



Sacred Heart  
UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University  
**DigitalCommons@SHU**

---

Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies Faculty  
Publications

Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies

---


2002

## "Catholic" and "Intellectual": The Way I See It

Brian Stiltner

*Sacred Heart University*, [stiltnerb@sacredheart.edu](mailto:stiltnerb@sacredheart.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/rel\\_fac](http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/rel_fac)

 Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#), and the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Stiltner, Brian. "Catholic' and 'Intellectual': The Way I See It." Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition Volume 2: Issues and Perspectives. Anthony J. Cernera and Oliver J. Morgan, eds. Fairfield, CT: Sacred Heart University Press, 2002.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact [ferriby@SacredHeart.edu](mailto:ferriby@SacredHeart.edu).

## CHAPTER FIVE

---

---

### *“Catholic” and “Intellectual”: The Way I See It*

BRIAN STILTNER

---

I am a member of a transitional generation. Born in 1966, I am the child of the last generation of American Catholics who saw Catholic schooling as a religious obligation and a way to maintain a distinctive subculture. Already by the time I was being sent to grade school in the 1970s, suburban Catholics such as my family were enculturated in a pluralistic society, not sure why it was so necessary to send their children to a Catholic school and whether it was worth the increasing costs, except that they were starting to have qualms about the quality of public schools. So I, who went to Catholic schools from third grade onward, was sent there secondarily for religious reasons and primarily for the order and higher quality education. (I was a hyper-curious child who needed some order, frankly.) Yet this schooling was immensely influential to my developing understanding of faith and appreciation of the world around me. Catholic schooling reached its fruition, for me, at St. Charles Borromeo High School in Columbus, Ohio, one of the few remaining all-boys schools these days. There I learned Latin and Greek, took AP English and AP Chemistry, and had four years of religion, including courses in Social Justice and Moral Decision-Making that were the earliest roots of my eventual career. These four years, which were crucial to making me who I am today, had their power on me because

they built on a base of parochial education and were complemented by a Jesuit college education and finally—what I think was appropriate after all this Catholic schooling—by graduate education at a multi-denominational divinity school and graduate school.

My Catholic schooling is the context for my remarks tonight for two reasons. First, this education inculcated in me an attitude about being Catholic and intellectual that has greatly shaped my work as a Catholic scholar. Second, the social and chronological location of my education calls attention to a generational shift with major implications—potentially negative implications—for the future of the Catholic intellectual tradition. (Much has been written about the way of thinking of Generation X, its approach to media, knowledge, and institutional religion. But I am the very earliest of Generation X, and there is a significant difference between my attitudes and those of the youngest members of this generation and the next one, sometimes called Generation Y. This shift involves very different attitudes about the authority structures of the Church, the university, and institutions in general, and about acquiring and using information.) I will talk first about what being Catholic and intellectual means to me, and then indicate some challenges facing Catholic scholars in the postmodern era.

Probably the most important attitude I took away from my Catholic schooling was an appreciation of the beauty and value of all academic disciplines. As students, we were expected to take all our courses seriously and were given no reason to believe that we couldn't excel in all of them. There were no awkward attempts to force Catholic lessons into difference parts of the curriculum; there was a simple confidence that all truth coheres. It is a notion that I have found beautifully expressed in the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of which I will quote in full:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
 As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's  
 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
 Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:

Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

I say more: the just man justices;  
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;  
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is.—  
Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's faces.<sup>1</sup>

This poem expresses three characteristics of the Catholic intellectual tradition that are significant to me, that I hope inform my intellectual endeavors, and that are an important gift to the cultures and traditions with which Catholicism interacts. The first is the sacramental imagination.

The underlying theological conviction is that every created thing and creature reflects the glory of God's handiwork. "Each mortal thing does one thing and the same: / Deals out that being indoors each one dwells." It is a commonplace how sacramentality is central to Catholicism—to its liturgical practice, theology, cultural expressions, and scholarship. This conviction has undergirded the Catholic intellectual tradition's serious engagement with various sectors of human knowledge: early on, philosophy, then later on adding the natural sciences, the social sciences, and most recently, cross-cultural studies. A fuller treatment, following David Tracy and others, would incorporate the sacramental imagination under the analogical imagination—"a specific intellectual practice . . . [that] seeks to discern the similarities or the unities that exist among events, entities, or state of affairs that seem different."<sup>2</sup> In short, the analogical imagination refers to Catholicism's distinctive emphasis on *both/and* instead of *either/or*. In the case of sacramentality, the analogical imagination affirms *both supernatural and natural realities, both God and the world*; it coordinates these through creation-oriented theology, natural law theory, liturgy, and art.

A second characteristic of the Catholic intellectual tradition is entailed by sacramentality: attentiveness to the distinctive nature

of things. Appropriate to the sacramental imagination is to start each quest for truth with observation, with paying attention. The approach is bottom-up rather than top-down. The method is to let things reveal themselves, speak on their own terms. Hopkins did this wonderfully in his poetry: "As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame"; "rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim"; "Nothing is so beautiful as Spring — / When weeds, in whites, shoot long and lovely and lush"; "Towery city and branchy between towers; / Cuckoo-echoing, bell-swarmèd, lark-charmèd, rook-racked, river-rounded." One pays attention to see and know what is, as well as to be impressed by its beauty. There is an interesting tension between the sacramental confidence that God is disclosed in the natural world and the method of starting with observation and attention. If the former is stressed too much, then the academic disciplines become mere tools for trying to prove theological convictions. If the latter is stressed too much, the disciplines forget why theology is important and set themselves up as better, rather than as complementary, ways of knowing. This is an analogical tension, the best approach to which is to affirm *both/and*. The Catholic intellectual tradition strives to get the delicate interplay right and, on the whole, I think it succeeds.

At the same time, the Catholic sacramental imagination is not starry-eyed. As Terrence Tilley puts it, the tradition is better described as "hopeful" rather than "optimistic." Discussing the Catholic notion of redemption, he writes, "An important factor that differentiates this form of hope for redemption from an optimistic attitude is that the latter need not recognize the 'darkness' in and of the world."<sup>3</sup> Catholic writers, artists, dramatists, and musicians have a knack for expressing the beauty and goodness of the world without neglecting the dark undertones of human experience and culture that cry out for reform. To take just one example, the Irish rock group U2's last two albums contain numerous expressions of the highs and lows of human life. U2 offers, for instance, a celebration of nature and the workaday world reminiscent of Hopkins:

See the world in green and blue  
See China right in front of you

See the canyons broken by clouds  
See the tuna fleets clearing the sea out  
See the Bedouin fires at night  
See the oil fields at first light  
See the bird with a leaf in her mouth  
After the flood all the colours came out  
It was a beautiful day.<sup>4</sup>

Just as frequently, the group presents moral outrage or plaintive queries at the injustices that, it appears, God fails to stop:

God has got his phone off the hook, babe.  
Would he even pick up if he could?  
It's been a while since we saw that child  
hangin' 'round this neighbourhood  
See His mother dealing in a doorway,  
see Father Christmas with a begging bowl.  
Jesus' sister's eyes are a blister,  
the high street never looked so low.<sup>5</sup>

Note that in this lyric, U2's outrage is generated in part by a confidence that God, Jesus, and Mary are joined incarnationally to human experience. It is an analogical, sacramental imagination that allows these affirmations of beauty and gloom; it is an imagination informed by Christian hope that leads to the coordination of good and bad in the final words of their most recent album:

What once was hurt  
What once was friction  
What left a mark  
No longer stings  
Because Grace makes beauty  
Out of ugly things.<sup>6</sup>

Hopkins' poems and U2's songs are representative of the Catholic intellectual tradition's conviction that the act of knowing has an aesthetic dimension. The tradition also claims that the act of knowing has a moral dimension; this is my third characteristic.

The description of a grace-filled world leads ineluctably to a commitment to the dignity of each person as created in the image of God. "Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the feature of men's faces." Much could be said here about moving from this apprehension of God in fellow persons to the affirmation of human rights and the common good. For now, I'd like simply to note that, as before, there are tensions that arise from this analogical claim. One concerns theology and theological anthropology. Human beings are good because they are God's creatures and are so loved by God that God fully took on human flesh—its joy, pain, limitations, and expectations—in the Incarnation. But something is missed if that is all we assert about human worth, for it could suggest that we value other persons, and ourselves, merely as channels to valuing God. But humans are real, eternally connected to God but not the same as God, and we have been called by God "very good."

So the Catholic-Christian moral vision not only imputes infinite worth to persons, but appraises a value that resides there that a supremely just God himself recognizes. Another tension concerns political thought. The Catholic social tradition has arrived at an unequivocal embrace of pluralist democracy. The sacral age, when the Church demanded a privileged place in the polity, has fallen to the wayside in the forward progress of civilization. And yet a genuine democracy should never leave behind its Christian inspiration. To a dialectic imagination, the following argument of Jacques Maritain is likely to be confusing, but it makes sense within the analogical, sacramental imagination that animates Catholic social theory:

The more the body politic—that is, the people—were imbued with Christian convictions and aware of the religious faith which inspires it, the more deeply it would adhere to the secular faith in the democratic charter; for, as a matter of fact, the latter has taken shape in human history as the result of the Gospel inspiration awakening the "naturally Christian" potentialities of common secular consciousness, even among the diversity of spiritual

lineages and schools of thought opposed to each other, and sometimes warped by a vitiated ideology.<sup>7</sup>

These are among the reasons I embrace the Catholic intellectual tradition. It affirms faith and reason, aesthetic appreciation and moral development. With these characteristics of the Catholic intellectual tradition in mind, I'd like to name very briefly what I personally have found to be some of the joys and difficulties of working within this intellectual tradition. One joy is the interdisciplinary engagement. Working in the Catholic intellectual tradition disposes me to be interested in a lot of things! Why? Because, in various ways, truth, beauty, and moral challenges are to be found in political science, sociology, computer science, literature, and so on. A corresponding difficulty is intellectual fragmentation and the need to justify one's ideas in many courts. For example, like many Christian ethicists and theologians, I pay a lot of attention to the work of contemporary philosophers, yet the interest is usually not mutual.

A second joy is to pursue learning that is valued for its own sake, for the pure satisfaction of intellectual growth and the aesthetic appreciation of the world. At the same time, it is no easy task to excite contemporary university students to such appreciation. It is not impossible, certainly, but economic and cultural trends push increasingly for instrumental education: preparation for a career. I don't want to state this too broadly or stereotypically. Students need training for a career, and no humanist like myself would stay in this business if he or she did not encounter on a regular basis students who get excited over the ideas we present. The challenge here is directed to cultures and institutions. What is the best way for Catholic universities to make theology, philosophy, and the humanities both compelling and viable to the students of the twenty-first century?

A third joy for me has been engaging the prophetic tradition of Catholic-Christian thought. A recent example was hearing Sister Helen Prejean speak at Sacred Heart University on October 31, 2000. Her passionate witness against capital punishment, thoroughly interwoven with concrete compassion for victims' families, stirred in me and many others a desire to reinvigorate



our moral, political, and spiritual commitments. What particularly struck me was her metaphor of Christ's cross that has two arms, one reaching out to embrace death-row inmates and their families, the other reaching out to enfold victims' families.<sup>8</sup> I can think of other symbols besides the cross that can seize our imagination for stopping capital punishment; I cannot think of another that captures as profoundly the reality of emotional loss and justified rage when a loved one is murdered *and* the possibility, indeed the necessity, of healing forgiveness. Again, the analogical imagination reconciles—perhaps tenuously and painfully—what our culture would force us to choose between.

Helen Prejean's ministry to death-row inmates and to victims' families stands at the near end of a long line reaching back to Jesus, who said, "Father forgive them; for they know not what they do," and to the prophets who held out to the Jewish people the opportunity for healing and restoration through moral and spiritual reform. A related difficulty is the difficulty of being prophetic, failing to live up to the awesome responsibility of resisting the awful ways human beings can treat each other. This obstacle is rooted in the human heart and faces both individuals and institutions. As Reinhold Niebuhr conveyed with the dichotomy "moral man/immoral society," and John Paul II with the category "structures of sin," it is all too easy for relatively benign intentions to become morally corrupted; especially in collectivities.<sup>9</sup>

My fourth joy in working in the Catholic intellectual tradition is being able to contribute to the ongoing implementation of the Second Vatican Council in the life of the Church and the Catholic academy. I am a post-Vatican II baby whose understanding of the Church and of his role as a layperson has been thoroughly shaped by the Council's articulation of the Church as the People of God. I internalized this understanding both in a number of informal ways (for example, as I saw laypersons have roles in the liturgy, as lay teachers had as much influence on my faith as clerical teachers, as I was inspired by movements like the Catholic Worker) and in formal ways (namely, as I learned about the Vatican II understanding of the Church in high school and college). When I first got involved in social service projects at

college, wrote articles for the student newspaper on topics ranging from arming the Contras in Nicaragua to rethinking birth control, I always had the nascent sense that I was speaking for the Church, my Church, playing a small role in shaping its thought and practice, particularly the practice of Catholic lay people in the modern world. That is an exciting, if daunting and occasionally burdensome, vision. It is a vision I carry into being a moral theologian.

Yet difficulties for me as a teacher and scholar arise here as well. (Some are occasioned by *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, a topic I will leave aside here.) A major challenge is making Vatican II relevant to the newest generation of Catholics, today's college-aged and younger students. Do they care, can they care, about what they take for granted and have already moved quite beyond? More broadly, how can today's Catholic young adults—raised in a digital, hyperlinked, media-saturated culture—come to appreciate the Catholic intellectual tradition, this ancient tradition stretching back through 2000 years of systematic theology, philosophical speculation, and largely European history? I like to think that if it matters to me, a member of Generation X, then it can matter to Generation Y and beyond, but I know it is a daunting task for us teachers. When it comes to teaching the Catholic intellectual tradition to today's students, I often feel more like a contemporary of Maritain than of Madonna.<sup>10</sup>

Vatican II opened as many questions about the role of the lay theologian as it did opportunities. Vatican II greatly legitimized the role of the lay theologian. At the same time, it tended to accelerate the lay person's movement into the crosscutting conversations and engagements of a pluralistic world. So as moral and systematic theologians inhabit the overlapping worlds of the Catholic scholarly community and the secular academy, a number of tensions arise—from justifying the place of theological studies in a public university to justifying to the Church's hierarchy our critical reflection upon the *magisterium*. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* offers a model of being a theologian that tries to respond to the conflict between these worlds, but at the expense, most Catholic professors feel, of Vatican II's understanding of the competency of laypersons and the Church as the People of God. The way forward will undoubtedly be difficult.

Taking off from this point, I will conclude with a few directions for the future, each of which is quite challenging and requires coordinated efforts among many Catholic institutions. One is the need for better primary, secondary, and family/parish education of young people into the Catholic intellectual tradition. If we want students at the collegiate level to explore and appropriate the Catholic intellectual tradition, they need to have a good foundational education in the tradition, just as we cannot expect them to learn the college-level math they need for the technical twenty-first century without studying algebra, geometry, and trigonometry in high school. Can Catholic universities fill a role that is not remedial, but perhaps that assists Catholic high schools, grade schools, and parishes in their roles? (At Sacred Heart, REAPS is an institution that plays such a role by training parochial school teachers in the Hartford archdiocese.) Of course, such initiatives do not address the facts that many Catholic students have not attended parochial schools, and that many students at a Catholic university are not Catholic.

A second direction involves coming to grips with how to teach the Catholic intellectual tradition in the postmodern era. Some commentators on education have claimed that the only way to make teaching viable to Generation X and beyond is to replace the model of the teacher as a disseminator of knowledge to the model with the teacher as a facilitator of learning that students accomplish largely on their own and access through the web and other multimedia. Classrooms should be transformed from lecture halls to project rooms where students learn by creating and applying information to real-life problems.<sup>11</sup> I imagine the Catholic intellectual tradition can be taught, and perhaps more effectively, with the assistance of new technology. Parts of it, such as the ethical and social teachings, may even be well suited to a problem-based and project-based approach. But an embrace of the postmodern, technological era entails a fundamental shift in how we think about tradition, its authority, and its content. I am unsure how much justice will be done to the Catholic intellectual tradition by these new educational models. At any rate, it is an open question that cannot be avoided and must be explored creatively.

A third direction is to put renewed effort into "doing" the Catholic intellectual tradition, as opposed to studying it and talking about it. We must certainly study and examine, but then how can we nurture, promote, renew, and expand the Catholic intellectual tradition in all its cultural manifestations? The question must be directed more broadly than to Catholic theology and philosophy. Fortunately, that is the purpose of tomorrow's working groups. It was the question raised by David O'Brien when he convoked people to Holy Cross last November to talk about the future of Catholic intellectual and cultural life. Some basic ideas are taking shape at a number of institutions. I would like to see Catholic universities exposing their students to novelists, poets, musicians and filmmakers who express Catholic themes in their work, and even sponsoring such work. I would like to see initiatives for engaging the Catholic intellectual tradition in courses and research projects in the natural and social sciences. These initiatives often take place through Catholic Studies programs and core curricula, which are two means among others for "doing" the Catholic intellectual tradition. Whatever form the initiatives take, they should be cognizant of and responsive to the technological and multicultural global environment that is taking shape. As the Catholic Church is ever more a worldwide church, the study and practice of the Catholic intellectual tradition must be attuned to the multiple enculturations of Catholicism. In addition, "doing" the Catholic intellectual tradition should not be limited to universities, so we need to explore the creation or rejuvenation of institutions that support Catholic-themed arts and letters.

A final point for consideration would be for educators to make a renewed appropriation of our prophetic traditions. This would open so many avenues that for now it is best to close with another open question: What will it mean for Catholic education in the next century to claim its prophetic roots?

#### Notes

1. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," in *Hopkins: Poems and Prose* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 18.

2. Terrence W. Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 126.
3. Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition*, 134.
4. U2, "Beautiful Day," *All That You Can't Leave Behind* (Interscope Records, 2000).
5. U2, "If God Will Send His Angels," *Pop* (Island Records, 1997).
6. U2, "Grace," *All That You Can't Leave Behind*.
7. Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 113.
8. Sister Helen Prejean, "The Journey of *Dead Man Walking*," *Sacred Heart University Review* 20 (Fall 1999/Spring 2000), 1-30.
9. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Scribner's, 1932); and John Paul II, "Sollicitudo Rei Socialis: On Social Concern" (1987), in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992), paragraph 36.
10. For a positive account of the distinctive faith of Generation X, see Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).
11. See Peter Sacks, *Generation X Goes to College: An Eye-Opening Account of Teaching in Postmodern America* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), ch. 14.