

Modeling the Best of What Catholic Higher Education Has to Offer Society and the Church: Reflections by a Mission Officer and Faculty Member

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The author writes from the perspective of a faculty member and mission officer, suggesting that a Catholic university has a unique task in the landscape of contemporary higher education. Rooted in Catholic faith and Catholic social teaching, universities in the Catholic tradition are part of a mission in the world reflective of a theological perspective. All disciplines are oriented toward a greater whole and serve a common good. The challenge to mission officers, then, is cultivating this shared sense of purpose among faculty. The Boston College Roundtable provides an example of how to do this.

Although we as faculty members at Catholic colleges and universities are expected to follow the methodologies of our disciplines, the purpose, the content, and even the way we teach should be different than at secular institutions. At the “heart” of a Catholic college experience there should be a call for all community members to dialogue around ideas and issues found within the intellectual tradition and social teaching of the Church. The Boston College Roundtable discussions provide a model for faculty, staff, and administrators at Catholic colleges and universities to have conversations and dialogue, intellectual inquiry, and scholarly discourse, followed by solidarity in action,

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around questions about who we are, what our mission *really* is, and how we can truly be the “intellectual heart” of the Church.

Catholic University—Unique Purpose

A Catholic university or college has a unique purpose in its connection with the Church. A university education promotes the acquisition of knowledge and helps students to consider what they are learning, why they think what they are learning is important, and what they hope to gain from the acquisition of this newfound knowledge and understanding. In a Catholic university or college we take this concept a bit further. At Catholic institutions of higher learning we affirm faith and reason as fundamental to a university education. We consider the gift of reason as a way to examine the world and all of creation.¹ We hold high standards for scholarship, but we do so for the glory of God.² We not only study, research, teach, and educate but we share a passion for the search, discovery, and communication of the truth as it is found uniquely in every field of knowledge. Our privileged task is “to unite existentially by intellectual effort, two orders of reality: 1) the search for the truth; and 2) the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth.”³ We must simultaneously search for the truth while encouraging a Catholic imagination within every field of knowledge.

It is through what and how we teach that leads to the transformational goal of our distinct Catholic pedagogy. Integration of the Catholic intellectual tradition and its sacramental way of looking at the world leads students (and the entire university community) to a new level of discernment and reflection about people, place, and purpose. It is where we encounter faith and reason, faith and culture, and the reason for our underlying Christian hope. Most university studies may not relate directly to matters of faith but they do intersect with the study of creation in one way or another.⁴ A Catholic education, however, has the potential to promote a profound experience using “reason in search of the truth while encountering through faith the one who is ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6).”⁵ Catholic universities can enhance academic inquiry by preserving continuity with the faith tradition in “the search for an integration of knowledge, a dialogue between faith and reason, an ethical concern, and a theological perspective.”⁶

Within the plurality of religions and cultures on our campuses, Catholic social teaching provides a common ground for understanding the rights and dignity of each person. Catholic theology can then apply critical reflection on what is taught, how it is learned,

1 Archbishop Thomas Collins, “A Catholic University in the 21st Century,” talk given at the University of St. Michael’s College, Toronto, Canada, May 30, 2009.

2 Collins, “A Catholic University in the 21st Century.”

3 Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (1990), 1, at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae.html.

4 Collins, 2.

5 Collins, 3.

6 Pope John Paul II, *Ex Corde* 12.

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and its possible implications and applications within the context of Church teachings.⁷ At our Catholic schools we provide a sense of “guided activism” by providing witness, reflection, discernment, and a call to action. The various charisms of our institutions share a way of being as they relate to a particular founding religious community. This religious and/or spiritual dimension to the academic experience provides vision and authentic depth to intellectual inquiry which moves beyond specialized disciplinary discourse. The charism provides a unique context and language for building relationships within and among disciplines and people.

We can bring Church teaching into the consciousness of our students within all of our disciplines through the sacramental lens inspired by the Catholic faith. We are privileged and obligated to help students see beyond themselves to begin to make connections to their experiences and how God fits into them. Every discipline can add particular insights from which Catholic intellectual and social teachings can be manifested as part of a transformative process: history teaches contingency while reflecting upon the past; anthropology shows commonalities and differences within and among societies; art and literature provide paths to develop empathy and perspective; and scientific thought develops the capacity for systematic thought and analysis.⁸ Whereas philosophy engages the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, particularly at a Catholic institution, theology offers a guided methodology to help us help our students to make connections between their studies and themselves with purpose and intentionality.⁹

If universities are where the Catholic Church does its best thinking, learning, and teaching, then they must also be places where the search for the truth incorporates mutual recognition of the truths found within other faiths and cultures. Catholic higher education, as a microcosm of the world, can be a place where a common peaceful life can be learned and lived. Catholic social teaching shows us how to treat one another. Social activism that promotes the common good and expresses the dignity of each person provides a framework and model for life in lived-in community—working together

7 Paul Locatelli, S.J., “The Catholic University of the 21st Century: Educating for Solidarity,” keynote paper presented at the Heartland Delta 6 Conference, John Carroll University, University Heights, Ohio, 2005.

8 Drew Gilpin Faust, “The Role of the University in a Changing World,” speech given at the Royal Academy, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland, June 30, 2010, 7, 9.

9 Walter Kasper, “The Role of the Church and a Catholic University in the Contemporary World,” *Sacred Heart University Review* (Spring 2001), 59.

with respect, justice, and peace. All members of the University have the responsibility through their witness to be “disciples” as part of this model.¹⁰

Our campuses should also aspire to a solidarity that begins with a “Christian anthropology and a Christian humanism” as it is “rested in God’s creation.”¹¹ This type of solidarity invites us to transcend the human condition not by sacrificing personal liberty but by realizing our freedom and full potential, which exists in community. It is important for a Catholic university to restore a sense of transcendence through the sacred and not let human life be devalued, manipulated, or lost.¹² Human solidarity provides communion with God and with each other as a way of life.¹³ Solidarity as a theological virtue differentiates Catholic social and intellectual understanding of life from the excesses of liberalism and individualism. Approached through interdisciplinary engagement and discourse, solidarity of justice can lead to the desire for a more humane and just society where social benefits extend to the entire human family, for the good of all people, cultures, and nations.¹⁴

Academic solidarity can be achieved through the sharing and joy of the search, discernment, and communication of the truth in every field of knowledge. Solidarity can also be present in engagement with the poor.¹⁵ Intellectual inquiry and thinking critically about great questions, building an awareness of the reality of our times, and discovering the impact of choices and actions on others, especially those less fortunate, can “challenge the mind to where the heart is touched by direct experience.”¹⁶ Academic excellence is “needed in order to solve complex social problems. It is only through this type of inquiry, action, interaction, reflection, and discernment that we can hope that our students will become citizens and leaders who desire to transform the world.”¹⁷

The Church and its academy therefore need intellectuals who use their skills and knowledge in the service of the common good to promote “a world which is shaped according to the truth God reveals to us in creation itself and is bestowed upon us through his revelation in salvation history.”¹⁸ Catholic academics who show the spirit of joyful wonder found in the solitary work of scholarship, the communal experience in the classroom, and within daily conversation are needed as witnesses to this revealed truth.

Challenges

Challenges to the mission of Catholic higher education are many. Schools are often conflicted in their desire to provide a “Catholic” education when students (and their

10 Collins, 1.

11 Locatelli, 4.

12 Locatelli, 4.

13 Locatelli, 4-5.

14 Locatelli, 6.

15 Locatelli, 8.

16 Locatelli, 8.

17 Locatelli, 8.

18 Kasper, 63.

parents) have the anticipated outcome of “getting a well-paid job” upon graduation as primary in significance for a college education. A Catholic education, however, is distorted or devalued in purpose if it is considered solely as the foundation for prosperity, social mobility, and economic growth.¹⁹ If left unchecked, a Catholic university or college can lose sight of the rationale for critical inquiry within a spiritual and values-centered environment, giving way to the promotion of unbounded curiosity over true learning, critical thinking, and the desire to serve others.²⁰

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Utilitarian motivation as an overarching theme loses sight of the ultimate purpose of the search for the truth that is in Jesus Christ. The specialization and fragmentation of information, disciplines, and knowledge undermine and contradict the integration of faith and reason, which is key to a Catholic education. Distance learning, with its limited human interaction and lack of community formation, allows indifference to the needs of others. Teachers and students alike can become detached from the virtues of a Catholic educational experience, approaching the academic enterprise as a business where work is done as a meaningless means to an end.

Faculty, staff, and administrators often find it difficult to see their own personal, professional, and disciplinary connection to institutional mission in regard to Catholic identity. “Silos,” although often complained about, are created as safe havens for solitude and detachment. Even more dangerous are the silos built through hierarchy of discipline, rank, degree, and position. These tend to lead to a lack of collegiality, a competitive environment, and limited genuine engagement, interaction, and discourse. Silos tend to sell people short and limit relationship building. Without an open and authentically Catholic environment, faith, if present at all, is expressed privately, and is thought to have little if any place on campus other than in campus ministry or theology and religious studies departments. Communally explicit witness is either sheltered or nonexistent. Faculty members therefore are often minimally engaged or unwilling to take risks for the faith, which compromises the integrity of a true Catholic education.

We must be careful to note that students are deeply influenced by the environment around them. When faculty and staff demonstrate even an inadvertent offense to the Catholic mission, the search for the truth in a Catholic context is replaced by a search

¹⁹ Faust, 2.

²⁰ Faust, 7

for material well-being that is a detriment to the purpose of a Catholic education and undermines hoped-for spiritual development.²¹ An environment often hostile to overt faith practice in fear of offending those of other faiths (pluralism) allows for secularization to occur. Relativism and focused professional training also detract from the ultimate goal of the search for truth—to be one with God.²² Limited pastoral care for faculty is also a problem on many Catholic campuses. Fewer religious present on campus to share in Christian formation and charism and theologians with limited ability to communicate with those of other disciplines prevent opportunities for witness, engagement, and discernment. Institutional and personal autonomy, often mislabeled as “academic freedom,” are often cited as the rationale to keep the Catholic mission and identity at bay.

Our greatest challenge stems from a fear of integrating the faith as part of the academic enterprise. If the Catholic faith is not palpable on the campus, through liturgical expression, sacramentally through prayer, acts of charity, concern for justice, and respect for God’s creation, we do not and cannot bear witness to who we say that we are.²³ We cannot share the joyful boldness that arises out of a lived faith and its associated academic achievements.²⁴ And we cannot develop well-educated and morally responsible citizens²⁵ who witness to our mission if we don’t provide them with “an academic community which, in a rigorous and critical fashion, assists in the protection and advancement of human dignity and of cultural heritage” and include the teaching of the Church within our “research, teaching, and various services offered to the local, national, and international communities.”²⁶

Mission Engagement Programs

Over the past four years, faculty and administrators from various disciplines and positions have been invited by Boston College to reflect together on the mission of Catholic higher education as it can be applied throughout the institution. Coming from a variety of different Catholic colleges and universities across the country through the disciplinary lenses of theology, philosophy, religious studies, mechanical engineering, economics, management and organization, biology, physics, psychology, sociology, literature, and the arts, they have demonstrated and experienced how “institutions rooted in the Catholic tradition stand to enrich academic freedom and scholarly inquiry, student learning, and social development” through interdisciplinary discourse.²⁷

21 Kasper, 60.

22 Kasper, 60.

23 Collins, 6

24 Collins, 6.

25 Locatelli, 3.

26 Pope John Paul II, *Ex Corde* 1.

27 Timothy P. Muldoon, “A Qualitative Review of the Boston College Roundtable,” *Integritas* 5.1 (Summer 2015), 1.

Roundtable discussion within a welcoming, hospitable, and collegiate environment can create opportunities for authentic encounter within disciplinary understanding, research, and classroom teaching.

Many ideas emerged from these discussions. As an observer, I was able to focus on what was being presented not only as a faculty member but from my perspective as a mission officer. Having helped to create many programs that orient, educate, and ultimately develop “next-generation” leaders for mission, I have found these roundtable discussions a superb model for our Catholic university or college campuses to emulate. However, in order for such discussions to be truly effective for an institution, a Catholic university must have an environment conducive to dialogue. The campus environment must share a sacramental view of the world, seeing God in all things, as a gift to be cherished, one that is transformational in nature. Faculty members, especially, need to demonstrate a different way of looking at the world through their disciplines that involves their entire being—mind, body, and spirit. The ideas of worth and identity, relationships and dialogue, truth and goodness, and solidarity of mission need to be regular parts of the community’s vocabulary. Roundtable discussion within a welcoming, hospitable, and collegiate environment can create opportunities for authentic encounter within disciplinary understanding, research, and classroom teaching.

Mission engagement and integration must exist beyond policy and marketing. They must take place in the whole of the academy—but particularly in the classroom. Ideas generated from the Catholic intellectual tradition, Catholic social teaching, and the charism of founding religious communities must anchor all we do. These ideas need to be the basis of dialogue and reflection, formation, and values, and used as a common language. Seeing their value among and within academic disciplines should take place through interdisciplinary courses, panel discussions, guest scholars, featured presentations, symposiums, seminars, and conferences. Common experiences provide opportunities to make connections, discuss issues, and implement actions. Exposure to new ways of thinking helps all involved discover underlying preconceptions and biases. Reflecting on common experiences from a variety of perspectives can inspire critical thinking about moral issues and the impact one’s choices and actions have on others. Acting in solidarity, through critical thinking based on a faith premise, a Catholic pedagogy of engagement is enhanced, community-based learning is achieved, and more intellectually stimulating discussions can occur.

Roundtable discussions of the nature provided by Boston College, especially when offered in a safe, collegial environment, can bring “enlightened” faculty (administrators and staff) together to discover common themes within disciplines and their Catholic

“touch points.” They can nurture understanding, appreciation, and a desire to incorporate more intentionally elements of Catholic intellectual and social traditions into their teaching and engagement with others. Institutional commitment and a sense of demonstrated solidarity to the Catholic mission of the institution are necessary for such programs to take place. Roundtable discussions at this level can help Catholic universities and colleges reclaim their Catholic heritage and identity as integral to their academic mission—but they do take time and money to develop and implement. With their high scholarly engagement and intellectual insight, however, they will inevitably reshape Catholic higher education by building relationships within and among institutions, transforming perspectives through thought-provoking discourse, and creating solidarity for a common Catholic mission.²⁸ As the Boston College Roundtable discussions have done for all of its participants and observers, scholarly and intellectually charged discussions across disciplines with an intentional focus on their intersection with the teachings of the Church can bring about an awareness and witness to the greater good only possible within Catholic higher education.

28 Locatelli, 10.