

Essay on the Idea of the Catholic University

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In order to flourish in an ever-increasing world of change, a university should have a vision with which to guide itself, and the flexibility to meet the changes and demands of its students. This duality of structure and of flexibility is proving to be essential for survival of every type of organization: families, businesses, and educational systems. A university has the ability to provide for its students numerous informational resources, opportunities to add value to themselves and the community around them. A question that arose many times in the seminar was, "What makes a Catholic university unique?" In my mind, I framed the question as to what was unique about its organization and its ability to educate students in a manner that will allow them to contribute productively to society.

Universities, in general, have been characterized as places where knowledge is given by the faculty and gained by the students. Catholic universities have the opportunity to create a learning culture that is accented by theology and the history of the Catholic faith. Many of the readings for this seminar discussed how to imbue the learning process with the ethics of the Catholic faith:

The Catholic University can welcome the one great Christian church into its midst and allow her the full and open celebration and joy of her being. It can also labor to provide pastoral and intellectual care for members of its own faith and for all other faiths and believers. For all that openness, for all the centrality of the church in the ceremonial life of the university, the Church exists within the university and cannot be identical with it, as much for her own sake as for its. To confuse the university with the people of God constrains that people far beyond any bounds they or their God would find acceptable. It would also lay on the university a responsibility and burden which for all its skill it simply cannot bear.¹

The learning culture within a Catholic university is filled with its history and theology, and within this there is a deep respect for the values of other people's faiths and traditions. For most students, a university is the first place where learning appears to become complex and ambiguous. There are not always straight answers, but a plethora of information in any subject that must be sifted through and, with the guidance of the faculty, examined for what is most useful. This process of learning must be filled with both mechanistic and humanistic properties. The mechanistic properties of education are performed well by almost any higher educational institution. The humanistic properties at a Catholic university should be more apparent because of its focus on justice, compassion, and hope as a community.² In this type of learning-culture, both faculty and students are encouraged to walk the path of knowledge together looking to improve their own understanding and helping the other construct new ideas. It is in this environment of humanistic and mechanistic teaching that a small Catholic university has the advantage. A small university has numerous opportunities to deal with affect, teacher modeling, and the abstract in many one-on-one, or one-on-small group, situations:

The young come to college to learn, but they do not expect that learning to be exclusively intellectual. If you ask them to supply two verbs, "learn" would be the first, and "grow" would probably be the second.³

An effective learning culture will thrive in an atmosphere that is non-threatening and open to discussion from all. Faculty are also looking to learn and grow; this is done not only through research in one's field but through collegial interaction with other faculty and students. In a Catholic university, the community comes together in various ways to strengthen each other and learn from one another's experiences. Neither learning nor growing occur without some pain, but having an organizational structure that fosters the learning and growing process in the history and theology of the Catholic faith would be unique to higher education.

One organizational structure that would allow both the flexibility and structure of a "learning and growing" university to be present would be a shamrock model⁴ consisting of three parts: the administration core, the faculty-staff leaf, the student leaf, and the community leaf. This type of structure is not a new idea, but in a Catholic university these pieces of the organization would create a whole that would be unique from other hierarchically structured universities. Each part of the structure has its own unique tasks to accomplish, but together they become, as a whole, the Catholic university community whose mission in justice, compassion, and hope bring together many diverse people in a learning culture. This type of organization is a more horizontal structure where the people involved work together to produce the highest quality of education, both mechanistically and humanistically, possible.

A core administration/board of trustees needs to be firmly committed to the mission of the Catholic university and flexible enough to accept new ideas from the other leaves. The purpose of a strong administrative core is to keep the university in touch with its history and its mission. The administration has the large task of facilitating communication between groups, when necessary, and instigating and encouraging new ideas on becoming a more effective learning culture for all who are participating in it, faculty, students, and the outside community:

A Catholic University pursues its objectives through its formation of an authentic human community animated by the spirit of Christ. ... As a result of this inspiration, the community is animated by the spirit of freedom and charity; it is characterized by mutual respect, sincere dialogue and protection of the rights of the individual.⁵

These goals need to be facilitated by a strong administrative core that is open to facilitating this type of dialogue on academic and the individual freedoms in a respectful manner toward all parties.

Faculty and staff need to have a high level of respect for the mission of the core administration. From the other groups, the faculty and staff need the tolerance and respect (academic freedom) from the core and other groups to "educate" students properly in their chosen academic field. Faculty should be held accountable for the quality of their

educational programs. This requires cooperation between the core for resources and the students for quality of effort put into the system. Students of all ages and the outside community need to be aware of the learning-culture on the campus. All groups deserve to be respected for who they are and comfortable enough to ask questions in order to obtain the most from all of the university resources.

Each of these groups is interdependent on each other in order to create an effective learning-culture. Many people will read this and say that in an idealistic world, anything is possible, or that all of these features are already present at our university. Depending on your point of view, you are all correct. In my view, based on my participation in and reflection on this summer's seminar and the readings discussed therein, a Catholic university should be a place where all participants can "learn" and "grow" both academically and personally. A Catholic university is unique from other universities in that it allows its history and theology to help shape the community in which it resides, as well as to foster a respectful community that is open to discussing many issues under the rubric of the Catholic faith. Together we "create the road by walking."⁶ In this dynamic learning-culture, more respect is always needed for other people's beliefs, along with the energy and enthusiasm to keep from becoming stagnant. An effective way of doing this is for the participants in this learning-culture continually to create experiences for each other that are effective in teaching ourselves and each other. With this type of organization, all participants have the opportunity to work and learn effectively.

1 Healy, T. "The Doing of Truth." Timothy Healy, unpublished, pg. 14.

2 Healy.

3 Healy, pg. 22.

4 Handy, C. *The Age of Unreason*. (Boston: Harvard University Press), 1989.

5 Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on Catholic Universities, August 1990, pg. 17.

6 Antonio Machado, *Selected Poems*. trans. A.S. Turblood (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1982, 143.