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The Heart of Catholic Higher Education: The Liberal Arts

Cover Page Footnote

Monika K. Hellwig is the Executive Director of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. This talk was presented at the Convocation for entering students at Sacred Heart University on September 16, 1998.

MONIKA K. HELLWIG

*The Heart of Catholic Higher Education:
The Liberal Arts*

It is a pleasure to be with you here. I want to congratulate, first, the University on its three and a half decades of existence, so wonderfully founded during the Second Vatican Council as an enterprise of lay Catholics passing on in a scholarly way the Catholic tradition. I want to congratulate Dr. Cerneria on his ten years' contribution to that wonderful history that you have. And thirdly I want to say to the freshman class, ``Welcome." You are entering a wonderful experience, and I hope that you will get the benefit of it in every way that you can.

The theme for this convocation is the liberal arts as being at the heart of a Catholic higher education. I'm going to talk about three things. First, I'm going to talk about what makes a university Catholic in the first place. Second, what do we mean by the liberal arts? And third, why should they be the heart of a Catholic higher education?

What makes a university Catholic like the university to which you, the freshman, have just come? Well, many things. First of all, the institutional commitment to carry on the Catholic tradition to make Catholic worship and life, spirituality, and thought alive on the campus. Second, the fact that both Catholic worship and spiritual guidance, in various ways, are offered to you on this campus. Further, that a Catholic campus such as this sees theology as a necessary ingredient of a seriously thoughtful life. That is to say, that in higher education we consider it important that every student be offered the possibility of integrating the goals of life — the professional goals, the family goals, the personal and civic goals — around a reflection on what ultimately life is about and what makes human life worthwhile. And we expect that theology classes in the _____

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curriculum would give you something of the wisdom of the Catholic tradition about those questions, would give you some of the

accumulated experience and yearning and thinking of a community that has lived this faith.

Further, on a Catholic campus you expect to find and you do find a very active campus ministry: people concerned about you, your spiritual growth, and your life together as a community; people to help you shape authentic community among yourselves on campus as we hope that you will do later in the world at large. You will also find on a Catholic campus that there is a preoccupation with ethics – ethics in general in human life and ethics in professional fields – because it is not enough to learn how to do things: it is also important to learn how to reflect on what is worth doing, and why and what choices to make. You will expect to find, and you certainly will find, that this Catholic university is very concerned about our shared responsibility for the shape of society and especially our responsibility for those who are left out in the common affairs of the society. The university hopes to inspire you to live your life, to practice your profession, to act as a citizen in such ways that you never forget the people who are left out, that you never forget the people least privileged and most needy.

You will find also that a Catholic university is very concerned about the whole person of the student. They – your professors, your administration, your student life people – are not content simply that you learn academic things, not simply that you acquire competence in a professional field. They want to see that you are happy, that you are relating to the others around you, that you are becoming a truly responsible and mature and integrated person. And finally, you will expect to find on a Catholic campus, and I hope and trust you will find, a faculty that is really committed to the mission of this institution in the ways I just sketched it.

But one of the characteristics of a Catholic higher education that you might not immediately see as obvious is a very strong focus on the liberal arts. We call them the liberal arts because they are for people who are free of immediate preoccupations in earning a living. Liberal means free, of course: people who are free, who have leisure, who are able to think about large issues, who are able to think about more permanent concerns. In the history of the Western world, that used to be very few people, just a very privileged elite. In our society, fortunately, we are able to offer it to many people, and those of you who are beginning four years of college are in many ways freer than the

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rest of us: freer than your professors, your administrators, the student life personnel, your parents, and other people around. In many ways, you are the leisure class of the society because you have been given time to think, to explore, to read, to experiment, and to enjoy it. You may think that because you have essays to write, tests to prepare for, labs to fit in, that you're not all that leisured. But let me assure, looking back over a long life, I realize that the most leisure time in our lives, in my generation certainly, was when we were students. Make the most of that.

What do we mean by the liberal arts? What are they? Well, we mean such things as literature, reading the thoughts of thoughtful people. We mean such things as philosophy, thinking through the big issues in life, and theology, asking what is it ultimately all about. But we also mean such things as history, reflecting on the cumulative wisdom that comes out of other peoples' experience through the centuries. We also mean such things as mathematics and science: not when you're learning simply how to do something or the immediate skill you're going to employ, but when you are able to look at the world around you and say, "That's how it works. So, that's how it fits together." Isn't it exciting? Isn't it wonderful to be able to understand and to look and to marvel and to penetrate further?

So, the question is, Why do we think that all this is so central to a Catholic education? For several reasons.

One is that we are thinking in terms of broadening your horizons, helping you to see more than you see immediately from your situation in life, seeing through others peoples' eyes, other people from other times in history, from other cultures and societies, from other types of experiences. We hope that through the liberal arts you will cultivate your imagination, and what I mean by imagination is your ability to look at what is going on around you and interpret it, fit it together into a meaningful whole. I mean your ability beyond that to empathize with the experiences and hopes and dreams of other people beyond your own. I mean beyond that the ability to look at what is and imagine what might be. This is the aim of the liberal arts in higher education.

We want, therefore, to educate people to whom we can appeal, to whom society can appeal, to be creative in the world, to fashion new kinds of social structures, economic structures, political structures — people who can critically evaluate cultural aspects of their society and

enhance the society with spiritual goals, with a higher aspiration for what human life might be. Catholic tradition has seen this kind of education as very important as a basis for spirituality, as a basis for becoming the most that a human being can be, as a basis for becoming a responsible citizen in the world, as a basis for becoming someone who makes the world better: someone who not only has the skill to do efficiently what others have worked out before, but who has the creative imagination and drive to make it better, to enhance peoples' lives.

What are the implications of that for you as students just about to commence on your higher education? One of the implications that I see immediately is: Don't get too busy doing things outside of your studies. Enjoy the leisure that college gives you for thinking big ideas, for dreaming, creating things, experimenting in various ways. Give yourself that time. Another implication I see is: Don't put the grades you get as the most important priority in your life. Put the pursuit of understanding of knowledge, of wisdom, of insight, first. Another implication I see is: Do enjoy it. If you're not getting enjoyment out of your college studies, ask yourself why. And find some good advisers on the faculty, in the campus ministry, in the student affairs. Find some good advisers to help you figure out why you're not enjoying it. It is supposed to be intensely enjoyable.

And do I have a word of advice for the faculty? Well, of course I do. If we value a liberal education in the way I have suggested we ought to be doing, then I think the first recommendation to the faculty is that you make sure that you teach in way that the students will enjoy. My second recommendation is be sure that you teach in way that the students will find themselves challenged: challenged about their existing assumptions; challenged about all the things they don't know that they could explore; challenged about what the implications are for society of what they are learning; challenged about their relationships with you as professors, and whether they are really using the opportunity of their relationship with you to the maximum to explore, to debate, to experiment, to get deeper into the field.

And I think that means I am suggesting to you who are faculty that you ask yourselves from time to time: Am I more concerned with whether they master this particular material or that particular material? Or am I more concerned that their horizons keep opening up and that

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they keep seeing further lands to explore, further territory to explore? I also want to say to you who are faculty to have a conversation with other faculty, engage in conversation with faculty in other disciplines. Sometimes we can be so busy that it seems that conversation with our colleagues is a waste of time and is interfering with the project. But conversation is really at the heart of culture. Conversation is at the heart of acquiring wisdom. Conversation is at the heart of becoming a good teacher and constantly progressing in insight.

I don't know whether there are any parents of the freshmen here. Most parents send their young people to college because they would like them to achieve something more than the parents themselves have achieved in society, because they value their children, they are proud of them, they love them, and they want to give them the best. What should parents be expecting of the best? I think that they should be expecting that you come to college for three reasons. You come not only to be equipped with a professional competence. That's important and most parents think a lot about it because they want you to be established, to be able to earn your living, and to be productive. But, second, you come to college to become a more cultivated person, to become a more cultured person, more knowledgeable in a very broad sense, more perceptive, more critically aware of what is going on, more creative, and more courageous in the way that you live. You come to college to gather wisdom that will help you to focus your life and make something very fine, something very exalted out of it. And, third, of course, you come to college to become more responsible as a member of society, to become more aware of your gifts and the purpose for which you have them, which is to use them where they are needed in the community and particularly among those of the community that need your talents and your gifts most. For all of those three purposes you come to college, and in all of those ways college should help you to grow and grow and acquire a thirst for pursuing wisdom further when you leave here in four years time. I wish you well with your college career and with all the rest of your lives.