

FIRST PERSON

Universal lessons in brotherhood of learning

By PHILLIP THOMPSON

When I came to Emory to direct the Aquinas Center of Theology seven months ago, I did not know what to expect. I had grown up in Atlanta but quite honestly had a limited if positive impression of the University. As for the Aquinas Center, I was aware that it had been in existence for over 20 years and was the oldest institute of its kind, that it is a Catholic intellectual center at a non-Catholic school. Building on our Dominican heritage of joining reason and faith, I knew my Center's mission was to foster the Catholic scholarly presence at Emory in an ecumenical spirit and to take Emory to the Archdiocese of Atlanta through relevant speakers and programming.

What I have learned on the job is that these descriptions, while accurate, do not do justice to my experiences. For example, there have been a lot of surprises and they have come in many forms. One time my assistant called me because a person contacted the Center for an exorcism and she asked, "What do we do?" Indeed, what do we do? She wisely forwarded them to the Archdiocese.

More often the surprises occur in our programming. I taught a class this past fall on J.R.R. Tolkien for the Emory Center for Lifelong Learning. I was afraid that class members might show up in character! Thankfully, none did so. They did bring a fascination with the works of Tolkien and they uncovered many insights in his works that had eluded me. One of the secret joys of teaching is how much you learn in the process.

In our programming, I have learned to be careful not to

underestimate our audiences. We arranged for Steffen Losel, a theologian at Candler, to speak at Our Lady of the Assumption Church on Thérèse of Lisieux. I knew his talk would not present the standard hagiography; it was complex and nuanced. Would I be getting calls from angry parishioners? They really liked it. He has been invited back to the parish for another talk on Mozart. The talk by Steffen reminded me that in my job you have to take some chances.

I have learned another lesson. In taking risks, you cannot be afraid to think big. In truth, the risk is often only that someone will say no. I took an Emotional Intelligence test once and I scored highest on optimism. That is a helpful quality in my line of work.

I am working with Steffen Losel on another project: to bring Cardinal Walter Kaspar, who is in charge of the Vatican Office of Promoting Christian Unity, to campus. Kaspar is a thoughtful member of the Vatican leadership, a person considered papabile or worthy of votes in the last papal election. What are the chances we could get him? What are the chances we could find others on campus interested in inviting him to campus? Well, we have pursued the matter and have secured the collaboration of the Halle Institute, the Candler School of Theology and Atlanta Archbishop Wilton Gregory for a joint invitation. We are waiting for his response any day now.

I am optimistic, but then again I generally am. If we fail, there will be other opportunities. You learn from your failures, but you should not be bound by them.

The invitation to Cardinal Kaspar reflects the need for

our Center to develop partnerships if we are going to develop the support and audience that we seek here on campus. As an affiliate organization, we are not part of a department, a school, or an administrative unit. So, the need for collaboration is critical.

In addition to Candler and the Halle Institute, we have been very fortunate to develop partnerships and collaborations on various programs with the Center for the Study of Law and Religion, the Department of Religion, the Center for Ethics, the Philosophy Department, the Pitts Theology Library, The Carter Center, and the Center for Lifelong Learning.

These partnerships are facilitated by the University's firm commitment to promoting the study of religions as a vital part of the university experience. Our Center aspires along with other Emory entities to provide students, faculty and staff with a broad range of religious insights and experiences.

In this quest, we will need to develop new directions to continue to fulfill our mission at the University. I want to build on our traditional activities like our support of the Aquinas lecture on Thomistic philosophy, the Catholic Studies Minor, and the exploration of Catholic social principles in programs, like we did this year on the death penalty and immigration.

One new direction that I am pursuing is a Hispanic Initiative to facilitate discussions of the connection of Hispanics and religion. We sponsored a debate on illegal immigration by two Catholic attorneys and we are exploring how we can participate in future conferences sponsored by the University of Florida



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and the Ford Foundation on Hispanics and religion in the Atlanta area.

While each day may offer new opportunities, there are of course problems and obstacles. On balance they have been very manageable. So, I can wake up wondering what possibilities may come our way or that we might want to develop.

There are nice personal surprises as well. In my e-mail today, there was a note from a priest from the Congo whom I met at a conference on evolution sponsored by the Vatican in Rome. We sat though five days of lectures and had lunch together as well. I learned a lot about his remote village and his separation from his family. In his e-mail, he asked about my family, talked of his difficult studies in Rome, and asked that I keep him in my prayers.

He reminded me of how he valued our new friendship and ended with the French phrase, "Tu es mon frère." You are my brother. What a nice surprise. I have made a lot of new brothers and sisters these last seven months.