

# Introduction

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John Paul II in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* speaks of centers of education as "privileged places of culture." This phrase aptly describes what I experienced at the University of St. Thomas during the first full week of August 1996. In response to a kind invitation from Professor Don Briel, Chairman of the Department of Theology, I found myself serving as the facilitator of a week-long seminar exploring the issues suggested by its title: "The Role of Faculty at a Catholic University." In accepting his invitation, I confessed to Professor Briel that I did not (and do not now) regard myself as having any particular authority for discourse on these matters. The best I could claim was to have thought long and hard (if not always well) about the mission of the American Catholic University as an observer and participant over a span of some forty years. Perhaps the witness of a survivor may be useful. For whatever reasons, those within the academic community at the University of St. Thomas with whom I worked seemed willing to overlook any limitations I may have as an "authority," and accorded me ample instances of a spirit of generosity and hospitality and vitality that I conclude must animate the entire institution. From the moment of my arrival to my departure I knew that I was in a privileged place.

One reason I raise this theme of authority at the outset is that I find "the issue of authority" to be a continually vexing one, reoccurring in a variety of forms in discussions about Catholic higher education. Just when one thinks we have put to rest the old chestnut about the name "Catholic university" being oxymoronic (because the terms, when linked, are said to cancel each other out), we find the charge surfacing in new and sophisticated forms. Witness, for example, the recent exchange between Stanley Fish and Richard John Neuhaus on "Why We Can/Can't Get Along," a spirited debate about whether dialogue is possible between the claims of reason and the claims of faith. The crux of their argument turns on a fundamental opposition apparent in their understanding of the kinds of authority accorded to either faith or reason, and from the differences in their starting points flow, predictably enough, radically divergent views about the nature of free inquiry in a faith-centered community.

The issue of authority is going to force its way into the foreground of any discussion about the role of faculty in a university, whether Catholic or otherwise, because the very title "faculty" brings with it an array of associations having to do with the exercise of power or authority. The term "faculty" denoted "power" or "capability" before it came to denote "a body of teachers in a particular college or university." The term first denoted something abstract, then something concrete and particular, albeit collective. The term now often implies a kind of dialectic between the one and the many (the individual faculty and the faculty comprising a college), between what one knows (mastery of a body of knowledge) and what one does (the transmission of that knowledge), between a power that is earned and a power that is conferred, between the active and passive senses

of power (as we may say that the faculty — in the collective sense of college — empowers the individual to teach, and the individual is thereby empowered). Somewhere in this complex of ideas are the old guild notions of "free association" and "self regulation." The essential authority for the faculty in the work of the faculty arises from the faculty itself.

The issues become more interesting and enriched when the discussion finds the faculty in the context of American Catholic higher education. Catholic institutions of higher learning in America do not exist in a vacuum, isolated from the dominant culture. The studies of Philip Gleason have shown how the institutions of Catholic higher learning in America have come to take on the shapes and forms and purposes of "mainstream" institutions. In *Contending With Modernity*, he cites innumerable instances of specific decisions in the history of American Catholic colleges or universities wherein the authoritative model guiding formative decisions was rarely "the Church" but nearly always the "mythos" of secular institutions of cultural prestige: the large public institutions and (increasingly non-sectarian) private ones. In a complementary study, *The Soul of the American University*, George Marsden has traced why and how it is that the "establishment schools," founded by specific faith communities with specific faith commitments, have moved from "Protestant establishment" to "established non-belief." Marsden has shown that the institutional movement from belief to non-belief has followed at every step an impetus from the dominant culture of secularism. American Catholic higher education has not been immured from these influences, nor can it be, nor should it be. We must acknowledge that much of the vitality of Catholic higher education in America is in direct response to the spirit of our dominant culture. But the studies of Gleason and Marsden give us ample admonitory warnings that we need to know how and when to shape our decisions within that culture, sometimes working with it and sometimes standing against it, to advance our own Christian calling which is to renew the face of the earth.

A great good fortune of Catholic higher education in America (as most of the essays compiled for this seminar attest) is that it can regard itself both as wholly American and as participating in something that is broader and deeper and older than only American. Catholic higher education, in other words, can think of itself as Catholic, and in doing so can turn to any number of concrete expressions of collective wisdom about what it means to be a Catholic college or university. The most lucid statement among the current sources for self-study must surely be *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, wherein I have found the most comprehensive and eloquent articulation of the spirit and purpose that inform Catholic higher education. And *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* places the heart of the work of the university in the work of the faculty: "By vocation the universitas magistrorum et scholarium is dedicated to research, to teaching and to the education of students who freely associate with their teachers in a common love of knowledge." (Section 1) This enterprise is essentially communal: indeed, all the essential activity of the university flows from "its formation of an authentic human community animated by the spirit of Christ. The source of its unity springs from a common dedication to the truth, a common vision of the dignity of the human person and ultimately the person and message of Christ, which gives the institution its distinctive character." This community, furthermore, "is animated

by a spirit of freedom and charity; it is characterized by mutual respect, sincere dialogue and protection of the rights of individuals." (Section 21) A Catholic university is marked, not by its exclusivity, but by its open inclusivity. A Catholic university, to be true to its mission, must be capacious, extending to all who participate in its life, whether Catholic or otherwise, an invitation to join in the search for a deeper understanding of the "meaning of truth, that fundamental value without which freedom, justice and human dignity are extinguished." (Section 4)

My reflections on *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* lead me to three points of emphases about the distinctive marks of a Catholic university that enrich the work of the faculty and are enriched by the work of the faculty. These points are informed and deepened in more ways than I can enumerate by the days of conversation with the faculty of St. Thomas and by the wisdom garnered in our readings:

1. a Catholic university is a place nourished by tradition
2. a Catholic university is a place of dialogue
3. a Catholic university is a place of celebration

On the first point: a Catholic university is a place nourished by tradition. One can hardly think about Catholic universities without some acknowledgment of the founding of the first universities – from out of the heart of the Church – more than seven hundred years ago, and of the tradition of cathedral and monastic schools for some seven hundred years before that. To hold the cumulative wisdom of the past in reverence is not to be held hostage by it, but is to be freed by the past the better to understand the present and create the future. Such was the endeavor of Aquinas in his readings of Augustine and the Fathers of the Church and the ancient philosophers. Josef Pieper puts the challenge this way: when investigating the question of human knowledge, Thomas placed himself "within the stream of traditional truth nourished by the past; without claiming to give a final solution, he leaves the way open for future quest and discovery as that stream flows onward toward the yet unknown." (84) So also must we. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* issues a call to the faculty of universities in their teaching and learning "to be expert in humanity." (7) That end requires a comprehensive embrace of tradition, the full record of all culture. John Paul II is writing in that tradition when he says: "A faith that places itself on the margin of what is human, of what is therefore culture, would be a faith unfaithful to the fullness of what the word of God manifests and reveals, a decapitated faith, worse still, a faith in the process of self-annihilation." (44) Those are strong words and strong reasons to uphold the tradition of Christian humanistic studies at the core of our curricula, but then, as *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* expresses it: "What is at stake is the very meaning of the human person." (7)

On the second point: a Catholic university is a place of dialogue. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is explicit on this matter: "a Catholic university enables the church to institute an incomparably fertile dialogue with people of every culture." (6) Dialogue, of course, can happen only within community. Dialogue is inter-personal: the participants must be of open disposition and be free from external constraints. Dialogue in a university occurs daily in and between and among all parts of the university: faculty, students,

administrators and staff. The kinds of dialogue that *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* calls for, and sees as well suited to the mission of Catholic universities, include the ongoing dialogue between faith and reason, between and among Christians and believers of other faiths, between Christians and non-believers. We expand this to include as well the dialogue that should occur between and among differing cultural and global perspectives, between East and West, between North and South, between and among different ages, and sexes and races. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* calls for dialogue between and among different academic disciplines, between sciences and humanities and social sciences, and especially between all the disciplines and theology, between the demands of liberal and professional education, between ethics and the applications of technology. At a Catholic university, dialogue among the faculty is a necessary manifestation and extension of their essential work of learning and teaching. What will distinguish dialogue at a Catholic university will be that what is begun in opposition or difference will, at some fundamental level of belief, be carried forward toward unity in the fullness of the revelation of the Word. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* affirms repeatedly that the search for an integration of knowledge is a mark of Catholic higher education. Moreover, this dialogue will flow over into service.

My final point: a Catholic university is a place for celebration. As a privileged place of culture, any university, but especially a Catholic university, is a place set apart, is indeed a sacred place. I borrow again the language of John Paul II, quoting *Gaudium et Spes*, the document from the 2nd Vatican Council aptly titled *Joy and Hope*. Pope John Paul here is stressing our goal as educators: "the human spirit must be cultivated in such a way that there results a growth in the ability to wonder, to understand, to contemplate." (Section 23) A Catholic University must create spaces and places for wonder and contemplation, for the nurturing of what Michael Himes has called "sacramental observers," and indeed we do that in the sacred places and times of communal liturgical celebrations. But wonder and contemplation are not exclusive nor restricted to these occasions. Everyone in the community, each in his or her own way, is invited to share in and to communicate the joy and the hope that undergirds our enterprise of teaching and learning, research and service. The gift that has been entrusted to the faculty of a Catholic university to transmit to their students is the gift of knowledge transfused with hope. St. Thomas, the illustrious patron of this university, well understood that the very act of knowing, the apprehension of the truth, is itself an act of praise.

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