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“The Promise of Catholic Studies”

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***Ex corde ecclesiae's* repeated call for a dialogue of faith and culture at Catholic universities would seem to demand the establishment of centers for Catholic studies specifically aimed at this dialogue.**

This past spring John Carroll University in Cleveland hosted a meeting for Catholic universities that have initiated Catholic Studies programs. Representatives from some thirty to forty universities attended. Some have well-developed programs in Catholic Studies with a significant number of majors - mostly double-majors. The University of St. Thomas in Saint Paul, MN, would be the flagship program here. A number more have begun with minors in Catholic Studies. Some have “centers” of Catholic Studies involving various levels of activities with faculty, alumni, advisory boards, etc. (See Thomas M. Landy, “Catholic Studies at Catholic Colleges and Universities,” **America**, Jan. 3-10, 1998, 12-14. Also Francis W. Nichols, “Catholic Studies are here to stay.” **Commonweal**, April 30, 1999, 30-32.)

Several years ago Seton Hall University initiated a Center for Catholic Studies and I have been its first director. Recently the center has begun a minor in Catholic Studies and it is contemplating a major. Mostly we have focused on faculty development with faculty from various departments regularly gathering for dialogue on humanistic and religious issues. These dialogues have been very well received. One faculty member called it the best academic experience she had had at the university. In this article I would like to reflect on this emergence of “Catholic Studies” and on its ultimate significance for Catholic colleges and universities

Let me at the beginning set forth my own measured judgment. It seems to me that catholic studies is “an idea whose time has come.” It is a direct implication of the encounter of the Christian Gospel with contemporary culture at the Catholic university. It is a way the Word of God can encounter the human words that constitute the various academic disciplines. This encounter has structural implications for the contemporary Catholic university. Bernard Lonergan might term it an instance of “vertical finality,” that “feeling” or need that a number of people have felt and that here and there begins to find expression. It is finding such expression in courses being initiated on the topics such as “religion and literature,” “the question of God in contemporary literature,” “Catholicism and art,” “the Catholic imagination,” “Catholic Social Teaching and the Professions,” “spirituality and business,” etc. It is finding expression in programs of Catholic studies. It is finding expression in faculty workshops exploring the contemporary implications of the Catholic intellectual tradition.

It seems to me that the need for these types of efforts is obvious for those with eyes to see. For many reasons the tight structure of the Catholic colleges of the 1940s and 50s disintegrated during the 1960s and the time of the Second Vatican Council. That structure, as Philip Gleason put it in his *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the 20th Century*, revolved around Neo-scholastic philosophy. The language of “body and soul” permeated even the psychology courses. But with the collapse of that integrating philosophy the individual departments and disciplines of the university became autonomous with the determining factor being the “guild” or academic association for each of the disciplines. Hiring took place almost exclusively with regard to disciplinary expertise - Ivy league degrees being especially prized - with little or no concern for an over-arching or integrating vision.

As a result – apart from some few religious studies and theology courses – and perhaps apart from a sometimes vibrant campus ministry program - a student’s experience in the classroom at a Catholic college or university can be no different than that of one attending a local state college or university. The “vision thing” animating the whole university can be conspicuously absent. It can be particularly absent from the

classroom. The disciplines are often taught in splendid isolation from each other and from any questions about a religious vision of the human person.

It is important to note that the changes in Catholic universities over the past thirty years have not been without theological reason. Recognition of the autonomy of the individual disciplines is a direct result of changes in Catholicism's stance vis-à-vis modernity. Where previously there had been a pronounced tendency to stand apart and condemn the whole modern project, the tendency of Vatican II was much more pastoral and discerning. While not plumping for an uncritical embrace of all things modern, the tendency of contemporary Catholicism is to discern the wheat from the chaff, the tinsel from the silver, the counterfeit from the gold.

This, it seems to me, is the stance of John Paul II's apostolic constitution, *Ex corde ecclesiae* which speaks of our changing times, "which certainly face serious challenges but which also bear so much promise under the action of the Spirit of truth and love."⁽²⁾ Although most press coverage of this document concerns the "mandatum" for Catholic theologians, that provision occupies only one footnote in my 49-page version of the constitution. The overwhelming emphasis is on the dialogue of faith and culture that should take place at the Catholic university – for the enrichment of both the faith and the culture. Even the American bishops' "Application" of *Ex corde ecclesiae*, mostly concerned with juridic issues, points to this dialogue of faith and culture as a central focus of the constitution. (Cf. Introduction as well as Part One, sections 2 and 6).

In the rest of this article I would like first to summarize *Ex corde ecclesiae's* major themes on this dialogue of faith and culture and secondly, I would like to suggest that the newly emerging Centers for Catholic Studies are at least one key institutional forum where this dialogue can be fostered in the Catholic university.

Ex corde ecclesiae

"A faith that places itself on the margin of what is human, of what is therefore culture, 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"(44).

John Paul II's *Ex corde ecclesiae* envisions a profound dialogue between Catholic faith and contemporary culture. Again and again the apostolic exhortation stresses the importance of this dialogue: "The dialogue of the Church with the cultures of our times is that vital area where the future of the Church and of the world is being played out as we conclude the twentieth century."(3) Rooted in faith and in the heart of the Church, the Catholic university is a central forum where faith in Christ encounters the world. "A Catholic university enables the Church to institute an incomparably fertile dialogue with people of every culture." (6)

Such a dialogue is interdisciplinary. In the context of the Catholic university, Catholic faith, articulated theologically, enters into a dialogue with the various university disciplines. As any dialogue, this one is not a one-way street in which theology does all the teaching and the other disciplines do all the learning. Rather in this dialogue, all parties can be enriched, for "the various disciplines are brought into dialogue for their mutual enhancement."(15)

Theology plays a particularly important role in the search for a synthesis of knowledge as well as in the dialogue between faith and reason. It serves all other disciplines in their search for meaning, not only by helping them to investigate how their discoveries will affect individuals and society but also by bringing a perspective and an orientation not contained within their own methodologies. In turn, interaction with these other disciplines and their discoveries enriches theology, offering it a better understanding of the world today, and making theological research more relevant to current needs. (19; cf. 43)

Within this dialogue, the methodological autonomy of the academic disciplines is asserted.(12) Academic freedom is prized. Only in this way of respect for autonomy can Christian theology itself be enriched. Obviously, if Christian theology is itself to be enriched by this dialogue, is it too much to hope that the scientific and humanistic disciplines themselves might also be so enriched? *Ex corde ecclesiae* offers various suggestions in this direction, for example, in the area of the sciences and technology: Because Christian theology considers the human person as created in the image and likeness of God and to be renewed in Christ, “men and women of science will truly aid humanity only if they preserve the sense of the transcendence of the human person over the world and of God over the human person.”(18) This is a long way from the reductionist science that seems to reign in so much of academe. It is also a long way from the secularism and fragmentation of much of the humanities. It is for this reason that the interdisciplinary dialogue envisioned by *Ex corde ecclesiae* requires philosophical tools.

An area that particularly interests a Catholic University is the dialogue between Christian thought and the modern sciences. This task requires persons particularly well versed in the individual disciplines and who are at the same time adequately prepared theologically, and who are capable of confronting epistemological questions at the level of the relationship between faith and reason. Such dialogue concerns the natural sciences as much as the human sciences which posit new and complex philosophical and ethical problems.(46)

Where are we to find such persons equipped with such philosophical and theological tools? The Catholic university must search for them and prize them. It must keep these skills in mind in its hiring practices as well as in its efforts at faculty development.

University teachers should...endeavor to set the content, objectives, methods, and results of research in an individual discipline within the framework of a coherent world vision...All teachers are to be inspired by academic ideals and by the principles of an authentically human life. (22)

According to *Ex corde ecclesiae*, this integration of knowledge is a process which will always remain incomplete, but it always must be sought. "It is necessary to work towards a higher synthesis of knowledge, in which alone lies the possibility of satisfying that thirst for truth which is profoundly inscribed on the heart of the human person"(19).

Aided by the specific contributions of philosophy and theology, 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 that is enlightened by the Gospel, and therefore by a faith in Christ, the Logos, as the center of creation and of human history. (16)

Professors' impartial research, set within this "catholic" vision of the whole touches the student's own desire to know in an ever wider and deeper ways.

While each discipline is taught systematically and according to its own methods, interdisciplinary studies, assisted by a careful and thorough study of philosophy and theology, enable students to acquire an organic vision of reality and to develop a continuing desire for intellectual progress. In the communication of knowledge, emphasis is then placed on how human reason in its reflection opens to increasingly broader questions, and how the complete answer to them can only come from above through faith. Furthermore, the moral implications that are present in each discipline are examined as an integral part of the teaching of that discipline so that the entire educative process be directed towards the whole development of the person. (20)

Nor is such communication of knowledge without its social implications. A Catholic University is called on to become an ever more effective instrument of cultural progress for individuals as well as for society.

Included among its research activities, therefore, will be a study of serious contemporary problems in areas such as the dignity of human life, the promotion of justice for all, the quality of personal and family life, the protection of nature, the search for peace and political stability, a more just

sharing in the world's resources, and a new economic and political order that will better serve the human community at a national and international level. (30)

The Gospel interpreted in the social teachings of the Church is an urgent call to promote "the development of those peoples who are striving to escape from hunger, misery, endemic diseases and ignorance; of those who are looking for a wider share in the benefits of civilization and a more active improvement of their human qualities; of those who are aiming purposefully at their complete fulfillment." (34)

The dialogue of faith and culture that should characterize the Catholic university includes the dialogue with persons of other beliefs and faiths. "When the academic community includes members of other Churches, ecclesial communities or religions, their initiatives for reflection and prayer in accordance with their own beliefs are to be respected."(38) Indeed, the dialogue characteristic of the Catholic university as a whole is enriched by the presence of those of other beliefs. (26) While Catholic members of the university community are expected to be truly Catholics and foster the Catholic ends of the university, the Catholic university respects the religious liberty of all members of the university community.(26) In doing so, the university contributes to both ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue. The presence of persons of other religions assists in the discernment of the spiritual values that are present in the various religions. (47)

The Need for Catholic Studies

Ex corde ecclesiae presents a very idealistic picture of genuine interdisciplinary dialogue at the Catholic university. My question is "How is such dialogue concretely to take place?" and my answer is "One way is through centers of Catholic studies."

If dialogue between faith and culture is to be the central characteristic of the Catholic university, if that dialogue is to be genuinely academic and interdisciplinary, how is a Catholic university to achieve such dialogue? How is it to do battle with the powerful undertow of obscurantism that totally rules out of court any interdisciplinary questioning about wider humanistic and religious issues?

Perhaps the Catholic university is to do many things, but for my mind one essential thing it should do is set up a specific institutional structure that has as its goal the kind of dialogue envisioned by *Ex corde ecclesiae*. In fact, that indeed seems to be what is happening in various “centers for Catholic studies” and programs of Catholic Studies at Catholic universities throughout the United States. It would seem to be “an idea whose time has come.” It would seem to be a “felt need” for a structured format for dealing with the questions rising above the methodological limits of the particular disciplines.

The objection has been raised that such a center within the Catholic university takes away the responsibility for Catholic identity from the individual departments of the university. My response is that such centers are needed precisely to help the individual departments assume such responsibility. As things stand, the “conventions of the guild” are so strong in most departments that individuals who might be interested in such meta-departmental concerns are generally unable to overcome such restraints. They need the support of the administration, the wider university and a structure specifically geared toward interdisciplinary dialogue. It is a question of support for the genuine intellectual life of faculty members at Catholic universities. The aim of centers for Catholic studies should be to support precisely those *academic* concerns that relate particular disciplines to other disciplines in the totality of a Catholic university’s human concerns. As things now stand, the departments are so into the type of specialization that learns more and more about less and less that they miss the type of specialization that collaborates for the genuine good of the whole human family.

Catholic Studies Today

Catholic Studies as it is developing throughout this country seems to be developing on two fronts. One front focuses on topics of explicitly “Catholic” theology, that is, it treats the various historical, doctrinal and systematic expressions of Catholic belief and the Catholic intellectual tradition. This is only to be expected at a university that calls itself “Catholic.” Just as a Jewish university would very properly encourage “Jewish Studies” and a Baptist university would encourage “Baptist studies,” so a Catholic university would privilege “Catholic studies.” These studies would include not

only theological studies of the core commitments constituting Catholicism, but it would also include exigent historical studies of how those commitments were honored or not in history – what Lonergan calls “evaluational” or “dialectical” theological history.

But besides the generally historical presentation of “the Catholic thing” in culture, Catholic studies is the means by which the question of the human person and the question of God is encouraged throughout the university in its various forms. It would seem that the interdisciplinary character of Catholic Studies, its “catholic” character with a small “c,” would lead it to explore and encourage raising the question of the human person within the context of the various other disciplines and professions in the university. To put this in terms of Bernard Lonergan’s “functional specialties” in theology: where the first emphasis would be on the specialties of historical theology, foundations, doctrines and systematics, this second emphasis would deal especially with the theological specialty of communications. Specifically, it would focus on Catholic theology in its interdisciplinary relations with art, language, literature, and other religions, with the natural and human sciences, with philosophy and history. It would deal with what Lonergan calls “the transpositions that theological thought has to develop if religion is to retain its identity and yet at the same time find access into the minds and hearts of people of all cultures and classes.”

In other words, Catholic studies is “the place” or institutional structure in the Catholic university where the question of the relation of literature and religion is raised in its most explicit way. What to make of the theme of “redemption” in Flannery O’Connor’s stories? What underlying “vision” of the contemporary world comes through in the novels of Walker Percy? What to make of the sacramental Catholicism in the short stories and essays of Andre Dubus? Does any “sacramental” vision come through the plays of the once-Catholic Eugene O’Neill?

This line of questioning streams off into the examination of the question of where the human spirit is most open, most alive, most humble before the truth, indeed most repentant – and where such human qualities find expression in any of the disciplines – psychology, sociology, political science, literature, art, etc.. Is, for example, José Casanova correct in his book **Public Religions in the Modern World** that the thesis of inevitable secularization at the foundations of modern social science is seriously flawed?

What to think of the reductionism of many neuro-biologists and physicists? What to think of other scientists who contest these reductionistic views? (Cf. the relatively new **Journal of Consciousness Studies**.) What is “science” in operation and in fact as distinct from the various popular scientific stories (“cover stories”) about what science is? These questions eventually require some philosophical sophistication to be handled adequately – but the least we can do now is to institutionally encourage the questions to be raised.

All of these are questions about the human person and flow into the question of God. To answer these questions adequately, to integrate the sciences into a vision of the human person as both capable of raising scientific questions and also capable of raising further questions, requires a breakthrough. Bernard Lonergan makes this point by saying that to appreciate it the person – scientist or not – needs an intellectual conversion, a breakthrough to ourselves as essentially questioners, as not materialists, as capable of arriving at answers – even answers about God. At least Catholic Studies should, in an interdisciplinary context, raise these questions.

Ultimately, to do Catholic Studies well, it seems to me that it is important to have at hand an integrating philosophy capable of integrating the various disciplines into a dignified view of the human person. This is what Newman was seeking when he spoke of “a science of the sciences” that would not be the whole of knowledge but would be concerned with the whole in knowledge. This was Lonergan’s concern for a heuristic metaphysical framework capable of linking the disciplines to each other and to the unceasing dynamisms of the human person.

Implications

The question is: Do the administrators of Catholic colleges and universities have the institutional will to support such centers? Are they willing to encourage the various departments in the contemporary Catholic university to hire persons capable of teaching such a course as “Catholic Writers in American Literature” or “The Catholic Imagination” or “Spirituality and Nursing” or “Catholic Social Teaching.”

Now someone might say, “Well such courses can be taught in the theology department or the religious studies department.” But the point is that such a solution continues to isolate Catholic thought and belief from any truly inter-disciplinary dialogue with the departments of the university: from any encounter of Catholic thought and theology with the worlds of art and music, the world of literature, the worlds of science and history.

Looked at in this way, it would seem that the institutional will needed to spark such an ongoing dialogue would include the hiring of new professors precisely for this purpose of implementing *Ex corde ecclesiae*'s call for interdisciplinary dialogue. Would such professors have dual appointments: to a particular department as well as to the program in Catholic Studies? It would seem that such is needed. Someone said to me that until centers of Catholic Studies have faculty specifically hired for Catholic Studies, these programs will not get off the ground – and they will not begin to exercise a leavening effect on the university. For there is no doubt that the “drift” of the individual departments is towards a purely secular classification of course – for that is the classification most faculty have been exposed to in their graduate studies.

Cautions

This vision of Centers for Catholic Studies as an institutional arrangement for the fostering of dialogue between the disciplines and Catholic faith and the encouragement of the question of God in the contemporary academy should not be undertaken arrogantly. Catholics have too long projected the image of “having all the answers” and not needing to learn anything from others. They have too long suffered from their own arrogance.

At the same time, if Catholic thinkers truly enter into inter-disciplinary dialogue, I believe that they can truly come to marvel at the many ways the question of God – and ourselves – can arise in the midst of contemporary culture. I have been wonderfully surprised at the openness to the divine expressed in the faculty seminars sponsored by our Center for Catholic Studies at Seton Hall University. Justin Martyr in the second century held that “the seeds of the Logos” can be found scattered throughout the universe – and I would say that those seeds can be found scattered throughout the university.

God's ways are indeed "marvelous to behold" and if we can truly begin to encounter one another on the level of our deepest selves, then I believe the Catholic community can begin to perform its proper intellectual and loving role in the service to the world. For it is in dialogue and encounter that we come to know ourselves. As Bernard Lonergan put it,

In brief, the first [historical] phase of theology is incomplete, if it is restricted to research, interpretation, and history. For as we have conceived these functional specialties, they approach but do not achieve an encounter with the past. They make the data available, they clarify what was meant, they narrate what occurred. Encounter is more. It is meeting persons, appreciating the values they represent, criticizing their defects, and allowing one's living to be challenged at its very roots by their words and by their deeds. (**Method in Theology**, 247)

It would seem that only this kind of dialogue can lead us to truly understand what it means to be a Catholic university in the contemporary world.

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