

Comments upon receiving Roger A. Fortin Award
for Outstanding Teaching and Scholarship in the Humanities
John Sniegocki, Department of Theology
March 19, 2025

I'd like to begin my reflections today with some gratitude and a confession. First, my thanks to those who have made my being here at Xavier possible. As some of you know, my wife Elizabeth Groppe was hired into a tenure-track position first, in 2001, and I began as a visiting professor. When the time limit for that position was reached, we approached the Xavier administration with the suggestion of a tenure-track position to be shared by my wife and myself. While we were told that there was no precedent for this at Xavier, the idea was strongly supported by our chair, Bill Madges, our dean, Janice Walker, and was ultimately approved by the academic vice president at the time, Roger Fortin. So it is thanks to Bill and Janice and Roger that I'm able to be here in this position today.

I would also like thank my family for their loving support – my wife, Elizabeth, who is here with us today, and our wonderful son, John David, who is unable to be with us as he is deeply immersed in his studies of global affairs and environmental sciences at the University of Notre Dame. I'd also like to thank my theology department and other university colleagues for their friendship and support through the years, and the members of Community Friends Quaker meeting, located near campus on Winding Way, where my family and I serve as resident caretakers. There is a Quaker contingent here with us today.

Also, I would especially like to thank my students. My confession that I alluded to above is that I really am not a very good teacher, at least as that is conventionally understood. I am not particularly charismatic, I have problems with visual memory and sometimes struggle with connecting students' names and faces, and I don't always employ the latest innovations in pedagogical technique. What I do have, though, is very deep care for my students, very deep care for the state of our world, and a willingness to be honest with students about the depth of the crises that we face, along with introducing them to some of the people, movements, and practices that can potentially serve as sources of hope and resilience as we try to respond constructively to these crises. And, for most students, that is enough. Ultimately, this award belongs to my students, for their inspiring openness to being challenged and transformed.

Much of my teaching and scholarship has focused on exploring the critical issues of our time through the lens of Catholic social teaching, a tradition that I would argue is needed now more than ever. It is a tradition that affirms the fundamental dignity of all human beings as being created in the image of God and, like Jesus, stresses the centrality of compassion. It is a tradition that highlights the need for a more just and equitable distribution of our world's resources, identifying excessive economic inequality as the root cause of many of the problems that we face. It is a tradition that tells us that true political democracy is impossible without economic democracy, as concentrated economic wealth will always find ways to translate itself into concentrated control of the political system, as we see so clearly today. It is a tradition that warns of the dangers of religious nationalism

and forms of populism that scapegoat the ‘other’. It is a tradition that boldly speaks out in defense of migrants, reminding us that Jesus and his family are portrayed as migrants in the Gospel of Luke, having to flee for their lives, and reminding us that how we treat the least of these, including migrants, is how we treat Jesus. It is a tradition that tells us that climate change and care for creation are among the most critical ethical issues that the world has ever faced, something that Pope John Paul II had strongly emphasized already in 1990 and that Pope Francis stressed with even greater clarity and urgency in his encyclical *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, and his follow-up document *Laudate Deum* in which he sharply criticizes the failure to take adequate needed action.

These various principles of Catholic Social Teaching give rise to calls for far-reaching political, economic, and social transformation. As Pope Francis puts it, “let us not be afraid to say it: we want change, real change, structural change. This system is by now intolerable.”

Importantly, Catholic Social Teaching emphasizes that these transformations should be pursued through the way of nonviolence, rejecting the path of violence and war. Pope Francis powerfully states: “A war is always – always! – the defeat of humanity, always....There is no such thing as a just war: they do not exist....There was a time, even in our Churches, when people spoke of a holy war or a just war. Today we cannot speak in this manner....Wars are always unjust... To be true followers of Jesus today includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence....Let us make active nonviolence our way of life.”

These themes of Catholic Social Teaching form the basis for the 4 Jesuit Apostolic Preferences which have been put forth by the Society of Jesus as principles and commitments that should guide all Jesuit institutions, including Xavier University. As many of you know, these four preferences are:

- Showing the way to God through spiritual practice
- Walking with the marginalized and excluded
- Accompanying young people in the creation of a hope-filled future
- Caring for the earth, our common home

It is crucial to understand that Catholic Social Teaching is not addressed just to Catholics. It is rather addressed to everyone, meant to be part of a broader global conversation and dialogue. It is also open to critique. In our university context, students are of course not expected to necessarily agree with all that Catholic Social Teaching affirms, but they should at least be aware of what it affirms and be able to engage in critical and respectful conversation with it along with other dialogue partners.

These themes and commitments from Catholic Social Teaching and the Jesuit tradition have of course not always been welcomed and positively received, particularly by those who benefit from the structural injustices that the tradition challenges. Jesuit higher education includes a tradition of martyrdom, as exemplified for example by the Jesuits from El Salvador who, along with their housekeeper and her daughter, as well as Archbishop Oscar Romero, are commemorated on the side of Bellarmine Chapel.

Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, former superior general of the Society of Jesus, speaks of the core task of Jesuit education as being to foster ‘well-educated solidarity.’ “Students, Kolvenbach says, “must let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering, and engage it constructively. They should learn to perceive, think, judge, choose, and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and the oppressed.” As part of this process of formation Kolvenbach highlights the importance of experience.

Part of what I bring to my teaching are insights from my own past experiences. These include, among others, being involved in peace movement and Central America solidarity work in my final years of high school, living in a Gandhian community in the mountains of south-central France as an internship during my undergraduate studies at Earlham College, living for several years on a farm in Iowa connected with the Catholic Worker movement, co-directing along with my wife a peace & justice center in Little Rock, Arkansas, and several months spent in Guatemala where I lived with a family of the disappeared, the eldest daughter of the family having been abducted and killed by the death squads for her work as a university student in defense of human rights. And it was also in Guatemala where I witnessed many inspiring acts of courage in pursuit of a more just world.

In addition to drawing upon my own experience, part of my teaching at Xavier has involved providing experiential opportunities for my students. Two forms that this has taken have been immersion trips to Detroit, exploring issues of racial and economic justice, urban farming, sustainability, and spirituality, and a new peace & justice-focused trip to Guatemala for undergraduate students and theology graduate students which Diane Ceo-DiFrancesco and I co-led for the first time this past May, exploring human rights, Mayan culture and spirituality, and the role of the Catholic Church. A very special part of this experience is that I was able to share it with my son John David, who accompanied us, along with a wonderful Xavier group. Some photos from those immersions can be seen on the display table.

At the core of my teaching has been attention to the whole person. This includes attention to the emotional and spiritual dimensions of the issues being explored. For example, when discussing climate change, we not only examine the science, the politics, and the ethics, but we also examine what it’s like to be a young person growing up in a context in which the very habitability of the planet is being undermined. And we explore what kinds of practices may help us to face this honestly without being overwhelmed by despair or paralyzed by hopelessness. In all my courses contemplative practices such as meditation and mindfulness, drawn in part from the Buddhist and Christian traditions but presented in ways accessible to persons from any or no religious tradition, play an integral role.

This ability to engage with students in an interdisciplinary and holistic way, caring for the whole person, is, I believe, one of the unique contributions that a theology department can make to a Catholic university and why it is such a crucial part of the core curriculum.

Let me end with a few comments from my students, comments which demonstrate their inspiring openness to transformation and which provide me with the reasons to keep doing this work:

“Overall, I am extremely happy I took this class. I can’t even put into words the impact it has had on me.”

“This was a fantastic class. It opened my eyes to so many issues and changed the way that I look at the world. I’m glad I took it! May have changed my life – and saved it.”

“Overall, this class has really touched me in ways I never expected. I know it will continue to inspire me throughout my life....I can truly say that no other class has drawn out this much passion nor has it challenged me the way this has.”

“This course has opened my eyes...I have connected deeply with some of the issues and many of the issues hold a new importance in my heart....I am not only grateful for the space to learn about and explore these issues, but [also for] the fire and compassion that has grown inside me.”

“This class has offered me very sad facts but it has also offered me strategies to grapple with them. It has broken my heart but it has also healed it. It has changed me into someone who is more aware, more able to make thoughtful changes in my lifestyle, better able to think critically, and therefore better able to help others. I am so grateful to have experienced that change, to have had so many discussions about such critical topics, and to have opened my eyes to so much of the world’s pain and to so much of its beauty.”

“The importance of this course is not simply academic for me. This course’s impacts will last a lifetime.... So, this course, in whole, has taught me how to be a better person. I’ve learned how to concentrate better, how to pray better, how to give better, how to love better, and how to change better...If the Jesuit tradition is really about educating the entire person, then every single person at a Jesuit institution should take [this] course.”

May all of us who are teachers be blessed with such wonderful students.

Thank you.