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Engaging The Catholic Intellectual Tradition – Sacred Heart University’s Common Core: *The Human Journey*

MICHELLE LORIS

The Catholic Identity of a Catholic University

Pope Benedict XVI is concerned about preserving the Catholic identity of Catholic universities. His concern is valid: the question of what constitutes a distinct Catholic identity at a Catholic university has been a pressing concern and a much debated issue in Catholic higher education during the past fifty years. The late Monica Hellwig, former Executive Director of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, stated that “[a] Catholic university or college cannot take its Catholic identity for granted in the way we might have done in the earlier decades of the twentieth century.”¹

Certainly, at Catholic universities we have lofty and ambitious learning outcomes for our graduates. We want to provide our students with the knowledge, ideas, skills, and critical abilities needed to understand, reflect upon, and act with purpose and effect in our increasingly complex, ever-changing, global world. We want to equip our students with the intellectual abilities, spiritual discernment, and moral and ethical principles that will enable them to distinguish between those things which inspire the mind, satisfy the soul, and advance the human good – and those things which do not. We want to develop in them the intelligence and compassion needed to serve and lead in our world today. In all, we want our graduates to live lives which reflect, that as creatures of a loving God, their lives and their world are sacred and divine.

But how do we embed these goals into a vision and mission that can constitute a distinctly Catholic identity for our institutions and at the same time maintain the institution’s essential character as a university? For a Catholic university must be, first and foremost, a university. It must be, as the Reverend Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C has stated “a place where all the great questions are asked, where an exciting conversation is continually in progress, where the mind constantly grows as the values and powers of intelligence and wisdom are exercised in full

1 M. HELLWIG, *The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Catholic University. Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*, ed. by A.J. CERNERA – O.J. MORGAN. Fairfield 2000, 3.

freedom.”² A Catholic university does not flourish, nor can it serve its students and faculty well, if, in the words of John Paul II, it is not dedicated to “search for truth wherever analysis and evidence leads;” if it does not provide for the free exploration of knowledge and ideas. How, then, do we create a distinct identity as a Catholic university in our curriculum, in our teaching and research, and at the same time, sustain the intellectual rigor and academic excellence that are the very essence of a university identity?

Hellwig points us in the right direction; she tells us that “most basic to the whole enterprise (of a Catholic university) is the institution’s respect and care for the Catholic intellectual heritage.”³ Peggy O’Brien Steinfels, former editor of *Commonweal*, also asserts that “Catholic intellectual life is central to Catholic identity (... and) colleges and universities cannot claim to be Catholic if this tradition is not part of their core understanding; and the tradition cannot survive if Catholic colleges and universities do not renew it, maintain it, nourish it, support it, and pass it on.”⁴ It is the main responsibility, then, of the Catholic university to be a steward of this intellectual tradition. As its steward, the Catholic university’s task must be to engage in the preservation, transmission, and ongoing development of the Catholic intellectual tradition; and as a university, it must engage in this task not only with receptivity for the “accumulated wisdom of the past,”⁵ but also with critical reflection and spiritual discernment as it values, and re-evaluates this tradition, as well as continues its ongoing development. It is in this way that a Catholic university can be its best self as distinctly Catholic and at the time same engage its faculty and students in the intellectual life that advances knowledge; promotes the human good, and honors God. This essay will discuss how Sacred Heart University, a comprehensive Catholic university rooted in the liberal arts and Catholic intellectual traditions, has strengthened its Catholic identity and deepened its intellectual and pedagogical life as a university through the development and implementation of its new academic signature piece, its common core: *The Human Journey*.

The Catholic Intellectual Tradition

The Human Journey engages faculty and students in an integrated, multi-disciplinary understanding of the liberal arts and sciences, the Catholic intellectual tradition, and four fundamental and enduring questions of human meaning and value:

- 2 T. HESBURGH C.S.C. News and Information. University of Notre Dame, 1. <http://newsinfo.nd.edu/content.cfm?topicId=12044>.
- 3 HELLWIG, 3.
- 4 O.M. STEINFELS, The Catholic Intellectual Tradition. Occasional Papers on Catholic Education. Associate of Catholic Colleges and Universities (November, 1995), 5–6.
- 5 HELLWIG, 7.

- what does it mean to be human;
- what does it mean to live a life of meaning and purpose;
- what does it mean to understand and appreciate the natural world; and
- what does it mean to form a more just society for the common good?

The courses that constitute this core are: history, literature, a choice between a social science (psychology, political science, sociology), or a natural science (chemistry, biology, physics), and a capstone course in religious studies or philosophy. The four fundamental questions stated above frame the syllabus of each course taught in *The Human Journey*. Further, each course must engage the Catholic intellectual tradition from the perspective of its discipline, and so our first question, as we developed and implemented this new core, has been to ask: what is the Catholic intellectual tradition?

In his 2003 opening address on "The Catholic Intellectual Tradition" at St. John's and St. Benedict's, William Cahoy defines the Catholic intellectual tradition as "a 2000 year body of thought, literature, and art that has been historically influential."⁶ He points out, however, that this intellectual tradition is not simply an historical artifact intended for museum appreciation, but that the Catholic intellectual tradition "is a 2000 year conversation resulting from the belief that thinking, serious, sustained intellectual reflection is a good thing."⁷ He further explains that this ongoing conversation is essentially a product of the interaction of Christianity and the culture of which it is a part. In sum, he states that the Catholic intellectual tradition may be understood as "a 2000 year conversation about the world; our place in it, God's work in the world, and our relationship with God."⁸

At the core of the Catholic intellectual tradition, then, is an ongoing dialogue between faith and reason, between religion, nature, and culture. It is a dialogue characterized by rigorous intellectual inquiry. In the words of Pope John XXIII, it is a dialogue that seeks to "distinguish the signs of the times" (Humanae Salutis 6) within the culture in the light of faith and reason. We see this same thinking resonated in the late John Paul II's repeated call for a "dialogue with the culture."

The Catholic intellectual tradition most prominently thrives at the Catholic university where this interaction between religion and intellect should take place. Theologian Michael Buckley describes the nature of this interaction in the following way:

Any academic movement towards meaning or coherence or truth, whether in the humanities, the sciences, or the professions, is inchoatively religious (...) [that is, it is] the drive of the human mind toward ultimacy i.e. towards a completion or a whole, in which it can obtain a comprehensive sense (...) unless the culture arrests its progress by dictating the despair of its fulfillment (...) Similarly, the commitments and instincts of faith are inescapably towards the

6 W. CAHOY, *The Catholic Intellectual Tradition*. Fall Forum: College of St. Benedict/St. John's University, 2004, 5.

7 CAHOY, 7-8.

8 CAHOY, 11

academic (...) [T]he dynamism inherent in the experience of faith – if not inhibited by fideism – is towards the understanding of both itself and its relationship to every other dimension of life.⁹

The Catholic intellectual tradition is the crucible that fosters this interaction between the academic and the religious for two important reasons. First, it is in this tradition that serious intellectual inquiry raises questions about truth and ultimacy; and second, it is in this tradition that faith is nourished; and a faith that is not nourished by intellectual inquiry would become, as John Paul II states in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, “a faith that places itself on the margin of what is human, of what is therefore culture, [it] would be a faith unfaithful to the fullness of what the Word of God manifests and reveals, a decapitated faith, worse still, a faith in the process of self-annihilation.”¹⁰ Thus, the Catholic intellectual tradition is where the Church can do its best thinking, and the Catholic university is where that thinking can best take place. It is the Catholic intellectual tradition’s commitment to serious intellectual inquiry and to cultural dialogue between faith and reason that sustains both the vibrancy of a Catholic university as well as the meaning of its faith.

Themes of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

Both Mönikā Hellwīg, in her essay, “The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Catholic University,” and Mark Roche, in his monograph, *The Intellectual Appeal of Catholicism and the Idea of a Catholic University*, identify certain distinct characteristics of this intellectual tradition “which have direct implications for Catholic higher education and scholarship,”¹¹ and which “mark the Catholicism of a Catholic university.”¹² It is useful to look at what each author describes and then to examine the relationship between their ideas – which is what we have done as we developed our common core, *The Human Journey*. For it is understanding these distinguishing characteristics of the tradition that we can best develop and implement curriculum, pedagogy, and scholarship that distinguishes our universities both as a university as well as distinctly Catholic.

Hellwig identifies the following characteristics: “commitment to the continuity of faith and reason; respect for the cumulative wisdom of the past; an anti-elitist bent; attention to the community dimension of all behavior; concern for the integration of knowledge and ideas; and a keen awareness of the sacramental principle.”¹³ Roche likewise sets out the following four principles: “Catholicism’s universalism, its sacramental vision, its elevation of tradition and reason, and its emphasis on the

⁹ M. BUCKLEY, *The Catholic University as Promise and Project*, Washington 1998, 15–16.

¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (August 15, 1990), 44.

¹¹ HELLWIG, 7.

¹² M. ROCHE, *The Intellectual Appeal of Catholicism and the Idea of a Catholic University*, Notre Dame 2003, 8.

¹³ HELLWIG, 7.

unity of knowledge."¹⁴ Already we can identify the connections in their thinking, but for the purposes of this essay which describes the development of our core, I will focus on the three characteristics that were especially important to the program, curriculum, and faculty development of our core, *The Human Journey*.

First is the sacramental vision of Catholicism. As Roche describes it: "The Catholic tradition elevates a sacramental vision that finds God in and through the world (...) [I]t recognizes the value of this world (...) and the transcendence of divinity (...) present in the world, though not exhausted by this world."¹⁵ Thus we study the liberal arts and social and natural sciences, because they all embody a sacramental character that can be a means of honoring God and advancing the dignity and worth of the human simultaneously.

The idea of this sacramental character is essential in our core, *The Human Journey*. We understand the Catholic intellectual tradition to be embodied not only in philosophy and theology, but in literature, history, and the social and natural sciences as well. Thus, five courses comprise *The Human Journey*. The first course, *The Human Journey: Historical Paths to Civilization* provides students with a fundamental understanding of the continuity of the human experience throughout different epochs and it also gives our students a historical understanding of the Catholic intellectual tradition. The second course, *Literary Expressions of the Human Journey*, leads to a fundamental understanding of the human reflective and creative capacity to give expression to the human condition. This course also introduces students to both classical and contemporary literary works that represent the tradition. The third course, *The Human Community: The Individual and Society*, promotes an understanding of humans as social beings who are both architects of society and who are shaped by society. This course demonstrates to students how the tradition can be in "dialogue with the culture." The fourth course, *The Human Community and Scientific Discovery* leads students to a fundamental understanding of the natural world in which humans function. This course most explicitly engages students with the dialogue between science and religion. The fifth course, *The Human Search for Truth, Justice, and The Common Good*, is a capstone course which synthesizes and integrates learning from the previous courses and provides students with an ethical and moral frame to reflect upon, evaluate, and act in the world in which they live.

We engage our students in this multidisciplinary understanding of the humanities and sciences as the fundamental mode of inquiry of the human person, the world, God's work and presence in the world, and our relationship with God. This study of the liberal arts and sciences emphasizes to both students and faculty that everything that deals with human meaning and value gives us a window into the divine structure of reality.

The second defining characteristic of the Catholic intellectual tradition that

14 ROCHE, 9.

15 ROCHE, 18-20.

necessarily influenced the development of our core, *The Human Journey*, is the “continuity of faith and reason.”¹⁶ or as Roche identifies it: “the elevation of tradition and reason.”¹⁷ The Catholic intellectual tradition embraces the connection between faith and reason and understands that “the elevation of reason does not contradict faith (... even as) true faith cannot contradict the rigorous use of reason.”¹⁸ Since reason seeks truth, reason brings us closer to God. We developed courses for *The Human Journey* based upon the assumption that it is essential for faculty and students to understand the Catholic intellectual tradition’s commitment to the interplay and ongoing dialogue between faith and reason. We want our students to realize that, in the words of John Paul II, “reason should be encouraged to search for truth wherever analysis and evidence leads.” And so, through the curriculum and pedagogy of this core, we endeavor to equip our students with the critical and analytical skills of research, thinking, and questioning that they will need to exercise a continuous critique of themselves and their society and culture; and equally, to examine the strengths and weaknesses of their Catholic tradition.

This tradition contains, as Hellwig tells us, “the accumulated wisdom of the past.”¹⁹ It is a treasury of theological and philosophical thought, art, literature, music, as well as a body of early classical Greek and Roman works of philosophical thought, art, and literature. In the courses that constitute *The Human Journey*, we provide our students with knowledge of this treasury. But, learning *about*, as well as *from*, this tradition implies two ways of learning, both of which are necessary. The first, learning *about* the tradition, requires a respectful receptivity to what has come from the past. It assumes that there is a profound humanizing value for us as we develop an understanding of works which bespeak the wisdom of the past. Learning *from* this treasury, however, implies that, like Aquinas and many other great Catholic thinkers have done, we teach our students to critically wrestle with the ideas of the past as well as with the ideas of the present. We equip our students with the skills of questioning and critical reflection, of analytical interpretation and re-interpretation not only of this treasury of thought but also of the ideas and thought with which they must wrestle in the present. The essence of a rigorous intellectual life impels us to critical inquiry, and our Catholic intellectual tradition, in its best moments, has modeled for us the necessity of rigorous self-critique. This critical engagement with the past as well as the present is what constitutes the “continuity of faith and reason” (Hellwig) and the “elevation of tradition and reason” (Roche) that enables us, as a Catholic university, to fulfill our task not only of preserving but also of transmitting and developing the vision and wisdom of the Catholic intellectual tradition.

The third characteristic of the Catholic intellectual tradition is its emphasis on the integration of knowledge, or as Hellwig frames it: “the concern to inte-

16 HELLWIG, 7.

17 ROCHE, 9.

18 ROCHE, 26

19 HELLWIG, 7.

grate knowledge as a true basis for wisdom.”²⁰ Roche explains that “the Catholic tradition, inspired by the concept of the unity of knowledge, seeks to cultivate meaningful and integrative thought across the disciplines.”²¹ Hellwig explains the importance of an integrative, multi-disciplinary approach to the Catholic intellectual tradition. She states that the “integration of the curriculum cannot simply be carried by the theology and philosophy departments. That responsibility must be shared by all departments in ways appropriate to their disciplines.”²² This focus on engaging our students in a multi-disciplinary, integrative understanding of the liberal arts and sciences and the Catholic intellectual tradition has been central to the development of our core, *The Human Journey*.

As a momentary aside, it may be useful to mention that this emphasis on integrative learning is also now beginning to emerge in higher education in general in the United States. A joint statement by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching asks those of us in higher education to consider the importance of providing our students with integrated learning:

Fostering students' abilities to integrate learning – across courses, over time, and between campus and community life – is one of the important goals and challenges of higher education. The undergraduate experience can be a fragmented landscape of general education courses, preparation for the major, cocurricular activities, and 'the real world' beyond the campus. (...) Students need programs of study that will help them understand the nature and advantages of integrative learning and assist them in pursuing college experience in more intentionally connected ways. They also need courses designed by creative faculty that model and build integrative skills, and curricula that define pathways that encourage integrative learning within and across fields (...). Developing students' capacities for integrative learning is central to personal success, social responsibility, and civic engagement in today's global society. Students face a rapidly changing and ever-more-connected world in which integrative learning becomes not just a benefit (...) but a necessity.²³

Thus, if the wisdom of providing students with integrative learning is becoming more recognized by our colleagues in the secular academy, then to remain true to our Catholic intellectual tradition, we must see that integrative learning is essential at our Catholic universities. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* stresses the importance of such interdisciplinary integration to assure that “university scholars will be engaged in a constant effort to determine the relative place and meaning of each of the various disciplines within the context of a vision of the human person and the world

20 HELLWIG, 9.

21 ROCHE, 34.

22 HELLWIG, 21.

23 Association of American Colleges and Universities and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Statement on Integrative Learning. March 2004, p. 13.

that is enlightened by the Gospel.²⁴ In other words, it is critical that there is an integration to a student's entire educational experience at a Catholic university, and as such, the curriculum must be unified and whole rather than unrelated and fragmented.

Theologian and Sacred Heart University President Anthony Cernera explains the fundamental rationale for multi-disciplinary, integrative teaching and learning at a Catholic university: "The Catholic university is a place where the search for truth is cherished and nourished. Since truth is whole, there is also a fundamental unity and interconnectedness of knowledge. This conviction of the Catholic intellectual tradition is the basis for an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge."²⁵ These assumptions about the importance of integrative knowledge, learning, and teaching are at the very core of the Catholic intellectual tradition and have served as the basis for the development of our core, *The Human Journey*.

In our core, *The Human Journey*, this integration of the humanities, sciences, and the Catholic intellectual tradition is further implemented by several other components of the program. First among these is the Common Core Reader in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. The aim of the Reader is to provide works which represent the Catholic intellectual tradition across the disciplines. Classical western works as well as works representing non-western cultures, historical as well as contemporary works, and works representing cultural diversity all are the kinds of texts included in this Common Reader.

Second, a series of colloquia and cross-disciplinary course conversations serve to intentionally integrate the humanities, sciences, and the Catholic intellectual tradition. Colloquia may be offered by faculty or by outside speakers, but the topics of the colloquia will integrate the humanities, sciences and the Catholic intellectual tradition.

Such intentional efforts at integrating teaching and learning have involved faculty development. Faculty require opportunities to read, study, and reflect upon texts, works, ideas of the Catholic intellectual tradition and to understand how this tradition engages with their discipline. At our University we offer faculty a unique opportunity to participate in the Presidential Seminar on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, a year long work which begins with an immersive week long seminar. Also, because faculty are trained in specialized areas within their disciplines, they need opportunities to learn and develop a scholarship of integrative teaching and learning. Faculty who teach courses in our core have been working intensely reading materials in common, discussing how their individual courses might organize around the four fundamental questions that appear on every syllabus, and they have been discussing and developing their syllabi with their colleagues. Faculty have been working together discussing pedagogy; they

24 Ex Corde Ecclesiae 16.

25 A. CERNERA, The Catholic Intellectual Tradition and Sacred Heart University, in : Sacred Heart University Review 18/No. 1&2 (Fall 1997) 81.

have been discussing how to teach in ways that integrate the humanities, sciences, Catholic intellectual tradition; and how to engage students in this integrated way of learning and knowing. Faculty development is an integral part of our core, *The Human Journey*.

“The Signs of the Times”

Most important, with all the courses, colloquia, conversations and lectures that go into making our core, *The Human Journey*, we strive to teach our students that the Catholic intellectual tradition is a *living* tradition embodied in historical and cultural contexts. We want them to understand that there are at least two ways of thinking about the tradition that follow from this assumption. First, following the work of Terrence Tilley in *Inventing Catholic Tradition*,²⁶ we teach our students that not only are we shaped by this intellectual tradition, but that we do, in fact have a responsibility to shape this tradition within our own time and culture. Second, we strive to show our students that when the tradition is doing its best work, it is most *catholic* and most *universal*, and in that way, it is most *inclusive* and *diverse*. Indeed, with more than 70% of all Catholics coming from Africa, Latin America, and Asia; it would be difficult for this tradition not to be racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse.

The Church herself has challenged us to these two ways of understanding its intellectual tradition. First, in *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes* the Second Vatican Council made clear that the Church had the duty of “scrutinizing the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel (... and the duty) to recognize and understand the world in which we live.” Very specifically, *Gaudium et Spes* tells us, “It is a fact bearing on the very person of man that he can come to an authentic and full humanity only through culture. (...) Where human life is involved, therefore nature and culture are quite intimately connected.”²⁷ The document calls for the Church to engage with the world in a mutual dialogue of speaking as well as listening, of teaching as well as learning: “The Church must rely on those who live in the world, are versed in different institutions and specialties, and grasp their innermost significance in the eyes of both believers and nonbelievers.”²⁸ Thus, we, as Catholic intellectuals, are responsible for the ongoing development of this tradition by “reading the signs of the times” in the light of faith and reason.

And second, in his remarks on the Catholic intellectual tradition, William Cahoy asks us to consider the ideas of diversity and inclusivity in this tradition:

Diversity and openness to others are not at odds with the tradition, are not

26 T.W. Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition*: Orbis Books 2000.

27 *Gaudium et Spes*, 53.

28 *Gaudium et Spes*, 44.

something we pursue *in spite of* our catholic identity. Quite the contrary, it is required if we would be truly catholic. Thus using the affirmation of Catholic tradition and community to create a ghetto of like-minded people is a *misunderstanding* of the specific tradition of this community. Turning in upon ourselves in parochialism or sectarianism is a failure to live up to our ideals as a church. In the end it is a failure to be Catholic, not merely a failure to be humane, relevant or politically correct.²⁹

This statement challenges our tradition to be inclusive, diverse, truly catholic.

Finally, then, we want to teach our students that, at its best, the Catholic intellectual tradition espouses the dignity and worth of every human being of every race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ethnicity, and religion. We want to teach them that at its very best it is a tradition that works to create a more just society for all persons. We want our students to experience this tradition as intellectually rigorous and we want to engage them in the ongoing dialogue between faith, reason, and culture and to challenge them and have them wrestle with the questions, issues, and dilemmas that emerge from this dialogue. We want our students to learn how “reading the signs of the times” with critical reflection, intellectual rigor, and spiritual discernment can develop a tradition that uses the intellectual life to advance knowledge, promote the human good, and give honor to God. In this way, we believe that our core, *The Human Journey*, framed by four questions of enduring human meaning and value and rooted in an integrative and multi-disciplinary understanding of the liberal arts and sciences and the Catholic intellectual tradition, constitutes a distinctly Catholic identity for our university and at the same time nourishes our institution’s essential character as a university.

29 W.J. CAHOY, *The Catholic Intellectual Tradition. What is it? Why should I care?* Fall Forum August 20, 2003: College of Saint Benedict/Saint John’s University. <http://www.csbsju.edu/catholicidentity/values/bilcahoy.htm>