

## THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY IN MODERN ACADEME: CHALLENGE AND DILEMMA

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*How can the Catholic university reconstruct itself to bring the resources of Catholic tradition to bear on our common task of rebuilding the house of learning? The Catholic university needs to inhabit the domains of secular learning and Christian knowledge. The participation of Catholic intellectuals and universities in the postmodern dialogue will benefit the entire intellectual community.*

One hundred and fifty years ago Edward Sorin founded his tiny college on the American frontier. One decade later John Henry Newman did the same thing on a slightly grander scale in Dublin. In that primitive era, university development offices had not yet been invented. So both Father Sorin and Father Newman had to figure out how to work up support for their institutions. Lacking a football team, Father Newman chose a method that would make any development officer cringe. He gave a series of lectures.

Those lectures eventually became a book called *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated* (Newman, 1873). Father Newman's book was the keenest statement of the aims and ideals of a university education by any Victorian; in fact, it has been a regular source of embarrassment to all succeeding writers on the aims and ideals of university education, especially those who have the bad luck to be asked to address the challenges and dilemmas of the Catholic university. For it was, of course, the animating principles of the new Catholic University of Ireland that Father Newman was particularly trying to unfold for his listeners.

Fortunately, much has changed since Newman, else I might be reduced to quoting long passages from his book. For instance, we now regard

research as a key part of a university's mission—an idea Newman explicitly repudiated. We now think it natural to integrate education for a career, say in business or engineering, into a liberal-arts education—a notion Newman almost violently rejected.

Yet a reader today will still be brought up short by two of Newman's theses. First, it is strange that a Roman Catholic priest, the rector of a Roman Catholic university, the great English spokesman of the principle of authority in the Church, would stress the separation between Church and university, the distinction of their roles, the autonomy of their functions. Yet who, upon reflection, would deny that Newman was right? A Catholic university is a university, not a chapel. And however we may differ about the character of the Church, no one with experience of the university will regard it as a divine institution. Its task involves human knowledge, not eternal salvation.

To be sure, a Catholic college provides a home for young people in some of their most formative years; and it ought to aid in their formation (as should any college). Thus, it has a crucial pastoral role (again, like any college, but with a distinctive Catholic aim). Ideally, a college nurtures moral values, inculcates responsibility for oneself and for others, and, in its specifically Catholic role, guides students toward a more mature and deeper faith. These responsibilities affect not only extracurricular matters, such as dormitory life and athletics, but also the curriculum. Because the Catholic university in America normally houses undergraduate colleges, its task does, in these respects, touch on eternal salvation. But it does this work, if I may make the distinction, *qua* college and not *qua* university. The university's proper task, to repeat, involves human questions, not divine.

Why, then, does Newman's distinction between the Catholic university and the Catholic Church sound odd? The reason, I think, is convoluted and largely subliminal. In the 20th century we have grown used to thinking of faith and knowledge as mutually exclusive, almost contradictory, even hostile. So we fear that, in the end, no church would release its universities from the fetters of doctrine to pursue knowledge. At the back of our minds we suspect that a Catholic university cannot disentangle itself from the heavy hand of ecclesiastical authority—the long, legendary shadow of the Inquisition—without disengaging itself from Catholicism.

## THE CHALLENGE AND DILEMMA

So the challenge of the Catholic university in secular academe is to demonstrate that the phrase "Catholic university" is not an oxymoron, that is, that the university is a first-rate institution which is a full and distinguished participant in the increasingly international world of scholarship. The dilemma of the Catholic university is the same. Catholic traditions, after all, insist on the integration of faith and learning; modern academic traditions insist on

their separation. Many believe that, if a Christian institution plunges headlong into the profoundly secular sea of modern learning, it will unavoidably drown its Christianity. Ergo, it seems a Catholic university must either shun the world of secular scholarship or abandon its Christian beliefs and Roman Catholic intellectual traditions; it must either cease being Catholic or cease being a university.

We may find a clue to lead us out of the impasse if we consider Newman's second puzzling thesis. Newman placed philosophy as the keystone of university education. He thought that philosophy would unify the curriculum; integrate all the subjects of study; provide, as it were, a map of knowledge. Today this notion sounds downright quaint. Yet Newman would have found few skeptics among his audience.

For the unity of knowledge was still an axiom of European culture when Newman spoke. Knowledge formed a seamless whole because all knowledge referred to either the one Creator or his single Creation. Thus there could exist a discipline like philosophy (in Newman's sense) which showed, in principle at least, how the various specific bodies of knowledge related to each other and to the larger whole. And this explanation of the unity of learning would naturally form the central pillar of university education. Indeed, in American Protestant colleges in Father Newman and Father Sorin's era, the college president conventionally delivered just such a course of lectures to the senior class each year, notably Francis Wayland's *The Elements of Moral Science* (1837).

But in the last decades of Newman's life, doubts about the very existence of a Creator became widespread within the intellectual classes of Europe and America. Disbelief in God washed away the axiom that gave unity to knowledge, eventually unleashing a flood of doubts that wiped out all those once secure connections that held the pieces of knowledge together. Perhaps the most compelling overall analysis of this development, though carried through from a different point of view than mine is Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989). I do not say that this was altogether a bad thing. An excess of certainty can make a formidable barrier to the spread of knowledge, especially when the confidence turns into smugness, as it often did in the voices of those old college presidents.

It took almost a century for Victorian epistemological certitude to collapse—though Nietzsche was sufficiently crazy to see its end in its beginnings. The Victorian crisis of faith turned out to be equally a crisis of knowledge. Within this crisis of knowledge, there are actually two distinguishable but closely related problems that share the same genealogy (apologies to Nietzsche). The first is the simple fragmentation of knowledge that makes it difficult, if not impossible, for a molecular biologist to speak intelligibly to a political scientist, or for either to speak intelligibly to an educated layperson. The second is the uncertainty about whether there can be any secure ground

for knowledge, which has led to the subjectivism, at times solipsism, that characterizes a lot of recent theory in the humanities and social sciences. Knowledge lies scattered around us, in great, unconnected pieces, like lonely mesas jutting up in a trackless waste. That this fragmentation has impoverished public discourse is a more and more common lament; that it has emaciated education, both undergraduate and graduate, is too painfully obvious a truth to dwell on. So as we try to navigate through waves of uncertainty from one disciplinary island to another, all universities, not just Catholic ones, face the challenges and dilemmas of remapping the world of learning.

Catholic universities may be called to a special role in this common task. Traditionally, the great strength of Catholic intellectual life has been just that—tradition. That is, Roman Catholics, even more than other Christian intellectuals, heard their own voices as participants in an unbroken and multisided conversation stretching back continuously over more than two millennia. Catholic writers were as apt to interrogate Aristotle or Anselm or Aquinas as they were their own contemporaries. During the late 19th century, with the papacy under siege and Catholics fearful of modernity, this respect for intellectual tradition gelled into an artificially rigid, sometimes factitious neo-Thomism. This revived Thomism—increasingly subtle, increasingly faithful to Aquinas—remained the center of gravity of Catholic intellectual life until the mid-20th century. Whatever its defects, neo-Thomism kept alive, even deepened, among Catholics their powerful sense that intellectual life meant thinking within a tradition.

When the Second Vatican Council opened the Church's windows to modernity, the winds of change often drowned out these voices of the past. But Catholic intellectuals are now recovering their sense of the gravity of tradition. (So, too, are many Protestant intellectuals.) And any Catholic intellectual over 50—we ain't dead yet—retains powerful memories of what it was like for intellectual life to operate as a self-conscious tradition.

Now, tradition matters—if we are ever to resolve our common problem of the fragmentation of knowledge. For only within an ongoing framework of shared questions and axioms can we find common ground even for coherent disagreement, much less mutual engagement. This truth has in recent years been hammered home by some of our best philosophers, notably Alasdair MacIntyre (1990). That we would need to have articulated something so foundational speaks volumes about the intellectual condition of the 20th century. If we are ever to reestablish communication among the scattered realms of scholarship, ever to find a common ground of discourse, ever, in short, to build anew the lost unity of knowledge, we will do so only by constructing a new intellectual tradition that we all can share.

This task must remain for now a literally utopian adventure. No one can conceive what such a tradition will look like—though it is hard to imagine that it will be so exclusively European or so overwhelmingly male as the tra-

ditions we have grown out of. We are hopefully in for exciting decades of trial and error, of piecemeal construction, of trying to fit together familiar and unfamiliar pieces into a jigsaw puzzle that will eventually make a picture that would likely startle us out of our socks if we could see it now.

The Catholic university is a natural home for this experimentation. In common with most other Christian intellectuals, Catholic scholars retain the conviction on which unity of knowledge most comfortably rests, the dual faith in a God who created the universe and in human reason as a reliable God-given instrument for comprehending this creation. Even more than most other Christian intellectuals, Catholic ones retain three other advantages: the living memory of an actual unity, the recent experience of working intellectually on a common ground, and the philosophical and theological resources of the full Catholic intellectual tradition from which to build new connections.

Yet no one would accuse Catholic universities of using these resources to great effect. There are two reasons for this ineptness. First, Catholic universities, like the rest of us, are still stumbling blindly around the problems posed for all universities by the unraveling of the old seamless web of knowledge. But there is a second, especially Catholic fumbling. It arises from the fact that Catholic universities are wrestling with their own identities in the wake of Vatican II's opening to the modern world. They are going through what American Protestant colleges and universities groped through a century earlier: figuring out how to adapt to a thoroughly secular world of learning.

Those Protestant institutions made one of two choices. Most held on to their Victorian confidence that even secular knowledge must ultimately support their religious beliefs. Christianity needed no special nurturing or protection. They therefore welcomed secular modernity without reservation. Harvard had done this by the 1870s, Yale and Princeton a generation later, and Duke and Vanderbilt later still. But all eventually shared the experience of the 19th-century Yale sociologist William Graham Sumner. Sumner said that one day he put his religious beliefs in a drawer. When he opened the drawer some years later, he found that they were no longer there.

Not every Protestant college succumbed to secularization. A few, wary of secular learning, chose differently. They retreated into their Christianity, built up bulwarks against modernity (such as loyalty oaths for their faculty), and thus preserved their religious character. But they paid a heavy price. They cut themselves off from any real hope of influencing the larger world of knowledge, or, indeed, of tempering their own Christian scholarship in the chill waters of modern knowledge.

Catholic colleges and universities today seem poised to repeat the history of their Protestant analogues. Most are rushing to make themselves over in the image of Princeton or Mount Holyoke. At Notre Dame, for example,

the debate has become, fortunately, self-conscious and vocal. Some faculty members seem embarrassed that the university should claim any relationship between its religious heritage and its scholarly mission. Others warn that Notre Dame is sacrificing its Christian birthright for a very messy mess of pottage—that, in fact, it is already sliding down the slippery slope to secularization.

Sometimes the current debate reminds one of Karl Marx's dictum: Historical crises that occur first as tragedy repeat themselves as farce. There is something at least quaint, if not comic, in the spectacle of my co-religionists and fellow academics rehearsing the quarrels of 1892 about whether a Christian university can preserve its virtue in the potent embrace of secular knowledge when secular knowledge has collapsed in an undignified heap of squirming confusion. One smells a question badly posed. In fact, it is yesterday's question.

Today's question is much different. How can the Catholic university reconstruct itself to bring the resources of Catholic tradition to bear on our common task of rebuilding the house of learning? In answering that question we need to keep in mind the first of Newman's peculiarities: his insistence that a Catholic university is not the Catholic Church. Thus, the Catholic university enlists the resources of the Catholic tradition in a human enterprise, which itself is by no means exclusively Catholic or Christian or even religious. Yet *ipso facto* the Catholic university cannot fulfill its part in this enterprise without nurturing its own distinctively Christian and particularly Catholic intellectual traditions.

In short, the Catholic university must become, to borrow a phrase from Sir Thomas Browne, a "great and true Amphibium" (1964, p. 33). It must shrink from neither the vast ocean of secular learning nor the old ground of Christian knowledge, but inhabit both domains. Easy enough to say, but how to put this principle into practice? What would a university that was truly Catholic and truly a university look like today, or, better, tomorrow? Let us try to imagine.

## ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE

To begin with, what would its faculty look like? At least half of them would be Catholics, though not necessarily devout or even practicing Catholics. To insist on personal piety is to miss the academic point, which is reflexive familiarity with the intellectual habits and resources of Catholicism, so as to provide a distinctively Catholic matrix for debate and teaching within the university. If one were considering what I earlier called the pastoral function of the college, the issues would be posed differently. But, put bluntly, it matters more for the intellectual mission of the university that Catholic faculty members be "culturally Catholic" than sincerely Christian. I am evading here

an important, indeed potentially crippling, subsidiary problem. With the decline in number of Catholic schools and colleges, and with the decreasing attention in their curricula since Vatican II to specifically Catholic intellectual traditions, recruiting younger faculty members who were raised as Catholics (and who may still be devout ones) does not guarantee getting professors who are culturally Catholic. My own impression (admittedly not well informed) is that Catholic colleges today are beginning to show renewed interest in Catholic intellectual traditions, which may help to ease the problem in coming decades.

Another characteristic of the Catholic university would be that its critical mass of faculty would be sincerely Christian. For only committed Christians are apt to take seriously the work of developing a scholarship deeply informed by Christianity. Much of the Christian tradition is common to all Christians. So Protestant or Orthodox faculty members would in many, perhaps most, roles in a Catholic university prove just as useful as Roman Catholics. Within a somewhat more restricted range, the same would be true of committed Jews, Muslims, or other theists.

Yet having nonbelievers on the faculty would be equally essential. A Catholic university would hire many secular-minded professors, and not reluctantly, on the grudging ground that qualified Christians were too few to fill its faculty. Rather, it would hire them because it needs them. To be blunt, without ongoing synergy between Christians and nonbelievers, the experiment of a Catholic university will fail.

Catholic and other Christian scholars will have to grope their way into a largely untried conversation. They must learn to talk as Christian intellectuals with colleagues skeptical of Christianity. They must persuade secular scholars that knowledge forged within the Catholic tradition illumines problems of universal import. In historic fact, Christianity has generated, and continues to develop, a broad and complicated set of ways of understanding reality. These overlap and interpenetrate all the major bodies of Western thought: science, philosophy, history, literature, even sociology. Christian scholars ought to be able to show that all this matters.

But to pull it off, they must not only rediscover and reapply the intellectual resources of Christianity in unimagined ways, they must do so with the constant thought of speaking to the universal university, not just the Catholic university. Sallying forth to conferences four times a year will not suffice. Dailyness is key. So a Catholic university will make itself internally pluralistic not by accident but by design, for only thus can it become effectively Catholic. But the very fact of doing so will make it an attractive home for non-Catholics. For the enterprise will energize and enlighten secular faculty as much as Catholic.

In its teaching, too, the Catholic university would experiment with novel forms of recovering the Christian learned tradition. The curriculum would

presumably require theology or biblical studies or ethics, as Catholic colleges often still do. But it would include substantial efforts to relate the full range of university studies to Christian, particularly Catholic, intellectual traditions. This would not be a matter of studying “Christian literature” or “Christian chemistry” (whatever that might be). Rather, students, like faculty, need to explore how to locate modern knowledge within the broad and humane perspective of the Christian intellectual tradition and, still more broadly, within the perspective of theistic transcendence.

We can hardly guess into what curricular forms such explorations might ultimately develop, for the obvious reason that a full-bodied modern instantiation of Catholic learning does not yet exist. But we can imagine how a college might begin. A mathematics requirement might include the philosophical foundations of mathematics. Biology students might hear lectures on natural theology. The history program might include a seminar exploring philosophical and theological understandings of human agency and time. And all students might share a “foundations of knowledge” course, which would achieve what Newman imagined philosophy as doing and what Victor Cousin more or less did in the 1820s at the College de France with consequences that still echo in French intellectual life. None of this program would compromise, still less, censor, the full range of contemporary mathematical, biological, or historical scholarship. But it would give students practice in thinking about their studies in broader, more interconnected ways that would infuse their knowledge with extra meanings and wider resonance.

That other mission of the modern university, research, is at first tougher to imagine as distinctively Catholic. For it is in research that Catholic scholars engage most directly with colleagues who will raise at least an eyebrow, if not their hackles, at the phrase “Christian scholarship.” But the answer to this conundrum is surely not to fabricate a special set of Christian standards for research. Down that road lies isolation and intellectual impoverishment—the plight from which Catholic universities really began to extricate themselves only in the 1950s. Catholic academics ought to know better than to think of that problem as a solution. No, researchers in a Catholic university must live fully in the modern academic world, welcoming the hard-wrought standards of specialized professional scholarship, wading into the debates over new methods, new directions, new canons.

What would make research distinctive in a Catholic university is not the methods it applies but the kinds of questions it favors. Some fields of study— theology, biblical criticism, and the philosophy of religion—bear very directly on Catholic and Christian traditions. A Catholic university would naturally provide a special home for such inquiries. In other fields, a Catholic university would probably be indistinguishable from any other. The natural sciences have for the most part taught themselves to operate by shielding inquiry from questions of meaning that lie outside the theoretical structures



of the field itself. It is hard to imagine what "Catholic chemistry" might look like, even harder to imagine who would want it.

Still other disciplines have no specifically Christian content yet engage with questions of wider human meaning than the natural sciences: philosophy, literature, history, economics, sociology, and anthropology. In these, the humanities and human sciences, the Catholic tradition raises some kinds of questions more urgently than others. A Catholic university would naturally tend to favor these in its research program. One thinks, for instance, of a sub-field like medieval intellectual history or an issue like distributive justice in economics. But the focus could not be exclusive. Internal pluralism is essential in research, too, if the Catholic university is to recover the salience of its traditions for the full range of modern knowledge.

Whatever questions are asked, the answers would not be constrained by Christian intellectual traditions, but informed by them. The research supported in a Catholic university must remain entirely consonant with secular inquiries in its field. That research may raise issues and suggest interpretations that secular researchers might overlook or play down. As Christian scholarship matures, it ought to lead toward thicker and thicker connections between fields of study, growing out of the common tradition in which all are embedded. A Catholic university would ultimately reform graduate training in a more integrative mode. But we cannot really conceive what contributions Christian scholarship might make so long as Christian intellectual traditions sit in malnourished isolation from the mainstream of scholarship.

What we can see is that the lingering death of positivism has left us hungry for new modes of knowledge, while postmodern pluralism has offered hospitality to experiments wilder than this one. If the Catholic university grows into its full maturity and power, more than just Catholics stand to gain: just as feminist scholarship has opened eyes far beyond programs in women's studies.

For the stunting of the Catholic tradition in modern intellectual life has excised some of the most important roots of Western thought, including even those of modern natural science. We still read Augustine and Aquinas. But we have largely lost their tradition as a living, critical force in intellectual life. We have lost the benefits of the perspectives that this tradition can give us. We have lost, in short, an illuminating way of viewing reality. Regaining it could help all of us to argue more cogently about where we have come from, where we are, and where we ought to head. Just as the integration of women's ways of knowing into academic knowledge is expanding the university's horizons, so, too, could the resurrection of Catholic ways of knowing help even those of us who have no truck personally with Christianity to bring the isolated islands of human knowledge back into fruitful communication.

Perhaps these benefits become more palpable if we translate them into

the classroom. Those of us in higher education worry a great deal about the incoherence of undergraduate education reflected in current arguments about canons and core curricula. We ought to worry a great deal about the incoherence of graduate education, from which the incoherence of undergraduate education naturally flows. And therefore we ought to welcome and pay close attention to efforts to tie individual subjects into broader patterns of meaning, to encourage students to think coherently about the interlinkages and mutual resonances of their diverse studies. The University of Michigan could hardly adopt the curriculum of a Catholic university. But Michigan might learn a great deal about how to teach students to look for relationships among, say, chaos theory and family psychology and the Russian novel. And that is the first tiny step toward restoring coherence to our intellectual life and public discourse.

## IN CONCLUSION

Thus far, I have been considering exclusively the Catholic university in its engagement with and service to the larger world of learning. In this I have followed Newman's dictum that the Catholic university is in its nature a university. But Newman firmly believed as well that a Catholic university, in carrying out its functions *as* a university, would also serve the Church and its people.

As recently as 1960 or so, the phrase "Catholic intellectual," if not downright oxymoronic to non-Catholics, connoted a strange person who read Thomas Aquinas and papal encyclicals while harboring deep suspicion of Sigmund Freud and John Locke. This character might be bright, even interesting as a curiosity, but certainly was not someone to engage in debate about contemporary sociology or recent literary criticism. The Second Vatican Council, to oversimplify, exploded the cozy nest within which this odd bird had hatched.

But from the debris few recognizably Catholic intellectuals have arisen. And this despite the fact that the United States today houses a great many more intellectuals who happen to be Catholic than it used to. Nor has there grown up any lively intellectual life among educated Catholics in general. And this despite the rising proportion of college graduates in the Catholic population. College-educated Roman Catholics in this country still tend to keep their religious commitments in one box and their intellectual and artistic interests in another.

Neither of these observations should surprise us. Catholic universities of the post-Vatican II era have rarely fostered scholarship that plunges Catholicism into the pluralistic intellectual life of our times. So it comes as no great shock that few Catholic intellectuals have appeared. And, likewise, Catholic colleges in recent decades have seldom encouraged their students to

think seriously and flexibly about the relationship of their faith to the novels they are reading or the physics they are studying. So it is hardly startling that intellectual life among American Catholics remains torpid.

Yet none of this is inevitable. No Christian people have a richer intellectual tradition. But to activate that tradition in the lives of Catholics, to fulfill its mission to the Church, Catholic higher education needs to make a dual move—back to the intellectual resources of Catholicism and out into the larger arena of modern knowledge, so as to bring each to bear upon the other. But this, as Father Newman might tell us were he writing today, is precisely what the Catholic university must do to fulfill its mission as a university.

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