

# The Curriculum and the Catholic University

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The topic of this summer's seminar was the nature of a curriculum at a Catholic university. The task for this essay is to make specific recommendations about the substance of that curriculum in light of one's discipline, which in my case is philosophy; however, before such a presentation is given, an understanding of the ultimate goal of a Catholic curriculum is necessary, since the structure of a curriculum is animated by the goal of education as a means is to its end.

## *The End of Catholic University Education*

The question I would like to ask is: What is the ultimate end of a Catholic university education? The answer to this will immediately inform us as to what should be the content and conduct of the contemplated curriculum at a Catholic institution of higher learning. I will freely admit that this is not a simple question. Nor is the answer to this question free from controversy both within and without Catholic circles. But what I feel is essential to the existence of a truly Catholic university curriculum is one's assumption about its purpose. The current ambiguity about the answer to this question has given rise to a wide-spread reappraisal of the direction of Catholic universities in light of the church's mission. Contributing to this ambiguity of purpose is the Catholic university's relationship to a scholarly community and society at large, whose standard of academic freedom and freedom of expression has led them to look suspectingly at Catholic universities. One need only call to mind George Bernard Shaw, who noted that a Catholic university is a contradiction in terms.

In the midst of such internal and external pressures, the Catholic university must still decide what ultimate end it seeks as both a university and as a Catholic institution of learning that exists within the church. It must take seriously both its mission as an institution of higher learning and its mission as a contributor to the church's mission of human salvation. The question remains as to how the Catholic university can remain true to both goals. The answer to this question depends upon one's understanding of the ultimate end of this form of education. One way of posing the question is what kind of student does the Catholic university aim to produce at the end of the term of studies.

One view of the ultimate end is that of evangelization. The Catholic university is a contributor to the work of spreading the gospel message. Some view this goal as one of proselytizing and so unacceptable. But if the Catholic faith is viewed as a source of truth, it cannot be ignored in the university curriculum. Though one should not apply a litmus test to a college course as to how many converts were made, at the same time, one should not react with surprise if a student should embrace the faith partially as a result of a Catholic curriculum. One's personal embrace of the truth of the Catholic faith should not be in spite of a Catholic curriculum.

It appears that a Catholic curriculum should enhance an understanding of the truth of the Catholic faith and not diminish it. This is due to the fact that the faith should be viewed as a source of truth that should be compatible with truths received from the natural order. This is not to say that correction, further reflection and emendation cannot occur in the understanding of the world and revelation. What makes the Catholic university and its curriculum distinctive from other schools is that the search for truth includes divinely revealed truths and does not exclude them. What appears to be the goal of this view is to challenge the student to take seriously the claims of the Catholic faith.

Another view sees the goal of a Catholic curriculum as producing a student who, though not necessarily an adherent of the Catholic religion, is Catholic-minded in his or her thinking. Students should be animated by the truth and wisdom of Catholicism, even though they may not practice the faith. What one seeks is to instill an intellectual conviction of the truth of Catholicism on subjects short of religious observance, such as ethics, social responsibility and political policy.

Yet to be convinced of the truth of Catholicism short of religious practice would still seem to require as much commitment by a faculty as the goal of evangelization. The underlying foundation for claims of social justice and political rights is a religious understanding of human nature and its destiny as stated in the Gospels. To truncate instruction to these claims without their religious and supernatural foundations would obviously misrepresent the truth claimed by the church and not fulfill the university's mission as cooperator in the church's salvific work.

A third view of the goal would be one of appreciation of the Catholic perspective. The student is neither moved to membership in the church nor necessarily convinced of the truths of Catholicism; rather, the student is to gain an appreciation for Catholicism as a world-view that is one among many such comprehensive views which quite possibly conflict with each other. The student is left to choose which view to personally incorporate, if any at all. But the goal is for the student to come away with an appreciation of Catholicism as a way of life with its own history, intellectual tradition, rituals and symbols, spirituality and institutions.

However, what is missing in this attractive approach is a real claim to truth and participation in a supernatural life. To share in preaching the gospel is to present the truth as more than a world-view or as one view among many. It will involve more than merely showing the coherence of a system of beliefs. To share in the church's mission on this level would require at least to adequately present the boldness of its claims as proposing a way for human salvation that was personally revealed by God who entered human history. The church calls upon its universities to present more than a neutral narrative. It involves an intellectual conviction that takes seriously the claims of the Catholic faith and makes a decision one way or the other on its validity. It may involve also being an apologist for the faith.

Which of these goals is appropriate for the Catholic curriculum of the university?  
Probably a combination of all three, with some qualifications. Certainly a Catholic

curriculum should cultivate an appreciation of the history, traditions, beliefs and institutions of Catholicism through deep, mature reflection and investigation; however, the Catholic university has a corporate responsibility to present an interdisciplinary and systematic instruction in real truth, beauty and goodness. This instruction should have a harmonious integration with the truths of the Catholic faith. It should not be mistaken as merely a world-view but as a claim about what is real.

Likewise, a Catholic university curriculum should seek to present, to the fullest extent possible, the truth of Catholicism in a manner that is intellectually compelling even to non-Catholics. If it is not possible to show the intellectual attractiveness of Catholic beliefs then it is incumbent upon us as Catholics to ask ourselves why we hold these truths. This goal of a Catholic curriculum entails a commitment to the intellectual truth of Catholicism that is accessible to all and is not a matter of cultural preference or familial upbringing.

I grant that a Catholic curriculum may not be sufficient to warrant personal conversion, especially in light of the grace necessary for the gift of faith. Also, the sole purpose of the Catholic university is not a course in catechesis; however, if one is really convinced of the truth of the Catholic faith and that it is a full participation in the supernatural process of eternal salvation in its teaching and sacramental practice, then how is it possible not to share it with others on the university level?

A Catholic curriculum should have as its goal to assist in a student's personal search for meaning and truth. This personal need, which human beings have experienced for millennia, is what the gospel purports to fill. This need is expressed in the literature, philosophy, art, music and science of human civilizations. The gospel message is as challenging and consoling for today's troubled humanity as it was for those in the apostolic times. It speaks to humanity on its deepest concerns and struggles. It embodies the preeminent answers to humanity's most significant and enduring questions. The gospel message is therefore eminently qualified to engage in the great discussions of ideas touching upon the deepest longings of the human heart and can be legitimately integrated into a university curriculum. As followers of Christ we are entrusted with an apostolic calling to the world. If every Christian is called to be an apostle, then how is a university instructor to claim an occupational exemption?

Accepting the proposals that a Catholic university curriculum should encourage an embrace of the faith, develop Catholic-minded individuals and impart an appreciation for the history and practices of Catholicism, I think there is a common principle underlying all three that can articulate the ultimate end of this curriculum. That is, that a Catholic curriculum should aim at the goal of presenting the most intellectually compelling case — based on the current achievements of the sciences, arts, history, philosophy and literature — for the claim that the Catholic faith offers us the best answers to the greatest questions concerning the human race and its ultimate destiny. Given this end of a Catholic curriculum, the problem that remains is one of means.

*Integrating the Faith With the Curriculum*

One question about any goal of a Catholic curriculum is how to integrate the truths of Catholicism within the various disciplines. One view rests on the position that truth is a fully integrated whole. The truths of Catholicism and the disciplines are parts of a whole that complement each other. The question remains as to what this fine-sounding, holistic approach entails in the concrete. Will this view result in a Catholic biology, or Catholic mathematics that is distinctive in character from other common forms of biology and mathematics instruction? If not, then where has the integration of Catholicism in this holistic manner occurred? To talk of such things as a Catholic biology would have the unfortunate effect of placing Catholic curricula in a sort of self-imposed intellectual ghetto, separated from the current status of the discipline. One need only think of the current movement of creation science, which in its attempt to reconcile a literal interpretation of the Genesis account with the geological and fossil records, maintains that the Earth is 5,000 years old.

Another model for integrating truths of Catholicism in the curriculum is the dispersion theory. While the various disciplines pursue their studies and instruction autonomously, the truths of the faith engage with these intellectual pursuits on points of convergence. Biology would be conducted in a similar way as now but would be informed by Catholicism on matters such as research ethics and the use of technologies. History would be taught while keeping in mind the view of salvation history.

According to this view, the task of integrating Catholic truths into the curriculum is one of dispersing them across the various disciplines. This view appears to place the primary responsibility for this task on the philosophy and theology departments at a Catholic university. Of course, this assumes from the outset that the philosophic outlook or theological approach are not at variance with Catholicism. But assuming these two departments conscientiously undertook this responsibility, it is not altogether clear how they could disperse Catholic truths beyond their own philosophy and theology courses.

Rather, the responsibility would appear to rest upon the instructor in every course to maintain the Catholic perspective on his or her discipline. Such a perspective easily could be problematic to sustain among a religiously diverse faculty. I readily admit that I do not as yet see a clear way to maintain this fine balance of a curriculum that is faithful both to Catholicism and to the scientific development of a discipline. Both the holistic and the dispersion models have their merits, but also their drawbacks.

### *The Discipline of Philosophy at a Catholic University*

At this point, I am left only with my particular discipline. There has been a Catholic tradition of philosophy that reaches back to the great Christian apologists, such as Justin Martyr. Since any philosopher is dedicated to the task of understanding and defending the truth, it is legitimate for a Catholic philosopher to study, expound and defend the truth in light of the faith.

The question that immediately arises is whether this philosopher is engaging in philosophy or theology, since to engage in the rational examination of truths that one

believes in is to do the work of the theologian. Suffice it for this discussion, I would propose that the Catholic philosopher engages in philosophy by examining the truth of things through the use of natural reason unaided by revelation, even though it may also be a truth that he or she has access to by faith. I offer this merely as a stipulative definition, fully conscious of the unresolved points of this vigorous debate.

In regard to concrete proposals for a philosophy course as part of a Catholic curriculum, I would propose that three fundamental philosophical ideas and their related problems be posed to the student. First is the topic of God. The philosophy curriculum should encourage the student to examine the questions of God's existence and the proofs for and against, His nature, and the capabilities and limits of human reason to know God. Various thinkers and traditions could also be examined in relation to these topics.

Second is the topic of the soul. The student should philosophically confront the questions of whether human beings have a soul or not, what is the nature of the soul, how can one account for its union with the body, can the mind know reality or only its own subjective mental states, the origin of ideas, the nature of emotions, the existence of free will and the debates concerning it. A number of theorists and schools of thought related to these topics could also be addressed.

Third is the topic of goodness. The questions relating to this topic that the student should address are: What is meant by good? How does one account for the differences in the conceptions of good and evil, right and wrong? Is there a difference between an apparent good and a real good? Is moral goodness based on some natural human goodness or is it a "value" that a human being, society or culture creates and destroys for itself at will? How does one rationally defend what is good, and what principles, assumptions and evidence does one employ? Various schools of thought on the question of morality could be examined.

All three topics appear to be of vital concern to every human being at some point in life. They correspond to the questions: Is there a God? Who am I? What should I do? The position that one takes on these topics determines one's personal philosophy or general outlook on the meaning of human existence and its destiny. A Catholic curriculum can not only contribute the truths of the faith to these questions but also enrich the student by raising in a relevant way the questions, themselves, in a society that no longer seems to confront them as it offers a dizzying array of physical and non-reflective distractions.

In the finest Socratic tradition, a philosophy course in a Catholic curriculum can challenge the student to question the very assumptions of a society and culture that seek to furnish answers to questions of import without any reflection. Philosophy can foremost excite the student to wonder at the reality of what exists in the world and question why it is. In doing this, the student can then embark on the journey that seeks a meaning, a sense of purpose to everything that the gospel endeavors to give humanity.

Each group of topics could be a course in itself or be parts of one course. I personally favor the former option. There is something to be said for spending enough time in order

to sufficiently reflect on weighty matters. One should not philosophize hastily and yet every instructor knows how pressed for time the average undergraduate is, given their financial and personal concerns. But if philosophy instructors on the Catholic university level do their jobs right, it will be time well spent.