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St. Joseph's College president hopes for broader role for laity in church

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Jul. 9, 2013 Conversations with Sr. Camille

St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Hill might be the most petite college president in the United States, but she brings a truckload of credentials and creativity to the faculty and students on two widely separated campuses of St. Joseph's College in New York. Since assuming that position in 1997, she has become a valuable, deeply respected influence in the Fort Greene-Clinton Hill section of Brooklyn and beyond.

A magna cum laude alumna of St. Joseph's, Hill received her master's degree in history from Columbia University and studied theology and Scripture at Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. Hill received a J.D. from St. John's University School of Law, where she was a Thomas More scholarship student and president of the Criminal Law Institute. After receiving her J.D., Hill was a staff attorney with Catholic Migration Services in Brooklyn. Prior to being named president, Hill was the executive assistant to St. Joseph's previous president, St. Joseph Sr. George Aquin O'Connor, from 1980 to 1997.

Sr. Camille: Elizabeth, what have you learned from your 33 years in administration at St. Joseph's?

I've learned many things about many things, of course, but perhaps the most important has been that people can be just incredibly generous and dedicated. Through the years, I have been blessed to work with countless individuals who give over and above the expected, not just occasionally but consistently. They are a source of joy and inspiration to me every day.

The list of your accomplishments is longer than this conversation allows. Your presence in the community is evident in your positions on the steering committee of the Long Island Regional Advisory Council on Higher Education as well as on the College of Advisors for ERASE Racism. You serve on the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce, Fort Greene Strategic Neighborhood Action Partnership, and the Brookhaven Board of Ethics. You are on the Commission for Independent Colleges and Universities in New York state and on the boards of The Mary Louis Academy and Saint Saviour High School. A roster of awards -- more than two dozen -- testifies to your influence in many arenas. Are you able to identify what you consider your greatest contribution?

It's hard to single out one thing. I don't mean that I have done so much, but that everything is so intertwined it is difficult to select a "greatest contribution." The overall growth of the college, not only in size but in reputation, is very important. Many initiatives -- such as our efforts to diversify the Patchogue, Long Island, campus, the creation of the Council for the Arts at each campus, the increase in the number of full-time faculty, and the addition of much-needed facilities -- reflect an institution that is alive and well.

If forced to focus on one of the above initiatives, I would say I take great personal joy in the growth of the arts at the college. Under the leadership of the faculty- and staff-led councils, many wonderful programs in dance, music, drama and art have been brought to our campus, and many students have been able to attend performances at the Met or on Broadway.

Can you trace your passion for education to any person or persons?

My passion for education comes from my parents, both of whom were lawyers. Both came from families with very limited financial resources. They were keenly aware of the importance of education and made it clear that our homework came first! They knew from personal experience how transformative education can be, and they imparted that to their children.

Where, with whom and in what setting did you spend your childhood?

I grew up in Brooklyn, in Holy Innocents parish. The Sisters of Mercy taught me through grade school, and then I went to Saint Saviour High School and St. Joseph's College for Women. I had two older brothers, so I was the youngest and only girl and, yes, I was spoiled! My parents, especially my mother, were very committed to social justice issues even before we called it that. For example, we were fortunate to have a lovely home, one of those old Victorians, and my mother transformed the basement into a kind of clubhouse for the local kids, many of whom came from poorer situations. They could come to our house and play pool or pingpong, listen to records (the old 45s) and enjoy snacks, keeping them off the streets and out of trouble. She and my father also helped a number of them with legal problems and, I think, enabled many of them build good and meaningful lives.

Were your parents religious?

My parents were religious in a way. That is, the parish was a big part of our lives. They often went to daily Mass, and they had many priest friends who would visit our home. At the same time, my mother used to speak of a "healthy anti-clericalism" and say that if priests would be poor gentlemen, the church would be in much better shape. It was a very interesting house in which to grow up, with many fascinating conversations going on all around me.

What do you wish for the students currently on your campus?

I wish and hope our students will be open to the wonderful, exciting possibilities in this beautiful world of ours. I want them to embrace the new, to be curious and willing to explore the unknown, to challenge any stereotypes with which they might come to college. I also want them to care deeply about those who do not have the opportunities they have and to become engaged in changing the systems that are the root of injustice. And I want them to do all of this because they see themselves as part of the human family, joined in the great adventure of life!

What attracted you to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood?

The CSJs taught me in college, and I was drawn at first to their intellectual life. They were superb teachers, and I really believe I received an Ivy League education at a fraction of the cost. As time went on and I got to know them better, I realized there was something very important beneath and behind their academic lives, and I wanted to find out what it was. Eventually, of course, I realized it was their commitment to Christ and the Gospel, and I found that very attractive. Clearly, I have had no reason to regret my choice!

What gifts of faith or encouragement do you draw from your religious community?

My religious community is a constant source of support and encouragement. From my first days as a postulant until now, I have been given many opportunities for personal growth, and I've been expected to respond to those opportunities with generosity and openness. It hasn't always been easy, but at each step, there have been good friends and mentors who have guided me, counseled me, at times pushed me, and always loved me. I am very fortunate, indeed!

Your profession is a demanding one. Have you been able to maintain ties with relatives and friends?

The role of college president is, as they say, a 24/7 job, yet I have tried, I think pretty successfully, to maintain a balance between work and recreation. My family and friends are very important to me, so I carve out time to be with them, and I think I am always the one who gets the most from the visits and meetings. To be honest, I sometimes forget to send a birthday card on time, and my nieces and nephews are used to getting their greetings a few days late, but they don't mind. I am grateful for Jacquie Lawson e-cards!

What spiritual sources nourish your faith?

My faith is nourished every day by living with women of deep and abiding faith. The sisters in my local community are extraordinary women who have lived lives of prayer and service in a self-effacing way that is truly countercultural. I also belong to Pax Christi, an organization that challenges me to see beyond the narrow confines of my little world and to participate in bigger issues. As a subset of that, I belong to a small group in my congregation pledged to nonviolence. We meet once a month, and I am always truly edified by our discussions and, even more, by their actions and engagement.

Do you have a favorite way of praying?

As I've gotten older, my prayer has become very simple. I pray in my room in the morning (I learned that if I wait until later in the day, it just doesn't get done!) and usually start by trying to remember: "Be still, and know that I am God." I often use the readings of the day as a "starter." It is not so much a conversation with the Lord, as I used to try to make it, but a time of quiet listening or just being there.

Does any particular Bible story or Scripture passage influence your life?

I love the story of the woman taken in adultery. It is such a great reminder that we are all sinners and all forgiven if we're just willing to accept God's incredible love and mercy. I have had occasion to use that passage as the lens through which I've made some decisions here at the college, and it has guided me to be more compassionate and understanding than many people thought wise or appropriate. And I have not regretted any of those decisions.

What are the spiritual wells from which you drink?

Scripture, of course, is a great source of spiritual nourishment. The charism of the Sisters of St. Joseph has also played a huge role in my life, since it sets forth as the ultimate goal of our lives "love of God and neighbor without distinction." That calls me to be as caring and generous as I possibly can and to work for the reconciliation of all creation to God and each other. We speak of the "dear neighbor," and it is always a goal to see everyone as dear.

What have you learned from personal disappointments or losses?

As I said above, I have lived a very fortunate life, and it's hard for me to think of any meaningful

disappointments. That may sound absurd coming from someone who turned 70 this year, but it is really true. If pushed very hard, I could say not being able to go on for a Ph.D. in humanities and going to law school instead was a big disappointment. But in the end, it all turned out well, so that was not a very big deal.

What is your image of God?

My image of God is Ezekiel's gentle breeze: tender, loving, constant.

Has it changed?

It has not so much changed as deepened over time. I think it might be because I have been so blessed and fortunate. I enjoy excellent health, and I have had a great life. I only hope that, when I am tested in the future, as no doubt I will be, that I will be able to cling to that wonderful sense of God's presence in my life.

What in contemporary Catholicism encourages or distresses you?

Contemporary Catholicism can mean many things. If you are referring to the institutional church, I think it is in a very sad state, in which there's little room for the real values of the Gospel, or even basic humanity. The hierarchy has strayed so far from the path of service, social justice and care for the poor that it's impossible to take their efforts at leadership seriously. I am cautiously optimistic that Pope Francis may make some difference, but he's clearly quite conservative, and I wonder if he will make the changes necessary to get things back on course.

On the other hand, if you mean all the things that are going on "in the trenches," I feel very differently. The laity is alive and well and ready to take on leadership roles, if only the bishops would let them. I hope that someday (soon?) the bishops will realize what great allies they have right at hand and will be open to much fuller participation of the laity in all aspects of church life, including worship.

Is there anything you would change?

As I mentioned, I would love to see the role of the laity expanded so that the church is really the church *of* the people, not just *for* the people. There are so many gifted, generous people out there, yearning to contribute their time and talents, yet all they are being asked for is their treasure. The bishops are being narrow and shortsighted, alas!

What causes you sorrow?

The reality that there are so many, many people in the world who are struggling in multiple ways with little or no hope that their circumstances, or their children's, will improve in any meaningful way causes me sorrow and not a little guilt. I realize I have so much and I am not generous enough, and I pray for the courage and strength to be more generous with all I've been given.

What causes you joy?

Joy comes in many forms: through a time of quiet, peaceful reflection, or a meal with a friend, or the success of a student who has won a fellowship, or the beauty of a tulip (my favorite flower), or a great cartoon or joke! I love to hear the sound of the children at our Dillon Center, laughing as they play on the mall, or to see the smile of Sr. Alice Francis, our 98-year-old darling who lives with us. Joy is all around.

What gives you hope?

Being with young people is a great source of hope. Their idealism and belief that they can and will help make

things better, that they can and will change the world, gives me hope. All our students are involved in many service projects, and their enthusiasm is a source of pride and inspiration for all of us who are privileged to work with them.

Is there something you wish I had asked?

No, I think you asked all the right things, and I hope I answered openly and clearly enough to be helpful and useful.

It's a pleasure to have an opportunity to grade a college president. I'm giving you A+.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available [1] from Now You Know Media.]

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