

PANEL DISCUSSION

"What the Universities Have and Have Not Done to Instill Ethics in Public Service"

ETHICS IN PUBLIC SERVICE AND THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN INCULCATING ETHICAL VALUES AND BEHAVIOR

ANDREW A. GONZALEZ, F.S.C.

President

De La Salle University

I. INTRODUCTION

Forums like this one, on ethics in public service and the role of universities in inculcating ethical values and behavior, always make me a little uncomfortable.

On one hand, if one is deeply religious and raised on a spirituality of self-deprecation and self-abnegation, the tendency is to blame oneself whenever there are public failures among one's students and to ask sincerely: WHERE DID WE GO WRONG?

On the other hand, if one is a purist on the mission of a university, one will assert that the specific objective of a university is the cultivation of the intellectual virtues, not the moral virtues, and that therefore worrying about the ethical lives of one's students is a case of barking at the wrong tree.

A middle position will say that human beings made to the image and likeness of God cannot be compartmentalized, that the primary purpose of a university is intellectual and scientific excellence and the virtues which are prerequisites for this excellence, intellectual honesty and integrity, a sense of genuine wonder for inquiry, and a perseverance in pursuing an investigation, but at the same time, in a university or an academic community, there are individual and social virtues which are dimensions of growing up and adulthood which should be cultivated or at least provided a proper environment where these virtues can flourish. The pure love of knowledge demands not only intellectual honesty and perseverance but a magnanimity of spirit which shares findings, engages the cooperation of all without envy or selfishness, respects the opinions of one's peers and calls for justice and charity in one's dealings with them, and a respect for persons as ends in themselves rather than as means to be exploited. Under this view, the university no matter how intellectually oriented has to have an integral ethical dimension in its lifestyle even

if not formally teaching ethics and morality because of the specialization which must be done to propagate and advance knowledge.

II. WHAT THE UNIVERSITIES HAVE DONE

A realization of this mission of integral humanism therefore has motivated many universities to include courses in professional ethics; in medicine, for example, and in genetics, bioethics has become a preoccupation and bioethics committees have been formed for discussions and for decisions on day-to-day ethical issues which now confront a teaching and research hospital.

In religious-sponsored organizations, universities, and hospitals, there are usually mandatory requirements on the formal study of theology which usually includes courses on morality and social justice as well as professional ethics.

Moreover, in student cocurricular activities, through seminars and workshops, retreats and seminars, there are organized sessions for values clarification, processing of one's philosophy in life and one's personal code of morality, and practical application of these principles in extracurricular activities in student life. The organizational culture of the school, its traditions and its mission statement, the values it announces, its witness through its priorities and its reward system, its own organizational ethos and ways of treating sectors of the academic community, are indirect and no less powerful means of inculcating social ethics than formal classroom instruction.

III. WHAT THE UNIVERSITIES HAVE NOT DONE

However, in these attempts to instill ethics for both private and public service, in the use of power to serve the people and in consonance with ethical principles based on social justice and distributive justice, the universities have sometimes been limited in their impact for many reasons, perhaps the result of the over-all human condition and the need to take the stance that all human institutions are in perpetual need of reform – *universitas semper reformanda*, since all human endeavors seldom result in perfect completion or fulfillment of one's objectives.

In Catholic circles, there has been an excessive emphasis on personal morality, in this case, almost exclusively sexual, to the point of not emphasizing the social dimension of justice sufficiently.

Perhaps the style of instruction in theology and moral teaching has been highly cognitive and juridical, instead of being personal and attitudinal, to ensure a nexus between life and practice. A paradigm of legalism in moral theology has resulted in legalism and casuistry sometimes resulting in an absence of internalization and even common sense. Some of us have become imprisoned in our no-longer-viable paradigms of morality and a limited interpretation of natural law.

Perhaps our biggest limitation has been to fail to develop adequately the virtue of critical thinking not only in the cognitive sphere but in the sphere of praxis to lead us to question many of the models of good behavior we have come to accept without question, some of them subtle remnants of our own class prejudices and personal and cultural backgrounds.

We have found out that sermons and retreats of the traditional type do not hit home, that exhortations have at best a temporary effect, that far more powerful for internalization is learning by doing, by practical experience and exposure, of actual work in social action rather than merely by fund-raising. We have likewise found out that group processing of values and reorientation of thinking seems to be more powerful tools than mere lectures or even journal writing, that group projects have a way of inculcating attitudes and motivations which are more effective than intellectual considerations alone. Even the use of the audio-visual media has temporary effects unless the activity is followed by processing and debriefing as well as briefing.

Processing takes time and human facilitators, seldom available in today's university because of the sheer weight of numbers and the lack of properly trained faculty to exercise the kind of facilitative leadership needed. Young people need time to grow and to internalize; they also need the leisure to be able to do so which is militated against the multiplicity of subjects and requirements that the present system imposes on them.

Above all, our experience demonstrates quite clearly that the primary venue for ethical development is the home and that school and home, including the university, must work together to guide the young men and women in our universities towards ethical awareness and behavior. Unless therefore family life is strengthened by other social agencies, then the university and any school for that matter is handicapped in its attempts to instill ethical principles and behavior especially if the student does not see witness of moral living in his own home, and for the university, worse if even the university staff and leadership do not exercise their moral suasion by leading ethical lives themselves.

IV. CONCLUSION

I end where I began. I do not beat my breast in self-blame but neither do I exonerate myself and the university for the shameless acts of some of our alumni. The parents must take their share of responsibility; so should society in general.

Rather than bemoan the past, we have to look towards the future and take the means now through both cognitive and affective means to lead our students towards the vision of the good life informed by a morality based on respect for all of life and for all living things and justice to nature and to our fellow human beings.