

A Response to Professor David O'Brien

Despite its profound errors and certain academic haughtiness, Professor David O'Brien's response to Bishop McManus still provides a valuable service. It not only crystallizes what intellectual problems exist at Holy Cross, but also reveals how deeply entrenched they are. Specifically, he presents well the College's agnostic approach to education. For him, Holy Cross plays the role of Socrates – urging students to question, ask, and search. He gives us the image of intrepid, indefatigable investigators and never-relenting pursuers of...well, not the truth but questions. It is a quest for questions:

The Holy Cross community places at the center of its mission *serious engagement with "fundamental human questions"* of meaning and mutual obligation. We seek to build an intellectual and educational community centered on *"fundamental religious and philosophical questions."* Toward that end, the College offers courses in theology, including Catholic theology, religious studies, and what is now called Catholic Studies, courses engaging Catholic ideas in many disciplines. We developed a nationally recognized first year program *centered on the vocational question "how then shall we live?"* As we write, the community, the entire diverse faculty, is preparing to launch a wider first year program *centered on fundamental questions*: they call the program Montserrat, recalling the spiritual transformation experienced by Jesuit founder St Ignatius Loyola. (emphases added)

Funny, it would seem wiser to build a community on answers rather than questions. You cannot build a community on questions anymore than you can build a house on a questionable foundation. Imagine your contractor telling you that he has some questions about the foundation he just set for your new home. Then, deigning to instruct you, he adds, "But the important thing is that we're asking the questions." So, taking O'Brien as a fair representative of the administration, it is clear that the college's willingness to let the Church's enemies use its facilities is not a lapse of judgment or an oversight: it is part of official policy to ask questions – but not provide answers.

Professor O'Brien boasts about the "Montserrat" program. It is worth pointing out that St. Ignatius's experience at Montserrat would have been markedly different had he contented himself with only questions and never actually settled on answers. It was a Catholic, not an agnostic Ignatius that lay down his arms at the feet of the Black Madonna and took up the beggar's cloak. He gave his life to her because he had found the Truth, not questions.

Leaving aside the College's presumed Catholic identity, from a purely academic angle it should be clear how wrong-headed this is. There is no final end, no *telos* – at least not articulated – for studies at Holy Cross. It is all about questions. Are answers ever provided? Do students graduate with a firmer grasp of the truth, or just a keen ability to ask questions? Academics cannot exist without a confidence in the truth. A commitment to only asking questions produces only cynics. It is the investigation of the truth that produces liberally educated people and scholars.

Further, the Socratic method worked for Socrates because he lacked the benefit of revealed truth and a magisterium to clarify the natural law. Presuming that Holy Cross is a Catholic school, it cannot act as if the answers do not exist. Certainly, it can provoke the questions, as any good teacher should. But it must also provide the answers. The reason for this is more than merely academic. Souls are at stake. It is morally irresponsible and simply uncharitable to boast about the questioning and remain silent about the answers. Perhaps on Mt. St. James they do not have to deal with the consequences of never-ending questions. But we parish priests – living amid what Professor O’Brien calls “all those modern realities that form the web of daily existence of lay Catholics” – we are left to tend to the spiritual carnage of unanswered questions.

For O’Brien the Holy Cross zeal for questions is behind the hosting of NARAL and Planned Parenthood speakers:

[H]ospitality to strangers is a powerful Christian tradition, and *that hospitality is never conditioned by the ideas of behavior of the stranger*. In an academic setting hospitality requires *a willingness to listen to and perhaps learn from, not just instruct, the stranger*. (emphases added)

This statement cannot be taken seriously. After all, the stranger in question *pays* to use the College’s facilities. Some hospitality, that. Further, we are not talking about simply welcoming a stranger to lunch. The issue at hand is whether we should provide that stranger (a *paying* stranger) a forum to announce death-dealing views. Nor can we say that this stranger is entirely unknown. We know what this stranger will say, we know the stranger’s billion-dollar industry, and we know what this stranger does to the unborn.

The fraudulence of the “hospitality” rhetoric is easily revealed when we consider inviting other strangers. Would O’Brien give the same approval to a conference featuring speakers from the Neo Nazis or Aryan Nation or North American Man/Boy Love Association? If so, we should have a clear declaration of that. Heck, according to O’Brien it should be celebrated.

In the end, the quest for questions is just a shell game. We know that if the issue were global warming or racism then the College would advance more answers than questions. If Holy Cross had a strong statement against abortion and contraception, then perhaps the rhetoric would be slightly more believable. But as it is, the proposed dialogue and the supposedly earnest consideration of questions are hard to believe precisely because Holy Cross has virtually no voice against these evils. Can we have an unequivocal statement from Professor O’Brien, or from the administration, that contraception and abortion are *always and at all times wrong*? To up the ante a bit, let us require that the statement cannot use such provisional phrases as “Catholics believe that” or “the Church teaches that” or “in our tradition.” These always keep the speaker at least one degree removed from the teaching. It has to be the administration or Professor O’Brien stating that truth *in their own names*. And if they cannot state that truth, then they should not bother us with their rhetoric about dialogue. As it is, displaying no clear adherence to Church’s teaching, no confidence in the truth, they bring nothing to the dialogue with the people of NARAL and Planned Parenthood. They have no real questions to ask except perhaps, “Will that be cash or credit?”

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