

Pro-Life Challenges in an Academic Environment

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IFIRST CAME to Molloy College in 1978 accompanying Ellen McCormack, who was being honored by the college for having run as a pro-life candidate in the 1976 Democratic Presidential Primary. She was the main speaker at the commencement, and the college conferred on her the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters. Sister Janet Fitzgerald, O.P., who was then president of the college, had a reputation for being pro-life and helpful to pro-life groups. But when the honoree was introduced, about a half dozen faculty members who had been sitting up front got up and left. There was no other disturbance; they appeared to be leaving in protest of the speaker.

That memory was with me when later that year I enrolled in Molloy. I completed my undergraduate education there as a returning student. I had a strong pro-life background, having been a member or officer of several Right-to-Life organizations and having worked for pro-life candidates since the late 1960s.¹ When I completed my studies, Molloy hired me as an adjunct instructor of English. Five years later I began teaching full-time. Although I knew that some of the faculty, students, and administrators were pro-life, there was no active pro-life presence on the campus and my sense was that feelings on the subject were mixed.

Nevertheless, Molloy seemed to be a haven from the secular world. In the late seventies and early eighties most of the Dominican sisters who

¹ I had held the following positions: Coordinator, Women for Life; Coordinator, Committee for Human Life; Member, Women for the Unborn; Vice Chairman, Pro-Life Action Committee during the Ellen McCormack Presidential Campaign; Treasurer, Right to Life Party during the Mary Jane Tobin campaign for Governor. In addition, I had run as the first gubernatorial candidate for the Right to Life Party.

taught there wore modified habits that clearly identified them as religious. We had Mass every weekday in a Chapel in the main building. Most of the classrooms had, and still have, crucifixes on the wall. But over the years the Dominican presence lessened, with some sisters leaving the order and many of those who remained changing to secular clothing, thus making their presence on campus less obvious. For a long while Masses dwindled to twice a week. Theology and Religious Studies course titles in the catalog reflected little that was specifically Catholic. It seemed that those who strictly adhered to the teachings of the Church, including those related to the life-issues, were considered by some to be mired in the past. As a result, I felt I had to make extra efforts to prove my academic standing.

Although Molloy identifies itself as “Catholic and Dominican in tradition,”² the meaning of the description is unclear. After teaching under four different presidential administrations, I am still not sure what that phrase means. When the subject comes up, which it has several times, some of the faculty emphasize the Catholicity of the institution while others insist that we are not Catholic at all, but rather an independent college as categorized by the state. As a result, I did not believe that consistent support for pro-life views in keeping with the teachings of the Church could be taken for granted. Since I never knew in advance who would appear on my tenure and promotion committees, I tried to act prudently, yet without betraying my own beliefs. For example, I listed my membership in University Faculty for Life (UFL) and my position as coordinator of Women for Life on my tenure application form, but I only alluded to my political involvement in a general way by stating that I had worked in various political campaigns on the state and federal levels. It wasn’t until after I had tenure that I felt secure enough to send out college-wide e-mails inviting others to join UFL.

Several members of the faculty responded to these invitations and became members. Later, a few of us wanted to bring UFL’s emphasis on scholarship regarding the life-issues to our own area. At first we attempted

² *Molloy College Undergraduate and Graduate Catalog 2005-2006*, p.2.

to start a Molloy Chapter,³ but the Acting Dean rejected our request. Her memo quoted the college attorney as follows:

The tax-exempt status of Molloy College could be jeopardized if the proposed Chapter was deemed a political or lobbying group by the Internal Revenue Service under the auspices of Molloy College. In addition, any recognition by Molloy College of such a group could open the door to the formation of other groups that might be deemed political or lobbying in nature, such as 'Faculty for the National Rifle Association' or Faculty for Planned Parenthood.

In the interest of time we decided not to argue the point since it had taken two months to get that answer.⁴ Instead, we broadened our base by creating a Long Island Chapter and were happy with the results. Our chapter now has twelve members from Molloy and twenty-two from six other area colleges.⁵ We hold programs at Molloy and at Nassau Community College, and we reach a larger audience than we would have otherwise.

As an outside group, we are not always sure what our boundaries are at Molloy. The college has been most generous in allowing free use of its rooms for programs; but when the English Department revealed in its annual report that it had been co-sponsoring programs with us, the Dean declared such sponsorship inappropriate.⁶ Yet, much to its credit, in 2004 Molloy College offered a series on the life-issues as part of the President's Crossroads Program. The Center for Social and Ethical Concerns and the Long Island Chapter of University Faculty for Life co-sponsored the

³ Dr. Donald Doyle (History and Political Science Department), Dr. Kinpointner (English Department Chairman), and I signed the request.

⁴ We sent our letter of 9/9/99 requesting permission to start a Molloy Chapter of UFL to the Acting President of Molloy. She passed it on to the Acting Dean who responded on 11/11/99.

⁵ Our members have taught at St. John University, Long Island University, Fordham University, Adelphi University, Nassau Community College, Suffolk Community College, Queens College, Mercy College, and St. Mary's College in Sligo, Ireland.

⁶ The Long Island Chapter of University Faculty for Life held ten programs at Molloy in the period from 2001 to 2006.

series, which included two notable UFL speakers, Father John J. Conley, S.J., and Dr. Edmund Pellegrino. For this program, Molloy picked up all the expenses, advertised the event and made arrangements to have Dr. Pellegrino's talk videoed by our local diocesan TV station.

However, the college has also invited to the campus such well known pro-abortion advocates as *Hardball* host Chris Matthews; Eliot Spitzer, then the New York State Attorney General; and former Secretary of State, General Colin L. Powell.⁷ Letters and e-mails to the Vice-President for Development, with copies to the President, pointing out our concerns, received replies emphasizing that these speakers would not specifically address abortion issues. Yet Bishop James McHugh, former bishop of our diocese and former member of the Molloy Board of Trustees, had written that pro-abortion public officials and candidates should not be invited "to address Catholic agencies or organizations, school or parish groups," even if they did not intend to express their pro-abortion opinions, because to do so might imply toleration of "their rejection of Church teaching on pro-life issues." Even so, the administration saw no problem, nor did the college community at large, who enthusiastically supported these programs.

Because the college seemed inconsistent in its outlook, I was reluctant to create courses focusing on the life-issues. However, at one of UFL's conferences Dr. Donald Schneller shared his experiences teaching a sociology course on abortion at Middle Tennessee State University. Prof. Schneller pointed out that even colleges that are not pro-life in general want to appear to be open to all views and need at least one prominent pro-life person on campus to whom they can point. His comments made sense to me, and so I introduced a Business English practicum course that was connected with the Sisters of Life. Part of the students' experience was to review videos whereby students were exposed to pro-life arguments. The first time that I taught the course I had the pleasure of witnessing a few students who initially considered themselves

⁷ Chris Matthews was the keynote speaker for the Joseph F. Maher Leadership Forum in 2001. Eliot Spitzer did the same in 2003, and Powell in 2005.

pro-choice modify their views.⁸

Later I initiated a core course that I have taught for several years with Sister Janet, the former President of Molloy, entitled Literature and Philosophy of Life, which lends itself to discussions of life issues. While students come in maintaining both pro-life and pro-choice views towards abortion, euthanasia, and embryonic stem-cell research, they often do not have a good basic understanding of these issues. By the end of the semester, some are more open to pro-life views while others defensively retain their pro-choice positions.

Molloy has recently instituted what I consider positive changes. We once again have daily Mass. Our new campus minister and our new chaplain are both enthusiastically pro-life and have joined our Long Island Chapter. In response to an e-mail invitation to the student body, we now have a student pro-life group. In addition to their outreach efforts for women in crisis pregnancy centers, these students help with Long Island Chapter mailings and programs.

Upon reviewing my years at Molloy for this panel, I realize that I tended to magnify the number and the importance of those with opposing views. My misperception reminds me that I sometimes react like the knights in the Arthurian legends who fearfully warn Lancelot of lions on the other side of the Sword Bridge. After crossing the bridge, Lancelot finds there are no lions, but only shadows playing tricks on the viewer's eyes.⁹ Like these knights, I am often too ready to retreat from active pro-life pursuits at the college because of perceived opposition from the academic community. For me, participation in yearly UFL conferences, where I can witness faculty members with impressive academic credentials presenting well-documented evidence concerning controversial life-issues helps remind me that expressing such views is an appropriate exercise of academic freedom.

⁸ The course ran in the summer 2001 semester and the fall 2004 semester. In 2001, students reviewed Mark Crutcher's *Life Talk* videos.

⁹ Chrétien de Troyes, "Lancelot, or The Knight of the Cart" in *The Romance of Arthur*, ed. J. J. Wilhelm (New York NY: Garland, 1994), pp. 121-99.