**Encounter and/as Pedagogy for Catholic Higher Education in Our Time**

Encounter has emerged as leitmotif for the pontificate of Pope Francis. He proposes encounter as a way for Catholics to appropriate the *aggiornamento* of Vatican II, and, in particular, the *Declaration on Christian Education* framing a new theory or philosophy of Catholic education. While addressing students from Jesuit schools of the Italian province in Italy and Albania, he remarked: “School can and must be a catalyst, it must be a place of encounter.”

In the apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii Gaudium*), Francis locates encounter at the center of the Gospel:

> I never tire of repeating those words of Benedict XVI which take us to the very heart of the Gospel: “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” Thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption.\(^1\)

In the Pope’s first language, Spanish, *encuentro* is often invoked in spiritual terms indicating a dynamic, decentering interplay between persons. As it regards our relationship with God, Francis emphasizes the divine initiative; we are being encountered.

This essay proposes encounter as a promising pedagogical strategy for a Catholic university in our time. The argument unfolds in three parts: First, I explore Francis’s praxis of encounter in terms of displacement, dialogue, and discernment. These dimensions are illuminative in developing a pedagogy of encounter. Second, I discuss relational pedagogy as an emergent approach to education emphasizing the caring relation as reciprocal in thriving educational communities.\(^3\) Nel Noddings, renowned educator and philosopher, grounds relational pedagogy in maternal instinct. She has developed an ethic of care in light of Levinasian encounter and response to the other.\(^4\) Relational pedagogy may be conceived as a pedagogy of encounter in light of Francis’s witness. Third, I outline the promise of relational pedagogy for Catholic higher education today.

**Praxis of Encounter**

In a letter to the theological faculty of the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina, Francis adapts a favored phrase used to describe his vision of Catholic bishops. “Even good theologians, like good shepherds, have the smell of the people and of the street and, by their reflection, pour oil and wine onto the wounds of humankind.” He adds:

> Teaching and studying theology means living on a frontier, one in which the Gospel meets the needs of the people to whom it should be proclaimed in an understandable and meaningful way. We must guard against a theology that is exhausted in academic dispute or one that looks at humanity from a glass castle. You learn so as to live: theology and holiness are inseparable.\(^5\)

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5. Pope Francis, *Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Grand Chancellor of the “Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina” for the 100th Anniversary of the Founding of the Faculty of Theology*, March 3, 2015.
He also describes theology as “an expression of a Church which is a ‘field hospital,’ which lives her mission of salvation and healing in the world today.”  

In this address Francis links displacement with theological education in a way that echoes remarks elsewhere on encounter as “going out of ourselves.” On the Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements he remarked:

In this “stepping out” it is important to be ready for encounter. For me this word is very important. Why? Because faith is an encounter with Jesus, and we must do what Jesus does: encounter others… We must go out to meet them, and with our faith we must create a “culture of encounter,” a culture of friendship, a culture in which we find brothers and sisters, in which we can also speak with those who hold other beliefs, who do not have the same faith. They all have something in common with us: they are images of God; they are children of God.

The images of a soiled shepherd and the field hospital indicate that encounter’s displacement is thoroughly embodied and a foil to Gnostic duality. In Care for Our Common Home (Laudato Sí), Francis further specifies embodied encounter in terms of physical proximity to the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth.

Many professionals, opinion makers, communications media and centers of power, being located in affluent urban areas, are far removed from the poor, with little direct contact with their problems. They live and reason from the comfortable position of a high level of development and a quality of life well beyond the reach of the majority of the world’s population. This lack of physical contact and encounter, encouraged at times by the disintegration of our cities, can lead to a numbing of conscience and to tendentious analyses which neglect parts of reality.

Francis’s employment of encounter also highlights a dialogic dimension. The displacement into the life of the other is transformative. Dialogic encounter is an antidote to a culture of indifference celebrating mere tolerance, as it emerges from genuine attentiveness and vulnerability. At Aparecida then Cardinal Bergoglio remarked:

To foster encounter the most useful tool is dialogue, to create the capacity for dialogue. When a person enters into an encounter, he begins to dialogue, and dialogue means not simply hearing but listening. One must foster this capacity for listening. The other person, no matter on what side of the street he happens to be ideologically, politically, or socially, always has something good to offer, just as I have something good to offer him. Throughout encounter, into which I carry these good things, is built a creative, fecund synthesis.

That Francis grants primacy to listening in dialogic encounter stems from the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and from his experience as novice master and spiritual director. When a director listens to a directee engaged in the Exercises, the focus is on how the Gospel has moved him or her to consolation or desolation – and this is heard in the tone, through the “music” as Francis calls it. While displacement emphasizes the activity of going out of oneself, the attentive listening of genuine dialogue underscores encounter’s anti-Pelagian giftedness. Indeed, the going out of oneself is a response to the prior call of Christ “knocking at the door.”

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6 Ibid.
7 Pope Francis, Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements, May 18, 2013.
8 Pope Francis, Laudato Sí, 49.
9 J.M. Bergoglio, Conferencia en la XII Jornada de Pastoral Social, September 19, 2009.
11 Francis, Vigil of Pentecost.
dynamism of reciprocal gift exchange is more pronounced in the Spanish term *encuentro*. In the *Joy of the Gospel* Francis calls for “a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them.” Our encountering God and others is cooperation with a divine initiative.

Encounter’s discernment is eminently practical in denouncing ideas and practices that deny the other’s inherent dignity and therefore impede or rule out the possibility of encounter. Conversely, discernment encourages situations and structures which promote inclusion, entirety - the flourishing of human (and non-human) living. Francis notes the daunting particularities of current global conditions:

> Today, when the networks and means of human communication have made unprecedented advances, we sense the challenge of finding and sharing a “mystique” of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing a supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage.

Encounter resists the overwhelming tide of consumerism and its “throw-away culture” which regards whole categories of people as disposable relative to their social, political, and economic status. Encounter discerns against relationships with others primarily predicated upon self-referential utility. In addition, encounter evaluates the role of virtual presence in fundamentally shaping interpersonal relationships. In *Laudato Si* Francis remarks: “Today’s media do enable us to communicate and to share our knowledge and affections. Yet at times they also shield us from direct contact with the pain, the fears and the joys of others and the complexity of their personal experiences.”

Displacement, dialogue, and discernment are three integral dimensions of Pope Francis’s praxis of encounter. Going outside of ourselves, attending to the other in mutual mediating conversation, and valuing the intrinsic dignity of others – particularly those deemed disposable – may inform a pedagogy of encounter for our time. The insights of relational pedagogy further elucidate the centrality of interpersonal relationships within the context of education.

**Relational Pedagogy**

The pedagogy of relation has a genealogy with ancient roots. There is a long philosophical tradition emphasizing relations beginning with Plato and Aristotle. For example, Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium* refigures pedagogical relations in terms of natality, and it portrays education as a potentially “generative encounter.” More recent philosophical accounts of relation include Martin Buber’s “I-Thou,” Gadamer’s game-play dialectic, and Levinas’s face-to-face ethics. Critical pedagogy draws from Paulo Freire in highlighting the interplay between social determinism and interpersonal relations. Educational theorists advocating a communicative approach also belong to relational pedagogy. Nel Noddings, the focus in this essay, provides relational thinking a significant voice in the mainstream of American educational theory today. Along with forerunners Carol Gilligan and Jane Ronald Martin, Noddings employs feminist thought to displace the dominant Western model of the autonomous individual subject enshrined in the Enlightenment philosophy of Immanuel Kant. In place of prescriptive teaching

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12 Francis, *Laudato Si*, 47.
13 Ibid., 87.
14 Ibid., 47.
practices for managing the daily occurrences within the classroom, the concern here is to introduce an educational theory.

Rachel Jones outlines relational pedagogy in three key features. First, relations are not viewed as merely a means to an end, such as the teacher more effectively transmitting knowledge to students or students acquiring a skill. Rather, relations are the “constitutive and always embodied site of education understood as an ongoing and open-ended process.” Second, the multiple relations constituting the teaching-learning event (including previous “educative encounters”) do not depend on prescribed or static roles, but constitute its participants as both learning and teaching as relational activities. Third, this pedagogy focuses on the relations constituting the teaching-learning event and the “encounters that foster them,” rather than on individual outcomes of the participants considered apart from those relations.\textsuperscript{17}

In recent years relational pedagogy has received heightened attention in response to ongoing efforts at school reform that center on teacher and administrator accountability, reflecting a narrow view of education as the effective transmission of content. According to this view, methods, curricula, and high-stakes testing overshadow the human relationship between teacher and student that relational pedagogy theorists place at the heart of educational events. Economic models borrowed from the world of business, however, may not reap dividends when applied to education. And ironically, once the relational basis of school organization is seriously injured, it becomes more improbable to achieve high academic standards.\textsuperscript{18}

In contrast to pedagogy for high-stakes testing, relational pedagogy illuminates interpersonal relationships as foundational to learning. Nel Noddings’s groundbreaking work \textit{Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education} (1984) is an enduring contribution to an ethic of care applied to relational pedagogy. Noddings remarks, “When we see the other’s reality as a possibility for us…, when I am in this sort of relationship with another, when the other’s reality becomes a real possibility for me, I care.”\textsuperscript{19} Noddings underscores the significance of receptivity and mutuality in the caring relationship. The one caring (for example the teacher) is receptive to the cared-for (the student), and the cared-for receives the caring. An essential element of caring is the ability to sustain the reciprocal relationship over time. Noddings models teacher-student caring on the reciprocal caring dynamic of a mother for her diverse family. “Infants contribute significantly to the mother-child relation, students to the teacher-student relation, and patients to the physician-patient relation.”\textsuperscript{20}

That caring precedes learning heralds an important feature of relational pedagogy: learning occurs within and through relationships. Care ethicists look to establish the conditions and relations that support moral ways of life. This emphasis distinguishes care ethics from a virtue ethics approach to character education in that care is fundamentally relational rather than individual agent-based. Care ethicists prioritize caring relations with the expectation that virtues will develop naturally through these relations.\textsuperscript{21} Noddings succinctly states the \textit{telos} of the ethic of care: “Our main educational aim should be to encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving, and lovable people.”\textsuperscript{22} This aim is based on the recognition that all people everywhere want to be cared for – even if manifestations of care differ across times, culture, and even

\textsuperscript{17} Jones, “Re-reading Diotima,” 185.
\textsuperscript{18} Bingham and Sidorkin, \textit{No Education without Relation}, 2.
\textsuperscript{20} Noddings, \textit{Educating Moral People}, 2.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 1-10.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 94.
individuals. For an ethics of care, moral life is the main goal of education. It supplies the firm foundation for intellectual development and academic achievement. For example, in a study sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation, Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider examined the school reform efforts in Chicago across the decade of the 1990s. They arrived at “relational trust” as the factory holding the greatest explanatory power. A school that had high relational trust and/or a leadership core that worked on trust-building had a roughly five-out-of-seven chance of better serving students over a decade.

Noddings argues that dialogue is the most fundamental component of the care model. Paulo Freire describes true dialogue as open-ended; it is not a mere formality aimed at a foregone conclusion. Both interlocutors speak, and both listen. While there is a shared originating topic, it may shift as the exchange unfolds. The participants attend to each other in addition to the topic at hand. The emphasis on dialogue reflects the basic phenomenology of caring. A carer attends to or is engrossed (at least momentarily) in the cared-for, and the cared-for receives the carer’s efforts at caring. This reception is also a form of attention. Noddings remarks: “Caring requires staying-with, or what Ruddick has called ‘holding.’ We do not let our friends fall if we can help it, and if they do, we hold on and pull them back up.” Simone Weil described the connection between caring and attention in this way: “The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: ‘What are you going through?’…This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth.” Dialogue is central to moral education because it implies the question: What are you going through? Recognizing Levinasian alterity, the carer remains open and attentive to what the encounter discloses rather than arriving with preconceived assumptions. Noddings comments, “The recognition of relation, not a fixed ideal of teaching, steers the teacher’s choice of methods.”

Noddings offers five directives for enacting a mission of care in education. (1) Be clear and unapologetic about the goal of education to produce “competent, caring, loving, and lovable people.” (2) Take care of affiliative needs. This includes legitimatizing time spent on building relations of care and trust. (3) Relax the impulse to control. This includes encouraging teachers to learn new materials with their students. Relaxing the impulse to control may also entail encouraging self-evaluation and teaching students how to do it competently. Moreover, involve students in governing their own classrooms and schools. (4) Dedicate time to themes of care. This involves giving students the opportunity to practice caring in the classroom. Teachers can help students understand how individuals and groups create rivals and enemies. Students should be encouraged to extend care to the environment as well. (5) Teach students that caring in every domain implies competence. Caring entails accepting the responsibility to work continuously on competence so that the recipient of care is enhanced.

Caring is fraught with fragility. Relationships of care are complex and can be difficult, particularly when they span differences of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and gender. That

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23 Ibid., 21.
24 Ibid., 99.
26 Noddings, Educating Moral People, 98.
28 Noddings, Educating Moral People, 149
Noddings grounds her notion of care on a sense of intimate relationships at home has become a point of multicultural criticism of her work. Audrey Thompson’s Black feminist treatment of caring literature argues that “love and caring do not step back from the world in return to innocence, but step out in the world in order to change it.”\(^{31}\) Cris Mayo rejects the basis of “home” or “domestic relations” for the basis of relational pedagogy. Instead, Mayo proposes a guiding metaphor of vertigo as a “state of discomfort that is aware of the fearful familiar that has been repressed.”\(^{32}\) She advocates for an unapologetically disquieting and interruptive approach to education. Mayo explains: “In short, these homeward trends in education forestall precisely the sort of alienation toward ourselves and others that would better facilitate an examination of power relations and undergirding racialized subjectivity and race relations.”\(^{33}\) Mayo worries that the focus on care may trap educators in one-on-one therapeutic relations with their students rather than education for political action born from relationship struggle.

That both Pope Francis and Nel Noddings center their approaches on interpersonal relationships suggests that relational pedagogy may contribute richly to pedagogy of encounter. While Noddings employs the term encounter less frequently than Francis, she understands it as integral to the aim of education inspiring relational pedagogy. She comments, “Despite sometimes irresolvable differences, students should not forget the central aim of moral life – to encounter, attend, and respond to the need for care.”\(^{34}\) Noddings favors encounter over the ambiguity of community which by its very nature is both inclusive (“us”) and exclusive (“them.”) She invokes Levinasian encounter in which caring arises out of the need of the other. The face presents a desire for a loving response. Noddings comments: “Caring is not confined to a group with identifiably common features. It recognizes the community of those who have nothing in common. We should be able to respond to the pain of strangers as well as friends.”\(^{35}\) Noddings’s linking of encounter and caring here echoes the commitments of Pope Francis. Francis’s praxis of encounter as displacement, dialogue, and discernment resonates with Noddings’s relational pedagogy.

**Pedagogy of Encounter and Catholic Higher Education**

The application of relational pedagogy to higher education may immediately appear as an insurmountable task. A pedagogy of encounter calls for a reconfiguration of deep-seated educational notions in our day. There is the deeply entrenched individualist thinking that undergirds discourses, practices, and philosophies of education. For example, the highly influential Tyler Rationale is beholden to an ideal of students learning as disconnected individuals without regard to their relation to others. Tylerism insists on Objectives, Content, Method, and Assessment with the assumption that students learn curriculum as atomistic individuals.\(^{36}\) It is the guiding rationale for much of higher education pedagogy. Standardized testing also reflects an individualistic view of education in which each student is assessed individually by comparing to other individuals without regard for the relational context where the ability is measured.

There is the commodification of higher education buoyed by the cult of “meritocracy” which reduces education to another object to be consumed among others. William Deresiewicz

\(^{31}\) Audrey Thompson, “Rejoiner: Listening and its Asymmetries” *The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education* 33, no. 1 (2003), 79-100.

\(^{32}\) Cris Mayo, “Relations are Difficult” in *No Education without Relation*, 122.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 121.

\(^{34}\) Noddings, *Educating Moral People*, 23.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 10.

updates John Henry Newman’s critique of vocational education in light of the neoliberal capitalist reduction of college education to merely learning marketable skills.37 Students facing tens of thousands of dollars of debt upon graduation are reasonably concerned about utilitarian education for the marketplace. Initiating and sustaining caring relationships takes time, and the modern corporatized university values efficiency and productivity above all. The authors of The Slow Professor, Barbara Seeber and Maggie Berg, observe: “The values of productivity, efficiency, and competition have time as the common factor. Productivity is about getting a number of tasks done in a set unit of time; efficiency is about getting tasks done quickly; and competition, in part, is about marketing your achievements before someone else beats you to it. Corporatization, in short, has sped up the clock.”38 By attending to the quality of relationships, a pedagogy of encounter runs against the grain of the commodified academy which views education as primarily transactional.

Our “virtual identities” present another challenge for a pedagogy of encounter in higher education. Sherry Turkle notes how the ubiquitous presence of smart phones fundamentally alters the very nature of conversation.39 Personal electronic devices present a steady deluge of entertainment and informative stimuli that constantly tempt us into a flight from attentive, face-to-face conversation. We turn to our phones at the first hint of boredom and thus atrophy the capacity for attentiveness. Resultantly, we are easily bored. The dictionary now includes the term “phubbing,” which means texting while maintaining eye contact.40 It comes as no surprise that conversations held while multitasking tend towards superficiality; divided attention naturally results in keeping content light. Turkle argues that the cost of less attentive and demanding conversation is a lost practice in the “empathic arts – learning to make eye contact, to listen, and to attend to others.”41 Turkle’s research indicates a 40 percent decline in the markers for empathy among college students in the past twenty years, with the greatest drop in the past ten years.42 Researches attribute this decline to the emergence of digital communications. To be clear, Turkle is not anti-technology but pro-conversation. “Conversation is on the path toward the experience of intimacy, community, and communion. Reclaiming conversation is a step toward reclaiming our most fundamental human values.”43 A pedagogy of encounter may aid in this task. Norm Friesen, researching relational pedagogy and internet technology, argues that the space on the screen can be a site of meaningful educational relationship although its world is marked differently than the embodied place of the classroom. Creating the conditions for interpersonal encounter on the screen requires more deliberate and skilled creation of tone and mood than in the case of our more spontaneous face-to-face interactions.44

Each of these profound challenges is also an opportunity for a pedagogy of encounter to enable Catholic higher education to realize its mission more fully. Moreover, there is hopeful evidence that a relational approach to education can play a decisive role in determining a

38 Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 8.
40 Ibid., 4.
41 Ibid., 7.
42 Ibid., 21.
43 Ibid., 7.
44 Norm Friesen, The Place of the Classroom and the Space of the Screen: Relational Pedagogy and Internet Technology (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).
student’s collegiate success. In *How College Works*, Daniel Chambliss and Christopher Takacs conclude that long-lasting friendships with fellow students and sometimes teachers are a major result of the college experience.\(^{45}\) According to their research, personal relationships play an integral role in learning and are often the central mechanism and daily motivators of the student experience. Alumni frequently report that friendships are the most valuable result of their undergraduate years. Chambliss and Takacs comment: “This pervasive influence of relationships suggests that a college – at least insofar as it offers real benefits – is less a collection of *programs* than a gathering of *people*.\(^{46}\) Programs matter, to be sure, but friends matter more. Friendship is crucial for students, but having a large number of friends is not. Most students need only two or three good friends, and one or two great professors to have a rewarding and even wonderful college experience.\(^{47}\) The extensive research of Chambliss and Takacs conducted at Hamilton College, a small, rural, and elite liberal arts college in New York, confirms the monumental role of education’s interpersonal dimension. Their research can be summed up in a single sentence: “[W]hat really matters in college is who meets whom, and when.”\(^{48}\) College is most effective when it is not primarily about program or technology but about meaningful human interaction that can shape student choices, increase motivation, and lead to more overall satisfaction with the college experience. College “works” when people are committed to learning together. “People, far more than programs, majors, or classes, are decisive in students’ experiences of college.”\(^{49}\) While the idyllic and cloistered context of Hamilton College does not stand in for all of contemporary higher education, Catholic or otherwise, the research suggests that the role of caring relations may be at the heart of successful education everywhere.

Newman underscored the crucial role of friendship in learning within a liberal arts education.\(^{50}\) Michael Buckley places that insight within an explicitly Christian and Catholic context:

> Academic exchange in thought and collaborative inquiry formally constitute the specifying activity of any university. The only spirit that can further specify any community as Christian is charity, that love of friendship for God and for other human beings that bespeaks the influence and teaching of Christ. To the degree that the university’s characteristic interchange is permeated by a love of both the truth to be explored and for the human beings who are to come to know it…a love found in the concern that human beings share so great a good as that of sacred and profane knowledge, of reason and of revelation and that by their influence, especially teaching, they make this same development possible to others – is that university Catholic in spirit.\(^{51}\)


\(^{46}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 21.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 163.
