

# The "Catholicity" of the Faculty in the Catholic University

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As a member of the theology department, it is specially significant for me to reflect upon the role of the faculty in a Catholic university. First of all, it is pivotal that the "catholicity" of the University is by no means solely dependent upon its theology department, despite its unique contribution to the self-understanding and the mission of the Catholic university. Louis Dupré, a noted theologian, scholar, and expert on spirituality says this with great clarity:

Yet all too often religion itself is presented as adding one more value to all others, thus relativizing what ought to be an absolute ground of values. In functional terms this means that we treat religion as if it were one among many things that we ought to cultivate and learn about. But the 'object' of religion does not tolerate this kind of compartmentalization; it either includes all aspects of life or none at all. If God were only the particular subject of an academic discipline called 'religious studies' or 'theology,' he would not be God. Such a discipline is useful and, I think, in a Christian system of education, indispensable. But the transcendent presence in the educational process touches on all disciplines and above all, becomes the integrating factor of all moral education.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, it is vital to recognize that a Catholic community which does not function as a communal enterprise is neither "catholic" in the broad sense nor the narrow sense of the term. It can and must be a community, and one which considers outreach to the world it inhabits as fundamental to the nourishment of its very particularity. The search for truth is the central "catholic" principle, as stated again and again by John Paul II in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*:

It is the honor and responsibility of a Catholic university to consecrate itself without reserve to the cause of truth. This is its way of serving at one and the same time both the dignity of man and the good of the church . . . a Catholic university is distinguished by its free search for the whole truth about nature, man and God. The present age is in urgent need of this kind of disinterested service, namely of proclaiming the meaning of truth, that fundamental value without which freedom, justice and human dignity are extinguished. By means of a kind of universal humanism, a Catholic university is completely dedicated to the research of all aspects of truth in their essential connection with the supreme Truth, who is God.<sup>2</sup>

The meaning of "catholicity" as it is stated above, is one which includes both the dimension of universality (the broad sense of the term) and the dimension of particularity (the narrow sense of the term). The role of the faculty in a Catholic university hinges

upon both of these meanings. In recapturing that reaching out toward the world, to truth, to all human knowledge and existence, we are aided in our awareness of what a "Catholic university" should be and has been in the past. Faculty in such a setting are undeniably situated to make unique contributions to the search for knowledge and also to the advancement of higher education.

Such a definitive statement, strongly worded, is not merely an ideal. In the course of the evolution of the uniquely American idea of higher education and the definition of the "intellectual" within this tradition, Catholics have been left out of the equation.<sup>3</sup> But if one looks at the history of the university itself in western culture, we find it emerging precisely from Christian convictions. The original universities of medieval scholasticism were not a place where a set of merely propositional truths were imparted and memorized, but were modeled on the ancient arts of rhetoric, disputation, and the quest for an insight into the Truth itself. That they were equally convinced the truth would lead them unequivocally to the God revealed in Jesus Christ merely underlines their vibrant faith, which felt that challenge, thought, and tireless questioning were not a threat to their faith but rather a way in which to glorify God through human capacities to reason, to know, to create, and to search. Aquinas, on whom we rely now for an accurate picture of Catholicity, was himself a daring innovator in the thirteenth century: combining pagan philosophy only just rediscovered with Christian revelation to build his synthesis of Christian and human truth was an experiment which has resounded down through the ages as one well worth undertaking. Moreover, professors at medieval universities could lose their positions if not well prepared for challenges. A public disputation answered poorly by a professor not only affected his reputation but lost him his position!

The middle ages are not the only resource for understanding the significance to Catholic Christians of the search for truth. The early church believed that the presence of God showed itself everywhere, were we to look for it and actually see it for what it revealed. The deep sense of sacramentality which Catholics have prized since Christian origins and defended to present day plays a significant role in their conviction that the world and its mysteries unlock the truth, the greater Mystery for us. The integral role which sacramentality plays in the identity of all things "Catholic" and "catholic" results in the "communitarian" dimension of the Catholic faith and in its dedication to the inseparability of faith and reason in the quest for truth. Monica Hellwig asserts that it is precisely the adherence to a tradition known for its dedication to faith and reason that is the defining characteristic of Catholicism; she cites the disputes of the early Church as evidence that this is not a post-Tridentine, anti-Protestant stance but one which has been essential since the beginning to the community called Church.<sup>4</sup> Sacramentality should remain central to our Catholic identity, and not be restricted to ritual, theology, and the arts. Finding God in both reason and that which goes deeper and further than reason are traits which a Catholic university needs to esteem and to preserve.<sup>5</sup>

Where, you might ask, does the role of the faculty at a Catholic university enter into this rather esoteric and idealistic discussion? I suggest the following ideas as possible avenues for exploring the role of the faculty at Catholic universities today.

o The faculty of Catholic universities have a key role in preserving the link between faith and reason in all the disciplines that they represent. Not only must they remain sensitive to this link, but must model it for the rest of the university community, especially students. If the Pope is not afraid of the search for truth but embraces it, what do we have to fear? We have much to gain.

o Sacramentality does not limit itself to ritual, but enables the faculty of a Catholic university to have the proper respect and reverence for disciplines which are often thought to have "nothing to do" with religious faith: if all creation is sanctified by the presence of a creator God, then the sciences are not a separate realm of exploration. Moreover, sacramentality insists that we take the environment and forms of life into serious consideration when we consider the dilemmas of the present day.

o A faculty can be "catholic" with these above two commitments; but it also can be "Catholic" if it shares these commitments as fundamental to its identity and mission. Both assert that disciplines are connected, not compartmentalized, which underscores the Catholic value of communal identity; both assert that truth can lead only to that which is truth itself, which to the believer is God.

o In asserting that there is room for both faith and reason in every Catholic inquiry, the faculty at a Catholic university ironically have a responsibility to academic freedom which exceeds that of the secular schools. In refusing to allow open inquiry in the search for truth, a Catholic university and its constituent faculty members offend not only human dignity in denying questions rather than addressing them, but ultimately offer an insult to God. If, as Catholic faith attests, God is Truth, then a search for truth unfettered by restrictions cannot bring harm to God or to the faithful — providing, of course, that such a search is conducted responsibly, and not to sensationalize issues or present a different yet equally inflexible ideology.

o In claiming that faith and reason work in concert, a Catholic faculty may be part of a wider conversation about the nature of reality and the implications that this has for life. The uneasy division of Church and State, poorly understood by most Americans, could be looked at more impartially from a Catholic perspective which reflects the First Amendment claim that "no religion shall be established" and yet pursues the ideal that all may have freedom of expression religiously. We were not meant to exclude faith from discussion, but to keep it from tyrannizing others and preventing a free exchange of opinion. Catholic tradition upholds the notion of open debate and conversation, yet from a perspective of a solid faith commitment.

o Sacramentality insists that we take seriously all forms of data. We cannot limit ourselves to what the Enlightenment termed "reason" but must expand our horizons to include any and all forms of knowledge that can be gained from experience. This can liberate both a Catholic faculty and institution to become leaders in fields in which the limits of the Enlightenment project are already being felt. For example, medicine is finally rediscovering that it is the whole person that needs treatment: body, psyche, spirit. Catholics need to feel less reticent about what the "academy" will think of a more holistic

view of reason and knowledge. It was Dr. Herbert Benson at Harvard who broke through the medical barrier in writing his book *The Relaxation Response*, which draws upon the tradition of meditation and contemplation in religious traditions for its central ideas. The difference is that Benson "secularizes" these traditions so that they might be "acceptable" to the general public.

o It is the role of the faculty in a Catholic university to take fearless hold of the strengths of its own tradition, and to once again become innovators by the use of its own traditions and principles. For too long we have remained cowed by the inevitable fear that any Catholic scholarship will be regarded as suspect, ideological, and catechetical. Well, if this fear is a legitimate one — I personally think that it often is — then why not disregard it? If anything we contribute is deemed suspect, we might as well ignore those sitting in judgment and perhaps astonish them with significant insights.

o It is the role of the faculty in a Catholic university to respect the Catholic faith and its traditions, even if members of the faculty do not share it. From the point of view of the Catholic faculty, all human endeavor leads to the God they know; while this may seem triumphalist to faculty who are not Catholics, it is an invitation for them to be part of a community that Catholics do not see as limited by membership alone. Non-Catholics may provide the necessary corrective in a Catholic faculty by challenging easy assumptions or by introducing new ideas into the mix. They are also "catholic" in the sense that they are dedicated to the search for truth unreservedly and have chosen to do so in an institution which prizes communal life and investigation over the fragmentation of many secular institutions. Catholic faculty members must help to preserve the tradition of their faith and mode of intellectual inquiry while remaining open to the fact that non-Catholic members of the faculty who join a Catholic institution may well have a better insight into these traditions than Catholics who are fearful of losing their identity if those other than Catholic believers are part of the composition of the faculty. A non-Catholic who is dedicated to the ideals and mission of a Catholic institution is often a greater contributor to its identity than a "Catholic" in name only.

o Catholic faculty members must see more clearly that they are not alone in a struggle to understand their role in universities; they merely have a different set of perspectives and issues with which they begin. Protestant universities have largely been secularized or frightened away from their traditions;<sup>6</sup> secular institutions must cope with whether "truth" means anything at all, and if it does perhaps it is purely relative. Other traditions act out of a sense of ideological superiority and fear of that which they do not accept or know. I think of Carl Sagan's new book, *The Demon-Haunted World*, in this context. Sagan is as afraid of religious or intuitive forms of reason as fundamentalists are of empirical investigation. Perhaps the communal support of a Catholic faculty and its openness to learning what is novel which should result from an appreciation of the link between reason and faith and a deep and profound sense of the sacramental can provide members of the faculty with the assurance that while there is much to fear, it is not the questions we raise or the challenges of one another. Perhaps, as Margaret Steinfels suggests, we can help as a necessary corrective to the subjectivist trend in society today.<sup>7</sup>

In conclusion, I think that in considering the role of the faculty in a Catholic institution, the emphasis on conversation sums up many of the ideas presented in this reflection. Conversation implies that there is a mutual exchange of ideas, an openness to the quest for truth, a responsiveness to the singular contributions of each person in the search for meaning and truth. This is asserted in the Declaration on Religious Liberty from Vatican II:

The search for truth, however, must be carried out in a manner that is appropriate to the dignity of the human person and his social nature, namely, by free enquiry with the help of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue. It is by these means that men share with each other the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in such a way that they help one another in the search for truth. Moreover, it is by personal assent that men must adhere to the truth they have discovered.<sup>8</sup>

In our conversations, we need to respect the ideal of tolerance: not that all views are equal and ultimately do not matter, but the tolerance that is willing to hear out possibilities and weigh their contribution to our unending search for truth.<sup>9</sup> It is by exploration that we discover; by conversation that we explore the meaning of such discoveries; and by trusting "catholicity" in both senses of the word that we are enabled to advance in knowledge, search for truth, collaborate as colleagues, and honor our Catholic heritage. I close with one of the theses presented by Richard John Neuhaus for creating a Christian University:

If Christian truth does not illumine and undergird every quest for truth, it is questionable that Christianity is true. The God who gave us reason and keeps faith with the orders of creation calls us to respect the integrity of every way of knowing. Not every way of knowing must bear the label "Christian" — as in Christian chemistry, or Christian musicology, or Christian linguistics. In the Christian university, the word Christian is not a limiting label but the starting point, the end point, and the guiding inspiration all along the way. The words of Psalm 36 express the guiding inspiration of the Christian university: "In your light we see light."<sup>10</sup>

Where does theology fit into this picture? Theology is a discipline practiced by those who experience life in the light of faith, and who are honored with the charge to seek God and explain God's ways, and how they intersect with our ways. Theologians are not the "Catholic faculty" of the university as a whole; but their outlook must be "catholic" in order that they may responsibly make faith meaningful for life lived to its fullest, including an unwavering search for the truth.

## References

1. Louis Dupré, "On Being a Christian Teacher of Humanities," *The Christian Century*, 1992, p. 454. See also Peter Steinfels, "Catholic Identity: Emerging Consensus," *Origins* 25 (1995), p. 175.

2. Pope John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, #4. Page 267 in the version translated and published in *Origins*.
3. Josef Pieper, "The Intellectual and the Church," from *Josef Pieper: An Anthology* (1989).
4. See Monica Hellwig, "The Best of Times, the Worst of Times: Catholic Intellectual Life in Today's Academic Setting," *Conversations* (1995), pp. 17-18. See pp. 16-17 for the historical importance of faith and reason; p. 18 for the centrality of sacramentality. For agreement on the interpretation of Thomism, see also Josef Pieper, above.
5. *Ibid*, p. 18. For a fascinating discussion of sacramentality, see also Michael Himes, "Living Conversation: Higher Education in a Catholic Context," in *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, 8 (1995), pp. 21-27.
6. See George Marsden, "The Soul of the American University," *First Things* 9 (1991), pp. 34-47.
7. Margaret Steinfels, "The Catholic Intellectual Tradition: Colleges and Universities," *Origins* 25 (1995), p. 172.
8. Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Documents of Vatican 11*, p. 801.
9. For a stronger and longer exposition of this point, see Richard John Neuhaus, "Why We Can All Get Along" *First Things*, p. 31 especially.
10. Richard John Neuhaus, "The Christian University: Eleven Theses," *First Things*, 59 (1996), p. 21.