

Professors Profess:

The Academic Vocation as Incarnational, Sacramental, and Evangelistic

I intend the title with both of its possible meanings. Professors do profess. This is a statement of fact, as I shall demonstrate. But it is also a statement of exhortation. Professors: profess! We ought to profess. For the purposes of this article, I define professing as the act of proclaiming ideas and ideals. At its best, that act is incarnational, sacramental, and evangelistic. By understanding our vocation – that is, our profession – in light of those theological categories, we professors can more ardently and effectively engage in the task before us.

I should state my own background at the outset. In light of such transparency, I hope that the motivation behind my argument will make more sense. I am a historical theologian by training, with an emphasis on the modern era. For the last two years, I have been exclusively teaching in the interdisciplinary core curriculum of a Catholic university. I offer this article as a personal theological reflection, rather than as a piece of historical research or theological analysis. This article will use theological language and concepts as a means for reflecting on the academic vocation, arguing that professors' role in the classroom should be incarnational, sacramental, and evangelistic in the broadest sense.

For the purposes of space, I will ignore the non-teaching aspects of being a professor, except to the extent that they are relevant for teaching. This is not to say that research and service are not important; far from it. But not all who research or serve in colleges and universities are professors, while all those who profess ideas and ideals in the college classrooms they lead are, by definition, professors. Not only is teaching the central-most aspect of the professorial vocation in a technical sense; in the task of teaching, both in the classroom and beyond, we find the opportunity for Christ-like self-giving.

The professor's vocation is incarnational. Christians have traditionally proclaimed that Christ is fully God and fully human. Rather than dwell, unincarnate, apart from humanity, God became one of us. Similarly, in our capacity as educators, we should not be aloof, inhabiting a realm apart from our students; rather, to the extent that we can do so without compromising our values and intellects, we should become like our students. To that end, we must learn to speak their languages, even if it means listening to their music, watching some of their TV shows and movies, and occasionally eating their food. The reasons for this are simple: our best means for them relating to us is our concerted effort to relate to them. We need not alter the contents of what we teach, but the format of our lessons and our style of presentation can do much to accommodate the ethno-cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of our students. We are called to be all things to all students, to adapt Paul's observation of himself (1 Corinthians 9:22). In short, we must make our intellects incarnate in the cultural spheres of our students.

The benefits of making our ideas incarnate for students are especially clear in contrast to the alternative. It can be tempting to dwell on high in the fullness of God's glory in unassailable light, among Plato's forms, far beyond most students' grasps. What we see from on high – or what we think we see – can be thrilling. Who we are up there – or who we think we are – can be equally thrilling. We might be tempted to say with Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration, "Hey Lord! Let's stay up here! Let's build some tents on the mountaintop and stay in the shining cloud of God's glory." That is not what we are called to any more than it was what they were called to.

Rather, we must bring knowledge down the mountain to the people on their terms. Or, to put the metaphor in humbler terms: it is not that we have attained the fullness of knowledge or have reached the top of the mountain; but we can meet our students part-way down and invite them to

come further up. We are not those endowed with the fullness of all answers; but we are those committed to asking the Big Questions and to cultivating in our students the desire for pursuing them. We are the stewards of the memory of the Light. Even if we have not seen it, we are charged with the task of spreading the hope of light and the urgency of pursuing it to those who dwell with us in darkness. The best way to do this is to commit to living fully integrated lives.

While academics have ample safeguards against neglecting the life of the mind, we must be wary of the opposite extreme, cultivating the intellect at the expense of all else. We have the opportunity to model for our students lives that are fully integrated intellectually, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. To the extent that we live in light of what we teach, we make incarnate for our students the ideas and ideals we teach not as mere abstractions but as realities. In our research and writing, we have the opportunity to apply the skills we teach. The lessons we offer to students are but an expression of who we are and who we are in the process of becoming.

For our students, we are emissaries from a foreign realm. We bespeak the possibility of absolute truth, a strange notion to many of our students, having long imbibed the radical relativism of the culture in which they are immersed. Even for those of us who doubt whether knowledge of absolute truth is attainable, we offer a strange message to our students that, whether it is knowable in this life or not, absolute truth is a possibility and has been seen as such for much of human history, and that moral and metaphysical relativism are far from being self-evident facts.

While all fields of academia have the potential to be incarnational, the humanities in general and theology in particular have an urgent need to be so. The humanities must be incarnational because they deal with humanity; and many of its disciplines and sub-disciplines are currently struggling to make the case for their relevance in modern society because of their failure to adequately proclaim ideas and ideals in ways that ordinary folk can relate to. Indeed, given the recent

vogue of deconstructionism, in all its various forms, it has been difficult to make the case for why literary analysis, for example, is an important part of education. In some circles, the doubt that there can be an authoritative interpretation of a given text – literary, religious, or otherwise – has eroded to a despair of the attainability of all knowledge. In essence, many fields have come close to utterly rejecting in its entirety the possibility of representing (or incarnating) for their students any greater truth. Instead, they offer the stripping away of old traditions until nothing remains. A theologically responsible, incarnation-minded steward of the humanities will guard against this trend.

This is especially true for the theologians among us. If our discipline really does concern the greatest of all possible beings, the corollary is that it also concerns matters further removed from our students' understanding than perhaps any other field. Systematic theology, moral theology, biblical theology, historical theology – all will be dogged by abstractionism and, thus, irrelevance in the minds of our students unless we find a means to make our lessons more tangible, more “relatable,” to borrow a favorite word of my students. I have yet to encounter a student who claims to have seen God – though I one day hope I will – but I know many students who have found themselves able to relate to Julian of Norwich because of her love of cats. Something about her identity as a dedicated animal lover (“crazy cat lady” is the term many use) made it possible for them to make sense of her mystical experience and liminal place in society.

Not only should professors meet students on their terms; we should draw them up closer to where we stand to consider Higher Things. Like the sacraments proper, we college and university educators should be “visible signs of invisible grace,” to use the phrase from Augustine. I would argue that this is a potential component for any healthy relationship but in different ways: a good friend can be a sign of God's providential care; husbands and wives should experience God's grace

through each other; so can dog and cat owners through their pets; but there are particular ways in which we, in our capacity as educators, can offer signs of the grace of God to our students.

Like that of the sacraments, the grace we offer is no easy grace, for we demand self-sacrifice and transformation. Our primary task is to shape our students into keener intellectuals and more responsible citizens. While we may play a pivotal role in cultivating their faith, if and when this happens it should be as a side-effect of our fostering their greater intellectual and moral engagement with their world. If our students grow in faith, it should be because of the presence of the questions we pose, rather than because of their absence. We have the duty to call our students' beliefs into question, not for the deliberate sake of undermining them, but in order that what remains might be tested and true. In our lecturing, moderating of discussions, crafting of assignments, and our grading, we have the opportunity to care for our students' hearts and minds, challenging them to become something greater.

Analogous to the grace of God in salvation, we must offer our students both justice and mercy. Indeed, the two are inseparable. Unless I am just, I will not apply the same standards of excellence and accountability to all of my students. Furthermore, without justice, mercy is meaningless. Justice can take many forms, but it boils down to students getting both what they need and what they deserve. Some students lack sufficient strength of character to meet course requirements unless there are dire consequences should they fail to deliver. Especially for those students oblivious to their own mediocrity and puffed up with a groundless sense of their own inherent merits, a well-deserved "B" grade for the course can be a great blessing, whether they recognize it at the time or not. The forms that professors' justice and mercy take are practical and personal, even tangible, in the sense that grades, comments, and consequences are tangible, having a visible form or at least having relational context and having a direct impact on the lives of students.

In particular, severe consequences for plagiarism have the potential to redeem those most lost of student souls. Plagiarism is the severest of academic sins because it is an all-encompassing rejection of the academic project masked as an embrace of excellence: it is a lie to oneself and to others, a work of fraud, and a refusal to fully apply oneself or to learn from the task at hand. Just as excommunication ideally serves to discipline the excommunicated and return them to grace by means of awakening them to the depths of their sin, so too catching and giving a failing grade to a student for plagiarism has the potential to return a student to the path of moral and intellectual integrity by helping them realize how far from the path they have fallen. In order to offer that grace, we must engage the guilty parties with a firm, personal rebuke, paired with proof of the undisputable fact of the offense.

In our sacrament-like interactions with our students, we are their minds' fathers and mothers, their older sisters and brothers. We are perhaps the first adults to respect and address them as adults, as the beginnings of the people that they will be for the rest of their lives. They do not always deserve that respect, but by offering it freely, we invite them into the fullness of the life of the mind. You are the authority in the classroom, functionally if not always truly. (Sometimes I look back on a lesson and think that one or another of my students was more often correct than I was.) When you speak truth, you speak God's truth. When you love, you love with God's love. When you fail to speak truth and fail to love your students well, you fall short of your calling. You are called to be a vessel of the grace of God and that is a wonderful, terrifying thing.

In light of that calling, both incarnationally adopting students' language and sacramentally offering tangible signs of intangible grace to them, we should not shy away from inviting them to embrace a sort of conversion. The question is not whether college and university professors will evangelize, but how and with what "good news." Do not misunderstand me. We should catechize or

indoctrinate. The modern university classroom is not the place for such pursuits, given their religious diversity and the nature of intellectual inquiry. We should not put our students in the position of having to endure efforts at proselytization as another prerequisite for their degrees. But we must invite them to convert to something, nonetheless.

Explicitly or implicitly, whether we admit it or not, all professors are already in the business of evangelism. In our particular departments, we recruit majors and minors. We can and should make the case for the relevance of our particular disciplines, and there is room for healthy competition in that. As educators in the humanities, many of us inevitably find ourselves in the position of promoting the validity of the liberal arts. Whether for Christ, for the liberal arts, or for the mere ideal of education in general, in modern academia every professor is an evangelist for something.

For millennia, philosophers have been recruiting the ignorant to abandon their assumptions and pursue truth. This is true for all of us who are Doctors of Philosophy, even if not all of us are scholars in the field of philosophy proper. What is the truth that we pursue? Recently, many have purported the only so-called transcendent truth to be life's absence of meaning. For example, Rice University professor Jeffrey Kripal has asserted that the discipline of religious studies itself has become and should remain a sort of new Gnosticism, in which insiders are aware of how religion is merely a human construct devoid of ultimate meaning.¹ Now I do not suggest that the battle lines should be drawn between theology and religious studies. I know that many of us are happily employed in religious studies departments and/or produce research in that field. The battle lines are, in fact, between those of us comfortable appealing to ultimate meaning as a metaphysical and perhaps knowable possibility for humans and those of us convinced, either overtly or more subtly, that human life has no inherent meaning.

Perhaps the best illustration of this that I can give is the contrast between Simone Weil and David Foster Wallace. Both were brilliant writers and philosophers, who sought to find the profound in the midst of the ordinary, and whose prematurely cut their own lives short. In her 1943 essay, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” Weil insisted that any efforts at paying attention were useful for students later cultivating an attitude of prayerfulness: “Even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result, one day a light that is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul. Every effort adds a little gold to a treasure no power on earth can take away.”² Similarly, in a commencement speech, Wallace exhorted Kenyon College’s class of 2005: “if you really learn how to pay attention, then [...] It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down.” So far, Wallace almost sounded like he agreed with Weil. But he continued: “Not that that mystical stuff is necessarily true. The only thing that’s capital T True is that you get to decide how you’re gonna try to see it.”³ This is, of course, what many of our students already believe. But we have a duty to confront them with the possibility that there may be more capital T Truths than them getting to decide how they are going to try to see the world. In fact, this so-called truth masks a lie; for neither we nor our students should decide how to see the world, as if we could impose our will by force of make-believe to concoct arbitrary and subjective meaning out of nothing. Rather, we should seek truth and see what we learn. We do not get to decide what truth is. We do not define truth. Rather, truth must define us.

All of us who are involved in educating university students share the common goal of converting them, heart and soul, to the life of the mind. Especially for those of us who are people of faith teaching at faith-based institutions, the spiritual and the intellectual are inseparable, either in the

invitation to pursue them or in the pursuit itself. The invitation to embrace a lifelong quest for truth is more than mere marketing because we are not selling a product; we are offering a path of growth and self-sacrifice leading to the transcendent, a transformation with implications that will last a lifetime and beyond. In distinction to simplistic evangelists who divorce the intellect from a watered-down version of things spiritual, we do not offer answers and certainties, but, rather, questions and nuances; and while some answers and certainties are to be found, they bring with them a growing list of further questions and points of unclarity. Thank God there is beauty in the mystery of it all. Let us love the mystery, fall in love with the mystery, and fill our students with hunger for the mystery, for it is an infectious hunger.

Incarnationally, sacramentally, and evangelistically, we professors profess, proclaiming in word and action that the truth is out there and it is worth seeking. Professors should profess, just as students should study. Whether we do so or not is up to us, by the grace of God. In practice, we should be defined by a sense of self-sacrifice on behalf of others. We should care about our own learning not merely as an end unto itself but as a tool in our task of facilitating the learning of others. This calling is radically other-centered, counter-cultural, and counter the increasingly prevalent business-oriented model of higher education. As we seek to inhabit students' worlds, as we seek to offer visible signs of God's work, and as we cry out as voices of critical faith in an uncritical and often faithless wilderness, let us look to each other for words of hope and signs of grace. God knows we need them.

Word Count: 3231

¹ Jeffrey Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 4-14.

² Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), 59.

³ David Foster Wallace, accessed June 25, 2013, <http://moreintelligentlife.com/story/david-foster-wallace-in-his-own-words>.