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The Catholic Intellectual Tradition and Sacred Heart University

Cover Page Footnote

Anthony J. Cernera is President of Sacred Heart University.

ANTHONY J. CERNERA

*The Catholic Intellectual Tradition
and Sacred Heart University*

Neither an individual nor an institution is well served by neglecting a continuing reflection on its nature and identity. This is true of all times but especially in a period like our own which is marked by profound cultural transition. Our continuing growth and development as a university depends, in part, on our ability and willingness to continue to reflect on what we are and what our purpose is.

Since the approval by the Board of Trustees in 1989 of its strategic plan, *Reaching Our Potential*, Sacred Heart University has sought to engage in an ongoing process of reflection on its mission as a comprehensive Catholic university in the contemporary world. Such reflection has led me to ask about the distinctive elements of Catholicism that pertain to the identity of a Catholic university in general and of this particular Catholic university, which was founded in 1963 by Bishop Walter Curtis, who had an innovative vision of a Catholic university for lay people and led by lay people.

For the purposes of this paper, I would like to identify five distinctive elements within Catholicism that I think bear on our ongoing reflection on the nature of a Catholic university. These are: 1) the principle of the Incarnation; 2) Catholicism's philosophical anthropology; 3) faith and reason; 4) the existence and knowability of truth; and 5) Catholicism as *universalis* and *katholikos*. With each of these distinctive elements, I have identified some implications for our life as a Catholic university.

I. The Principle of the Incarnation

When the Christian community gathers at the Eucharist on Sundays, those present profess in the Nicene Creed a core belief of Catholicism, indeed what some commentators would suggest is its distinctive or defining element – namely, the Incarnation of the

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Word of God: "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit, he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary and was made man." For Catholicism, as indeed for all Christian churches, the center-point of human history is that the Son of God became incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth. The *Logos* of God, the Eternal Word of God, is made visible in the flesh. This has consequences for all of human history, both before the historical event of Jesus and into the future. God is definitively present in all of history from the beginning of time, in the present and into the future, a future which will find its eschatological fulfillment in the final establishment of the reign of God.

Because of this core belief of Catholicism in the Incarnation of the Son of God in history, there follows a sacramental principle which pervades how Catholicism engages the world. It also has general implications for a philosophical anthropology and has specific implications regarding reason and the intellectual life.

According to St. Augustine, a sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible reality. That invisible reality is grace or the divine presence. Pope Paul VI, in his opening address at the second session of the Second Vatican Council in 1963, expressed this classical view in a more contemporary way by referring to a sacrament as "a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God." The sacramental perspective of Catholicism 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. For Catholicism, all reality is potentially sacramental.

Thus, St. Ignatius of Loyola captures the depths of the Catholic sacramental vision in establishing the ideal of Jesuit spirituality as "finding God in all things," since that is precisely where God can be found. According to the Catholic understanding of things, it is in the visible, the tangible, the finite, and the historical that God can be found. All of these are actual or potential carriers of the divine presence.

Implication

The fundamental proposition that emerges from this first distinctive element of Catholicism is that the Catholic university is the

place where the religious and the academic are intrinsically related. Michael Buckley of Boston College captures it most thoroughly when he writes:

Any movement toward meaning and truth is inchoatively religious. This obviously does not suggest that quantum mechanics or geography is religion or theology; it does mean that 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.

At the same time, the tendencies of faith are inescapably toward the academic. This obviously does not suggest that all serious religion is scholarship; it does mean that the dynamism inherent in faith – if not inhibited – is toward its own understanding, toward its own self-possession in knowledge. In their full development, the religious intrinsically involves the academic, and the academic intrinsically involves the religious – granted that this development is *de facto* always imperfectly realized at best or even seriously frustrated.

To grasp the character or promise of the Catholic university, one must understand this unique institution as an organic fulfillment of the two drives for knowledge out of which it issues: the drive of inquiry toward an ultimacy or that comprehensive meaning that is the object of religion; the drive of Christian faith, i.e., of living within the self-giving of God in Christ and in the Spirit, toward the appropriation of this comprehensive experience in understanding. The inherent integrity of faith-experience moving toward intelligence and of finite intelligence moving toward completion, this mutual entailment is what a Catholic university must affirm and embody, however halting and imperfect

its attempts.¹

II. Philosophical Anthropology

The second distinctive element of Catholicism that pertains to the identity of a Catholic university is its understanding of human existence and what it means to be human. Human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. Every human being is a spiritual creature who is alive by the breath of God which dwells in us. Since each human person is an image of God, it can be said that, in a sense, every human being reflects God. The twentieth-century German theologian Karl Rahner captured this fundamental insight of the philosophical anthropology of Catholicism this way: "When God chooses to be what is not God, man comes to be."²

In addition, human existence is always graced existence. This existence, which is radically oriented toward God, is also radically social. Not only do we go to God with one another, but our destiny is also fundamentally linked with all of humanity. The goal of human existence is also about communion with one another in the company of the saints. Furthermore, there is a special connection to the poor and those who are deprived of their fundamental humanity. In the Catholic view, my humanity is diminished when the dignity and the worth of another human being is damaged or destroyed. A vision of the human person and his or her fulfillment necessarily involves an active concern for justice in the world.

Implication

The implication of this second distinctive feature of Catholicism as it relates to the Catholic intellectual tradition is that the Catholic university is the place where the deepest aspirations of the human person and the community are of utmost importance. At a Catholic university, the fundamental questions of Who am I? Why am I here? and Where am I going? are of critical importance. These questions are uniquely personal ones. The way we answer them and the life we live based on those answers will have significant implications and effects for all of us. So they are not isolated questions. They are profoundly social, and they are of ultimate significance.

Students at a Catholic university ought to be provided with ample opportunities to search for the meaning and purpose of their lives within the context of humanity's collective wisdom regarding this search. In addition, the search for a more thoroughgoing humanity permeates the research and teaching of the faculty and provides a distinctive organizing principle for the general education program for undergraduate students.

Furthermore, there are always moral and spiritual dimensions to education. Education in the Catholic tradition is concerned about the whole person. A complete education assists students in their human development as persons. Therefore, a comprehensive education in a Catholic context must attend to these dimensions as well as to the intellectual dimension.

III. Faith and Reason

There follows from these first two distinctive elements of Catholicism a third characteristic that I want to hold up as being of importance for our reflection on the nature of a Catholic university. Catholicism maintains that there is a fundamental relationship of compatibility and continuity between faith and reason. Since reason is a participation in the divine *Logos*, it is fundamentally trustworthy and ultimately cannot conflict with faith. Reason can be allowed to, indeed encouraged to, in the words of John Paul II, "search for truth wherever analysis and evidence leads."¹³

Implication

This third distinctive feature implies that the Catholic intellectual tradition affirms the significant role of the human intellect in the search for and discovery of truth. This search is ultimately for God, who is the source and goal of all human desire to know. The tradition affirms that human beings have the ability to grasp and understand truth through rigorous intellectual activity. Through the use of our reason, we can come to significant knowledge of the world. This includes the important task of reflection on experience and engagement in the world. Critical thinking and reflective action, as well as research, inquiry, and questioning, are cherished values of this tradition and

should characterize the intellectual life of a Catholic university, both its faculty and its students.

This principle of Catholicism forms the basis for a strong defense of academic freedom at a Catholic university. It is precisely because there is a fundamental relationship of compatibility and continuity between faith and reason that a Catholic university seeks to ensure the scholar's search for truth. Understood in this context, a denial of a professor's academic freedom would be a failure to affirm the Catholic university's conviction that the source and goal of truth is one.

IV. Truth

Implied in the third characteristic of Catholicism is the conviction that truth exists and that it is knowable within the limits of the human condition. For Catholicism, as in Judaism, truth has its origins in God who can "neither deceive nor be deceived" (First Vatican Council). Rabbi David Novak suggested a new role of a Catholic university in our contemporary culture. His notion is provocative, and I quote it at length:

In earlier modernity it could be assumed that the difference between a Catholic university and a secular one was located in the proper object of the spiritual quest for truth. The quest itself was assumed to be common to all, however. Thus it was commonly held that human persons are beings engaged in a search for truth that is proper to both their own nature and the nature of the things they seek to know (*veritas sequitur esse rerum*). Today such an assumption can no longer be made. There are large segments of the university world, especially in the humanities (which is the modern location of the study and teaching of philosophy), who do not believe that there is any real truth, either within humans or within the world, and that any search for it, by whatever means, is therefore quite futile. Human intellect, then, is simply a function of the power interests of the particular group one happens to be part of. Only power, not

truth, is real and worth dealing with. In this world, there is no longer any tension between faith and intellect because there is no longer any truth over which they can even quarrel. Without the assumption of the reality of truth, neither faith nor intellect can really desire (*quaerere*) anything. The only thing left then is either at best compromise or at worst conquest. But neither compromise nor conquest is an act of faith or of intellect. Thus we are left today with neither theology nor philosophy but only ideology. And, of course, in this kind of world, there is no need for a university anymore, whether a Catholic university or even a secular one.

Into this empty cultural situation both faith and intellect must forcefully reinsert and reassert themselves. That cannot be by argument, because there is nothing outside of them to argue with anymore. Instead, it must be by demonstration, by showing that human life and culture, as Aristotle said about nature, cannot stand a vacuum, in our case the intellectual vacuum that the denial of truth necessarily entails. For Catholics, this reassertion can perhaps best come through the revitalization and rededication of one of the greatest contributions your tradition has made to our civilization: the university as *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*. Such a community seems to be possible only when truth is accepted from one's background and hoped for on the horizon.⁴

Implication

This distinctive feature relates to the idea that the Catholic university is the place where the search for truth is cherished and nourished. Since the truth is whole, there is also a fundamental unity and interconnectedness of knowledge. This conviction of the Catholic intellectual tradition is the basis for interest in interdisciplinary approaches to learning. In addition, it is the reason why education in a

Catholic context is always interested in the synthesizing of knowledge. Learning is not complete without the students' learning how to bring together what they have learned in a variety of places.

V. Catholicism as Katholikos

Towards the end of the Nicene Creed, the community professes its belief in the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church." The Jesuit scholar Walter Ong has noted that the early Church chose to use the Greek word *katholikos* rather than the Latin equivalent *universalis*. While both words mean universal, *universalis* carries within it the image of turning around a point, describing a circle and hence an area with boundaries. *Katholikos*, on the other hand, means throughout-the-whole. It suggests permeation, a leaven within a larger whole that expands as the larger whole expands.

As Ong pointed out,

"throughout-the-whole," *katholikos*, "catholic," does not suggest a boundary as "universal" does. It is expansive, open, growing. If the whole gets larger, what is "throughout the whole" gets larger too. This concept "throughout-the-whole" recalls Jesus' description of the kingdom of God as leaven, yeast, placed in dough. In Matthew 13.33 (echoed in Luke 13.21) we read, "The reign of God is like yeast which a woman took and kneaded into three measures of flour. Eventually the whole mass of dough began to rise." Yeast is a plant, a fungus, and it grows. It has no limits itself, but is limited only by the limits of whatever it grows in. The Church, understood as Catholic in this way, is a limitless, growing reality.⁵

The Church is more fully catholic when it is *katholikos*. The Church gathered at the Second Vatican Council was a visible manifestation of what Walbert Buhlmann has called the world-church. Gathered together for the first time were representatives from every continent of the planet, no longer only Europeans or North Americans

representing those continents. During the twentieth century, the geographical center of Catholicism has shifted from Western Europe and North America to Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Today more than 70% of the 1.1 billion members of the Catholic Church live on these continents, whereas at the beginning of the century, 90% of Catholics lived in Europe and North America.

The Second Vatican Council recognized that the twentieth century was a period of rapid and profound change. Seeking to understand better the nature and implications of this ongoing change, the Council developed a process of undergoing reflection and thinking referred to as "reading the signs of the time" (*Gaudium et Spes*). The Church recognized that it has much to learn from as well as to contribute to the world.

Implication

One would expect to find at a Catholic university in North America a commitment to serious study of the Western intellectual tradition. That tradition has been shaped and has carried the Catholic intellectual tradition for two thousand years. However, because of this fifth distinctive element within Catholicism, an education at a Catholic university should encourage its students to learn about cultures and traditions beyond their own. Such learning is done in ways that foster synthesis and greater understanding among people.

Conclusion

Finally, by way of summary, it is a particular responsibility of the Catholic university is to preserve, transmit and develop the Catholic intellectual tradition. Like all Catholic universities, Sacred Heart University has the responsibility to preserve, develop, and transmit the Catholic intellectual tradition and to bring the wisdom of that tradition to bear on the great questions of the times in which we live. There are, therefore, implications for teaching, research and community service at Sacred Heart University and at all other Catholic colleges and universities:

- Since Catholic universities have the responsibility to

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transmit the Catholic intellectual tradition, one ought to find in the curriculum opportunities for students to engage that tradition as it bears on their growth and development as human beings as well as on their preparation to be leaders in their professions. In addition, there ought to be opportunities within the curriculum to understand and evaluate the wisdom of this tradition as it bears on the contemporary questions and issues facing the world today.

- Catholic universities fulfill their responsibility to develop the Catholic intellectual tradition by providing opportunities for their scholars to engage in the discovery of truth. In addition, this occurs through fostering various kinds of research that engage that tradition with the new knowledge being generated in a variety of disciplines. Furthermore, the Catholic intellectual tradition is developed through various research projects that create dialogue between the contemporary culture and the tradition.
- Catholic universities are profoundly aware of their responsibility to the broader society, especially to the poor. It is, therefore, an essential dimension of these institutions that they foster ways for all members of the academic community to be of service beyond the walls of the academy. Such service includes the responsibility of those engaged in scholarly research to search for solutions that contribute to the common good, research that is undertaken in collaborative ways, both within a department and with colleagues outside of one's discipline. There is also the conviction that critical reflection on such activities can be a significant way of learning and discovering truth.

Notes

Michael J. Buckley, "The Catholic University and the Promise Inherent in Its Identity," in John Langan, ed., *Catholic Universities in Church and Society: A Dialogue on Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Univ. Press, 1993).

Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), p. 48.

John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*.

David Novak, "Comment" on Michael Buckley's essay, in Langan, ed., *Catholic Universities in Church and Society*. pp. 99-100.

Walter J. Ong, "Realizing Catholicism: Faith, Learning, and the Future," Marianist Award lecture, 1989; monograph published by the University of Dayton, 1989, p. 8.