

# Catholicism, the Intellectual Life, and the Academic Vocation: Tradition and Renewal

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PRESENTED TO  
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I begin with a disclaimer. I was flattered by the invitation to give this talk, but I have to tell you up front that I am a simple American historian, with the American historian's characteristic irritation when confronted with questions about theology and philosophy. The great Henry Adams early in his life wrote some well researched volumes on the presidential administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. But he turned away from university research, moved to Washington and, to our great benefit, brooded over medieval cathedrals and modern dynamos, and over what he called his education. Many years later Samuel Eliot Morison, reflecting the priorities of most working historians of his day, said that Adams got interested in philosophy and never again did any useful work.

So I am not a deep thinker, a philosopher or a theologian. Our Holy Cross colleague William Shea, himself no mean deep thinker, tells the story of the captain of a cruise ship who, standing at the bridge, saw a passenger fall into the sea. Picking up a megaphone, the captain shouted "man overboard, man overboard, get me a theologian, get me a theologian". His first mate, puzzled, blurted out "Captain, why do you ask for a theologian?" Impatiently, the Captain replied: "because they can go down deeper and stay down longer than anyone else".

Fortunately you will be hearing from two wonderful theologians, Michael Himes and Lisa Cahill. Both can go very deep and they always resurface with ideas that are clear, compelling and enormously helpful. With them, and with your remarkable array of colleagues and mentors here this week, you are in for an intellectual and spiritual treat.

With that disclaimer, let me extend a welcome to Collegium, to Holy Cross and to Rehm Library, and say a word about each.

My admiration for Collegium and Tom Landy goes back to the very beginning; I recall Secretary of State Dean Acheson's memoir Present at the Creation. On request I will share creation stories, some featuring ways in which Tom Landy was right about all of you and, on a few occasions at least, I was wrong. We could also have a long discussion of how to pronounce the word Collegium.

Welcome also to Holy Cross. I was not present at its creation in 1843 but, through an odd, or oddly providential set of circumstances, I have been here since 1969. I will tell some stories shortly about that experience.

And welcome as well to this beautiful Rehm Library. When this building was under construction, those in charge envisioned a space that would visually embody our collegial commitment to the integration of faith and learning. In their dreams, the room, quiet and dimly lit, featured dark mahogany paneling, thick oriental carpets, and deep overstuffed chairs. But the unsentimental blueprints called the space a “library/chapel”. On consultation some traditionalists proposed aula, or even magna aula. None of those labels, and certainly not library/chapel, was attractive to our generous donors, who preferred the name Rehm Family Library, and so it is. Nevertheless, when the building opened and we held our first public event, early arrivals were reverently silent or spoke in whispers. When I asked why, a woman said: “It’s so like a chapel.” We hope you feel the same way.

My assignment today echoes those aspirations of Holy Cross and Rehm Library: the integration of faith and learning. Tom invites us to think about the relationship between faith and learning in our own life and work, our vocation; to think about that integration in the life of the colleges and universities where many of us carry out our vocation; and in the life and work of the Church. We are all learners and we share an interest in faith, if not faith itself. And the Church, in our case the Catholic Church, Tom likes to say hopefully, is a “learning church”, learning along with us.

Of course these three, vocation, college and church, are related. The Collegium invitation arises from and reflects its Landy origins in Jesuit higher education. Some of you are here at the request of a Dean or Department Chair at a Catholic college or university. Our Catholic colleges and universities, like each of us, struggle to respond with integrity to three intersecting sets of responsibilities: professional, civic and ecclesiastical.

First, they and we have professional academic responsibilities. “This is a college, not a church”, our former President used to say. Yes, these are authentic American colleges and universities, and we are authentic American scholars and teachers. Consequences follow, among them institutional autonomy, academic freedom, academic self-government, and a variety of very real professional responsibilities. Our colleges and universities have chosen, deliberately, to move out of the sub-cultural margins they once occupied and to participate in and share responsibility for the cultural and educational life of American society. And, speaking for my generation, so have we. This is a college, not a church. Do I also say that here, on campus, I am an historian, and a professor, not a Roman Catholic? Not quite, but like the institutions, most of us acknowledge complicated but altogether serious professional and disciplinary commitments and responsibilities which mediate our understanding and practice of faith. And that has consequences, not least a certain dualism that leads us to our own dialogue between faith and culture, but also risks, among them the segmentation, sometimes mistaken for secularization, that disturbs many of our friends.

Second, we all have civic as well as academic responsibilities. Our colleges and universities are public bodies, chartered by the people of the several states, supported by public appropriations as

well as semi-public and private benefactions. Our institutions are expected in return to serve the public interest, the common good, and so are we. Civic, or could we say political, responsibility is a fact and not an option, though we all worry when talk turns to the politics of knowledge. Once again, do I leave civic and political responsibilities behind when I put on my professional robes? Not quite, but on my bulletin board in O’Kane 364 down the hall I post a bumper sticker that reads “TRUST ME---I’m not into Politics or Religion.”

Finally our particular colleges and universities have a third set of responsibilities because they profess to be Catholic, and some make that commitment concrete through vital connections with religious communities of women or men, in our case the Jesuits. Our institutions almost all fiercely defend their institutional autonomy against any effort to exert control from the outside, political or ecclesiastical, but, with the church as with the public, they freely acknowledge genuine responsibilities and attempt to act on them. In our Catholic case our connection to the church can at times seem burdensome, challenging, but at times disrespecting, our professional and civic obligations. So, in our human way, we sometimes minimize its importance in order to avoid conflict. But on our better days we try to turn the Catholic and Jesuit heritage, and our living connections with the church and the Society of Jesus, into assets that enrich our vocations (Tom has just returned from leading a faculty group on an Ignatian pilgrimage through Spain and Italy; one of my young department colleagues said yesterday that the experience far exceeded her expectations. Later I hope to learn how. I have benefited in my own life from multiple connections with Catholic ministries). But, with the church as with the government, collaboration is a two way street and external authorities do not always make it easy for us, and we at times may not make it easy for them.

So this institutional balancing of academic, political and religious responsibilities has a personal counterpart, doesn’t it? Our students in their future will similarly have to balance professional, civic and moral and religious responsibilities, and we hope to help them do that with intelligence and integrity. We hope they will be competent professionals, conscientious citizens, intelligent disciples. And our hope for them expresses our aspirations for ourselves. All of us are at once scholars and teachers, citizens of complicated civic communities, and, in some cases, active participants in communities of faith, in all cases people of conscience and commitment. What the second Vatican Council said of ordinary Catholics could be said with only slight modifications of all of us: “the laity, by their very vocation, seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family, and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven.” (LG par 29). Weaving that web is another name for vocation. I am sure that Tom and the Collegium board hope that we might be better able to do that weaving for having been here together.

Let me say a few words about this weaving as we have thought about it here at Holy Cross. I take as my text the College Mission Statement, whose logic I hope you find helpful.

When we set out fifteen years ago to write a Mission Statement we made several preliminary decisions. First we wanted to develop a statement that actually reflected the experience and especially the aspirations of the people who make up the Holy Cross community. Given our concern at the time to improve the quality of our collegiate governance, we focused in particular

on faculty and professional staff, but we consulted as well with students, alumni, benefactors, trustees and the Jesuit community. After four years of dialogue and pilot planning the statement eventually was approved by vote of our Faculty Assembly and Board of Trustees. Secondly, we made a deliberate decision to avoid questions of uniqueness. We would affirm what we thought we should affirm and, if other colleges and universities made similar affirmations, so much the better. This was not a marketing or boundary-setting device. And third we would honor those three sets of responsibilities, academic, civic and religious, and attend to how those responsibilities were being expressed as invitations by the Church and the Society of Jesus. In retrospect, I think without knowing it, we practiced a kind of academic, social and ecclesiastical solidarity learned directly or indirectly from the second Vatican Council, whose “Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World” has been rightly called the magna carta of contemporary Catholic intellectual life and higher education.

The Mission Statement had three basic elements.

First: “To participate in the life of Holy Cross is to accept an invitation to dialogue about basic human questions: what is the moral dimension of learning and teaching? how do we find meaning in life and in history? What are our obligations to one another? What is our special responsibility to the world’s poor and powerless?” In short we are here by invitation to share in a community constituted by conversation about “basic human questions” of meaning and mutual obligation.

Second, “because the search for meaning and value is at the heart of the intellectual life, critical examination of fundamental religious and philosophical questions is integral to liberal arts education.” Dialogue on such questions “requires us to remain open to that sense of the whole which calls us to transcend ourselves and challenges us to seek that which constitutes our common humanity”.

And third, within that framework, we affirm a responsibility to insure the presence of a vital Catholic intellectual life and worshipping community and provide opportunities to engage in the life and work of the contemporary church.

Let us take a look at the three parts: fundamental questions, religion and liberal arts education, and Catholic intelligence.

Conversation about fundamental questions comes first because it captures our shared commitment to the College’s singular mission of undergraduate liberal arts education. Regardless of religious or political orientation everyone is invited to share in that dialogue, which finds expression in projects like our first year program, whose banner is “how then shall we live?”, as it does in the wide variety of Lilly funded vocation initiatives at Holy Cross and in other church-related colleges and universities. The National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education publishes a semi-annual magazine called Conversations which is designed to be used on each campus for dialogue about “fundamental questions” as we confront them in our work together. Almost all our institutions now have mission effectiveness programs designed to forward discussion not, in the first instance, about denominational religion or even Catholic identity but about those fundamental questions of meaning and mutual obligation that are at the heart of

liberal learning and with which all of us hope to be engaged. If participants in Tom's Ignatian pilgrimage drop by, I suspect they will report intense reflection on basic human questions, only secondarily dialogue about the presence or absence of Catholic commitments.

For us in Jesuit higher education, there is a characteristic link of meaning and mutual obligation, with special reference to our obligations with those who are impoverished. As one non-religious professor said as we developed the Mission Statement, at this Jesuit school someone is always placing on the table the question of God and the question of the poor. This experience reflects the decision of the Society of Jesus to locate all their ministries within an option for the poor and to think always of faith and justice as inextricably entwined with each other. That commitment finds expression in memories of slain Jesuits in El Salvador, in a remarkable annual pilgrimage of students and staff to Fort Benning, and in a great variety of educational and community service initiatives.

Yet, for all the inspiration derived from the Jesuits, our decision to place the justice questions in this initial paragraph about the fundamental definition of liberal learning was intended to call forth dialogue on these matters not under some special, distinct Jesuit or Catholic heading but as integral to the learning and teaching that unites us. In short the questions of mutual obligation challenge us at the liberal arts foundations of what we do. The late Philip Berrigan was not a popular campus speaker because he always asked whether higher education sharpened or dulled conscience, and Jesuit John Haughey occasionally wonders whether our teaching and learning make us a bit more "neighbor numb". Just a few years ago hundreds of college and university Presidents signed on to declarations of civic renewal, admitting that more needed to be done to affirm the social and political responsibilities of American higher education.

But the questions of justice and social responsibility are too easily segmented from the question of meaning, and the problem of faith. Those questions themselves are often posed as specific to the Catholic or the Jesuit dimensions of our community, but surely they are questions for us all. Boston College's David Hollenbach says as much in one of your readings. Speaking of the "wariness" we all feel in the face of the multiple evils of our history, Hollenbach writes: "At least a whiff of nihilism can be detected in the atmosphere of the contemporary university. The question of the university today, then, is whether there is any ground for its hope to uncover meaning that can sustain human life and guide the vast energies of its scientific, political, economic and cultural undertakings. Or is all this activity simply a way of coping with life, filling the time between young adulthood and death with activity that is perhaps interesting but ultimately pointless?"

So the second plank of the Mission Statement is the claim that precisely because liberal learning deals with fundamental questions of meaning and obligation, serious academic attention to religion is essential. The source of this claim is not an argument about Catholic identity or ecclesiastical responsibility but the logic of liberal learning itself. Hollenbach's essay exemplifies the spirit of intellectual, social and ecclesial solidarity that marked so many of the writings of Pope John Paul II. His first encyclical was a powerful statement of realistic Christian humanism, his Apostolic Constitution on High Education centered on the dialogue of faith and culture, and he insisted again and again on the obligation of modern scholars to dedicate themselves to the construction of a new international order of justice and peace. And, on so many

historic moments, he delivered a message of hope aimed precisely at the despair Hollenbach sees beneath the surface of academic life. A religious sister and distinguished scholar told me recently that she was a college student on Boston Common when Pope John Paul II first visited our country. In the rain she heard his words “do not surrender to indifference” and they stayed with her as she discerned and eventually practiced her vocation.

So of course the great religious questions belong in the conversation, and our dialogues must always be open to that sense of the whole which opens us to the possibility of our common humanity. This sounds simple enough, but of course it’s not. Many of you may have found your vocation as undergraduates in courses where questions of meaning and value were valued and religious options were respected. But I suspect that in graduate school many were encouraged to leave religion behind. Historian George Marsden has laid out how American higher education at the turn of the last century cut its ties to the churches and moved theology off campus and into the divinity school. James Burtchaell and other critics believe that Catholic colleges and universities have done the same in recent years, distancing themselves from the church, turning theology into an academic department and discipline like the others, and leaving faith to campus ministry. Our mission statement suggests that it was a mistake to marginalize theology and religious studies in American higher education and that our Catholic institutions are well positioned to assist in recovering religious resources for the basic work of liberal learning.

As many of you know, however, it is no simple matter to translate that conviction into academic programs. Even if you accept the claim that religion belongs in the curriculum, you immediately confront debates about the relationship between academics and pastoral ministry, reasonable reservations about injecting personal beliefs into academic disciplines, and the mini culture wars between theology and religious studies. On the one hand critical study of religion now enjoys renewed prestige and popularity on campus. On the other hand many are extremely wary of theology. At faith-related and church-related colleges, theology has a place of priority, but often in considerable tension with religious studies. And theology brings with it a host of ecclesiastical and pastoral as well as philosophical problems that can arouse passionate debate and open divisions between colleges and their constituencies.

Moreover theologians who once were drawn from religious orders able to provide their members with extensive training in philosophy, scripture studies, and church history, as well as formation in the particular charisma and spirituality of the order, are now replaced by lay people with more specialized academic training but usually far less opportunity for the broad academic and spiritual formation available to their predecessors. They are asked on the one hand to help members of their faith community become more literate and sophisticated about their faith: to overcome religious illiteracy. Then they are asked to take the lead in cross disciplinary dialogues with the faculty, preliminary to programs engaging students with those fundamental issues. Only slowly have we come to understand the need to extend the invitation to engagement with faith and learning to all faculty and staff. Programs in Catholic Studies---self-conscious attention to Catholic life and thought across the college, with adequate human and financial resources---reflects that need to share responsibility more broadly for the academic implementation of institutional mission. I would argue that fulfillment of this responsibility will require uncharacteristic cooperation among the many Catholic institutions of higher education, in dozens of projects, most already proposed.

So, we come to the Catholic plank of the Holy Cross Statement: the need to insure the presence of a vital Catholic intellectual life on and off campus. Perhaps it is not properly located, coming after, and in support of, the wider mission objectives of fundamental questions and broad religious inquiry. But we think the location is right. At the level of college and university research and teaching, Catholic inquiry, "faith seeking understanding," should take place among and not apart from all those other people who also search for understanding in this world we all share. It is our judgment that it is better to think about the meanings of our Christian faith amid the challenges posed by religious pluralism, market economics, social diversity and political democracy, all those modern realities that form the web of daily existence. Here on campus the resources of the Church, its prayer and liturgy and community and wisdom, are readily available; we hope that they will someday be equally available to us in the marketplace and the city square. But we are called, most of us, like it or not, to live our faith, not in monasteries or separate enclaves composed only of Catholics, but in the midst of contemporary American life. After all, we are supposed to be the very Body of Christ all the time, and not just when we are gathered in church, or in a classroom with people like ourselves studying the latest Vatican directive.

So there is an intellectual solidarity, which requires pursuit of the academic vocation within the horizon of the human community's search for meaning and value. According to David Hollenbach, intellectual solidarity requires us to "take pluralism to conversation," affirming diversity without surrendering the possibility of unity. Hollenbach believes that the most serious conversationalists are religious communities which uphold substantive notions of human good, and the university is the place for that conversation to begin, its public responsibility if you will. Intellectual solidarity draws us to a mediating stance that rejects confessionalism, that is higher education without diversity, and mere sponsorship, higher education without religion.

American Catholic intellectual life is a work in progress. It has long been hampered, in the words of Charles Taylor, but the exhaustive, polarized debate between Catholic "'boosters' and 'knockers' who either condemned or affirmed modernity en bloc, missing what is really at stake which is how to rescue admirable ideals from sliding into demeaning modes of realization." James Turner, a distinguished American historian, similarly lamented the failure of Catholic scholars to directly take up the challenges of modernity in a spirit of solidarity. For a long time the phrase "Catholic intellectual," always seemed to Turner "if not downright oxymoronic to connote a strong person who read Thomas Aquinas and papal encyclicals while harboring deep suspicions of Sigmund Freud and John Locke. This character might be bright, even interesting as a curiosity, but certainly was not someone to engage in debate about contemporary sociology or recent literary criticism." Vatican II "exploded the cozy nest within which this odd bird was hatched," Turner continued, but from the debris few recognizable Catholic intellectuals, as distinct from "intellectuals who happen to be Catholic", emerged, at least from his then vantage points of Cambridge and Ann Arbor. Turner was not surprised, because, in his judgment "Catholic universities have rarely fostered scholarship that plunges Catholicism into the pluralistic intellectual life of our times...and Catholic colleges have seldom encouraged their students to think seriously and flexibly about the relationship of their faith to the novels they are reading or the chemistry they are studying." But none of this is inevitable: "No Christian people have a richer intellectual tradition. But to activate that tradition in the lives of Catholics, to fulfill its mission to the church, Catholic higher education needs to make a dual move: back to the

intellectual resources of Catholicism and out into the larger world of modern knowledge, so as to bring each to bear upon the other." In the end, that argument drew Turner to Notre Dame and his development of the Erasmus Institute program of fellowships and conference to encourage scholars to seek assistance with significant issues in the resources of Christian, Jewish and Islamic intellectual traditions.

Just a few weeks ago Protestant historian Nathan Hatch focused precisely on intellectual solidarity as he prepared to leave his position as Provost at Notre Dame to become President of Wake Forest. "While I am deeply aware of the struggles and failures of Catholic institutions and of the powerful secular undertow in academic life, what I find remarkable is how creative and intentional these communities have become in renewing their Catholic identity.....The generosity of American Catholics has propelled many institutions to a competitive academic level, bolstering endowments, facilities, faculty support and financial aid. Catholics and non-Catholics alike are attracted to these academic communities where religion is taken seriously and is studied and practiced intelligently.....Even more, Catholic higher education has an important role to play as the United States and other nations face the uncomfortable realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century....Catholic universities have not given up the dream of linking intellectual and moral purpose. They provide a middle ground where vital religious traditions can engage modern thought in a climate of academic freedom....Catholic universities face stiff challenges if they are to prosper as genuinely Catholic and remain accountable to the highest standards of scholarship....Most important they have to recruit Catholic intellectuals and other faculty members who are committed to the august tradition of 'faith seeking understanding'". (Chronicle 5/6/05) That I suppose is where Tom Landy's invitation comes from, and where you come in.

I hope all this suggests that the Collegium invitation, like the Holy Cross invitation, is inclusive, welcoming everyone into the dialogue about fundamental human questions and the academic study of religion, while recognizing our specific responsibility to nourish and sustain a rich Catholic intellectual community. The link is that spirit of solidarity, itself turning on recognition that in the end we are all in the same boat. Thomas Merton is helpful here. The continuity of his life was the active seeking self, a personal, spiritual and intellectual preoccupation that informed his poetry and art as well as his essays and forecast the religious world Catholics would find as they left their subcultures behind and made the modern world their own. Once Merton regarded other "children of the modern world" as corrupted by pride and self-assertion, but later, like Hollenbach two decades later, he feared that they lived at the precipice of meaninglessness. And he knew with all that was in him that there was meaning to be found first of all not in Catholicism but in the God available in solitude in the depths of the human heart and at the heart of the world. Finding God was not easy in the busy marketplace or the hermits cabin. In the years after Vatican II it was especially difficult, Merton thought, because Christian communities that once could be taken for granted had to be rebuilt and renewed. "The times are difficult," he wrote in a Christmas letter toward the end of his life. "They call for courage and faith. Faith is in the end a lonely virtue. Lonely especially where a deeply authentic community of faith is not an accomplished fact, but a job to be begun over and over as it is today in all Christian communities."

In 1967 Pope Paul VI asked Merton to draft a letter from contemplatives to people living "in the world." At first Merton hesitated, telling his superiors that "we [contemplatives] do not speak the

language of modern man" and there is danger of "driving him deeper into despair, simply by convincing him that we belong to an entirely different world." The monk, Merton argued, would have to speak to those outside the monastery "as brothers, as people who are in very much the same difficulties as he is, as people who suffer much of what he suffers, though we are immensely privileged to be exempt from so many, so very many of his responsibilities and sufferings." Others might go to the people of the world as good Samaritans, but for Merton "myself and my brother in the world are just two men who have fallen among thieves and do our best to get each other out of the ditch."

In that spirit Collegium's invitation may be a sign of the times. This spring the BBC presented a series of reality television presentations about five men, none Catholic, who spent several weeks as guests of a Benedictine community in Sussex. According to the London Tablet all five "reported rather against their expectations that they had benefited profoundly." The editors commented: "This was not spirituality without religion, which the modern age seems to think might be the answer to its needs, but religion serving the purposes of spirituality. The men were invited to dig deep within themselves, not asked to accept a heap of doctrine from outside. Still, without the doctrine, as the viewer was well able to understand, there would have been no monks, no monastery, and hence no journey of interior discovery." As Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor commented, the young men "were overwhelmed by the sense of being accepted for who they were, and at the same time grateful to be challenged to be much more than they were." (Tablet, 5/28/05)

The needs of real people, the prospects of important institutions, the search for avenues of evangelization that respect difference, intelligence and experience, all draw forth invitations and responses. Thanks to all of you for accepting Tom's invitation. I pray you will receive many more and that the results will be of great benefit to you in your vocations.

Thank You.