

The Personal Use or Exercise of Language: Literature and the Catholic Curriculum

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George M. Marsden, in *The Soul of the American University*, (Marsden, Soul; also, "What Can Catholic Universities Learn?") traces the changing emphases of various American colleges and universities with regard to religion from the founding of Harvard College in 1630 to the recent past. The oft-repeated pattern has gone something like this: College X was founded by Christian denomination Y in 1800 with a charter that clearly laid out a curriculum centered on the tenets of denomination Y. Over the years College X became more and more generically Christian, so that by 1860 its charter was revised to be acceptable to virtually all main-stream Protestant groups, and by 1920 even the references to belief in Jesus Christ as the Messiah had been deleted so as to be acceptable to Unitarians, Jews and other non-Christians, with just a vague reference to "general spiritual uplift." By 1960 even spiritual uplift had gone to make way for "purely objective scholarship."

During more or less those same years Catholic colleges generally stayed out of the mainstream and remained more narrowly sectarian in their focus, but Catholics as a group, partly because of the success of these same institutions in giving a decent education, began moving more into the mainstream of American life and so became less comfortable with their narrowly sectarian past. The Second Council of the Vatican (1962-65) and its aftermath encouraged Catholics to be more open to the world in which they lived, and this was sometimes taken to mean a greater openness to the world of the post-Protestant and secular university.

This openness had many good points (recognizing truth and good wherever they may be, and being in dialog with one's non-Catholic professional colleagues, for example), but there was also the risk of losing one's own Catholic identity. During the last 30 years, unfortunately (so it seems, at least, to me) a number of Catholic colleges have followed the post-Protestant route outlined above, but with a greater speed than most of the Protestants. Among those colleges still wishing to maintain their Catholic identity, therefore, a groundswell of support has arisen for thinking through once again what it means to claim to be a Catholic college or university, and for making whatever adjustments are necessary, in the curriculum or elsewhere, to make that claim credible.

Because English is a department found in virtually all colleges, and because a couple of courses in English are usually found among the general requirements, it seems that a certain Catholic focus might be found in the English department of a Catholic college. What might such a focus be?

First of all, I would like to narrow the field of my inquiry. "English" has probably always (since its inception as an academic discipline in the 1870s) been a term that has covered a

number of activities: writing, linguistics, literary theory, and the study of literature. In this essay I will concern myself only with the study of literature, which Cardinal Newman has defined as "the personal use or exercise of language." (Newman, *Idea*, 207)

1. Perhaps the most obvious way in which the teaching of literature can contribute to the Catholic nature of the curriculum of a Catholic college is the teaching of a significant number of Catholic authors, pointing out how their religion has played an important role in their imaginations.

By "Catholic authors" in this context I mean authors who not only remained loyal to the Church but whose writing was significantly determined by the way their religion formed their world-views, authors such as Dante, Newman, Chesterton, and Flannery O'Connor. These are all writers of a high enough quality that their works are regularly taught at secular colleges, and, even in those secular colleges, the authors' Catholicism must be recognized if one is to deal with the writings adequately. It would seem very odd if the same authors were not taught at a college that professes to be Catholic; one would normally expect that they would be taught more, so that most of the students would encounter at least some of them.

2. A more subtle but perhaps also more important topic arises when we consider "Literature from a Catholic Perspective." (We offer one such course here at UST.) One can affirm, I think, that all literary works express some attitudes and values, some world-views, and that Catholic Christianity also sometimes has teachings on these same attitudes, values, and world-views. It would be a mistake never to point out the similarities and differences to students, whether out of ignorance or out of a false sense of political correctness and neutrality.

When teaching pre-Christian literature, such as Homer and the Greek tragedies, for example, it is surely not wrong or narrowly sectarian to point out how these works contain adumbrations of Christianity, and also how they differ from Catholic Christianity in some of their mentality. It seems to me that it would almost be deceiving the students, or at least making it more confusing for them, to pretend that Homer's morality is exactly the same as the morality we find developing in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures.

A more delicate but nevertheless important distinction arises when dealing with works of Protestant or Eastern Orthodox origin, such as the writings of Spenser and Milton, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Here a great deal of the world-view is similar to the Catholic, and yet there are significant differences. It is surely not narrow or anti-ecumenical to point those out; until we are clear about our differences, how can we possibly talk them through — and isn't that what ecumenical dialogue, focused on the hope of eventual reunion, is all about? One would hope to find these issues dealt with straightforwardly in a literature class in a Catholic college.

One topic that both Catholic and Protestant colleges probably don't really like to face is the post-religious nature of much of the modern world, and yet anyone who studies the literature of the last three centuries is bound to come up against the fact that many

modern authors, like many modern people, are post-Protestant or, increasingly, post-Catholic. Students should be able to read the writings of these authors, but the teacher of such texts has the obligation to clarify issues that may be disconcerting to the student. In almost all such authors, for example, there are going to be some features that are recognizable remnants of Christianity, and there also will be some other features that are non-Christian (either explicit statements or attitudes implied, for example, by situations in stories); simply in order to teach the texts honestly, one should point out these differences.

It should be clear that recognizing these differences does not mean simple-mindedly applauding the Catholic-Christian elements and ridiculing or lamenting the non-Christian ones. The purpose of these courses is not primarily apologetic. There is, furthermore, no particular reason to assume that any one of these cultural confrontations will lead to a student's conversion; besides, if the Catholic-Christian element is the stronger one, it should speak for itself. But surely we cannot claim to be faithful to our mission if we blur all distinctions or sweep them under the rug; when arguing these issues, a student should be as clear as possible about what he or she understands by them.

In connection with this last point, I would like to offer some reflections on the multicultural emphasis that has in recent years become so much more prominent in our thinking on this campus as on most others. As long as we are talking only about giving a more adequate voice to populations hitherto under-represented, such as the four governmentally recognized minority groups in the United States (African-American, Native American, Hispanic, and Asian-American), I have no trouble with multiculturalism and even applaud it, but I am uncomfortable with the specter of broadening the concept to include minority opinions incompatible with Catholic/Christian morality or even anti-Catholic opinions diametrically incompatible with Catholic/Christian faith. I do not think that this paragraph negates the preceding one; I still think that all significant voices should be represented, but not in a relativistic way. (Every opinion is just as good as every other opinion — which seems to be a rather common student opinion, no matter what is expressed.)

3. Lying behind all of the above is my conviction about the place of literature in the curriculum as a whole, and the place of Catholic literary studies in the Catholic studies program as a whole. First of all, following Cardinal Newman, I think we may say that the end of the university is knowledge for its own sake, and that literature has a sort of "right" to be studied insofar as it is a phenomenon that exists (Newman, *Idea*, "University Teaching," chapter 5; "University Subjects," chapters 2 and 3; cf. also Pelikan, chap. 4); furthermore, because of the nature of the human person (not a pure mind, but a thinking animal, with an imagination), literature and the fine arts have a greater importance for our study than some other matters. A person who would have only a good grasp of science but with no appreciation of literature or art would strike me as lopsided in the experience of life. And a person who would have only a good grasp of Catholic theology and philosophy but with no appreciation of any Catholic literature or art would strike me as sadly lacking in the experience of Catholicism. And so I think that any college graduate should have some knowledge of some literature and art, and likewise that any Catholic

college graduate should have some knowledge of some Catholic literature and art, including music.

4. Some practical suggestions for UST and other similar institutions: For a variety of historical reasons we at UST seem to be at a critical moment, a moment of opportunity, but also a moment of danger. During the past 30 years, at the same time that we have experienced growth, we have managed to adapt to the changes mandated by Vatican II and to have kept our Catholic identity without becoming narrow or ultra-Catholic. And we have managed to keep our curriculum solid; as some of us used to say back in the '70s, "We resisted the '60s."

I don't think that that is enough, however, especially for students of the kind we are attracting in the '90s, or are likely to attract. Unlike the undergraduates of the '70s, many of our students today are not Catholic, and those who are Catholic are more and more apt to know very little about their religion; therefore, what worked in the '60s and '70s in terms of Catholic higher education is less and less apt to work today unless we strengthen it.

At least part of that strengthening can come from the powerful imaginative influence that Catholic literature can have on some students. We have at least a number of faculty here who can help students use literature to access the Catholic imagination, and hiring more of such should be a priority for the Department of English. And I would strongly urge that a consideration of an author's theological world-view be made in determining the common text for freshman English. It is still possible — it is always possible — for a Catholic college to turn out graduates who are at least aware of where Catholicism stands on doctrinal and moral issues; it should be possible for a Catholic college to turn out graduates who are aware, through the study of literature, of some of the forms that a Catholic imagination has had and might have.

The Department of English already has gone out of its way to seek out multicultural texts for the freshman common text, even though multiculturalism is not a purely literary norm; there is no inherent reason why the department could not seek out a second common text, one that would exemplify "the Catholic imagination." There are even authors, such as Shusaku Endo, who could be used as both multicultural and Catholic.

It remains to be seen how the new Catholic Studies Program will develop, not so much in terms of its own offerings as in terms of its influence on the university as a whole. Obviously only a few students will elect a Catholic studies major, but the program could have a significant leavening effect if more students took it as a minor, or even took just a few courses in it. Presumably, at least some of those courses would overlap some English offerings: Literature from a Catholic/Christian Perspective and The Catholic Literary Tradition.

If a significant number of students take such courses, the courses should have some value to the university curriculum as a whole. Courses of this sort, especially if they were deliberately paired with courses in Catholic art and music, Church history, and, of course,

theology, should be able to make a significant contribution toward "filling in the gap," and to offer the students some background on the Catholic intellectual and imaginative tradition and some framework within which to develop their own imaginations, should they want to do so, in the Catholic tradition. And thus future generations, also, might exemplify, not merely accidentally but as a result of their St. Thomas education, "the personal use or exercise of language" in the Catholic/Christian imaginative tradition.

Works Cited

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