

Moving Forward: Overcoming the Roadblocks to Progress

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We at Holy Cross are happy and proud to be hosting all of you this weekend. You are here, like me, because you deeply love the Church. It is part of the fabric of our lives; it nourishes and strengthens us; and provides meaning and direction. We grieve over the scandals, the loss of loyalty and vitality, and the deeper structural threats affecting authority, vocations, and Catholic practice. You want to see a renewal; and you are committed to doing your part to make it happen.

The question before us, then, is how to restore health to a family that has been weakened and damaged, if not totally broken apart. The Gospel offers an important perspective on this. I will begin by reminding you of a familiar story.

Jesus [said]: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

" 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' " (Luke 15: 11-32, NIV)

This story illustrates three important obstacles to the unity and well-being of any family or community. The first is a self-serving individualism, which we see initially in the younger son. This is what threatens to destroy the family. The son regards only himself and his own desires. The family and his place in it seem to mean nothing to him. Not only does he turn his back on his father and brother; but he insists on dividing up the patrimony, which he properly holds in common with them, thus not only rejecting the fundamental relationships that bind them together, but also shattering the structures of shared ownership and responsibility around which the family is built. He puts himself and his interests first; no one else seems to matter.

This attitude has certainly contributed to the current crisis in the Church. It is easy enough to find many cases of those who had responsibility for the welfare of the Church and its members who turned their back on that responsibility to pursue their own interests, whether it was self-gratification, maintaining a tight grip on power, or avoiding accountability. Less noted, but also important, are the many who have simply walked away, abandoning not only the institution and their share of the responsibility for it, but also their brothers and sisters, in a time of great anguish and need. They found a safe, comfortable place for themselves by detaching emotionally, whether or not they maintained their formal membership. Others saw the crisis as an opportunity to advance their own agenda, whether on the right or the left, hoping to exploit the Church's fragility and self-doubt to their own advantage. All of these have helped weaken and divide our family.

Once the younger son has been confronted with the destructiveness of his selfishness, he falls victim to the second obstruction, which is despair. Once he has grasped the enormity of his sin, he cannot conceive of the possibility of redemption. His place in the family, as beloved son, is gone, destroyed by his own hand, never to be recovered. This is a further sin, because it underestimates the power of the father's love and forgiveness. It threatens the restoration of the family, because it prevents him from seeking reconciliation. It is only his own desperation, a happy relic of his selfishness, that brings him back to the father, with much lowered expectations.

In the same way, in this crisis many are tempted to despair. They are so caught up in the anger, the shame, and the breakdown of trust and confidence in our leadership, that they dare not hope for a recovery. They cannot imagine what form it would take. So they either rail at the Church and its impotence, which is really their own, or they sullenly sink into passivity. Neither brings progress; they just get in the way. The fact is that the Church has faced far worse crises in its history and has come through them stronger than before. We have had corrupt and venal popes, bishops and clergy, intense confusion and conflict over leadership, outright warfare over both doctrine and power, murderous opposition from governments, widespread indifference and apostasy among both laity and clergy, and just about every other problem imaginable. We have always managed not only to survive, but to use those occasions for reform and renewal and to emerge purified, focused and with greater wisdom and understanding. We will do so again, by

God's grace under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus promised in last Sunday's Gospel, "By your perseverance, you will secure your lives."

The third obstruction we see in the older son. That is resentment. When his sinful brother returns and is gladly embraced by his father, he refuses to be a part of the reconciliation. In his mind justice demands that his brother suffer and be cast out, even if it hurts the entire family. He will not let go of the sense of being wronged; yet until he does no progress is possible. And notice how as he stubbornly hangs on to the resentment, justified though it may be, it grows to include even the father, and threatens to poison whatever of the family is left intact. So, like his younger brother, the elder son, by focusing on himself and his legitimate grievance, turns his back on the family bonds that are the source of his well-being. Better to wallow in the sullen misery of isolation than to forgive.

There are many victims in the current crises in the Church. Those who have been subject to abuse, manipulation, deceit and betrayal have been deeply traumatized. Their anger and sense of injustice is deeply rooted and very real. They know that part of the healing means letting go of those feelings. But they also know that that cannot be achieved simply by willing it. It is a long, slow painful process that requires wise guidance, care and support, as well as some acknowledgment of guilt and repentance, if not restitution, by the offending party. There are many others who are aggrieved because the Church and its leadership have not lived up to their own promises. They feel a sense of betrayal as well. Those feelings are not unjustified, just unhelpful. One of the most insidious and destructive effects of victimization is that one can get comfortable with being a victim, which erodes one's freedom and the ability to enter into the kind of trusting relationships that are lifegiving. Until we can let go of the resentment and embrace forgiveness, we cannot restore the vitality of our Church. This may not seem fair; but it is true.

What counterbalances and ultimately overcomes the destructive attitudes of the two sons is the indomitable will of the father. His single-minded, seemingly irrational, concern for his sons, to the exclusion of all self-interest, refuses to give in to the selfishness of the younger son. Moreover, when the younger son despairs of any forgiveness and restoration of his place in the family, the father never wavers in his desire to bring him back, and as soon as the possibility presents itself rushes to embrace it. Finally the father's stubborn refusal to give in to resentment, even though he is the one most wronged, shames the older son from wallowing in his self-indulgent grievances. In the end it is the power of the father's love and selfless devotion that rebuilds the family and makes it whole again.

There is no question that our God wants to bring healing and restoration to the Church. The only question is whether we want to join in and be part of the process. That means renouncing the attitudes that are impediments to progress, setting aside our personal prerogatives and devoting ourselves above all to the common good. The remainder of the colloquium, as I understand it, will consider what that might mean in practice. Here I will discuss briefly what it means for us at Holy Cross.

I think there are three ways in which we can support the process of healing and renewal. First, we can model some of the values that are important in the renewal of the Church. This is not to say that we have all the answers or that we are better than dioceses, parishes and other institutions. But we have been doing some things and have some experiences that are worth sharing. One of these values is collaboration. Clearly the Church needs to make better use of the great gift it has of a well-educated and dedicated laity. That means sharing power as well as labor and responsibility. We have been doing that since 1969, when control of Holy Cross was transferred from the Jesuits to a mostly-lay board of trustees. The College has flourished under their stewardship. Not only have the trustees been very generous in their support, but they have provided valuable professional experience and knowledge, accountability, wisdom and a passionate dedication to the College and its work. Furthermore, no one is more committed to maintaining a strong Catholic and Jesuit identity than our board. They are constantly educating themselves on mission-related issues; and we are now more self-conscious and proactive about our mission than ever. During the same period, we have gone from having a majority of Jesuits on the faculty to having a large majority of lay people. It is our job to select them, orient them, and support them in a way that they understand and feel responsible for our mission. There are many ways in which we do that; and we are developing more all the time. Just this year, we added the Ignatian Pilgrimage, run very effectively by Tom Landy, as a way to have young faculty contemplate the life of St. Ignatius and incorporate it into their teaching and scholarship, Jesuit Heritage Week, and the Presidential Colloquia on Jesuit education. What we are trying to build is a faculty that brings a richness of experience and expertise, and a diversity of interests and backgrounds that reflects the diversity of the world in which our graduates will live and work, yet who convey a consistent message about our fundamental values as an institution, which align well with the values of the Church. It is a risky direction to take, because it means sharing responsibility and surrendering some control, so that many voices may be heard. We get some criticism for this, because even among those who talk about collaboration, there is a deeply embedded conviction that apostolic effectiveness equates with clerical control. We are out to prove them wrong; and I think we are doing it. I would not claim that we are where we need to be on that. Yet I am constantly impressed by how many of our students and recent graduates do exhibit a lively faith and a commit to living it out in love and service, and how often they attribute that to their experience at Holy Cross. You have met some of them this weekend. We have survey data that indicates that these are not isolated cases, but are representative of the experiences of many of our students.

Another value we can model is our openness to new ideas and influences. This is the particular, though not exclusive, genius of Jesuit education, for which we are admired, or hated, depending on one's point of view. We regard encounters with the outside world and peoples of different beliefs and cultures, not as a threat that could corrupt us, but as a new and enriching encounter with the God who is present and active in our world, and as an opportunity to share our values and beliefs with others and to influence them in a positive way. I would be so bold as to suggest that the Church is more effective in promoting its values in a pluralistic culture like ours when it approaches the encounter with openness and a presumption of good will than when it retreats behind the walls of its

rules, practices and beliefs and hurls down condemnations on the benighted world outside.

The third element we can model is the ability to be self-critical and to adapt and change. Colleges and universities at their best are not only institutions of learning but institutions that learn. We are taught to be critical thinkers; and it is inevitable that we will turn that searching gaze inward to see where we ourselves fall short. That is not always comfortable, especially for someone in my position, but it is necessary. It is the way we improve and grow and meet the new challenges that are constantly assaulting us. Here at Holy Cross we are right now in a strategic planning process that is looking at our strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats to see where we need to put our energy and resources in order to pursue our mission more effectively. Some of the most graced moments in the life of the Church have been those times, like the Council of Trent or Vatican II, when it has been able to step back and enter into a thorough self-assessment, so that it can renew itself in fidelity to God's call.

The second way we can support renewal is that we can be a forum, a gathering place, where people can come together to share their concerns, their experiences, their desires, their new ideas and to think more deeply about the challenges we face and the resources we can draw on to meet them. This Colloquium is a good example. We are seeing many indications that our alumni especially are looking for ways to build on and extend their Holy Cross experience, not just socially but intellectually and spiritually as well. Alumni groups have been arranging days of service and retreats, to go along with the traditional receptions, speakers and excursions. The Center has done a number of programs on issues of faith, ethics, the Church, and interreligious and intercultural dialogue that have been of interest to alumni; and they will continue to grow that aspect of their work. In addition it is clear that we need to do more on alumni education and are planning to do so, through the web, study trips, short courses and so on. We can also be a clearinghouse for information, a place to share our experiences and beliefs, and venue where an honest and lively debate on the critical issues in the life of the Church can take place.

Finally, the most important contribution we can make is through our core mission of education and formation. Liberal education, as its name suggests, is meant to liberate, from ignorance, self-centeredness, narrowness and prejudice. It does so by promoting a deeper self-knowledge, an engagement with the depths of our humanity, and facility in logical and moral reasoning, and above all by fostering a meaningful and sympathetic encounter with the Other. All those elements are central to our mission here. Not only are they a part of the curriculum in many ways, but they are also present in the co-curricular and extra-curricular life of the College, in our many service program, in the increasing emphasis on community-based learning, in our international and multicultural programs, and in our prayer, worship, retreats and other religious activities. All of these are meant to help students see themselves as part of a larger community that makes genuine claims on them and to increase their capacity for compassion, forgiveness and concern for others. As an example, I will close with the words of Sarah Janecko '04, who did an internship with the Worcester Diocese and was a part of our Magis ministry training program. Her internship was with the diocesan Office of Healing and

Prevention, then just begun to help deal with the sex abuse crisis. She spent the summer meeting with victims, visiting churches that had just had a priest removed, and helping draft policies for dealing with victims and preventing future cases of abuse. She became very aware of the uglier side of the Church. At a panel we held a couple of years ago for Holy Cross Magazine, on the sex abuse crisis, she said this:

While the initial shock of the gravity of the situation may cause a temporary decline in overall faith, I think that people my age care about our Church and the current situation. I know for myself, even though these awful tragedies have caused such pain among myself and my peers, I believe that change is possible. I hope for the future of our Church and a true sense of repentance and forgiveness. It is through this forgiveness that all wounds will be healed, and our Church will be able to move forward.