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Teaching Social Justice in a Tradition: Where You Sit Matters

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Blog Series: Social Justice and Civic Engagement
May 12, 2021
Tags: embodiment | power | Anglo-Catholic | Chapel

At Nashotah House Theological Seminary, a crucial element of our participation in the seminary's Anglo-Catholic tradition is the student body and faculty's regular presence at morning prayer, mass, and sung even-song. In the seminary's beautiful chapel, surrounded by stained glass and hand-carved wooden statues, we sit in the antique wooden choir stalls lining the chancel and join together in worship.

As a junior faculty member, I quickly learned a Nashotah House tradition: your choir stall is not yours to determine. The seats are assigned based on seniority, and priority is zealously guarded. Where you sit matters. This tradition of established place carries its own ethical challenges and requires its own ethical interrogation. What assumptions regarding hierarchy and privilege in our tradition and amongst our student body and faculty does it underwrite? To provide one example, our tradition has come into conflict with our commitment to ensuring that students with mobility challenges have equal opportunity to participate in worship, requiring questioning and ultimately changes to our tradition.

Teaching social justice in a tradition requires inviting students to engage in a similar (although broader) excavation of that tradition. Of course, a crucial part of this teaching involves learning alongside my students how to step outside the tradition to critically confront the

moral and ethical failure of Anglicans, such as the use of Anglican theology at times to support slavery and colonialism. This critical engagement requires accepting that our seats often are gained at the expense of others, and may require change and even surrender on our parts. These moral failures have been well documented and extensively explored, so excavating the resources for critique has been fairly straightforward.

An unexpected joy of this type of excavation, however, has been how many good and constructive resources for social justice remain to be uncovered in the tradition. The Oxford Movement which launched Anglo-Catholicism accompanied liturgical revision with a serious theologically-grounded commitment to working for social justice, spanning generations of the movement and manifested in many different forms. Excavating these resources provides the opportunity to invite students into a different form of engagement with the tradition.

Students have become imaginatively engaged in questioning their own social assumptions and career aspirations by reading about the so-called "slum priests," for example, whose commitment to "ritualism" was equaled by their commitment to working to challenge the economic, social, and political structures which created and justified the appalling living conditions suffered by the poor of British manufacturing cities. Students have learned how to connect social critique and advocacy for justice to Anglican theology through reading the works of the great reforming Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple. Of course, exposure to works of Anglicans such as Pauli Murray and Bishop Desmond Tutu have expanded their conceptions of Anglicanism's work for social justice beyond Anglo-Catholicism and the British Isles.

One of the most fruitful resources I have found for retrieval within the tradition are the editions of the *British Critic*—the journal edited by John Henry Newman in the early days of the Tractarian controversies. Along with discussion of history, doctrine, and liturgy, the pages of this Christian socialist leaning journal are filled with essays of social critique and challenge. One of the essays, written in 1842, which has engaged and challenged my students the most is a long theological critique of the practice then common in British parishes of renting pews to the social elite. The author describes how the poor, walking in and seeing the great boxed pews lined along the front of the parish church, are confronted with an image of the priority of wealth and privilege which runs exactly opposite to Jesus's message of the priority of the poor in the gospel. Rather than encountering "the image and pattern of heaven" in the church, they see "the world, the flesh, and the devil apparently in full possession." As part of the Anglo-Catholic liturgical revival, the author calls for the removal of these pews and the restoration of the parish to the poor and needy whom Christ intends to possess it. Through this image, students begin to encounter the connection between the Anglo-Catholic tradition of beautiful worship and architecture with the beauty of justice and service.

Over my time at Nashotah, I have realized that our tradition of choir stall seating incorporates not only seniority, but also service. At every service, one of the sacristans (the student-leaders with the most authority in worship) always forgoes sitting in choir to sit by the back door of the chapel—he or she is placed there by the tradition to greet, care for, and assist any guests who

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301 West Wabash Ave, Crawfordsville, IN 47933
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might join in the service. My hope for my students is that they leave our seminary having learned that Anglo Catholicism not only provides choir stalls, but also provides models and methods to emulate, just like the sacristans sitting at the back of the church ready to serve and care for others. Where you sit matters.

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