

Catholic Studies Programs In the Contemporary Catholic University

by Don J. Briel
Department of Theology

In our own day there is considerable hesitation about the search for unity of any kind, but there is, even in Catholic circles, a particularly well-established distaste for what once appeared to be an unassailable scholastic synthesis of faith and reason in which all disciplines of a Catholic university might have been seen to have a proper place and role. Even if we acknowledge that such a system was neither so monolithic nor all pervasive as contemporary critics would sometimes suggest, it is clear nonetheless that there is little desire for such an ambitious, some would argue naive, reconstruction of that older system in our own time. Still, it is, I think, widely held that one of the principal characteristics of a Catholic university has been its concern for wholeness, the daring conviction that all truths are capable of resolution in the one truth, the Word, however lambent and diverse its historical and cultural expressions. This remarkable confidence, revealed certainly in early Christianity in all of its intellectual and religious tensions but institutionalized in unique ways in the medieval universities, has shaped all subsequent developments in Catholic thought on education. The relatively late erosion of this confidence has been discussed from a variety of perspectives in recent years and it is not now my concern to consider the sources of this loss but rather some of its contemporary implications for the curriculum of a Catholic university.

On the one hand the presuppositions that faith and reason are not mutually exclusive and that there is an essential unity of truth remain fundamental principles for Catholic thought in general, but a growing awareness of the historical complexity of these relations has provoked a new sense of humility before them and a hesitation to attempt a thorough synthesis of their often competing claims. Many would argue that this humility is an inevitable result of a more thorough historical critical scholarship; others would caution that the new attention to historical "facts" cannot dispense with traditions of interpretation that presuppose unified theories.

In any case the supposition that the claims of faith and reason need to be distinguished does not necessarily suggest that they can be adequately engaged in isolation. In a sermon preached at the University Church, Dublin, in 1856, Newman argued that it was the function of the Catholic university to "reunite things which were in the beginning joined together by God, and have been put asunder by man." He was aware that some would argue that such an attempt would "stunt the growth of the intellect by ecclesiastical supervision." But he claimed to have had no such thought in mind.

Nor have I any thought of a compromise, as if religion must give up something, and science something. I wish the intellect to range with the utmost freedom, and religion to enjoy an equal freedom; but what I am stipulating for is, that they should be found in one and the same place, and exemplified in the same persons. I want to destroy the diversity

of centers, which puts every thing into confusion by creating a contrariety of influence. I wish the same spots and the same individuals to be at once oracles of philosophy and shrines of devotion. It will not satisfy me, what satisfies so many, to have two independent systems, intellectual and religious, going at once side by side, by a sort of division of labor, and only accidentally brought together. ... Devotion is not a sort of finish given to the sciences; nor is science a sort of feather in the cap, if I may so express myself an ornament and set off to devotion. I want the intellectual layman to be religious, and the devout ecclesiastic to be intellectual.

– "Intellect, the Instrument of Religious Training"

Sermons Preached on Various Occasions

We are today clearly more conscious than ever of this precariousness of Newman's assertion of the interdependence of faith and reason and it is perhaps fair to say that what is new in the way in which issues of "identity" and curriculum are discussed is that both are now described as problems to be addressed or tasks yet to be achieved rather than accomplished facts.

Philip Gleason has argued that, at least in the American context, this problematic character was in large measure the result of a twofold process of Catholic acculturation into the mainstream assumptions of American society, the first social and the second academic, which became evident at least by the 1960s when "social scientists began to publicize the finding that Catholics had experienced dramatic upward mobility and by then surpassed their Protestant fellow citizens in most aspects of status." (Philip Gleason, "What Made Catholic Identity a Problem?"; *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University*, ed. Theodore M. Hesburgh, 1994, 93). One obvious consequence of these acculturations was the gradual loss of a sense of Catholic distinctiveness (or more practically, the loss of a "ghetto mentality") and a growing willingness to accept the general social and academic standards of American culture as normative. Also contributing to the problematic character of the identity and curriculum of Catholic higher education was the increasing specialization of academic disciplines, the diversity of religious belief and commitment among faculty, students and staff, the challenges of new schools of thought and a variety of expressions of American individualism. Each of these issues deserves its own treatment; however, my principal concern remains their curricular implications.

An essential resource for recent reflections on Catholic identity continues to be John Paul II's *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* not only because of its source but also because of its broad philosophical and humanistic presuppositions. In this apostolic constitution, John Paul II rejects the tendency to insularism described by John Tracy Ellis and others in the 1950s but insists again that the Catholic university "has to be a 'living union' of individual organisms dedicated to the search for truth. ... It is necessary to work toward a higher synthesis of knowledge, in which alone lies the possibility of satisfying that thirst for truth which is profoundly inscribed in the heart of the human person." (*Ex Corde*

Ecclesiae, 1990, n. 16). In reaffirming this emphasis, the pope describes four essential characteristics of the Catholic university:

1. a Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the university community as such;
2. a continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research;
3. fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church; and
4. an institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life. (n. 13)

The first of these characteristics suggests that it is not sufficient that individual faculty, courses or disciplines be animated by and reflect a Christian inspiration but that the university's academic life and teaching as a whole should reflect such an inspiration. This does not necessarily suggest that all courses or faculty should do so equally directly. The pope, several times, insists that non-Catholic faculty, indeed nonbelievers, have a vital role to play in the university's search for truth, and that specific disciplines have their own appropriate methodologies and presuppositions in the pursuit of the one truth. It would suggest, however, that the burden of institutional identity cannot be fulfilled simply in the areas of one or two disciplines but must penetrate in various ways all of the disciplines and academic programs of the university.

The second characteristic is a concrete expression of the pope's earlier insistence that "a Catholic university's privileged task is 'to unite existentially by intellectual effort two orders of reality that too frequently tend to be placed in opposition as though they were antithetical: the search for truth, and the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth.'" (n. 1) Here the pope argues in the name of a universal humanism that "the Catholic university is completely dedicated to the research of all aspects of truth in their essential connection with the supreme truth, who is God." (n. 4) And so, the two-fold commitments of faith and reason find expression in an optimism that there can be no final contradiction of truths, although as Newman has cautioned, this confidence does not free us from real collisions and tensions that frequently deserve the metaphor of warfare.

This characteristic suggests that the curriculum should secure sustained opportunities to reflect upon human knowledge in the light of Catholic faith, but this has two distinct, if potentially complementary, elements. On the one hand, the curriculum should reflect the pursuit of truth in all of its aspects and in terms of the specific disciplines; at the same time, such knowledge must be critically reflected upon in the light of the Catholic intellectual and faith tradition. This would not necessarily suggest that all courses in any discipline reflect both of these elements in their fullness, but that the university as a whole must commit itself, within the curriculum and within its larger research activities, to a sustained reflection of this kind on all aspects of human knowledge. This does seem to me to have both hiring and curricular implications.

The third characteristic suggests that, at the least, the curriculum ought to guarantee access to the Christian message as articulated by the Church. This necessarily opens the possibility of a wide variety of interpretations of what we mean by Church. It would certainly include the range of historical expressions of Christian life and thought, both in individuals and communities, including contemporary illustrations, but it would necessarily include, though not be limited to, the formal magisterial teaching of the Church.

The final characteristic emphasizes the necessary prophetic role of the Catholic university within the Church requiring, as the pope said, "the courage to speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion, but which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society." (n. 32) Here I am reminded of two consistent temptations of the Catholic university: sectarianism and secularism. The first arises out of a legitimate attempt to safeguard the university's essential distinctiveness but in overemphasizing that unique character, reduces it to a defensive isolationism, refusing the complex but necessary dialectic of faith and culture in the pursuit of universal truth. The second is secularism, in which the Catholic university in its affirmation of the good of contemporary cultural expressions of truth, loses its distinctive tradition, which might, in a critical engagement with cultures, disclose a hidden wholeness of truth.

John Paul II argues that, "In the light of these four characteristics, it is evident that besides the teaching, research and services common to all universities, a Catholic university, by institutional commitment, brings to its task the inspiration and light of the Christian message. In a Catholic university, therefore, Catholic ideals, attitudes and principles penetrate and inform university activities in accordance with the proper nature and autonomy of these activities. In a word, being both a university and Catholic, it must be both a community of scholars representing various branches of human knowledge and an academic institution in which Catholicism is vitally present and operative." (n. 14)

It is clear, I think, that these four characteristics and the pope's later description of four principles of research (a. the search for an integration of knowledge; b. a dialogue between faith and reason; c. an ethical concern; and d. a theological perspective) in a Catholic university have curricular consequences. (n. 15) They presuppose an integrity of truth, expressed in a broad dialectic of faith and culture, that does not preclude an often jealous tension of disciplinary perspectives and claims, but rather, in larger measure, depends upon them. In fact, John Paul II clearly agrees with Newman's understanding of the unity in tension that ought to characterize any university. In *The Idea of a University*, Newman argued forcefully for the presence of a strong department of theology in the university, not merely to secure the presence of a sustained critical examination of the principles and role of faith but also to maintain the "wholeness" of vision on which truth ultimately depends; nonetheless, no single discipline, however central, is sufficient to sustain this broad search for intellectual wholeness. In recent years, a number of Catholic universities have developed programs in Catholic Studies, designed to provide opportunities for both students and faculty to engage in sustained interdisciplinary conversations within a wide expression of the Catholic intellectual tradition. Such programs have been developed not merely to articulate the broad claims of that tradition

but also to serve as catalysts on campus for the intellectual dialogue of faith and reason. Some have argued that the development of such programs constitutes an open acknowledgement of the failure of the Catholicity of sponsoring institutions. On the other hand, one might well argue that the increased pluralism of contemporary culture provides both new opportunities and challenges in the search for universality that has been a chief feature of Catholic higher education and certainly opens the possibility for rich and vital conversations in pursuing it. The greater risk is perhaps that of a new secular sectarianism in which various religious, political and ethnic groups retreat into autonomous positions of mutual distrust and suspicion under the cloak of mutual tolerance.

David O'Brien recently argued for the development of Catholic Studies programs not as a refuge for a Catholic remnant but rather as the base for a vital presence of the Catholic intellectual tradition that has implications for all of contemporary thought. "We need," he said, "to develop Catholic Studies programs to provide the institutional base and support for Catholic scholarship and teaching. Support for Catholic intellectual life in Catholic colleges and universities is an institutional responsibility, shared by everyone, and not a matter for the sponsoring religious community, the theology department and campus ministry." (David J. O'Brien, "Conversations on Jesuit (and Catholic?) Higher Education," *Conversations*, Number 4, fall 1994, 9.) In addition, O'Brien argued that Catholic universities need to ensure that there is a vital Catholic scholarship on our campuses both to sustain and extend the integrity of the intellectual life of the university. To that end he proposed the creation of an institute for advanced study that would promote a genuine and critical Catholic scholarship. "Such a center might awaken interest in Catholic ideas among American academics. It might catch the attention of Catholic scholars now not very interested in religion. After all, no university can honestly claim Catholic identity unless a critical mass of the faculty is intellectually committed to Catholicism. But intellectually committed Catholic scholars will not automatically emerge from secular graduate schools; they need to be identified, recruited and supported. Most of all they need to be invited to share in a sustained dialogue on issues that matter. Such a center, or some comparable project, might initiate that dialogue." (O'Brien, 10) St. Thomas is committed to raising funds in the upcoming capital campaign to support a Center for Catholic Studies designed to support exactly that kind of sustained dialogue which might enhance and encourage a critical reflection in pursuit of the whole truth about nature, the human person and God.

It is worth noting that St. Thomas' Catholic Studies program was among the first in the country and has been described as a model for a variety of subsequent programs in Catholic colleges and universities across the country, including Santa Clara, Loyola (Baltimore), St. Louis University, Marquette and Loyola (Chicago). Our own recent review of the general curriculum included a strong emphasis on the role of faith and the Catholic tradition. To have sustained that presence is itself a genuine achievement, but the task of integration in a broad interdisciplinary dialogue is one that continues to challenge us. We will need to continue to develop new forums and structures that will allow us to fulfill the mission of the Catholic university, a task perhaps never more essential than in our own time when as John Paul II points out "... the dialogue of the

Church with the cultures of our times is that vital area where ‘the future of the Church and of the world is being played out as we conclude the 20th century.’