

Exploring Vocation: Early Career Perspectives on Vocation in Action

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Abstract

As tenure-track professors at a Catholic liberal arts college, we began our academic careers four years ago with a strong desire to excel in our research and teaching. Most importantly, however, we hoped to come to a deeper understanding of how we might imbue our work in a Christian higher education context with a strong sense of purpose and connection to our beliefs. This reflection details our experience of co-developing a sense of vocation and sacramentality in ourselves and our students during the busy pre-tenure years. We discuss how religious and scholarly texts, workshop and retreat experiences, and course design focused on experiential learning have deepened our ability to live out vocation and sacramentality through our work.

“Do not neglect the gift that is in you.” (1 Timothy 4: 14)

On the first day of classes this year, Sarah came across this quote in her daily devotions and shared it with Alisha. The two of us agreed that it speaks to desires we have had and challenges we have worked through since we were hired as tenure-track professors at St. Thomas More College, a Catholic liberal arts college four years ago. For both of us, starting our jobs as recent graduates represented a welcoming home of sorts: not only were we moving back to Western Canada after several years of study in the Central and Eastern regions of the country, but we were beginning careers in a faith-based context embodying our beliefs after graduating from secular universities. Of course, our time at our new workplace began with a certain amount of anxiety about—and a strong desire to excel in—our research and teaching. Most importantly, however, we hoped to come to a deeper understanding of how we might imbue our work in a Christian higher education context with a strong sense of purpose and connection to our beliefs.

Although we are fortunate to work in an environment

with institutional support for connecting our teaching to our belief systems, we had to see what would make sense for us, and how our strategies might fit within our respective disciplines. This is a journey that has unfolded in action, and is still unfolding as it guides our research and teaching agendas. Here, however, we focus on how it has shaped our work as teachers, and hopefully shaped our students' learning as well. Thus, this reflection details our experience of co-developing a sense of vocation and sacramentality in ourselves and our students. We focus on how religious and scholarly texts, workshop and retreat experiences, and course design centered on experiential learning have deepened our ability to live out our vocations. At the core of our learning, we emphasize the need for acceptance of the inherent vulnerability in the process of exploring vocation.

The Context: Our Vocational Calling

We met in a hallway in our college in July 2012. Our friendship and our professional relationship formed over tea as we discussed our shared interests in teaching, vocation, and doing our best not just to get through our pre-tenure years, but to thrive together in the environment our college had provided for us. Throughout the next few months we spoke of our responses to the mission statement of our college. Both of us were drawn to the ideas of partnership, growth, and inclusivity that are central to our college's mission. Specifically, the statement that resonated with us the most was the following: “Through our teaching we are devoted to a partnership of learning and growth with our students which addresses the synthesis of faith and reason in all aspects of the human condition” (St. Thomas More College, n.d., *Catholic Identity and Mission*, para.2). This stance is a direct response to John Paul II's apostolic letter *Ex corde ecclesiae* (1990), which calls Catholic universities to explore the “riches of revelation and of nature so that the united endeavour of intelligence and faith will enable people to come to the full measure of their humanity” (sec.

5). By reading our mission statement, we realized that not only did working for a Catholic college mean that our vocation for teaching and research within our respective fields provided the basis for our own lives, but also, our individual searches for meaning could be done within the wider community.

The call to be a part of, and find meaning within, the greater community of a Catholic college, felt distinctly different for us. Both of us had come from secular universities, and thus the college's mission called us to tap into our personal values and ideals in our vocation in ways that we had not done before. In our quest to understand this new dimension of our lives, one of our first faculty council meetings proved fortuitous. During this meeting, one faculty member presented her reflection on her attendance at "Collegium: A Colloquy on Faith and Intellectual Life" that previous summer. By the end of the presentation, we were convinced that we needed to attend Collegium, which is organized by the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. We were accepted to the program and attended Collegium at the end of our first year in June 2013.

The Collegium Experience: An Exercise in Vulnerability

"Collegium: A Colloquy on Faith and Intellectual Life" is an annual colloquy that aims to support Collegium's member institutions in their call to be Catholic institutions of higher education. As such, Collegium seeks to engage "faculty from all traditions to discover how they can make a particular contribution to their institution's identity that respects and explores Catholicism's traditions and goals, while also respecting and taking advantage of their own religious perspectives and talents" (About Collegium, n.d.). As part of the colloquy, we were asked to write about why we were interested in attending the colloquy. From those essays, we were placed in small groups that were made up of like-minded individuals. During the week, we also had the opportunity to participate in discipline-based discussion groups, listen to key-note addresses, attend retreats, and speak with fellows from other Catholic institutions. Given the format of Collegium, we were able to create an experience for ourselves that was tailored to our specific interests and goals. In what follows, we will discuss our individual experiences by referencing our goals, and the elements and themes that spoke to us.

Sarah: For me, Collegium offered the chance to explore possibilities for enacting vocation—in the secular and religious senses—through my teaching. Looking retrospectively, there was already evidence during my graduate studies of my hunger to live out what I term a "dual" sense of vocation as a sociologist (i.e., a strong sense of purpose as well as a call with spiritual dimensions): I had attended a conversation circle on vocation convened by theologian and social activist Mary Jo Leddy, and had also written a paper about classical theorist and sociologist Max Weber's views on science as a vocation. For me, those pre-Collegium explorations of vocation grew out of my unease with tensions in sociology between academics who see no contradiction between a life of active sociological inquiry and an active spiritual life, and those who see adherence to a particular faith tradition as problematic or in conflict with teaching sociology.

Weber (1946), in his essay *Science As a Vocation*, suggested that faith and reason need to be separated, yet many institutions of higher education founded in faith traditions—including my own—promote the very opposite: a synthesis of faith and reason. Also in contrast to Weber, sociologists C. Wright Mills (1959) and Michael Burawoy (2005) both called for a bold commitment to raising public awareness of social justice, and championing values common to Christian doctrine (e.g. promotion of social equality, compassion for disadvantaged or stigmatized groups) as responsibilities of an active and complete intellectual life.

In light of these contrasting and thought-provoking statements, I hoped that Collegium would allow me to address questions such as, How might living out my faith interface with the idea of doing "public sociology" and the public side of intellectual life more broadly? How can I, in my teaching and research, honor and live out the values of my faith (which correspond very closely to many core values of my academic discipline) without being accused of bias or scientifically unsound thinking? At the colloquy, I was fortunate to be able to discuss these questions in a non-judgmental small group environment. We agreed that our teaching in faith-based environments demanded a strong commitment to rigor in our work, and invited a particular commitment to authenticity in terms of being transparent about how our values may have shaped our attraction and commitment to our discipline. I came away from our discussions convinced that a

value-driven commitment to my discipline, taught with passion, but in a way that leaves students open to forming their own understandings of what drives their interest in the discipline, is a way that I can live out my college's mission statement and give authentically of myself in the classroom.

In the context of my day-long retreat at the end of the colloquy, titled "The Path of Vulnerability," we zeroed in on the realization that living out one's vocation and being authentic is also a commitment to vulnerability. As we considered research by vulnerability scholar Brené Brown (2012), I came to understand why I had felt unsure and at times reticent about living out a dual vocation through my teaching: the vulnerability it demands is scary. That said, Brown's research also showed high correlations between vulnerability and life satisfaction, so I accept the call to vulnerability.

Back at the college, I became more and more conscious of how one of our existing pedagogical approaches, community service-learning (CSL), offers an ideal means of co-developing vocation (alongside vulnerability!) in my students and in me. I now offer a CSL option in most of my classes, which enables students to do around twenty hours of volunteer work per semester with a community partner. These placements range from extended care homes and crisis nurseries to drop-in centers for at-risk youth and correctional facilities, thus bringing students into contact with many of society's most marginalized populations. I ask students to keep critical reflection diaries of their experiences and interactions, and invite them to comment on how engagement in public sociology might bring about positive social change for the marginalized groups they have come to know through their placement. I am always delighted to read their reflection diaries and see a sense of vocation developing in them—whether for social work, work with the elderly, or another realm of service.

Alisha: For me, Collegium represented the opportunity to understand the roles that faculty members can play in the enacting of the college's mission. The goal to understand these roles was not only because of interest in my own role, but also because the main tenets of the Collegium program and its interest in vocation are vitally linked to the basic questions that drive my own scholarship on the development of faith-based education. My underlying research question is: "To

what extent does how one educates depend on one's commitments to one's own values and ideals?" My research, then, took on a new dimension as the mission of the college essentially called me to engage in my own basic research questions on a personal, professional, and administrative level. At the same time, this new dimension of my vocational life underlined the inherent tension between my role as an educator in a Catholic college and my role as a religious studies professor. That is, as a religious studies professor, my mandate is to be objective and impersonal when looking at religion from a non-faith-based perspective; however, as a professor at a Catholic college, I am a part of the college's mission to address the relationship between faith and reason in the classroom and help my students develop "their full measure of humanity" (Ex corde ecclesiae, 1990, sec. 5 as cited in St. Thomas More College, n.d., Catholic Identity and Mission, para. 1) and a sense of vocation by "allowing students to discover their own callings in life" (St. Thomas More College, n.d., Pastoral Care of Students, para. 5).

Based on the issues that I raised in my Collegium essay, I was placed in a small group that focused on program development and administration goals. From the discussions that followed in my group, I became more and more interested in the concept of sacramentality as a way to bridge the two sides of my vocational life—my faith and my discipline's assumptions concerning pedagogy in the classroom. According to the principle of sacramentality, every moment holds the potential of becoming a moment of sacredness. That is, as Michael J. Himes (2014) argues, sacramentality means that what is and must be noticed, accepted and celebrated can be brought into our concrete experience (p. 3). For me, sacramentality means that every syllabus, every lecture, every discussion, every assignment, and every interaction has the potential to speak to the college's mission, which for me, centers on partnership, inclusivity, and the relationship between faith and reason, and my goals in teaching my specialty. With the principle of sacramentality in mind, I began to include a CSL component in several of my classes. My community partners were selected based on my class's learning objectives. Thus, two of my classes, "Jewish Religious Thought (Foundations in Social Justice)" and "Monsters and Mischief-Makers" were partnered with an association that assists newcomers to Canada in becoming community members, and an inner city organization, which serves the physical, emotional and

spiritual needs of inner city children and youth. Our partnership with this organization has been especially significant for my students, as one student, who was interested in early-childhood education, won the CSL Excellence in Writing Award for her critical reflection on her time with the organization, and another student, who was a social work major, was offered, and accepted, a permanent job with them. To me, CSL provides my students with the best opportunity to enact the college's call to work for the greater good in our community because, as our mission statement states, "the work of our college is not an end in itself, but must find application for the good of humanity" (St. Thomas More College, n.d., Catholic Identity and Mission, para. 4). Thus, in my understanding, CSL allows students to discover their gifts by working in the community and helps them to develop the full measure of their humanity.

"Cultivating Humanity": An Exercise in Envisioning Community

Two additional aspects of St. Thomas More's programming have become significant in our teaching life. As part of our commitment to our vocation and teaching according to the principle of sacramentality, both of us teach classes that are included in our social justice minor (minor in critical perspectives on social justice and the common good), and both of us have regularly taught in "Cultivating Humanity," the foundation class for this minor. "Cultivating Humanity" brings together faculty and the students of the class to explore what it means to be human through looking at various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences in order to give special attention to the challenges of intercultural relations and the fostering of respect in the face of diversity and exclusion. Our participation in "Cultivating Humanity" speaks directly to our interest in vocation and sacramentality because for us, this class gives us the opportunity to work together in the fullest sense of community (students, faculty, and the wider community as this class offers a CSL component) in order to explore questions and values that are based on the college's mission and vision. This year (2016) is especially of interest for us because Alisha is now one of the coordinators of "Cultivating Humanity," and Sarah is the chair of the committee for the social justice minor.

Moving Forward: Ongoing and Future Projects

As pre-tenure professors, our teaching experiences and our participation in Collegium have taught us about

the need to be vulnerable and accept how who we are as scholars and individuals is part of our teaching. As such, in order to enact these ideas, we see that our work with CSL, "Cultivating Humanity," and the social justice minor flows directly from our understanding of our vocation in our context precisely because our college calls us to make use of our gifts as people and scholars. The trust our community places in us has helped us develop these gifts, and as we mature as teacher-scholars, we will continue to develop in our understanding of how to use our vocation to develop future programming for our students. To that end, both of us plan to become involved in Intercordia, an international study abroad program, where students live and work in partner communities in Latin America. Moreover, we have begun a research project that focuses on aspects of mentorship at the college. This project, "Creating Community: Learning and Mentorship at a Catholic College," will study student and mentorship programs by looking at how these programs create communities that directly engage with the college's mission and with the broader ideas of the Catholic intellectual tradition. As part of this project, Alisha's 1's 4th year/MA Seminar in 2015, "Community: Thought into Action," explored the college's mission in connection with its Just Youth Group (a group that is a part of the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development of Peace) and its Basilian charism and heritage.

As we move forward, we will continue to use 1 Timothy 4:14 as our guiding principle because it teaches us not only to respect our own gifts in our teaching, but also, and more importantly, to respect and help develop the gifts of our students. Hopefully, our vocation will help our students discover their own, and that for us is the point of teaching—to show vocation in action!

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