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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Teaching and Healing: Sacramental Spaces

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Blog Series: Teaching and Traumatic Events

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Teaching and learning in academic settings can sometimes appear contrived or artificial in relation to the “real” world or professional contexts for which students prepare. However, this does not always have to be the case. One of the things that has surprised me about teaching in theological education is the spontaneous emergence of holy moments or sacramental spaces in the classroom. These serendipitous occurrences have transpired despite carefully constructed lesson, lecture, and discussion plans. The intrusion of grace-filled moments in the midst of linear, rationally focused pedagogical agendas remind me of the synergistic power of the Divine that never leaves us alone, even in our best efforts and intentions.

Addressing trauma through pedagogy as a form of educational and professional development can be an integral part of the teaching and learning experience. Pain is a part of life. In fact, pain is a constant, albeit varied, component of what it means to be human. There is great value in developing ways to gradually face pain directly, as opposed to shrinking or retreating from its reality. Part of a quality classroom education is helping students negotiate methods of confronting pain. Knowledge-based and contextually-driven learning enables students to acquire applicable models for dealing with pain and trauma in other settings.

One way of thinking about teaching and traumatic events in the classroom is to envision instructional and experiential sacramental spaces. Sacraments are outward, visible signs and symbols of invisible, interior spiritual graces. They are gifts of the Divine. Although primarily viewed as specifically dogmatic and rites-based, sacraments can also be understood in terms of the varied means by which God manifests transcendental grace. Opening pathways for the intrusion of the holy, through multiple iterations, into learning spaces mirrors the healing process and thus becomes a viable way in addressing trauma.

Historically, Roman soldiers took an oath of allegiance, or *sacramentum*, declaring a vow of obedience to their militaristic superiors. Similarly, adherents of ancient religious cults ritualistically declared service to the gods or mottos heralded by those societies. By pledging devotion and loyalty, participants bonded to the values and beliefs exemplified by the institution. Christians adopted this system in response not only to the allegiance believers swore to the Divinity of Christ, but also in recognition of the gift of Christ's own suffering. The solidarity of God with humanity in pain formed the nucleus of a movement. Swearing the sacrament of faith to God was indeed, as in the other systems, a rite of membership. But it was also a means of acknowledging the work that God had done and was doing on their behalf.

This deeply reflective theological method is relatable to teaching trauma in the classroom. Teachers and learners bring their best efforts in terms of preparation, study, and participation. That is, they do the work. Yet, they also make room for the work of God. Teachers can allow for this to happen through the cultivation of listening moments in the classroom. For example, the traditionally contemplative method of *lectio divina* is organized by study, prayer, reflection, and meditation. These steps allow for holy listening to the Spirit in the midst of the rational, exegetical process of biblical learning. Balancing the logical processes involved in classroom learning with short breaks of reflection, problem-solving, and simple quiet nurtures a sacramental atmosphere. In so doing, awareness is distilled that God embraces our best efforts with the unmerited grace that transforms.

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