

The Pedagogy of Humility
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I find myself meditating more deeply on teaching as an Ignatian vocation. Quentin Lauer, Fordham Jesuit philosopher, said once that teaching is one of the classic ministries of love because it seeks the good of the other qua other. As a ministry it requires purity of intention and periodic reflection on its means and ends.

In the modern American university teaching occurs in a prescribed format of courses, exams, and grades, a scripted process that runs from the admission of students, through eight semesters and x number of credits, to graduation. The faculty run this show as the professors of knowledge, the dispensers, assessors, enablers, and accreditors. The professor professes; the student studies. But the challenge of interdisciplinarity is the challenge to perceive the essential identity of professor and student; to recover, in other words, the essential truth at the core of the teaching vocation, namely, that the professor is in essence a student, from *studeo*, *studere* “to be eager for,” one who hungers for learning and wisdom. We are paid to know things, of course, and to teach others; but we can only do so because we are, first and foremost, learners, students who strike out into our own field and into new areas, people who live the life of the mind. This means modeling the intellectual curiosity and responsible adventurism we hope to enkindle in our students.

We are ourselves responsible if we allow the mundane realities of life in the university—yearly evaluations, pay raises, tenure, promotions, etc.—to destroy or obscure our essential identity as students. And we are ourselves responsible if we lose touch with this identity because we allow ourselves to become mesmerized by the achievements of our *curriculum vitae* and the desire for *fama gloriaque*, academic distinction and peer adulation. We need always to remind ourselves that the most fundamental and indeed the highest vocation at the university is the vocation of the student. And the student is one who is eager for learning, who exists in a state of tension and unfulfilled desire, who seeks with mind and heart deliverance from the state of unknowing. The deliverance requires energy, commitment, and sacrifice but it brings great joys.

So it is, paradoxically, that professors are most truly themselves when they know things and when they don't know things but engage in the search and the struggle. This in my mind begins to argue for a pedagogy of humility, an important virtue in the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises (164-8). Students need to practice the virtue of humility: they need sometimes to forget about the need for approval and self-esteem, the need for flattery and feeling good, and submit to the discipline of the demanding and unforgiving river, as the young Mark Twain does in *Adventures on the Mississippi*. This means accepting and welcoming the exhilarating and sometimes uncomfortable frictions necessary for intellectual growth. And professors too need to practice this virtue; we need

occasionally to take courses, to cultivate and satisfy the deep desire within to learn that first drew us to academics. And at least once in a while we need to drop the mandarin pose and say “I don’t know,” “I was wrong,” and “I have changed my mind.” We need to let down the guard enough to be students and to show others that we are students too. And happily so.

The First Principle and Foundation says “Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul.” What kind of service? Among the many possibilities, Thomas More, at least as Robert Bolt portrays him in *A Man for All Seasons*,” provides an answer appropriate for us as professors and students: “God made the angels to show him splendor.. .animals for innocence and plants for their simplicity. But man he made to serve him wittily in the tangle of his mind.” Living out our vocation as professors and students is our best and most proper means of serving God and giving witness to his presence in creation.