

On the Meaning of the "Catholic Intellectual Tradition"

Bernard V. Brady

Abstract

The phrase "Catholic intellectual tradition" appears in many self-descriptions of Catholic colleges and universities. It communicates the identity of these institutions to the broader Catholic community, to members of the particular college or university community, and to the broader academic world. The phrase "Catholic intellectual tradition" suggests a fundamental confidence in reason as evidenced in the long list of classics in the history of Catholicism. The Catholic intellectual tradition seeks integration among disciplines inviting convergence, dialogue, and transformation. The tradition is grounded in basic theological affirmations about God and human persons.

*"This is an intellectual age. It worships intellect. It tries all things by the touchstone of the intellect. . . . The age will not take kindly to religious knowledge separated from secular knowledge. . . . An important work for Catholics in the coming century will be the building of schools, colleges, and seminaries; and a work most important still will be the lifting up of present and future institutions to the highest degree of intellectual excellence."*¹

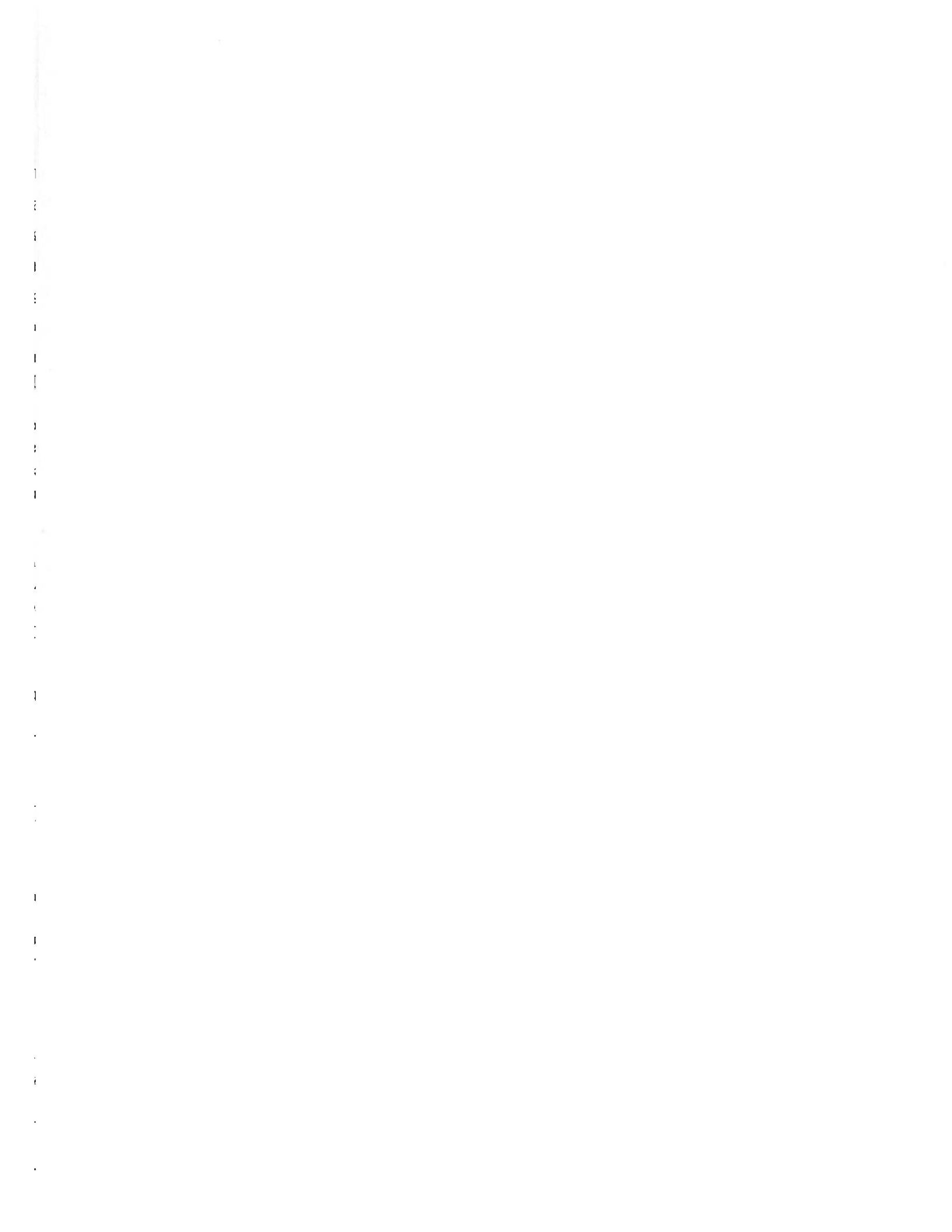
—Archbishop John Ireland in an 1889 speech

In the summer of 2011, the University of Saint Thomas held a seminar for all department heads involved in hiring. One of the sessions was devoted to "hiring for mission," and the facilitator had the university's mission statement, which includes the phrase, "Catholic intellectual tradition," projected on the screen. The meeting was going quite well until someone asked, "What does 'Catholic intellectual tradition' mean?"

Bernard V. Brady, Ph.D., is Professor and Department Chair in Theology at the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota.

¹ John Ireland, "The Mission of Catholics in America," *The Church and Modern Society*, vol. 1 (St. Paul, MN: The Pioneer Press, 1904), pp. 92-93.

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The facilitator paused, looked around the room and found me, the chair of the Theology Department, and asked, "Could you come up here and speak to this?" I found the walk to the podium to be very short. I said a few things, returned to my chair, and thought, "What does 'Catholic intellectual tradition' mean?"

This essay is a belated response to the facilitator. It argues that the phrase "Catholic intellectual tradition" emerged to respond to the questions of three contemporary communities: the broader Catholic community, the academic community within a college, and the broader academy. The essay then reviews the basic affirmation in human wisdom held by the Church that inspires the tradition. The essay describes the role of classic texts within the tradition and the contemporary expressions of the tradition as a hope for *convergence* with other sources of knowledge and wisdom through *dialogue* that will lead to some *transformation*.

The Phrase "Catholic Intellectual Tradition"

The phrase "Catholic intellectual tradition" has been used in mission statements and other descriptive documents by Catholic colleges and universities over the last forty years.² It has become an important identity marker for these institutions in the contemporary context. The dramatic decrease of professed religious on campuses (priests, brothers, nuns) over these years, along with the increase of faculty, staff, and students who are not Catholic, has been the occasion for soul searching. It is out of this context that the phrase "Catholic intellectual tradition" has become prominent in mission statements of Catholic colleges and universities.³ The phrase addresses the challenges brought by three contemporary audiences, namely, the broader Catholic community,

² Sandra Estanek, Michael James, and Daniel Norton, "Assessing Catholic Identity: A Study of Mission Statements of Catholic Colleges and Universities," *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, vol. 10, no. 2, December 2006, pp. 199-217, presents an analysis of the mission statements from 55 out of the 218 Catholic colleges and universities in the U.S. (what the authors refer to as a "systematic random sample"). Of these statements, 23 of the institutions, 42 percent, have "themes related to the Catholic intellectual tradition," p. 208.

³ Certainly the term "Catholic intellectual tradition" was in use before 1975, but since then its place in the literature about Catholic higher education has significantly and dramatically increased. For a bibliography of the phrase, see Villanova's helpful website: <http://www3.villanova.edu/mission/bibliographies/cit.htm>.

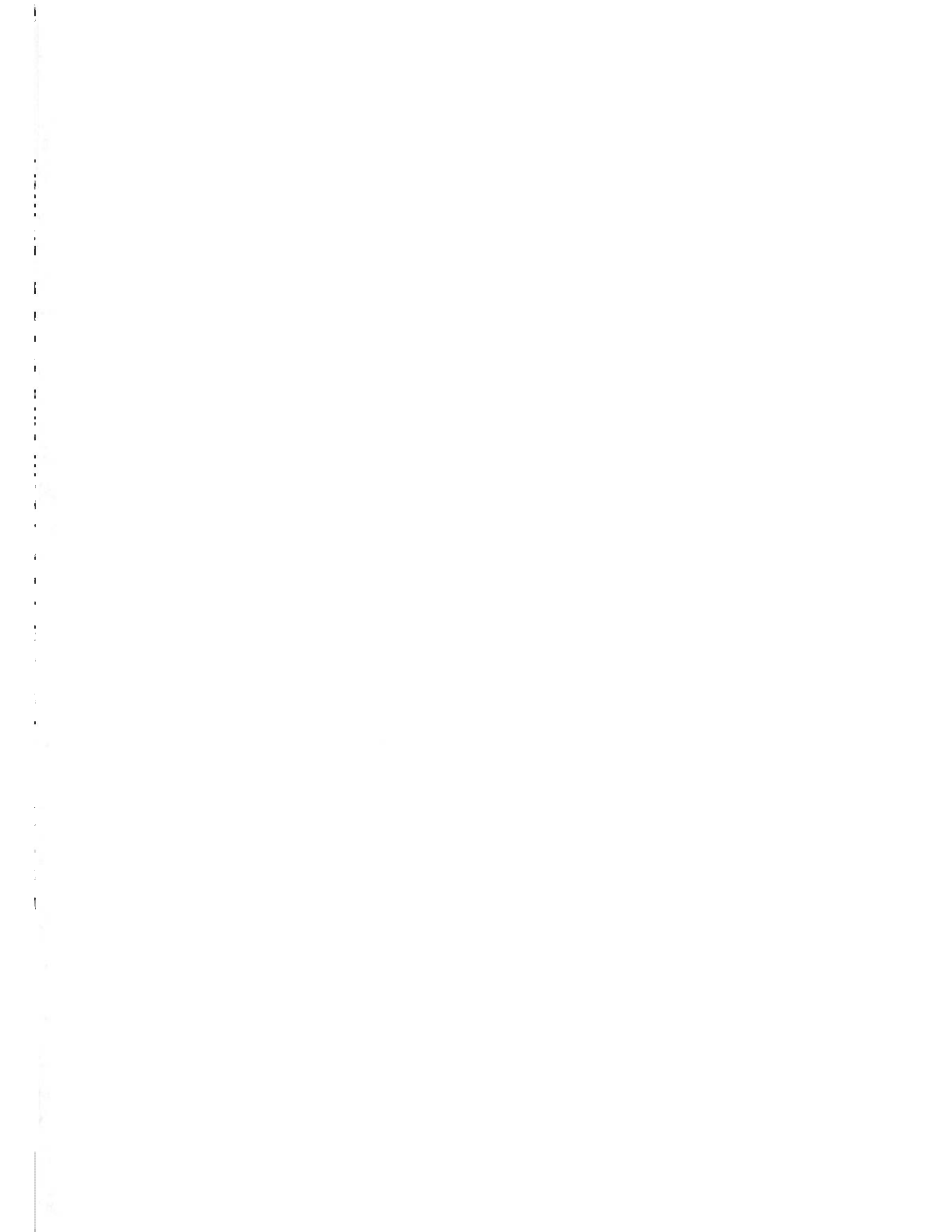
the faculty and staff in these institutions, and the wider academic community.

The phrase "Catholic intellectual tradition" describes the distinct role of Catholic institutions of higher learning within the broader Catholic life and culture. The Catholic intellectual tradition, then, is related to but distinct from the Catholic moral tradition, the Catholic liturgical tradition, the Catholic spiritual tradition, the Catholic monastic tradition, or for that matter, from the Catholic healthcare tradition or the Catholic charitable tradition or dozens of other Catholic traditions. The phrase distinguishes the particular purpose of the Catholic college from a Catholic hospital or a Catholic parish or a Catholic homeless shelter. While these other traditions may be present in the college or university or a part of the institution's work, the overriding vision of the college or university is to participate in the Catholic "intellectual" tradition.

The phrase addresses questions coming from the broader Catholic community. It says that the overarching purpose of the institution is the intellectual development of persons within a Catholic context. This context has identifiable features and characteristics that support and complement the primary task. What this means in practice is that at times a Catholic college may do things in classrooms or in public—for example show movies, present lectures, or hold discussions of controversial topics—that may not be appropriate within the contexts of other types of Catholic institutions. This can be a source of tension, as Catholics outside the university might not understand or indeed might not support this nuance. The phrase, then, is meant to declare the particular features of a Catholic institution of higher learning from other institutions and traditions within Catholicism.

Second, the use of "Catholic intellectual tradition" links the work of a contemporary college to a practice that has existed since the earliest centuries of the Church. Christianity, indeed the Bible itself, is characterized by a certain respect for and at times a convergence with other cultures and communities. Underlying this history is a basic affirmation of human wisdom and the human ability, independent of one's faith tradition, to know the good, the true, and the beautiful.

Explanations of the Catholic intellectual tradition often note that many of the most important teachers in the history of the Church relied on non-Christian sources to help them understand their faith. St. Clement of Alexandria in the second and third centuries made use of the work of the first-century Jewish philosopher, Philo. St. Augustine in the



fourth century relied on the classical Greek philosopher, Plato. St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century famously rested his theology on "The Philosopher," Aristotle. Thus when a college or university says that it is "informed by" or "is inspired by" or "promotes" or "contributes to" or "continues" the Catholic intellectual tradition, it seeks to connect its existence and mission to the great teachers and thinkers in its own past who have appropriated various sources of wisdom, truth, and beauty in their work.

We can call this the "integrating" feature of the Catholic intellectual tradition. The word "integration" suggests elements coming together while maintaining their fundamental identity. This coming together, however, may result in some change or transformation. The integration that is central to the Catholic intellectual tradition might be described as a *convergence* with other sources of wisdom and truth through *dialogue* that leads to some *transformation*.

True dialogue is marked by a creative tension. In any dialogue participants bring their views and values into relation with the views and values of others. Participants must be open and able to learn and to change. Yet at the same time, they bring values that are so central to their identity that to change them or to give them up would be destructive. Dialogue is based on the idea that fundamental difference is to be understood and appreciated, not converted. Nonetheless, when one comes to understand and appreciate the other, a change occurs. I have experienced this in Jewish-Catholic conversations, Muslim-Catholic conversations, and in conversations with colleagues from a variety of disciplines in the university. True dialogue is marked by this creative tension.

Pope Benedict XVI's 2008 address to American Catholic educators in Washington, D.C., describes a form of this tension in the Catholic college:

In regard to faculty members at Catholic colleges and universities, I wish to reaffirm the great value of academic freedom. In virtue of this freedom you are called to search for the truth wherever careful analysis of evidence leads you. Yet it is also the case that any appeal to the principle of academic freedom in order to justify positions that contradict the faith and the teaching of the Church would obstruct or even betray the university's identity and mission; a mission at the heart of the Church's *munus docendi* [duty to teach] and not somehow autonomous or independent of it.⁴

⁴ Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI during the Meeting with Catholic Educators, Catholic University of America, April 17, 2008, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080417_cath-univ-washington_en.html.

The Catholic intellectual tradition is characterized by a hope for *convergence* through *dialogue* that will lead to some *transformation*. "Convergence" is a key idea in the Catholic intellectual tradition, but it is complemented by "contrast." Not all that human knowledge brings forth is beneficial to persons and their relationships. At its core, the Catholic intellectual tradition promotes and defends wisdom in the quest for human flourishing. This, then, sets up potential contrast situations. Within this context, Catholic institutions have created *practices* and policies that both encourage particular behaviors and limit particular behaviors. For example, many Catholic colleges today have developed policies regarding controversial topics or speakers to mediate tensions that arise between *convergence* and *contrast* in these contexts.

The importance of this phrase today, then, is to affirm the Catholic identity of an institution while welcoming all who seek to explore the true, the good, and the beautiful. This is a significant point. The commitment contemporary Catholic colleges seek from their faculty, staff, and administrators is not primarily a commitment of faith, but rather a commitment to the search for knowledge and wisdom within a broader context that sees that search as part of the institution's faith commitment.

A third function of the phrase is to reach out to the academy by connecting the Catholic sense of wisdom with the purpose of the modern university. The phrase is meant to communicate the idea that Catholic tradition values the intellectual life and its virtues, and thus supports the methods of inquiry and practices of the contemporary university. It sends the message to others in higher education that we study biology and sociology and literature in the same way that all scholars and researchers study biology and sociology and literature. Commentators on the Catholic intellectual tradition often point out that the earliest universities were formed and supported by the Church in the medieval era. The existence of universities today mirrors the ongoing Catholic interest in the intellectual life; thus the Church continues to sponsor colleges and universities today.

In short, the phrase "Catholic intellectual tradition" has at least three strategic purposes. First, it defines and limits the sense of the Catholic tradition in its institutions of higher education. We are not monasteries or seminaries, even though we might have those on campus; we are not Catholic grade schools, even though we educate students; we are not parishes, even though we have chapels on campus. In this sense, it speaks to the Catholic community and its expectations about the nature of a *Catholic* university. Second, it links the contemporary campus with the long

history of Catholic intellectual convergence and at times presents a contrast from other cultures and methods of inquiry in the search for wisdom and the quest for human fulfillment. In this sense, it addresses the faculty, staff, and administration of the institution and their expectations about the nature of a *Catholic university*. Finally, it seeks to establish credibility within the broader environment of higher education and their expectations about the nature of a *Catholic university*.

All three purposes, and indeed the phrase itself, rest on the premise that Catholicism has a certain "faith" in human nature and human reason. The following section addresses the understanding between faith and reason in the tradition.

A "Reasoned" Faith Implies a "Faith" in Reason

Near the end of the eleventh century, St. Anselm of Canterbury described theology as "faith seeking understanding." St. Anselm is a prime example of one who worked to develop a reasoned faith—a faith that takes into account the relation between divinely revealed truths and truths that can be known through rational inquiry. His often-quoted words express the basic tenet of the Catholic intellectual tradition: There is no dichotomy between faith and reason. This tradition supports a measured confidence that persons can know truth through reason, and that this truth, properly understood, does not ultimately conflict with faith.

This past summer I visited the Vatican Museums and Sistine Chapel and had a visual experience of this link between faith and reason. Before one can enter the Sistine Chapel and view the incredible beauty of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment* or his image of the hand of God reaching out to Adam, one has to pass Raphael's masterpiece *The School of Athens*. That is to say, before we can take in Michelangelo's artistic representation of biblical narratives, we must experience Raphael's famous tribute to the reasoned search for truth. One cannot miss the metaphor here: Faith and reason coexist peacefully under one roof in the Vatican Museums as they ought to coexist on the individual's journey of life.

The most expressive statement of the Church on the relation between faith and reason is found in the Second Vatican Council's 1965 document, *The Church in the Modern World*. The Council wrote: "If *methodical investigation* within every branch of learning is carried out in a genuinely scientific manner and in accord with moral norms, it

never truly conflicts with faith, for earthly matters and the concerns of faith derive from the same God. Indeed, whoever labors to penetrate the secrets of reality with a humble and steady mind, even though he is unaware of the fact, is nevertheless being led by the hand of God, who holds all things in existence, and gives them their identity" (emphasis added, #36).

More recently, Pope Francis affirmed this "faith" in reason:

The Church . . . calls for a synthesis between the responsible use of methods proper to the empirical sciences and other areas of knowledge such as philosophy, theology, as well as faith itself, which elevates us to the mystery transcending nature and human intelligence. Faith is not fearful of reason; on the contrary, it seeks and trusts reason, since "the light of reason and the light of faith both come from God" and cannot contradict each other Whenever the sciences—rigorously focused on their specific field of inquiry—arrive at a conclusion which reason cannot refute, faith does not contradict it.⁵

There are two very public expressions of Catholicism's sense of faith and reason. One is how it approaches moral matters; the other is how it interprets the Bible. Consider the Church's moral methodology. When the pope or a bishop makes an official pronouncement on a moral matter—for example, workers' rights, the use of nuclear weapons, capital punishment, a particular war, abortion, or stem cell research—his conclusions follow from a particular form of rational reflection of the issues. Catholic moral reflection is grounded on an understanding of persons and human experience. It presumes that "people of good will" reflecting on being persons in relationships and living in the world can agree on basic moral principles stemming from the value and dignity of human life.

This moral methodology has been known as "natural law," or in more recent discussions, "personalism." In 1960 John Courtney Murray wrote what is perhaps the best shorthand description of natural law: "The doctrine of natural law has no Roman Catholic presuppositions. Its only presupposition is threefold: that man is intelligent; that reality is intelligible; and that reality, as grasped by intelligence, imposes on the will the obligation that it be obeyed in its demands for action or abstention."⁶ According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, natural

⁵ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html, #242-43.

⁶ John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1960), p. 109.

law, "established by reason," is present in the hearts of all persons. "It expresses the dignity of the person and determines the basis for his fundamental rights and duties" (#1956). Thus, the tradition holds a certain "faith" in the human ability to know the good and the related ability to do the right thing.

A second area that illustrates the Catholic confidence in reason is how the tradition interprets the Bible. Modern historical-critical scholarship has had a dramatic impact on contemporary biblical interpretation. The Catholic Church has, after considerable debate, welcomed this reason-based examination of the Bible.⁷ For example, in 1943 Pope Pius XII wrote, "Let the interpreter [of the Bible] then, with all care and without neglecting any light derived from recent research, endeavor to determine the peculiar character and circumstances of the sacred writer, the age in which he lived, the sources written or oral to which he had recourse and the forms of expression he employed."⁸

Here is a (very) brief example of this scholarship. In 2008 the Pontifical Biblical Commission (an official organization of biblical scholars working within the Vatican) published *The Bible and Morality: Biblical Roots of Christian Conduct*. It was noted in the text that while the Bible certainly presents original and distinctive aspects, some elements of its teaching reflect historical integration with the wisdom of contemporary pagan communities. Several examples are cited. For instance, some Old Testament laws are very similar to the Code of Hammurabi.⁹ Discussing New Testament texts, the Commission writes, "Like the philosophers of his time, especially the Stoics, Paul teaches that freedom from passions is a pre-requisite of moral conduct. The theme of the struggle with passions was not a discovery of Paul or of the New Testament."¹⁰ All of this is to say that reason, in the form of modern historical/cultural/linguistic analysis, helps the contemporary Church to understand the meaning in biblical texts.

⁷ For a brief history of the Church's understanding of biblical interpretation in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries see Raymond Brown and Thomas Collins, "Church Pronouncements," in Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, and Roland Murphy, eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990).

⁸ Pius XII, *Divino afflante spiritu*, #33, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_30091943_divino-afflante-spiritu_en.html.

⁹ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Bible and Morality: Bible Roots of Christian Conduct* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008), p. 147.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

We have been painting something of an ideal picture here. Catholicism holds that faith and reason do not contradict each other. This ideal picture, however, is not without controversy in real life. Indeed, the history of the Church can be told on the playing out of the tension between the two. Certainly there have been times when a commitment to faith overruled claims to reason. Examples come to mind readily: the Inquisition of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; the Galileo Affair in the seventeenth century; and Pope Pius IX's condemnation of modernity in the nineteenth century. On other occasions the Church relied too heavily on reason diminishing the centrality of faith, one of Martin Luther's claims against Catholicism that helped spark the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.

The same tension exists in the Church today. On one hand there are Catholics who hold that the flourishing of the Church depends on openness to the world; and on the other hand, there are Catholics who hold tightly to traditions as the essence of the Church's vitality. There will always be disagreements about the boundaries between faith and reason. Yet the ideal remains, and it ought to direct reconciliation and growth in the creative tension between faith and reason.

The Catholic "faith" in reason, that is to say, the human ability to know the good, true, and beautiful, is a faith in God and God's creative activity, and not "faith in humanity." The grounding belief here is that not only did God create persons good, but God created everything that persons study good as well. There is corollary here: that through reflection on creation we may come to know something of the Creator. As Michael Buckley writes, "Any movement toward meaning and truth is inchoately religious. . . the dynamism inherent in all inquiry and knowledge, if not inhibited, is toward ultimacy, toward a completion in which an issue or its resolution finds place in a universe that makes final sense, i.e., in the self-disclosure of God—the truth of the finite."¹¹ Commentators refer to this as the "sacramental principle" of Catholicism. It maintains that "one can see the divine in the human, the infinite in the finite, the spiritual in the material, the transcendent in the immanent, the eternal in the historical . . . it is in the visible, tangible, the finite, and the historical that God can be found."¹²

¹¹ Michael Buckley, "The Catholic University and Its Inherent Promise," *America*, May 29, 1993.

¹² Anthony Cernera and Oliver Morgan, "The Catholic Intellectual Tradition: Some Characteristics, Implications and Future Directions" in Cernera and Morgan, eds., *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition* (Fairfield, CT: Sacred Heart University Press, 2000), p. 213.

The next sections will explore the expressions of the Catholic intellectual tradition, namely, the canon of classic Catholic intellectual works and the characteristic interpretations of the tradition in higher education.

Classics in the Tradition

The Catholic intellectual tradition can be illustrated by the canon of Catholic classic texts and art, the great books and aesthetic works, as it were, of Catholicism. This includes works of theology, philosophy, spirituality, poetry, fiction, and biography as well as music, art, and architecture.¹³ Although the production of such a list invites the usual problems of geographical, gender, and ideological inclusion, clearly there are texts that are "classics," not simply in the sense that they were well read in previous generations, but by the power they have to invite us into conversation with our own time. To quote David Tracy, classics have a certain "permanence and an excess of meaning" that invite continual discussion, appropriation, and interpretation.¹⁴

Traditions live within communities, and communities build and nurture their traditions. Traditions survive only within communities. They are "handed down from one generation to the next." The process of naming something a "classic" is fundamentally an act of the community, a community describing its own identity and recognizing itself in the work. So it is with the Catholic intellectual tradition. In the words of John Cavadini, "Appeal to the Catholic intellectual tradition' apart from some explicit relationship to the Church risks reducing the tradition itself to an abstraction."¹⁵ The Catholic intellectual tradition must find nourishment and life, as well as links to the past, within the broader community of the Church, that is to say "the People of God in the world."¹⁶

¹³ See Loyola University Chicago's list of "Catholic Classics," <http://www.luc.edu/ccib/CatholicClassicsReadingList.shtml>.

¹⁴ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 154.

¹⁵ John Cavadini, "Open Letter to the University Community," *Notre Dame Observer*, April 19, 2006, <http://www.ndsmcobserver.com/2.2756/open-letter-to-the-university-community-1.265347#.UqqIIGRDv2E>.

¹⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #752, <http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENGLISH/INDEX.HTM>.

The functions of Catholic classics, writes Richard Liddy, are multiple: "For born-Catholics it helps them deepen their understanding of the Catholic faith in the light of the problems and questions posed to them by their every new cultural setting. . . . On the other hand, for those in search of belief, the Catholic intellectual tradition functions in an apologetic way: It provides an articulation of how faith and belief relate to the rest of life."¹⁷

Thomas Merton's life illustrates this well. Reading Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* inspired Merton to convert to Catholicism in the late 1930s. Gilson's book is regarded as a Catholic classic. Biographer Paul Elie writes that Merton "was changed by the experience. . . . He got the sense of God as a living reality, existing beyond all human approximation, and also of the claim to realism at the heart of the Catholic intellectual enterprise. . . . he had come upon a conception of God that he could respect, and it was in this discovery, by his own account, that his religious life really began."¹⁸ Merton became a prolific Catholic author, and several of his books are now recognized as classics. Thus the point of a tradition: Generations beget generations. Classics invite reflection on times very different from their origin; the tradition lives on.

It is interesting to note that there are people recognized as authors of Catholic classics who, in their times, pushed the limits of the tradition. A few were criticized or silenced by the Church authorities of their day.¹⁹ They lived the creative tension between faith and reason. It took later generations of interpreters within the community to recognize the contributions of these artists and authors. Thus, as Paul Lakeland

¹⁷ Richard Liddy, "The Catholic Intellectual Tradition: Achievement and Challenge," in Thomas Landy, ed., *As Leaven in the World: Catholic Perspectives on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life* (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2001), p. 13.

¹⁸ Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 81.

¹⁹ In 1277 Bishop Tempier of Paris condemned a number of propositions associated with the writings of Thomas Aquinas. Tempier's successor revoked the condemnations some forty years later. See Vernon Brokoue, "St. Thomas Aquinas," in Paul Edwards, editor in chief, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 8 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1967), p. 113. Books by John Courtney Murray, Yves Congar, and Henri de Lubac, all of whom were silenced by the Church, are on many Catholic classic lists. See, for example, Terence Nichols, *That They Be One: Hierarchy and Participation in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), p. 303.

reminds, this canon ought to inform us, but we must not mistake tradition for a “closed body of texts or a fixed set of ideas.”²⁰

I note two unifying characteristics of these texts and indeed two characteristics of classic Catholic intellectual life. The first is its publicness. One does not have to be Catholic to appreciate and indeed be moved by these works. Their impact, their effect, their message, their reach is hardly parochial. Merton was not looking to be converted when he read Gilson.

The second is more difficult to define. What links these texts is not simply that they were produced by Catholics or that they are recognized as outstanding. What links these texts is a particular set of concerns and sensitivities, themes and habits of mind and heart.²¹ This sense of being and being in the world is “the outcome of centuries of experience, prayer, action, and critical reflection.”²² It is something like a “practice” as described by philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre.²³ It is a religious sensibility grounded on a mixture of affirmations: human dignity and relationality (including a recognition of sin), finding God in all things (the sacramental principle), and consequent focus on hope and love.²⁴

When we review the canon of the Catholic intellectual tradition, we realize that no one theological or philosophical book or story or poem or artwork can capture the whole tradition. Any thorough list of the Catholic classics includes an inherent diversity. We have St. Thomas Aquinas (a thirteenth-century theologian), Gustavo Gutierrez (the founder of liberation theology), Dorothy Day (the American social activist), and Patricia Hampl (a contemporary writer). Indeed, no single virtue covers the whole of the moral life. Taken together, various elements are needed to express the tradition. Taken separately, the various elements convey, to greater and lesser degrees, features of the tradition. While certain disciplines may take a lead in expressing the tradition, no one academic discipline can fully express it.

²⁰ Paul Lakeland, “Forum: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition. Classic Texts: Revelation, but not Normative,” in *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, vol. 36, art. 7.

²¹ Cernera and Morgan, “The Catholic Intellectual Tradition,” p. 203.

²² Monica Hellwig, “The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Catholic University,” in Cernera and Morgan, ed., *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*, p. 3.

²³ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 174-181.

²⁴ See also Hellwig, “The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Catholic University,” p. 7. Melanie Morey and John Piderit, *Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 133; Cernera and Morgan, “The Catholic Intellectual Tradition,” p. 208.

The Integrating Effect of the Tradition

Catholic colleges and universities tend to have a strong set of core course requirements, not unlike non-Catholic liberal arts institutions. Catholic schools, however, frequently include as part of the core a number of theology and philosophy courses. This course of study, the liberal arts with strong theology/philosophy requirements, is said by some to be the Catholic intellectual tradition.²⁵ At the heart of this view is the idea that theology and philosophy provide some context to understand and to integrate the other disciplines.²⁶ Unfortunately, it is the experience of many students in Catholic colleges and universities that the core required courses are discrete and unrelated hurdles to jump over on the way to one’s major. Their experience mirrors the view of faith and reason that the Catholic tradition rejects. It is not surprising that the contemporary calls to uphold the Catholic intellectual tradition often revolve around the practical application of integration. The Catholic intellectual tradition is characterized by a hope for *convergence* through *dialogue* that will lead to some *transformation*. Commentators on the tradition at times highlight one of the three facets over the others.

Convergence

The classic model of integration can be called the convergence model. This view holds that through the study of the liberal arts (broadly understood) directed by theology and philosophy, students may ultimately come to know not only particular disciplines but also the truth itself. Those who stress this approach often quote John Henry Newman’s late nineteenth-century Catholic classic, *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated*. Newman offered the following basic principle: “All Knowledge is a whole and the separate Sciences part of one.”²⁷ He continued, “I have said that all branches of knowledge are connected together, because the subject matter of the knowledge is intimately united in itself, as being the acts and the work of the great Creator.”²⁸

Such a course of study could indeed, in the words of Gerald McCool, “lead a prayerful and reflective mind through the meaning which it

²⁵ See Morey and Piderit, *Catholic Higher Education*, Chapter 5.

²⁶ See John Paul II, *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, #16-20.

²⁷ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1893), p. 99.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

finds in God's creation to knowledge and love of God himself."²⁹ For Alasdair MacIntyre, this feature of the Catholic tradition stands in contrast to the status quo of American higher education that rejects the notion that there could be unified understanding, or in his words an "integrated understanding of the order of things."³⁰ He writes, for example, "And so the very notion of the nature and order of things, of a single universe, different aspects of which are objects of enquiry for the various disciplines, but in such a way that each aspect needs to be related to every other, this notion no longer informs the enterprise of the contemporary American university. It has become an irrelevant concept."³¹ The task of the Catholic intellectual tradition in this view, then, is to bring unity to the various disciplines.

Dialogue

The stress on convergence was key to the Catholic tradition, from Newman's time through most of the twentieth century. While it is still held by many, there is a second competing model. This second approach might be called the dialogical model.³² The Catholic intellectual tradition in this view purposefully invites students to develop dialogues between the disciplines and with the broader culture. In 1990 Pope John Paul II, in *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, affirmed that the Catholic university ought to be a place for multiple forums for dialogue. He wrote, "A Catholic university must become more attentive to the culture of the world today, and to the various cultural traditions existing within the Church in a way that will promote a continuous and profitable dialogue between the Gospel and modern society" (#45). Dialogue partners include science and other religions. "Catholicism is engaged in a long, historical

²⁹ Gerald McCool, "The Ideal of the Catholic Mind," in Cernera and Morgan, ed., *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*, p. 37.

³⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, "Catholic Universities: Dangers, Hopes, Choices," in Robert E. Sullivan, ed., *Higher Learning and Catholic Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2001), p. 1.

³¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), p. 16.

³² Advocates of this view rely on theologian Bernard Lonergan's distinction between the "classical" worldview (that grounds the convergence model) and the "historical-mindedness" worldview (that supports the dialogical model), as they reject what they see as an understanding of rationality detached from culture and an intellectual process more interested in certainty than understanding. See Bernard Lonergan, "Theology in Its New Context," in L. Shook, *Theology of Renewal* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968).

conversation," writes Dennis O'Brien, and the Catholic intellectual tradition "is an invitation to join that conversation."³³

The point of stressing convergence is the search for truth and certainty. The point of stressing dialogue is to seek understanding. This essay suggests both, along with formation, are needed as part of living out the Catholic intellectual tradition. Stressing one of these to the exclusion of the other may be at the heart of the Catholic identity tension that exists on some of our campuses.

Formation

The third model, one that concretely attempts to infuse the Catholic intellectual tradition into campus life, and one that is generally non-controversial, is the formative approach. A critical objective of the Catholic intellectual tradition as a set of core courses with a strong theology/philosophy component is that students integrate the material into their lives. The moral questions, the faith questions, and indeed the fundamental questions of identity and meaning addressed in liberal arts courses, ought to become the questions of the students. They should take them personally. The core courses should form students; they should create the conditions that make it possible for students to become morally responsible persons. Put simply, the Catholic intellectual tradition ought not merely to influence the way students think, it should also influence who they are.

It is not unusual to see the Catholic moral tradition, particularly the principles of Catholic social thought, used in programs as the interesting feature of a course of study. We can see these in first-year seminars and in professional graduate programs that promote social responsibility and provide the opportunity for students to reflect on the issues of faith and work. Indeed, the concern for the dignity of persons, human need, and human development is a critical and often repeated theme in *Ex corde Ecclesiae*.³⁴ In the words of David Hollenbach:

³³ Dennis O'Brien, "Catholic to the Core: How One College Does It," *Commonweal*, March 14, 2008, p. 18.

³⁴ See *Ex corde Ecclesiae's* emphasis on ethics in research within the Catholic university in relation to the person (18), the role theology and philosophy play in interdisciplinary studies so the "educative process be directed toward the whole development of the person" (20), and the section on service the Catholic university ought to provide to society (31-37).

The Catholic tradition makes the extraordinary claim that the ultimate ground of meaning for all human struggles is a compassionate God who both understands and even shares human suffering. This belief can sustain hope and courage in the face of the conflicts and injustices of our world. In my judgment, this is the deepest source of the Catholic tradition's contribution to social justice. It is most relevant to the task of the Catholic university today.³⁵

In every context in which one reads of the Catholic intellectual tradition, one finds the term "integration." Whether based in the effort to seek convergence, to foster dialogue between faith and culture, or to contribute to the formation of the person, integration is a necessary component of the tradition. Campus leaders ought to provide the conditions for the possibility for faculty, staff, and administrators to experience this integration. At the undergraduate level the core curriculum can promote integration in the ways described above. Required courses in graduate programs can provide the opportunity for integration as appropriate.

No one view of integration captures the richness of the tradition. This has important implications for thinking about the role of individuals and individual departments within the Catholic university. No one person or department or college controls the heritage, yet all, to some extent, must contribute to the whole. All are parts of the greater whole advancing the tradition within their means. Yet it rarely happens on its own. Thus there is the need for institutional programs aimed at integration. Administrators, faculty, and staff not only contribute to the tradition, the goods of the tradition also rebound, as it were, back on them. The practice of the Catholic intellectual tradition can leave its mark on these groups as well as on students.

The Grounding of the Tradition

The Catholic intellectual tradition is grounded on two theological affirmations.³⁶ The first is that there is a God and this God is known primarily through Jesus. The second is that this God created humans with the ability to know and to do the true, good, and beautiful. From these two affirmations come (at least) six habits of the heart and mind.

³⁵ David Hollenbach, "The Catholic Intellectual Tradition, Social Justice, and the University," in *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, vol. 36, art. 10.

³⁶ This section is a direct reflection on the two "fundamental" criteria and the six "specific" criteria developed in Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Bible and Morality*.

These habits can direct the institutional activity of Catholic colleges and universities.

First, the Catholic intellectual tradition appreciates the true, the good, and the beautiful in other traditions, cultures, and religions. Second, the tradition seeks dialogue and looks for possible convergence with others as it seeks to advance wisdom and knowledge. Third, the tradition expects community members to thoughtfully and morally pursue wisdom and knowledge to advance the common good. Fourth, the tradition challenges all that diminishes human dignity and human flourishing. Fifth, the tradition promotes certain sensibilities, primarily gratitude and hope, as it seeks wisdom in the promotion of human flourishing. Sixth (and finally), as with any tradition, the Catholic intellectual tradition relies on a lively community inspired by a narrative that makes sense of today by reflecting on yesterday as it looks forward to tomorrow. The vibrant sense of unity, ownership, and rationality within the membership of the community is necessary for a living tradition.

Life of the Mind and Life in the Spirit

At times, Catholic universities and colleges fall into the trap of defining their culture in negative terms, that is to say, by what they do not allow on campus rather than what they actively do on campus. The Catholic intellectual tradition makes positive contributions to campus culture. Thus Catholic universities and colleges are places that take faith seriously—seriously enough to invite both participation in it and critical reflection on it. Non-religious community members, whether they are faculty, staff, or students, are invited to see that the life of the mind may be enhanced by life in the spirit. Catholic universities and colleges promote the intellectual life in ways characterized by dialogue and practices aimed at integration. They are communities that encourage members to feel the burden of social justice and the call toward moral responsibility as they seek wisdom and knowledge.

