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# Imagining How to Be Christ-Like Together

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# ► Mission CENTRAL

## Imagining How to Be Christ-Like Together

*By Karen Eifler and Rev. Charles B. Gordon, CSC, at the University of Portland. The authors co-direct the university's Garaventa Center for Catholic Intellectual Life and American Culture. A version of this paper was presented at the fall 2014 King's College Conference on "The Idea of a Catholic College: Charism, Curricula, and Community."*

In an era of fierce competition for shrinking financial and human resources, academic silos might feel like the solution for keeping individual interests secure. It's every department and professor for themselves in the battle for tuition dollars, grant monies, institutional influence. The walls between the English or Philosophy departments and schools of Nursing, Engineering, and Education, even on small college campuses, appear impermeable as professors and programs become more specialized. This is exacerbated by the relentless demands of professional accreditation cycles, with their insatiable appetite for data and documentation of minutiae that seem so far from the actual practice of teaching, nursing, or creating water filtration systems.

The silos that have come to feel inevitable on our campuses may not be necessary, and we might look to a dimension of the recent past—the presence of large numbers of religious men and women of our institutions' founding orders—as a model for “de-siloing.” When those priests, brothers, or sisters lived in community, academic silos were obviated by the very nature of members' shared lives. In their common life, theologians dined at the same table as mathematicians and nurses and philosophers, as a matter of course. Not only did the religious community members take part in talk that meandered among all the disciplines, but because these men and women shared, for example, their Benedictine, Norbertine or Holy Cross heritage, each of their disciplines was naturally refracted through the lenses of the religious, sacramental imaginations at the heart of those communities.

Beyond these quotidian interdisciplinary encounters making it habitual for economists to know what was going on in psychology, the visible presence of religious men and women on campuses served to transmute the abstraction of Catholic mission and identity into something concrete: the attractive, approachable, ultimately human face of Christ. And as they did their work, teaching, uncovering truth, and revealing beauty to their students and to their lay colleagues,

religious did not just look like Christ; they acted as Christ in the worlds of their campuses.

We do not mean to suggest that if we could all just increase the numbers of vowed religious on our campuses, questions of Catholic mission and identity would be resolved. That is magical thinking. However, we do assert that the common table, shared meals, and listening deeply to one another's stories are not the exclusive domain of the religious orders that founded our institutions. They are, in fact, absolutely replicable, portable constructs available to all of us, regardless of our station in life, who answer the call to live the Catholic missions of our institutions: to be Christ-like, to inculcate in one another and in our students a sacramental imagination. And it makes a virtue of the small size of many of our campuses, where it is actually possible for all faculty to know one another, given the right circumstances.

### A Telling Vignette

So embedded is the Holy Cross charism of hospitality into campus life at the University of Portland that it dictated the first official act in our tenure as directors of the Center for Catholic Intellectual Life and American Culture. While we were settling into our new office on a Friday morning in mid-August, unpacking boxes lost its luster. We had also noticed a certain ennui among the few people who had not escaped campus for a last respite before the onslaught of meetings, orientations, and classes. We pooled the cash in our wallets, made a quick trip to a discount store for wine and cheese and sent an e-mail blast to all faculty and staff to drop what they were doing that afternoon and stop by to see our new digs. Our small size makes such an endeavor manageable.

The monthly ritual of “Thirst Fridays” was born that day: a time for any adult on campus to come by for 10 or 90 minutes of simple refreshments and convivial conversations with people whose paths they would ordinarily never intersect... a gentle destruction of silos, as French professors chat with Residence Life staff, the provost with the grounds crew, nurses with engineers. A ceramic bowl with the plaintive sign “Please help save us from boxed wine” generates enough funds to replenish our supplies each month.

We have been, as Jesus suggested, “as cunning as serpents and as gentle as doves” (Matthew 10:16) in creating this space

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## Generating Agenda-Free, Interdisciplinary Spaces

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for generating agenda-free interdisciplinary conversations: We've lined the walls with sticky notes of potential program ideas, laid out colleagues' recent publications, and watched these small tendrils blossom from mere conversation-starters into fruitful cross-divisional collaborations. We continue to imitate Jesus' temperate, invitational example from his walk to Emmaus with his two despairing friends: "Tell me about your day" is a no-cost, no-risk, thoroughly Catholic strategy for creating buy-in to the mission of a place. Breaking bread and enjoying wine together, even day-old bread and bargain-basement wine, elevates it to the sacramental.

For those whose work demands that they think in terms of "deliverables," one specific program (and there are more) whose genesis was a spontaneous Thirst Friday conversation illustrates the potential of this simple campus rite.

A signature mission-related endeavor is our "Pre-Play Primer" series, a collaboration between the professional theater program and multiple academic units on campus. "What shows will you be doing this year?"—an obvious dialogue opener—yielded a slate of lesser-known plays. A professor of Greek philosophy sidled into the conversation and noted that he might have some things to say about their production of Euripedes' *Alkestis*. The head of the Feminist Discussion Group on campus also noted the potential for illuminating dimensions of that play and another on the slate, Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*. The shows' costume designer wanted a platform to showcase the conceptual framework of the colors and lines he had selected for the productions.

And so it came to pass that before the Saturday performance of each main-stage show, a trio of experts from a range of disciplines provides a taut series of eight-minute talks affording insights to the audience that open their eyes and ears to a richer experience of the play than they would have had unaided. True beholders are being cultivated among audience members. Modest financial contributions from our Center and the Theater Department provide wine and cheese to panel attendees. All this happens under the aegis of our Center for Catholic Intellectual Life and American Culture, quite possibly the last campus unit with which the head of the Feminist Discussion Group or the Professional Theater Program's head of costuming might have expected to find themselves collaborating. Not only has this opened up the intellectual dramatic experience afforded to theater patrons, but it has reshaped the Theater Department's way of contemplating potential material. They now seek plays that lend themselves to being examined

through diverse disciplinary lenses, rather than lamenting, "Because we are on a Catholic campus, we are restricted in what we attempt." This new mode is an expansive, rather than a constrictive understanding of what's possible under the Catholic intellectual "umbrella."

This single programmatic snapshot captures the essence of our principal argument for how Catholic colleges, especially small ones, can successfully promulgate their mission into diverse academic and professional programs: Eat together, draw out people's stories, and listen deeply to them. However, as fundamental as genuine hospitality is to our endeavor, we will fail if we are not intellectually credible.

*This new mode is an expansive, rather than a constrictive understanding of what's possible under the Catholic intellectual "umbrella."*

The work demands that its practitioners be intellectually nimble, curious enough about all the units on their campuses to see and to forge connections among them. They must be willing and able to engage with anyone about any discipline if they are to undermine silos. The same intellectual instruments that they (and we) have honed in pursuing our individual disciplines are the ones we can enlist to develop programming, publications, and grant projects that promote our Catholic mission and identity.

The key to doing this is, again, to foster amenable humane relationships in which, taking the risen Christ as our model, we walk with our weary colleagues and draw out their stories. We break bread and pour wine with them, reflecting back what they have told us, and then, more often than not, good fruit comes forth: new courses, articles, collaborations, even just renewed zeal for the work already in front of us all. ✧