The Challenge and Promise of Catholic Higher Education for Our Time

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Abstract

Catholic colleges and universities face significant challenges in the present context of American higher education. Yet, there are opportunities to be found in the midst of this crisis when one carefully examines the intersections between the Catholic mission and objectives of an institution and current culture and academia. A return to the Neoscholastic framework of the twentieth century will not provide the sort of philosophical and theological grounding needed for the twenty-first century. However, the Catholic tradition does offer teaching and an intellectual tradition that can orient the curriculum and inform the dialogue of Catholic colleges and universities and, in this way, give these institutions coherence and distinctiveness. Unlike their secular counterparts, Catholic institutions can appeal to a clear and distinct rationale for the purposes of education and inquiry. Being situated in the Catholic intellectual life, these colleges and universities can enjoy substantive orientation in their academic endeavors while fostering serious inquiry and vigorous debate.

In his excellent introduction to this conference, Bernard Prusak identifies the challenges that Catholic colleges and universities face today. He contrasts Pope John XXIII’s “trust in the hidden intentions of Divine Providence” with less sanguine voices about the prospects for Catholic colleges and universities. One example of the latter is Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis, in which John Piderit, SJ, and Melanie Morey write that the optimism and enthusiasm of administrators of Catholic colleges and universities about their institutions appear “unfounded.”

My own view is that, while the challenges are significant, they are not surprising in the present context. One can argue that Catholic colleges

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and universities are in no greater crisis than is the Church in our society. And, I will suggest, there are opportunities for those who want to seize them. Such opportunities are discerned in reflection on the intersection of our mission and objectives and on the possibilities present in the current cultural and academic context.

I organize my reflections here into three parts: discussion of the history of American Catholic colleges and universities, the current cultural context, and some thoughts about the future.

**Looking Back: The Neoscholastic Heritage**

Let me begin by saying something about my own intellectual history and interests. I am a philosopher, and my greatest philosophical hero is St. Thomas Aquinas. His writings have been the heart of my scholarly work. I am wary of philosophical labels—I think they often obscure more than illuminate—but if I had to choose a label for myself, I'd call myself a Thomist.

I began to fall in love with the thought of Aquinas in my senior year at Notre Dame—1975—in a class taught by a great Thomist, Ralph McInerny. I was a philosophy major and, though I never lost my faith, I was struggling with questions about God's existence. Though I probably was not able to articulate it at the time, I was searching for an understanding of God that did not make him an anthropomorphic and implausible “add-on” to the world we knew.

Encountering Aquinas in Professor McInerny’s class was an intellectual epiphany for me. When I worked through a careful reading of the first half of the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*, the light went on. Here was an attempt to speak of a God distinct from creation, a God who transcends our understanding—a God who, in the words of Aquinas, “we understand insofar as we understand we do not understand Him.” I learned of the doctrine of analogy, the manner in which we can speak intelligibly of God, from Professor McInerny, who was a novelist and had a profound sense of the subtle elasticity of language. With time and further study, I came to appreciate in Aquinas’s thought the harmony of the ways in which God can be understood through faith and reason. And I came to see the disputed question form of Aquinas’s writing in the *Summa* not as some antiquated stylistic convention, but as an expression of the essentially dialogical, open-ended character of his thought. Aquinas’s response to a question was an attempt at resolution in light of the strongest objections in the tradition to that position, but
this response was always open to a further objection, a further question. I continue to learn from reading his works.

I mention that not only so that you will know about me, but also to make the point that this fresh and exciting discovery of the thought of Aquinas would not have been possible at Notre Dame twenty years, or perhaps even ten years, earlier. This is ironic—as I’m sure some of you realize—because in earlier decades at Notre Dame the philosophy department and philosophy classes would have been dominated by Thomists and Thomism. So why do I say that this discovery would not have been possible then?

In an excellent book, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century*, the historian Philip Gleason suggests that it was the heritage of Thomism and what came to be called Neoscholastic philosophy and theology that gave Catholic colleges their intellectual coherence and distinctiveness until the 1960s.

Neoscholasticism was inspired by Pope Leo XIII’s 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. Written after the first Vatican Council, it made the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas more or less the official Catholic philosophical and theological system for combating the threat of modernism—a rather broad and somewhat loosely defined collection of philosophical and theological doctrines. The thought of Aquinas, as appropriated by Neoscholasticism, was to be the philosophy and theology taught at Catholic seminaries and colleges.

In the wake of that encyclical, there emerged some excellent Catholic philosophical and theological thinking in this Neoscholastic tradition. Neoscholasticism came to have real intellectual vitality to it, and for a time it gave the whole Catholic intellectual world and Catholic colleges an intellectual coherence, distinctiveness, and clarity about intellectual opponents.

As Gleason points out, however, the intellectual vitality of Neoscholasticism was eventually sapped and its coherence unraveled. The vitality was often diminished when taught in countless philosophy and theology classes required at Catholic colleges. Textbooks often presented Aquinas’s thought as a system, and in such a presentation it lost much of its richness, subtlety, and power. Armies of teachers had to be recruited for this task, and not all had the training and skill to present the material in ways that engendered interest and appreciation. There were complaints by students that such classes were primarily exercises in memorization—something that seems the antithesis of a true philosophical spirit. And, on top of all this, Thomism came to be seen as the
“official teaching,” ecclesiastically and institutionally imposed, and as such intellectually curious young people almost instinctively resisted it.

I personally experienced the antipathy this instruction created in students. When I told older priests, who had been trained in this earlier Neoscholastic system, that I was interested in studying Aquinas, they often suspected me of being intellectually dull, an ecclesiastical syco-phant, or both. They encountered Aquinas in dry, formulaic textbooks taught in dull classes that often seemed more like indoctrination than an exercise of true philosophical inquiry. They had missed the brilliance and suggestiveness of Aquinas's writings that is seen only through a careful reading of the texts.

A second challenge for Neoscholasticism is that the philosophical consensus splintered in the years before the Second Vatican Council. Reginald Marie Garrigou-LaGrange, OP, became the chief proponent of a “strict observance” Thomism that tended to present Thomism as a coherent, logical system of doctrines, the presentation of which could be divorced from the texts of Aquinas. Younger scholars, such as Marie-Dominique Chenu, OP, Yves Congar, OP, and others, became the leaders of the nouvelle théologie school that emphasized attention to the historical context of philosophical writing and urged a ressourcement—a return to the study of the classical texts. Jean Marechal, SJ, and Karl Rahner, SJ, developed a Thomism influenced by the thought of Immanuel Kant. And Bernard Longeran, SJ, a Canadian Jesuit, combined the thought of Aquinas with the insights of John Henry Newman and Charles Pierce. These are just a few prominent examples. Aeterni Patris envisioned a Neoscholastic unity that could withstand what it saw as the degenerate trends of modern philosophy, but the Thomism it spawned soon became a multiplicity of contending schools of thought, some of which were influenced by the modernist philosophers that encyclical had condemned.

I do not see this development as an accident of history, but as reflecting the very nature of philosophical inquiry. As I suggested above, Aquinas's thought is inescapably dialogical. Indeed, I would say this is the nature of all great philosophical thought. Questions inevitably arise, philosophical thinkers propose theories, and further questions and insights lead them to develop the thought in different ways. All serious philosophy has an open-ended, dialogical character about it, and universities are precisely the places that foster and encourage such an open-ended dialogue in pursuit of greater understanding. I would suggest that any attempt to achieve coherence and unity by imposing a particular, comprehensive doctrine is bound to fail, for it is inimical to the open-ended character of the human search for truth.
Pope John Paul II was himself a Thomist philosopher in the school of a phenomenological Thomism influenced by Edmund Husserl and the personalism of Max Scheler. The Holy Father, in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (*Faith and Reason*), offered a similar line of reasoning to the one I have developed above. Pope John Paul wrote:

> The Church has no philosophy of her own nor does she canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others. The underlying reason for this reluctance is that, even when it engages theology, philosophy must remain faithful to its own principles and methods. Otherwise there would be no guarantee that it would remain oriented to truth and that it was moving towards truth by way of a process governed by reason.²

In this encyclical, Pope John Paul focuses on philosophy because of its close relationship with revealed doctrine. Nevertheless, a similar point could be made for physics, psychology, economics, and many other fields grounded in human reason. Each of these must be faithful to its respective principles and methods in the search for truth and ought not be imposed by decree.

Looking back at the twentieth century in Catholic higher education, Philip Gleason sees the recovery of something like the Neoscholastic synthesis as the key challenge facing Catholic colleges and universities. “The task facing Catholic academics today,” writes Gleason, “is to forge from the philosophical and theological resources uncovered in the past half-century a vision that will provide what Neoscholasticism did for so many years—a theoretical rationale for the existence of Catholic colleges and universities as a distinctive element in American higher education.”³

Whatever the “theoretical rationale” Catholic colleges and universities offer, I do not believe that it will be found through the imposition of a philosophical and theological framework such as Neoscholasticism. The Neoscholasticism of the first half of the twentieth century in colleges and universities was not sustainable and eventually fell under its own weight. I’m doubtful that the embracing of any single comprehensive philosophical or theological doctrine can provide the coherence and vitality that is sought.

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I do believe, nevertheless, that the Catholic tradition gives us teachings and an intellectual tradition that can orient the education and inform the dialogue of these institutions. In the last part of this paper, I offer some suggestions on qualities we may seek in Catholic colleges to give them some coherence and distinctiveness. Before I do that, however, I offer some points about the broader intellectual landscape in which we find ourselves.

**A Detour through the Wider Landscape**

Before we can fruitfully address the question of the coherence of Catholic colleges, we must recognize a certain incoherence of the wider intellectual culture in which we live. For any talk about a distinctive contribution of Catholic colleges must take account of the wider culture which helps shape our institutions and to which we hope to contribute. I suggest that we live, and our students and faculty live, in a culture that, in profound ways, is characterized by incoherence and fragmentation.

One could choose many examples to illustrate this broader incoherence, but consider with me one of the most influential philosophical efforts to find some philosophical coherence in our understanding of our political community.

John Rawls had perhaps the most authoritative philosophical voice in our times on the theoretical foundations of liberal democracy. Rawls's 1971 book, *A Theory of Justice*, was one of the most influential works of political philosophy in the last one hundred years. He continued to develop his thought and in 1993 published *Political Liberalism* which aspired, in his words, “to work out a political conception of political justice for a constitutional democratic regime that a plurality of reasonable doctrines, both religious and nonreligious, liberal and nonliberal, may freely endorse.”

Rawls’s work is magisterial. I do not attempt to review it here in anything approaching a comprehensive treatment. I simply want to point out one way in which his work falls short of its ambitious aspiration, and the manner in which that shortcoming reflects the deeper challenge for all of us in our political life.

A guiding principle of Rawls’s views throughout his career is that the justification for any political system must rely on principles and

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arguments that cannot be reasonably rejected by any member of that community. In his *Political Liberalism*, he claimed that a liberal system of government must commit itself to “the ideal of public reason”—the notion that citizens must engage one another in reasoned discussion in which assumptions and inferences are acceptable to all reasonable people.

Someone may have had a dream that portended—he sincerely believes—immanent disaster for the nation. Such a person is free to believe that the day of doom is coming and to act on that belief by building a subterranean shelter and storing up supplies. However, because the dream is private and the dreamer cannot provide publicly accessible reasons for others to believe his apocalyptic vision, his dream cannot be offered as a reason for the government to build shelters across the nation.

So stated, Rawls's restriction on public reasons seems unobjectionable. Another person's dreams are by nature inaccessible to evaluation by others, and so they cannot provide a basis for action by the political community. But what about religious convictions others do not share, but which are critical in motivating a person to act and in defining the political community in which she or he wants to live?

Rawls was criticized for unduly excluding religious beliefs in the 1993 edition of *Political Liberalism*, so in the 1996 paperback edition he proposed the following proviso to accommodate them: “Reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or nonreligious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons—and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines—are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines introduced are said to support.” This applies not only to religious doctrines but, Rawls emphasizes, to any claim based on any other set of reasons.

Again, Rawls's point initially has the ring of plausibility. I may be a committed Christian, and you may be an atheist who embraces Utilitarianism as a moral philosophy. I should not argue for my proposal in the political realm by appealing to the sayings of Jesus, but you should not argue for yours by appealing to the sayings of John Stuart Mill, one of the founders of Utilitarianism. Someone who draws his convictions from religious faith or a specific moral or philosophical doctrine cannot simply present these tenets as arguments to those who don’t share the same views unless she or he joins these arguments with what Rawls

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5 Ibid., li-lii.
calls “proper political reasons” that provide sufficient support for the proposal. However, Rawls’s application of his principles quickly shows the limits of his approach. He writes of his political liberalism: “To maintain impartiality between comprehensive doctrines, [political liberalism] does not specifically address the moral topics on which those doctrines divide.” Rawls is saying here that two competing positions, derived from different doctrines, must somehow be resolved in a way that is neutral among the religious or moral beliefs in question. Political arguments in Rawls’s liberal political society must be neutral about the nature of the good life and thus allow for competing versions to coexist.

Yet at this point the allure of the initial plausibility of Rawls’s account loses its luster for many. To the extent we live our lives reflectively, we are guided by an understanding of what the good life is and by some set of moral principles derived from that understanding. In our society, the nature of the good life and fundamental principles are contested, and so, on Rawls’s account, we cannot appeal to them. But if we cannot appeal to them on the moral issues that confront our political community—whether the issue is slavery, the declaration of war, the use of nuclear weapons, abortion, women’s rights, same-sex marriage, or any number of other issues—we have no basis for making a decision. Should the United States have dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? There is no position on that issue that can be neutral on the central moral questions: What is our duty to protect innocent life? Are there instances in which that duty is superseded by a higher duty?

The difficulty with Rawls’s account is that, in the quest for a neutral ground of public reason, he has ruled out appeal to “comprehensive doctrines” that are contested. But, though contested, these doctrines offer the only basis for making decisions about these questions.

The elusiveness of a morally neutral position is pointed out by philosopher Michael Sandel in his book *Justice*. Sandel takes up the example of abortion. One view says that the desire to make abortion illegal is driven by moral convictions, while the desire to keep abortion legal is driven by a morally neutral position that allows everyone to make his or her own choices. But both positions on abortion are based on an answer to the moral question: Is the unborn baby a human being? (Some may prefer the language: Is the fetus a human being? One’s language suggests one’s answer.)

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6 Ibid., xxx.
As Sandel says: “The case for permitting abortion is no more neutral than the case for banning it. Both positions presuppose some answer to the underlying moral and religious controversy.” There is no neutral basis to adjudicate this very difficult question.

Of course, in our society these questions are usually resolved by appeal to the courts, and the courts oblige by rendering a decision, often claiming that the decision is made from a position of moral neutrality regarding the fundamental issue in question. Yet those who disagree often find, behind the claims of morally neutrality, a morally substantive position imposed arbitrarily and less than transparently. Thus our deepest disagreements often become political battles to elect the officials who will appoint the judges who agree with our views.

I believe that Rawls’s ambitious project “to work out a political conception of political justice for a constitutional democratic regime” fails because it cannot find a neutral ground between competing and widely shared doctrines of justice and the good human life. We struggle to establish a substantive set of values on genuinely neutral ground. We are thus forced to deal with a great deal of incoherence and fragmentation in our culture.

This cultural context poses a challenge for secular institutions. Let me be clear: My friends and colleagues who lead secular colleges and universities are able and conscientious women and men who serve their institutions with skill and dedication. From my perspective on the sidelines, however, it seems that they are at a disadvantage when it comes to articulating the higher purposes of education at their respective institutions. Certainly there is broad agreement around the pursuit of academic excellence and the need for academic freedom. Beyond that, however, they often seem to be forced to choose between vacuous, vanilla statements and the arbitrary imposition of a set of values. Because they must remain neutral between competing religious and moral understandings, they do not have the luxury of appealing to a clear institutional rationale for a stronger statement of the purposes of education and inquiry at their institutions.

The danger, however, is that if an institution does not define the purpose of its activities, other forces will. Study after study has shown that a college degree is ever more valuable for enhancing a person’s earning power over the course of his or her life. Thus, when we try to

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justify the costs of education to students and their parents, we tend to speak of the value of a college education in giving a person marketable skills. And so we come to think of education as a commodity which we sell to students, the value of which is judged in terms of the financial returns it can realize for the individual. One can call this development the commodification of education.

With the high cost of education and the financial strains on students and families, I can certainly understand their taking a serious look at the returns on their investment in higher education. Yet if this is the only value around which we can find consensus, then the traditional, more noble aspirations of higher education have been lost. Colleges and universities can become high-level technical schools.

It is precisely here, I want to argue, that Catholic colleges and universities can make a distinctive contribution, for they can presuppose a richer framework of values to guide their educational efforts.

The Opportunity: Treasures New and Old

The Catholic faith has its foundation in the doctrine of God’s creation of the world out of nothing and the mystery of redemption through Jesus Christ. These are proclaimed by the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and a genuine and full faith in them leads people to serve others in love, which includes the work of education, to which Catholic colleges and universities are committed.

Reflecting on these and other central doctrines and mysteries, the Catholic tradition has produced an array of teachings on the range of human endeavors. A brief review of these teachings would include: the dignity and value of every human life; the primacy of the common good in the social order and the need for solidarity among all peoples; the central role of the family in society; the dignity of work, the right of the individual to take economic initiative, and the imperative to order an economy to the needs of all; a special love and concern for the poor; respect for the integrity of creation, including the natural environment; the proper limits on military action and the use of lethal force in conflicts, together with the obligation of all to work for peace; and the value of artistic expression in its various forms as an expression of the sacramental character of the world. These and other teachings constitute a rich tapestry of values that gives direction to the work of education and inquiry at a Catholic institution of higher education. And this is perhaps the greatest advantage for such institutions, for it gives them a
rich set of values that are not readily accessible at secular peers. The communal work of education and inquiry is richer, I submit, to the extent it is informed by a rich set of values.

I believe that a Catholic institution is strongest when it is animated by a healthy number of committed Catholic intellectuals. However, I do not believe that every member of a Catholic college or university must be a Catholic or embrace every one of the commitments that come to us from the tradition. Indeed, many of the most valuable and dedicated members of my university, Notre Dame, are not Catholic. Nevertheless, all should understand the mission of our respective institutions and recognize the values, arising from the Catholic tradition, that help shape the institution’s activities, including its central work of education and scholarship. Various members of the community play different roles and contribute in different ways to the mission of a Catholic institution. But the institution will flourish—and the individual will flourish in the institution—only if the members collectively understand and work together for success in that mission.

Let me emphasize an important point to avoid a serious misunderstanding. In identifying a set of values that are part of the fabric of Catholic teaching and that can give direction to the work of a Catholic college or university, I do not want to suggest that they are in some way beyond the range of debate. On the contrary, it is precisely these commitments that can open up the possibility of interesting debate. We can debate, for example: How are we to balance respect for the integrity of the natural environment with the right to undertake economic initiatives in a free market? How can the protection of the rights of an individual be reconciled with a social order that serves the common good? What are the appropriate limits of the use of lethal force when we are dealing with amorphous terrorist organizations, such as ISIS or al-Qaeda, that do not recognize such limits? How does our society foster a robust economy while avoiding the dangers of a corrupting consumerism and neglect for the poor on the margins of such an economy? These are difficult questions, the answers to which are not at all obvious. It is, however, the special role of Catholic colleges and universities to foster informed, rigorous debate about them. Indeed, the commitments of a Catholic institution put it in a privileged place to engage in such debates in classrooms with students, among faculty, and in scholarly publications.

So much for what I am not suggesting. I am claiming, on the other hand, that it is not possible for an institution to identify itself as a Catholic institution and not have the fundamental commitments of Catholic teaching shape its central activities. How this influence occurs
is a prudential judgment and can be—and often is—a source of legitimate controversy. But it seems to me that it is not legitimate controversy to question whether such commitments should play a role, for to deny their role is to render the mission of the institution incoherent.

The mistake of Neoscholasticism in Catholic colleges and universities in the first half of the twentieth century was that it supposed that the Catholic commitments I’ve spoken of could be maintained against cultural threats by the imposition of a more or less fully developed philosophical system. As laudable as the system may have been, and as talented as many of its practitioners were, the effort failed because it failed to appreciate the open-ended character of human inquiry and dialogue, particularly in philosophy. Human learning and inquiry does not proceed by the inculcation of a finished system. We begin from the intellectual heritage that has come down to us, but inquirers must question, raise objections, and offer alternative views. And all claims must be subjected to further debate and criticism. Indeed, this was the method of the disputed questions, the form of which Thomas Aquinas incorporated in his major works, and it captures his true spirit. The failure of certain strands of Neoscholasticism is that they tried to extract from his writings a finished philosophical and theological system without recognizing the essentially dialogical character of his work.

The question, then, is how a Catholic college or university remains committed to certain teachings and fosters the vigorous debate that characterizes any serious institution of higher learning. A critical part of the answer to that question involves the concept of a tradition of intellectual inquiry. A tradition is constituted by a set of concepts, assumptions, and practices of a community that grapples with key questions and claims across generations.

In advancing this notion, I owe much to the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, for whom it is a central concept of rational inquiry. Yet we should also note that it is a central concept of a Catholic theological self-understanding. Christianity, of course, is a religion of the book—the Bible—but it cannot be only that. We know that Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers shook up this self-understanding with the principle of sola scriptura—Scripture alone—as authoritative in Christian life. Yet a Catholic response would be that the contents of Scripture were disputed by the Church until the fifth century after Christ. It was only through the discernment of a believing community shaped by traditions of oral teaching, liturgy, and practice and guided by the Holy Spirit that we identified Scripture as authoritative. In some sense, then, the authority of Scripture is grounded in the authority of the Church’s
tradition. Similarly, in other areas of inquiry and in various ways, the tradition of the Christian community grappling with questions over generations can and should inform our teaching and debate.

My friend and colleague John Cavadini wrote an excellent article in *Commonweal* in fall 2013 in which he elucidates the notion of tradition with respect to the question of the relationship between the Christian doctrine of Creation and the scientific accounts of the origin of the world and human life. Cavadini, a Patristics scholar, points out that Jewish and Christian scholars of the second and third centuries were as troubled—and perhaps even more troubled—by the creation story in the book of Genesis than we moderns are. They wondered, for example, how God could separate light from darkness in the story before he created the sun and the moon, the sources of light. Also, how can we understand an omnipotent God strolling in the garden searching for his creatures? These were what Augustine called *questiones*, which arise from our reading of Scripture. The challenge for faith is to seek an understanding that preserves the truth of Scripture and the truths discovered by learned disciplines. Such a quest, which is part of our tradition, has been going on for two millennia in Christianity and will continue as new *questiones* arise.

These reflections on teaching and tradition are relevant, I contend, to the life and mission of a Catholic college or university. For it is the particular role of a Catholic institution of higher learning to foster such inquiry and discussion in this tradition, enriched by the great thought and writings of previous ages and ready to take on the questions that arise in our age. In this way, Catholic institutions can be grounded in the Catholic tradition while being places of vigorous inquiry and debate and, in that, making valuable contributions to the Church and the world.

Different institutions will, of course, do this in different ways. One important dimension should be the kind of education we offer our undergraduate students. Although not all our students will be—or should they be—avid theology or philosophy majors, I think all of them should be at least introduced to the riches of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition in some fashion. Our students should never think that the only options for them regarding faith are a narrow, unquestioning fideism or an aggressive secularism, popular in many quarters. They should at least be

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introduced to the subtlety of thought of Augustine, or Aquinas or John Henry Newman, or any number of others. Students interested in health care should be aware not only of the formal directives of Catholic medical ethics, but also of the spirit of a very long tradition of medical care that seeks to alleviate suffering while preserving human dignity, and that recognizes that death is not the ultimate evil. And students interested in a career in business should have the occasion to encounter Catholic Social Teaching that seeks to balance the operation of the free market with the sense that, in the words of Pope Emeritus Benedict, “in commercial relationship the principle of gratuitousness and the logic of gift as an expression of fraternity can and must find their place within normal economic activity.”

Similarly, the scholarship and debate that are fostered at Catholic colleges and universities should include some that are clearly part of the Catholic tradition. Just what debates an institution wishes to foster depend upon its history, focus, and interests. It seems to me, though, that among the primary intellectual concerns of a Catholic college or university must be the presence of a living continuation of this Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

It has often been said that a characteristic feature of the Catholic tradition is to hold in balance commitments in tension. That is particularly true for Catholic colleges and universities which hold in tension a commitment to truth received from Catholic teachings with a commitment to robust intellectual debate. Far from being a fatal contradiction, I see this tension as the special strength of Catholic institutions of higher education. For, being situated in Catholic intellectual life, they can enjoy a substantive orientation in their academic endeavors, while fostering, in the light of a great intellectual tradition going back millennia, serious inquiry and vigorous debate.

It was this special gift of Catholic institutions of higher learning that Pope Saint John Paul II was referring to, I believe, when he said in *Ex corde Ecclesiae* that “a Catholic university’s privileged task is to unite existentially by intellectual effort two orders of reality that too frequently tend to be placed in opposition as though they were antithetical: the search for truth, and the certainly to already knowing the

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fount of truth.” In other words, perhaps the role of a Catholic college or university is to join the quest of faith seeking understanding, and to help our students undertake and find joy in this quest. The task is a challenge, but it is even more a gift and an opportunity to offer what is so sorely needed in our age. We must strive to be worthy of this calling, and to make our institutions like the scribe trained for the Kingdom of Heaven who, in the words of the Gospel of Matthew, can bring “out of his treasures what is new and what is old” (Matthew 13:52).

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