

The Catholic University Project: What Kind of Curriculum Does It Require?

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The topic of this seminar is, of course, "The Curriculum in a Catholic University," or perhaps (to put it in question form), "What should the curriculum of a university, which calls itself Catholic, look like?" The implication in this question is that such a curriculum should have a special character, one that distinguishes it from the curriculum of any other kind of university. This implication seems correct to me, but to see it clearly one must first answer a series of other questions. Some of these questions were addressed in last summer's seminar, "The Idea of the Catholic University" (and so can be addressed perhaps with less depth here), while others are specific to the current topic. The questions, I think, are these:

1. What is a university? What is a Catholic university?
2. Given this definition, is it the task of a Catholic university to lead students to "think Catholically," to have a Catholic awareness in whatever profession they should enter? What would it mean to have a "Catholic awareness"?
3. If this is the project, is it then the task of each area of the university to promote this goal?
4. If this is the project, how important is the curriculum to this task? How do individual disciplines engage this project?
5. How does my discipline accomplish this task in the curriculum? What perspectives must the students investigate? What skills should they develop? What courses should be in place?
6. What is the role of a Catholic studies program in such a university?

Question 1

A university is, I think we would all agree, a locus of education, which means, literally, "leading out." It is a place where people lead one another (to use Plato's analogy) from the dark cave of ignorance into the light of knowledge. The great masters of this art — the scientists, the artists, the philosophers, all the great leaders out of this darkness — have some common characteristics. They hit upon something startling, something that fills them with wonder, something that makes them see the world they live in, and their own presence in it, in a new way. This wonder is not a "what if" kind of wonder ("What if we had eyes in the back of our heads?"), but rather that wonder at having stumbled across "what is." Filled with this new wonder and insight, they turn to anyone who will

listen and say, in effect, "Hey, come here! You have to see this!" They have glimpsed some facet of the truth, and newfound truth is hard to suppress.

What are the sine qua nons of the university? First of all, a university is its faculty. Although a university would likely be a poorly run affair without administrators and staff, it would still have the essence of a university without them. It is the faculty, therefore, that is the necessary and sufficient condition of a university (although not the sufficient condition for a well-run one); however, a collection of people, no matter how intelligent or degreed, is not a university until it has a specific project (typically specified by the board of trustees, protected by its administration, and carried out by the faculty), a goal to which the totality is committed. For the university, that project is the pursuit of truth in the many ways truth can be sought. A university is not just a collection of scientists, or historians, or musicians, but a collection of men and women who, in all sorts of different areas of existence, say to us, "You have to see this! Now, let's see what else we can find out."

What is a Catholic university? All of the above applies. After all, it is a university. But notice that the word "Catholic" modifies "university." It is a characteristic of this group of people, of this project. It does not modify the atmosphere, or a program, or the campus chapel, except insofar as these things are connected to this project. The great Catholic source of wonder, the truth that beckons us to "come and see," is the Truth itself, God made man, Jesus born of woman, Jesus crucified, Jesus raised from the dead and ascended to the Father, Jesus who left us His Church to guard and guide, so that we might not, like Pilate, wander in the darkness asking, "What is truth?" In the light of this revelation, how we view the world takes shape; we see how to live, and to die, as complete human beings. In the same way that the truths of science cannot be ignored by the artist, or those of psychology by the philosopher, without falsification of the whole university project, so the truth that Catholicism claims cannot simply be ignored by any member, or any discipline, of the university without falsification of the claim to be a Catholic university. (This does not mean that every member of the project has to accept Catholicism, but simply that each member cannot simply ignore it, or dismiss it, or attack it as a member of the project.) A Catholic university stands committed as an institution to the truths of Catholicism in faith and morals, as that is interpreted through the teaching authority of the Magisterium. This Catholicism must inform the entire academic life of the university, in the ways appropriate to the various disciplines.

Question 2

If this description of the nature of the Catholic university is accurate, other propositions follow necessarily from it. It would be quite peculiar for a faculty that has seen this particular source of wonder, the very Font of Truth, to put that source aside as somehow irrelevant. So it would seem a natural, logical outgrowth of the project of a Catholic university to show each student what it means to be affected by the truth, to show how this knowledge reverberates through one's entire life, one's outlook, one's approach to other human beings and the world. One would hope to see the student take on a certain habit of mind, to have at his or her disposal a tool for approaching life.

This seems to me to be such a natural outgrowth of the project that it would require some serious justification not to do it. We may, for instance, be afraid of scaring off potential incoming students; we may be afraid of a certain loss of academic prestige, due to a predominant world view that thinks Catholicism is a bad habit of the weak willed and simple minded, craving answers from some strangely frocked authoritarian leadership. But should we be afraid of how the world views us? Is not Catholicism supposed to be "a scandal" to those who are strictly "of the world"? Is it not a falsification of the project to put aside the central core truth because it is inconvenient? On the other hand, we may be afraid of offending non-Catholics, afraid of the charge of brainwashing rather than teaching, of improperly restricting academic freedom. We may simply be afraid of coming across as arrogant and intolerant. But the project of any university is not brainwashing; it is an invitation to "come and see." Catholicism has rational arguments; it can be rationally discussed. Let us converse; this is the heart of the university project.

Question 3

If it is the task of the Catholic university to bring a Catholic awareness, the "Catholic habit," to all its students, one must ask how this is to be accomplished? Is there something "in the air," a certain atmosphere, at a Catholic school, which our students can somehow inhale? Is it an extra-academic task for which, say, Campus Ministry is responsible? If it is an academic task, is it one that can be accomplished through one or two courses, or through the efforts of one or two departments? Does the Catholic university require some special program that the non-Catholic university could not have?

If a Catholic university has a "Catholic atmosphere," it is not the "atmosphere" that makes the place Catholic. The atmosphere of any university is an outgrowth of the particular project of that university. If the Catholic university has a "Catholic atmosphere" it is only due to the fact that the people involved in the project take that project, and the central truth involved, very seriously. Nor can any amount of atmosphere give students a clue as to its applicability in their particular disciplines or stations in life.

Similarly, an extra-academic function, such as Campus Ministry, is not the answer. A non-Catholic university can have a Campus Ministry. Nor can an extra-academic function bear the weight of this task, for it is not essentially concerned with "habits of mind"; this is the purview of academia.

Clearly, then, it is an academic task to encourage these habits of thinking in the student. And if our prior comments about the nature of the Catholic university project are correct, all academic departments of the university, all members of the faculty, would see it as their task to bring these habits of mind to their students; indeed, such a task would be joyously engaged by the entire faculty, for the members, in freely taking up the project, would hardly be able to contain themselves in their eagerness to show students "what they have seen." Even those who are non-Catholic, insofar as they have found the project valuable and have respectfully and freely adopted it, should be fully capable of pointing to the intersections between Catholicism and their own disciplines; indeed, they should

be eager to do so, to arouse in their students the recognition of the tensions between Catholic belief and the great diversity of ways to view the world.

Equally important, however, is the realization that one or two departments cannot bear the load of developing this habit of mind. For one thing, to have one or two "Catholic departments" would mean precisely that: there are Catholic departments, but not necessarily a Catholic university. More essential, however, is the disciplinary nature of learning. Each discipline has a peculiar habit of mind, and a peculiar set of questions, which other disciplines are not competent to address. Identifying the intersections between Catholicism and the particular discipline is, therefore, a task properly suited to the particular discipline. Theology or philosophy, for instance, do not have it within their power to point out how the Catholic faith informs, and is informed by, the study of history, or biology, or music. It is only the Catholically aware historian, or biologist, or musician — or the historically, biologically or musically aware Catholic — who can awaken that awareness in the student.

Still less is it possible to expect one or two courses to bear the weight of inculcating a Catholic habit of mind. Again, the logic of the terms is felt: one or two "Catholic courses" are just courses, not a university. Also, one is hard pressed in a single course to instill a mental habit of any sort. Majors must take a number of courses to develop the discipline of mind appropriate to the subject matter; expertise is only gained through more study, more observation, a constant immersion in the subject and its processes, in order to see how it applies to diverse areas and topics. Should we expect anything less to bring a Catholic habit of mind to our students?

We do not expect all of our students to agree with us. We do not teach with the purpose of driving from their minds all opposition to our viewpoints, or of filling their minds only with our own positions. This would be brainwashing, not the "leading out" that we espouse. But like the philosopher in Plato's cave, we should want our students, even those who disagree with us, to at least see what it is we see so that they may judge for themselves. The Catholic university project, it seems to me, is a desire to at least get each student to see what the Catholic sees, wherever he or she turns, in whatever career calling or vocation he or she adopts.

Question 4

How important is the curriculum to this task? It depends on what one means by this question. Does the project require a particular curriculum common to all Catholic universities? I would think not. There may, however, be certain vital areas wherein a "Catholic awareness" is of particular importance, in theology or philosophy, for example. Aside from this, one can form a "Catholically aware" student in just about any curriculum respectful of the Catholic university project.

How do we execute this project within the curriculum? I cannot answer this question for all disciplines — I do not have their disciplines, their habits of mind, and so I am not in a position to give anything but general ideas about them. I would think that a faculty

excitedly engaged in the project would be eager to look for intersections between each discipline and Catholicism. Clearly this task is easier in some fields than in others. The Catholic mathematician, it would seem, might have few opportunities, the Catholic philosopher many. Still, most fields have more opportunities than we might realize. The challenges to the faith by the findings of physics and chemistry come to mind — as does the challenge to the assumptions of the physical sciences by a Catholic world-view. Theories of the person driving many of the social sciences have their assumptions challenged by Catholicism. History, literature and art are full of stories about the Church, by the Church, and against the Church. How the Catholic needs to act in relation to business and economic affairs, education, and social work is a crucial aspect in the development of the career person.

Many of these intersections are best dealt with in moments — a brief aside, a single day. Some, however, cry out for development, and can act for teachers and students as a time of intense disciplinary and interdisciplinary activity. Courses dealing with these issues would be highly appropriate to give students time to see the Catholic habit of mind at work over a whole semester, and to attempt that same work themselves.

Question 5

Aside from theology, the clearest point of intersection between academic disciplines and Catholicism comes in the field of philosophy. As a philosopher, it is easiest for me to speak of what my own field can do in regard to a Catholic university curriculum.

As we have said, a university is committed to the pursuit of truth, in the many ways truth can be sought. Departments, specific disciplines, are committed to the pursuit of truth in certain areas, areas that are not properly analyzed by the methods and questions of other disciplines. Philosophy is no different. Using the data of all other disciplines, we seek more ultimate answers, answers to questions of ultimate meaning: the very possibility of the world, the place of human beings in that world, and the meaning of human life and human action. All these are sought from the starting point of experience and through the use of reason, not faith or revelation.

To that end, the philosophy student — especially the major — must be given the tools to be conversant in the myriad methods used to arrive at answers to these questions, and at the many answers given to those questions, in order that he or she may be able to make independent investigations into these questions of ultimate meaning, and (we hope) arrive at more satisfactory conclusions than previously accepted. In other words, the student is called to live "the examined life," and we must supply the means to make a meaningful examination.

All this would be true at any university.

A Catholic university, I have argued, is committed as an institution (though not necessarily all of us individually, except insofar as we freely commit ourselves to the project) not just to the search for truth in general, but in a special way to the truths of

Catholicism in faith and morals, as that is interpreted through the teaching authority of the Magisterium. The philosophy department in a Catholic university, as a fully integrated part of that project, is committed to what that entails; thus, it seems to me, it is incumbent upon us philosophers to make our students — especially our majors — conversant in the problems and questions proper to our discipline, which have been addressed by the Church, and the possible answers to those questions, especially those answers that have been embraced by the Magisterium (but from the starting point of experience, not revelation).

Such a commitment entails a department with at least a considerable knowledge of, and respect for, the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition as a particular access to truth. It entails more than a cursory transmission of the highlights of Aristotle's or Aquinas' thoughts or methods. It requires that we be committed to making all of our students at least aware of the power and importance — and limits — of this tradition. The Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition is the very philosophical language of Catholicism. An ability to have some idea of what the Church means exactly when it speaks of the soul, transubstantiation, the intrinsic dignity of the human person, or moral absolutes, is vital to the Catholic university project; further, it requires that we give our majors the opportunity to become conversant in the language of that tradition, able to bring that tradition to the questions of life and culture and apply it usefully. Such students would have the language and concepts for understanding what the Church teaches, for talking about these things to others, and defending their faith from the position of reason alone.

What kind of curriculum should we see from such a department? At the very least, each student in the university, in order to be conversant at all in the overall project of the university, would need to grapple with the questions of what it means to be a human being and how we ought to live (and in that order, for the second question cannot be answered without answering the first). These are the overall questions of philosophical anthropology and ethics. Each student begins here to encounter the complexity of the creature that is the human person, and the multitude of answers — including those compatible with Catholicism — to questions about body and soul, knowledge, freedom, and death, moving on in ethics to questions about happiness and how best to act in relation to it.

There are several other courses that would be important in such a department. Besides logic (which is a necessary component of any philosophy department, which must do its job based on reason alone), one would expect to find here a higher-level course working out the details of the language of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, i.e., a course in the philosophy of nature and metaphysics, dealing with such topics as substance and accident, form and matter. It gives to advanced students who wish to pursue it a whole different way of approaching reality, which most other systems deny. One should probably also find in such a department a course in the philosophy of religion, which discusses the power of philosophical proofs for God's existence, the nature of faith claims, and the problem of evil. Each of these courses would need to have an element of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition in conversation with other world-views.

There are many other courses necessary to make for a well-rounded philosophy minor or major. Because the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition is such an important one, it is a fairly easy task to place it in conversation with the other major philosophical traditions in just about any course being offered. It is equally easy to note the challenges to Catholic teaching, especially in matters of morality, encountered in these opposing philosophical views, and some plausible answers to those challenges.

Question 6

What role does a program in Catholic studies have in this kind of a university, which by logical consequence, it would seem, should have the kind of curriculum I have been describing? There is a danger inherent in a Catholic studies program, but also one overriding strength. The danger is that such a program could act as a convenient shunt for faculty members or departments who are discomfited by the idea of being part of the Catholic voice of the university. I imagine Star Trek's "Bones" McCoy, as a member of our faculty, snapping at his department chair Captain Kirk, "Dammit, Jim, I'm a doctor, not a Catholic." For a faculty uncomfortable with the Catholic project, the Catholic studies program would be an opportunity to place responsibility for the Catholic habit of mind on other shoulders. The danger is that the project of developing this habit of mind becomes marginalized. Unless every student is a Catholic studies major, too many students miss the chance to "come and see" what we claim to be offering; the habit of mind fails to be developed, the burden of its development placed on too few professors.

Let us not, however, assume this of the faculty. Let us assume instead that this faculty is committed to the project, excited at the prospect of offering students a look at the intersections between the wisdom of the Catholic faith and their own academic fields. Here is where we find the great promise of a Catholic studies program, a strength that overrides the potential danger.

It seems to me that, in a university dedicated to the project as I have described it, a Catholic studies program offers yet another opportunity, a spectacular opportunity, to focus the development of the Catholic habit of mind for those students and faculty wishing to do so. It is an opportunity, not simply to "come and see" what it is that excites the faculty and drives the project of the Catholic university; not only to become conversant about the intersection of Catholic faith with the academic exploration of human life and culture; but further to seek fluency, a degree of expertise, in this vision of the world. Disciplinary and interdisciplinary courses, developed by a faculty eager to explore these intersections, can be cross-listed with the Catholic studies program, giving the student great flexibility and expanding the faculty's invitation to partake in the project. Interdisciplinary courses are especially important in this regard, for they allow faculty members to become part of the project as learners. Faculty members, then, not only gain expertise in Catholic awareness, but also knowledge of other disciplines. By team teaching in an area outside their normal field, they also get a chance to learn how to think in that discipline. In other words, they model for students ways of learning, which is good for students and faculty.

Conclusion

These answers, I have argued, are the logically necessary outcomes of a claim to be a Catholic university, that is, of a commitment by the institution to the truth of what the Catholic Church teaches. I have witnessed the eagerness for this project in many of my colleagues. Lest some, however, find these outcomes frightening or threatening, I implore you: Look at your Catholic friends and colleagues. Do you trust them? In an era that calls us to celebrate diversity, can we not welcome the invitation to come and see the Truth which animates and guides them? Even should you not accept the conclusions the Church has argued for about the ultimate truth, we ask you to respect the intellectual and moral integrity of this 2,000-year-old project. Let us not, like Pilate, wash our hands of this invitation from the Truth that stands before us. Let us instead join hands and begin our work together. We have much to offer each other.