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## The Catholic Intellectual Tradition

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In 1988, I gave a talk in this very city to this very organization, or at least a subgroup, the presidents of Catholic colleges and universities, not on this very topic but closely related: "The Church and American culture: The challenge to the Catholic intellectual community." Seven years have passed. Most of you are too young to have been in the audience, and most of you don't look like presidents yet. The temptation to repeat myself has been strong. I dug out that seven-year-old talk. It looked to be one of my very first encounters with a computer. From my errors, I infer that Larousse instead of the American Heritage Dictionary was on my spell-check. My talk was very long, as only computer-generated talks get to be, which probably explains why I have been given a strict time limit this evening. (Margaret O'Brien Steinfels is editor of *Commonweal*)

I went over the usual suspects: John Tracy Ellis and Thomas O'Dea and a few unusual ones, Richard Hofstadter and the Vatican. That talk had the usual rhetorical strategies: a golden age of Catholic education (including a glowing account of my education at Loyola university) and a leaden age dulled by the difficulties faced in 1988. In concluding I offered the usual solutions and some unusual advice: Catholic colleges and universities should take *Commonweal* as a model of critical engagement with Catholic intellectual life, and for only \$39 a year.

As I reread that talk I said: This is good! Then came a voice from heaven: But is it true?

My analysis in 1988 rested on two controversies whose trajectories were then unclear. Since then, each has taken a decisive direction.

The first controversy: Was the Catholic identity of Catholic colleges and universities a question that would be or could be taken seriously? Many people wanted to address the issue, but concern for academic freedom along with a certain defensiveness led them to suppose that an effort to study Catholic identity would be defined primarily by episcopal control, theological narrowness, and moral overreaching. The Curran case was still being adjudicated in 1988, and the Catholic University was a living example of the tensions and dilemmas. It is not surprising if some people felt that addressing the Catholic identity of their institution would be like embracing a porcupine or maybe a skunk.

This anxiety distracted attention from other pressing issues: The erosion of Catholic identity because academic disciplines and accrediting agencies were shaping faculty and curriculum; because faculty and students were becoming more religiously and diverse; because of the decline in the numbers of religious and priests who expressed that identity; and because there was competition for students. (In defining its market niche, a Catholic school did not usually emphasize its Catholicity, but rather advertised a tradition of service and learning in the spirit of its founding religious community. Thus we have schools in the Jesuit, Benedictine, Mercy, Ursuline, Vincentian, Dominican, Holy Cross traditions, all managing to sound both more benign and more universal than the Catholic tradition.)

Seven years and many discussions later, it has become clear that, despite those anxieties, the Catholic identity question is being taken seriously. Whatever uncertainty lingers around *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and its ordinances, groups and individuals have pressed ahead to look at how colleges and universities see themselves as Catholic. Inevitably some find that they are Catholic in name only, while others are striving to sustain or reappropriate their Catholic identity. Your presence at this meeting and your numbers certainly suggest a willingness to talk about this neuralgic subject.

There was a second unresolved controversy in 1988: How should Catholics understand this identity issue in the context of American intellectual life generally: Were we now mainstream? Or irretrievably subculture despite the efforts to pursue excellence as defined by the nation's premiere schools? How would loss of Catholic identity affect the church and ordinary Catholics, especially those who attended Catholic colleges and universities?

We have an object lesson in the secularization of the nation's once Protestant universities traced in such powerful detail by George Marsden in *The Soul of the University*. I

do not think that Professor Marsden makes any explicit link between the current perilous condition of mainline Protestantism and the readiness of denominational bodies over the last century to give up their colleges and universities because they felt so congruent with the culture. But it is hard to imagine that the connection is not there.

On the other hand, another Protestant historian, Mark Noll in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, sees one symptom of evangelical Protestantism's debilitating anti-intellectualism in its inability to sponsor a single genuine university rather than strictly confessional colleges. Are Catholic institutions ambulating along the same garden path to secularization or in a few cases, along the alternative path to sectarianism, with the same deleterious consequences, in either case, on the church's life and mission?

Today, how we fit in is no longer quite the right question. It has become clear or clearer, I think, that American intellectual life, depending on your perspective, has broken open or broken down. Conservative ideas and intellectual forces that once seemed marginal even to conservative politics have achieved an influence and coherence that many liberals envy. This influence brings with it a resurgence of talk about traditional values, attacks on the Enlightenment project and a spirit of anti-modernity.

Conservatives in the academy, in think tanks and at journals of opinion work diligently to fill the vacuum created by the fragmentation of the political consensus, largely liberal, that has governed America since the New Deal and our intellectual life since the progressive era.

This fragmentation opens American intellectual life to new questions, new cultural and political configurations, an altered mainstream, if you will. All of us, including Catholic colleges and universities, are in a new ball game, though with the ascendancy of conservative ideas perhaps we face some of the same old "Catholic" temptations.

So seven years later I think there is something new to say (Surprise!), and it is this: Among many, though not all, American Catholic institutions there is now a readiness to take the issue of Catholic identity seriously. And about time! Or perhaps better to say, good thing, because the time frame in which this can be done becomes increasingly narrow.

Most dramatically, religious and clergy are fast disappearing from both classrooms and administrative offices. Who will be invested with the mission of fostering a school's Catholic identity and its connections to the Catholic community? Then there is the generational shift from pre- to post-Vatican II educated Catholics who are moving into those teaching and administrative posts. Without prejudging the outcome, we all know, whatever our age—from our peers, our siblings, our children, our grandchildren, our

friendsâ€”that this represents a dramatic shift in attitudes wider church, and basic understanding of "the Catholic thing."

I believe we have a decadeâ€”ten yearsâ€”in which this question of identity must be honestly addressed and definitively taken on as a commitment and core project of institutions that hope to remain Catholic.

And let me be clear about that: Such a project cannot simply be the work of a few individuals, of small groups, or of special institutes. The whole institution must make a substantial commitment to fostering a Catholic tradition of intellectual life.

Coming at this question as I do from the editorial trenches, I see this project as both exciting and perilous, and I will focus most of my remarks on Catholic intellectual life in general, leaving to Peter the simple task of talking about the specifics of higher education.

Catholic intellectual life is central to Catholic identity. It is fundamental to the life of the church, big C and little c, cathedral and congregationâ€”to its continued vitality and to the church's mission in this culture. This is not a narrow ecclesiastical tradition, but a broad and infinitely useful one. *Commonweal* has fostered and questioned that tradition. Our writers and readers reflect that affection and that criticism. They are university people and journalists, book editors, lawyers, physicians, scientists, politicians; they are bishops, clergy and ordinary Catholics, who in their daily lives practice and depend upon the kind of thinking, reasoning, reflection that make up the Catholic intellectual tradition. Furthermore, this tradition also is explored and appreciated by writers and readers who are Methodists, Episcopalians, Orthodox as well as Catholics, and not only by Christiansâ€”Jews, secular humanists, and those lapsed from every religion known to humankind.

This tradition is carried on, pursued, criticized, developed, wrestled with by people from many different backgrounds. The way they think and write, read and reflect very frequently rests on their education in American Catholic colleges and universities. So along with the preservation of knowledge, the scholarly work of retrieval, the building up of bodies of knowledge and the education of the young, your schools are central to the practice of the Catholic intellectual life. Colleges and universities cannot claim to be Catholic if this tradition is not part of their core understanding; this tradition cannot survive if Catholic colleges and universities do not renew it, maintain it, nourish it, support it, and pass it on.

In the past several decades, Catholicism in the United States has become more charismatic, more Pentecostal, more experiential, open to intellectual life both old and new currents of spirituality and meditation; it absorbs individualistic and congregational attitudes from American religion generally. But Catholicism is also and always has been a church with a brain, with a mind. So as important as these new manifestations may be, it is essential to the church, to its mission in the world, to the lives of ordinary people that there be a vigorous and Catholic intellectual life. And *Commonweal* can't do everything!

Of course, the Catholic identity of Catholic colleges and universities can have many expressions: honoring the founding mothers and fathers; worship and prayer; service projects; works of social justice like basketball and football; campus ministry; statues, medallions and endowed lectureships; the work of notable alum and prestigious faculty. But all of this would be a thin facade if it did not include at its core a living experience among students and faculty of Catholic intellectual life.

Yes, carrying on this tradition is an enormous challenge. You have to overcome bigotry and bias, including especially the prejudices Catholics themselves have against their own tradition. A Catholic intellectual is not an oxymoron. You do not have to be a Jesuit to be a Catholic intellectual. Yes, Catholicism and Catholic ideas have a checkered history. What institution, tradition, idea does not? From Plato to Foucault, from nominalism to deconstructionism; if human ideas have consequences, we can be sure some of them are bad. We have our fair share.

Many people, perhaps some of you, consider that the Catholic intellectual tradition is singular in its intellectual repression and oppression, its narrowness and dogmatism.

Well, I say go read a history book! Some of you may be skeptical that the adjective *Catholic* adds anything to an institution or discipline except the judicial authority of ecclesiastical officials. I disagree. For 2,000 years, Christians have struggled in multifarious ways with everything from body and soul to kingship and regicide, from usury to voluntary poverty, and today still struggle with everything from medical decision-making to political theory, from child care to spiritual counsel, from race to gender. It is this tradition that pressed through the centuriesâ€”and reminds us in the Gulf War, in Bosniaâ€”the idea of civilian immunity. The distinction between ordinary and extraordinary care of the sick and the dying remains a viable one because this tradition teaches it.

It is a deep and rich tradition; it is a tradition worthy of our attention and study. If this tradition does not have a place in Catholic colleges and universities, what is it that you are doing? What tradition has a better claim?

All thinkers and thinking are based in some tradition. A tradition is not a browned and dried up certificate of deposit in the bank of knowledge, but a locus for questioning, a framework for ordering inquiry, a standard for preferring some sets of ideas over others. Tradition is the record of a community's conversation over time about its meaning and direction. A living tradition is a tradition that can raise questions about itself.

What am I talking about? Let me at least sketch what I think the Catholic intellectual tradition looks like.

"The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the women and men of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.

... Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history."

That opening paragraph from *Gaudium et Spes* speaks of our responsibility for all that is genuinely human, for what draws the minds and hearts of women and men. The Catholic intellectual tradition is universal in its breadth and its interests; that is a notion set forth, defended, repeated, and encouraged throughout the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

I quote the quote because there is an odd nostalgia for something like neoscholasticism, if not neoscholasticism itselfâ€”a nostalgia for a framework that provided the high level of integration said to have been the guiding light of preconciliar Catholicism. From my post at *Commonweal*, I am inclined to think that we are a long way from holding or even recovering, at least with any integrity, that kind of framework. In a post-positivist, post-Enlightenment world, no body of human knowledge enjoys that degree of authority.

But if we do not have such an integrated system, we do have ideas, habits of mind and heart. We have preferences and predilections, intuitions and practices. We have a history. As *Gaudium et Spes* says, our tradition is not set against the world. But neither is it naively accepting of every current of opinion that washes up on the shores of a pluralistic culture. It helps us to maintain a robust and refreshing level of skepticism. What do I find of value? A tradition where reason and discourse based on reason are honored and practiced.

Let me describe just a few of its characteristics.

First, reason and faith are not antagonistic or unconnected. In the Catholic tradition we do not accept what we believe blindly or slavishly, we are urged to think about and to

understand what we believe. This is in some contrast to the society in which we live. American culture, with its Protestant history, tends to see religion as an expression of the individual, the subjective, the emotional, the immediate. In public life, religion and religious belief are confined to the realm of the private and personal, sometimes in an absolutist reading of the First Amendment, sometimes with the prejudice that religious thought has nothing to contribute. For the revivalist, faith is a personal and private encounter. For many in the cultural elite, as Stephen Carter argued in *The Culture of Disbelief*, faith is understood as a curious avocation, a personal hobby.

It is a loss to the whole society when any religious group accepts that role. In contrast, Catholics—the bishops, but many Catholic politicians and citizens as well—have often brought a philosophical and linguistic sophistication to public policy issues. If, for example, laws that would permit euthanasia and assisted suicide are kept at bay in the United States, it will be because the bishops, Catholic institutions, nurses, doctors, lawyers, ordinary citizens have been willing to express their deeply held beliefs, religious and philosophical, in a reasoned discourse that can build consensus across the whole society.

A second and closely related characteristic: Catholics have a tradition that takes philosophy and philosophical thinking seriously. This meant that from the beginning Christianity had to adapt systems of thought that were alien and even contrary to its religious beliefs and yet were crucial to its mission: that is, rendering its knowledge of God's presence and action in the world in a way that would make sense to others.

We don't usually think of Paul of Tarsus as a philosopher, but there he was in the agora debating Epicureans and Stoics, and in front of the Areopagus explaining the heretofore unknown God. Nor did it stop there. Eusebius, Bede, Augustine, Ambrose, Anselm, Thomas, Catherine, Teresa, etc., right down to our own time: American Catholic colleges and universities in the years after World War II were often the home to diverse philosophical schools—phenomenology, existentialism, Hegelianism, liberalism, pragmatism and Thomism—at a time when secular schools prided themselves on a univocal voice in their philosophy departments. The sometimes imperfect hospitality in our tradition expresses the conviction that a disciplined mind and systematic thought can help discern important things about what is real.

A third characteristic: Our tradition challenges the belief that facts come in pristine form—no baggage, no assumptions, no preconditions, no ends, no language that fills it with meaning. Our culture likes to treat facts as a given, as autonomous, unadorned objective realities; but a fact is an abstraction from something thicker and deeper containing implicit ends, whether or not the researcher, commentator, or scholar acknowledges them. There are virtually no value-free facts, from the construction of public opinion polls to descriptions of brain synapses or histories of the decision to drop the bomb on Hiroshima. The Catholic tradition reminds us that the fact/value distinction is practically a nil one, although our tradition is tempted sometimes to think there can be fact-free values.

Nonetheless, in our tradition epistemology and ethics are always interrelated. So, for example, the notion that education can be a value-neutral process in which teachers simply convey facts and the students simply receive them, in which behavior is neither right nor wrong but a matter of personal choice, in which judgments are neither better nor worse but simply someone's opinion, is nonsense, as the condition of so many schools grimly illustrates. This same analysis could be applied to psychotherapy, opinion polling, political analyses, medical decision-making, etc.

This brings me to a fourth and last point: it is a characteristic of our tradition, at its best, to resist reductionism; it does not collapse categories. Faith and reason are compatible but not equivalent. Our tradition rejects fundamentalistic readings of Scripture; the human person is neither radically individualistic nor socially determined. Empirical findings are not solely determinative of who we are and what we do. Yes, absolutely: Findings in psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, neurobiology enrich our understanding of the human person and the human project, but they do not exhaust that meaning or determine that trajectory. We are neurons and neuroses, but not only neurons and neuroses; neither DNA or TGF fully determined who we are or what we will do this weekend. There is space for grace and free will, thought, conscience, choice.

Time flies, and the list goes on: Symbolism is taken seriously, so is Analogical reasoning; images provide us with alternative ways of knowing. All of these are implanted in minds and hearts by our sacramental and liturgical practices. Our tradition takes mysticism seriously, so we know that ordinary everyday consciousness is not the last word about reality. The practice of caring for the poor and thinking about caring for them shapes political philosophy and social theory. The struggle everywhere to link faith and culture blesses us with an abundance of fictional worlds from Shusaku Endo's *Deep River* to Isabel Allende's *Eva Luna*.

To sum up: Yes, these characteristics can be found in other traditions. Yes, the Catholic tradition has been untrue to them at times or embraced them only kicking and screaming; but finally they have been embraced because our tradition becomes part of the cultures in which it finds itself—it must become part of the culture intellectually as in all other ways. Why? Because of its mission to transform the world, as we read in *Gaudium et Spes* (No. 40): The church, a visible organization and a spiritual community, "travels the same journey as all humankind and shares the same earthly lot with the world; it is to be a leaven and, as it were, the soul of human society in its renewal by Christ and transformation into the family of God."

Today in our culture, where the commodification of human life, human relationships, and body parts goes on everywhere, that engagement, that mission, means keeping the human person at the center of our inquiry. The human person must be seen in his or her social context, where an implicit and shared understanding of the good can be found and expressed.

All of this is deeply congruent with a religious tradition that is incarnational and sacramental, that keeps before us the idea of a God who acts in history on our behalf, a God who sent Jesus, who lived among us, who taught, who died for us, who rose from the dead and is present in the Eucharist. We are to love the Lord and love one another as he has loved us.

And there's the rub and that's the challenge. Catholic higher education, Catholic identity, Catholic intellectual life, the Catholic Church and its work in the world must finally be the work of a community of believers. In our culture that is a suspect category, nowhere more so than in the university.

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