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Mary-Paula Cancienne

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MARY-PAULA CANCIENNE

RESPONSE TO MARK WILHELM:

Vocation—Wide Perspective Questions

Part of the mission of higher education that is rooted in the Christian traditions is to help students awaken to an experience of living that is beyond the sense of “Is this all there is” and, paradoxically, to one of seeing and understanding the simple and ordinary wonder in what is, probably is, maybe is, and in questions of why it isn’t. Considering the topic of vocation in our arena of education, is there a slight turn-of-the-prism that could further help us tap into *vocation* as the fascinating as well as holy ordinary drama and journey that it is?

According to Iain McGilchrist, humanity, especially in the Western world, but increasingly all around the world, has come to prioritize seeing through micro lenses that offer insulated silos of understanding. While humanity has benefited from micro lenses, such as specializations developed in science, economics, humanities, and the arts, a micro approach limits our understanding of the interconnectedness of life and our life stories, individually and collectively, presently and historically.

Instead, McGilchrist claims we should begin with macro views, wide perspectives that make it possible to grasp how life and life events are connected, then attend to the details at the micro, narrower focus level, where we drill into skill development, subject learning, disciplinary

functions, issues, and tasks. More so, after the details are attended to, he directs us to return to a broad, comprehensive, integrated focus, made that much more credible and richer because of the research, work and practice carried out at the micro level. What are beginning macro perspectives on vocation that can help us grasp the holy and holistic significance of each journey, and our collective journey together in these times (McGilchrist)?

We find evidence of pushing against siloed perspectives in higher education, as in inter-discipline studies, department project collaborations, plenary presentations where multiple disciplines are represented, and president advisory councils populated by wide, diverse representation. This is not to slight in any way the necessary work of specialization, but to advocate for the need to bridge specifics with other perspectives so to enrich the dialogue and our understandings, holding singularity under a wide umbrella. We might ask, “How would Homer, Confucius, Plato, Teresa of Ávila, Martin Luther, an Alaska Native



Mary-Paula Cancienne, RSM, PhD, is a theologian who presently works for the Conference for Mercy Higher Education as Associate Director for Mission. Her background includes advanced degrees in fine arts, psychology, spirituality, and theology. She explores, writes, and speaks on pluralistic/secular thought and contemporary spirituality/theology in a world of extreme challenges; deep aesthetics that includes political and environmental ethics; tensions between violence and non-violence as instruments for change, and discernment. She is particularly involved in formative processes for those drawn to the charism of Mercy in higher education and co-developed a five-course program, Mercy Spirituality Online. Mary-Paula is a trained spiritual director and supervisor, and she “writes” contemporary icons. Mpcancienne@sistersofmercy.org

leader, Nelson Mandela, Jane Goodall, “Captain Kirk,” or a journalist refugee from any number of oppressive nation states begin to express the drama of a wide perspective vocation story today, mindful of how we got to where we are (or think we are) and where we might be going?

Story is drama because there is tension and conflict wrestling for resolution. Our lives are drama because life is at its core tension, working for resolution, which only leads to another tension, another valley to cross, mountain to climb, meal to cook, problem to solve, river to appreciate, and child to love. Just learning to stand up and walk is a match against gravity, an early phase of a long adventure. However, without tension there is no becoming. Even trees need the wind to gain strength and resiliency. Certainly, the backdrop story of the Passion of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection is a drama-tension against and within which we interpret and re-interpret our lives again-and-again. Familiar with its archetypal plot, we interpret our experience of life through it, drawing forth meaning from the juxtaposition.

Today, meaning communicated through many national epic stories is being challenged. In the United States, these include traditional stories of Christopher Columbus, the founding fathers, and the way U.S. history is told in general. Many stories are being stretched to include more perspectives and questions. Because underlying conflicts were hidden or buried within status-quo-stories and were never resolved, tensions festered untold without the light of day. So, now, we are wrestling with the long shadow of having enslaved human beings who were instrumental in the building of a nation and its wealth, as well as on land grabs, broken treaties, and policies that brought to near

extinction native populations. We are working our way back to a wider story so we might go forward. There are oppressive corollaries for how we have told the story of Earth.

The wide perspective includes great accomplishments, heroic deeds, beauty, and marvel, and collective achievements that make us wonder how we did it, like building the James Webb Telescope that is capturing infra-red-light images from the edges of time. Today, we are reaping benefits and tragedies from an Enlightenment mindset that stretches across a few centuries. Advances in technology and science, increased standards of living for many, as well as provided a path toward climate warming and the growing gap between the very wealthy and people caught in poverty (Phan).

How do we hold the drama of our lives within a large plot, even if we interpret that plot as a moving one, one that needs to be tended and re-interpreted afresh by each generation? Now, however, there is a clock that is ticking. Our collective drama, like a Greek tragedy, has us in the amphitheater, where together we empathize and weep for the protagonists, both a suffering planet and its struggling humanity. Weeping is a good sign. Does it stir the heart? Does this put a particular twist to vocation stories today?

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