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The Poor Will Always Be among You: Poverty, Education and the Catholic Ideal

Francis Campbell

Introduction

Poverty remains a major issue in today's world. As a Catholic university, St Mary's has a duty to stimulate and engage in discussion about how we can work to eliminate poverty, and my paper will be reflecting on St Mary's as a 'case study' of what it might look like for a Christian institution of higher education to contribute to that important goal. So I am delighted that we have been able to join with Tearfund and Caritas to stage a conference and to produce this book. I am also delighted that we practised what we preach by ensuring that part of the registration fee for the conference went to the Riverbank Trust, a local charity which works with vulnerable single mums and their families in Richmond.¹

A preference for the poor

My starting point must be the first half of my title, which will be familiar to you as the words spoken by Jesus to some of his disciples when Mary Magdalene anointed him with oil, not long before his crucifixion. His disciples were indignant, because they felt she had disobeyed Jesus's instructions to sell luxury items in support of the poor. They regarded her use of expensive perfume as a waste and counter to his teaching. Yet Jesus admonished them by saying, 'You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me' (Jn 12.8). Jesus was not, of course, intending to be dismissive of the poor. He continually spoke out in support of the poor and famously said it was easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Lk. 18.25).

His teachings are responsible for the Church having an explicit preference for the poor. That is something that the current Pope is, of course, extremely concerned about. As he has said, the Catholic Church should be 'a poor Church for the poor'. He used

¹ See Ellie Hughes, 'Poverty and Dehumanization', in this book.

that phrase to demonstrate his concerns about stories concerning the lavish lifestyles of some members of the Church hierarchy, which he believed were serving to alienate the faithful. As a consequence, Pope Francis has been determined to adopt a more visibly austere approach, eschewing big apartments and most recently using a Fiat to get around New York rather than the Popemobile. Some have attacked those actions as political stunts. They are certainly intended to send out a political message – but I would not dismiss them as stunts. Rather, those actions are important symbols which push us to examine how we behave and live, and that means each of us.

As I will come on to later, the Pope's warning about the alienation caused by extravagance should resonate with those of us involved in education, and higher education in particular.

Putting God first

So concern for the poor and the need to relate to the poor is absolutely embedded in the DNA of the Catholic Church. Jesus was not signalling indifference to the poor when he referred to them as always being with us. The point he was making was captured in what he said next: 'You will not always have me' (Jn 12.8). His message was that our first duty is to love and serve God. How is that relevant to our discussion about poverty, education and the Catholic ideal?

Poverty, education and the Catholic ideal

First, I would say it is highly relevant in the context of the UK and some other Western countries which have witnessed a trend of rising secularism in recent years. Many Catholic educational institutions founded in such pluralistic societies face the temptation or indeed the pressure to blend into secular societal norms rather than to promote their distinctiveness. That temptation, that pressure, is greater in societies that have become hostile or indifferent to Christianity and unsupportive of the benefit that faith-based institutions bring to the wider community.

Material and professional pressures

As the education system places increased emphasis on professional metrics and academic standards, as funding is increasingly tied to performance in league tables and as students are turned into consumers by a system of fees, the focus of schools and universities is inevitably drawn towards the daily grind and the demands from meeting statutory targets and material expectations. The space for attention relating to the core gospel-centred identity of these institutions becomes squeezed. As a result, a number of Catholic educational bodies have decided to weaken their religious affiliation. However, that seems to me a betrayal of their history and purpose. Catholic schools and universities should not just hang on to their core identity; it should be their central foundation. It is a strength upon which to build, not a burden to be cast aside.

The Catholic ideal

In November 2015, Catholic academic leaders gathered in Rome for the Congregation for Catholic Education's World Congress on Catholic Education to explore the role of Catholic identity in today's Catholic schools and universities. In a world where educators can be focused on university rankings, athletic team competitiveness and the future monetary gain of students, we discussed how Catholic institutions provide parents and students with a holistic education that is focused on developing character.

As I have seen at St Mary's University, focusing on Catholic identity can strengthen Catholic schools and universities, enabling them to better serve their pupils and students, better serve society and more actively engage in public debate. So what does a Catholic educational institution look like? And how does it engage with the issue of poverty?

Catholic education rooted in the poor

To answer those questions, let us begin by considering the origins of Catholic education in this country – a story in which St Mary's played, and continues to play, an important and influential role.

The Catholic Church was the first provider of schools and universities in England, but the Reformation saw significant upheaval in the centuries following. It was not until the nineteenth century that there was a significant formal expansion of Catholic education in England, largely in response to the wave of Catholic immigrants entering English towns and cities from Catholic Ireland. In 1847, a unique partnership was agreed with the State, and the Catholic Poor-School Committee was established by the Bishops of England and Wales to focus on the promotion of Catholic elementary education for this growing – largely poor Catholic – population.

Since the Church has always viewed education as vital to the formation and development of the whole person, the Catholic Bishops in England decided that educating the poor was to be the Catholic community's first priority. They even put the creation of schools for the Catholic community ahead of building churches, often using those schools in the early days as the place for worship for the parish.

The establishment of Catholic schools inevitably made teacher training a priority, and so a number of teacher training colleges were established. St Mary's, established in 1850, is one of the oldest. In keeping with the Catholic missionary tradition, which continues to play an absolutely vital role in educating the poor in all parts of the world, St Mary's was originally built on the labours of six French priests who arrived in England on a mission to teach the poor. Since then, St Mary's has sent generations of teachers out into the schools of England and more widely. It remains absolutely central to the mission of our university.

Open, accessible, diverse – and Catholic

So a concern to educate the poor has always lain at the heart of the Catholic ideal of education. For that reason, the issue of accessibility is a critical aspect of the identity of

Catholic schools and universities. They are not intended to be elitist or exclusive. They are intended to be comprehensive, open to all.

At St Mary's, we have a community of nearly 7,000: about 5,000 undergraduates, 1,000 postgraduates and just under 1,000 staff on a beautiful fifty-acre campus by the banks of the Thames at Twickenham in south-west London.² An important part of our story is that only a small minority of our students and staff are practising Catholics. Like other universities, we have on our books large numbers who are of other faiths or of no faith. We have the utmost respect for all faiths and a very strong belief that our community – in particular its intellectual rigour – is enhanced by the presence of people who come from different traditions.

Nonetheless, you may ask how an institution can claim to be Catholic if most of the people inside it do not belong to the Catholic faith. The answer is that the Catholic nature of our university is not located in any individual or groups of individuals but in the general ethos of the university – the 'spirit' of the place. Many people – staff, students and visitors – remark on the powerful community spirit that is present in St Mary's. No doubt that comes in part from our size, our beautiful location and the fact that we have all our facilities on one site, but I think there is more to it than that. Part of the strength of community life at St Mary's stems from the core Catholic foundation that recognizes the intrinsic dignity of every human person. That is what underpins our commitment to ensuring that everyone who enters our university feels included on an equal basis.

Another key aspect of our Catholic ethos is the emphasis on offering a service to the wider world and a determination to stand up for justice, fairness and ethical values. That ethos informs the direction and focus of our work. It runs through everything we do – from sport through to education.

Now, in saying that, I should stress that we are not a seminary. We are an autonomous institution. We value academic freedom, independent thought and a diverse but inclusive community, but we are motivated by a desire to develop rounded students through a philosophy that can be traced back to Cardinal Newman's vision of a university education which reunites intellect and virtue.³ It is that emphasis on the whole person – the mind, body and spirit – which creates the community spirit of St Mary's and holds a powerful appeal to students past, present and future.

Furthermore, we are guided by our Catholic identity to raise the tone of intellectual debate and to pursue work that is ultimately designed to make the world a more just, peaceful and compassionate place. That is a very deliberate decision. If an institution truly wants to retain its Catholic identity, then it needs to decide that Catholic values will underpin its activity and work, and work out how they can be given practical expression.

It is a philosophy that runs through everything we do, not just on the academic side but also in the way we run the institution. For example, we are mindful that our students and ancillary staff find it hard to make ends meet, particularly in times of

² Numbers are as of the 2017–18 academic year.

³ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (London: Longmans Green, 1852; now freely available on the internet).

recession and economic difficulty. That is why we were first out of the traps to pay the London Living Wage. That is why as a matter of policy we do not outsource services even though there is a financial cost. It is also why we have a concern to avoid the sort of extravagant salaries and expenses that have brought senior leaders in other higher educational institutions into disrepute. It is an example of St Mary's fulfilling its words about a commitment to dignity and social justice with actual deeds.

Conclusion

We do not just bear our Catholic identity as a label to be stuck on brochures or deployed in marketing materials. We live it, as an open and inclusive institution that is driven by a guiding concern to integrate faith and reason in pursuit of the common good. That seems to me to encapsulate the enduring Catholic ideal for education – an education that is available to everyone, rich or poor, and is aimed at providing academic excellence and moral virtue.

In conclusion, as a Catholic university, we must be a pole of opposition to the clear trend that has witnessed an increasing tendency to excessive individual acquisitiveness and growing inequalities in the distribution of economic wealth and political and social power. But more than that, we must be a beacon of positive light and hope in promoting the social values of a shared community – compassion, justice, awareness of the needs of others – and if we believe this and wish to act on it, then we are inevitably placed close to the poorest in our society. Now these are not exclusively Catholic values, but we as a Catholic-based institution are required by our faith to give a lead in promoting them, and we must be prepared to build alliances with like-minded people in society. At the end of the day, we are reminded that it is by our fruits that we shall be known.