

Habitat For Hope: the Catholic University at the End of the 20th Century

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A Catholic university is without any doubt one of the best instruments that the church offers to our age, which is searching for certainty and wisdom.

Ex Corde Ecclesiae, Introduction, par. 10

The current state of American society is frequently distressing, if not depressing, plagued as it is by some rather disturbing trends: economic uncertainty, the disintegration of generally accepted moral standards, the general loss of civility, the seeming disregard for the common good and unprecedented levels of violence – especially among the young.

Despite the fact that Catholic higher education is deeply affected by these societal conditions, it has the advantage of being in a position to offer a counterpoint to these forces by providing an environment where students have an opportunity to find meaning in a world that seems to have gone awry.

Although the environment to which I refer is composed of many frequently complex elements, I would like to comment on a selected few characteristics which seem to me to be of particular significance and importance. No specific order of priority is intended.

A Call to Excellence

While the term "academic excellence" has not always been applied to Catholic institutions, the fact remains that, as the parable of the talents reminds us, our commitment to the message of the Gospel requires that we strive for excellence in all we do. For those of us engaged in education, this call to excellence implies a special sense of responsibility, since education plays a major role in helping others respond more fully to the challenge of this parable.

As faculty, this call to excellence requires of us more than the mastery of the content and methodology of our disciplines. It demands that we seek to make explicit for those whom we teach the "mutual enrichment and reciprocal clarification between scholarly enterprises and a life of faith ..." to which Monika Hellwig refers (Hellwig p. 18). It is the continuing dialogue between faith and reason which serves as the hallmark of our teaching and encourages us and our students to review human knowledge in this context.

In addition, the call to excellence challenges us as faculty in a Catholic university to assist each other and our students to avoid the narrowness so characteristic of the current highly disciplinary approach to teaching and learning. We are expected to grapple with the demanding but invigorating task of striving for the integration of the various facets of

knowledge. For us, therefore, efforts toward a more interdisciplinary, holistic approach are not only desirable, but perhaps even essential. As we are told in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*: "it is necessary to work toward a higher synthesis of knowledge in which alone lies the possibility of satisfying that thirst for truth, which is profoundly inscribed in the heart of the human person" (par. 16).

A Special Way of Seeing

Following closely upon this call to excellence is the responsibility of Catholic educators to introduce their students not just to new information, but to new ways of perceiving and knowing. In addition to helping them develop a sense of wonder and curiosity, we are expected to foster in them the incarnational dimension of perception. As Teilhard de Chardin said: "By virtue of creation, and still more of the incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see." We are invited to help our students become what Michael Himes refers to as "sacramental beholders...people who see what is there in its full depth" (Himes p. 24).

In this context, the physical signs and rituals of our faith tradition play an important role since they assist us in this process by acting as helpful reminders and at times as catalysts which spark further examination or greater understanding of the transcendent in our lives.

Perhaps we more than most educators are asked to remember the often repeated admonition that students are not vessels to be filled, but candles to be lighted.

An Openness of Mind and Spirit

The educational experience in a Catholic institution should foster an internal openness that results in greater appreciation and respect for others. This is no small achievement for, as Louis Dupré points out: "respect is possibly the most neglected quality in the moral habits of our time. To respect the other is precisely not to draw him into the closed circle of my own subjectivity, but to encounter him in the open space where he is allowed to be himself" (Dupré p. 455).

In a Catholic university those of other faith traditions are not only welcome, but they are important to its intellectual and spiritual vitality. "From its beginning," says Walter Ong, "Catholic teaching has learned by contact with what is not itself and even what is opposed to itself. For example, ...St. Thomas Aquinas learned from the pagan Aristotle – and met massive resistance for his use of this pagan author, who, moreover, was mediated to the Latin West through Muslims, Arabs, and others. In our own day, Catholic teaching has learned from certain kinds of existentialism and especially from personalist philosophy" (Ong p. 349).

By its very nature the Catholic university, like the Church itself, is marked by a profound respect for those with whom it comes in contact and seeks to foster an appreciation for the contributions of those of diverse religious backgrounds. The celebration of diversity, about which we hear so much today, is a given in an institution which claims to take

seriously the concepts of the communion of saints and the mystical body of Christ. Our students have an opportunity to become familiar with the traditions of their colleagues of other faiths. This experience, far from being a threat to their own faith development, serves as a source of enrichment.

Like most things, however, the openness which fosters this welcoming spirit and deep appreciation is best learned by example. The effectiveness of the lesson depends on the quality of its translation as seen in the attitudes and actions of those who make up the institution. A challenging reminder for all of us!

A Commitment to Social Justice

The educational experience at a Catholic university is marked by an effort to understand and develop a sense of responsibility for the common good.

Calling on the Church's long tradition of on-going commitment to social justice, the Catholic university is not only eager to offer students an opportunity to become familiar with the documents which embody the Church's position on social issues, but also to engage them in service-oriented activities through which they can contribute concretely to the good of society.

However, simply having participated in these activities or projects is not enough. They are rendered more meaningful and therefore more valuable when linked with a thoughtful review of the experience. These experiences are frequently most effective when coupled in some way with the student's academic program. Once again the role of faculty becomes critical especially with regard to the culminating review. One assumes that the nature of the review and the final outcomes of the experience might be quite different at a Catholic university.

A Focus on Affirmation, Connectedness and Hope

I began by saying that, in my opinion, perhaps the most important contribution of Catholic higher education today is that it gives students an opportunity to find meaning in a world that seems to have gone awry. For many students, this world gone awry is all too familiar. They need opportunities and encouragement to find hope in the future and faith in themselves and others.

A few years ago, I read a report about a survey of high school students done by a news agency in the 1940s. The students had been asked to list the things that were most problematic for them. Their responses included the following: chewing gum, talking out of turn, violating the dress code, littering, making too much noise, and running in the halls. I found myself chuckling at the childishness of their answers – until I read on.

The report indicated that in the 1980s the same agency had conducted a similar survey. The answers provide an alarming contrast: drug and alcohol abuse, assault, rape, robbery,

and pregnancy. It seems unlikely that the list would be less disturbing if the survey were to be repeated now.

As faculty in a Catholic institution we have an opportunity to give our students, not only the fruits of our academic expertise and experience, but more importantly, a context for dealing with the significant questions raised by the human condition and a sense of affirmation about their own gifts and worth. We do this, in part, by welcoming them into a community of learners that will lessen the isolation so many of them seem to experience. We also do it by introducing them to the faith tradition of the institution, which will reinforce their sense of self-worth and further their assurance that an all-caring Providence does exist. They will not have answers to life's most difficult questions, but they will have a context of understanding and trust in which to deal with them.

A Spirit of Hope and Compassion

Those most essential to the creation and maintenance of the environment to which I have referred several times are the faculty. It is not that others at the University have no part in this critical work. It is a simple fact, confirmed by several studies, that faculty have a more significant effect on students than does any other group on campus. This includes their experiences or contacts in and out of the classroom. As a result, the creation of an atmosphere of hope and affirmation depends essentially on the faculty. The tone is set by them and depends upon the degree of joy and enthusiasm they experience in their work.

Conclusion

Unlike those who feel Catholic education is on the "slippery slide to secularization," I prefer the image of the Catholic university as yeast in the world of higher education which was proposed by Walter Ong, S.J. However, the eventual effectiveness of the yeast depends on us. It is up to us to make of our campus a habitat for hope.

As William J. Rewak, S.J., president of Spring Hill College, said in an address earlier this year: "We are, all of us, responsible for the world we build, the society we construct, the family we nurture. We must build with both intelligence and love. We have around us the intelligence. We should all pray that we have the love."

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