“The Advantages of a Catholic University”

BY AVERY DULLES

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When the history of American higher education is written, scholars will surely remark on the phenomenal proliferation of Catholic universities since the middle of the 20th century. To some extent, these universities are still finding their way in relation to the church and the secular society in which they carry on their mission. I believe that notwithstanding all the problems and difficulties, Catholic universities can be proud of their identity and confident of their future.

The status of Catholic universities is still a subject of public debate in our land. One party to the discussion holds that religion belongs in the church or the private sector, but not in the university, which is a public institution. At most, they would say, the university should study religion as a phenomenon to be analyzed by purely rational methods. Thinkers of a second school maintain that all points of view, including Catholic Christianity, may be allowed to assert themselves within the university, but that the university itself should remain confessionally neutral. A third group maintains that a university may legitimately dedicate itself to the Catholic intellectual tradition, because that tradition makes a valuable contribution to the life of our religiously pluralistic society. But they would add that other traditions have an equal right to maintain their heritage. Still a fourth school of thought, to which I adhere, asserts that Catholic universities have unique qualifications for the discovery and dissemination of truth, which is the task of every university.

In this very brief presentation I should like to say a few words about why I think that a university not only can but ought to be Catholic if it is to achieve its highest potentiality. In saying this I take inspiration from John Henry Newman and from our present pope, John
Paul II. With the help of these authors, I wish to call attention to six major benefits that higher education can receive from being Catholic.

**Personalism**

Although personalism is not peculiarly Catholic, the dignity of the human person is central to Catholic faith, especially as it has been expressed in and since the Second Vatican Council. Applying this principle to our present theme, one may say that Catholic universities may be expected to recognize the primacy of persons over things, the superiority of being over having, and of spirit over matter (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae* [E.C.E.], Pope John Paul II’s 1990 apostolic constitution on Catholic universities, No.18). Our modern utilitarian and technological society tends to reduce the individual to the status of a mere instrument, a docile servant of the state or of the firm, an efficient tool in the workforce. Education, however, is more than an acquisition of technical skills. It is cultivation of the students’ active powers. A genuinely humanist formation will help them to rise to the full level of their humanity, enabling them to find truth and meaning in their lives. As Newman contended, liberal education is its own end.

**A Sense of Tradition**

Although all religions have traditions, the Catholic Church has a special affinity with tradition. It has lived by tradition for 2,000 years, and has consistently defended the rights of tradition against those who denigrate it. It knows how to preserve the past not as a dead museum piece but as a living memory, enriching the present.

The school by its very nature ought to be a locus of tradition. It passes on to new generations a fund of knowledge and skills that has been built up over time, presenting it in a form appropriate to the current situation. The goal is to enable the young to take advantage of what their elders have learned, rather than having to begin again and, so to speak, "reinvent the wheel." Thanks to their humanistic formation, students should be able to adapt the heritage of the past to the needs of their own day, and in some respects to make progress beyond what was previously known. Catholic institutions, instilling a lively sense of tradition, are especially qualified to form students for this task.
**Rootedness in the Culture of the West**

The Catholic Church, I would contend, is the principal bearer of the great heritage of wisdom that emerged from the confluence of biblical revelation and Greco-Roman culture. While other cultures have much to offer, none of them, I believe, has equaled Western culture in the fields of literature, philosophy and science. However that may be, it may be safely said that most American students today can best find their identity in relation to this biblical and classical heritage, which has been foundational for the United States and the whole family of nations to which the United States belongs.

Some are asking today whether education should be multicultural. To the extent that cultures are consonant with authentic Christian values, their diversity is something to be celebrated, not suppressed. An educational institution should respect the various cultures from which the students come and to which they are likely to return. Any given university will take account of all the major streams of culture that are vitally represented in its own student population.

Catholic universities located in other parts of the world, such as Central Asia and the Far East, will have special responsibility to engage in dialogue with non-Western cultures. Without prejudice to other civilizations, Pope John Paul II expresses his deep respect, in particular, for the spiritual traditions of India, from which humanly sound and beneficial elements may be gleaned (*Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II’s 1998 encyclical, "On Faith and Reason,” No.72). But in carrying out this discernment the Christian will have to make use of the full range of wisdom that has been acquired from Christianity’s prior inculturation in the world of Greco-Latin thought.

**Unity of Knowledge**

It is of the very nature of a university to impart knowledge of many fields. It is good to have courses in the various arts and sciences, even though no individual student will be able to take more than a limited selection. While specializing in certain areas, students should see their fields of specialization in relation to the realms of knowledge that they have not been able to study in detail.
A fourth criterion for Catholic education, therefore, is that it be such as to impart a sense of the unity of knowledge. In the absence of this sense, one could not have a true university but at best a "multiversity." In some schools the struggle for coherence has been abandoned, with the result that the students are disoriented and perplexed. How can the claims of different specialties, they ask, be reconciled and integrated? Reason itself teaches us that there can be no ultimate contradiction between truth and truth. In the Catholic university, the search for a higher synthesis will be kept alive.

**The Light of Faith**

Christians are convinced that no synthesis of knowledge will be successful without reference to God, the supreme Truth, and to Christ, who is the divine Logos, the center of creation and human history (E.C.E., No.16). In this season of national and international peril it needs to be said quite simply that the future of the world will be in danger unless it turns to him who is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (E.C.E., No.4). A university that neglects the word of God deprives itself of an important source of truth.

Theology, which studies all reality in the light of divine revelation, has its proper principles and methods, defining it as a distinct branch of knowledge (E.C.E., No. 29). It should, moreover, interact with the other disciplines by bringing a perspective and orientation not contained in their own methodologies (E.C.E., No.19). In the words of Pope John Paul II: "In promoting the integration of knowledge, a specific part of a Catholic university’s task is to promote dialogue between faith and reason, so that it can be seen more profoundly how faith and reason bear harmonious witness to the unity of all truth" (E.C.E., No.17). The university should be a place in which faith enters into conversation with reason on every level, including historical reason, scientific reason and philosophical reason.

**A Sense of Mission**

As they are intellectually formed in the light of faith, students will become aware of moral imperatives and the power of the Gospel for the transformation of human society. Conscious of the gap between what is and what ought to be according to God’s design for the world, they will be motivated to bring ethical values and a sense of service into their lives as
husbands or wives, parents or children, employers or employees, citizens or statesmen. They will work for peace and justice in the family, the neighborhood, the nation and the world. By their integrity they will evoke trust and respect not only for themselves but for the tradition within which they stand. They will bring credit upon the religiously oriented education they have received.

For all the reasons I have given, I believe that every university, no matter how excellent it may be, would stand to gain if it stood fully within the Christian and Catholic tradition. Most American Catholic universities, to be sure, fall far short of realizing their promise. For the most part they are relatively small, young and poorly endowed. But with all their limitations, they are on the right path. Even now they are capable of giving their students an excellent formation as persons, imbuing them with a keen sense of tradition, an appreciation of the biblical and classical heritage and a capacity to see the bearing of faith upon the whole universe of knowledge and upon every area of human conduct. If students take advantage of the specific strengths of Catholic higher education, they can be proud of their alma mater.

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