

A Catholic University: Views from Boston College

Exploring the Jesuit and Catholic dimensions of the university's mission

A broader, equally thought-provoking, and perhaps more accessible approach to identifying the distinctive qualities of a Catholic university (because rooted in more familiar language and experiences) might be to look at some statements that have come from members of the Boston College community or have emerged from Boston College occasions.

- Michael J. Buckley, S.J., former director of the [Jesuit Institute](#) and professor of theology at BC, has been one of the most thoughtful writers on the Catholic university. In a series of essays and finally in a book he has advanced the thesis that it is the distinctive service of the Catholic university to sustain a dialogue between religious faith and the experience of God's self-disclosure in revelation on the one hand and the various forms of academic reflection on contemporary culture on the other.
- One might begin with Buckley's essay, "[The Catholic University and Its Inherent Promise](#)" (*America*, 29 May 1993), where he says:

The university is Catholic in its deliberate determination to render the church and the broader world this unique service: to be an intellectual community where in utter academic freedom the variant lines of Catholic tradition and thought can intersect with all of the traditions and convictions that constitute contemporary culture and move toward a reflective unity between world culture and the self-revelation of God.

(*America*, 29 May 1993, p. 16)

- Buckley's position here became the subject of a subsequent debate between him and David O'Brien, professor of history at the College of the Holy Cross, in the pages of *America* magazine ("[A Collegiate Conversation](#)," September, 1993). O'Brien thought that Buckley advocated installing a distinctive Catholic intellectual tradition as the integrating principle of the university. He feared this would undo all the positive openings to contemporary culture that have enriched Catholic higher education in the recent past. Buckley replied that he was proposing a mutually illuminating dialectic of the religious and the academic, the Gospel and contemporary culture.
- On October 17th, 1996 Buckley preached a homily, "[The Vision of the Catholic University: All Things in Christ](#)," at the Mass on the occasion of the installation of Rev. William P. Leahy, S.J., as president of Boston College. In the course of it, he argues that "a Catholic university should be more truly a university precisely because it is Catholic. Its parent culture, the Church—at its best—evokes,

encourages, and sustains those questions of ultimacy which have for three thousand years framed the wisdom of any intellectual community."

- Buckley has also argued that a proper understanding of humanism requires including a concern for justice. See "[The University and the Concern for Justice: The Search for a New Humanism](#)" (*Thought* 57, June 1982) and "Christian Humanism and Human Misery: A Challenge to the Jesuit University," in Francis M. Lazarus, ed., *Faith, Discovery, Service: Perspectives on Jesuit Education* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1992), 77-105.
- Buckley gathered many of these ideas into a book-length reflection on the history of religiously oriented education and on the Jesuit tradition of education in *The Catholic University As Promise and Project: Reflections In A Jesuit Idiom* (Georgetown University Press, 1998).
- David Hollenbach, S.J., Flatley Professor of Catholic Theology at Boston College, has written a useful essay on the Catholic dimension of the university entitled "[The Catholic University and the Common Good](#)" (*Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, 1994), which argues that the Catholic understanding of social solidarity can contribute better solutions to our urgent cultural and social problems than individualist and pluralist viewpoints.
- A second lecture by David Hollenbach, "The Catholic University Under the Sign of the Cross: Christian Humanism in a Broken World" (included in *Finding God in All Things: Essays in Honor of Michael J. Buckley, S.J.* Ed. Stephen Pope and Michael Himes. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996, 279-298.) takes up Michael Buckley's thesis that a concern for justice is not only compatible with but is required by the university's humanistic aims. Hollenbach argues that this enlarged sense of the requirements of humanism will be furthered by a more explicit emphasis on the central symbol of Christianity, the cross. The cross counters an optimistic, often grandiose tradition of scientific humanism by insisting that the ultimate mystery that surrounds our lives embraces human suffering and shares human misery. Its central lesson, compassion for the suffering of others, needs to be part of the university's humanism.
- Michael Himes, professor of theology at Boston College, describes the hallmarks of education in a Catholic and Jesuit context as: sacramentality, humanization as divinization, introduction into a living conversation that transcends time and space, and an insistence on social action and reflection upon that action. See "[Living Conversation: Higher Education in a Catholic Context](#)" (*Conversations in Jesuit Higher Education*, Fall 1995).
- A former trustee of Boston College and a noted theologian Brian E. Daley, S.J., who for many years has taught at Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, now the School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College, reflects on what it means to be a Catholic university in "[Christ and the Catholic University](#)" (*America*, 11 September 1993).

- In a [commencement address](#) at Xavier University, Cincinnati (May 19, 2001), the former president and now chancellor of Boston College, Rev. J. Donald Monan, S.J., describes the sense of community, of connections between mind and heart that are the silent message of a university's buildings, its curriculum, the pursuits of its faculty and staff, and the friendships that its students form.
- Stephen J. Pope, of the Theology Department at Boston College, wrote a piece for *Commonweal* magazine, "[A Vocation for Catholic Higher Education?](#)" (28 March 1997), in which he contrasts two claims about the nature of a university. One, Jon Sobrino's, emerging from the experience of the oppressed in El Salvador, argues that a Catholic university must be committed to the poor and participate in movements for their empowerment. The other, in Cardinal John Henry Newman's famous work, *The Idea of a University*, rests on the view that knowledge is valuable in itself, whether or not it is useful or motivated by compassion. Pope weighs both views, finds them not at odds with one another, and argues that Catholic universities need to graduate students who have learned both "enlargement of heart" and "enlargement of mind."
- A more trenchant statement of the view that education in a Catholic university should involve the kind of encounter with the poor and the marginalized that results in a conversion of heart, a developed sense of solidarity with the suffering of the world and a desire to use one's gifts in the project of understanding and changing unjust social and political structures can be found in an essay by Dean Brackley, S.J. (of the Universidad Centroamericana in San Salvador), "[Higher Standards for Higher Education: The Christian University and Solidarity](#)," (in *Listening: A Journal of Religion and Culture*, 2002).
- A fascinating way of approaching some of the central issues in Catholic higher education today is to read the papers that formed the symposium, "Remembering A Past—Imagining A Future: Catholic Higher Education," that was held to mark the inauguration of Rev. William P. Leahy, S.J., as president of Boston College, on 17 October 1996 in Robsham Theater on the BC campus. Its three addresses were reprinted in *Boston College Magazine*.
- In "[Marley's Burden: A Ghost Story](#)," Martha Nussbaum of the University of Chicago Law School develops the idea that Catholic universities are not about business as usual but have "taken as their mission the development of the whole person rather than just the preparation of students for a trade or a livelihood."
- In "[Just Say No: The Power of Negative Reinforcement](#)," Peter Steinfels, religion correspondent for the New York Times, summarizes the religious identity and mission of Catholic colleges and universities in terms of four "nos" (no to the historical pattern of secularization followed by most religiously affiliated universities in the 19th century, no to any surrender of academic freedom, no to any arrangements that would make non-Catholic students or non-Catholic faculty unwelcome, no to

the idea of returning to a supposed golden age) and three tentative affirmations (that Catholic identity should be reflected not only in campus ministry, liturgy and service programs but also in the intellectual life of the university; that that Catholic identity is something broader than the place and character of theology and should show up in all the other academic departments too; and that maintaining any kind of distinct identity implies somehow bringing that factor into the hiring process.

- In "[Dedicated Memory: The Virtue of Hindsight](#)," Rev. J. Bryan Hehir of Harvard Divinity School grounds a vision of the Catholic university on three "memories": the "long narrative of faith and reason" that is part of the Catholic experience, Vatican II's fresh vision of the relationship of church and world, and the distinctively American understanding that knowledge is transformed into power, which Hehir sees as related to the Jesuit tradition that both knowledge and power must be framed within the structure of a moral universe and must be given direction in terms of ends and means.