

Graduate Business Faculty in the Catholic University

by Ray MacKenzie
Graduate School of Business

Pope John Paul II gave an urgency to the issue of a Catholic university's identity with his 1990 apostolic constitution, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*; its opening sentence insists upon the closeness of university and church by saying that the Catholic university is "born from the heart of the church." It would be far easier, of course, to ignore this relationship and to continue with the school's ordinary enterprise, because the relationship between church and university is not easily defined or even perceived when we move into a specific field—like business. And it is tempting to dismiss the issue altogether with some superficially valid formulation such as "after all, there's no such thing as Catholic accounting." And apart from a tendency to cross oneself when approaching the bottom line, this is probably true. But there are Catholic accountants, and there are people who teach and study accounting at a Catholic university. Accounting, or any other business field, must somehow be brought into closer relationship with the school's Catholic identity. This is to be done not by redefining or tinkering with the subject (Catholicizing it), nor even solely by an emphasis on the ethics involved in the subject (though this is important), but by the particular intellectual qualities of the faculty involved.

The question then becomes, what sort of faculty should a Catholic university be seeking and developing for its graduate business education programs? Should this faculty be any different than those in comparable programs in any other sort of university? Should we be looking for anything other than the usual criteria—competence in the individual's field, solid teaching skills, and an appropriate level of commitment to consulting, research, and publication? Those criteria are obviously of great importance, but if a university is to call itself Catholic there are some other traits that its faculty should have as well, traits that, in turn, the university community and atmosphere should value, nurture, and enhance.

First, the one quality we should not be looking for is religious uniformity. A Catholic university as described in *Ex Corde* is not a university staffed exclusively by Catholics; therefore, there is no question of applying a religious litmus test to the faculty, of retaining those who pass and firing those who do not. The faculty need not be card-carrying Catholics, but they should be Catholic in another sense, a sense suggested by the word's root meaning. Father Walter J. Ong points up this meaning when he notes that in ordinary speech we often confuse the issue by saying that Catholic and universal are synonyms: but they are not. Ong contrasts the original meanings of the words *universalis* and *katholikos* to make the point: the etymology of *universalis*, he says,

suggests using a compass to make a circle around a central point. It is an inclusive concept in the sense that the circle includes everything within it. But by the same token it also excludes everything outside it. *Universalis* contains a subtle note of negativity.

Katholikos does not. It is more unequivocally positive. It means simply "through-the-whole" or "throughout-the-whole" ¹

Father Ong's point here is that the Catholic mind, like the Catholic institution of higher learning, is one that strives for inclusivity, for a permeation of the whole, for connection and relationship between and among cultures, races, ideas, fields of study. And this is the sort of striving we should be seeking and encouraging in our faculty as well.

The faculty of a Catholic university ought to be of an interdisciplinary frame of mind. This applies to all faculty, but my emphasis here is on business professors, who in this regard are probably not much better or worse than their colleagues in other fields. The faculty of a Catholic university should be people who are willing, even driven, to go beyond the boundaries of their particular disciplines, to find where the connections are, and where the gaps are. The institution must encourage them to do this, to enhance and enlarge their understanding of their field by exploring its place in history, the philosophical problems underlying it, the manner in which it is reflected in the arts. An eagerness on the part of the faculty to carry out this exploration is especially needed today, when all professions, and especially those within business, are increasingly narrowing their scope and growing more specialized, more compartmentalized. This narrowing process is by no means simply a characteristic of university life; it both mirrors and helps create our increasingly fragmented society. And it contributes – insidiously, because it does so quietly, and with the full authority of most institutions and professional associations – to a far-reaching dehumanization that characterizes our contemporary culture.

William F. May has traced one important aspect of our modern dilemma in the changing attitudes toward what it means to have a profession or be a professional.² May notes that the word formerly implied that a professional had a commitment to the good of the public he or she served. But today, a professional is better described as a careerist, committed only to maintaining the technical expertise of the field and to maximizing his or her own self-interest. The historical development of this trend is complex, going back at least to the eighteenth-century theoretical developments (in Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith, for instance) that accompanied the rise of capitalism. But whatever its history, the trend has accelerated recently: today, the sheer survival of the professional in an age of re-engineering and downsizing is an ever-present issue. It has become almost a cliché to say that today one's loyalty is not to the organization, which will probably change dramatically and continuously, but instead to one's profession—to developing and strengthening one's grasp of the cutting-edge tools and skills that will ensure one can safely land somewhere else when the organization hiccups, as it inevitably will. This state of affairs only deepens the problem May outlines: where is the place for public commitment when simply maintaining a job is a constant concern?

So as the old conception of professionalism contracts into careerism, and as professional expertise becomes increasingly specialized and always more technical, the individual's connection with the larger community fades and dims. And when this occurs within a society already bleeding from racial and ethnic divisions, the problem is dramatically

compounded. A university—and especially a Catholic university—ought to be a place where the individual can go to begin to build some of the intellectual and social connections missing in so much of modern life. A university founded on the *katholikos* principle is one dedicated to searching out and building up intellectual, cultural, and spiritual wholeness. Technical expertise is indeed a part of the picture, but if we only minister to the student's need for expertise, we are engaged in training, not education. Skills and techniques are expressions of the whole person, but they are not the person; and they can do little enough toward healing the spiritual and social wounds of our day.

There are of course strong and compelling reasons to emphasize skill and technique. Students want it, for one thing. One of the most enthusiastic students I've recently encountered proclaimed on the course evaluation that the best thing about the course was that "you can take what you learn in the class at night and apply it at work the very next day." Now that sort of praise is fine, obviously, but less obvious is the implication that if the subject matter cannot be applied the next day, there is something wrong with it. And beyond the pressure students bring with them, the doctoral training of most faculty members will have also insisted on the centrality of technique, and on a narrow specialization. And even more broadly, the culture itself, especially contemporary intellectual culture, demands this same emphasis; our journals and associations look with suspicion on a scholar who combines disciplines or attempts to reach a wider audience. To write and speak so that we are read and heard by people beyond those of our own specialization is—well, unprofessional. Alasdair MacIntyre sees this narrowing, this movement from substance to technique, as essentially a twentieth-century phenomenon:

The success of the natural sciences has conferred prestige upon technique as such, and outside the natural sciences agreement on technique has often been allowed to substitute for agreement on matters of substance. In both the humanities and the social sciences what can be reduced to technique and procedures and to results stemming from technique and procedure has enjoyed its own kind of status . . . So the values both of genuine technical expertise and of its simulacra have been accorded a central place.³

To be a professional, then, is to be master of a set of skills, of technique, in isolation from the larger community. This is reflected in modern professional associations, where the key term often used is portability—the development of sets of skills that can be transferred from one company to another. Obviously, developing such portable skills is very much in the individual's self-interest and to that extent a very good idea, but when emphasis is solely put on professional survival, there is little time left for the development of the whole person, let alone that person's wider obligations to the community. To be a teacher in a technique-based, skill-based professional world is, all too often, to be a purveyor of such skills at the expense of any concern with the development of the student as a whole person or as member of a larger community. But to be a teacher at a Catholic university ought to be to recognize these pressures for what they are and to resist them. A professor at a Catholic university ought at least to be able to raise these issues with students, and to give these issues the centrality they deserve.

The teaching of ethics in a school of business is naturally essential, and most business schools—by no means just the Catholic ones—have moved to do this following the series of business-related scandals and disasters we have witnessed over the last few decades. But here too a set of pressures comes into play, for what the business world (which, after all, mirrors the culture at large) wants is not ethical inquiry, but a set of codes, of processes for solving ethical problems: ethics must be, in MacIntyre's phrase, reduced to one of the simulacra of the natural sciences. But genuine ethical inquiry reveals—if one's experience has not already revealed it vividly enough—that human nature and behavior cannot be reduced to a set of processes handily managed by the right skills or the right code. This truth is fundamental, and to the extent business ethics courses make it plain, just so far they can become the true cornerstone of real business education. A Catholic university is an ideal ground for such considerations and such courses (indeed, a secular school can be so wholly dedicated to the skill-based ideal that such considerations would be easily invalidated and crushed by the weight of the whole institution).

A faculty that is truly interdisciplinary will be one that can bring into the classroom the fresh air that exists outside the narrow room of technical expertise. And the result will be an educational enterprise that moves students toward a fuller understanding of the question of what it is to be human, a question that involves a huge subset of more particularized questions that are insufficiently addressed elsewhere: what is it to be a business person, in America, in the closing years of the twentieth century? What are our responsibilities? What might help the situation, and what might make it worse? What are the tensions between the acquisition of wealth and the demands of the community? How can the teachings of the Church, with its long distinguished history of ethical inquiry, help in illuminating and in guiding the everyday life of the business person? None of these questions in any way precludes the development of the necessary expertise—what it takes to be a competent accountant or writer or operations manager—but insisting upon such questions will enfold that expertise within a profound intellectual and spiritual context for the student, a context almost completely ignored elsewhere. A Catholic university, with a faculty dedicated to interdisciplinary inquiry, can help move students from skill to substance, from technique to fuller participation in their own humanity, and to a clearer and healthier relationship with the human community.

Trying to teach and learn along these lines is complex and difficult, and success is not assured. Asking faculty and students to explore new and foreign areas is fraught with problems, messy and—the worst term of all in a business context—unmanageable. And it can only work when the institution as a whole is dedicated to the enterprise, when truly interdisciplinary work is rewarded with tenure, promotions, sabbaticals. Curriculum development must take interdisciplinarity as its goal, and bureaucratic problems such as who pays professor X when she teaches a course outside her department must be managed so as to make the cross-disciplinary assignment as easy as possible. We have long paid lip service to the value of the interdisciplinary, but if we took it with full seriousness we would soon find a dramatic transformation at work.

Again, this enterprise would not be an easy one. Both we and our students would have to confront the complexities it presents, and give up the easy certainties of the narrow, skill-

based model. Probably one of the first things to change would be our terminology, both in the university and in the business world. For example, we would have to return to thinking of employees as people rather than 'human resources'. (When a layoff was threatened at a local software company, one of the programmers sardonically said the company was calculating how many 'carbon-based coding units' it would need.) We would have to confront the web of connections between business and community, between community and world at large, with no guarantee we could organize and codify the connections and predict outcomes of all our business decisions. It would be easier not to do any of this—for that is the greatest allure of the technical-expertise model, that it promises to make things easier. But its allure is false, as a glance at our current social and cultural condition will demonstrate. The opposing model is that of the Catholic university, an institution which, as John Paul has said, "assists in the protection and advancement of human dignity."⁴ The opportunities for conducting business education within such an institution are remarkably rich and diverse, and they require a faculty who can appreciate them, a faculty willing to range far more broadly than they would be able to in any other sort of school.

References

1. Walter J. Ong, S. J., "Yeast: A Parable for Catholic Higher Education," *America*, April 7, 1990, p. 347.
2. William F. May, "The Beleaguered Rulers: The Public Obligation of the Professional," *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 25-41.
3. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 225.
4. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Article I, subsection 1.