

ENGLISH

English Senior Seminar: The Early Modern Idea of Work (ENGL 499)

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Course Information

According to Communal Reflection on the Jesuit Mission in Higher Education: A Way of Proceeding (2002), the first characteristic of Jesuit Higher Education is “Dedication to Human Dignity from a Catholic/Jesuit Faith perspective” (4). Pope John Paul II identified the source and expansion of human dignity as work. In On Human Work, he wrote, “Work is at the center of the social question, the key to making life more human.” My English 499 Senior Seminar, subtitled The Early Modern Idea of Work, sought to explore the ways in which many of our current attitudes toward work and workers were shaped by the drama and culture of the Renaissance, especially that of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

Goals for the Mission-Driven Teaching Component

- 1) Upon reflection and extensive discussion with my mentor, added to the coursework for the semester was a section on “holy work.” This included readings from the early English Jesuit Edmund Campion, biblical passages from the Geneva Bible concerning work (such as from Genesis and also the parable of the talents), and a play by the leading playwright (and teacher) among the English Jesuits, Joseph Simons (1594-1671). As we read, the goal was for students to recognize that the Renaissance used its literature to explore and shape new attitudes toward work. Students came to understand that while the ancients had conceived of work as punishment, Renaissance artists saw work as contributing to the greater glory of God. Thus, students were invited to find God in all things by considering the spirituality of work, the ways in which humans share in the activity of their God.

- 2) The course included several readings and discussions of the labor of those who were marginalized during the Renaissance, such as women, servants, slaves, and the jobless. Through these readings, my goal was to raise awareness and stimulate reflection about the lack of social justice in the modern working conditions of others both in the United States and abroad. Father Kolvenbach echoes his Santa Clara lecture when he speaks at Spring Hill in 2004 about the need to educate the whole person of solidarity: “to provide an education for the common good of the global human community. If students in fact allow the stark reality of this world to enter into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering and engage it constructively, they will become men and women for others.” Some of this “stark reality” includes “human rights” and the unemployed, according to Joseph Daoust, S.J. in “Of Kingfishers and Dragonflies: Faith and Justice at the Core of Jesuit Education” (18). This focus on solidarity leads to action, according to the Jesuits: “Solidarity also means a commitment to

change the economic, political, and social structures that enslave, dehumanize, and destroy human life and dignity” (Communal Reflection 8).

3) Ultimately, through reading and extensive discussion about the work of others from so many perspectives, my goal was to help students gain a concept for themselves of work as vocation, or the idea that God invites individuals to a certain lifework. Because all of the students were in the second semester of their senior year, the discussions about work in this class could remind them of the importance of choosing a post-graduation job that would allow them to be men and women for others. A passage from the 2004 article “Whatever! Is Not Ignatian Indifference: Jesuits and the Ministry to Young Adults,” from Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits, by David E. Nantais, S.J., was particularly influential in helping me understand why incorporating the mission into the college classroom is so important. Father Nantais speaks of the significance of teachers’

efforts at connecting their students’ faith with their choice of career. . . . All Jesuit schools should invite their students to reflect on their future profession as a calling rather than as a mere means to accumulate material goods. We should also not assume that students at Jesuit schools understand what “men and women for others” means. . . . A Jesuit education is not just for self-improvement, but also rather to prepare young adults to direct their hearts and minds to improving the condition of the world. During a time when young adults are grappling for some sense of meaning in their lives, highlighting the mission aspect of their education may be exactly what they need to get excited about their future. Young adults want to know that their future lives are going to mean something and . . . they are passionate about helping their fellow human beings. They need some help discerning how they can funnel that passion for service to their profession, so that they can see the connection. (34-35)

This description of what students need from their Jesuit education can be found in Father Kolvenbach’s idea in his Spring Hill lecture of the “education of the heart”: “A more complete education will invite us to a more genuine success: recognizing that the love of God calls us to use these gifts to create a world in which all may find a home and be participants in the human community.”

Overall, then, these goals for the mission-driven component in English 499 sought to solidify the goals we have for all of our graduates, outlined in the 2003 Xavier Jesuit Education and Ignatian Pedagogy: A Desktop Primer: to “be morally sensitive to the needs of our times,” to “Be committed to a faith that does justice,” and to “Have a sense of moral responsibility in career choice.” Not only was the incorporation of the component rewarding for me as a teacher as I watched my students engage with new ideas and with themselves, but it also enriched my research. I plan to use the component when I teach the course again. Below are student comments on vocation the first day of class, a copy of a mission-driven assignment on vocation, and student responses to this assignment at the end of the semester.

Seniors’ comments from the first day of class

“I have no clue what is next for me once I graduate. I’m trying to decide what I’d like to do as far as a career goes.”

“I have no idea what is next to be honest—I am in the process of applying to law schools.”

“I plan to attend law school after I graduate.”

“I will be here next semester to finish. After that = ?”

“I am taking a break from school for awhile to work and travel.”

“The next step for me is hopefully teaching high school English.”

“After graduation I am taking a year before going into grad school or picking/starting my career.”

“What’s next: I’m interning this semester with Thomson Learning, hoping that if I like it, that might lead to something later on. If not, I have no idea.”

Mission-Component Assignment

English 499: Reading Response #4 (due 3/28)

In our discussion of the writings of English Renaissance playwright Joseph Simons, S.J., we found that the subject of Jesuit “holy work,” such as a school play, does not have to be holy. The artist creates his work with conscious recognition of God’s inspiring grace and prays that his work will reflect the glory of God. Thus, the promotion of Christian ideals in Jesuit drama was secondary. What, then, do you think Simons thought was most important for his students to gain from participation in his plays—in other words, how would reciting lines in Latin from a play help students fulfill their vocation?

In order to answer this question, you might reflect on your own Jesuit education. How has your Jesuit education prepared you to realize *your* vocation? In class we read the version of the parable of talents in Matthew that Simons would have read. Do you have a sense of your “talents” that you did not possess before college? What are they? What particular talents or gifts has Xavier helped you develop that you will use in the future? One of the goals for Xavier graduates is that “A Xavier Graduate at the time of graduation should be able to have a sense of moral responsibility in career choice and be a contributing member of society.” How will you direct your heart and mind to improving the condition of the world? How will you funnel your education and passion for service into your profession? In what ways will your future profession be a calling rather than a mere means to accumulate material goods? What are you excited about in your future?

Xavier Student Reflections

“For Joseph Simons, S.J., and other Jesuit playwrights of the Renaissance, I would imagine that one of the most important things they felt for students to learn from performing and studying plays would be an **understanding of a world bigger than one’s own**. . . . I answer this question this way because I feel that is what my own Jesuit education has been about, studying what it is to be human, and what it is to live in a place full of other humans, and trying to pay attention to humans from the past in order to create better lives for humans of the future. The ‘talents’ that I have gained in my study of humanity are an ability to critically read, understand, analyze, and deliberate over moral questions presented in literature or current situations, an understanding of the world at the present moment and its history that helps me to relate to other humans and want to work to solve their problems, and a sense of responsibility as an educated young person to do something greater in a world so full of troubles. Xavier has taught me about being a person ‘for others’ because there is no other way to be. . . .

A gift that I possessed before college that Xavier has helped me develop is my talent for writing and my ability to communicate with others. It is only through others’ ability to communicate with me that I am able to learn; it is only through others’ ability to share their own human experiences that I am able to reflect on my experience with a larger perspective. . . . Because of the writing and communication that has been shared with me, I have been able to learn about people’s lives in the Renaissance, in the 18th century, in the Great Depression, in Haiti, in South Africa, in Spain, in Uzbekistan, people in many times and places that face situations like and unlike my own. But because of one person’s ability to communicate his or her experience to me, I am able to understand my own experience in a new way. . . . I want to write; that is my passion and my way of leaving a mark on human history. Through my writing I want to challenge the world as it has challenged me. . . . Writing will be more a calling for me than anything as right now I am not sure I will be able to obtain any material goods through it, but it is the means by which I feel I can make the biggest impact on the world. . . . In the spirit of Joseph Simons and the first Jesuits, my education at Xavier has prepared me to become an artist who creates in order to reflect the glory of life and human existence that I am inspired by and also to expose the truths, both bitter and beautiful, of our world.”—Jess

“**What has a Jesuit education *not* brought alive in me?** . . . Thanks to the Jesuits’ emphasis on art and music, my talent has been respected and shaped by professors both inside and out of the music department. But do I want to devote my life to singing? Will singing as a profession allow me to still serve the community, or will I fall victim to the ‘diva syndrome’ and perform only to flaunt my talent and make money? . . . I was so happy when the benefit concert that I and a fellow music major produced and sang in last semester was a hit; we raised over \$500 for hurricane victims. I realized then that while singing takes a lot of personal commitment and time focusing on the self and the voice, that self-training is necessary so that the talent can be its best when shared to help others.”—Margaret

“In my experience at Xavier, I have noticed an extreme emphasis on exploration and discovery of ideas for oneself, which I feel is another important aspect that will aid me in my future. In any career, this skill for delving deeper will be an asset. Learning is so highly esteemed for its own sake at Xavier, and this habit is an admirable trait in any employee. **Creativity to think outside the box is encouraged.** . . .”—Amanda

“While at Xavier, I have discovered that I have an excellent grasp on language. Like James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, I have discovered that **serving God isn’t just for priests**, but for each of us. . . . I learned that I am called to serve God through language. I have discovered that if God has called me to a vocation, to be one of His ‘men for others,’ he definitely requires me to teach—one of the most obvious, yet greatest ways to serve others. I will teach English to the next generation of learners in the hope that they too will undergo the same searching process that I underwent—discovering what they excel at and what they don’t so they too can know how to best serve God.”—Paul

“My own Jesuit education has allowed me to **develop my talents for writing, speech, and critical analysis** of historical and literary works. It has also given me a fuller knowledge of the scope of social injustice and inequity in the past and present. Thus, it has forced me to appreciate the relatively privileged position in the world than I’ve been given.”—Mike

“Just like Simons felt that it was extremely important for his students to repeat Latin, a talent some individuals felt was useless, Xavier University continues to expound the glories of the Jesuit ‘core’ curriculum. Based on the idea of a well-rounded education, Xavier’s core focuses greatly on the liberal arts and, especially unusual in the modern university setting, a focus on theology and philosophy. . . . Their focus is on simply on giving students a classic, well-rounded education—no matter how antiquated and hated the subjects may be. And this, simply, is the reason I appreciate my Jesuit education. Other universities that allow students free rein over their curriculum, and only require a few classes in English or math, are, in my opinion, giving students a sub-par education. **Why would I want to take Bowling 101 when I could read Plato’s Republic?** No, I did not enjoy the reading during my philosophy classes, but I know that I have learned much more in these classes than I would ever gain in a physical education class.”—Rebecca

“I found that my involvement in Campus Ministry most helped me find my talents. I participated in Alternative Breaks my sophomore year, and found that fulfilling and eye-opening. From that experience, **I discovered that I am an excellent listener, and most of the time that is what’s most important.** It’s difficult to let someone else talk without interrupting them with the insights you think will help them. . . .

I learned from a friend my sophomore year that it is possible to receive work study from the university while tutoring elementary school children in the daytime who are struggling with reading. I was hired at Burton Elementary. . . . Experiences like this one at Burton have helped me decide that I would like to become a teacher. I will soon be receiving my degree in English from Xavier, but for me, English is a way to get inside the lives of students. Yes, I enjoy literature, and sometimes I even feel passionate about it, but my opportunities for service and interaction outside of the classroom are what have ultimately allowed me to discern my best gifts.”—Kelsey

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