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‘Courageous Conversations’ to Examine Social Justice Issues

Saint Leo University to Present Free, Virtual Series

Beginning Sept. 17, Based on ‘Just Mercy’ Book, Movie

Saint Leo University will present a six-part series, *Courageous Conversations*, examining social justice issues. This free, virtual discussion will look at topics included in Bryan Stevenson’s book, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, from different perspectives across multiple disciplines. The first session will focus on race and racism and is set for 7 – 8 p.m. (ET), Thursday, September 17, via Zoom. The public is invited, and it is not necessary to attend all sessions, but everyone is invited to do so.

Examining this narrative of *Just Mercy* through a variety of lenses will provide a forum to discuss issues of race and racism; the impact of socioeconomic status; ethics and America’s criminal justice system; the structure and role of nonprofit organizations; how religion and spirituality shape perceptions of and interactions with the criminal justice system; as well as juvenile justice; education; and mass incarceration.

The university community created this series in response to a message from Dr. Jeffrey D. Senese, university president, said Dr. Holly Atkins, chair of the undergraduate education program, who is organizing the series. In May, following the death of George Floyd, Senese made several calls to action in his message: “We are all members of this society, and we must connect our work to teach to serve and to make a difference in our communities. I believe we should no longer be comfortable with or unaware of the racial disparities that exist in justice, health care, education, housing, and a myriad of other areas. We can and must make a difference.”

Dr. Ebony Perez, chair of the undergraduate social work program, encouraged faculty in the College of Education and Social Services to join her in initiating subcommittees to further social justice issues.

Courageous Conversations will continue throughout the academic year. The schedule includes:

- September 17, race/racism, facilitator Dr. Eileen O'Brien, associate chair of the Department of Social Sciences and professor of sociology;
- October 15, social work/social justice, facilitators Dr. Ebony Perez, chair of the Department of Undergraduate Social Work and assistant professor of undergraduate social work, and Christina Cazanave, director of field education and instructor of undergraduate social work;
- November 19, criminal justice/ethics, facilitator Charlotte Braziel, instructor of criminal justice;
- January 21, business/nonprofit organizations, facilitator Dr. Pamela Lee, director of the Master of Business Administration (MBA) program and associate professor of management;
- February 18, religion/spirituality, facilitator Dr. Marc Pugliese, associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and associate professor of theology and religion; and,
- March 18, education, facilitator Dr. Holly Atkins, chair of the Department of Undergraduate Education and associate professor of undergraduate education.

“Conversations about important topics should happen in community,” Atkins said. “We see this webinar series as a way for individuals to gather together to learn from and with others—to reflect on social justice, racism, and related topics, from their own perspective and from others’. Ultimately, we hope that the reflections and the conversations lead to action by individuals within their own spheres of influence.”

The book, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, which also was made into a popular movie that now is available on cable and online, was selected for the series because it “invites inclusive, multiple perspectives,” Atkins said. “We felt a text with a spiritual perspective would have an advantage as it would fit with our Catholic identity.”

Reading the book is not required, but is recommended, or participants can view the movie. “We believe the text is a spark for the conversations, but this is not a book club,” Atkins said. “We see it as more of a venue and opportunity to have important conversations about race and social justice.”

O'Brien added, “These conversations will be a great place for those who are seeking to gain practice and tools to enter into difficult conversations. They ideally will be a place where participants can get a little more confidence in their conversation skills around these issues, by equipping themselves with more information and ways of approaching the material.”

The first session on September 17 will take a sociology of racism lens on the book, O'Brien said. She will provide a framework and then invite dialogue on the theme of "how 'bad apples' and 'implicit bias' as individualistic concepts limit us from fully grasping the extent of systemic racism in the way the criminal justice system and other social institutions are built, with a discussion of what effective systemic solutions might look like."

"Social Justice and the Importance of Advocacy" will be the topic for the October 15 session. Perez said, "2020 has revealed issues of social justice are more present than ever and individuals, communities, and even companies have proclaimed their allegiance to social justice. However, the term 'social justice' is broad and in some ways non-specific. So, what do we mean when we say 'social justice?' Is a protest the only way to advocate for social justice?"

This Courageous Conversation will also look at the importance of advocacy in the social work practice and beyond.

All sessions will be 7 – 8 p.m. (ET) via Zoom, <https://saintleo.zoom.us/j/94551952591>. For more information, contact Nikki Heister, special programs manager, Department of Public Safety Administration, at nikki.heister@saintleo.edu.

About Saint Leo University

Saint Leo University is one of the largest Catholic universities in the nation, offering nearly 60 undergraduate and graduate-level degree programs to more than 19,500 students each year. Founded in 1889 by Benedictine monks, the private, nonprofit university is known for providing a values-based education to learners of all backgrounds and ages in the liberal arts tradition. Saint Leo is regionally accredited and offers a residential campus in the Tampa Bay region of Florida, 15 education centers in five states, and an online program for students anywhere. The university is home to more than 95,000 alumni. Learn more at saintleo.edu.

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