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WHAT YOU MOST HAVE TO OFFER IS WHO YOU ARE

In which the new occupant of the University's Chair in Ethics gives the first non-boring speech about ethics in the history of the universe.

By Michael Andrews

Let me begin with a very personal tangent, in honor of the benefactors who established the McNerney-Hanson Endowed Chair in Ethics in celebration of their mothers. I lost my own mother to brain cancer 17 years ago, and my father to pancreatic cancer in 2006. I cannot fully express my gratitude to them for who they were and what they gave me: the gift of life itself, a keen sense of integrity, and a deeply felt compassion for those who suffer, mentally and physically, especially the poor and the forgotten of the earth. I like to think of my mom and dad as being here today and sharing this time with us, being part of our prayer, our work, our joy, our ongoing commitment to give comfort to those in need, to seek righteousness, to walk humbly with our God.

The inspiration for my talk today comes from a single sentence in Pope Paul VI's social encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*. In it, Pope Paul wrote that we are in search of "a new humanism...which will enable human beings to find themselves again." What I'm not going to do today is define ethics or humanism or justice in a neatly wrapped academic package [applause]. Rather I hope to shake up some of our pre-conceived notions and assumptions about ethics. I want to ask three questions: What does ethics ask of us? What does justice seek? How might the University's chair in ethics serve the kind of faith and justice mission for which we yearn as brothers and sisters in this Holy Cross institution?

"Why should I?" This was the question my six-year old daughter planted on me one afternoon, after I explained to her that she needed to tell me the truth about a situation that had apparently transpired at school with one of her classmates that day. Her question brought a cold sweat to my forehead. I suddenly found myself spinning back to my senior college ethics course, and there is my ethics professor, staring down at me from her podium: "So, Mr. Andrews, why *ought* one to be moral?"

Twenty years later, the question still haunts me. Of course, I can quote away from The Official List of Approved Authors and Texts: Aristotle, Mill, Kant, Bentham, Nietzsche, Augustine, St. Thomas...de-ontology, virtue ethics, contract ethics, praxis ethics, discourse ethics, utilitarianism, social justice, distributive justice, an ethics of care, natural law theory...The list of witnesses for Clear and Distinct Ideas is endless. But my daughter wasn't asking me to provide theory. She was asking a question much more pro-

found: What's so good about being good?

If we hold that the dignity of the human being is neither *homo economicus*, he or she whose primary purpose is to buy and sell; nor *homo gubernatus*, he or she whose rights are legitimated, established, and protected by the changing whims of the State; but rather *homo Christus*, he or she who is created *imago Dei*, in the "image of God," then we are talking about the deepest aspects of human life when we talk about ethics. The word "ethics" in fact refers etymologically to the Greek word "ethos," meaning "character," though in the sense of "customs" or "customary behavior," including, for example, rules governing communal life, dress codes, and cultic rituals. (The Romans, too, similarly spoke of "mores" in terms of customs, hence, the word "morality.") Starting with Heraclitus, however, we have the first instance in which character — ethos — becomes associated with the "divine spark." Henceforward, ethics gets defined as that which separates human beings from all other forms of animal life. The groundwork for Aristotle was thus laid by the pre-Socratic philosophers, such that the search for wisdom — what the Greeks call *sophia* — requires much more than merely understanding a *theoretical* abstraction. Ethics, or good character, concerns the coming-to-understanding of prudence, through habit and action, in a life of virtue.

What do I mean by referring to a life of virtue? Here's an example. Edith Stein was born in 1891 to a large Jewish family in Breslau, in modern-day Poland. The young Edith declared herself an atheist — to the absolute horror of her devoutly Jewish mother — at the age of 15 and subsequently left home to study phenomenology under Edmund Husserl, then teaching at the University of Gottingen, in northern Germany. Edith Stein proved a formidable student, even for Husserl, and completed her doctoral dissertation on the thematic of empathy under his direction. This was followed by a series of penetrating analyses on the nature of the state, culture, and social constitution theory. In 1921 she underwent a conversion and was baptized; she entered the Carmelite Order in 1933 and remained in cloister, first in Germany, and later, following the tragic events of Kristallnacht, in Holland, where she sought refuge at a Carmelite convent in Echt. There she continued to pray and write until the Gestapo forcibly removed her from her Carmelite community and

sent her by train to Auschwitz, where she died in a gas chamber, along with her sister Rosa, on August 9, 1942. Her philosophical and theological works were all but forgotten, until a certain Polish cardinal was elected pope in 1978. He also had studied phenomenology, with two of Stein's mentors, and was quite aware of the complexity and immensity of her thought. Against all odds, Edith Stein was canonized a Catholic saint in 1999.

I mention Stein here, not only because I think she is worth knowing and learning about, but also because I think she offers a model of how ethics and empathy can lead to the kind of 'new humanism' called for by Pope Paul. For Edith Stein, the human person never exists as an isolated object, a thing, an entity, an agent intellect or rational animal. The human person is inherently, innately *social*. What does this mean in ethical terms? It means that to be human is always and everywhere to exist in community. Contrary to Rene Descartes, Edith Stein believed that an individuated, alienated self is merely fictitious. Before the 'I' exists, there is always, already, a life-world community of persons. The individuated self is born into a life-world, a world of culture, language, meaning, and relationality. Hence, the modern notion of an alienated, individuated Ego cut off from other egos is purely fictive, a mere construct of social engineering. [Shout from audience: *postmodernism is a joke!*]

Consider the political and religious implications of what Edith Stein is describing: the individual ego — the individual who makes all decisions by himself or herself, who is utterly independent and radically free — is a fiction. There is no such being.

Empathy, according to Stein, is not about losing myself in the other, but rather *finding* my authentic self in and through my encounter with a living community. Neither the community nor the individual is 'itself' apart from the other. For Edith Stein, empathy entails solidarity. Solidarity requires that I offer hospitality not only to those within my closed circle of sameness. Ethics requires that I extend my concern to unknown others who lay outside my reach, outside my inner circle of time and place, outside the horizon of my normal concerns and family obligations.

Such infinite concern, I argue, is *what ethics ask of us*. Ethics posits an

infinite concern, a command that comes from outside every circle of vested self-interest. For Edith Stein, empathy places infinite responsibility on my shoulders and bids that I respond to an other's needs far beyond anything I can *reasonably* imagine. Ethics points me beyond myself and demands that I respond with infinite concern and infinite respect to the one who disturbs and confounds me. Empathy implies a far richer sense of solidarity than any human community can reasonably hope or imagine.

We look to ethics, then, to give us an informed sense of the world, a developed sense of empathy, and a sensitivity to human pain and social injustice. Like Edith Stein, what we

To love one's enemies as oneself, to forgive seventy times seven the person who has wronged you, to care for the orphan and the widow, to give my shirt also when a stranger asks for my coat — this is an impossible ethics. This kind of ethics violates my integrity, my self-interest...even my constitutional rights. Further, this kind of ethics does not ask, it demands: feed the hungry, visit the imprisoned, comfort the sick, bury the dead, clothe the naked, respect the immigrant, love your enemy, pray for your persecutor. Who can bear such ethics, such commands? Who could offer such hospitality to a stranger? Who, indeed, would dare to "see in all the image of God imprinted within," as Father

Basil Moreau, founder of the Congregation of Holy Cross, wrote in his 1854 treatise, *On Christian Education*? No one can reasonably be expected to dare such things; but true ethics, genuine ethics, demands just this. We are required to do the impossible by *living* what we say we believe.

What might such an ethics look like for us, teachers and parents, alumni and students? At the very least, it would challenge us to ask new questions in new ways.

"How should humans dwell?" is an ethical question that cuts to the heart of an engineer's vocation.

"How shall limited medical resources be shared amongst the world's most poor and vulnerable?" is an ethical question that needs to be raised by nurses and doctors who work in hospitals and public health clinics and serve on medical boards and government agencies.

"Why are so few people so wealthy and so many others struggling to obtain even the

basic necessities of life?" is an ethical question that every business major, entrepreneur, and economist needs to ask in light of the Church's social teachings.

And more: Under what circumstances can modern technological warfare be justified? How do we fix a broken educational system that leaves one in five American children trapped in a spiral of poverty and despair? What are the ethical implications of what science tells us about the origin of life, whether in the womb or in the stars? Should human beings, especially the poor and marginalized, have access to basic needs in health care? By what justification dare I define another human being who bleeds as I

want is to be able to grapple intelligently with the complexities of the modern world, to be confident enough to reject easy answers and to be able to speak effectively with our lives. Nothing less will do. This is what Pope Paul VI called for in his 1968 papal encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, on the Development of Peoples: "We seek," he wrote, "a new humanism...which will enable human beings to find themselves again." This new humanism must be deeply sensitive to the savage exploitation and misery that have come to characterize our new millennium.

What does ethics ask of us? In a nutshell: ethics asks us to do the Impossible.

bleed and who hopes and dreams for his children's welfare the same way I hope and dream for mine; by what justification dare I define this other human being as alien, foreign, illegal?

Nearly 45 years after his death, Senator Robert Kennedy's query still haunts us, both personally and collectively. To what extent am I responsible for helping maintain a mad economy in which the gross national product of our country counts napalm and smart bombs and nuclear warheads and television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children — yet does not allow for the health of our children, or the beauty of their voices, or poetry, or our national wit and compassion?

A concern for justice lies at the heart of ethics and at the core of our mission as a Catholic and Holy Cross institution. It remains an essential element in the search for the kind of "new humanism" for which Pope Paul VI called. To do less means to be less than we are, to fail to see what Basil Moreau clearly saw and bids us to see as well, namely, "in all the image of God imprinted within."

There is much talk today about "academic excellence" and "service for justice." Who could argue with such grand, noble sentiments? Strangely enough, however, these words often ring hollow. "Educating the whole person" and "educating for justice" have become standard script on just about every academic undergraduate campus in North America. Yet I wonder what I would say if one of my students asked me whether I had adequately educated her for justice? I would have to answer, in all sincerity and humility, "well, sort of. Ummm... probably not."

Certainly I think all of us on this campus can agree that educating for justice has become and should remain an essential, required component of ethical formation, of teaching and learning. There are amazing service programs and volunteer opportunities for faculty, students, and alumni, on and off campus, and goodness knows how important these service programs are. How many lives, individually and collectively, do our students and alumni, faculty and staff touch each day? Many thousands. How many hours of community service do University students and alumni and faculty and staff offer to people in genuine need, people who are hungry, and homeless, or in need of medical care or legal advice, people who are poor, sick, dying, mentally ill? Many thousands.

And yet, in this very assurance of our success lies a grave danger that threatens to undermine all that we do, all that we are. The question I wish to pose is uncomfortable; some may regard it as treasonous, frivolous, misguided. Nevertheless, I believe the question must be raised: Is the doing of justice enough? That is to say, does a Catholic university get off the hook by graduating seniors with big hearts but who do not have the intellectual tools and moral capacity to challenge the very structures and institutions, both in the church and in society, by which many injustices flourish?

|| How do we fix a broken educational system that leaves one in five American children trapped in a spiral of poverty and despair? By what justification dare we define another other human being as alien, foreign, illegal? Why do we produce napalm and warheads but let children starve? ||

Let me be even more blunt. Surely the quest for "justice" is not unique or distinctive to Catholic higher education? Do not Jewish and Islamic scholars, too, speak in terms of justice? And Marxist-Hegelians, as they shrewdly teach economic theory to a world reeling from capitalist excess? What about the Hebrew prophets? Tibetan monks? Lakota Sioux elders? Or the self-proclaimed "secular pragmatists" who speak on behalf of the post-liberal left in American politics? While we celebrate the aspirations of an Arab Spring, we nevertheless recoil when violence in our own cities erupts that is exploited by similar social, political, and economic injustices. You see my point: When everyone is practicing justice, is it any wonder why the call for "education for justice" is often

met by with a quiet yawn, a wink of the eye, a principled affirmation, and a check mark on our next outside assessment review?

Listen; our heartfelt concern about "justice" will fall far short of its goal unless the teaching and learning of ethics requires helping young people discover that what they most have to offer is *who they are*, rather than merely what they do. Ethics in its humanist and Christian context is not about answering the question, "Which ethical decision is correct?" It is, rather, asking which choice helps me become the kind of person I hope to be, the kind of person God desires me to be? This is why the ethical question cannot be limited to, "Who am I?" but must include "Whose am I? To whom do I belong?" "What do I love?"

How you answer *those* questions determines everything.

The question I want to pose today is not merely, *What is ethics?* It is, rather, *How might we imagine our future?* What might our world look like if we allow ethics to set our hearts and minds on fire? Why not imagine ethics as a horizon of discourse that points always beyond itself to the kind of justice that is always yet-to-come? Such an open and welcome and inclusive community of the future! Such an ethics of possibility, of hope! Such an ethics of promise, rife with possibility, this future of the Impossible, where the first shall be last and the hungry shall have their fill!

To my mind, such an ethics is not about following mere rules and abstract theories. It is about finding in this particular moment the fullness of time, about preparing for a future that — in all honesty — we know not what it will bring. If Christianity has anything to say about ethics, it is that the search for ethics can never be separate from concrete, human suffering and the longing for wholeness that we all seek. Otherwise, we run the all-too-easy risk of becoming mere academics, mere administrators, mere theorists, rather than being *educators*. Even worse, we run the risk of turning our students into mindless and soulless automotons whose only goal is to get the "right" answer, no matter what the cost. "To see in all the image of God imprinted within..." Dare we even try? Do we really have the courage for that? □

Michael Andrews is the dean of Arts & Sciences, and the second occupant of the University's McNerney-Hanson Chair in Ethics; this essay is drawn from his talk at his installation.