News

by Heidi Schlumpf

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Theologian Claire Bischoff was nervous about addressing her colleagues at the College Theology Society convention, but it wasn't a regular case of the jitters.

For her, working as an adjunct faculty member means living in a constant state of anxiety, fear and vigilance that she could lose her job.

"I put so much energy into staying employed," Bischoff said. "I'm always waiting for the other shoe to drop."

Bischoff shared her experiences as part of a plenary session on "The Crisis of Contingent Faculty in U.S. Higher Education" at the annual convention of the College Theology Society, which met May 31-June 3 at St. Catherine University in St. Paul.

Although she now holds a one-year position at St. Catherine, Bischoff taught as an adjunct for six years at two institutions. She described how being a contingent faculty member was a spiritual crisis for her, leading her to internalize a feeling of being "less than" and preventing her from having authentic relationships with her students or colleagues.

The hypervigilance that comes with being one step away from unemployment also meant "little to no room to feel God in our lives," she said.

"Contingent faculty" refers to any non-tenured teacher without job security or protections for academic freedom. They include adjuncts, postdocs, teaching assistants, part-timers, lecturers, instructors and clinical faculty.

An estimated 70 percent of all faculty in higher education — including graduate students who teach — are contingent, said Gerald Beyer, an associate professor of theology and religious studies at Villanova University in Pennsylvania.

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Although data about Catholic colleges and universities is hard to confirm, Beyer believes they mirror the national trend of a move toward contingent faculty, which is "particularly troublesome," given the church's teaching on the dignity of workers, a just wage and the right to health care and other benefits, he said.

"We might as well not teach it if we're not going to embody it," Beyer said of Catholic social teaching on labor. "Many of our institutions are good at promoting justice outside our walls, but not inside our walls."

The average adjunct in the U.S. earns less than $3,000 per class and receives no benefits. Even at the high load of eight courses per year (which for an adjunct would have to be at various institutions and necessitate travel between them), that comes to an annual salary of $24,000.

Consequently, nearly a third of part-time faculty live near or below the federal poverty line, while a quarter receive Medicaid or food stamps, Beyer said.

Yet the increase of executive compensation at colleges and universities is "astounding," he said, sharing data detailing the top presidential salaries at Catholic institutions and how disproportionately high they are, compared to the next highest salary at the school.

For example, the former president of the University of Dayton, Daniel Curran, had total compensation of $2.4 million in 2015.

Meanwhile, Steve Werner has been trying to make a living as an adjunct theology professor for 28 years and "not succeeding," he said. "You cannot survive on adjunct pay."

While, at most, a tenured professor would teach about 200 courses over 25 years, Werner has taught 527. One semester, he had 13 classes. "You do what you have to do," he said, noting the irony of adjuncting to pay his children's college tuition.

Adjuncts are cheaper, can be fired easily, and "there's an oversupply of us who want to do this work," Werner said, explaining the trend.

Some tenured faculty in the audience voiced the importance of honesty with doctoral students about the extremely tight market for tenured-track jobs.

Beyer raised an even thornier issue: solidarity salary cuts, if necessary, when there are real budget crises, with higher earners — including administration — giving back proportionately more.

Of course, some tenured faculty want to protect what they have, Beyer said, but that raises moral and ethical questions.

Participating in union busting, as has been the case at some Catholic institutions, would constitute cooperation with evil and scandal, Beyer said. But even accepting lighter course loads, time for research and funding for conferences may involve appropriating evil and be morally wrong.

At St. Catherine, when the administration directed the theology department to cut one full-time position, Bischoff assumed that as the last one in, she would be the first out.

But instead, everyone in the department made sacrifices — accepting more students in their classes, or giving up course release for administrative or research purposes — so that no one lost their job. Bischoff went from full-time to two-thirds time, but is still employed.

That act of solidarity demonstrates the power of love over fear, and the ability of a community to sacrifice for the common good, she said.

"By the world's standards, we haven't made an appreciable dent in the crisis of contingent faculty in the U.S. We may have only bought some of us one more year of employment here at St. Kate's," she said. "Yet by the standards of Catholic spirituality, their solidarity made all the difference in the world."

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