

Summary of Roundtable Conversation

In response to the papers of Cunningham and Plante, members of the Roundtable began their discussion with practical observations about the necessity of scientific research in the context of contemporary Catholic higher education. The immediate response, though, was a practical one: it is very expensive, and yet it is indispensable. One thread of the discussion compared the costs of hiring researchers a generation ago to the costs today, which have (according to one estimation) tripled, favoring highly the land-grant institutions that were able to take advantage of federal grants to build laboratories in the latter part of the twentieth century. Today it is extremely difficult for most Catholic colleges and universities to compete with the infrastructure demands of high-quality research in the hard sciences, even as colleges try to recruit the many highly talented students interested in such studies.

Members observed a number of significant challenges to Catholic colleges seeking to build a greater commitment to the sciences. Cunningham's narrative of how Catholics have had to play "catch up" in scientific fields resonated with many. Few bishops have scientific training; comparatively few endowed chairs in the sciences exist; there are conflicts about space in the curriculum for advanced scientific study in light of existing core curricula. One participant recalled the observation in the Macelwane Report that the colleges in the study had too many pious and useless men; too much emphasis on theological and spiritual formation meant too little formation in the discipline proper to scientific research.

What is needed, according to one participant, is a new theological narrative which takes science seriously. The old narrative, which imagined a God as a mover within creation, was rendered null because of the advance of Copernican theory and Newtonian physics, and had the Church backtracking for generations. Philosophy and theology were pitted as the enemies of the advance of science. Cunningham related insights gained during his studies in philosophy: that there was a kind of triumphalism embedded in the narrative of scientific history that gave rise to a competitive approach to scientific discovery, even at the expense of moral questions like the ecological or social cost of that research. The benefit of his dual immersion in science and philosophy enabled an approach captured by the epigram near the telescope at the Vatican observatory: *Venite Adoremus Deum Creatorem* (Come let us adore God the Creator).¹

¹ See above, page 15, footnote 24.

Catholic colleges and universities have the opportunity, one participant argued, to make a virtue of necessity: to recognize the difficulty of breaking into the grant-seeking game and develop a collaborative approach. Plante pointed to what is happening in Silicon Valley, where businesses, industries, and wealthy donors work with universities to establish new directions for research. With a large network in both the United States and abroad, and with developing educational and research technologies, perhaps scientists and students at Catholic colleges and universities could develop new ways to work together that would pool resources. The example of Jesuit seismographers of the twentieth century offer a historical model.

There emerged a general sense that while competing with major science-heavy universities, or developing a “Catholic Institute of Technology” was not feasible, what is necessary for Catholic colleges and universities is to constantly raise the difficult moral questions about the purposes and by-products of scientific research. On a macro level, there are moral questions about the extent to which universities might compromise their missions through fiduciary ties to corporate or military interests. On a micro level, researchers who are persons of faith are in a position to raise hard questions about the direction of research in their fields: whether such research might devalue the human person or harm the ecosystem.

One result of this direction of speculation was the insight that graduate training of men and women of faith, together with the ongoing invitation to new professors and researchers to conversations about mission, are important to the future of Catholic institutions. Such efforts would require the work of discernment, not only in training others in an existing understanding of mission, but also in the sense of listening to their expertise so that they might help chart the direction of Catholic higher education in pioneering ways.