

## “Dissent in Catholic Universities”

BY WILLIAM J. REWAK

Published in *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education* (8:1). ©Association for Catholic Colleges and Universities. Used with permission.

---

Discussions have been rife these last months on Catholic university campuses about what some consider the Vatican's recent heavy-handed use of its authority. Father Charles Curran of The Catholic University of America has been ordered not to teach Catholic theology; Archbishop Hunthausen of Seattle has been relieved of his teaching authority--though he's been allowed to retain administrative and financial authority. Father Michael Buckley, S.J., of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, had been questioned last spring concerning his purportedly irresponsible action in signing a statement in 1977 concerning the ordination of women; after a formal investigation, however, he was allowed to accept his position as a resident theologian in Washington, D.C., for the American bishops.

And there has been that current difficulty in the Church's new Code of Canon Law: a statement requiring those who teach theology in Catholic universities to receive beforehand a mandate, or permission, from the local bishop. In addition, a draft of a new pastoral letter Pope John Paul II wants to publish regarding Catholic higher education was recently issued, a draft all the Catholic university presidents were asked to comment upon. They've objected to it very strongly and there have been indications that some changes will be made--though recent events might indicate to a perceptive Vatican watcher that the Pope is not easily persuaded to change his mind or, as he sees it, to back down on strongly held principles.

I will not elaborate on the specific cases just mentioned--except to draw my conclusion in the context of the Curran controversy. Rather, I want to say something about Catholic university education while allowing those specific cases to function as background.

It is normal that the question would arise in our minds: what is the future of Catholic education if the isolated instances I have cited become a well-woven pattern? Bishop Matthew Clark, of Rochester, New York--Father Curran's bishop--released a statement on



March 12, 1986, before the Vatican issued its order, and he said this: "If Father Curran's status as a Roman Catholic theologian is brought into question, I fear a serious setback to Catholic education and pastoral life in this country. That could happen in two ways. Theologians may stop exploring the challenging questions of the day in a creative, healthy way because they fear actions which may prematurely end their teaching careers. Moreover, able theologians may abandon Catholic institutions altogether in order to avoid embarrassing confrontations with Church authorities. Circumstances of this sort would seriously undermine the standing of Catholic scholarship in this nation, isolate our theological community and weaken our Catholic institutions of higher education."1

Such a concern gives rise to three important questions: Is there a place for freedom of intellectual inquiry in a Catholic university? Is there a place for responsible, and public, dissent? And how valuable is the pluralism of an American Catholic university? For pluralism does not seem at the present time to fit into the pattern the Vatican is weaving.

Was George Bernard Shaw right after all--that "Catholic university" is a contradiction in terms? Or, to be more contemporary, is Denis O'Brien, President of the University of Rochester, correct when he says, "The traditions of church and university are radically different ideological traditions, and nothing but disaster results from assimilation . . . these traditions are in conflict, and so an attempt to blend university and church into one happy, syncretic whole will end in the corruption of both"?2

Let us look at the first question: Is there a place for freedom of intellectual inquiry in a Catholic university?

Two considerations impel us to answer an obvious "yes" to that question. The first involves the very nature of the mind itself. Looked at epistemologically, inquiry is as much a part of the brain as are the blood vessels and nerve endings; it is the process by which the intellect searches for meaning. "Human intellect," says Bernard Lonergan, "belongs to the realm of spirit... (and) Its knowing is process." And that process, he says, "is the prolonged business of raising questions, working out tentative answers, and then finding that these answers raise further questions."3



The dynamism of the intellect, in other words, forces us to keep probing; it is of the nature of the intellect to want always to know further. This is, for all of us, an experiential fact. It is what we do in a university, and as long as we are a university, we will continue to do that--whether our minds are Catholic minds or Lutheran minds or Jewish minds.

But the second reason why we should say "yes, there is a place for intellectual inquiry in a Catholic university" involves both the nature of truth and our apprehension of it. And here we touch upon what it means to be "Catholic."

Admittedly, Catholic universities adhere to certain values. They are outlined in our statements of goals and they are part of our lived experiences on campus: liturgy and prayer are important values; the struggle for an integrated morality is an important value; the respect for life is an important value; and the ordinary teachings of the Church are important values. But truth is also an important value. After all, Truth is, ultimately, God. The Church is therefore as much committed to the truth as a university is; indeed, over the centuries the Church has recognized that the particular modality in which the Catholic university carries out its mission of service is in seeking the truth, with all the critical intelligence at its command.

But there is no doubt that the consistent stance, if you will, of the formal "teaching" Church--the magisterium--is to protect and guard the truth; while the consistent stance of the university is to elucidate, question and explore the truth. What must be asserted with all due respect is that these two stances are not incompatible. It is dialogue, discourse, and mutual respect which make compatibility possible.

And I am not saying that the Church's approach to truth is absolute while the university's is relative. Truth, that value we continually strive for, is not relative, but our apprehension of it is always partial; we are never in complete command, at any one point in history, of the fullness of reality or of God's revelation. And that is only because we live in space and time; we progress through mistakes to a small understanding of one aspect of truth. We are not disembodied intellects, all-knowing and completely, simultaneously aware of all of reality. We are incarnate: we are stuck in matter and we live in dimensions. And so



being committed to the truth--even with a capital "T"--is not the same as possessing it, whole and entire, consciously and articulately, at any given moment. We are always groping, with assurance and with humility, toward understanding.

For revelation is both a-historical--coming as it does from the timeless essence that is God--and historical: the Word is spoken and imbedded in history and we must therefore look to the unfolding of history for the continuing incarnation of that Word.

There must, ultimately, after the last star has faded and after the last voice has spoken, be only one truth, even though we experience different facets of it. Then why be afraid of seeking it? If we trust that God is good, that He has reached down in some mysterious way and made us a part of His life, then we cannot, if we are humble and honest, be too far wrong in our seeking. Mistakes, yes. But honest ones. The important thing is that we keep moving, haltingly but determinedly, toward Him.

I do not deny that some self-conscious integration is necessary in a Catholic university. Prudent balancing is called for when we are institutionally committed to something we accept with faith and at the same time obligated in a professional way to question that which we believe. But that is the only way theological understanding in the Church grows; it is the only way we learn more about what we believe. Anyone familiar with the vagaries of past pronouncements by various Church councils knows that we believe and accept things as true today that we did not accept 500 or 1000 years ago. That fact does not undermine the teaching authority of the Church; it is only to say that we do understand ourselves, our social nature, our relationship with God in a better, more enlightened way. We become ever more precise in the articulation of our understanding.

And on a personal level, integration is called for. If we are religious persons, we have to respect what our religion teaches, accept it with humility, but be ready to question it *so that we may understand it better*. Integration is not always an easy matter: our lives are filled with compartments; the schizophrenic is the one who jumps from compartment to compartment without seeing any relation among them. And so the tension between faith and inquiry will always remain a part of our inheritance as human beings. But it is both possible and



necessary to strive to integrate them--through discourse, through clear and humble scholarship, even through prayer.

As a Catholic, therefore, as a Jesuit priest, I believe very strongly in certain issues, but that does not prevent me from studying those issues with enlightened and respectful scrutiny. As a Catholic university, we are committed to certain traditions and values, but that commitment does not prevent us from applying to them the gift of our intellect; rather, *it is precisely through the operation of its critical intelligence that a Catholic university serves the Church.*

Father Richard McCormick, in his *America* article on the Curran controversy, wrote: "... discussion and disagreement are the very lifeblood of the academic and theological enterprise. We all learn and grow in the process, and it is a public process. Without such theological exchange and the implied freedom to make an honest mistake, the magisterium itself would be paralyzed by the sycophancy of theologians."4

The second question is more difficult and takes its cue from Father McCormick: Is there a place in a Catholic university for responsible, and public, dissent from ordinary Catholic teaching? For if we allow freedom of inquiry, dissent will be an inevitable by-product.

Archbishop James Hickey of Washington, D.C., said last August, in referring to the norms established by the United States bishops in 1968 for public dissent, that they are simply unworkable. Indeed, the Holy See has gone on to clarify that for us and to say there is no right to public dissent."5 His statement came as a surprise to the U.S. Catholic Conference; but it does indicate that, regarding dissent, we are witnessing both a growing uneasiness within Vatican walls and a hardening resolve on the part of some members of the hierarchy.

What does a Catholic university do in the face of such a resolve?

An easy answer, though a valid one, would be to underline the primacy of academic freedom in a university setting. It is, however, not the complete answer, because dissent by itself is not the central issue. As a matter of fact, despite the general tenor of Archbishop Hickey's statement, even quite traditional theologians often view dissent in the Church now



"much more realistically and positively--as the ordinary way to growth and development," as McCormick has written.

In other words, *in order to protect the intellectual vitality of the Church's understanding of itself, responsible dissent is not only allowed, it is required.* The controversial issue, as both Archbishop Hickey and Father McCormick have suggested, is *public* dissent.

First of all, we must acknowledge the nervousness that certain groups in Rome feel about dissent--and especially about dissenting Americans. The nervousness is historical, with roots in the Modernist controversy of the last century; and Pope Leo XIII had problems with "Americanism" at the start of the present century. Rome does perceive us at times as a dissenting part of the Church. They feel, perhaps, that they are dealing with 13-year-old adolescents, and we should be honest enough to admit that we have not infrequently acted that way. Americans can be feisty; but I think our theologians do understand that dissent, handled responsibly, with study and humility, is "a way of getting at things, a part of the human process of growth in understanding." (McCormick) The fact remains that we will continue to have to deal with the differences between our approaches to theological investigation: Rome tends to be prescriptive; America tends to be dialogic.

Secondly, in today's world, we cannot avoid that dissent will be public--especially in sensitive matters. With modern communications, with the immediate availability of information, with the interest of the media in the Church, it is inevitable that any controversy surrounding those issues which do touch the lifeblood of the Catholic Church--or even appear sensational to the media--will become public.

Public dissent, however, is not always and necessarily desirable. It can foreshorten reflection and often makes careful scholarly work difficult: it is almost impossible for the media to handle complicated and thorny issues. But the fact is that dissent will be public. My point is that we cannot step back from dissent simply because of its inevitable publicity; however, dissent must always be handled in a respectful and responsible manner. And it must avoid confrontational tactics: such tactics only harden positions and make accommodation and workable solutions impossible. A scholar's mind is open and humble--



but honest.

Karl Rahner asked this: "What are contemporary moral theologians to make of Roman declarations on sexual morality that they regard as too unnuanced? Are they to remain silent, or is it their task to dissent, to give a more nuanced interpretation?" And his answer is, "I believe that the theologian, after mature reflection, has the right, and many times the duty, to speak out against a teaching of the magisterium and support his dissent."<sup>6</sup>

Father Rahner always insisted, however, that such dissent be handled with love for the Church.

What if such dissent is not responsible, is not handled with love for the Church? What if such dissent is not advanced within the context of a dialogue but only serves to harden positions and cause intellectual collision?

I suspect there are situations existing on a Catholic university campus here and there where a president would be very happy to see a tenured theology teacher resign. A bishop now and then must throw up his hands and wonder in stark amazement about some of the ideas being discussed and preached under the guise of responsible theological scholarship. But those cases are minimal when compared with the deep commitment, honest scholarship, and careful thought that characterize our theology departments. An aberration here and there is an unfortunate but reasonable price to pay for an intellectual freedom that the Church must have if it is to grow in its understanding of itself. The alternative is unreasonable, for to stifle such an aberration, with some form of censorship, is to put in jeopardy that far greater good of theological development.

Peer criticism has always been much more effective, historically, than censorship. But peer criticism is only possible if the study of theology is accepted by the magisterium as a public function of the Church. To some extent, it has always been public--wars have been fought over opposing theological claims--but it has become more so in recent years. However, if we take Vatican II seriously, such public theological activity, always recognizing the requirement of competence, is enjoined on the whole Church: "all the faithful, clerical and lay, possess a lawful freedom of inquiry and of thought, and the freedom to express their



minds humbly and courageously about those matters in which they enjoy competence."Z

It is clear, I hope, that I am not opting for theological anarchy. Mistakes and irresponsibility are regrettable, and authorities in a Catholic university have an obligation to minimize, as far as lies in their power, the scandal that can be caused by such mistakes and irresponsibility. And there is a serious obligation on the part of the Church authorities, as far as lies in their power, to help maintain a theologically astute and steady course toward truth. But it is still true that the end does not justify the means: the goals of purity of doctrine and of clarity of understanding are valid, but they cannot be sought using means that vitiate the process of understanding.

So, yes, we run the risk of false scholarship and irresponsible behavior. But it's a risk we have enthusiastically agreed to and one we monitor with both the professional academic safeguards of peer review and a clear understanding of the traditions of our institutions--in a pluralistic, academic context where we cannot and ought not to exclude from our consideration any facet of the diamond of God's creation.

That brings us to the third question: How valuable is the pluralism of the American Catholic university?

It is a valid question: the Vatican appears now somewhat uneasy with pluralism. In its initial stages certainly, the pastoral letter on Catholic universities to be issued in the near future by Pope John Paul II emphasizes the dangers of pluralism. The letter's message seems to be that everyone should say and think the same thing in order to ensure that doctrine is kept safe. But universities, it must be said, ought not to be safe; they should be alive and bustling. The American university, especially, is used to pluralism. We are a nation of many religions, of many peoples, of many languages. Respect for the human conscience and for religious liberty is a cornerstone of our nation; indeed, in Vatican II, thanks to the Jesuit John Courtney Murray, that notion became a part of the Church's consciousness of itself.

Humanity, made up of billions of differently-shaped pieces of flesh, finally, in the whole, composes the face of God. We should honor that difference, dialogue with that difference among ourselves, understand our differences to see where our love fits together.



It seems to me, therefore, that a university, if it is to be catholic, with a small "c," must emphasize pluralism--that's really a tautology. It must reach out to everyone and leave no part of creation untouched. It must embrace creation. Be critical, yes, but be loving, too.

But if a university is to be Catholic, with a capital "C," it must also emphasize pluralism. As Joseph Komonchak recently observed, "The adjective 'Catholic' was first employed by church fathers precisely in opposition to sectarian and regional claims; it referred to the broad, worldwide communion of churches engaged in their creative and transformative encounter with the ancient culture."<sup>8</sup>

We cannot honor and do justice to the astonishing diversity of God's gift of creation if we do not open ourselves to it.

In summary: we are being true to our mission as a Catholic university 1) only if we are engaged honestly and unrestrictedly in intellectual inquiry; 2) only if we are allowed to dissent--and the dissent is couched in sincere terms of a dialogue--in order that our understanding of our role in the Church's mission can grow, and so that the Church's understanding of itself can grow; and 3) only if we embrace pluralism. Those three values are unreservedly necessary for the vitality and effectiveness of a Catholic university. Without those values, we are not a Catholic university.

For both the Church and the university have the same goal: to set people free so they may live the freedom of the children of God.

And Catholic universities passionately espouse all the traditional values of the Church: its struggle for wisdom, its adherence to the gospel message, its ecumenism, its deep reverence for the liturgy, its predilection for the poor (nowhere but in America, by the way, do Catholic universities do so much in the form of community service and scholarship aid for minorities and underprivileged). Indeed, in today's world, there is probably no more crucial concern shared by both the Church and Catholic universities than the search for justice.

With such common concerns, should we not be able to dialogue without recrimination or fear of censorship? The Catholic university, to remain true to its calling, needs constant dialogue with its traditions; the Church, to be able to give to the world, needs constant



dialogue with the world.

And so the question is inevitable: What if we, at this university, were presented with the same situation as was presented to The Catholic University of America? First of all, of course, there are differences: that University has divisions chartered by the Vatican; American bishops comprise a certain percentage of the Board of Trustees; and the Catholic theologians there are expected--certainly by the Vatican--to represent Catholic teaching in a much more formal way than they are in other American Catholic universities. That needs to be said, because if a theologian were ordered to stop teaching, we would--given the American legal and educational system--have a much harder time than Catholic University in complying with such a directive; we would not be able to comply with it. But it is also true that The Catholic University of America, since it, too, is subject to accreditation and empowered by the state to give civil degrees, will certainly have a difficult time if it decides to heed the Vatican directive.

And here I must make a distinction between the university's response to such a directive and the individual professor's response. A university, when it grants tenure, makes a contractual agreement with a professor that binds the university to maintain the employment of that professor--barring those circumstances usually made explicit in the contract. The professor, however, is not so bound. Ordinarily, he or she can leave at the end of the year with impunity, by choosing not to sign the annual contract.

The university, therefore, cannot eliminate tenure or remove a professor from the classroom simply because an outside agency forbids a professor to teach. A professor, however, may very well decide--because of a special bond of obedience which he respects; because of the greater good or perhaps to avoid further scandal; or for personal reasons--to cease teaching, and even to give up tenure. But this is a personal decision made apart from the institutional commitment to him. He can decide to give up his right to tenure, but the university cannot order him out on the basis of an external directive.

However, quite apart from the legal and educational constraints, my point is that such compliance on the part of this university would not be desirable, and could not be assented



to, *precisely because we are a Catholic university, and precisely because of our love for the Church.*

One last thing: I don't think we can be a true Catholic university without taking risks. Moses took a risk when he went to the Pharaoh one day and said, "I have a message for you." Jesus took a big risk when He said, "I have one thing to say to you, love one another." Teresa of Avila took a risk when she started travelling around to monasteries and convents and compelling them to a more evangelical way of life, and Ignatius Loyola took a big risk when he started a new religious order, and new schools, with no money.

Because of risks, history is changed. It moves suddenly closer, with clearer purpose, towards final meaning, final understanding.

So we should not be afraid of taking risks with our intellects, with our ideas and our criticism. Not all ideas are good, we should be honest in our criticism, but most ideas are worth investigation. We are here to extend human knowledge; and as far as I am concerned, that is also to learn divine wisdom. In the final analysis, they ought not to be separated.

---

*Fr. Rewak is the President of Santa Clara University. His text is a revised version of an address delivered at Santa Clara's Faculty Convocation, September 19, 1986.*

---

## Notes

1. Quoted in Richard McCormick, "L'Affaire Curran," *America*, April 5, 1986, p.267.
2. "One, Holy, Catholic and Somewhat Infallible." *America*, April 4, 1987, p.276.
3. "Insight: Preface to a Discussion," in *Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan, S. J.*, ed. by F.E. Crowe, S.J., Herder and Herder, 1967, p.156.
4. *Op. cit.*, p.264.
5. *National Catholic Reporter*, September 5, 1986.
6. *Stimmen Der Zeit*, 1980, quoted in McCortnick, *op. cit.*
7. *Gaudium et Spes*, no 62.
8. "Issues Behind the Curran Case," *Commonweal*, January 1987, p. 43.



