

## Intellectual Hospitality as Guiding Virtue in Campus Conversations on Abortion

Megan Halteman Zwart

IN 2017, AFTER THE DIVISIVE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, I developed The Dialogue Project at Saint Mary's College, a collection of programs that aim to promote dialogue across difference. Each year, The Dialogue Project student leaders survey students about the issue on which they most desire better campus dialogue. Since we started surveying, abortion is always in the top spot. No other issue has even come close.

This makes sense to me. I have taught Medical Ethics at Saint Mary's for fifteen years, and abortion is the most anticipated and appreciated course topic. Interest in this issue is understandable at a Catholic women's college, where questions raised by abortion—bodily autonomy, the rights of women, and the dignity of human persons—touch the lives and deeply held values of nearly all our community members. However, in the students' annual request for better dialogue on abortion, I also hear echoes of disordered engagements that have occurred during my time here.<sup>1</sup> Pro-choice students have felt frustration as their effort to start an official pro-choice club was denied. Students from pro-choice and pro-life organizations have had their door decorations defaced, fliers torn down, or their events menaced. Faculty have felt over-scrutinized about whether they are on the wrong side of the line between advocacy and education.

If Catholic colleges are to be inclusive spaces, we must work to ensure that community members with different views and experiences

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Huffington Post* even wrote an article about one of our students who “thought college would be a place of self-discovery. ... But at [Saint] Mary's, she found, a woman's right to an abortion wasn't open to intellectual debate.” This particular assessment stung as I had facilitated a public dialogue on abortion from multiple perspectives on campus just days before the article was posted. However, the student's experience underscores how perceptions about the disordered conversation on abortion drive pain and alienation by community members. Melissa Jeltzen, “Inside the Fight for Abortion Rights on a Catholic Campus,” *Huffington Post*, [www.huffpost.com/entry/abortion-pro-choice-club-catholic-college\\_n\\_5f930dabc5b63bc74ba64f41](http://www.huffpost.com/entry/abortion-pro-choice-club-catholic-college_n_5f930dabc5b63bc74ba64f41).

on abortion can thrive in our shared community. I suggest that by developing a culture of intellectual hospitality we can meet the challenge dialogue about abortion raises at Catholic colleges and universities. To this end, I will describe what I mean by intellectual hospitality, then offer concrete strategies for developing a culture of conversation about abortion marked by this virtue, and finally address some justified concerns about this approach.

In the words of Diana Pavlac Glyer, “Intellectual hospitality invites us to gather around a table—a seminar table, a dinner table, a communion table.”<sup>2</sup> When seated together at the table, we are more likely to open ourselves to others with curiosity, to “engage with new ideas, read books from unknown authors, and entertain new ways of looking at the world.” Pope Francis expresses a similar sentiment recognizing that “our relationships, if healthy and authentic, open us to others who expand and enrich us.” He also notes that offering hospitality indicates “readiness to move beyond [ourselves] in openness to others” (*Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 89–90).

Intellectual hospitality not only opens us to others, it also helps build skills and virtues contributing broadly to human flourishing deeply resonant with the mission of Catholic higher education. As Glyer says: “At its best, intellectual hospitality takes us deeper than mere tolerance. It calls us to something higher, something better, something that marks our character and transforms our souls. It teaches us to cultivate generosity, humility, kindness, and patience, and it helps us overcome selfishness, insecurity, suspicion, and shame.”<sup>3</sup> As wisdom traditions have taught for thousands of years, and contemporary social science confirms,<sup>4</sup> these are skill sets that help our students thrive in college, careers, and communities throughout their lives.

But how do we foster intellectual hospitality on our campuses? And how can it provide a path to better dialogue about abortion? I would like to propose several strategies growing out of my experience of facilitating these conversations.

---

<sup>2</sup> Diana Pavlac Glyer, “Intellectual Hospitality,” *APU Life*, [www.apu.edu/articles/intellectual-hospitality/](http://www.apu.edu/articles/intellectual-hospitality/).

<sup>3</sup> Glyer, “Intellectual Hospitality.”

<sup>4</sup> There is evidence that dispositions like curiosity and humility help students thrive. For example, psychology and neuroscience confirm that curiosity helps students learn more and is positively reinforced biologically, since “at peak curiosity, dopamine pathways in the brain fired with increased intensity” (Judson Brewer, “Curiosity: Our Superpower for Just about Everything,” *Psychology Today*, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-craving-mind/201909/curiosity-our-superpower-just-about-everything](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-craving-mind/201909/curiosity-our-superpower-just-about-everything)). Research also indicates that intellectual humility correlates with “greater open-mindedness, empathy, prosocial values, and tolerance towards diverse ideas and people” (Elizabeth J. Krumrei-Mancuso and Brian Newman, “Intellectual Humility in the Sociopolitical Domain,” *Self & Identity* 19, no. 8 [2020]: 990).

### OFFER ATTENTION TO CONTEXT AND GOAL

We cannot create a climate of intellectual hospitality without the preparatory work of setting the table for good dialogue. Dialogue about abortion has to begin with attention to a community's unique context, including investigating power dynamics at work on campus. For example, we must ask which perspectives are explicitly or implicitly endorsed by the following: state and federal laws, religious leaders, campus health and counseling services, the administration, a majority of the faculty, a majority of students, high profile speakers, and official vs. unofficial clubs. The diversity of views among these stakeholders explains why folks with perspectives across the spectrum can simultaneously feel unheard.<sup>5</sup> Honesty about a community's unique context, including honestly facing the community's history of dialogue about abortion, is an essential preparatory step.

Attention to the goal of a conversation also matters at the outset. We may enter critical conversations intending to persuade those who disagree. This sets us up for failure because debate-style exchanges rarely change minds but can alienate interlocutors. Of the conversations on abortion I have facilitated, only one stands out as harm-producing. The event, planned by students, was billed as an opportunity for students to share their varied perspectives openly and listen to others. Several attendees had participated in a pro-life apologetics training, and skillfully deployed talking points with the aim to persuade. Students unprepared to debate felt overpowered and even deceived by the event description. When I tried to steer the conversation back to principles of dialogue rather than debate,<sup>6</sup> some students felt silenced. In this instance, lack of attention to context and goal fostered a hostile rather than hospitable context for dialogue.

### CREATE OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD EMPATHY BY LISTENING

If we want an alternative to contentious debate or topic avoidance, we can invest in helping community members build and practice listening skills. Listening sessions might not be appropriate in most classroom settings, but can be effective if they are optional, supported

---

<sup>5</sup> By this I mean that a hypothetical Catholic college in a red state with restricted access to abortion, a mostly pro-choice faculty, and a mostly pro-life administration and student body is going to have a different context for conversation than a college in a blue state with mostly unrestricted access to abortion and a different make-up of community members. Some of these components of context might be unknowable, but an honest assessment of the climate will require attention to those that can be known.

<sup>6</sup> For more on my distinction between dialogue and debate, see Megan Halteman Zwart, "Dialogue not Debate," *Inside Higher Ed*, [www.insidehighered.com/views/2022/04/28/help-students-learn-dialogue-not-just-debate-opinion](http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2022/04/28/help-students-learn-dialogue-not-just-debate-opinion).

by trained faculty/staff and driven by student interest. At one particularly effective campus event, pro-life and pro-choice students collaboratively hosted an evening conversation on abortion.<sup>7</sup> Participants discussed prompts crafted collaboratively by the student leaders, practicing intentional listening when others spoke.<sup>8</sup> Nearly fifty students attended, and many wished aloud that these conversations about hard issues were held more frequently. Such events can succeed if we ensure that the conversations are voluntary and non-coercive, provide resources like access to counselors for students who may experience hard emotions, and set a tone for listening to understand rather than persuade.

### INTENTIONALLY SUPPORT CURIOUS QUESTIONING

Opportunities for listening are more productive in a climate that genuinely welcomes curiosity and exploration. Curiosity opens us up to learning new things, while fear and defensiveness have the opposite effect. If a discussion on abortion stokes fear of surveillance, retribution, shame or hostility, then participants will be unlikely to learn from others or share freely to their own comfort level. Assuring community members that those with power are supportive of open conversations can be a first step, though there must be evidence of this beyond verbal assurance.

Supporting a climate of intellectual hospitality means helping community members build skills for asking curious questions. This semester I gave my Medical Ethics students a prompt asking them to craft a curious question for a hypothetical person who disagreed with them on abortion, formulated to provoke openness rather than hostility. Most students struggled to do this. We returned to the exercise another day, but this time I gave them some examples of curious questions in contrast to those likely to provoke defensiveness.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> To read about the event see Maeve Filbin, "Belles for Life Promote Pro-Life Pro-Choice Discussions on Campus," *The Observer*, [issuu.com/the-observer/docs/theobs\\_ever\\_11-21-19?e=1401011/93883548](http://issuu.com/the-observer/docs/theobs_ever_11-21-19?e=1401011/93883548).

<sup>8</sup> Questions for the event developed by students in collaboration with me (lightly edited for length): 1. How would you describe your views on abortion and policies about abortion? What has helped to form your thoughts? 2. Share a positive or negative experience you have had discussing your views on abortion on campus. 3. What is one thing you think is typically misunderstood about your stance?

<sup>9</sup> One example I often use in class to illustrate the difference between a curious question and one likely to promote defensiveness came from an actual class session. A pro-choice student had asked a pro-life student something similar to: "How can you hypocritically believe that fetuses' lives matter but the lives of children in cages at the southern border do not?" Recognizing immediately that this was likely to put the other student on the defensive, but that it contained a kernel of curiosity, we talked about how to reframe it to something like: "I know that you value lives of vulnerable children, so I am curious about how you think about that value in connection with immigration practices that separate parents from children." This example helps

I then offered time to write reflectively about their questions before sharing them in small groups. This time, I heard many interesting conversations emerge, demonstrating that asking curious questions is a skill built with practice, though one rarely modeled in public life.

### **ALLOW SPACE FOR VIEWS TO TRANSFORM**

A climate marked by intellectual hospitality will allow space to grow and transform.<sup>10</sup> My Introductory Philosophy students often say they are grateful that college classes allow them to test out new views or question assumptions they have held previously, an important part of the liberal arts tradition and the Catholic intellectual tradition. Modeling such transformation is an important part of creating intellectually hospitable spaces. Faculty and administrators should take appropriate opportunities to demonstrate how their own views on various issues have changed, and what new experiences or perspectives have expanded their moral imagination. Recognizing and expressing gratitude for opportunities to grow and change within a supportive community makes a powerful statement to others that transformation is part of the mission of Catholic higher education.

### **CONCERNS ABOUT INTELLECTUAL HOSPITALITY**

For some, intellectual hospitality as a concept raises concerns. Some might ask: To *whose* table are we welcomed, highlighting the power imbalance implied in a host/guest relationship. Others might worry that bringing many views to the table risks legitimizing unjust or harmful ones. These concerns, often raised on behalf of protecting those on the margins, should be welcomed. It is not hospitable for those with power to set a table and require everyone to sit down on the institution's terms. Rather, we need to struggle with the reality that inviting some to sit down at the table will mean that others will feel unwelcome. Honesty requires us to continually ask who is issuing the invites and who controls the agenda. Constant critical engagement with the impact of our efforts to engage diverse viewpoints offers an antidote to the risk of treating all views as morally equivalent. As we recognize the pitfalls and imperfection of our efforts at hospitable dialogue, we can try, with successes and setbacks, to move towards a more expansive, diverse, and welcoming table where more of our community members want to pull up a chair. **M**

---

illustrate that curious questions a) avoid making assumptions but give others a chance to answer for themselves and b) try to recognize values that interlocutors have expressed to demonstrate listening.

<sup>10</sup> "Make room to transform" is one of the principles of the Better Arguments Project ([betterarguments.org/](http://betterarguments.org/)), a program in which I am currently serving as a Better Arguments Ambassador.

**Megan Halteman Zwart**, PhD, is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy at Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, IN). Megan received her PhD in philosophy from the University of Notre Dame (2010). Her interests include philosophical pedagogy, history of philosophy, and applied ethics. Megan is founder and director of The Dialogue Project, a collection of programs supporting dialogue across difference at Saint Mary's College.