the stranger is a relatively blank slate to us. Therefore, welcoming the stranger as Christ may pose a challenge, but it would seem plausible that we could train ourselves to view each new person in our lives with the default perspective that they are Christ.

Now, consider taking this statement to heart regarding people we interact with on a regular basis. Unlike the stranger with a relatively blank slate, the people who regularly inhabit our lives have texture. We

⁵ Timothy Fry, et al., eds., *The Rule of St. Benedict in English* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

know their behavioral tendencies, their preferences, and their demeanors. We also have explicit memories of them. If we are drawn to or have something in common with those behaviors, preferences, and demeanors, or if we have had positive encounters with the person, it may be easy to see him or her as Christ. Essentially, it can be easy to see the beauty in those we love or admire. Consider, however, the people we know who have behaviors, preferences, and demeanors that do not resonate with us, or who bring us negative memories. In such situations, I would argue that not only is it more difficult to welcome and treat that person as Christ, but it is also more difficult than compared to a stranger who is devoid of that personal texture. Thus, it may be those with whom we prefer not to interact who are the most difficult to “welcome” as Christ.

All parts of our lives are probably filled with such individuals with whom we regularly interact, though we do not particularly love or admire them. This is likely true of our neighborhoods or the communities in which we live. In these settings, I suspect we often simply choose not to interact frequently with those individuals; thus, we are not often confronted with how we are or are not treating them as Christ. In our workplace, however, it often becomes impossible to simply avoid or ignore such individuals. This is precisely why the Benedictine principle of welcoming all as Christ is so important to remember as a department chair. Our colleagues may not be the particular people we would choose to be around, yet they are the people with whom we spend large portions of our lives and people with whom we need to work to accomplish significant shared goals.

As a department chair, I have struggled to remain true to this vision: I am not always able to see and then interact with each of my colleagues as Christ. Nevertheless, making continual efforts to see my colleagues in this way (even if I fail) has made all the difference in my attitude toward them, toward my job as chair, and toward my own faith journey. I have found that the same people who challenge me the most are those who I have come to truly appreciate the most, thanks to the richer faith journey I have experienced because of them. I only hope that my efforts in welcoming them as Christ have helped them to be accepted and appreciated in our educational community.

2. Adapt to each person's temperament.

A second item from the Rule of St. Benedict provides instruction for leaders. In Chapter 2, in which Benedict wrote about the qualities that an abbot must possess, he stated that the abbot must “serve a

variety of temperaments, coaxing, reproving, and encouraging them as appropriate. He must accommodate and adapt himself to each one's character."⁷ For me as a department chair, this advice has been indispensable. Not only does everyone have a story, but everyone also has a particular temperament and character. To attempt to treat each person identically would likely have disastrous results. Clearly, each person needs to be dealt with in a way that is fair and just, but each also needs to be treated in a manner particular to his or her own temperament and character.

In reality, of course, some people are easier to work with than others. Take, for example, a colleague I will call "Sam." Sam often expresses ideas that are somewhat counter to the culture of the department or the institution. Furthermore, Sam has a rather blunt confrontational style and can quickly become impatient and angered. When working with Sam, colleagues, myself included, respond in different ways. Sometimes the response is anger, either directed toward Sam or suppressed, where it can fester in hiding before reappearing later. At other times, people simply dismiss Sam and Sam's ideas, often acting as if the expressed perspective didn't even exist. Personalities like Sam's can threaten a leader's authority and cause great disruptions within the group.

Catholicism implores us to respect the dignity of each person. Respect is not earned or conditional; rather it is a function of simply being. If we envision each person as a manifestation of God's love in the world, then each person ought to be respected. Furthermore, they ought to be respected not *despite* their temperament or character, but respected *for* their temperament or character because those are part of what makes each of us unique, beautiful individuals. If I tried to avoid, ignore, or dismiss Sam because of his temperament, I would also miss seeing an intelligent and passionate person who is deeply committed to his field and his students in a way that has challenged me to become a better educator.

Referring back to the "each person has a story" platitude, I think the power of the statement comes in reminding us that people's behaviors or attitudes, which can sometimes rub us the wrong way, are often rooted in historical or current life circumstances of which we may be unaware. Often the life circumstances at the root of the behavior we find objectionable are filled with pain and vulnerability. Although I could speculate about the roots of Sam's temperament, I do not know his story and, quite frankly, it should not matter whether I know it or

⁷ Ibid., 24.

not. My respect for Sam's dignity should not be dependent upon anything other than that Sam is. If I am to truly respect Sam's dignity, I must recognize his temperament and character as well as the vulnerability that may be at their root. If I instead treat Sam's temperament as a problem to be dealt with or solved, I am ignoring what makes Sam the unique individual he is; I am wishing he were someone else rather than valuing the person. Treating Sam as a problem would be antithetical to my quest to live out my Catholic faith within my role as department chair.

3. Listen with the ear of your heart.

In the previous section I noted that the abbot as leader of the monastery, and thereby the chair as leader of the department, is called by St. Benedict to "accommodate and adapt himself to each one's character."⁸ While he does not provide a guidebook for relating to certain temperaments in prescribed ways, St. Benedict does provide a guiding principle, which is the third element of the Rule. In the prologue to the Rule, St. Benedict commands us to listen with the ear of our hearts.⁹ In academia, we are typically trained to listen with a critical ear. We carefully dissect, analyze, and critique statements to determine how we can argue against them. We listen with an attitude of judgment and critique. Listening with the ear of our heart suggests, instead, that we hear individuals with a sense of openness, respect, and wholeness. It requires more than just listening to their statements or arguments. It requires listening to the values, motivations, and emotions that are embedded in their statements and arguments. In short, we must listen holistically, respecting the entirety of the person rather than just the words they are saying.

When we listen in this manner, we hear people and their ideas for what they are and value them for what they are, rather than trying to deny them and change them to fit our position. This can do two things. First, it grants more respect and acceptance of the speaker, thereby increasing the odds that they will be open and potentially transformed by the interaction. Second, listening with the ear of the heart opens up the listener, who can then learn from and be transformed by the speaker.

⁸ Ibid., 24.

⁹ Ibid., 15.

Retired Minnesota judge Elizabeth Hayden spoke of the transformative effect of being listened to in this manner.¹⁰ She reflected on the influence of the Benedictine nuns on her own professional development when she was a student at the College of St. Benedict. She communicated that the monastics “simply listened to her” and allowed her to think out loud rather than trying to influence her. But, paradoxically, influence her is what they did. Through their modeling, they taught Judge Hayden how to listen with the ear of her heart. The judge further reflected the value of this lesson in her professional life, stating, “The more I listened... the more I understood people.” She was told by a Benedictine sister that, “You don’t need to develop patience; you need to develop understanding. Then you don’t have to tolerate and be patient; you simply understand people.” The implication was that if one listens and understands another, the need for patience with that person evaporates. Understanding conveys a deeper sense of support, a truer sense of welcoming the person as Christ, than patience; and listening is the key to understanding. With this sense of support and understanding, conditions are in place for transformation to occur.

Thus, listening with the ear of your heart affirms others, allowing them a greater opportunity to bring forth their true voices. If we are to respect the dignity of each person, Catholic Social Thought instructs us to create the conditions under which each person can become most fully developed.¹¹ Listening in a manner that is accepting of others allows them the opportunity to grow in the ways that are authentic to them.

The beauty of listening with the ear of our hearts is that the process has the potential to transform ourselves as well as others. Such listening facilitates the flourishing of the other while providing opportunities for self-enrichment because it does not pit our own needs or perspectives against those of another. As I learned to listen to my colleagues, I grew in compassion. I thought less often about how someone could hold a view so different from mine or how I could get others to adopt my way of thinking. Instead, I began to see people more fully for who they were. Furthermore, as I started to better understand and accept people, I started learning more about them, the world, and even myself. The greatest transformation of listening in this manner may have occurred in me; I can only hope that through my change in per-

¹⁰ E. J. Dionne, Jr., et al., “Faith and Public Service,” College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University McCarthy Center Events. Video archives, March 22, 2011, <http://www.csbsju.edu/McCarthy-Center/Events/Video-Archives.htm>.

¹¹ Bernard F. Evans, *Lazarus at the Table: Catholics and Social Justice* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006).

spective, others may feel more welcomed and supported, leading to their own flourishing.

Through these three principles of St. Benedict I learned how to be a department chair as a Catholic. Furthermore, I feel I have become a better department chair. While I hope my colleagues agree with the latter, I suspect very few of them have much awareness that these Catholic Benedictine principles have guided my performance as chair. So, I have been able to sincerely live out my Catholic faith within my role as department chair, but without alienating my non-Catholic colleagues.

A Broader Scope

Because these guiding Benedictine principles focus on relationships in a broad sense rather than just department chairs' relationships with their departmental colleagues, the principles are relevant to other responsibilities of chairs. For example, department chairs typically continue to teach and mentor students, facets of the position to which these same Benedictine principles can apply. In fact, one of my most successful teaching moments stems from such application. A former student who I will call "Kim" was enrolled in my 8:00 a.m. research methodology course. For the first three weeks of the course, she portrayed characteristics of the quintessential sullen, disengaged student. She rarely paid attention, nearly fell asleep in class, never participated in or asked questions outside of class, and had a perpetual scowl on her face. During one class session students complete computer-based statistical analyses and interpret the results. As the students worked individually on their statistical problem sets, several students asked the same question. Sensing that there was general confusion about this particular issue, I asked the class to stop what they were doing and pay attention while I gave a five-minute impromptu lecture on the issue. After asking repeatedly if there were any questions, I told them to continue working on their problems. About a minute later, Kim raised her hand. When I came over to help, she proceeded to ask me the very same question I had just spent five minutes explaining. When I asked what part of the lecture she wanted me to clarify, she admitted that she had not paid attention to any of it! She was clearly embarrassed and seemed to be readying herself for a speech about life lessons. And, at that moment, every fiber of the teacher in me wanted to oblige.

Instead, I took a deep breath and reminded myself to welcome her as Christ, adapt to her temperament, and listen with the ear of my heart. As graciously as I could, I proceeded to help her understand the statistical problem. Without actually knowing her story, I remembered that she had one, as do we all. I tried to be accepting of this person, even if what she was asking was beyond what many teachers would consider reasonable. Throughout the rest of the semester, Kim asked more questions, engaged better with course content, her classmates, and me, and ultimately received a high grade in the course. After that course, Kim asked me to be her academic adviser and went on to assist me and other colleagues with various research projects. She is now in graduate school in psychology. I am convinced that if I had delivered the life-lesson speech at that moment, I would have lost Kim for the semester. She would have quit caring about the course. As her adviser, I later learned that her parents had divorced just prior to that semester and, as a result, she was not receiving familial financial support. Not only was she dealing with the stress of her parents' divorce, she was getting up at 4:30 a.m. each morning to work a second job to help fund her education. I would have missed this story, and a young woman would have been denied the support to flourish if I had acted on impulse rather than let Catholic Benedictine principles guide my interaction.

I recount Kim's story not to suggest that every teacher should accommodate every student's request. Similarly, a department chair should not give in to the requests of every faculty member. Rather, we need to recognize that each person does indeed have a story, typically one ripe with vulnerabilities. We also need to recognize our own vulnerabilities that stem from our stories.

Conclusion

In my teaching, as with my work as department chair, I was unfortunately a good student of the culture of my discipline, perhaps even the culture of academia as a whole. I learned to check my religious beliefs at the metaphorical academic door; I learned to analyze and critique others and their arguments; I learned to deny how certain destructive behaviors or philosophies of mine stemmed from my deepest vulnerabilities and insecurities. I am now in the process of learning how to transform my previous instincts with the guidance of St. Benedict by welcoming others as Christ, adapting to each person's temperament, and listening with the ear of my heart. Adopting this perspective is providing me a path by which I can live out my faith within my occupation in a way that facilitates

my sense of wholeness and integrity. These principles have also allowed me to experience a sense of awe in the beauty of the uniqueness of each of my colleagues and students, rather than becoming frustrated that they were not as I had initially wanted them to be.

In this way, a department chair who follows these Benedictine principles has the potential to impact the culture of the departmental faculty and students. If a department chair creates conditions where the faculty members feel welcomed, accepted for their temperaments, and listened to, the faculty may experience greater wholeness and integration. Nurturing these characteristics among faculty can create the conditions for further transformation, where faculty welcome, accept the temperaments of, and listen with the ear of the heart to their students.