Reading the Writing on the Wall:  
Visualizing One University’s Mercy Mission in a Cosmopolitan World

Michael Bathgate, Ph.D., Georgian Court University

At the beginning of each semester, I ask my students why, out of the hundreds of classes on offer at Saint Xavier University, they have enrolled in this particular course. By and large, they report much the same thing: they are taking my course to satisfy one of their graduation requirements. Many are forthright enough to admit that, if courses in Religious Studies were not required, they would happily complete their undergraduate career without them.

It would be wrong to see this as unique to departments of Religious Studies. Indeed, graduation requirements in Religious Studies or Theology at religiously affiliated institutions place these departments in much the same position as the humanities or social sciences at most colleges and universities. Courses that fulfill general education requirements may attract plenty of students, but their interest will often be concerned more with completing the requirement than with the content of the course. This is both the central challenge and, I would argue, the greatest opportunity of the so-called “service course.” Our efforts to engage students in these courses may inspire a happy few to change their major, but the ever-present (if often unstated) goal of the service course is that our students will, after satisfying their requirement, not only know something of a particular field of inquiry, but recognize something of its value. But on what grounds will they do so? Will students come to appreciate the value of their education only when it allows them to achieve economic success? Or will their education introduce them to critical inquiry and a different set of criteria by which to appreciate what they have learned?

Like many academics, my first efforts in this regard were essentially apologetic. Recognizing that students come to us for profitable careers, we often point to statistics that demonstrate the income gap that separates those with college degrees from those without, or to surveys of employers indicating that they seek employees with critical thinking and communication skills, as well as an understanding of diversity and other cultures. This approach fails to engage what seem to be the very real differences between students’ motivations in taking a course and our own reasons for offering it.

One of the features of the new general education program at Saint Xavier is an emphasis on primary sources. In most disciplines, this seems self-evident: students should read scripture (or poetry or the Constitution) rather than just reading about them in textbooks. Less self-evident, however, is the notion that primary sources need not be limited to documentary evidence. Sculpture, microscope slides and the stratified remains of human settlements require the same depth of interpretation as Anna Karenina...

...primary sources need not be limited to documentary evidence. Sculpture, microscope slides and the stratified remains of human settlements require the same depth of interpretation as Anna Karenina, even if they don’t always rely on the same methods. With that in mind, I have asked my students over the past few years to begin their readings, not with the Qur’an or the Epic of Gilgamesh, but with the messages encoded into the physical structure of the University itself.

The Cross as a Primary Source

I ask my students to identify some of the signs and symbols that appear on or around the main entrance to Warde Academic Center. As the University’s “front door,” this area boasts perhaps the widest array of these markers, recording the accomplishments and expressing the ideals of those who built it. Unlike more straightforward statements (like the University Mission or Philosophy Statements, which were the work of a small number of authors working in committee at
a fairly recent point in the University's history), the façade of Warde Academic Center is the product of many authors. It is thus a kind of palimpsest that evokes centuries-old traditions of iconography, heraldry and symbolic associations, as well as layers of the changing ambitions of a community from one generation to another.

The purpose of interpreting these symbols is less to discover some authoritative statement of institutional intent than to use them as a framework for discovery and discussion. A number of my students inevitably express frustration with this process. They seek some kind of definitive answer if only for the purposes of the midterm exam. They aren't sure just what to report. Yet I'm pleased to say that those who have taken more than one of my courses (and therefore repeat this particular assignment) have often commented that they were surprised by the new levels of meaning they discovered when they returned to "the same symbols" for a second look.

When faced with such an embarrassment of riches, it is perhaps unsurprising that my students tend to gravitate towards signs and symbols (the crosses that appear in virtually every space on campus, for example, or the Mercy Bell that links Saint Xavier University with the original Academy). Taken together, these symbols mostly tell them what they already know: Saint Xavier University is a Catholic institution founded by the Sisters of Mercy more than 160 years ago.

Different students recognize different degrees of nuance in the symbols that appear on and in the building. Some are familiar enough with the symbolism of the cross, for example, to note that the crucifix is usually a marker of Catholic (as opposed to, say, Protestant) Christianity. Fewer recognize the significance of the cross pâtiée that appears prominently on the University Seal and around the entryway. Those who investigate the University Seal online can report to the class that this particular form of the cross is associated with the Sisters of Mercy, while those who investigate further still can point out that the Sisters of Mercy drew the cross and bars of the Mercy Shield from an earlier order, the Fathers of Mercy.

It is here that students encounter their first real surprise: the style of the cross that appears on the Mercy Shield is more familiarly associated with the Crusades, or even, in the form of the "iron Cross," the German military. I have found it interesting to explore with them the possibility that, rather than an example of a symbol's ability to represent different things to different people, these diverse associations may in fact express a common impulse, however differently it has been applied by Templars and Teutonic Knights, German war-heroes or the Sisters of Mercy.

Writing in 1888, Mother Mary Teresa Austin Carroll described the first Sisters in Chicago as a "heroic band," "valiant women who came thither through perils by land and water" to dwell "in a poor hut on the bleak prairie." We might be inclined to dismiss this as hagiographic hyperbole. But the fact is that by 1854, less than a decade after their arrival, all but one of the original Sisters had given their lives, largely in the course of their duties nursing the sick of Chicago. Before this exercise, most of my students are disinclined to associate "mercy" with "heroism." This discussion goes some way towards reconciling the two.

But reading symbols requires more than establishing one-to-one correspondences (e.g., that the crucifix "means" Catholicism). Like other forms of expression, symbolic statements gain their meaning, not only from the discrete elements that make them up, but from the way those elements are arranged. Returning to the cross, perhaps the simplest example of the configuration of symbolic meanings can be found on the flagpole that stands immediately outside the entrance. Usually, this pole displays three elements (the cross, the U.S. flag, and a white flag bearing the University Seal). These each possess their own constellation of meaning, but they take on additional meanings from their placement in relation to one another. It is by no means arbitrary
that these three elements stand one above the other, a configuration that denotes hierarchy. We place each of these symbolic elements, not only over us at the top of the flagpole, but clearly over each other: the U.S. flag over the University flag, and the cross over both. If symbols are the words of a language, these spatial orientations are its syntax.

Pillars at the Entry-Way
These principles of symbolic interpretation help my students to investigate two key features of the main entrance, each evoking the twin traditions on which Saint Xavier is founded as a Catholic University. The first comprises the eight marble pillars that flank the entryway, each inscribed with a single word in gold: On the right, Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy and Music; on the left, Rhetoric, Logic, Grammar and Wisdom. These are a reference to the Seven Liberal Arts, the original core curriculum derived from classical antiquity that provided the foundation for the medieval universities whose heritage we evoke most obviously in the pomp of graduation ceremonies.

In discussing these seven areas of learning, my students are usually struck by the differences between the traditional curriculum encoded in these pillars and the general education program described in the catalog. Only music now lays claim to a separate academic department, and few in that department would be likely to view their discipline, in the classical parlance of the Liberal Arts, as the application of the theory of numbers. Yet the fundamental assumptions underlying this classical formulation remain useful for us to contemplate. The Seven Liberal Arts, for example, include both the Quadrivium and the Trivium. This is an important corrective to the common parlance by which the arts of the Trivium — Grammar, Logic and Rhetoric — have come to be associated with what is merely gratuitous. I often tell my students that general education is indeed a trivial pursuit, not because it is superfluous, but because it is fundamental, cultivating the arts by which we make sense of our world and communicate that sense to others.

Just as importantly, the imagery of the Liberal Arts encompasses a view of the ends to which that knowledge and those skills are to be put: these are the Artes Liberales, the arts traditionally understood to be the preserve of free men. While our view of who should participate in the political process has expanded considerably since classical antiquity, the core assumption of the Liberal Arts remains unchanged: that a certain basic education — distinct from the skills necessary to pursue our livelihood — remains essential for us to possess the freedom of mind necessary to exercise our franchise.

The Seven Liberal Arts, however, are not simply inscribed on the building. In the architecture of the University's main entrance they are inscribed on pillars, being themselves pillars. When asked about this, students often take it to indicate the central (perhaps, in the literal sense, foundational) importance of the liberal arts tradition at Saint Xavier. The significance of the liberal arts is further contextualized, however, by the presence of an eighth pillar. Wisdom is one of the five intellectual virtues associated with the liberal arts tradition. Seven columns would have made a poorly balanced entryway, but the choice of this particular virtue evokes a number of interesting associations. I ask my students, for example, to consider how Saint Xavier College would have presented itself differently had it chosen a different intellectual virtue: Prudence, say, or science. Prudence and science are eminently pragmatic virtues, necessary to accomplish the goals one sets for oneself, a valid aim for almost any future career. Wisdom, on the other hand, grounds the liberal arts in a somewhat different context.

But the presentation of the liberal arts as seven pillars, alongside Wisdom as the eighth, also evokes another important association of the
Catholic liberal arts tradition: the identification of the liberal arts with the "seven pillars" erected by Wisdom in Proverbs 9:1.

Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars.

More than a numerological justification for linking the historically distinct traditions of biblical revelation and the (originally pagan) liberal arts, the imagery of "Wisdom's house" presents a powerful allegory for the nature of the university, one grounded in the very Mercy tradition of hospitality.

Taken as a whole, Proverbs 9 draws a distinction between two houses, one constructed by Wisdom, the other by "a foolish woman." Both offer welcome "to those without sense," calling out to passers-by: "You who are simple, turn in here!" The foolish woman offers her guests nothing, but instead plays on their worst impulses, telling them that "stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant." Wisdom, in contrast, sets a fine table, calling on her guests to "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight." At its best, the University aspires to be a house of wisdom in just this sense, by both offering through vocational training the satisfaction of short-term needs while inviting its "guests" to pursue a more profound and fulfilling life, to lay aside immaturity and walk in the way of insight.

University Motto

A second feature I specifically ask my students to consider is the University Motto, "Via Veritas Vita," which appears not only on the University Seal but over the doorway to the University itself. Sister Josetta Butler, a past President of Saint Xavier College, and an individual closely involved in the development of the new campus and its new Seal, explained that these words were chosen as an expression of the educational mission of the institution, a statement of "the kind of whole persons we wanted our students to be — people seeking and living the truth." 9

More to the point, perhaps, these three words are drawn from the Gospel of John (14:6), in which Jesus is reported as saying:

Ego sum via, et veritas, et vita.
Nemo venit ad Patrem, nisi per me.

("I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.")

In this sense, the motto calls us, not only to view the search for Truth as inseparable from its existential consequences (that is, the Way and Life with which it is bound), but also implies that we will find the fulfillment of that search in and through Christ, indeed, only through Christ. The motto asserts a fundamental connection between Saint Xavier as an academic community of inquiry and the community of faith that founded it, and whose heritage continues to inform its mission.10

The nature of that connection, however, is seldom entirely clear, especially in the increasingly cosmopolitan atmosphere of the contemporary academy. The "dialogue between faith and reason"11 has been a definitive feature of the Catholic university since the Middle Ages, but the search for the Way, the Truth and the Life must now engage multiple formulations of the Way, the Truth and the Life. We may even have to entertain the possibility that there may, in fact, be multiple Ways, Truths and Lives. How does, or how should, the apparent exclusivity of John 14:6 shape that inquiry?

To give my students some sense of what is at stake in such a question, I ask them to consider a few of the ways that John 14:6 has been interpreted and applied historically. One of these is St. Cyprian of Carthage, a third-century bishop whose treatise De Unitate Ecclesiae represents an early formulation of a position that would come to be called extra ecclesiam nulla salus ("outside the Church, there is no salvation"). He writes:

Whoever is separated from the Church and is joined to an adulteress, is separated from the promises of the Church; nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ. He is a stranger; he is profane; he is an enemy. He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother. If any one could escape who was outside the ark of Noah, then he also may escape who shall be outside of the Church.12
Not surprisingly, few of my students find Cyprian’s antagonism towards the infidel especially compelling. Some note that Cyprian seems to assume precisely what most lies in need of clarification. If, as the Gospels affirm, no one comes to the Father but through Christ, can no one come to Christ except through the Church?

...a University – Catholic or otherwise – is about preparing students to seek the answers (their answers) rather than bestowing those answers upon them.

This is, of course, a question on which much ink continues to be spilt, by theologians, comparativists and philosophers of religion. Much to my students’ continued frustration, we find that modern authoritative declarations like Vatican II’s Nostra Aetate don’t offer the kind of definitive resolution that they hope for. There is much that my students find congenial in the documents of the Second Vatican Council – Nostra Aetate plays on much the same familial metaphor as St. Cyprian, but turns that metaphor to a very different purpose:

We cannot truly pray to God the Father of all if we treat any people as other than sisters and brothers, for all are created in God’s image.

Similarly, the Second Vatican Council acknowledges the truths and moral values that the Church shares with other religions, declaring:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women.

Yet it also goes on to state:

...it proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (see 2 Cor 5:18-19), people find the fullness of their religious life.

It seems that we are presented, not so much with an answer to the problem as the criteria by which to judge any answer we might devise.

**What If an Alternative Motto?**

With this in mind, I again ask my students to imagine the kind of statement Saint Xavier College would have been making if it had chosen to define itself differently, by evoking, not the first sentence of John 14:6 for its motto but the second. We usually conclude that something like "Nemo Patrem Nisi Per Me" would have suggested a very different institution, one arguably less hospitable to our current student body, composed of substantial numbers of non-Christians as well as non-Catholics. It may also have represented a departure from the goals of the first Sisters of Mercy in Chicago, who made a point of admitting students regardless of creed, and declared in their 1847 Charter that "no particular religious faith shall be required of those who become students of the Institution."\(^{16}\)

I usually conclude this exercise by drawing my students’ attention back to the interpretive principles with which we started: a consideration of the architectural position of the University Motto, specifically as it relates to the eight pillars. One enters the University by passing through the pillars, symbolizing the areas of inquiry necessary to a free mind. Over the doorway, the institution identifies itself simply as Saint Xavier University. It is only when leaving through the same doorway – going out, both literally and metaphorically, into the wider world, that one passes under the University Motto.

Like this exercise itself, which is more about raising questions the students had likely never thought to ask than it is about providing them with answers, Returning to the imagery of the University as the house of Wisdom, the institution invites its "guests" to “lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight”; the Way, the Truth and the Life are not the prerequisites of that journey (to be delivered, in the modern idiom, like so much content) but the goal towards which their education prepares them.
NOTES


2. In fact, those students who carefully peruse the University website will note that the first class of undergraduate women to enter Saint Francis Xavier College for Women did so in 1915, almost 70 years after the Sisters of Mercy first arrived in Chicago (http://www.sxu.edu/Administrative/Mission/sxu_history.asp).

3. http://www.sxu.edu/administrative/Mission/ seal.asp. Both the website and Sister Joy Clough’s authoritative work on the history of Saint Xavier describe the cross on the Mercy Shield as a “Jerusalem Cross” (First in Chicago: A History of Saint Xavier University, Saint Xavier University 1997, p. 33). The most common source credited by students on the origins of the Mercy Shield is from the website of Mercyhurst College: http://www.mercyhurst.edu/about/symbols/.

4. Mark 8:34. The Fathers of Mercy (more properly the Order of the Virgin Mary of Mercy of the Redemption of Captives), founded in 1218 by Saint Peter Nolasco and James I of Aragon, appears to have begun as a military order in its own right, dedicated to the rescue or ransom of captives in the Holy Land (http://orderofmercy.org/charism/survey/chapter-1/).

5. Mary Teresa Austin Carroll, Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy (The Catholic Publication Society, 1889), vol. 3, pp. 271, 325-6. Later, when describing the Sisters’ service nursing the soldiers of the Civil War, she continues this theme, telling of a certain “benevolent Orangeman,” who “had become a Catholic because he had been convinced by their heroism that the religion they professed must be the true faith.” (p. 295).

6. Ibid., p. 246.


8. As the “University Sites and Symbols” webpage has it: “Just as they support the entrance canopy, so the liberal arts and sciences support SXU’s academic program.” (http://www.sxu.edu/administrative/Mission/sites_symbols.asp)


10. The adoption of John 14:6 as a motto by Saint Xavier College would thus seem to anticipate what John Paul II declared to be the central task and problematic of all Catholic universities: “the research of all aspects of truth in their essential connection with the supreme Truth, who is God. It does this without fear but rather with enthusiasm, dedicating itself to every path of knowledge, aware of being preceded by him who is ‘the Way, the Truth; and the Life,’ the Logos, whose Spirit of intelligence and love enables the human person with his or her own intelligence to find the ultimate reality of which he is the source and end and who alone is capable of giving fully that Wisdom without which the future of the world would be in danger” (Ex Corde Ecclesiae 4).

11. Ex Corde Ecclesiae 17.


15. Ibid.

16. Clough, First in Chicago, p. 22.