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# The Role of the Church and a Catholic University in the Contemporary World

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Walter Cardinal Kasper is President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. This talk was presented on December 3, 2001, as the Fourteenth Annual Bishop Walter W. Curtis Lecture.

WALTER CARDINAL KASPER

*The Role of the Church and  
a Catholic University in the Contemporary World*

Jews and Christians share a common term which is central to both their traditions, known in the Hebrew Bible as *emet*, in Greek as *aletheia*, and in English "truth." Indeed, it could be maintained that all European and Western cultural tradition is built on the centrality of what is meant by *emet* and *aletheia*. This is true especially for an institution such as a university. The search for truth is, we could say, the rationale and the soul of academic life and academic institutions. In this light, it is not merely incidental that the first universities in the Western world in the medieval age were established by the Church, whose mission is to give witness to the truth of God revealed in creation and in the gospel. Thus, from the very beginning, Church and university were bound by a common mission and a common responsibility.

Clearly, however, Church and university are not the same; they are different, and they are even independent institutions. This too is rooted in the common Judeo-Christian heritage of *emet*, "aletheia," "truth."

The Hebrew-Christian Bible concerns itself with the truth which is inherent in human wisdom, human experience, in human art and literature. The biblical creation doctrine holds that the search for truth was written into the human heart by the Creator (see Acts 17:27-29; Romans 2:15). Truth and the knowledge of truth are intimately connected with human existence. Truth alone enables freedom (John 8:32); freedom from ignorance and slavery. Truth imbues clarity into life and its conditions, allowing people to react both contemplatively and actively. It gives answers to the questions that concern each of us existentially, about the "whence" and "wherefore" of our existence. Truth is the basis of the identity and \_\_\_\_\_

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unity of society and even of all humankind. It frees us from the

isolation and confusion in which ignorance keeps us imprisoned; it makes understanding and agreement possible. Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical letter *Fides et ratio* (1998) affirms: "One can define the human being as one who searches for the truth" (28).

Yet when we speak of truth, we are not merely referring to the truth sought by our own intellect, but to that which comes from God through revelation. "All your words are true," recites Psalm 119:60. For the pious, the law and the commandments are not a burden, but contain the truth and show the true way to life. Jahweh himself is rich with *chased* and *emmett* (grace and truth/faithfulness) (Exodus 34:6). In the New Testament the truth ultimately is Jesus Christ in person (John 14:6). Thomas Aquinas says about Jesus Christ that "*viam veritatis in seipso demonstravit*" (*Summa theologiae* III prol.). In his self-revelation in Jesus Christ, God not only revealed himself to humans but also revealed humans to other humans. The Church is called "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15), the tent and the house of the truth, the sign and instrument of truth.

*Fides* and *ratio* (faith and reason) are not contradictory. Reason in search of truth ultimately confronts a deep mystery, one known through both positive and negative experiences. The experience of love and the experience of suffering and death each in their own way disclose a dimension of depth and engender questions the human mind ultimately cannot answer. So reason transcends itself. On the other hand, while biblical understanding holds that faith is a gift, it is not one that destructs but rather heals and fulfills the human search for truth. Faith instills an inner dynamic to understanding. 1 Peter 3:15 urges us to confer reason to the hope within us. While faith and reason are distinct, they are mutual reference points, whether in dialogue and reciprocal enrichment or, as has often occurred in modern times, in conflict.

In this perspective, there are two principles in the theological tradition stemming ultimately from St. Augustine and St. Anselm of Canterbury: "*intellectus quaerens fideni*" (intellect seeking faith) and "*fides quaerens intellectum*" (faith seeking for intellect). In his encyclical letter, *Fides et ratio*, Pope John Paul II recalls the long and great history of their mutual interaction, especially in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, who, at the very dawn of European universities, provided the finest expression and deepest synthesis of faith and reason.

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The Pope has also drawn our attention to the current tasks of theology, namely the renewal of "its specific methods in order to serve evangelization more effectively" in accordance with the Second Vatican Council, and the search for the ultimate truth which revelation entrusts to us. We, as theologians, must remember that our work corresponds to a dynamism found in faith itself and that the proper object of our enquiry is "the truth which is the living God and his plan for salvation revealed in Jesus Christ" (see *Fides et Ratio*, §92). Hence, service to the truth is fundamental for the Church.

Indeed, the biblical word most at the heart of John Paul II is "truth." In my opinion, this is not only because of his teaching background, as a professor of philosophy concerned with *philosophía*, the search for truth and wisdom. It also reflects his episcopal ministry, as a witness and teacher of the truth of the Gospel. In fact, his task is to lead the Church in such a way that, directed by love, it keeps to the truth (Ephesians 4:15) and remains in the truth (see John 8:13).

If we therefore understand witness to truth as the fundamental mission of the Church, in times of crises of faith we would not retreat in fear behind supposedly secure walls. Difficulties must be seen as challenges to be overcome with the courage and confidence emanating from faith. For God has not imparted the spirit of timidity (2 Timothy 1:7). We can be confident that God's Spirit will lead us in and through new questions into the fullness of truth (John 16:13).

Catholic universities are in a special way places where this encounter of faith and reason, of faith and human culture must take place. The Church's role as founder of the university is not merely a footnote to Western cultural history or to Church history. Indeed, it is in the very own interest of the Church today to have such institutions and forums of encounter, which enable the Church to carry out her own mission to expound to our world the reason underlying Christian hope. While universities as such are not the means of evangelization, they can help the Church to carry out her mission of evangelization.

This common but distinct mission is important and even urgent today in a specific way, as there are many challenges that the service of truth now faces. Several currents of thought developing over time have marked our modern societies and cultures in different ways and at different levels. Church and theology have entered into contact with such systems in various contexts through dialogue and/or through

struggles, enriching themselves but also enduring suffering. Neo-Marxism, scientism and rationalism, pluralism and relativism have, among others, played a major role in shaping our way of thinking.

Materialism, for example, has often replaced the search for truth with the search for material well-being, focusing on worldly happiness to the detriment of spiritual achievement. This is a reduction and a life-threatening amputation of the human being.

For scientism and rationalism, the truth can never be perceived with absolute certainty: it is a regulative idea for the never-ending process of knowledge and understanding, and can be recognized only by "trial and error." At the same time, truth is what can be calculated and measured through scientific models. This line of thought can lead to arrogance on the part of human beings, with the ultimate risk of considering themselves masters of creation. The result is an excessive interference with nature, and a neglect for the basic meaning of existence, endangering not only its equilibrium but, in modern bio-medicine, leading to the manipulation of human beings.

In the face of these currents of thought, it is important for a Catholic university to remember the very nature of truth. The Christian understanding of creation holds that truth basically exists in the inner veracity of reality itself. Only because reality has structures of meaning can we recognize the ways reality conforms to natural law. Reality is not a scrap-heap of fortuitous events nor the result of blind evolution. It is rationally transparent and can be made transparent. But the light that shines into the world can only transpire through human beings, and in their understandings. Formally, truth lies in creative, intellectual reconstruction and comprehension, in its reflection in human understanding through which truth shows and reveals reality.

Thus, as Thomas Aquinas affirms, although the human person is the crux and pivot of reality (*Summa contra gentiles* II, 45), he/she is not the measure of all things nor their creator and "maker." Humans will only discern the truth of their existence if they behave in accordance with reality, and find their place in the God-given order in humility. The humility underlying this understanding of truth and reality is contrary to the arrogance with which humans assume to be masters of creation and of reality, masters of death and life. True humility is not a humiliation of the human being, but the expression of

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his or her dignity in the order of creation, the very truth of human existence.

Another challenge that the service of truth faces today is that posed by relativism and pluralism. These two streams characterize our entire modern culture. Our society has lost its trust in the truth, and even wonders whether there is "the" truth at all.

There are various reasons for this attitude. One is that abstract truth alone does not satisfy our hearts. Modern enlightenment and scientism transformed themselves into existentialism. There is only *my* truth; a general truth would be repressive and an obstacle to subjective self-realization. Indeed, the claim for absolute truth can become and often has become dangerous and totalitarian. The experience of totalitarian ideological systems and their inhuman disdain for human life and dignity, as well as the newer fundamentalist radicalism evolving towards terrorism must serve as warnings.

The unique and absolute dignity of every person independent of his or her culture, religion, nation, or ethnic group is deeply founded in the biblical message that God created the human person in his image and likeness. The Second Vatican Council recalled this truth when it issued its *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, which opened with the affirmation: "A sense of the dignity of the human person has been impressing itself more and more deeply on the consciousness of contemporary man. And the demand is increasingly made that men should act on their own judgment, enjoying and making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion but motivated by a sense of duty" (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 1). With this *Declaration*, the Church distanced itself from a former position whereby only the truth has a right to existence, not the error. Truth came to be seen not as an abstract reality or ideology, but as truth which exists, not as an obstacle but in and for the person. This personalistic view of truth does not guarantee just personal religious freedom, for one of its consequences is also, for example, academic freedom, which is of fundamental importance in our world.

But when personal freedom makes its passage towards individualistic relativism and a qualitative pluralism, when one states that nobody can claim the truth, and all "knowledge paths" are recognized simply as fragments of the effort towards truth, then the time of assurance is hopelessly gone; everything is provisional and

impermanent (see *Fides et Ratio*, §91), everything is indifferent, everything goes. We as human beings are left alone and without answers to the most profound questions of our existence. This is the skeptical and cynical position of Pontius Pilate: "What is the truth?" Truth begins to not matter, because nobody can answer this question. But when relativism, pluralism, and skepticism become overriding ideals there emerges also an internal contradiction. For then no truth exists except the truth that no truth exists.

This situation presents therefore a challenge for academic institutions in their search for truth. It is a challenge even more for the mission entrusted to the Church to serve and bear witness to the truth. The mission of the Church in this perspective is often reduced to social work. But her mission for the sake of truth does not involve simply a well-meaning campaign engendering sympathetic assent, but should provoke perplexity, skepticism, and even rejection and hostility. We could perhaps put it in these terms: with the loss of the truth enshrined in biblical monotheism there is a reversion to pagan polytheism. As Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Weber had already envisaged, the old gods and goddesses rise from their graves and return to begin anew their eternal struggle. For when there is no longer one God and one truth, there is no one humankind and no hope for a consensus about fundamental truth and human rights. If individuals only know their own truth, and each group only knows its own truth, then unity and relationships become a question of power to be resolved by the violence of the strongest. Hence, I would pose the query whether social Darwinism and violent ideological power struggles are the result of this ideology.

Here we meet the very challenge of today. Church and academic institutions are no longer antithetical or even inimical as has often been the case since modern enlightenment, where the institution of the Church seemed to be the enemy of free thinking and free research. This is no longer the situation of today and quarrels of this kind are now rear-guard battles. In our new situation Church and academic institutions, especially Catholic universities, are allies.

Together, though with different means and in different ways, they must embark on a struggle for the truth, for the capacity of the human person to know the truth and to come to a reasonable and free consensus about the truth, that truth of the human person, his or her

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inalienable dignity, the truth of life, the respect for life, and the preservation of creation.

In so doing, both the Church and academic institutions work for peace in the world. For peace is more than the silence of arms and cannot be imposed by arms alone. ``*Opus iustitiae pax,*'' ``peace is the work of justice" (Isaiah 32:17); peace presupposes respect for the truth of every human person and at the same time agreement and free consensus about the fundamental truths and values of common social life. Peace therefore is also the work of truth and of the common recognition of truth.

A Catholic university and the common life on a university campus should be and could be an example, the school and the home of such a search for truth, for mutual recognition of the truth of the other, and for a common peaceful life in truth.

It is not only our society and state which need such institutions, but also the Church itself, in order to carry out her own mission in our world today. The Church needs academics of the highest order, intellectuals who do not use their skills and knowledge only for their own sake, their own advantage, and their own interest, but in the service of the common good, and this means for the promotion of a world which is shaped according to the truth God revealed to us in creation itself and bestowed upon us through his revelation in salvation history.

The Church needs universities, as universities need also the Church, not as truth policemen or as watchdogs, but as witness of this revealed truth which does not oppress but acknowledges, even defends and values, the human search for truth. In terms of human limitations, often also narrow-mindedness and the possibility of error, the witness of the Church can have a healing power, can encourage, give orientation, and point the way to the future. For a Christian, ultimately all truth and all human wisdom is summarized and integrated in Jesus Christ, who is for us the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). Whoever follows him ``will never walk in the darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Jews cannot accept our Christian Christological vision of faith. Their faith community understands itself as the place where through the Torah the truth and the wisdom of the Lord is present. Yet the mutual appreciation and friendship between Jews and Christians

despite differences could become a model for a life in common, for the mutual search for truth, and for working together in respect for the truth in a world where true peace in justice and truth is needed more than perhaps ever before.