

Why Jesuit education can lead the way

By Michelle C. Sterk Barrett

Public life in the United States is in a perilous state.

According to the Pew Research Center, trust in government is near an all-time low, and our ability to get along in a diverse society is not faring much better. Gallup polls have found that over half of Americans believe that Black-white race relations are somewhat bad or very bad. Mainstream news media speak of The Big Lie, even as 60 percent of Republicans continue to believe the 2020 election was stolen from the former president. Tensions and distrust have spilled over into families, communities, social media, news media, and our own colleges and universities.

While there are many complex reasons behind all this, it seems to me to be fueled by people in many quarters feeling that they do not matter.

People such as the life-long auto workers in my parents' hometown of Janesville, Wisc., who are still reeling from the 2015 General Motors plant closure. Black Americans who feel helpless and angry as they watch the death of another person who looks like they do at the hands of a person hired to protect them. Police officers who wonder whether the sacrifices they make are appreciated. Undocumented parents who live in fear of separation from the children they love so deeply and for whom they have sacrificed so much. Christians who feel their beliefs are no longer respected. Students and colleagues who feel marginalized on our own campuses. The list could go on and on.

Behind the strong emotions and divisiveness is often a feeling of being treated unjustly or being overlooked—sometimes in life-threatening ways—by our economic, political, or common life. Too

many are wondering if their lives are valued and are hoping for someone or something that can give them reason to believe it is.

How can we begin to heal and reconcile our nation in a time of polarization when too many feel forgotten or treated unfairly? How can we end the years of finger-pointing and blaming and, instead, move forward in constructive ways?

How can we become reconciled to one another?

Pope Paul VI's statement, "If you want peace, work for justice," has much relevance and wisdom for this present moment.

And as we seek a peace grounded in justice, those of us in Jesuit higher education can play a critical role in helping to lead our nation forward. We not only have the privilege of educating future leaders who can have a positive impact on these challenges, but we are also educating them within the context of a rich tradition of wisdom that offers guidance about the pursuit of peace, justice, and reconciliation.

From our Jesuit heritage, we have the concepts of caring for the whole person, of being "people for and with others," of the magis—the goal of seeking to serve the more universal good. We claim a tradition committed to the pursuit of justice and to being more ready to put forth a generous interpretation of another's words and actions rather than a propensity to condemn. Indeed, the Society of Jesus holds up Jesus as the model—the one who embodied radical inclusivity, compassion, faith, mercy, peace, justice, and reconciliation in his actions.

From Catholic Social Teaching, we also have an array of relevant tools: an insistence upon the

inherent dignity of the human person, an emphasis on the common good, a preferential option for the poor, a call to live in solidarity.

These themes, Jesuit and Catholic, resonate throughout the mission statements, the visions, and the strategic plans that guide each of our institutions and are expected to shape the education we provide.

Further, our institutions provide abundant opportunities for engagement with what Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, former Superior General of the Jesuits, called the “gritty reality of the world.” Such experiences—which provide a foundation for peace, justice, and reconciliation—help our students to develop both compassion and nuanced thinking as they learn to see beyond stereotypes, statistics, and labels to know the challenges faced by real human beings in real situations.

The liberal arts foundation likewise fosters community engagement experiences that can be critically reflected upon from multiple disciplinary perspectives, enabling students to better understand the social and economic complexities that underlie “gritty reality.” Our institutions are therefore particularly prepared to develop “contemplatives in action” who reflect with depth and thoughtfulness about how they might respond to the brokenness of our world.

Caylie Whiteside, a 2021 graduate of the College of the Holy Cross who was highly engaged in her local community during her undergraduate years, offers just one example of our educational potential. She attests to how she was moved beyond “either/or thinking” to “both/and thinking,” recognizing that her education provided her, above all, with “the capacity to empathize with others” and the inspiration to work toward healing “our nation’s divides by recognizing it is not us versus them but both us and them.”

It is just this sort of nuanced thinking that can help our nation to become not only peaceful and just, but also truly reconciled. In the end, both/and thinking, the capacity to empathize, and the practice of solidarity produce the foundation of reconciliation.

How can I help build what Martin Luther King, Jr., called the ‘beloved community,’ a peaceful, just, and reconciled world?

As I think about the relevance of all of this in my daily work, the underlying question that motivates me, a question that I imagine motivates many others too, is this: “How can I help build what Martin Luther King, Jr., called the ‘beloved community,’ a peaceful, just, and reconciled world where everyone is treated with dignity, compassion, love, and respect?”

Greg Boyle, S.J., founder of Homeboy Industries, poignantly describes this type of beloved community as “radical kinship,” a way of living based upon the recognition that “We are one, and we belong to each other.”

Current divisions in our nation may make this vision feel unattainable, but I believe the education we provide, an education grounded in rich Jesuit and Catholic traditions, can play a vital role not only in helping us to build that beloved community, but to gain the wisdom and hope that we need in order to commit to the work before us.

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