

“Dedicated Memory”

BY J. BRYAN HEHIR

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I'd like to discuss memories that matter--whose function is to set the constituent elements of Catholic higher education--and choices that have the capacity to define the immediate future for Catholic higher education.

I have selected three memories, which I call the Catholic memory, the conciliar memory--referring to the Second Vatican Council--and the American memory. Each is a large theme, and together they provide an architecture for thinking about the tradition that shapes U.S. Catholic higher education today.

The Catholic memory is the theme of reason and faith, a theme as ancient as the history of Catholicism. It arises in the Scriptures as the participants in the narratives struggle with this question of meaning in a world in which God is the ultimate value, but multiple other values must be correlated in terms of a meaningful life. Reason and faith are a theme that affects the individual and that affects Catholicism as an institution. It is a theme that cuts through the lives of the saints. It is a theme that has been the source at times of scandal in the Church, when faith and reason have not been properly allocated. And it is a theme that find intensive, unique expression in the university.

This long narrative of faith and reason has a norm. Intrinsically and ultimately, these two sources of wisdom in the Catholic tradition are understood to stand in a creative dynamism, with the gift of faith enriching human intelligence. The two are to stand in collaborative tension but not in irreconcilable opposition. As with most large issues in life, stating the norm is simpler than realizing it in practice. And so the complementarity of faith and reason is achieved in this long narrative only through constant, creative effort to relate what is intrinsically destined to be seen as complementary elements. The difficulty of the struggle, I think, is rooted in two dimensions of the story.



There is first the complexity of the truths to be reconciled: those hard-won by reason and those entrusted to us by the gift of revelation. Both the world of reason and the world of revelation are possessive masters. Each understands the value of the truth it has grasped. And so there is a constant process of reconciling the claims of one truth we believe is rooted in God, reached by different roads of discourse and finally woven together in a single story. The complexity of the truth, however, and the way in which it is possessed requires constant effort by multiple parties in this long history of the Catholic theme of faith and reason.

At times, the apprehension of the architects of the truth of faith and reason, whether they sit in the magisterial chair or in the cathedral chair, may itself be the problem. The risk of reaching out to investigate the other side, the risk of allowing one's truth to be criticized by the other side, has at times been seen as very high. And so people retreat from the struggle to unite faith and reason. A Catholic university, however, is an institutionalized expression of the norm that faith and reason are complementary. Whatever failures we have known in our efforts to reconcile faith and reason, we maintain universities as a statement of conviction and a promise of continuity in this ongoing pursuit. In a sense, the Catholic university is an expression of the conviction voiced by Boston College's Michael Buckley that religion and the academy are intrinsically related. The inner dynamism of the work of the academy and the work of the Church are understood as being intrinsically in need of each other, with each finding fulfillment ultimately in the other.

That long story of how faith and reason are related today faces a unique challenge. It is a challenge that arises out of the two gifts that mark any major university: specialization of knowledge and pluralism of students, faculty, and traditions. Thus the growing edge of the story. The ultimate goal is a single structure of truth. But today to know the world means to accept specialization of knowledge as one of the great achievements of higher education and to accept pluralism of participants in the pursuit of knowledge as a welcome gift in the pluralistic world. In the face of secularized knowledge and a pluralistic constituency, the Catholic university faces a familiar challenge with a new and distinctive character.

That distinctive character is illustrated by my second memory, the conciliar memory.



The conciliar theme is the relationship of the Church and the world. This, too, is an ancient story, rooted in the Scriptures, finding classical expression in Augustine's *City of God* and contemporary expression in the longest and largest document of Vatican II, "The Constitution on the Church and the Modern World." That document gave a distinctive twist to the question of Church and world. For four centuries, one might argue, Catholicism found itself in constant opposition to broad themes that describe the world of modernity. The Reformation, the Enlightenment, the emergence of democracy and freedom of religion--all were problematical questions for the Church. There was a way in which, by the end of the 19th century, the Church found itself in a kind of pulverized opposition to broad themes that defined Western culture.

But the pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world opened a posture of dialogue with modernity in its religious, intellectual, and political dimensions. Dialogue meant a posture of sharing and learning, a posture of criticizing, opposing, and complementing themes that surrounded the life of the Church. The dynamic of dialogue was to enter into an argument about the religious, intellectual and political future of the world. Vatican II defined for the Church a new posture of confident modesty: a Church that believes that it has something to teach the world and also something to learn from the world, a Church therefore that is capable of dialogue in which it shares some but not all of the premises, in which it shares some but not all of the conclusions, in which it believes something to teach but also much to learn. Faith and reason, Church and world.

The final memory that matters for U.S. Catholic higher education is a distinctively American memory. The theme is the relationship of knowledge and power. The American tradition of learning has been characterized by two aspects of our culture: its pragmatic bent and the political role the United States has come to play in the world in the 20th century. Both our pragmatic tendency as a culture and our political role have led us to place emphasis on the transformation of knowledge into power. The pursuit of knowledge in and for itself is recognized as part of academic life, to be sure, but power is pursued relentlessly in and through growth and knowledge. It is one of the characteristics of our culture. It distinguishes



patterns of research that reach out beyond the locus of the university, to think tanks and sources of public knowledge, to the business and industrial worlds' support of pathbreaking scientific research.

The Jesuit tradition has always valued knowledge that is to be placed at the service of the human condition. And, therefore, the Jesuit tradition has said that knowledge and power must be framed within the structure of a moral universe, that both knowledge and power must be given direction in terms of ends and means. One reason why the translation of knowledge into power is so rich in this culture is precisely that we live in the world's laboratory. In 50 years this society has split the atom, cracked the genetic code and pierced the veil of space. Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz said of war that it had its own grammar but not its own logic. So technology has its own logic but not its own ethic. Technology's logic is that the ability to do something must inevitably lead to change. And so the relationship between knowledge and power, perhaps a distinguishing characteristic of American academic life, fits also into the memories that matter. How faith relates to reason, how the Church relates to the world, how knowledge relates to power in the moral framework of the universe--these are themes that help shape the American Catholic university today.

Similarly, choices can define a role for American Catholic higher education: intellectual choices, public choices and institutional choices.

The intellectual choice, it seems to me, is that American Catholic higher education must be committed consciously and explicitly to the norm of faith and reason and to the commitment of confident modesty that marked Vatican II. Just as the Church is expected to stand in the world--to be there as a servant and to be there as a church with enough intellectual courage to believe it can teach and learn from the world--so, uniquely, do Catholic universities stand, an extension of this mission. The choice is to be conscious, explicit and committed to the norm of faith and reason, to do so with respect for specialization of knowledge and pluralism, to do so by inviting multiple traditions into the framework of a coherent understanding of faith and reason, to do so in a public way. We



must think of the university as a place where we can join the cool, clear logic of critique that is the distinguishing mark of reason with the passionate understanding of life that flows from the prophets and the compassion of Jesus. This would be a public contribution: to make sure that knowledge is scrutinized carefully and in a detached way and always ultimately related to a human purpose, the kind of purpose summarized by the prophet's urging us to watch over the widows, the orphans and the ailing of our time. For the quality of our faith is judged by the character of justice, and that is judged by where those three groups stand.

The public choice would be to use selective examples of how knowledge and power face us in contemporary American society and how knowledge and power must be directed in our choices. The field of bioethics is a perfect example of the struggle about knowledge and power. We have expanded our capacity to touch the beginning of life, to extend the end of life, to penetrate the meaning and mystery of life at every stage along the journey. It is clearly an accomplishment of which the human community and the research community can be proud. At the same time, we know that the question about what we do with that knowledge is at the core of a major public debate.

But whether one looks at the abortion or the euthanasia debate, it is not simply differences in conclusions that divide us, but also how we define what is of public significance in the society and what, therefore, should come under the guidance of law and policy. These kinds of issues, precisely because they are marked by pluralism and power, by values and knowledge, are exactly the kinds of public issues to which the Catholic university can be expected to make a significant contribution.

Another public issue is America's role in the world. To be Catholic is not only to be Catholic; it is also to be catholic--to be universal not only in our understanding of what we seek to know, but also in our sense of the obligations placed upon us by the human community. We can start with the premise that the international community is not just a world of states but a community of humanity even if the determination of the specifics of those obligations is a constant process of research and analysis. And if Catholic universities start from that premise, they can make a valuable contribution to a country that seems



unclear about its role as it faces the semi-chaos of the post-Cold War world.

These kinds of issues, from bioethics to foreign policy, denote the realm of public choices that a university marked by reason and faith, Church and world, knowledge and power, would be drawn to--thereby enriching the public life of the nation.

Finally, in talking about institutional choices, we are talking about the internal character of Catholic colleges. These institutions originally were designed to support and serve our own community. But whether you look at Catholic hospitals, charities or higher education, we are now a much broader participant in American life. That has brought its complexities and its richness.

The kinds of institutional choices we face are, first, to create a community that welcomes the pluralism necessary in a successful university while still maintaining the memories I have talked about; second, to be a community that has enough confident modesty to see itself as a significant contributor to the wider world of American academic life; and third, to be a community that has a sense of its place in the wider Church.

What I am describing is an institution with a sense of the freedom it needs to do its work, a sense of the legitimate autonomy it needs if it is to fulfill its role in the service of faith and reason, and an understanding of itself as part of the Church's witness in the world as we approach a new century in which faith and reason must again be related in new and different ways.

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