

# The Idea of a Catholic University

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The idea of a Catholic university is in process — as it has been always. I feel privileged to be involved in its contemporary evolution generally and in its particular reflection at the University of St. Thomas. Being a part of the summer seminar was an excellent introduction to this community as well as a stimulating intellectual experience. Of course, the group attended to the readings and to the abstraction of the "idea of a Catholic university." The major learning for me, as a new administrator, was how the St. Thomas community has been struggling with this abstraction in recent years. There was the good news and the bad news: recollections of moments in which individuals were particularly proud, perplexed, or peeved. I found it all encouraging and fascinating rather than discouraging or frustrating.

How could we expect to find or discern THE definition of a Catholic university in five mornings? Our readings made it patently clear that since the dawn of university life there has been debate about what it means to be a Catholic university. For example, does the study of Aristotle's logic lead to secularization or the teaching of virtue (not an empty question for Augustine, Aquinas, or the early Jesuits). More recently, it was just short of 100 years ago that Archbishop Ireland spoke at the University of Notre Dame's jubilee celebration (1895). The archbishop took the occasion to consider "The Catholic Church and Liberal Education" (Ireland, Vol. I, 1896). Early in his talk, he mused:

I am not sure that, even today, all Americans estimate at its true value a liberal education. Give us, some say, an education which is immediately serviceable, which prepares our youths directly for business or for the professions, which brings pecuniary results without delay (241).

Similar expressions can be heard regularly at the University of St. Thomas and throughout higher education in 1994-95.

The archbishop went on to speak with pride of the role of the Church historically: "Throughout her whole history, the Catholic Church has ever made liberal education the object of her most tender solicitude" (246). For Ireland, the mission of modern Catholic colleges was to "provide leaders to the Catholic laity" (250) in order to preserve a society suffering from a "weakening of morals" (251). The colleges should prepare " ... men of elite, well-trained in faith and morals, resolute and reliable ... ," and "Their intellectual training should be the best the country can afford. We do them an injustice, as we do country and Church an injustice, if we send them out into the world a whit inferior in intellectual equipment to pupils from state or other non-Catholic institutions." For the "main purpose of education" is "the development of mind for mind's own sake" (252-253).

The idea of a Catholic university may have seemed clearer then — to educate men, many of whom were immigrants, primarily to have the means to improve their own circumstances and to help the society at large to become better as it would recognize the place of the revealed truth in Christ. Now, as we count down toward the 21st century, we face a world of ever-increasing complexity, and the Catholic university cannot escape its own reflection of this reality. We are now women and men, priests, sisters, seminarians, lay Catholics and non-Catholics of every or no religious persuasion, of all colors, with ages ranging from the teens to the eighties. We are local and international, full-time and part-time, undergraduate and graduate, degree-seeking and not, studying fields that range from the classics to those that didn't exist just 25 years ago (e.g., environmental studies, entrepreneurial studies). Thus, it is not surprising to me that there can be no single or correct definition of a Catholic university. Rather, we are in the midst of a centuries long process of ongoing definition that is much like a kaleidoscope, with many different parts/places forming a holistic — AND always changing — picture.

Catholic universities, as do all institutions, have discursive and nondiscursive elements. On the discursive level, our particular definition of St. Thomas as a Catholic university can be found in our mission statement. We are first a "Catholic, diocesan university, founded on belief in God and commitment to a life of worship leading to active participation in the mission of Christ and the Church to the world." Eleven other convictions flow from this first one (University of St. Thomas Course Catalog, 1994-1996, 7-8). In our undergraduate programs we seek to prepare our students for a life of the mind and are concerned that our students' education is focused on liberal learning, moral and ethical development, and career preparation (see "Proposal for a Revised Undergraduate Curriculum," August, 1994). Our undergraduate requirements reflect this explicit commitment to a Catholic, liberal-education tradition in both current and proposed form. The graduate programs in Arts and Sciences build on this dedication to liberal learning through intensive study in a focused area.

As important to our identity for me are the many nondiscursive reflections of our Catholic character. We have our crosses and statues, our Masses and opening convocations in the chapel, our continual search for community and connection, our concern for our students' spiritual and personal growth even as we attempt to instill a love of learning and deliver career preparation. As frustrating as it is at times not to be able to pinpoint exactly our Catholic character, I derive hope from the fact that, as Father Daley offered during the seminar, faith isn't always intellectual, that paradox is always present in the life of faith and the university. As he reminded us, the Epistle to the Hebrews states, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen." I have faith in our hope for our students and what they can contribute to the greater good of society. Or, as Father Dease said in September at our opening Mass celebration: "The heart has its reasons that the mind does not know." Secular or public institutions, in my experience, do not have the benefit of such faith or trust in the heart.

About eight years ago, I made a conscious decision to remain a member of the Catholic higher education community. My heart told me that this is where I needed to be. Since then, I've had many opportunities outside the classroom — where I began and hope to

end my career — to reflect and act on that choice. I've known for a long time now that I couldn't work anywhere that didn't have a focused mission. For several years, based on my history of serving mostly at Saint Louis University, I have derived much meaning from being at a Jesuit, Catholic university. It occurred to me even before I took on higher levels of administration that the primary functions of an administrator are to lead, serve, and advocate in a collaborative fashion. My experience in the summer seminar and with its readings provided a broader perspective. As Father Daley said, administrators have an obligation "to provide the connective tissue" or the "vision to maintain our Catholic charism."

For me, it is no accident that the Gospel for the day I chose to write this essay is the same that Father Daley cites in the last of the readings for our Seminar (Mk. 10:42-45):

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not to be so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.

Father Daley calls on all of us involved with university life to adopt a Christ-like STYLE, to eschew vanity, pomposity, snobbery, self-delusion — and other "academic vices" (10). In his view, the main "means a university must use to maintain and develop its religious identity" is "persuasive: to maintain, by the dogged efforts of a wide variety of people on the university team, a level of serious Christian conversation and reflection and prayer that will make the community as a whole a place where faith in Christ can seriously flourish and that will challenge each individual — whatever his or her religious position — at least to refine constantly the choices and motives that govern his or her life" (11).

The priest at Mass, Father Roc O'Connor, put it bluntly for an administrator like me. He said that the message of Mark's gospel is that the way to exercise power is to transform it into service. Father emphasized that those of us in "authority" positions who reflect authoritarianism generally are fearful, working out fears so that others will not see any uncertainty as weakness. My hope is that I'll be able to join in and help to facilitate the ongoing conversation about our identity. I'd rather be a connective tissue than a raw nerve-ending in our community. I want to try to persuade potential students and faculty that the University of St. Thomas is a place where they will be welcomed — regardless of their individual faith commitments — to explore, to learn, and to prepare for a life of the mind that enables them and others to serve the greater glory of God.

## References

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