

Continuous Renewal

by John R. Buri
Department of Psychology

Let me begin by explicitly stating that participation in the 1995 summer seminar on "The Curriculum and the Catholic University" was personally invigorating. At a time when Catholic higher education runs the risk of setting itself adrift from its religious heritage (as have numerous Protestant universities — for example, Northwestern, Syracuse, Duke, Vanderbilt, the University of Southern California, Boston University),¹ it is good to see us at St. Thomas wrestling unambiguously with issues of our Catholic identity. At a time in our personal UST history when we could relegate "Catholic" to the status of an adjectival window-dressing in a tight consumer educational market, it is encouraging to encounter a growing number of colleagues (Catholic and non-Catholic alike) who envision more for St. Thomas than a vestigial connection to our Catholic roots.

As stated by Pope John Paul II in his apostolic constitution on Catholic universities, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, "Catholic universities are called to a continuous renewal, both as 'universities' and as 'Catholic.'"² Within this context, we were encouraged during this seminar to look seriously at ourselves here at St. Thomas, both as a university and as Catholic. Without such moments of unabashed self-reflectiveness, we are in danger of becoming Catholic only in the chapel or only in campus ministry or only in the social concerns we selectively voice. Throughout this summer-seminar time of self-scrutiny, there was among the participants a respect for the delicate fabric of the tapestry that comprises our Catholic identity at St. Thomas. There were no attempts to settle upon answers, to push particular agendas, or to revolutionize the status quo. But at the same time there was present in many of the discussions the sentiment that our Catholic nature needs to be woven more ostensibly throughout our university.

Quite honestly, the thought of such a thing is daunting. Against a cultural backdrop that routinely trivializes religion,³ to intentionally elevate one's Catholic identity seems a threatening prospect. Against the cry of cultural soothsayers who are announcing that religion is gradually being "reduced to a belief accepted only by a minority composed largely of the least educated and least intelligent members of society,"⁴ to proclaim more perspicuous allegiance to one's Judeo-Christian roots seems tantamount to undermining one's credibility as an institution of higher learning. Wouldn't it be so much easier (and safer) to simply blend in with the broader 20th-century intellectual culture? But I am immediately reminded of Soren Kierkegaard's lament for Denmark:

When one sees what it is to be a Christian in Denmark, how could it occur to anyone that this is what Jesus Christ talks about: cross and agony and suffering, crucifying the flesh, suffering for the doctrine, being salt, being sacrificed, etc.? No ... in Denmark, Christianity marches to a different melody, to the tune of "Merrily we roll along, roll along, roll along"⁵

No, the solution to the inherent tension of being a Catholic university in the modern world cannot be a peaceful resignation, a capitulation, to the dominant cultural motifs of our age.

A View of Catholic Education

At some basic level, an essential element to any true educational endeavor (as opposed to training program) is the dislodging of personal complacency. There is a need in education to crack the veneer of "my world view encompasses reality," helping students to broaden their horizons, to stretch their visions, to deepen their insights, to cultivate a sense of "the whole" beyond each individual's narrow view of reality. Education should be such a liberating experience.

But a Catholic education should not stop here. Within a Catholic context, educators are not simply about the task of setting students free from their narrow prejudices and small mind-sets out onto the boundless ocean of perspectives. We are not simply reclining together each day at the smorgasbord of ideas where all entrees are of equal substance and merit. Rather, we are participants in a conversation, a conversation that has been going on for thousands of years, a conversation from which springs meaning and life, a conversation through which we have hoped "to drag ourselves out of the primeval slime by searching for truth and moral absolutes."⁶ Neil Postman has argued that "modern secular education is failing ... because it has no moral, social, or intellectual center."⁷ This should come as little surprise to anyone — as a 20th-century Western culture we have decidedly removed ourselves from this conversation, arguing (often vehemently) that there is no center, that truth is a fabrication, that morality is relative. Why should we then be surprised when our educational system teaches otherwise or when we live in a country whose citizens all too often act otherwise?

But within a Catholic context, we are not without a center. We do not participate in this age-old conversation as an archer who has no target. We do not participate in this search for truth without direction, without focus, without a destination toward which we adjust our aim. But rather, we come to the conversation bolstered by "the Catholic conception of the unity of truth. Catholics believe God is the author of all truth and the creator of reality. ... In uncovering each small truth we can discover something of the fingerprints of its creator."⁸ Thus we enter the conversation boldly because we know "the fount of truth,"⁹ but at the same time humbly because we realize that what any one of us is able to see of God's mosaic of truth is so negligible.

It is within this context, "a 'living union' of individual organisms dedicated to the search for truth,"¹⁰ that each of us has been invited to invest in the educational excellence of St. Thomas. It is within this context, where "Catholic ideals, attitudes, and principles penetrate and inform university activities,"¹¹ that we teach, do our research, and serve. It is within this context, where "ultimately, the person and message of Christ ... gives the institution its distinctive character,"¹² that we spend our professional lives.

Responding to the Person of Christ

When I use the term "spend" here, I am not referring to something like spending money, where we give of something that is not a part of us; but rather, I am referring to an expenditure of intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual vigor; a spending not just of what we know, but of who we are. C.S. Lewis once wrote:

This very obvious fact — that each generation is taught by an earlier generation — must be kept very firmly in mind. ... The moment we forget this we begin to talk nonsense about education. ... Hence the futility of many schemes for education. None can give to another what he does not possess himself. No generation can bequeath to its successors what it has not got. You may frame the syllabus as you please. But when you have planned and reported ad nauseam, if we are skeptical we shall teach only skepticism to our pupils, if fools only folly, if vulgar only vulgarity, if saints only sanctity, if heroes heroism. ... We shall admit that a man who knows no Greek himself cannot teach Greek to his form: but it is equally certain that a man whose mind was formed in a period of cynicism and disillusion, cannot teach hope or fortitude.¹³

When anyone of us conveys a body of knowledge/training in our discipline/a set of skills, we do much more than simply pass on information — we also pass on ourselves (whether for better or for worse). It is very easy to lose sight of this fact when our focus as educators is so often on the next day's lecture, or on our students, or on the curriculum, or on the art of educating. But the fact remains, our students daily receive who we are as well as (and sometimes more than) the information we offer.

Therefore a portion of the response by each of us to the mission of St. Thomas as a Catholic university is a personal response. Just as married individuals often find an intellectual assent to the ideas of marriage much easier than actually living out that marriage with another person, so too, we can often find an intellectual response to the message of Christ much easier than responding to the person of Christ. For the person of Christ exacts a personal response. As Lawrence Cunningham so succinctly stated in *The Catholic Heritage*: "Deep Christian belief should result in some kind of tension with whatever established order it encounters."¹⁴ Jesus has continually been in the business of disrupting settledness/dislodging complacency — in cultures, in institutions, and in individuals.

Day in and day out we find ourselves working with a student populace that is all too often dull and unimaginative, mired in a here-and-now orientation to life, non-reflective and "flat-souled,"¹⁵ abruptly disconnected from the rich living legacy of faith that is theirs. I would like to quickly add here that as I say this it is not meant to be an indictment of our students, for I have a love and a certain kind of respect for them. The vast majority of our students have grown up in a cynical/keep-your-options-open/experience-based/non-thoughtful/entertainment- saturated culture, a culture where most have never even been exposed to the idea that education might be for something other than the acquisition of job-related skills. Having been enmeshed in such a culture for 18-plus years, many of our students are responding quite nobly. But, our students aside, the question may be asked: What do we as individuals bring to the challenges that face us as educators today? What

is the person of Christ asking of us? For it is difficult to pass on that which we do not have. It is difficult to lead others where we have ceased to go.

As always, Jesus would point us in the direction of the source of truth and life, His Father, the God of our Judeo-Christian heritage. It is in coming to know this God more completely that the quality and depth of one's life is enriched. It is coming to love this God more intimately that one has more to give. As the thoughts of St. Thomas Aquinas encourage us:

God is good. When that statement calls to our minds the reckless generosity of His gifts, running the gamut of life's beginning to eternity's endlessness, we have actually missed the point of His goodness. The gifts tell us of His love, His mercy, His benign providence; but His goodness does not bring things to us so much as it takes our hearts away from us. The good God is that ravishingly attractive Being who is resisted only when He is not seen ... confronted by divine goodness, the heart of a man bursts into such a flame as to make a torch of this whole life. Fascinated by the invitation inherent in such goodness, a man finds no journey too long, no danger too great, no obstacle too wearying; here is strength, courage, daring for the weakest of men"16

"Catholic universities are called to a continuous renewal, both as 'universities' and as 'Catholic,' "17 but institutional renewal will only be as great as is the renewal of those individuals who serve within that institution.

To Set Our Course

Obviously I speak here of ideals, and certainly we will never (in this life) reach the ideals (anymore than the sailors who set their course by the stars ever expected to reach those stars), but if those sailors ever lost sight of them, they were sure to go off course.

Grant, O merciful God, that I may ardently desire, prudently examine, truthfully acknowledge, and perfectly accomplish, what is pleasing to Thee, for the praise and glory of Thy name.¹⁸

References

1. George M. Marsden, "What Can Catholic Universities Learn from Protestant Examples?" in T. M. Hesburgh (ed.), *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp. 187-198.
2. Pope John Paul II, *On Catholic Universities (Ex Corde Ecclesiae)*. Publication No. 399-X, U.S. Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C., 1990, p. 10.
3. Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*, (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

4. Burnham P. Beckwith, "Religion: A Growing or Dying Institution," *The Futurist*, July-August, 1986.
5. Soren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1975).
6. Ted Koppel, "Vanna White and the Ten Commandments," Commencement Address at Duke University, 1987.
7. Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).
8. Craig S. Lent, "Becoming a Great Catholic University," in T. M. Hesburgh (ed.), *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University*, (University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp. 141-152.
9. Pope John Paul II, *On Catholic Universities (Ex Corde Ecclesiae)*, p. 7.
10. Pope John Paul II, *On Catholic Universities (Ex Corde Ecclesiae)*, pp. 14.
11. Pope John Paul II, *On Catholic Universities (Ex Corde Ecclesiae)*, p. 14.
12. Pope John Paul II, *On Catholic Universities (Ex Corde Ecclesiae)*, p. 17.
13. C. S. Lewis, "On the Transmission of Christianity," *God in the Dock*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1970), pp. 114-125.
14. Lawrence S. Cunningham, *The Catholic Heritage*, (New York: Crossroad Books, 1983).
15. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).
16. Walter Farrell and Martin J. Healy, *My Way of Life: Pocket Edition of St. Thomas*, (New York: Confraternity of the Precious Blood, 1952).
17. Pope John Paul II, *On Catholic Universities (Ex Corde Ecclesiae)*, p. 10.
18. Prayer of St. Thomas Aquinas.