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**Interview with Carla Hills**Linda Chapel Jackson, recorder

March 16, 2018

NT: I think the Latin American church experience is different from the experience of the Catholic Church in the US and from other places, especially European Catholic churches. So in a way you can say Pope Francis is an expression of our church experience in the last decades. I would say that I am a fruit of the Catholic Church because I started gathering with the Catholic movement when I was 14 and have been part of this Focolare movement since I was 14. It is an ecumenical movement and an expression of the Vatican II and what I would say that I had the opportunity to live in the youth organizations in the church is the thing that led me to believe in service learning. Because in my own experience through my engagement in the youth organizations of the church in the 70s and in the 80s I learned a lot of things that I hadn’t been taught in school or in college. I really believe in service learning and the influence it can have in a young person’s trajectory of life because it’s the history of my life. [1:48]

CH: One of the things that you talked about on Wednesday was that it is so important to work side by side with the community. And one of your examples was that you need to listen to what the community says they need and work on a problem together. So can you elaborate on how you apply that as scholarship when you are working with students, because you talk also about how important the curriculum is to—working with the students prior to them actually implementing their fieldwork.

NT: [2:31] Yeah. From a conceptual point of view, in Spanish we don’t speak about service learning but about solidarity. Service learning. That in Spanish is not exactly the more political and radical word that it may sound in English. For us, solidarity is an everyday word that goes from donate blood and share your cookies with your classmate (laughs). It also involves a solidarity of the union and the solidarity of the country, but it’s also an everyday word. For me the main difference between service and solidarity is the idea of serving others may mean that you individually go to serve other people. Instead, the idea of solidarity is working together for the common good. So you cannot do it alone. [3:41]

That’s very important for universities because universities are such powerful institutions, complex institutions, that it’s easy for a university to think we have all the knowledge, we are going to teach the community, we are going to descend into the community and give them…From the point of view of scholarship, I think it’s necessary to recognize that academic knowledge is very important but it is one of the ways to approach to knowledge, and that empirical knowledge, popular knowledge, native knowledge, ancestral knowledges are also forms of knowing reality. [4:40]

The example is very clear when you talk about the dialogue with Native American communities or if you go to Africa, the dialogue with native cultures, but I think that applies also if you go to an urban setting and you have to establish a dialogue with an urban community, with their specific codes and ways of life. Many times we forget that the ones who know who’s who in the community, the worries which are in the community, which are the assets in the community, are those who are living there. I think to establish a real horizontal service, a real solidarity bond, you have to take the time to listen, to do participatory research and involve the community in the research. And I think that’s a way the most sophisticated and advanced science is going, because we are all told that now we have to learn how to solve problems and not just keep our knowledge closed in the very narrow margins of our discipline, our specialization, our micro-management. [6:38]

When I was a classic history professor in the Catholic University, I was teaching ancient history. My research was on the circle of women around St. Jerome in the fourth century after Christ. I spent years studying a group of five women that had been very influential, that had contributed to the translation of the Bible, blah blah blah, it was a very significant devotion to studies but it was a very narrow focus of knowledge. Instead, when we do service learning and we have to deal with real problems, reality has a bad habit of being interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and so in a way, working around problems forces us to build more complex and sophisticated knowledge. [7:38]

CH: What do you…This is a dual question. What do you consider a successful partnership and what do you think the community considers a successful partnership?

NT: [7:57] I think you always have to build this kind of compromise in the sense that usually the community expects you to do everything they need. So I think a healthy partnership starts by setting the right expectations about what we are able to do, what our students are able to do, because our students are not professionals. They are allowed to be wrong, to make mistakes, because they are on a learning process and a good community partner should know that and should accept that, and also should embrace a role as a teaching partner, because students will be learning in the field through their examples, through their motivation, through their complete knowledge about the reality. So I think it’s very important to have good partners in the community that understand that we are not any kind of social agency but we are an educational institution. [9:16]

And it’s important I think—very important, and I go back to your previous question—it’s very important to prepare the students to approach the community in a respectful way, in a way that’s open to the needs and priorities of the community, to understand that they are going to be learning a lot in the community. So they are not only providers of service but they also are beneficiaries of the project. In that sense it’s a real partnership, where you learn in the classroom but you also learn in the community. As you have to learn to navigate the university, an institution and its rules, you have to learn to navigate a community organization culture and rules and be respectful of them. [10:24]

CH: Have you…You’ve been doing this for a while now.

NT: Mm-hmm.

CH: Have you seen impact with the students in the ways that they then approach their adult professions? Do you have students who come back now and ask to partner?

NT: [10:52] Hmm. Yeah. In fact we are just finishing a research on students that had graduated in the last 10 years and had participated in a very strong service learning program in Buenos Aires University School of Veterinary—It’s been really amazing, the results, and you know one of the things that we knew in the textbooks but it’s interesting to see it expressed in such a detailed research, students that did good reflection through the service learning program show much bigger impact in their lives and in their professional trajectory than those who didn’t do reflection. [11:44]

But over the years we have registered lots of students that have changed their career paths—medical students that were thinking of going abroad and decided to stay in their cities and serve their community because of the service learning program, students who decided to do their doctoral dissertation researching for the community they had been working in, even students that decided to move to other parts of the country. [12:26]

I remember we followed a service learning program in a university, a public university in Argentina called Rio Quarto University. Rio Quarto is one of the centers of the richest farmland in Argentina. Usually students have plenty of working opportunities there. They were doing the service learning program, going to isolated rural areas to serve small producers to set sustainable agricultural and cattle production there. Some of the students after that experience decided to move to some of these more isolated, poorest locations because they were so motivated because of the program. I mean, I have hundreds of stories of the impact in the professional trajectory. [13:39]

CH: What do you think the US and an institution like ours, Michigan State University, what can we do to strengthen our scholarship and the curriculum with our service learning for working with countries like Argentina or Latin American countries, or any country around the world?

NT: [14:17] One of the things I appreciate and I wanted to be here because I know this university has a long, long tradition of true engagement. I’ve been coming to the US for many years now and I know how to recognize a university who is working for real than social marketing things. So I know you are a really serious university and you have an impact in your region that’s really significant. And in a way the part that you are a land grant university has a lot of meaning for us because I think in all our countries in all the Americas, public universities were founded to help create our countries. We didn’t have real countries. We were inventing countries as we went. And public universities played a very important role in that process. So I think this is a university who has been kind of faithful to that original mission. [15:30]

What I would say is that maybe it’s true not only for MSU but for so many universities in the US, is there’s a tradition of looking at the so-called developing world as a place where you go to serve—to help and to bring the light of democracy. With all due respect, the world has been changing in the last 50 years. As well-intentioned as it was, the idea of President Kennedy and the Peace Corps to send enlightened young professionals from the US to Africa and Latin America, I think at this point of history it should be interesting to stress more the dialogue part, that we all have things we can learn from each other. We all have our own culture and we all need respect for our own culture. [16:57]

CH: One of the things that we hear time and again is that we need to understand the culture before we can work with the culture. And that is part of the curriculum development, isn’t it, to prepare students—and actually for academics and those working with the students—to prepare a curriculum that actually addresses the culture before you’re talking to the partners about the projects or the work that needs to be done.

NT: [17:50] Yeah, I think it’s a process in the sense that of course it’s important to know more about the country you are going to. My organization has been working with American students coming for exchange in Buenos Aires for many years. Some of them can arrive really knowing something about Argentinian history and Argentinian culture. They arrive already knowing that Argentina is different from Mexico and Costa Rica because we are different countries. But we also receive students who have no idea about our culture. So I think the preparation before is important. [18:41]

But then I think it’s very important the kind of partners you choose to work with in the site, because there are a lot of nuances of the local culture that you can only start to understand and appreciate once you are there. And they are very difficult to translate and to understand from a book or from a lecture before going. And for that I think—one of the main barriers I see in general is how difficult it is for many students to learn a foreign language. I understand that anywhere in the world you go, you will find people who speak English. So it’s true that you don’t *need* to make the effort. But it’s also true that if you don’t understand the local language you are missing so much. [19:55]

CH: What do you want to see university administrators recognize about service learning? Do programs need to be expanded? Do programs need to—do disciplines need to address service learning? How do you see administration’s view of engagement and service learning?

NT: [20:35] One of the battles we think everywhere in the world we are involved in is we usually approach service learning and engagement from the point of view of the needs in the community, and they look for social justice, they look for social change, and of course that’s a very important part and that’s what motivates students to go out. But I think to administrators and to scholars inside the university, we should stress more that the way pedagogy is going in the 21st century, the way that meaningful universities are going in the 21st century, is precisely in the way of learning through addressing real issues, problem-based learning, project-based learning, interdisciplinary problems, addressing relevant and complex issues, because that’s what the market is also asking for young professionals. They don’t care if they have written thousands of papers and read thousands of books. They need to be able to work in a team, to be creative, to take initiative, to solve problems. Because knowledge changes so quickly, environmental issues and all these challenges of the 21st century change so quickly that we maybe won’t even be able to recognize the working place 15 years from now. [22:45]

So the point I think we should be doing more is service learning, one of the most effective ways of teaching. It is one of the most effective ways of educating active, creative, proactive young professionals, able to work in interdisciplinary groups, able to work with different constituencies, with different stakeholders… [23:22]

CH: Does that mean we also need to educate our students who are planning on being university scholars? Does that mean that we need to teach the teachers?

NT: [23:40] Of course, of course, because…Well you know the Davos conference? The big meeting of the highest of the highest millionaires in the world with governments and such in Davos, Switzerland? They published a book last year about 21st century education. They suddenly discovered that they desperately need not only the science and not only the hard skills but those of the soft skills and the building of character. And they are not saying that because they care so passionately about social justice, I believe, but they are really practical about what the 21st century needs. [24:35]

So I think that teaching future scholars to learn how to do participatory research, how to do engaged research, how to develop engaged scholarship, is also the way to keep the university relevant. Because what we are seeing, and especially in your country, where going to the university is so expensive, if you are going to be in debt for your whole life to receive an education that’s not meaningful for real life, more and more young people will ask themselves, then why go to university? And I think they find that neither Bill Gates nor Steve Jobs finished college—for this generation says a lot. They had to leave the university to reinvent the world. So I think the university has to rethink, we have to rethink our institutions to be the place where we can rethink the world and reinvent the world from within the university. [26:04]

CH: And I think that’s an inspiring message and a good place to end it. Thank you so much.

NT: It’s my pleasure.

[Recording ends]