



**Remarks of Greg Weiner, Ph.D., Provost  
Faculty Forum  
Wednesday, June 10, 2020**

Some of you have asked me to share the remarks I made at the beginning of today's faculty forum on race. They are below. An extensive conversation ensued on a variety of topics and from several perspectives. Thanks to all who participated.

I asked to make a few opening remarks, but what I want to do after that is listen. What I want to address is our academic approach to the crisis in society right now. I know a college has many functions and that they are intertwined. I mean only to speak to what we do in the classroom.

I hope it is superfluous to say I am repulsed by the murder of George Floyd and other similar and hideous events. I am repulsed by the fact that these are not isolated incidents. I do not feel a need to qualify that, and I do not feel a need to condone or condemn every reaction to George Floyd's murder in order to say so. I will tell you, for the record, that I find "law and order" and "abolish the police" to be false choices reflecting simplified, if impassioned, thinking. More on that in a moment.

When a social crisis of this magnitude occurs, the natural and commendable instinct is to say: How is Assumption helping? How should we respond? My answer is this: We should do what we would do under conditions of social crisis or calm. We should educate. I do not think Catholic liberal education is primarily about engagement with current events. It is about engagement with enduring ideas. When we confront issues in the contemporary more than the transcendent tense, we not only misconceive our function as educators. We actively undermine the very promise of Catholic liberal education: that ideas are real and tangible things with real and meaningful consequences in the world.

Fr. d'Alzon wrote the following in 1870, and it seems especially appropriate now: "It is crucial that you be convinced of the truth that the world, even in a decadent state, is governed by ideas. ... [R]eligious who are sowers of ideas, provided they be true and fruitful ideas, will be the true renewers of society. You ought therefore also to fill yourself with true ideas and great principles."

One result of a Catholic liberal education may be social change. Another may be social conservation. But I do not think either should be its immediate object. We are an institution whose explicit and specific purpose is to form students educationally, not to form our society as a whole or respond to events in it. I have said that to colleagues on the right and left and in between.

I do not say it to reject the vital importance of engaging in society. I do mean, however, that when we accomplish our specific and explicit purpose, society is healthier, and when we reach beyond it, we risk undermining the very kinds of broader results that Fr. d'Alzon said educational formation in the Catholic intellectual tradition should yield.

We must believe what we say about the kind of education Assumption aspires to provide. And that means we must believe that students educated to think about topics like equality and justice and prudence—these and other permanent questions of the human condition—will draw conclusions from them and act well as citizens.

Does that mean we should avoid current events in the classroom? Of course not. Does it mean we should not teach about the role of race in the criminal justice system, in America's ongoing history, in other important parts of the reality in which students live? We absolutely should. And certainly a predicate to any of this is a campus community that is welcoming both to diverse people and to diverse points of view.

But I believe the most important educational response—to the sin of racism or to any number of others—is to teach. To teach that we are made in the Divine image. To teach that questions of justice and equality exist in a precarious balance. To question what is good and prudent in an ongoing and millennia-long conversation.

We have all experienced students who think literally about their majors. If they are going to study literature, they assume it must be in order to become a novelist. Political science leads to working for the government, and so forth.

This is problematic for many reasons. It rejects the idea that truth and beauty are goods in themselves. And most important, this focus on usefulness is the precise opposite of what liberal education means.

I want to urge us to model for students a broader and less literal conception of higher education. If one goal of a Catholic liberal education is students who think justly and prudently about race, I am not sure, for examples, that lectures about race in its contemporary context are the only answer or even the primary one. Certainly studying race where it arises in disciplines is important. But so is a theology course that asks: What does it mean to be made in the image of God and to treat others as though they are as well? So is a political science or philosophy class that asks: What is just? So is a literature course that shows characters not dictating answers on these issues but rather struggling with them.

That would yield, I think, what is most missing, in my view, from the contemporary context in our society. That is the ability to struggle with and be grateful for the fact that human life is complicated. Each of us sees through a glass darkly. To say there are absolute truths, as I believe there are, is not to express confidence in any one person's perfect apprehension of them.

So much of this is about trusting our students and ourselves. Trusting them to find answers. To ask questions. To get things wrong and relish wrestling and struggling until they get it right and to keep doing so after they leave. And it's about trusting each other. Our most powerful asset as a faculty community is the joy we take together in this work.

I've gone on too long, and I look forward to hearing your views. I am one of those people I just said does not have an exclusive franchise on the truth. But I do feel confident about this: We need to know why we are here. We need to know what we do and why it matters. We need to be confident in our own promise, in Fr. d'Alzon's: that ideas endure, and ideas—explored thoroughly, prudently, humbly and in all their wondrous complexity—are what change the world.