

# **The Role of Faculty in the Catholic University: Facilitators of Actualization and Inculturation**

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While it is difficult to articulate what it means to be a Catholic university, it is even more difficult to articulate what one understands to be the faculty's role in a Catholic university. Certainly, it is not to be catechists or disseminators of Catholic doctrine or teachers of some kind of "Catholic" science or mathematics. Neither is it to say that all faculty members need to be baptized Catholics. What, then, is the role of faculty in a Catholic university?

One way to begin to clarify the role of faculty within a Catholic university is to work from one's own academic discipline, and to describe what it is that the practitioners of that discipline add to the Catholic identity of the university. However, this approach presumes that what it means to be "Catholic" can be treated merely as a layer of meaning added on to our primary role and identity as faculty within any university. It also presumes that we have satisfactorily articulated what it means to be a Catholic university. In the case of the latter presupposition, one who has struggled with this question comes quite quickly to the recognition that the identity of the Catholic university is something fluid and dynamic; it cannot be quantified and distilled into a static formula. Moreover, in the case of the former, the role of the faculty cannot be a "value added" element, or else the institution is not inherently Catholic.

Despite the obvious difficulties in addressing the question of the role of the faculty in the Catholic university, difficulties which I have noted above, I would like to offer some reflections on the question from the perspective of my own academic discipline, that of a biblical exegete. Biblical studies, a sub-discipline of theology, is an academic discipline in its own right. As such, it has a place in the academy and in the teaching university. However, as a Catholic, I am called to wrestle with the question of what it means to be a biblical exegete within a church community. To that end, a document entitled "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1993, provided me with some important insights. Therefore, I would like to attempt to respond to the question of the role of faculty within a Catholic university by comparing it to the task of the biblical exegete within the church, using some of the insights of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's document, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church." Although the analogy is admittedly inadequate, hopefully it can provide us with a thought-provoking starting place for creating a model of the role of Catholic university faculty as facilitators of actualization and inculturation.

In the preface to the document, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger refers to the Second Vatican Council's description of the study of the bible as the soul of theology (cf. *Dei Verbum* §24). The exegete is one of the persons

who facilitate the study of the Bible—the scholarly expert, so to speak—but certainly not the only one who has access to the soul of theology. In fact, the primary task of the exegete is to provide others with the means whereby they can study the Bible in a meaningful and relevant way and thus gain access to the soul of theology.

Analogous to the study of the Bible, which I am describing as the soul of theology, the soul of the educational endeavor undertaken by the Catholic liberal arts institution is the pursuit of truth. The faculty are the ones who facilitate the pursuit of truth—the scholarly experts, so to speak—but certainly not the only ones who have access to the soul of the educational endeavor. In fact, the primary task of the faculty is to provide others with the means whereby they can pursue the truth in a meaningful and relevant way and thus have access to the soul of the educational endeavor.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission describes the context within which the exegete works as multi-faceted. Most people immediately think of the task of faculty in a university in terms of the work of scholarship. Hence, it is not terribly difficult to conceive of the work of the biblical exegete in terms of scholarship. Biblical studies has its own methodologies and its subject matter. Moreover, it draws upon a variety of other academic disciplines to uncover the meaning of its subject matter, namely, ancient texts which church communities hold as sacred. Therefore, biblical exegesis also has an ecclesial context because it consists in the study and explanation of the bible "in a way that makes all its riches available to pastors and the faithful" ("The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," III.C). The term "ecclesial" suggests community; its Greek root *ecclesia* means "assembly." Therefore, when one describes the work of the biblical exegete one must necessarily describe it as situated within a faith community and as oriented toward the well-being of a faith community. The Pontifical Biblical Commission recommends that this ecclesial dimension ought to be reflected in both teaching and research.

If we can extend the analogy to the faculty of the Catholic university, the work of the faculty—regardless of academic discipline—rightfully is a work of scholarship but, at the same time, it is an ecclesial work. That is, it ought to be situated within a faith community and its efforts ought to be oriented toward the well-being of a faith community. Expectations that faculty will be engaged in the work of scholarship is quite universally accepted; in fact, competition among academic institutions demands it. However, to say that faculty in a Catholic university ought to perform their work with a view to its ecclesial dimension is much more problematic, appearing even to be antithetical to the academic endeavor. Again, we are confronted with the difficulties of articulating the role of faculty within the Catholic university. To say that the role of faculty within the Catholic university has an ecclesial dimension does not mean that Catholic educational institutions ought to have "Catholic" mathematics, any more than the world of biblical scholarship ought to have "Catholic" exegesis—though we do indeed have interpretations of the biblical text that reflect the Catholic tradition or that find their home in Catholic theology. How, then, are we to articulate the role of the faculty in the Catholic university?

Again, we shall make a comparison to the work of the biblical exegete. What is the process which the biblical exegete ought to be engaged in as he or she facilitates the study of the bible? The Pontifical Biblical Institute describes two processes whereby the faith community rightfully interprets the Bible. The first is actualization, meaning the process whereby the Bible is allowed to remain relevant and meaningful throughout the expanse of time. The second is inculturation, meaning the process whereby the Bible is able to transcend the limits of location. Underlying both processes is the conviction that the Bible is the word of God addressed to the faith community, but also to the entire world, in this present moment. The biblical exegete's responsibility is to facilitate these two processes among those who search for the truth of the scriptures.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission argues that actualization is possible because the biblical text possesses a richness of meaning that has value for all time. At the same time, actualization is necessary because the biblical text is a product of a people living in a time and place quite different from our own. Finally, the Pontifical Biblical Commission asserts the key role which the tradition of the community plays in the process of actualization. It is the way in which the community of the present places itself in continuity with the community which originated the sacred text ("The Interpretation of the Bible," IV.A.1).

One could argue that the faculty of the Catholic university plays an analogous role in a process which, for lack of a better descriptor, we can call actualization. The soul of the educational endeavor, the pursuit of truth, presumes that humanity has amassed a treasury of knowledge that has a richness of meaning and value for all time. Pope John Paul II calls it the "free search for the whole truth about nature, [humanity], and God" (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, §4). Further, John Paul II describes the Catholic university as the vehicle by which the church "explores the mysteries of humanity and of the world, clarifying them in the light of Revelation" (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, §3). As a consequence, the faculty of the Catholic university ought to facilitate and participate in the search for truth, confident in "the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth" (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, §1). Therefore, what distinguishes this search for truth from that of secular universities is the magnitude of its scope and the distinctiveness of its intent or motivation.

The process of actualization is necessary to the educational endeavor because humanity's treasury of knowledge is vast, derived as it is from historical periods and geographic locations quite different from our own. The universal truths of this treasury of knowledge can be made manifest only when they are expressed in a language people can understand and when they are applied to circumstances contemporaneous with the learner. Therefore, we need to describe or articulate a method of actualization. The Pontifical Biblical Commission describes the method of actualizing the biblical text as follows:

1. to hear the word from within one's own concrete situation;
2. to identify the aspects of the present situation highlighted or put in question by the biblical text;

3. to draw from the fullness of the meaning contained in the biblical text those elements capable of advancing the present situation in a way that is productive and consonant with the saving will of God in Christ ("The Interpretation of the Bible," IV.A.2).

However, the methodologies involved in the process of actualization in different academic disciplines will, of necessity, be different, because of the unique character of each discipline.

Yet, our sustained analogy might suggest some general guidelines for actualization in other academic disciplines. The role of faculty in the Catholic university is to help learners relate humanity's treasury of knowledge to their own concrete situation. This step requires students to have a trained intellect. This is the task of a liberal education. John Henry Newman described the aims of such an education: to impress upon the student an idea of science (method, order, principle and system, rule and exception), and to develop in them a capacity for synthesis, creativity, and critical thinking (The Idea of the University, 12-13). However, this intellectual training ought not be an end in itself, but rather a means. The goal of actualization is for students to be able to use these skills to draw from humanity's treasury of knowledge the "whole truth," a truth that will enable them to take their place in advancing the present situation so that the world's people can "come to the full measure of their humanity, created in the image and likeness of God...and called to shine forth in the light of the Spirit" (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, §5). The university is, by definition, a place of teaching universal knowledge.

Three delimiting factors will assure that the process of actualization comes to its proper end. Again, we shall make a comparison to the work of the biblical exegete. The Pontifical Biblical Commission cautions that the process of actualization is compromised when the biblical text is used for the interpreter's own narrow purposes ("The Interpretation of the Bible," IV.A.3). Analogously, in the Catholic university, actualization must be done genuinely and sincerely in the service of the free search for the whole truth about nature, [humanity], and God" (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, §4). When it is driven by other, more narrow agendas, its goal is thwarted. Second, the Pontifical Biblical Commission rejects any attempt at actualization that is "contrary to evangelical justice and charity" ("The Interpretation of the Bible," IV.A.3). Likewise, in the educational endeavor, when the faculty of the Catholic university guide students in the process of actualization, justice and charity should not be threatened. Rather, they should be fostered and allowed to triumph. Finally, the Pontifical Biblical Commission recommends that the process of actualizing the biblical text will come to its proper end, if it "continues within the stream of the living tradition, under the guidance of the church's magisterium" ("The Interpretation of the Bible," IV.A.3). For the Catholic university, this means, on the one hand, that the faculty's understanding of the pursuit of truth to which they are committed finds its place in the living tradition of the church. On the other hand, it means that faculty recognize their role as agents of evangelization, in the fullest sense of the word. Ex Corde Ecclesiae describes the Catholic university's role in evangelization quite eloquently and succinctly:

Research carried out in the light of the Christian message which puts new human discoveries at the service of individuals and society; education offered in a faith-context that forms men and women capable of rational and critical judgment and conscious of the transcendent dignity of the human person; professional training that incorporates ethical values and a sense of service to individuals and to society; the dialogue with culture that makes the faith better understood, and the theological research that translates the faith into contemporary language (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, §49).

We turn our attention finally to the process of inculturation. As it pertains to the Bible, inculturation is the process by which the Word of God is made to take root in a diversity of cultures. Biblical exegetes have an important role in the process of inculturation on the most basic level because they assist in the translation of the biblical text into other languages. They also provide the knowledge base to help the interpreter of the bible understand the differences between the cultural context of the ancient biblical text and his or her own cultural context. Finally, the biblical exegete assists in interpretation of the text in order to make the message of the biblical text speak in a way that is meaningful and relevant to the local culture ("The Interpretation of the Bible," IV.B). The Pontifical Biblical Commission describes this as an experience of "mutual enrichment." The distinctive values and wisdom of each individual culture enlighten the word of God and make it bear fruit in new and creative ways. In turn, the word of God embraced by that culture helps to shape the development of the culture toward the fullness of virtue and justice (cf. "The Interpretation of the Bible," IV.B).

What is the role of the faculty of the Catholic university with regard to inculturation? Clearly, the process of inculturation is part of the "free search for the whole truth about nature, [humanity], and God" (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, §4). It is a truth that transcends cultures, and at the same time a truth that is found at the heart of every culture, albeit in distinctively different symbols and expressions. John Paul II argues that there is "only one culture, that of [humanity], by [humanity], for [humanity]" (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, §3). Faculty of the Catholic university have a special role not simply in assisting students to learn about cultures different from their own (e.g., the current trend in multi-cultural education), but in helping students to recognize the intrinsic beauty of other cultures as manifestation of God's revelation in the world and therefore to respect, not simply in words, but also in action, the dignity of all persons. Likewise, they have the responsibility of assisting students in seeing how "every authentic culture is, in fact, in its own way the bearer of universal values established by God" ("The Interpretation of the Bible," IV.B).

There is another dimension to inculturation for which the faculty of a Catholic university play a crucial role. John Paul II describes it in this way: "A Catholic university, aware that human culture is open to Revelation and transcendence, is also a primary and privileged place for a fruitful dialogue between the Gospel and culture" (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, §43). The basis for this dialogue lies in the fact that human persons are intimately a part of culture. One cannot talk about faith or the gospel message outside of the cultural context of the hearer. In the words of John Paul II, "A faith that places itself on the margin of what is human, of what is therefore culture, would be a faith unfaithful to the fullness of what the Word of God manifests and reveals, a decapitated faith, worse

still, a faith in the process of self-annihilation" (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, §44; cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, §58). The faculties of the Catholic university—each from within their own academic discipline—ought to assist students in investigating the aspirations and limitations of the culture in which they live and in discerning ways in which humanity can reach its full potential and, in the process, transform human culture. Ex Corde Ecclesiae notes especially the unique and privileged role that the Catholic university has in the dialogue between Christian thought and the modern sciences, in particular, because of the explosion of philosophical and ethical questions raised by modern advances in technology (§46).

In summation, I would like to invite the faculties of Catholic universities to explore whether and to what extent their role within the Catholic university can be described in terms of actualization and inculturation, as these processes are thus described. The analogy with the task of the biblical exegete within the church community has its limitations, but perhaps it can invite further discussions across academic disciplines on the role of faculty in the Catholic university. These discussions have the potential, I believe, for Catholic universities to revision themselves, no longer thinking of themselves as second-class universities, but as universities with a mission that recognizes the "openness of humanity to the transcendent" (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, § 45).

### **Works Cited**

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