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Outside our Tent

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Hospitality on a Vincentian Campus: Welcoming the Stranger Outside our Tent

ANNELLE FITZPATRICK, CSJ, PH.D.
Introduction

The demographics of the United States are rapidly changing. Sociological research reveals that up until the late 1950s America was almost exclusively a Judeo-Christian nation. In 1965, however, Congress passed the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act which radically altered the demographic landscape of the United States. Up until the passage of that revolutionary legislation, the majority of immigrants to America (70%) were of European descent. Today, that is not the case. Ensuing legislation provided for the admission of immigrants from “underrepresented” nations, so immigration from Europe was capped and there was a dramatic decrease in the number of immigrants from traditionally Catholic nations (e.g. Ireland, Italy, Poland, etc.). Over the past five decades, millions upon millions of immigrants have come to our shores from nations such as China, India, Punjab, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Syria, Vietnam, Malaysia, Nigeria, Somalia and throughout Latin America. Many of these newcomers have brought with them religious beliefs and cultural traditions that are unfamiliar to most Americans. Today, Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Bahá’ís, are now not only our neighbors and colleagues at the workplace, but very often, their sons and daughters are attending Catholic Colleges and Universities.

Today, religious congregations that sponsor institutions of higher education are keenly aware that the demographic and religious composition of Catholic universities has radically changed. Long gone are the days when vast majorities of faculty and students were “cradle Catholics” (i.e. graduates of Catholic schools and imbued with a sense of the Catholic “culture”), and administrative positions were held by priests and vowed religious. Statistics gathered by the Institutional Research and Market Analytics Strategy Group stated that in 2010, DePaul University, the largest Catholic university in the United States, reported that only 33% of students identify themselves as Catholic, and 45% of the student body failed to identify themselves as being a part of a traditional faith-based religion. Likewise, St. John’s University, with 21,354 students, reports that only 46% of their students identify themselves as Catholic. Statistics such as these present serious challenges for sponsoring congregations concerned about preserving the spiritual component of a faith-based education. In response to these radically changing demographics, religious congregations have asked themselves: “How can we maintain our Catholic identity when both our employees and students are so diverse?”

Valiant attempts are being made, and significant funds committed, to shore up the Catholic identity of educational and healthcare institutions by establishing offices such as a Vice-President for Mission/Sponsorship or an “Office of Mission” whose primary task is to preserve and propagate the philosophical and theological underpinnings of Catholic institutions. For example, on campuses sponsored by the Congregation of the Mission, known by many as the Vincentians, pictures and statues of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac are everywhere. The names of these two giants are even chiseled into the very bricks and mortar of Vincentian institutions. Activities such as Founder’s Week
are held, and Vincentian medals are awarded to individuals who demonstrate Saint Vincent’s selfless commitment to the poor and disenfranchised. The mantras of “service” and “hospitality” are imbedded into the mission statements of every Vincentian institution.

However, in our enthusiasm for propagating the Vincentian value of “hospitality,” particularly as it relates to the poor, I believe that we might be losing sight of a unique opportunity to expand our sense of its meaning (enthusiastic welcoming of the stranger) to our non-Christian students and parents who might be totally unfamiliar with the Catholic culture. On days when we sponsor an Open House or New Student & Parent Orientation sessions, do we speak exclusively about Catholic and Gospel values? Does it sometimes sound like we believe that Catholics have a monopoly on compassion and care for the poor? Could we also reference other faith traditions that underscore and resonate with Vincentian values such as concern for the poor and marginalized? Could we be more inclusive and acknowledge that we seek to galvanize the spiritual energy contained in all of our students. Thus, we again underscore the importance and “value-added benefits” of a Catholic education by letting parents know that we will do everything we can to offer spiritual nourishment to their sons and daughters, for religious belief, regardless of one’s particular tradition, is a major component of what we offer—a faith based education! By no means am I suggesting that we mute our Catholic identity or spiritual beliefs; what I am saying is that we must be extra sensitive to how our words are heard and interpreted by non-Catholics who are new to the Catholic culture.

Researchers so often tell us that members of Generation X and Millennials often suffer from a condition called “spiritual ennui.” Vincent himself spoke of spiritual poverty, as well as material poverty, a condition that he, and founders of all religions, tells us can be alleviated by service to others. Vincent reminds us “Empty yourself of self.”¹ What an opportunity to build bridges among diverse faith traditions and to explore the challenges of self-sacrifice inherent in all spiritual traditions. Given the sobering statistics related to religious diversity in many Catholic institutions—many Catholic educational, healthcare,

and social service agencies now report less than fifty percent of their clients, employees, or students identify themselves as Catholic—I think that we as Vincentians must do more to foster the virtue of hospitality, getting to know the stranger in our midst, and actively welcoming the non-Catholic student into our community, thus widening the circle of spiritual dialogue.

All agree that an essential component within the Vincentian milieu, be it at a university, a parish, or a shelter for the homeless, is the central virtue of hospitality. Yet, hospitality is a word that now encompasses many different images—we even now offer a major in Hospitality Management! Thus, as a backdrop for this discussion, I want to use the scriptural passage recorded in Genesis 18. In this foundational story for the three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, we find the Patriarch Abraham sitting in his tent when he notices three strangers in the distance. The Bible tells us that Abraham runs out to meet these men, and that he immediately invites them into his tent to refresh themselves and to share a meal with both himself and his wife, Sarah. The Genesis account is further embellished in both the Talmud and the Midrash where the Rabbis tell us that Abraham purposely pitched his tent in the “crossroads,” opening all four flaps so that he could signal to strangers passing by that they were most welcome to make their home with him. Abraham was demonstrating the central Jewish mitzvah, Hachnasat Orchim—the virtue of welcoming the stranger with unconditional hospitality, that is, with no expectation of recompense.

The Call to Erect “Abraham’s Tent” On Vincentian Campuses

Recently I reflected on Genesis 18 and, as a follower of Vincent, I asked myself what this passage tells us about Abraham’s personality. Three observations jumped out at me. First, Abraham wanted to get to know the strangers in his midst. He didn’t just feed them; he invited them into his home. Secondly, Abraham humbled himself before these strangers. He washed their feet and called himself their servant, truly a Vincentian hallmark. And, thirdly, Abraham clearly showed these strangers that they were warmly welcome in his land. This 3,000 year old story should not only continue to capture our imagination, but it should also challenge us to be aware and sensitive to non-Catholic students, the stranger in our land, many of whom find themselves bewildered by flyers on bulletin boards with unfamiliar words inviting students to Eucharistic celebrations, Good Friday Walks, or Vincentian Service Opportunities.

I believe that we, like Abraham, must be alert to the stranger walking in the distance on our campuses and wholeheartedly embrace the challenge of hospitality. We must ask ourselves: What must it be like to be an outsider looking in? Do many of our non-Catholic students feel simply tolerated? Not welcomed? Do we, like Abraham, run out to welcome them? Are we truly anxious to really get to know them? To learn about their Gods? Their beliefs? Their rituals? The key to understanding the biblical virtue of hospitality as demonstrated in this passage is that Abraham rushes out to greet these strangers, he does
not wait for them to approach him to begin the conversation. He takes the initiative by
inviting them into his tent to dine with him and his wife. Abraham, it appears, is anxious
to get to know these new comers.

On our campuses we host many clubs: the Muslim Association; the Hindu Association;
the Jewish Student Association, etc. While such associations are important sources of
support and cultural nourishment for our students, I lament that these organizations might
encourage students to often remain within their own religious silos. I have often pondered
the possibility of building a variety of forums called “Abraham’s Tent,” wherein faculty
and students could discuss the virtue of hospitality together along with a variety of issues
such as abortion, euthanasia, and Wall Street greed, for example. This would include the
wide spectrum of religious perspectives found on our campus. Such forums might give rise
to a greater awareness that concern for the poor, the marginalized, and disenfranchised is
a core value inherent in all the world’s major religions.

**Hospitality is a “mutual gift”: the Jewish perspective**

Our Catholic students might be surprised to learn that in Hebrew class their Jewish
classmates were taught a lesson that embodies the spirit of Vincent de Paul: “Do not neglect
to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so many have entertained angels without
knowing it.” Catholic students might be unaware that their Jewish colleagues have a
world-wide organization similar to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul called *Tikkun Olam*,
which literally translates to “repairing the world.” The concept of repairing the world is
found in writings from the early Rabbinic period and is also referenced in the Kabbalah.

The Kabbalah teaches that when *Ein Sof* (The Ineffable God) willed to create human
beings, He made humanity in the image of God’s own likeness. However, when God
poured forth the radiance of the Divine presence into humans, the intensity of *Ein Sof’s*
light was so great that the vessels shattered, filling the material world with both light
and darkness, good and evil. Therefore, the devout Jew is obligated to restore God’s light
back into the world. He/she does this through the great *Mitzvah of Tikkun Olam* (repairing
and restoring God’s creation). *Tikkun Olam* clubs bring together committed young Jewish
students devoted to bringing God’s light into the world through healing, repairing, and
transforming some of the darkest corners of our planet. Since the desire to make this world
a better place is also fundamental to the Jewish tradition, Jewish students who belong to a
chapter of *Tikkun Olam* would have much in common with activities sponsored by Campus
Ministry or the Society of St. Vincent de Paul—repairing homes devastated by Hurricane
Katrina, working in soup kitchens and food pantries, etc.

**What about Sikh students?**

Likewise, what do we as Catholics know about the Sikh tradition? We often expect
“them” to know about Vincent and Jesus, but perhaps it is time for us to learn about their

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beliefs so that we can truly welcome them into our tent. What do we know about Guru Nanak or the Guru Granth Sahib? By discovering points of synergy between Christianity and Sikhism, I believe that we can build stronger and more vibrant faith communities on campus. I truly believe that Sikh students could be enticed to partake in many of the volunteer activities offered by the Office of Campus Ministry if we truly went the extra mile to actively invite them to join us. For example, inherent in the Sikh tradition is the concept of Seva: the Sikh mandate to be of service to others. To a Sikh, being of service is not just a nice thing to do, it is a religious command and Sikhs who fail to respond to the presence of God in the poor and marginalized cannot possibly reach mukti (absorption into God). Thus, they will be subjected to many more rebirths until they learn to recognize and honor the divine in the lowliest of persons.

If we could continue to create opportunities for dialogue, opportunities where a Sikh student could tell us about Guru Nanak, and a Catholic student could tell them about Vincent de Paul or Louise de Marillac, we would not only enlarge the circle but deepen the bond between religious traditions and, most importantly, deepen the spiritual dimension of the entire campus. For example, there is a wonderful story of a Sikh Sant (Saint) who is criticized by his followers for giving water to a dying enemy soldier. In response to the criticism, the Sant says: “I did not see the enemy, I only saw the face of God!” Does that not resonate with Vincent’s challenge to always turn the coin? That is the essence of Seva, yet it also embodies the essence of Vincent’s spirit. By encouraging students to share stories from their traditions we would not only enlarge the circle of those being invited into our tent, thus being nourished on a spiritual level, but we would also make all of our students more culturally competent and keenly aware of the richness of other traditions.

I personally witnessed a dramatic outpouring of Seva when groups of Sikh students came to Rockaway, New York, immediately after Hurricane Sandy. It took the Sikh community of Richmond Hill, New York, less than 24 hours to come to Rockaway with
cauldrons of soup, cases of bottled water, and piles of home-cooked naan bread to distribute to their non-Sikh neighbors. In fact, they arrived 24 hours earlier than the Red Cross! I am certain Sikh students would enjoy hearing of Vincent’s genius at both galvanizing and organizing the Ladies of Charity into a formidable response team. In addition, Sikhs have the religious obligation of *Langar*, feeding those who come to the *Gurdwara* (Sikh temple). Attached to every *Gurdwara* is a communal kitchen where Sikhs and strangers in the land, often the homeless or visitors, are offered food on a daily basis without any expectation of payment. So central is the theme of hospitality to a Sikh that a *Gurdwara* must have a *Langar* attached or it is not a house of God.

**What about Hindu students?**

One of the salient hallmarks of a Vincentian university is the Office of Campus Ministry. Very often, weekly schedules are posted listing a variety of activities such as Eucharistic celebrations or Eucharistic Adoration. I believe most Hindu students don’t have a clue what those words mean. Yet, if we could create forums where our students could share their reflections on “What nourishes you along your journey” we might be startled at the answer.

Central to Hindu worship is the religious ritual of *Darshan* wherein a Hindu sits, in total silence, before the image of a deity. Prayers are silent and the image is hidden behind a curtain until the *Pandit* (Hindu Priest), dramatically opens the curtains and displays the image of the deity. I have sat and prayed at numerous *Darshan* services and it is the closest ritual to Eucharistic adoration one can find. Total silence; staring at the Divine, the Divine staring back at you. This unique religious ceremony concludes when the priest closes the curtain, similar to Catholics returning the Eucharist to the locked doors of the tabernacle. Likewise, Hindus have sacred food called *Prasad* (food that gives peace). This is food available only in the *Mandir* (Hindu temple). *Prasad* is offered to the deities, blessed by the Priest, and consumed by the worshipper. Would that definition sound familiar to Catholics? Can you imagine the depth of a conversation between a devout Catholic student and a devout Hindu student concerning sacred food that nourishes the soul along life’s journey? What an opportunity to speak of Eucharist to the stranger entering our tent.

**What about Muslim students?**

What about Muslim students? How do we talk about the life and works of Vincent as a tool for evangelization? One possible avenue would be to sponsor an imaginary discussion between Vincent and Muhammad focusing on the issue of slavery. Our Catholic students might be surprised to learn that Muhammad, like Vincent, was obsessed with the deplorable conditions of the slave. The Holy Quran in *Sura 90* (*Sura* means Chapter), declares that the act of freeing a slave is the most meritorious action a Muslim could perform. Muhammad, like Vincent, was passionate about alleviating the suffering of slaves. On Vincentian campuses, we so often speak of Vincent going to care for the galley slaves, and of his
kissing the chains that bound these slaves. In our imaginary dialogue a Catholic student could quote Vincent’s words on slavery, his challenge to Monsieur de Gondi to see the deplorable conditions these men lived in, telling him these are your people and you will have to answer for them before God.\(^3\) In turn, a Muslim student could speak Muhammad’s words exhorting his followers to ransom slaves. One hadith (stories about Muhammad), quotes the Prophet of Allah as saying, “Give food to the hungry, visit the sick and set free the one in captivity by paying his ransom.”\(^4\) On numerous occasions, Muhammad states that to free a slave will earn the believer forgiveness of sins. Such an interfaith dialogue could draw a parallel between Vincent’s and Muhammad’s passion towards alleviating the suffering of slaves, and perhaps bring students together to address ways in which to alleviate modern day slavery, human trafficking, and the plight of refugees.

On Catholic campuses we celebrate both the Feast of the Assumption and Ascension Thursday. Again, is this another opportunity to build bridges by seeing similarities in the mysteries each tradition embraces? Muslims believe that Jesus was taken up, in bodily form, into heaven by Allah and is now being held in a “state of occultation.” The Quran tells us that Jesus will one day return and “defeat the anti-Christ.” As a matter of fact, there is an empty tomb in Mecca right next to Muhammad’s that is reserved for Jesus after his return. It is a pilgrimage site for Muslims when making the Hajj (mandatory trip to Mecca). In addition, Muslims have tremendous respect for the Blessed Mother. They believe not only in the virgin birth of Jesus, but also that Mary was born without sin. All of chapter 19 in the Quran is dedicated to Mary, the Mother of ISA (Jesus). If we could get our students talking about such mysteries it would be an unbelievable opportunity to discuss more deeply the mystery of Jesus, the Prophet (Muslims) and the Son of God (Catholics).

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\(^4\) *Sahih Bukhari*, Volume 7, Book 65, Number 286.
and Mary are profound and major models for both our Catholic and Muslim students. Discussion of these and other shared mysteries would undoubtedly help foster greater bonds of friendship among Muslims, Catholics, and Protestants. For instance, throughout the Muslim world different countries (Pakistan, Turkey, Lebanon) boast that they have the tomb of the virgin (Mary) within their borders. This is an issue that our Protestant students could also weigh in on, as Protestants do not ascribe to the Doctrine of the Assumption of Mary. It would get our students talking. Likewise, within the walls of Abraham’s Tent, we could invite students to discuss Matthew 25 in light of their own religious tradition. Matthew 25 is perhaps the most quoted of all the Christian scriptures, reminding us that, on the Day of Judgment, Christ will separate his followers into sheep and goats. The Lord will ask the Christian, “I was hungry – did you give me to eat?” “I was thirsty—did you give me to drink?” Compare that passage with the following Islamic Qudsi (a Divine Hadith received in a dream), where the Holy Prophet said:

Allah will say on the Day of Judgment, ‘O son of Adam, I was sick and you did not visit Me.’ He will say, ‘O my Lord, how could I visit You, when you are the Lord of the Worlds.’ Allah will say, ‘Did you not know that My servant so-and-so was sick and you did not visit him? Did you not know that if you had visited him, you would have found Me there?’

Allah will say, ‘O son of Adam, I asked you for food and you fed Me not.’ He shall say, ‘O my Lord, how could I feed You and you are the Lord of the Worlds?’ and Allah will say, ‘Did you not know that My servant so-and-so was in need of food and you did not feed him? Did you not know that if you had fed him, you would have found that to have been for Me?’

‘O son of Adam, I asked you for water and you did not give Me to drink.’ The man shall say, ‘O my Lord, how could I give You water, when You are the Lord of the Worlds?’ Allah will say, ‘My servant so-and-so asked you for water and you did not give him to drink water. Did you not know that if you had given him to drink, you would have found that to have been for Me?’

Again, in this passage we see the intimate identification that the Divine has with human suffering and that to respond to a stranger in need is a sacred obligation.

Inviting Buddhist students into our tent

If we held a dialogue with our Buddhist students we would learn that they also venerate exceptionally holy men and women, although they do not use the term “Saint.” The recognition that some human beings excel in virtue is not unique to Christianity. Our Buddhist students would tell us about Bodhisattvas. Akin to a Catholic saint, a Bodhisattva is

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a soul that has gained so much merit that he/she is eligible to enter nirvana (like a Mother Theresa). They do not think of him/herself, rather they are concerned with alleviating the suffering in this world.

Through such dialogue, our Catholic students would learn that central to the Buddhist tradition is the cardinal virtue of compassion. Thus, when the Bodhisattva dies and he/she is told that nirvana (no more rebirths) is at hand. The Bodhisattva, due to his/her magnanimous soul, opts to be born again (i.e. another tour of duty) and forfeits any personal reward of entering into nirvana with the sole mission of alleviating the suffering of others in this world. One can only wonder the fruitful exchange that both our Christian and Buddhist students might experience if they compared Vincent’s prayer with the Bodhisattva’s Vow:

Vincent de Paul

Lord, when I ask You for the grace to put up with the difficulties Your Goodness will send me, I’m determined at the same time to receive them from Your hand. Since we can’t be without troubles in this world, Lord, I propose to accept for Your love all those I may have to bear, as well as to rid myself of the spirit of sloth, to do well the things that have been ordered, and to be steadfast in the good I’ve begun because that will be pleasing to you.6

The Bodhisattva’s Vow

I take upon myself the deed of all beings, even those in the hells, in the other worlds and in the realms of punishment. I take their sufferings upon me, I bear it, I do not draw back from it, I do not tremble at it, I have no fear of it. I do not lose heart, I must bear the burden of all beings for I have vowed to save all things living, to bring them safe through the forest of birth, age, disease, birth and rebirth. I think not of my own salvation, but strive to bestow on all beings the royalty of supreme wisdom. So I take upon myself all the sorrows of all beings. I resolve to bear every torment in every purgatory of the universe. For it is better that I alone should suffer than that the multitude of living beings should suffer. I give myself in exchange. I redeem the universe from the forest of purgatory, from the womb of flesh, from the realm of death. I agree to suffer as a ransom for all beings, and for the sake of all beings. Truly, I will not abandon them. For I have resolved to gain supreme wisdom for the sake of all.7

Here, in both the Catholic and Buddhist tradition, we see the theme of compassion and performing good works in spite of personal sacrifice as a supreme religious virtue.

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7 From the Vajradhvaja Sutra, see: https://www.csupomona.edu/~plin/ews431/bodhisattva_prayers.html (accessed 29 June 2015; link no longer active).
Conclusion

T.S. Eliot reminds us: “We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.”

As the demographics of the United States continue to reflect increasing religious diversity it is imperative that institutions of higher learning do more to build bridges of understanding. As educators we must move beyond thinking that a three credit course in World Religions or the occasional interfaith prayer service will build bridges. We, as educators, must constantly look for opportunities to offer sustained and structured interfaith forums wherein we, in Vincent’s words, “enflame the nations with this sacred fire.” Many Catholic universities are already at the forefront of such ecumenical endeavors. Likewise, non-Catholic universities such as Dartmouth, Harvard, and Yale have vibrant spiritual/campus ministry departments that are both inclusive and passionate about fostering interreligious dialogue. Such efforts are to be applauded. As Vincentians, we too must be at the forefront of spiritually nourishing all our students. Vincent himself exhorted his followers: “We must be totally for God... We must give ourselves to God, burn ourselves up, give our lives. We must lay open our lives to carry the Gospel to the most distant lands.” Ironically for us those distant lands, those strangers, are right on our doorstep. The challenge is how to welcome them into our tent.

Having taught at the college level for over twenty-five years, I am keenly aware that it might take a little urging to get students to want to share on a spiritual level. Following in Vincent’s challenge to address both physical and spiritual poverty, I suggest two incentives. First, feed them! A slight modification of an old adage is so true: “If you feed them, they will come.” Like Abraham, we invite them into our tents to share a meal with us—the most fundamental gesture of human bonding and hospitality. Secondly, I might offer class

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credit or gift certificates to students willing both to do the research and to participate in forums hosted inside Abraham’s Tent. Students would be challenged to speak not “of” Vincent, but “as” Vincent. One can only wonder what Vincent and Muhammad might say to each other should they meet on today’s Catholic campus. I am confident that it would be an encounter that students would not forget, for such sharing from the heart could be a transformative experience for all involved.

Thus, if we look at Vincentian hospitality as a challenge to welcome the stranger, we realize the rich opportunity we have at hand. More and more, non-Catholics are coming to our institutions as students, as faculty, and as staff. Let us pray we receive them as hospitable hosts and that when they graduate and leave our tents, they will graduate as better Catholics, more committed Jews, more devout Hindus, more compassionate Buddhists, and more self-giving Sikhs. Vincent reminds us:

If we’re really called to take the love of God far and near, if we must set nations on fire with it, if our vocation is to go throughout the world to spread this divine fire, if that’s the case, I say, if that’s the case… how I myself must burn with this divine fire!9

Let us all pray that we constantly burn with this divine fire and that we are forever vigilant in keeping the lights on in Abraham’s Tent, welcoming the stranger on campus, running out to meet them and extending a profound gesture of hospitality to all our students in need of being spiritually refreshed.

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Vincent de Paul, Father of the Clergy; Vincent helping the poor.

Stained glass, St. Thomas More Church, Jamaica campus, St. John’s University, N.Y.

*Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online*

http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/
Popular depiction of Guru Nanak (1469-1539), founder of Sikhism and the first Sikh Guru.

Public Domain
The “Hospitality of Abraham” Icon.
Public Domain
A gathering of worshipping Bodhisattvas.

Cave mural, China, Wei Dynasty (535-556 A.D.).

Public Domain