

Moral Education and the College Experience

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Moral education is an ongoing process and it should be included as a key component of the college experience. Although many colleges and universities are promoted as education for the whole person, that is encompassing the mind, body and spirit; morality and character education has fallen to the wayside. The undergraduate college years are a time when young adults are free to make decisions without parental intervention. Students are often faced with major moral issues and are forced to make choices that often contradict what they learned in religion classes and parish religious education programs. So, how can Catholic institutions foster morality without changing curriculum? The answer is through campus ministry programs and events. In the pages that follow, I will introduce several programs that can help students continue to advance in moral development during a time often filled with conflict and moral dilemmas. These programs emphasize the complete “moral experience” fostering: moral awareness, moral reflection, moral commitment and moral action.

As freshmen begin their college experience they are often filled with religious and moral values dictated to them by parents and teachers. Most know right from wrong but are they conscious of the issues that plague society? Do they know what really tugs at their heart? Have they experienced moral dilemmas outside of a book? Programs that immerse the student into the inequality of social structures offer them an opportunity to begin to develop their *moral awareness*. As James Keenan illuminates:

In the real merciful engagement, we realize that by entering into the chaos of others, we eventually have to face what causes that chaos. But usually we cannot know about those needs until we have a merciful engagement first...people who work for justice without knowing and meeting those who are suffering often have presuppositions for action that are not helpful.¹

Programs such as alternate spring breaks and pre-fall service immersion retreats introduce students to the needs of the poor, homeless and abused by placing them in service opportunities at homeless shelters, food pantries, soup kitchens, day care facilities, and shelters for abused women to name a few. These opportunities can be international as well as domestic and are excellent ways for students to feel the tug of moral awareness first hand and not just through media, textbooks and lectures.²

Moral reflection can often be a lonely process however; through faith sharing experiences (often known as small Christian communities) reflection on scripture with peers can facilitate a communal experience. Through conversation and reflection aides geared toward issues relevant to the young adult college student, scripture can be an excellent guide for moral reflection. David Setran and Chris Kiesling explain further:

[M]oral exemplars (role models) are necessary for emerging adults to form a concrete picture of the moral life. The biblical authors used such a technique repeatedly... moral exemplars can show them how to live out virtues in daily life

¹ James F. Keenan, *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 133.

² See the following websites for examples:

- www.fordham.edu/mission/mission_and_ministry/dorothy_day_center_f/p_respective_students_71217.asp
- <http://socialconcerns.nd.edu/academic/index.shtml>
- www.stjohns.edu/faith-service/service-opportunities/plunge-program

experience, providing historical, literary and real-world case studies of human flourishing (and decay) for their consideration.³

This group reflection fosters community through group discussion, and peer support. In addition, by including a call to action each week students can respond either with prayer or direct service. This is known as *Moral Commitment*.

Before I move on to *moral commitment* and *moral action* I want to touch lightly on the communal benefit of being part of a faith-sharing group. The discussions and issues that are deliberated are not centered around an individual, that is, the members of the small community interact offering different points of view on contemporary issues and dilemmas. This dynamic creates an awareness of being part of a group and fosters a reciprocal ethic of care amongst its members. Nel Noddings describes the benefit of caring as:

[An] advantage of emphasizing the relational sense of caring is that much of the mystery of altruism is removed. Because we human beings are defined in relation and because caring relations (and encounters) are so important to us, the acts we do for others are not entirely for others. If these acts strengthen the relations in which we are defined, they promote our well-being too.⁴

Moral commitment and *moral action* may seem widespread on campuses today with Greek Life and philanthropic clubs however is this really a personal call to action or just going along with the crowd. I would think it is the latter for the most part and once a student graduates, the action will cease. I worked with a priest who called it “busy work.”

³ David Setran and Chris Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Publishing Group, 2013), 157.

⁴ Nel Noddings, *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 150.

The key to continuous and lifelong moral commitment and moral action lies in religiosity. Through active participation in the liturgical life on campus, students will develop a greater sense of respect for the self and the other. Young adults can develop their own style of worship and take on leadership roles not often available to them in their home parishes. Participation in a faith community will foster connectivity between the person and the Divine Essence. Pamela Erwin illustrates this further:

Greater religious participation reflected more pro-social values and behaviors...Behaviors such as helping others, volunteering, involvement with their families, and a greater ability to cope effectively with stress have all been found to be associated with greater religious participation. Values associated with most positive outcomes, such as strong sense of personal meaning, beliefs in supporting community and society, and civic and political involvement, were also connected to greater religious participation.⁵

Understanding of what it means to be a part of the body of Christ is fundamental to moral commitment and moral action. To love your neighbor including your enemy, as yourself is to love God, to do anything else would be a sin. Kennan says it perfectly “sin is simply the failure to bother to love.”⁶ He sees sin not as what one does rather what one knows he/ she should do but does not act. Therefore, if students learn to love everyone through their understanding of religious practice, moral commitment and moral action will come naturally without causing moral conflict. Thomas Groome validates this with a question and an answer:

Ever wonder why Catholics put so much emphasis on going to mass on Sunday? The theological rationale is its emphasis on being a community of faith, on approaching God together... The undergirding theology is that Christians cannot be content with individual salvation alone, but must commit to living as a people of

⁵ Pamela Erwin, *A Critical Approach to Youth Culture: Its Influence and Implications for Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 150.

⁶ Keenan, 55.

God in the world-a daily challenge as a community rather than a fiat accompli of personal achievement.⁷

In conclusion, moral education is a lifelong process and campus ministers and college/ university administrators must implement programs that foster moral education and development outside of classroom situations. The classroom is associated with academic subjects and often seen as a tool for achieving a goal. However, by creating programs that are perceived as extracurricular such as: faith sharing groups, service opportunities, offering prayer vigils and creating a vibrant and inviting liturgical life on campus; moral formation will be fostered through “repeated practices that inculcate virtuous habits.”⁸ Students will develop the capacity to recognize the tug of moral awareness, have the ability to reflect on this tugging and develop a plan of action to address the issues and dilemmas that they encounter. Setran and Kiesling conclude:

While the Holy Spirit is ultimately responsible for transformation, character must be learned through practice and habituation, reinforcing virtuous thoughts, feelings, and actions repeatedly until they become second nature over time. Some practices, such as bible study, sitting under weekly preaching, and singing, will remind emerging adults of the larger telos, helping them to remember who they are and where they are going.⁹

⁷ Thomas H. Groome, *Educating for Life* (Allen, TX: Thomas More, 1998), 177.

⁸ Setran, 158.

⁹ Ibid

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