

**WISDOM, DIGNITY, AND JUSTICE:
HIGHER EDUCATION AS A WORK OF MERCY**

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It is a privilege for me to participate with you in this program of the Conference for Mercy Higher Education. Although I have worked in higher education for nearly forty-five years, I have not tried to design its institutions and curricula from the vantage point of leadership and responsibility that is part of the experience of many of you. Hence, I believe that I can learn more from you than you can learn from me. Nonetheless, I take seriously my invitation to speak with you, and it is my hope that together we can forge new insights and perhaps new courage to carry out the many roles we each play in response to the perplexing but magnificent tasks of higher education.

Let me begin by saying something about the title I have given to my address here today, a title that is slightly different from the one listed on your program. The revised title is: "Wisdom, Dignity, and Justice: Higher Education as a Work of Mercy." I do intend to fulfill my assignment to speak on the imperative for Mercy colleges and universities to be committed to education and action for justice as a transforming hallmark. And implicit in what I have to say is that this has been and should be true "from generation to generation," though I leave it to the historians to specify how this is so. In preparing this lecture, however, my focus has also been influenced by a publication that Kathryn Grant sent to me as potential background for today's session—that is, the report by Dennis Holtschneider and Melanie Morey regarding their study of the relationship of

Catholic institutions to founding congregations.¹ I imagine that many of you read this report five years ago or so, but this was my first introduction to it. The claim in this report that it is probably no longer possible, in institutions of Catholic higher education, to sustain the charism of the founders, is a provocative one, as you know. And the suggested alternative of a generic Catholic perspective is equally intriguing. Nonetheless, I found myself both agreeing and disagreeing with these claims as I thought about the "hallmark," or the charismatic life-line of Mercy higher education. Hence, my focus in this paper is on the particularity of a Mercy charism but also on the way this charism belongs to the whole church.

My analysis and argument are contained in my title: "Wisdom, Dignity, and Justice: Higher Education as a Work of Mercy." What I will try to show is the following: (1) Wisdom involves many things, but central to it is a recognition of the dignity of human persons and the value of all creation; (2) genuine recognition of the dignity of all persons, along with insight into the treasures of the rest of creation, yields imperatives of justice; (3) justice both calls for and makes possible relationships of compassion or mercy. What does all of this have to do with higher education? At its best, higher education aims at wisdom. Along the way, wisdom may be awakened and challenged by the claims of compassion and justice. This may sound very abstract, but let me pursue it by considering these concepts and claims—wisdom, dignity, justice, and mercy—in the context of higher education.

Wisdom

¹Dennis H. Holtschneider and Melanie M. Morey, "Relationship Revisited: Catholic Institutions and Their Found Congregations," (*Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, Occasional Paper No. 47, September, 2000*). See also "Responses to Relationship Revisited," *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education* 21 (Fall, 2000): 40-61.

The more skeptical among us might raise our eyebrows at the statement that the central goal of higher education is to grow in wisdom. In a time and society marked by narrow specialization of disciplines, economic pressures, desires not only for survival but for upward mobility, demands for custom-made programs that will meet every need, what even counts as "wisdom"? When trends in higher education seek to accommodate not only new forms of learning but also new challenges to any learning that aims at universal theorizing, what might "wisdom" mean? When departments are more and more isolated from one another in colleges and universities, and scholars find it difficult to understand the world through one another's lenses, what kind of "wisdom" might we search for or expect? In a culture where it is normal to question whether any self or subject can exist at all, where we seem to have agreed that there can be no truly "common good," and where individualism and collectivism compete with little room for other attitudinal or institutional contenders, has the very hope for "wisdom" been removed from the goals of life or learning?

I take such questions seriously, but I do not think they undermine a goal of wisdom in higher education. Insofar as the questions reflect extreme forms of deconstruction, and distorted desires shaped by multiple culturally hidden forces, they do seem to be conversation stoppers, and to render moot any longing for wisdom on which we might base our educational goals. But questions like these may also be a starting point in a search for understanding and wisdom. If, for example, educating in a postmodern world allows us to deconstruct inadequate theoretical idols and illusions of isolated individuality, if it brings us to an appreciation of diversity, engagement with the Other, and humility in the face of the partiality of knowledge, then it may still be education that begins in and aims toward wisdom.

Whatever its ultimate goals, all higher education has importantly to do with the initiation of new generations of persons into a civilization, a culture in which or against which they must find

their way. The Greeks educated for virtue and for freedom of intellectual inquiry; the humanists of the Renaissance educated for the reform of society and for individual self-fulfillment; Christians have educated persons in the workings of the world and in the relationship of the world to God. None of these educational traditions, nor any combination of them, has ever been divorced from preparing persons to make a living, to enter a career, to advance the skills and services that a society needs.²² Both theoretically and practically, both individually and communally, higher education has sought to initiate persons into a civilization and a culture through some form of expansion of mind, social analysis, development of skills, experience of relationships, and capacity-building for freedom of choice guided by some form of wisdom.

The goals of higher education today, insofar as they are adequate, take into account not only relativity in physics, but the culture-bound perspectives of history, literature, psychology and sociology, philosophy and theology. As David Tracy has noted, "We are all . . . struggling for some new interpretation of ourselves, our language, history, society, and culture."³³ We have learned to value pluralism when it does not mean that "anything goes." We have learned to welcome diversity (or at least we have learned that we ought to welcome it) and to see the possibilities of unity within it. We have learned to value community and the freedom it nurtures. We have experienced the necessity of interdisciplinary study, but also the humility it requires as we realize that everyone knows something that others do not know; and that we will all know more only if we are willing to share our knowledge and our methods.

² See Christopher F. Mooney, *Boundaries Dimly Perceived: Law, Religion, Education, and the Common Good* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), Part III.

³ David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 50.

Real wisdom in every respect comes from learning-through whatever process or with whatever resources-about the interrelationships of all beings and the dignity at the heart of every person. Much of higher education through long centuries of its development has been an attempt to learn just this, but to learn it primarily by studying human achievements-in science, the arts, politics, architecture, the winning of wars and the conquering of territories, the possession of land and the fruits of human labor on the land. Yet as Michael Buckley pointed out in the early 1980s, what was missing from these studies, from this education, was an encounter with human suffering.⁴⁴ Learning of human successes without learning of human pain, or learning about conquerors without learning about the exploited and the conquered, learning about the leaders and their ideas without learning about the marginalized and the poor, led and still may lead to the estrangement of an educated elite from the lives of the desperate and from the world-wide phenomenon of human misery.

This has changed (to some extent) in higher education generally since the early '80s, and certainly (again, to some extent) in Catholic higher education. Most colleges and universities at least offer possibilities of community service, urban immersion, and travel that is not only to learn of the glories of human achievement but the need for solidarity between persons in diverse cultures with diverse hopes and needs. Moreover, renewed studies of, for example, the classic content of the humanities, empirical research by social sciences, and humanitarian goals of many of the sciences, open the eyes of students not only to human impoverishment and injustice but to the mystery of the human person-to the dignity, the beauty, and the basic needs of all persons.

Dignity

⁴ Michael Buckley, "The University and the Concern for Justice: The Search for a New Humanism," *Thought* 57 (June, 1982): 219-33.

The Catholic tradition stands out among the multiple traditions of Christianity in that it has sustained a kind of optimism about learning. Unlike other strands of Christianity, it has continued to believe in the basic intelligibility of creation and in the basic capacity of the human mind to understand what is revealed in creation. Although the Catholic tradition, like others, has taken seriously the "human condition" limited by human nature and damaged by human sin, it has never thought that humans are either so limited or so injured and incapacitated that they cannot learn (however partially) about the universe and about humanity itself. Not only the Bible, but creation itself has been considered a revelatory text.

This learning, the study of this text, is not simple, however. Think of the ways we try to understand the cosmos, the universe, the planet Earth. Think of the academic disciplines we have developed in order to understand the worth of every creature—not only their instrumental worth but their worth in themselves. The motivations for such study may be multiple, but in Catholic education they can include the sort of inquiry that once motivated St. Augustine. Searching for God, Augustine described his questioning of the earth: "What is this God whom I love?" and "Tell me about God, you who are not God." All things on the earth answered him, he said, from the "sea and the deeps and the creeping things with living souls," to the "blowing breezes and the universal air with all its inhabitants," to the "sun, the moon, the stars." "They cried out in a loud voice: 'God made us.'" My question, Augustine said, "was in my contemplation of them, and their answer was in their beauty."⁵

The study of the world, from generation to generation, is complex and ongoing. What we learn not only assists us in living in creation, but it gives us wisdom about the treasures of all creation. From this wisdom ultimately arises some claims of justice.

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. Warner (New York: New American Library, 1963), 10.6.

But if study of the world is complex and ongoing, think of the study of ourselves. Discipline after discipline seeks to probe the meaning of the human species and of each human person. The concrete reality of human persons includes multiple dimensions. Each person is constituted with a complex structure-embodied, inspirited, with needs for food, clothing, and shelter, but also with a capacity for free choice and the ability to think and feel. Human persons are also essentially relational-situated in creation like other beings, but with particular interpersonal and social needs, and with capacities to open to others, including God. Persons exist in-the-world, so that their reality includes their particular histories and their locations in social, political, economic, and cultural contexts. Moreover, human persons have not only their present actuality but their positive potentiality for development, for human and individual flourishing, as well as their vulnerability to diminishment. Each person is unique, but every person is a common sharer in humanity.⁶

Probing the meaning of our lives and our destinies, we have glimpsed at the heart of every person a core value such that we claim to be ends in ourselves. In this recognition we claim further that we are to be treated as ends, not only as means. There are multiple warrants for these claims, but perhaps most frequently we ground them today in what we describe as our capacity for free choice and our capacity for relationship with all that can be known and loved. Because freedom of choice is a capacity for self-determination, it is a capacity for choosing not only our own actions but our ends and our loves. By our freedom, we possess ourselves; our selves and our actions are in an important sense our own. Freedom is a capacity, therefore, to determine the meaning of our own lives, and within limits, our destiny. It is a capacity to set our own agenda, so that we are unjustly

⁶ I have treated these elements of human reality in a number of other writings, most recently in *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), chapter 6.

violated if others attempt to absorb us completely into their agenda rather than respecting the one that is our own.

We are also terminal centers, ends in ourselves, because of our relationality. We are who we are not only because we can determine ourselves but because we both transcend ourselves and possess ourselves by reason of what we know and ultimately what and who we love. We belong to ourselves yet we belong to others; in knowing and being known, loving and being loved, we are centered both within and without. Each of us is a whole world in herself, yet our world is in what we love. This kind of interiority yet radical openness grounds us as ends in ourselves.

In addition, freedom and relationality are intimately connected. Relationships make freedom of self-determination possible (for without them we cannot grow in freedom); but freedom is ultimately for the sake of choosing relationships-of choosing what and how to love. Herein lies the basis of human dignity and the requirement to grow in wisdom regarding what humans need. Out of wisdom about human dignity arise imperatives of human justice.

Justice

The threads of ideas that I have been trying to identify may now be ready for weaving into a fabric (or a lecture) whose background is Catholic and Mercy higher education and whose central design is justice and mercy. Higher education I have said is about growth in wisdom. There is no wisdom, however, without recognition of the dignity of human persons and the beauty of all creation. And without recognition of human dignity and the treasures of creation, there can be no justice. Let me come, then, to the threads of justice.

Justice of course can mean many things. One of the tasks of higher education in initiating persons into civilization and culture is to test the multiple theories of justice that have been proposed through many centuries and in many different cultures. Some of these will prove to have

been inadequate, and some of them simply wrong. Some will be more adequate than others. I have no intention here, nor is it possible, for me to outline (let alone evaluate) even the major theories of justice currently on the table in our own culture. I can only suggest what seem to me important ways of thinking about justice and injustice, hoping to show why and how the imperatives of justice must shape Catholic and Mercy higher education.

Examples of theories of justice that cannot be adequate for our society or our church today are theories that accommodate human slavery (a seemingly obvious example), or theories that assume a basic inequality among persons on the basis of race or gender (an example apparently not yet so obvious to everyone).⁷ Indeed, we judge such theories to be not only inadequate but wrong. In the past, there were no doubt cultural reasons why such theories were not questioned, but today we (or at least most of us) condemn them as distortions of justice, as theories that actually support and reinforce systemic injustice. When we ask how such views of justice could have held sway for so many centuries and in so many cultures, the only answer can be that those who formulated the theories and those who accepted them failed to see the fundamental dignity that is central to the concrete reality of all human beings.⁸ And despite long struggles for a better recognition of this dignity, we still fail in practice if not in theory to oppose and remedy attitudes of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and cultural imperialism that are precisely failures to recognize and respect human dignity in every person—attitudes that continue to exist in societies and in the hearts of countless people, including ourselves.

⁷ For a remarkable study of the long centuries in which Christians accepted slavery, see John T. Noonan, *A Church Which Can and Cannot Change* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005). For the failure of church and society to recognize the equality of women and man, see Farley, *Just Love*, passim.

^{†8} Another way of putting this is that the dominant culture found reasons simply not to see that some individuals and groups are human, or at least not fully human.

Now no one expects higher education to be the sole solution to failures in wisdom and justice. It has not been so in the past, nor is it in the present. Indeed, institutions of higher learning are vulnerable like all institutions to the culture-blindness that is endemic to any given society. Yet, higher education is surely that realm of society where primary challenges to failures and distortions of thought ought to be taken seriously. It may even be that realm of society where critical challenges can be formulated for the moral failures that abet distortions of thought (moral failures such as greed, complacency, or the desire for power). Higher education functions, after all, not only to initiate persons into a culture that is already made, but thereby to influence the culture for better or for worse.

Wisdom, human dignity, and justice, therefore, remain not only relevant but crucial to the shaping of higher education. As a general statement, this is probably uncontroversial, and I risk being platitudinous if I simply proceed from here indicating all the ways Catholic and Mercy higher education are or might be shaped accordingly. Let me, rather, take a slightly different tack in the hope of doing more than provide yet another list of values for the institutions of higher learning. Let me begin with a thought experiment. Suppose we here today were in a position to found a new college or university; and suppose we knew that our own children or some particular individuals close to us would be the first students in this institution of higher education. What would we want to provide for these students, from their first day of matriculation to their last day before graduation? I will speak for myself, but you can each test the plausibility and desirability of what I propose.

I would want these students, my children or my friends, to find first of all an institution that is itself marked by justice. I would want a community of learning in which students could trust the competence of teachers, the care and commitment of teachers, and the extraordinary wisdom

of at least some teachers. I would want a college or university in which members of the administration and the staff work together for the same goals and are committed to adjudicating disagreements in ways marked by fairness and due process. I would want an institution in which just wages are paid to everyone, so that faculty, administration, and staff can be free and happy to work for more than their monetary wages. I would want an institution where interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary teaching and learning are rewarded, so that junior faculty would not be penalized for it nor would any student who appreciated its value be deprived of it. I would want an institution in which the students experience harmony, though not necessarily always agreement, among faculty and between faculty and administration; where faculty can recognize administrators as their advocates, not their adversaries; and where administrators can trust faculty, even when they are frustrated by them.

Above all, I would want this institution to be just toward its students. It would give them the education they need and deserve. It would respect them—in their diversity, their uniqueness, their plurality of gifts and possibilities. It would visibly and in every possible instance show respect and even reverence for the human dignity of each student. It would therefore aim in its policies, its actions, and its ethos, to nurture the capacities in the students for freedom and for relationship. It would not fear, but rather cultivate, students' possibilities for self-determination and for discerning their responsibilities. It would awaken their desires for union, through knowledge and love, with more and more of what can be learned about the vast reaches of the universe, the microscopic smallness of the tiniest of creatures, the diversity of human cultures and occupations, and human persons as embodied spirits. Each student would be able to encounter at least one teacher who might change their lives, not through indoctrination but inspiration.

The students would not be living in a paradise, isolated from human misery and pain. No matter how just the institution in which they studied, they would have opportunities to learn to accept human frailty, and to learn about forgiveness and patience. They would learn, and co-learn, about human sufferings that are a part of embodied life—such as natural disasters, illness, limitations great and small. They would be given the tools to recognize that the future of all of creation is in some way dependent on them—whether in terms of Earth's environment, the intrinsic worth of every being, or the survival of the human species. They would have at least encouragement to learn to see the gem of dignity in each human person, no matter how different from themselves, no matter how challenged in abilities, no matter even how wicked. They would begin to understand that some sufferings do not have to be; that some sufferings (such as exploitation, abuse, betrayal, oppression of all kinds) ought not end in death but in change. They would have possibilities to discern whether and what actions they may and must take to make the world more just, and to make their countries, families, churches, sexual partnerships, future occupations and professions more just. They would have ample opportunity to discover their own limitations, their own frailties and powerlessness. But they would also have ample opportunity to learn of their own dignity. And they would be part of an enterprise that bespoke not only respect but hope.

These students would also have lives outside of their community of learning. They would, like students everywhere, have to engage in their own education in spite of economic constraints and pressures. They would have to make decisions in terms of their relationships with the ordinary political, social, ecclesiastical spheres of the wider world. They would bring to their learning all of their experiences—with no questions ruled out, no methods dismissed as not worth a try, no voices

silenced because of their backgrounds. And they would be preparing-with the necessary training and learning-for the lives they must lead when they move beyond this institution.

And since this institution that I am imagining for my children and my friends would be Catholic and Mercy, it would foster an ethos, and have at least some participants, who can witness to students that their freedom has ultimately to do with a decision for or against God, for or against what they believe is ultimate; and some participants who can tell them that their capacity for relation stretches even to the infinite, and that they may dare to hope in an unlimited future.

I have seen colleges and at least parts of universities where this kind of wisdom and justice is possible and even present. Yes, of course, there are serious obstacles and genuine limitations on what any form of higher education can provide. For one thing, not all students are ready to take advantage of the possibilities I describe. And despite their own preferences, there are many students who cannot take the time for a full college experience, who must therefore learn piecemeal and against great odds (though all the while meshing their learning with their everyday experience). Institutions, too, have fiscal limits, the kind of limits that threaten to turn decisions about faculty, programs, and equipment into sheer business matters. I have known colleges and universities, and students, with all of these difficulties. No matter what, however, I would want to argue that no institution of higher education can be justified if its structures, its internal relationships, and its provisions for its students are unjust-which is to say, if they are unsuited to the pursuit of wisdom or respect for human dignity.

Mercy

I said in the beginning of this lecture that justice both calls for and makes possible relationships of compassion or mercy. I want now to show how mercy both requires and makes possible justice. I will begin by considering the ways in which it requires justice, and then turn to

the ways in which mercy contributes to the possibilities of an education for wisdom and justice. Regarding the first of these—that is, the ways in which mercy requires justice—let me share with you an experience I had more than five years ago. I have told this story in many other venues, but I retell it here because it represents my own growing clarity about the relationship between justice and mercy.⁹⁹

I was invited to participate in a White House Summit on World AIDS Day, December 1, 2000. This particular year's summit conference was focused on the massive spread of HIV and AIDS across the world's South—that is, across nations, largely in the southern hemisphere, that are relatively (sometimes drastically) economically depressed and politically marginalized. This conference was designed specifically to consider the role of religious traditions in response to the AIDS pandemic in these nations. Hence, the invited participants were, with few exceptions, leaders of religious traditions and faith communities in East and South Asia, Latin America, and (predominantly) Africa. Their presence in sizable numbers at this gathering represented a growing concern on their part and on the part of the coordinators of the conference for the role of religion in relation to HIV and AIDS. Was religion, or would it be, part of the problem or part of the remedy for this most dire problem?

Imams, rabbis, patriarchs, archbishops, sheikhs, and many others came to the conference from the nations of the South to consider together what an effective religious response could be. One after another they spoke of their growing awareness of the problem of AIDS, and they articulated in terms of their own contexts the need for compassion. The shared experience of rising compassion was almost palpable. It included reports of compassionate responses on the part

⁹ See my fuller rendition of this in *Compassionate Respect: A Feminist Approach to Medical Ethics and Other Questions* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 3-20.

of faith communities to those vulnerable to and suffering from AIDS. Religious groups, it was noted, were caring for the dying and for the living, and they were beginning to work at prevention and even advocacy for the needs of their people. At the individual, local, regional, national and international levels, moving examples were given of new initiatives and already long-standing efforts.

However powerful was the compassion and even the deeds of compassion described and expressed at this conference, many questions remained curiously unidentified. Little was said about what compassion might directly require of religious traditions as interpreters of the pandemic and as transformers of some of its causes. The implication was clear that every kind of medical care was needed—for prevention, treatment, and ongoing care of the sick and the dying. Compassion was seen to demand the establishment of clinics, outreach to rural areas, support for the few adults who care for thousands of orphaned children, and the raising of prophetic voices calling on the rest of the world to respond. All of these things appeared to be assumed; they were implicit in what compassion would require. If there were other specifications of what compassion would demand, they received little mention.

Hence, as I said previously, some questions seemed to be missing—questions directly related to the substance of religious traditions themselves. What, if any, has been the specific role of world religions (not only in the nations of the South, but everywhere) in shaping beliefs, attitudes, and practices that may have contributed to the spread of AIDS? Are new religious insights required in the face of this terrible disease? What, for example, has been the impact of religious teachings regarding human sexuality, the status of women, and poverty. Few might have denied that these questions were and are relevant to the halting of the spread of HIV, but few acknowledged them, and even fewer recognized what they entail. At the White House Summit, the

words of compassion were inspiring and uncontroversial. Words about sex and the status of women would have been extremely controversial. And while churches and temples and mosques are better at addressing the role of poverty in the spread of this infection, an analysis of the intersection of gender, race, sex, and poverty would also have been controversial. Without such words, however, the requirements of compassion remained inadequately specified. Without them, the responses of compassion would continue to be inadequate.

I could go on at length describing how a failure to identify the concrete needs in a particular situation rendered mercy, compassion, not only inadequate but unjust. But what does this mean for us here today, in our considerations of Mercy higher education? It means that we cannot too easily pass over concerns for the normative content of mercy. It means that mercy (or compassion) can be helpful or harmful, wise or foolish, inaccurate or true, creative or destructive. Mercy is the form that love takes when the beloved is in some need. But love, too, can be good or bad, right or wrong, helpful or harmful, creative or destructive. It must therefore be that there are standards, criteria, measures, for good love, wise compassion, true mercy. But what are the standards, the norms, for right love and for adequate responses in mercy? At the risk of being too brief and hence too blunt, let me say simply that the norm, the criterion for a right and good love, for genuine compassion (or mercy), and for the deeds of love and mercy, is the concrete reality of the beloved.

Let me illustrate this with three examples. (1) The first follows from the story I have just told. That is, to the extent that a faith community responds to its people in the context of an AIDS pandemic only by caring for the sick and the dying, and not by at least trying to prevent the spread of the virus-to this extent its mercy is inadequate and unjust. (2) The second example is of a different kind. If I love and care for my students only as supporters of my reputation or

fulfillers of my ambitions, they will be justified in saying that I do not really love them but only myself. Or if I do in fact love them, love them for themselves, yet I am quite obtuse when it comes to understanding their genuine needs, I may injure them when I provide for them what I have imagined they need, or wanted them to need, or projected onto them as needs that are more accurately my own. (3) The third example is perhaps the most basic example of all. If I love persons as if they are things, and things as if they are persons, I love them both unjustly. What is wrong with loving things as if they were persons is that they are not persons. What is wrong with loving persons as things is that they are persons. The norm for right and just loving, for right and just mercy, is the concrete reality of what is loved.

The requirement for genuine mercy is, therefore, the wisdom to understand-insofar as we can-concrete realities, and a recognition of the claims that realities make upon us in justice. Love and mercy, when they are just, are not blind. Insofar as we come to know and awaken to the beauty and the goodness of all creation, so we may choose to respond to it in love and in mercy. Insofar as we recognize (or at least believe in) the dignity at the heart of every human person, so we may experience an obligation to treat them as ends and to take account of their complex embodied and inspirited possibilities and needs. As a carpenter "trues" a board in relation to a larger structure, so our loves are to be "trued" to the reality of the beloved; so our loves and our deeds of mercy are to be just.

This, then, is how mercy requires justice. I turn finally to the ways in which mercy also makes justice possible. There are two: mercy enhances the knowledge that is needed for justice, and it motivates actions that respond to the claims of justice. Mercy, compassion, add to love an element of stronger affective response and an assumption of more acute access to knowledge of the concrete reality of others. Love is a response to persons as lovable, as valuable; mercy is this

same response with the added notion of "suffering with."¹⁰ Precisely because mercy involves beholding the value of others and a suffering with them in their need, it opens reality to the beholder; it offers a way of "seeing" that evokes a moral response—to alleviate pain, provide assistance in need, support in wellbeing. Mercy therefore illuminates justice and propels it to action.

This way of thinking about mercy may not at first appear appropriate when applied to higher education. Students have many needs, it is true, but it is not quite accurate to think of them primarily as "suffering" and hence in need of mercy. It is important, then, to expand our understanding of mercy as love for someone in need, so that it is neither condescending nor false. Where the range of needs is construed too narrowly, the range of mercy will be restricted as well. But there is a sense in which all creation, including ourselves, is a "needing" creation. Need is not always to be identified with extreme pain of mind or body. It can first of all be an ontological fact—as is our dependence for our ongoing existence and flourishing on a merciful God. To know the length and breadth and height and depth of divine mercy is to see it stretch from generation to generation, from one end of the earth to the other, from past to future, down to the depths of every being. We are all within this context of mercy; it is where we live and move and have our being.

But the mercy of God is intended to flow not only into and upon us but through us, one to the other. By God's grace, we are to understand one another's need for beauty as well as for bread, for companionship as well as for wisdom, for mutual respect and mutual strengthening of our loves, our justice, our faith and our hopes. This is why we participate in higher education as co-learners.

¹⁰I reject here certain meanings sometimes asserted for "mercy"—for example, as a kind of "condescending pity" or an unfeeling granting of forgiveness or providing of assistance without love. I draw here on the understanding of mercy as *misericordia*, which—like compassion—implies the holding of the beloved's suffering in one's heart.

This is why we recognize diverse responsibilities for mutual growth, whatever our role in an institution for Mercy higher education. Do we not grow in wisdom through the efforts of one another-administrators, staff, students, faculty? Do we not gain clarity about the demands of justice through the challenges of one another? Is not both receiving and giving a whole work of mercy whereby we develop our freedom and make choices about our loves?

I want, in conclusion, to go beyond my previous description of an imagined college or university. There I focused primarily on the interrelationships within the community of learning. Now I want to add to this description the claims of justice and mercy placed upon this institution (on the individuals within it and on the institution as a whole) by the church, the wider society, and indeed the world. These claims include a contribution to the advancement of human knowledge and wisdom, and a response to the needs of the other communities of which it is a part. If Mercy is its charism, then it will bear witness, in word and in action, to the need for wisdom, the dignity of human persons and the value of all creation, the obligations of justice, and a mercy normed by a just love. Let us pray for its courage.