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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Fifty Years of Homelessness: Reflections on Co-Curricular Collaborations between the Los Angeles Worker and Loyola Marymount University

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ABSTRACT

We reflect on the role of "co-curricular" partners in Jesuit education, focusing on the work of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker. Today, Jesuit education is faced with many challenges. It must provide students with a world-class education without reducing them to penury. It must invite them into in the historically extended conversation that is Christian humanism—a reflection on the good, the true, and the beautiful—in the context of a culture that views education only instrumentally. However, perhaps the *distinctive* mark of Jesuit education is that it would be incomplete without exposing the theoretical work of the university to the practical, lived reality of our world, including the realities of poverty, addiction, violence, and injustice.

Keywords:
homelessness; poverty; education; community-based learning

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Introduction

When the *Cura Psychologia* gathering was held at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) in the fall of 2024, the planning committee decided that it would be appropriate to think about the epidemic of homelessness and related issues in the United States. Homelessness, of course, is a nationwide problem that has waxed and waned over the years, but it is also a problem that, over the past decade, has been increasingly acute and visible here in Los Angeles. The August 2024 Homelessness Count—not a count strictly speaking but an estimate based on shelter occupancy, surveys, observational counts, and more—estimated that at the time of our gathering there were over 45,000 homeless people in the City of Los Angeles, which was more than one out of every one hundred residents, including thousands of children and elderly people. That is actually a slight *downward* trend (2.2%) from previous years. Nevertheless, once you leave the most affluent and insulated parts of the city, it is clear that homelessness remains at crisis levels.

During our gathering, we reflected on what our various disciplines—psychology, theology, philosophy—had to say about this phenomenon, as well as its significance for our students and the kind of education we help to facilitate. Not surprisingly, we came up with more questions than answers. However, in the face of this suffering and injustice, we were challenged to think anew about just what we are doing in our lives, personally and professionally.

It is fair to say that the highlight of the workshop was the day we took our out-of-town guests to visit two organizations that have a significant history with Loyola Marymount University: Homeboy Industries and the Los Angeles Catholic Worker.

Homeboy Industries got its start in 1988, when Fr. Greg Boyle began working to improve the lives of former gang members. Fr. Boyle had been assigned to Dolores Mission Church two years earlier. It was the poorest Catholic parish in in the city, in the neighborhood with the highest concentration of gang activity, at a time when LA was known as the gang capital of the world. Homeboy Industries has grown significantly over the years, and now has a bakery, a café, a diner, a dog-grooming business, and a silk-screening and embroidery program, all while still providing core services like tattoo removal, addiction recovery programs, legal services, counseling and mental health resources, job training, and more.

The Catholic Worker started in 1933 as a newspaper, founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, but soon blossomed into a loose network of "hospitality houses," farms, and communes serving different communities. There was a strong emphasis on serving the poor and carrying

out other corporal works of mercy, but the Worker was also, in different degrees, committed to nonviolence, pacifism, economic redistribution of wealth, and similar revolutionary causes. Increasingly, in the 1950s and 1960s, this led to acts of civil disobedience—for example, against nuclear weapons. Two figures loom large at the Los Angeles Catholic Worker: Jeff Dietrich and Catherine Morris, who have lived in the Catholic Worker hospitality house and served the homeless community on Skid Row for over 50 years. The Hippie Kitchen serves fresh hot meals to the homeless of Skid Row three days a week. Jeff and Catherine have led a rotating cast of volunteers over the decades, accompanying, serving, and caring for thousands of men and women who, for one reason or another, fell through the cracks of the American Dream and landed on the street. Jeff sums up his life at the Catholic Worker this way:

> I get up every day and make soup for the poor and once a week I sleep on the kitchen floor so that I will be able to get the soup pots on early. I wash dishes, I wipe tables, and I serve soup. I clean up vomit and I clean up shit. I have blockaded the Federal Building to protest the wars, and on occasion, I have thrown my body beneath the City's dump trucks to save the property of homeless poor folks from illegal confiscation by civic authorities.[1]

Food, shelter, clinics, carts for carrying belongings, programming—the Catholic Worker has done it all over the years, including accompanying people who, with nowhere else to turn, have died in their hospice room. Dietrich has been sent to prison no fewer than forty times for protesting various manifestations of violence, injustice, or indifference.

Working at LMU, we have visited both Homeboy and the Catholic Worker, had conversations with Fr. Greg and Jeff, used their books in class, and volunteered. Charlotte has worked closely with Jeff for a number of years, about which more below. However, visiting with colleagues who were hearing about the work of these remarkable organizations for the first time was an eye-opener. Any visit to the Catholic Worker or to Homeboy Industries is inspiring. It is the kind of thing that makes you rethink what is possible. Speaking with former gang members who are turning their lives around, or with people struggling with homelessness and addiction, is a powerful experience. Speaking with people who have given their lives to help people in these situations is both humbling and in a way unsettling. It is the kind of thing that makes you wonder about spending your life in the privileged halls of a university.

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1 Jeff Dietrich, "The Reluctant Saint," *Catholic Agitator* (February 2003); Dietrich, *The Good Samaritan: Stories from the Los Angeles Catholic Worker on Skid Row* (Marymount Institute Press/TSEHAI, 2014), 2.

On the day we visited, because we were with colleagues from other Jesuit institutions, we fielded many questions about LMU's relationship with Homeboy Industries and the Catholic Worker, which got us thinking again about LMU's mission and about our own vocations, particularly as teachers and mentors to young students.

The Challenges

It is no novel observation to say that higher education in the United States is in crisis.

For many students, attending college requires taking on significant and in some cases crippling debt. In the late 1980s, I (Brian) worked my way through college in bookstores, cafés, outdoor shops, and the like. Tuition and fees at UCLA, one of the top twenty schools in the country, were just $434 per quarter. With a reasonable sense of economy, I was able to pay my own way, including tuition, rent and utilities, food, and all the rest. A classic tale of student poverty that I view today through the rose-tinted glasses of nostalgia. I worked too many hours for my own good as a student—in truth, there were other reasons I was not a good student—but my jobs allowed me to emerge poor but *debt-free* from my undergraduate studies. That would be impossible for our students today. The minimum hourly wage in California is just over $16, or about $33,000 per year before taxes. LMU's tuition *alone* is over $60,000. And, of course, things like student debt are not unrelated to housing insecurity.

Beyond the economic proposition, universities are under fire from all sides of our polarized culture. Depending on who you ask, they are either too woke or not woke enough. They are silencing diverse voices, or they are platforming extremists. They have abandoned merit in pursuit of diversity, or they have abandoned diversity to pursue profit and preserve class privilege. It seems that everyone—or at least a number of very loud voices—objects to what universities are offering. Recently, the federal government waded into the fray, imposing cuts, freezing research funding, investigating DEI programs, cracking down on student activism, and other attempts to influence teaching and scholarship.

Finally, we face unprecedented—and we use that word advisedly—challenges related to the creation and distribution of knowledge. The internet has democratized knowledge production, but in so doing has eroded the impact of expertise. Social media connects people in novel ways, but guided by algorithms designed to maintain engagement in the "attention economy," it has destroyed our powers of attention and our ability to focus. Generative AI, which promised to solve problems and free us from drudgery, is leading to the outsourcing of thinking itself as people use it

to summarize difficult texts rather than read them, or express "their own" ideas in essays drafted or ghost-written by AI.

Unfortunately, all of these challenges are coming to a head in the context of a zeitgeist that is questioning, if not outright rejecting, traditional educational goals and values, including those that have historically animated Jesuit colleges and universities. Our culture frames university life in terms of two goals: first, climbing the economic ladder to make as much money as possible and, second, hedonistically enjoying the ride while doing so. A recipe two parts *Wall Street* and one part *Animal House*.

A Partial Response

We are under no illusion that we have the answers to these complex, interconnected challenges. There may be no solution to some of them, in the sense of something that would solve problems or make the challenges go away. All we can do is respond to the challenges as best we can. *Respond*, from *re* "again" *spondere* "to pledge," committing ourselves again to our vocation as teachers, scholars, professors. Some observations follow.

In the United States, the experience of financing college on your own is impossible today, even at most state schools. Tuition has outpaced inflation in part because of increased student services and support, in part because of changes in state and local funding, and in part because technological gains in efficiency and productivity, which keep costs down in other industries, do not apply to education. Whatever the causes, the fact is that postsecondary education in the United States is a massive investment that for many requires taking on significant debt.

When a student comes to LMU, they give us at least two things. First, time and attention—that is to say, life—and second, money. In exchange for the former they have a right to expect some measure of education in the classical sense. We help to draw out (*e-ducere*) of each student some measure of wisdom corresponding to their capacity to discover it and to our own capacity to facilitate it. The more attention they give to the texts, the more engaged they are, the more education they get. So, on this first point, in exchange for four years of what poet Mary Oliver calls their "one wild and precious life," they gain, or stand to gain, a measure of wisdom, a fuller human life.

However, each student also gives us treasure: more than $60,000 in tuition each year. If we are going to charge that much money, it is entirely appropriate that they expect some measure of financial return on their investment. Of course, unpacking the exchange like that is far too simple. Student tuition pays our salaries and so also funds the education they receive. Nevertheless, it is useful to distinguish students' time, engagement,

and effort from their tuition dollar. The former give them access to an education that involves Plato and Aristotle, Boethius and Augustine, Dante and Shakespeare. The latter—especially today—should see some return in kind.

That is sobering because at least on paper a return on one's tuition dollar is easier at non-Jesuit schools. Consider LMU, where we teach, and California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), where Brian earned his MA. In 2023, LMU's Pell Grant rate was 13%; at CSULB, it was 50%. So, it seems that CSULB is enrolling many poorer students looking to move up the socioeconomic ladder. LMU's 2024 tuition was $60,970; CSULB, $3,042. That does not look great. It is true that private colleges give out significant financial aid and that the average cost of attendance at LMU is actually *below* the tuition sticker price while it is *above* the tuition sticker price at CSULB. Still, the difference in discounted cost remains stark: $8,721 (CSULB) versus $45,394 (LMU). That's $146,692 over four years.

The point is not that a Jesuit education is not worth the price. Quite the contrary. In fact, the average income for LMU graduates is $78,349 compared with $64,403 for CSULB graduates, meaning that ten years after graduation the cost difference has been "repaid" and the LMU graduate is making more money for the rest of her working life.

Of course, statistical averages are just that, averages. Variations abound, from the differences between majors to the significance of internships and first jobs to unforeseeable fluctuations in the job market, the rental market, and the stock market. Most of all, statistics do not account for individual virtues: hustle, persistence, economy, and so on.

Nevertheless, the point remains essential: if private universities, including Jesuit universities, are going to charge upwards of a hundred thousand a year for an undergraduate degree, they must make good on the promise to improve the economic circumstances of their graduates. Otherwise, people will look elsewhere, losing all the nonfinancial benefits of a Jesuit education.

Although we've been speaking about ensuring our graduates have a reasonable chance of a return on their tuition dollar, it feels awkward to do so. That kind of argument is not our natural idiom. Like many scholars in the humanities, we gravitated toward academia because we felt and believed in the intrinsic value of the pursuit, that it was worthwhile to contemplate the good, the true, and the beautiful independent of any practical benefits. And we are happy to be at a Jesuit school because while Jesuit education has always been about career preparation, it has never been *just* about career preparation.

Many things happen to our students during the four years they travel life's road with us. They eat and sleep, exercise, and socialize. They may find a *métier*, something that in practical terms will help them secure their daily bread. They will make friends and begin to spread the wings of their independence. They will mature—some more readily than others—in a variety of ways. They will make mistakes; hopefully they will learn from them. Perhaps they will fall in love. These things are genuine goods.

However, we often remind our undergraduates that none of those things should be their *primary* focus while at LMU. During the four years they are with us, their primary goal should be the cultivation of a rich and varied intellectual life. After all, for many Americans college is the only time when they are given the liberty and the license, perhaps even the obligation, to think deeply about ideas. Some of those ideas may be practical, but others are impractical and in a sense all the more urgent for their impracticality. There will be a lifetime of focus on practical goods in post-college life and precious little time for the good, the true, or the beautiful. The latter are important values for all of us, but they are especially relevant to the transition from adolescence to adulthood, when students are figuring out who they are and imagining who they might become. At a Jesuit school, this entails a difficult balancing act between selfishness and selflessness.

Grappling with the big questions—and the big books that take them up—is not easy. It requires time and effort—not just for the reading but for the rereading, the rumination, the reflection. And this means that taking full advantage of a university education requires selfishness, at least for a few years. Not selfishness in the crass sense of self-serving but rather in the sense of prioritizing one's education and the formation of virtuous habits that, as Aristotle reminds us, will help one to flourish.

Just as students should take time to ensure their own physical and psychological well-being, they should take time to improve their intellectual and spiritual well-being. And the college years form the core of that time—when you have the liberty to lose yourself in Shakespeare or Plato or Augustine, when you are among others who at least ostensibly are doing the same thing, when you have professors and guides to support you. To continue the analogy, you are more likely to prioritize physical health if you establish good habits while young—working out, eating well, getting enough sleep, and so on. So too you are more likely to continue the humanistic "care of the soul" that is at the heart of the liberal arts if you develop those habits as a young person.

But, of course, a Jesuit education is not, in the end, a selfish one. Our model is not that of late nineteenth-century Oxbridge or the Gilded Age

Ivy League, where elites attended a kind of quasi-intellectual finishing school that gave them a veneer of culture and a semblance of intellectual depth, but which was really about entrenching class privilege, establishing social connections that would advance their personal interests, and laying the foundations for a lucrative career.

Although a liberal arts education has an undeniably self-centered aspect to it—after all, it is the *student's* life that is most directly enriched—Jesuit universities are committed to the belief that we live not only, or even perhaps primarily, for ourselves. A Jesuit education makes you a better person, but good people do not live only for themselves. This is why places like Homeboy Industries and the Catholic Worker fit into Jesuit education. They do not form the core of that education, which is the tradition of Christian humanism. However, if not the essence of a Jesuit liberal arts education, they are *necessary* to it, and in the strong sense.

Our universities and our students are after all quite privileged. That idea, *privilege*, is thrown around a great deal in the contemporary academy, sometimes too casually and thoughtlessly. By saying our students are privileged, we do not mean to deny, efface, or minimize their challenges—economic, social, psychological, or existential. In our years at LMU, we have mentored students who grew up in foster homes and who, after being turned out at eighteen, spent a large portion of their undergraduate careers couch-surfing or sleeping in cars. We have had students who were battling terminal illnesses while they pursued their degrees, aware that they would likely not live long enough to put them to use. We have had students who were the primary caregiver for a dying parent and students who were facing eviction, possible deportation, or other forms of displacement. And, of course, our current students are from a generation dealing with mental health issues exacerbated by a once-in-a-generation (we hope) pandemic.

Nevertheless, anyone at a Jesuit university in the United States is privileged to some degree. Few of our students have experienced the instability that characterizes the childhood and adolescence of many of the people working with Homeboy Industries or the kind of homelessness seen on Skid Row. None of them have experienced the conditions at Agbogbloshie or Dharavi, Mariupol or Darfur.

The problem is that if you do not see suffering—actually see it—it is easy to miss just how profoundly broken our world is. Of course, we do not want our students to experience that suffering and brokenness directly. We do not want *anyone* to experience it. But if students only know about these realities theoretically, it is easy to minimize them or misunderstand them.

If you ask someone, *theoretically*, if they are morally obligated to give time or treasure to people suffering in "extreme poverty"—those living on

less than $2.66 per day in 2024—it is very easy to think that you are not morally *obligated* to help. It might be *good* if you were to do so, but there is no moral *duty* here. It is much harder to think that if you actually see extreme poverty. Likewise, if you meet someone who was born into the poverty of Skid Row and grew up in that environment, you start to see the structural aspects of poverty, homelessness, and addiction in a new light. It is much harder to maintain the belief that your position at LMU is the result *only* of personal virtue and hard work. As Charlotte will make clear soon, everything happens in community; neither our successes nor our failures take place in a vacuum.

For the past decade, Brian has been taking students to the Balkans, where—working with the European Center for the Study of War and Peace (ECSWP)—they interact directly with communities impacted by the war, sectarian violence, and genocides of the 1990s. Sadly, in recent years they have also been learning alongside displaced Ukrainians who are studying with ECSWP. The LMU students come to appreciate that their own history and experience are highly contingent. If they had been born elsewhere or otherwise, they would have had very different lives. We do not want to make the error of conflating the first-hand experience of homelessness or violence with the "as-if" experience of narrative or sympathy. However, it is a perspective-changing experience to connect the *theory* of the classroom to the *lived experiences* of the people who come to Homeboy Industries or the homeless served by the Catholic Worker or the survivors of genocide with the ECSWP. Interacting with these communities makes them—and the challenges and injustices they grapple with—more concrete, a bit less abstract.

This is why Homeboy Industries and the Catholic Worker are vital partners in educating our students. The kind of experience they offer is not strictly speaking *extracurricular*. It is *co-curricular*, part of a full education in the Jesuit idiom. These are places where a student's theoretical grasp of justice and forgiveness, the individual and society, freedom and opportunity, self-interest and love meets the concrete reality of people's lives.

We have taught classes with "service learning," "engaged learning," or "experiential learning" components (the terminology has shifted several times over the past two decades). However, Charlotte has worked more directly with Jeff Dietrich and the Catholic Worker, and her reflections illustrate the impact of these experiences on our students.

The Los Angeles Catholic Worker

The LA Catholic Worker's Hippie Kitchen (its soup kitchen) is located at the corner of 6th Street and Gladys Street at the heart of LA's Skid Row.

To get there, you pass through block after block of what has become the de facto containment zone for the "superfluous" homeless—human beings stowed away because their very presence inconveniently broadcasts that their lives constitute the real cost of our lives. Throughout Skid Row, you find makeshift tent and cardboard dwelling places, broken down vans and campers from the 1960s and 1970s, extended-stay motels, carts filled to the brim with valued personal belongings. You see people wandering, people huddling together, people strewn about frozen in contorted poses in apocalyptic scenes caused by the fentanyl epidemic, drug sales, and drug use, as well as soup kitchens and shelters. In the midst of the blighted industrial area that constitutes Skid Row, the Hippie Kitchen itself is a beautiful and serene oasis with its garden, its mural of "Jesus of the Breadline," and its mosaics and other artistic displays.

Every time I (Charlotte) step into the LA Catholic Worker's garden sanctuary, I am reminded of Augustine's *Confessions* in which a garden is the space of vicissitudes and transformations. In Augustine's case, a garden provides the stage for the perpetual human reenactment of the Fall through his and his friends' infamous pear theft (Book II), their conversion (Book VIII), and his and his mother's shared mystical experience during which they passed beyond their souls "to that place of everlasting plenty, where you feed Israel for ever with the food of Truth" until they could reach out and touch wisdom itself (Book IX).

Like Augustine's garden, the Catholic Worker's garden releases us from our myopia and reminds us that everything happens in community—you never fall alone and you are never saved alone, whatever form this falling and redemption may take. The guests of the Hippie Kitchen are invited to sit outside in the beautiful leafy garden to enjoy their meals with dignity. It offers a peaceful antidote to the dehumanizing harshness outside. The garden is a vibrant embodiment of the medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen's concept of *viriditas*, or greening, the vigorous, life-giving, and creative force that sustains, animates, and permeates everyone and everything physically and spiritually (a form of inner sap). Suggestive of the teaching of the LA Catholic Worker's beliefs, Hildegard holds that doing justice and engaging in peace-making is that greening power.

After many years as a professor at LMU, I adopted the LA Catholic Worker as an engaged learning placement in a couple of my courses. The fruitful questions and discussions generated by this placement have left me convinced that co-curricular experiences deepen our students' learning. Now, how and why have I reached this conclusion? Why do I consider the Catholic Worker an important part of the educational landscape at LMU?

To answer these questions, I want to contextualize myself as a scholar and teacher. I was trained as a historian of Christianity at secular institutions in Europe and the United States (die Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Lund University in Sweden, and the University of Chicago). The main part of my adult life has been dedicated to deciphering ancient and medieval texts and manuscripts in various languages as I have focused my research on mysticism. I teach in a theological studies department, in a discipline that is all too often confused with catechesis or faith formation and so, unfortunately, is frequently dismissed by colleagues from other disciplines as incommensurate with the academic standards of the rest of the humanities and social studies.[2] Nevertheless, while theological studies broadly speaking pertain to religion, the discipline (like many others) does not operate monologically but dialogically. It intersects with a multitude of other disciplines, such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, economics, gender studies, modern and ancient languages, and so forth.

Although I do not wish to universalize my experience, I do assert that it is exceedingly difficult to remain staunchly in the proverbial disciplinary silo. To do justice and due diligence to my research and teaching, I am dependent on interlocuters from other disciplines. I have always been insatiably fascinated by what people believe, why they believe it, and what function their belief serves in their lives. I have spent the better part of my adult life studying, on the one hand, expressions of divergent people's beliefs as well as the dialectical relationship between the beliefs of individuals and religious institutions, and, on the other hand, those expressed in cotemporaneous social, cultural, philosophical, and political discourse.

During my undergraduate and graduate studies, not once was I exposed to community-based, engaged, or experiential learning. I must admit that when I initially encountered it at LMU, I quietly labeled it anti-intellectual and promptly dismissed it, secretly vowing that it would never appear in any of my syllabi. To this day, I am not a univocal convert to community-based learning because of its potential problems of local colonialism, exploitation, and voyeurism. My students and I foreground our time at the LA Catholic Worker with discussions about how to avoid exploitative practices by making the poor conduits for our intellectual, existential, and psychological formations as "whole persons." I admit that there is no indomitable antidote, and it continues to be the cause of my ambivalence.

2 For the sake of brevity, I avoid a broader discussion of the methodological distinctions between theology and religious studies. At LMU, the nomenclature of theological studies is meant to signal that members of the department in accordance with their different training engage in theology, religious studies, and pastoral studies.

I also tend to avoid grand conversations about personal transformation because they signal expected outcomes and experiences for my students that become increasingly problematic in the evaluation and assignment of grades. Moreover, should my students' putative transformations be on the back of people who are marginalized and spurned largely for structural reasons?

If I were to describe my slow and cautious embrace of community-based learning in more comfortably academic terms, I would contend that I nurse a commitment to Aristotelian and Thomistic epistemology broadly speaking. Jesuit universities are often guilty of promiscuously throwing around the notion of "faith seeking understanding" or "I believe so that I may understand" in axiomatic fashion, but we rarely probe what such assertions mean epistemologically. In fact, among many things that nearly got Thomas Aquinas swept up in the Aristotelian condemnations of 1270 and 1277 at the University of Paris was the conviction that we develop our understanding and knowledge out of experiences, observations, and experiments rather than out of a priori claims. Engaged- or community-based learning offers experiences that concretize my students' questions.

What finally led me to make the leap and introduce engaged- or community-based learning in some of my courses was a years-long organic process of getting to know Jeff Dietrich. As Brian noted, Jeff and his wife Catherine have been part of the LA Catholic Worker community for over 50 years, dedicating themselves to "putting flesh on the values of the Catholic Worker"[3] by living in solidarity with the poor and unhoused on Skid Row and with the Catholic Worker community in their house in Boyle Heights. Over the years, Jeff and other Catholic Workers would come to my classes as guest lecturers, which evoked more questions from my students (many of whom began to go to the Hippie Kitchen independently or in small groups) and finally requests from them to go there as a class, first once and then continually. Our time at the LA Catholic Worker expanded our classroom, as the people we encountered became our co-instructors. In some of my courses, I teach such topics as the Catholic Church's commitment to workers and unions, liberation theology, and eco-theology. These inevitably provoke broad questions that arise in other disciplines as well: What constitutes human progress? What does "success" mean? What do I value? How do I understand the meaning of justice?

While these questions in and of themselves do not necessarily lead to dramatic personal Copernican revolutions, they decenter the self a little bit at a time in a slippage toward the other. Students frequently feel that their

3 Jeff Dietrich, "Reluctant Saint," 2.

own dreams and ambitions bump up against the visions presented in these texts, especially since "progress" and "success" tend to be linked to the idea of material improvement. While my students are not unsympathetic to the visions, they are uneasy about their implications for their own anticipated futures. More uncomfortably, what if their envisioned future, rooted in the elusive ideal of an American dream and the delusive idea of American exceptionalism, rests on the fact that food insecurity, lack of housing, and displacement either remain constant or increase because all living beings share in the world's resources? It requires difficult intellectual, existential, and psychological acrobatics to, on the one hand, recognize that we exist in an interconnected and interdependent community with all that is created and, on the other hand, fail to question current structures. Linear positivist historical viewpoints are challenged. How can we claim that we are on the path toward "progress" when 30% of the world's population suffers from food insecurity, when 20% lack adequate housing and basic services, when 50% lack access to basic healthcare and 70% lack access to basic mental health services; when 17% of the US population (approximately 8% worldwide) struggle with some form of substance addiction?[4] These statistics are on full display on LA's Skid Row.

I am not an arbiter of our students' dreams and future plans; as an educator I am in the business of inflicting some positional instability, provoking more questions, and inviting them to use their critical thinking by conceiving of alternatives to the frequently binary options presented. For example, the choice is not only between capitalism and socialism—what about the gift economy, distributionism, or other economic models? These are questions that arise not only in classrooms of theology and religious studies but also in those of philosophy and psychology. Interdisciplinary resources as well as experience help us wrestle with these issues. The dialectics of being well-grounded in one's discipline while stepping out of it in dialogue with other disciplines invokes the invitation of many mystics to experience a form of ek-stasis—being firmly grounded while stepping out of oneself and moving toward another.

Engagement with the extended community of the LA Catholic Worker—the tangible encounter with fellow human beings confined to containment areas for the unhoused and poor—often compels students to reconsider (however slightly) the meaning of concepts such as progress and success, thinking beyond materialism and individualism, in broader concentric communal circles: Los Angeles, the United States, the world.

4 On the intersectional issues involved in addiction and homelessness, see for example Dietrich, "Sheba, Queen of Skid Row," *Catholic Agitator* (August 2012); Dietrich, *Good Samaritan*, 65–69.

The encounters and conversations at the LA Catholic Worker are awkward and uncomfortable sometimes, but they are also generative. Once you know someone's name and they know yours, once you have heard a bit of someone's story and they have heard a bit of yours, you cannot but remember your shared humanity and that you are part of a wider community in solidarity despite your differences. The witnessing of the lived reality on Skid Row pulls students out of solipsism. Many of my students remark with great surprise that the person they met was not so different from themselves, had grown up under similar circumstances, and had similar interests—a recognition that there is no chasm that separates you from the circumstances of the other person, and a reminder that changing places is not out of the question save for marginal differences. After talking to people at the Hippie Kitchen (some of whom were born on Skid Row and have lived their whole lives there), you cannot help but see the brokenness of our social and economic structures. The pretense that we have earned what we have and what we are, and that we are somehow more worthy of than others, gives way to the realization that we all live by gift,[5] for "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Cor. 4:7).

Unlike the other Jesuit Universities in the United States, LMU draws on the combined heritage of the Jesuits, the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange. LMU's mission statement calls everyone in our community to the encouragement of learning, the promotion of justice, and the service of faith (which should not be confused with fideism), the sum of which should be the education of the whole person. While I cannot pretend to have a complete grasp of what it means to "educate the whole person," I interpret it as a holistic view of my students as embodied, thinking, perceiving, and feeling human beings which calls for an integrated learning experience. Methodologically, it becomes complex, but I envision it to include a move beyond logocentrism (both philosophically and in the sense of a pure focus on the written word) to include material culture, observation, and experiences.

The 32nd Jesuit General Congregation (especially decree 4 "Our Mission Today: The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice") highlights our inalienable responsibilities toward each other. In the community formed at the LA Catholic Worker, such basic things as learning another person's name and recognizing their face are tentative steps towards clarifying our responsibilities toward one another—responsibilities that we are hesitant to extend to the poor and "troublesome" on Skid Row. While homelessness as such often seems insurmountable to take on, the respon-

5 Jeff Dietrich, "Wheelchair Bob," *Catholic Agitator* (February 2003); Dietrich, *Good Samaritan*, 10.

sibilities that come with affirming our interconnectedness and the fact of being "our brother's keeper" prevent us from pretending that inequalities and injustices are part of the inevitable order of things.

The oft-cited address at Santa Clara University in 2000 by Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, 29th Superior General of the Society of Jesus, centered the role of justice in Jesuit higher education.[6] Kolvenbach appealed for solidarity through contact that would give rise to intellectual inquiry and ethical reflection. He outlined the goal of helping our students to become whole persons engaged in this world:

> Tomorrow's "whole person" cannot be whole without an educated awareness of society and culture with which to contribute socially, generously, in the real world. Tomorrow's whole person must have, in brief, a well-educated solidarity. . . . When the heart is touched by direct experience, the mind may be challenged to change. . . . Students, in the course of their formation, 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.[7]

Kolvenbach reminded us that the service of faith and the promotion of justice cannot be reduced to a limp response but requires a whole-hearted "action-oriented commitment to the poor with a courageous personal option." Such a vision afflicts comfortable tribalism. It thus becomes a duty of educators at Jesuit institutions to cultivate an "educated solidarity" by forging ways to experience the multifaceted "gritty reality of this world." The missions and ethoses of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange hew closely to the praxis of the LA Catholic Worker. The Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary commit their lives to responding to the needs of the marginalized by working with others for justice. The Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange vow to bring all people into union with God and one another. Through corporal and spiritual works of mercy, they strive to address the ills of society and offer a compassionate presence.

Many of the members of the LA Catholic Worker live together with the poor at the Ammon Hennacy House of Hospitality in Boyle Heights, and serve and eat with the poor at the Hippie Kitchen. They vow "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable,"[8] which, if my classes are

6 Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., "The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education," accessed May 10, 2025, https://www.scu.edu/ic/programs/ignatian-worldview/kolvenbach/.

7 Kolvenbach, "Service of Faith."

8 Los Angeles Catholic Worker, "About the LACW," accessed July 12, 2025, https://www.lacatholicworker.org/about-the-lacw/.

a barometer, is a commitment that they live out vigorously. Nevertheless, neither the lives nor the writings of members romanticize the poor or their experiences with them. They talk openly about living simply and eschewing materialism to counter society's markers of success, which means living a life of ostensive "failure," at least according to common standards of success and society and the culture's idolatry of effectiveness and results—but also about the constant difficulty of doing so.[9] According to Dorothy Day, writing about the daily work of the LA Catholic Worker, "what we do is very little. . . . What we do is so little we may seem to be constantly failing. But so did [Jesus Christ] fail. He met with apparent failure on the Cross. But unless the seed fall into the earth and die, there is no harvest. And why must we see results? Our work is to sow."[10] Such a process-oriented rather than result-oriented vocation is exceedingly scary and provocative, and—like a Jesuit education—it threatens to "ruin you for life." The calling to a steadfast commitment to failure needles you. You catch yourself trying to defang it, soften it, and make it more palatable so that it does not chafe so uncomfortably against the values that you purport to have and the life that you hope to lead.

I have found that experiences and encounters at the LA Catholic Worker hinder our students and hinder me from compartmentalizing our thinking. They help us recognize our interconnectedness in palpable ways. They leave us with the distressing awareness of the unstated answer to Cain's question to God in Genesis 4:9, "Am I my brother's keeper?" It lingers in the silence that follows the first of a continuous human tradition of fratricides. The uncomfortable answer can only be in the affirmative: "Yes, I am my brother's keeper with all the troubles and joys that that entails." And what, then, does that mean in this life with its ruthless wars, starvation, price increases, escalating housing shortages, and falling hiring rates? Minimally, it requires personal presence and showing up.

At the LA Catholic Worker's Hippie Kitchen, my students' intellectual and experiential knowledge is deepened through interpersonal encounters. They rarely come away with fully formed answers, but their questions are sharpened and their perspectives are shaken as the realities of LA's Skid Row begin to indict society as it is and demand change. The repudiation of anything has to be informed by knowledge and experience. One has to be a knowledgeable and conscientious objector. The experience of Skid

9 For example, Jeff Dietrich, "Power of Suicide at the Heart of the World," *Catholic Agitator* (July 1990); Dietrich, *Broken and Shared: Food, Dignity, and the Poor on Los Angeles' Skid Row* (Marymount Institute Press/TSEHAI, 2011), 53.

10 Kate Hennessy, *Dorothy Day: The World Will Be Saved by Beauty* (Scribner, 2017), 122.

Row, where challenging and unsettling people like the poor, ill, and addicted have been displaced, denies self-deceptive attempts at *trompe l'oeil*, the fooling of our eyes and minds to believe that the lives of the poor are consequences solely of their poor choices and moral failures rather than the consequences of social and economic structures supported by our life choices. While the Hippie Kitchen does not offer the nowhere of utopia, it does offer the prospect of an elsewhere and otherwise. If we lean into and belabor the etymology of "education" and "culture," we are left with leading someone beyond where they are currently standing and tilling the soil. Thus part of educating our students is to lead them, as whole persons, to places where they have never been, to see and understand the world in its messy complexity, and to loosen and aerate their minds to grow curious and critical enough to prod the values, rights, and structures of a society that finds the alienation and suffering of many a fair price to pay for "the blessings of liberty" for some.

An undervalued dimension of critical thinking involves the imagination. The LA Catholic Worker compels us toward alternative visions of reality. A vision for a future reality is summed up by Jeff Dietrich, writing about the Catholic Worker as what he calls a resurrection community:

> I believe that each time we serve a meal on Skid Row, each time we stand on street corners protesting injustice to the derision of passersby, each time we go to jail to protest nuclear weapons or Arms Conferences, we strike a blow for the Kingdom of God. We give witness that the power of the Resurrection is stronger than the power of death. Like many twenty-first-century skeptics, I have difficulty believing in the actual bodily resurrection because it seems preposterous. But I believe in the story, which tells us that goodness, mercy, and justice will ultimately triumph over evil and inhumanity.[11]

Final Reflections

Allan Bloom says that every educational system aims to produce a particular kind of human being. There are no indifferent or neutral forms of education. If we do not supply a clearly articulated telos for the education that we offer our students, a teleology will come from other sources. Advertisers, social media influencers, and popular culture will be happy to point them toward the accumulation of wealth, the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure, and the prioritization of their individual interests narrowly understood.

It is a commonplace that a Jesuit education will, or should, "ruin you for life." The world is scarred by evil, rent by injustice, burdened by pov-

11 Jeff Dietrich, *Reluctant Resister: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Marymount University Press, 2023), 2.

erty. If an education trains students to succeed only in such a world, it does so by fostering her indifference to, or perhaps even her collaboration with, that evil, injustice, and poverty. Such an education would be selfish in the worst sense. But an education that cares about the good, the true, and the beautiful, one that thinks carefully about evil and injustice, one that suggests we are called to love rather than egotism—that means that our graduates cannot accept the world as it is. Although they may succeed in it, they will also work to change it.

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