

Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts: What Makes a Catholic University Catholic?

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Today's Catholic universities are engaged in a dynamic struggle in which much is at stake. What is this struggle? It is a struggle for identity! This struggle is an old one, because from its beginnings, at least in the United States, the Catholic university has sought recognition in an academic world dominated by the much larger, more powerful, and highly specialized secular university and has had to justify its existence in that setting. However, this struggle is also a new one, because the Catholic university of the late 20th century exists in a radically different religious and cultural environment than that of its earlier counterparts.

Today's Catholic university likely would not describe its mission in terms of its participation in the frontier missionary activity of the Catholic Church or its preparation of individuals to resist the threats that the culture at large posed to their faith, as did the Catholic universities of the 19th century (Power, 46-57). The landscape of the Catholic university is drastically different today, its relationship to the prevailing culture having created for itself an identity crisis of immense proportions. As Gleason has so aptly noted, Catholics in the United States are no longer identified with the disenfranchised and immigrant population. Rather, in most circles, Catholics are upwardly mobile, politically accepted, and socially assimilated into mainstream culture (Gleason, 244). In addition, Gleason points to profound changes in the religious environment after Vatican II, which piggybacked on the cultural upheaval of the 1960s as precipitators of this identity crisis: the watershed of new approaches to theology that were more compatible with American cultural norms, together with the upheaval created by the changes in religious practice and church life after Vatican II (245-246). In sum, Catholicism of the 20th century has become profoundly inculturated, and the Catholic university, which by its very nature mediates a position between faith and culture, suffers an identity crisis as a result.

The issue of the Catholic identity of the Catholic university is an important one because it is the focal point of the university's existence. A brief review of literature on the subject will reveal that, in the course of the past decade, a number of people have begun to advance a wide range of partial answers to the question. On their own, each is reasonable and laudable. However, as we shall see, no single response provides a satisfactory answer in itself. These responses are not satisfactory, I would suggest, because the identity of the Catholic university is not monochromatic. No one characteristic can epitomize the Catholic identity of a university, but neither is it a matter of naming the proper combination of characteristics. The identity of the Catholic university is greater than the sum of its parts. The following examples will demonstrate my point.

What makes the University of St. Thomas a Catholic university? A partial answer can be found in the fact that it has at its roots a founding group that is Catholic. In 1885, when John Ireland founded the seminary-college that set the direction for the University of St. Thomas, he had in mind first the preparation of priests for his diocese, but he also intended that the priests of the archdiocese provide the leadership for the growth and development of the institution that would educate young lay men within the Catholic tradition for their role in the world. Indeed, in its founding, the University of St. Thomas was Catholic, but history tells us that the role of this founding group has changed from the role it played in those early years. In sum, the existence of a Catholic founding group in St. Thomas' past does not ensure the university's Catholicity into the future.

What makes the University of St. Thomas a Catholic university? Some would want to say that St. Thomas is Catholic to the extent that its faculty and students profess or assent to a body of doctrine that is Catholic. While this might have been an accurate barometer for much of the early days of St. Thomas' history, when the vast majority of its faculty were Catholic and when the mission of the institution was to teach its students to persevere in the faith and to be strong against the threats of the culture around them, today's climate is quite different. It is no longer true that the vast majority of the faculty of the University of St. Thomas profess to be Catholic. Now, only approximately 70 percent of its students are Catholic. However, these changing demographics do not make the University of St. Thomas less of a Catholic institution. The university community has among its members many who do not profess the Catholic faith, but who are deeply committed to the university's mission and to its ideals as a Catholic university.

What makes the University of St. Thomas a Catholic university? A partial answer can be found in the fact that it has a theology department and that the study of theology is a significant component of the students' general education requirements. Consistent with the mission statement and goals of the University of St. Thomas, the theology faculty has designated itself as a theology department, and not as a religious studies department, because it does not see itself engaged simply in a sociological investigation of the phenomenon of religion. Neither does it see its task as catechesis or indoctrination into the faith. However, our modern valuation of the rational and scientific have often prejudiced us to think of things religious as irrational, prejudicial, morally constraining, and sentimental, and therefore necessarily segregated from the more important matters of life. In the words of St. Anselm, theology is "faith seeking understanding."

A theology department, if it's true to its task, is integral to a Catholic university, because, in the words of David Hassel, it deals with "that ever-changing knowledge that (a) arises out of the confrontation between the Scriptures and cultural learning and (b) attempts, by the light of faith in Christ, to mediate, between the Scriptures and the culture, a common understanding of life" (189). Addressing a question about the inclusion of theology in a university's curriculum, John Henry Newman expressed a similar sentiment in an earlier century: "Supposing theology be not taught, its province will not simply be neglected, but will be actually usurped by other sciences, which will teach, without warrant, conclusions of their own in a subject-matter which needs its own proper principles for its due formation and disposition" (93).

However, the existence of a theology department does not, de facto, make a university Catholic. Even if the theology department is of superior quality and its goals entirely consonant with the expressed mission of the university, if that mission statement is not embraced by the whole of the university, it will remain only words on a page. In other words, although it is integral to the Catholic identity of the university, the theology department cannot bear the burden of being the locus of its Catholic identity. The predispositions of our culture will only further alienate it, and therefore the Catholic mission of the university, from the mainstream of life.

What makes the University of St. Thomas a Catholic university? A partial answer can be found in the fact that it identifies itself with the Catholic Church. John Paul II, in his encyclical, "On Catholic Universities," described the two components of this relationship in terms of (a) the institution's fidelity to the Christian message and "its recognition of and adherence to the teaching authority of the Church in matters of faith and morals," and (b) the Church's responsibility to promote and assist the institution in preserving and protecting its Catholic identity (§ 27).

However, this kind of response, which locates the Catholic identity of the university in its relation to the Catholic Church, is extremely controversial on account of the questions it raises about academic freedom and about the hierarchical Church's involvement in the operations of a university. It is made more controversial by the preoccupation of American culture with individuality and freedom of speech, at the expense of an experience of community in its most profound and sacramental sense. Because of these complicating factors, the balance of understanding is extremely difficult to attain. Although the Catholic university ought never be the rival of the Church, neither is it its official arm. A university, by its very nature, must be committed to an impartial search for truth, but a Catholic university does so with the presupposition that it already has access to the "fount of truth" within the Catholic tradition and the Christian faith (On Catholic Universities § 1).

What makes the University of St. Thomas a Catholic university? A partial answer can be found in the fact that it seeks to educate the whole person in the liberal arts. At first glance, this might appear to be a rather odd response to the question of Catholic identity, unless, that is, one invests in a particular understanding of the motives and purpose of a liberal education. John Henry Newman described the product of the liberal education as the ability to apprehend "the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and its shades, its great points and its little" (96). "A habit of mind is formed," he says, "which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom" (96).

To this you might say, "But is this not the purpose of all education?" In his writings, Newman made a distinction between instruction and education. The term "instruction" refers to the communication of knowledge for the immediate purpose of learning skills and preparing for an occupation — something that is transitory and external. In contrast, the term "education" refers to a higher order communication of knowledge: "It implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of a character; it is something

individual and permanent, and is commonly spoken of in connection with religion and virtue" (105). In this context, we can speak of a liberal arts education undertaken within the Catholic tradition and the Christian faith.

The Catholic tradition and the Christian faith provide a matrix within which the university can educate its members with the result that they become productive members of the society, capable of examining and evaluating its predominant values and motivated to work for justice and the dignity of all. At the same time, courses in business ethics or journalistic ethics and programs in peace and justice issues do not make a university Catholic. The identity of the Catholic university is greater than the sum of its parts.

At this point, we could throw up our hands in despair and abandon our effort to answer the question, "What makes the University of St. Thomas Catholic?" Indeed, the question is an important one, but perhaps its value lies not so much in the answer, but in how we invite ourselves to be changed by asking the question. Perhaps it is this transformational process that constitutes the missing part — that which is greater than the sum of its parts. This transformational process defies identification because it is so deeply rooted in the substance of who we are as a community of teachers and learners. However, when it is ignored, it wreaks havoc on any attempts by the institution to fulfill its mission.

It is my investment in this transformational process, both for myself and the students I encounter, that motivates my ministry as a teacher of theology. In order to describe this transformational process I would like to suggest an analogy to Native American cultures. For Native American peoples, identity-making takes place in the telling of stories, in the participation in community, and in the celebration of rituals. For us, identity-making takes place in the telling of stories of the founding and development of the University of St. Thomas, because embedded in those stories are the ideals and aspirations that embody the charism of St. Thomas. More importantly, the University of St. Thomas ought to find its identity in the telling of stories that constitute the shared tradition of Catholicism and the Christian faith, a tradition that has its origin and sustenance in the sacred Scriptures. By being deeply rooted in this tradition we have access to the vision that will shape our future as a Catholic institution and our students' future action in the world.

Identity-making takes place in community. This idea is extremely problematic for American culture, which values independence and individuality above everything else, but unless we recognize ourselves in communion we cannot sympathize with those who are suffering or be motivated to work for justice in another's behalf. Unless we call our students to identity through the building up of community, we will not model for them a way of finding their place in the world that is meaningful and fulfilling even in the midst of life's difficulties.

Identity-making takes place in the celebration of ritual. Ritual is about remembering together as a community and in a way that involves both body and mind. In this sense, ritual is part of the continuum of life. Ritual is also about performing the way things ought to be. In other words, ritual has the capacity to transform its participants and nurture them toward a new and transcendent reality. In both of its functions, in words and

actions, ritual roots us, body and mind, in our identity as members of a community. But what is to be said, then, about the Catholic university community that is reticent to come together for the celebration of ritual? The issue is complicated by the need to respect the pluralism of the university community, but a Catholic university, if it is not to be Catholic in name only, must find ways to participate in ritual and to instill in its members a valuation of ritual.

What does this transformational process mean in relation to my own work as a professor of theology at the University of St. Thomas? I am profoundly aware that my work is only one small part of a much larger endeavor which is the mission of the University of St. Thomas. My attempts to struggle with the question of the Catholic identity of the university have brought me to a renewed commitment not so much to find a once-for-all answer to the question, but to appreciate the process, because it is a challenge and a call to conversion for me each day that I enter the classrooms and meeting rooms at the University of St. Thomas. The Catholic identity of the university is about a way of being that continually needs renewing, but which finds its source and vitality in the Catholic tradition and the Christian faith.

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