

Introduction

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The seminar we participated in last summer was one of the most positive experiments in Church I have known, and I would like to thank the University of St. Thomas for this opportunity. The project in Catholic education in process on this campus is impressive in its openness, thoroughness, and patience. I doubt such consensus building is occurring anywhere on such a scale, and am grateful for the chance of contributing to it for a short, but exciting week.

Our topic was curriculum; but one of the lessons of our discussion process was that, to reach such consensus on this issue, fundamental linguistic taboos must first be eliminated. We are all conditioned by the powerful undercurrent of political correctness that defines proper behavior in our relativistic society. The very word "evangelization" raises red flags. It smacks of smug, naive, totalitarian brainwashing, disrespectful of pluralism; it is perceived as an attempt against the freedom of conscience of others; it is thought incompatible with the university's dedication to the free search for truth: how can one search for what one already possesses? Yet, the fundamental definition of Church at Vatican II was its role as evangelizer, and the vocation of laymen has been repeatedly described as evangelizing their secular arena. This leaves little leeway for university professors to reject "evangelization" as a major role of a Catholic university.

Any real dialogue on curriculum must then begin with an effort to reclaim the true meaning of evangelization. And it eventually must lead to an examination of conscience: Do I shirk from the university's participation in "evangelization" out of fear of ridicule, of desire to be popular? Because it is so much less controversial to be searching? Because I am not sure of what I believe or love? Because I do not want any authority infringing on my freedom? All of which is ultimately not a matter for debate, but for choice.

We must not allow ourselves to forget that, even if "it is true crimes have been committed in the name of Truth ... equally grave crimes ... have been committed in the name of ethical relativism." (*Evangelium Vitae*, III, 70) The need to exclude religion from university teaching is a modern hang-up, not an intellectual evidence; in fact, it approaches intellectual scandal, as factual evidence is distorted or suppressed: for the 2,000 years of church presence in this world is a fact worthy of exploration, which shapes the present and opens interesting possibilities for the future.

The role of any university is transmission of traditions — accumulated factual information, methods of inquiry, models of insight. It calls for introducing new generations into the exciting human search for meaning, for self- and world-understanding and conquest. Isn't that precisely what "evangelization" implies, if one's tradition is Catholic? If judgment is what we hope to educate in our students, do we have a right, as witnesses called to the bar, to withhold fundamental information, essential documents, the bulk of "revelation," from the jury?

Evangelization is not manipulative brainwashing; it is transmission of information, 3,000 years worth of it, to which we are privy: texts, ancient and new; the historical record of a people, its failures and successes. This development shaped the world we live in. It is packed with useful lessons for us; proposes symbol patterns proven effective in the search for truth and joy. This information is being increasingly pressured out of the public awareness.

This is what the pope has in mind when he preaches, again and again, "Do not be ashamed of the Gospel"; "Be not afraid!" "Be urgent in season and out of season ... be unfailing in patience and in teaching." (EV, IV, 82) At times like ours, Christians cannot afford to sit on the sidelines. If they do, the chance is that they will soon have no place to sit at all, and few will regret it.

To rid ourselves of the ghetto mentality that fuels our shame and fears, we need only turn our eyes away from our navel and look outward: the world needs revelation so meaning re-enters life; it needs community, and we have one to offer. How can we resist its call?

At university, what specifically do our students need from us? That is the real question, not "Do we have the right to come out of the closet?" Can we communicate anything to them in the present state of general confusion, where consensus is rare, and either smorgasbord education or specialization reign? These are problems that professors all over America must raise, not just Catholics. And whenever they do, the public responds with interest. Alan Bloom a few years ago, and Neil Postman last year, produced best sellers on this topic. Why this success? Because, in response to our youth's desperate need for meaning, they dared to raise the possibility of an integrated curriculum, based on a universally valid philosophy of education. For Bloom, education means awakening that eros for Truth, which makes us human beings, by acquainting the new generation with the great philosophical classics of the tradition. For Postman, education means arousing pride in being human, and a sense of responsibility for humanity's future, by acquainting students with the history of human progress in all the disciplines. Both think students must be given a chance to become members of the human thinking-doing community, to participate in an age old and ongoing process, in which is founded every human person's dignity. And such is precisely the goal of "evangelization."

Every university must deal with Bloom's and Postman's problem: Students need an overarching vision of the nature of human existence, in order to develop a meaningful life project. How can we reawaken in them a thirst for truth; a sense of their responsibility to the human experiment?

When attempting to deal with this problem, Catholics have an advantage. We do not need to invent and sell an innovative educational project. We have already entered into one, which has been ongoing for millennia. We have a rich, complex revelation to transmit. It is a magnificent tool and lure in the search for truth. Paradoxically, this tradition of ours can probably be most effectively transmitted today by universities, which have access both to that traditional material and to extended blocks of students' time. It may be regrettable that other institutions — sleepy parishes, permissive high schools, broken families — have prepared them so badly for conscious Christian life. The fact, our burden and our chance, is that these religiously deprived young people are now our responsibility, and that we have what it takes to shoulder it.

We have an existing thinking community into which others can be introduced: the living church is the privileged linkage to the heart of mankind.

And the fundamental skills we need to transmit have been clearly defined for us: to know, love and serve the creator who made us all for this community of eternal joy.

It is easy to forget how "scholarly" such skills can be. We are far too ready to separate our needs as Christians from our needs as intellectuals.

1. Take "knowing God," for example. Universities exist to transmit information and to launch people in search of Truth; therefore, it is assumed, they should not "evangelize." But evangelizing is precisely transmitting factual information — the history of God's interaction with mankind. And it is par excellence introduction into the search for Truth. Revelation is not an answer, but a call, a challenge to "seek understanding." It points to a truth beyond all limits, intellectual as well as physical. Christianity, in fact, has developed one of the most sophisticated theories of truth in the history of philosophy, of humanity's love affair with wisdom. As Gregory of Nyssa points out, our Truth is paradoxically both given and withheld, the ground under our feet and an infinite ocean of potential knowledge, into which we immerse ever deeper, from beginning to beginning. Unlike post-enlightenment thinkers, we do not understand Truth as deconstruction of error and critical analysis, but as ever-deeper insight into and communion with reality. The God we love and seek is not the private projection of groups in need of community and hope, but the foundation of all reality, physical as well as spiritual, the ground and end of the whole universe. There is no private "Christian God." That would be an idol. Revelation is not cult initiation; it is graciously given privileged access to Truth, a mystery to meditate, an inexhaustible treasure to be shared.

2. Supposing we agree on this point — "Knowing God" is a proper topic for university teaching. What place, however, can "loving God" possibly have on a respectable, clear-headed campus? As Pascal pointed out, after Augustine, our heart, whether we like it or not, rules our intellect. "Imagination" with its lures has much to do with our decision to search for truth. Everyone knows this in practice, even university professors who have learned to package their courses to lure both students and funding into their research projects. Image rules the modern world, and all of us have learned to package ourselves since childhood. There has never been such an all-around manipulative attack on our imaginations, through what we call the "media." We must win our students' imagination back. The role of the Church is specifically "mediation," continuing Christ's role: We are meant to attract others to "taste and see" the goodness of our Lord. It is imperative that we reclaim this "mediating" role, for Christ is being forced out of the next generation's imagination. Our "truth" is becoming irrelevant, because it is not desired. There is an enormous deprogramming job to be done. Secular experts themselves are calling us to wake up to the danger our media behemoths represent, and to prepare our students for their onslaught.

Here again, as Catholics we should have an edge on the problem: we have a long mediatory history behind us; it is called Christian art, poetry, music and architecture. These aphrodisiacs, however, are often beyond the reach of North American students, because they are either physically or conceptually inaccessible. Universities are in an ideal position to re-educate young people into symbolic literacy, so that this Christian treasure can become their heritage. This is all

the more important, because it is a pre-condition to full enjoyment of and participation in the liturgy, which so many young people shun because it doesn't turn them on.

Our sacred symbols are exploited by the media idolatrously, to seduce and manipulate. They are used to induce viewers to live in "virtual reality." We must reclaim them for access to "the real world," where God and man meet; above all, for Eucharistic celebration, which is their fulfillment. Christian art is an introduction into the mystery of divine presencing through material reality. We call this sacramental presence. That expresses a unique insight, an insight into symbol that our world needs in order to escape the insulation of virtual reality, and learn again to live humanly: not abusing nature, communicating with mutual respect, and feeding from the transcendental reality that gives meaning to life. Our students have a right to this insight, the very heart of our heritage, and universities have the tools necessary to transmit it.

3. Agreement on the notion that the university should prepare young people to "serve" God is easier to reach; the impact of the "devaluation of values" is sufficiently bothersome in public life to make us all aware of the need to develop ethical parameters, in order to handle the numerous new interactive situations into which we are thrown by technological and sociological changes. An ideal place for interdepartmental exchanges, the university should be the perfect forum for dialogue among theology, philosophy, sociology, and the technical specializations that call for new guidelines as they break through new frontiers.

Catholics, moreover, have a long tradition of institutional organization, and have experimented with innumerable modes of "kingdom" building, from structuring and running the Church itself to the launching of ever-new attempts at "perfect communities" in its midst. Such experiments are going on today as ever, and make excellent objects of research, just as past experiments make useful models to help us think about the problem; moreover, they are challenges for ongoing "reformation." One cannot "reform" what one does not understand.

This is the kind of clarification of objectives needing consensus, before worrying about practical applications, as, for example: What would constitute a core curriculum? What would be its minimum content? Should it be required of all students? What percentage of the work should be allocated to which department? Etc.

As Catholic university professors, we have an agenda; indeed, handed on to us by Christ. And that agenda responds to our students' deepest needs. How can we meet them?

1. To live meaningfully, one must raise the question: What kind of a being am I? How do I fit in time-space? In world history? In America? In this university? What can or should I aim for in order to fulfill my potential? What is there to love out there? These are ultimately questions about God, the very questions raised by the classics of the tradition. Our students are most likely not raising them at all, but instead flying by the seat of their pants. They must be led to ask them, and they must be offered direction in answering them. This calls for potentially most stimulating cooperation between theology and philosophy, physics, biology, anthropology, the social sciences, art and literature: a true "university-level" project.

2. Our students have a right to be acquainted with their rightful cultural human heritage. They should be informed of the fact and content of divine revelation throughout world history; and they must acquire the necessary tools to interpret and exploit it to find life in God. This calls for courses on Scripture and its development (general ignorance of both is reaching abysmal proportions). But it also calls for introduction to liturgy, its meaning and history. Most of our Catholic students, scandalously, do not even understand the structure of the Mass. They must be given the necessary formation to participate meaningfully in the prayer life of the church. It is a primary mode of access to divine reality. "Lex orandi, lex credendi." This calls for a complete symbolic re-education. We need to make an all-out effort to waken our students to sacramental symbolism. Here again, theology needs the assistance of its arts, language, philosophy and social science colleagues.

3. If they are to make an informed choice on whether to join it or not, students need a balanced introduction to the Church as living fact; as historical, sociological community, which offers them membership. This is certainly as important as basic information on our political systems.

Christianity through the centuries has formed a motley people for Christ, and developed all kinds of institutions to hold it together. The successes of this incarnational process are an unailing source of faith, hope and love; they are also examples for practical action of one's own. Participation in this success is what we call the "communion of saints." It give us a chance to join an astonishingly variegated and passionate family. It proposes the most magnificent of jobs: making present what we re-present, as priests, prophets and kings.

But the Church's historical failures are by contrast grave sources of scandal, which undermine our students' faith and pride in the Gospel and in their ecclesial community. We must celebrate the successes; what one does not love, one loses. But we also must deal openly and compassionately with the failures. As the pope clearly points out in his "Third Millennium" apostolic letter, these failures cry for apology. We must make sure we are not repeating them. But we also must demythologize them, to take away their destructive fascination. Our students must not believe that Hitler considered himself a good Catholic; or that Galileo was tortured by the Inquisition because faith and reason can't ever mix; or that all evangelization is colonization.

Such situations were complex and they are paradigmatic. They originate in fundamental paradoxes about man's relationship to God, and raise fundamental problems we meet in real action every day. Only serious historical research can bring out what truly happened, why, and what lessons we can learn from it. The Church should not be slandered; this keeps young people from turning to her for guidance and life. But it should not be exonerated of its children's past errors. Crimes have been, still are being, committed in the name of Christ. This is blasphemous; it requires repentance, confession and reparation. What better place is there, for research oriented to these ends, than solid Catholic social sciences university departments, in dialogue with theology?

4. Our students need help integrating their Christian life with their "worldly" activities, which occupy 90 percent of their time. At most universities they learn instead to separate their scientific or business thinking from their faith claims. This is dangerously schizophrenic. Science departments, the medical school, sociology and psychology, the business school, can bring out

into the open the epistemological and ethical issues that students studiously avoid facing; they can help students integrate their decisions on these issues with their philosophical and theological stances, furthering society's ongoing search for "values" in the process. Does "proof" mean the same thing in science and in religion? What is the role of faith in science? Can one believe at once in creation and in random chance-driven evolution? Is physics turning into a kind of mysticism, in which spirit and matter are interchangeable? Is abandoning the economy to market forces compatible with Catholic social ethics? Is the "right to work" supported by the pope anything more than a pious dream? Are human beings fully conditioned, biologically, socially, psychologically? Such questions need to be faced and explored by us all.

5. If we are called to evangelize, so are our students. They need preparation to face this responsibility. To begin with, they must understand their dialogue partners — be able to empathize with the experience of contemporary atheism and with the main religious views held by their peers. Then only can they possibly be instrumental in orienting others toward a deeper, more viable relationship with our common Father. Reciprocally, then only will they grow themselves in love and learn from the encounter.

Catholic youth tend to be left in abysmal ignorance of the beliefs of others. Films like *Jesus of Montreal* may not be orthodox, but they provide insight into the desperate thirst for joy of those who lost the Church through scandal. We may not agree with Luther's stand on predestination, but this is no reason to remain in total darkness about the origin, development and tenets of the various Protestant denominations that surround us, pray with us, and work with us on healing injustice. Our students must learn to think with members of our sister churches about our differences and our common heritage; about our past sins toward one another and the necessity of reconciliation, if we are not to continue being a source of scandal to non-Christians. The pope's recent letter on preparation for the third millennium is an ardent call to work at establishing such foundations for ecumenical unity. Who is better placed to do this job than we, university educators, who can keep people in class long enough to explore the issues in some depth?

In an era when it is necessary to have a college education to repair automobiles, the notion that it does not take brains to be Catholic does not fly. Our society requires educated citizens; this education must include religious education, if our faith is to permeate our whole existence, physical, emotional and intellectual. God wants whole persons as partners, just as we do. Our religion is not a religion of the heart alone. We have the most impressive intellectual tradition to help us grow in understanding and find our way in daily action. Our students have a right to access it, but they cannot do it alone. We are their link to the warnings of Genesis, Jeremiah, John; to the organizational insights of Benedict and Jean Vanier; to the vision and praise of Dante and Annie Dillard; Christ images of catacomb artists and of Rouault; to the theology of Irenaeus and of Von Balthasar; to Eucharistic symbols and to the last rites of the church; to hierarchical structures that originated 2,000 years ago, and to unique mystical insights. We are their partners in the search for God's will and for our vocation, on the eve of a new millennium — an amazing job, and well worth the loss of professional face it probably involves.