

“Faithful Acts”

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In their professional roles as teachers, scholars and authors of human culture, faculty members at a Catholic university--whether Catholic or not--are vital agents in shaping the institution's religious character.

One of the great strengths of Catholic higher education is that it rests upon an implicit philosophy or theology of the human person. In the Christian perspective, the ultimate worth of a human person is not measured merely by what we know, but rather by what we freely do. While always profoundly committed to the importance of knowledge in and for itself, Catholic higher education has never regarded the human person as exclusively "thinker," but also as radically free, with knowledge instrumentally serving as a light to both the responsiveness and the creativity inherent in human freedom.

By reason of this theological perspective on the student as person, a significant purpose of Catholic higher education is to assist in the development of individuals for a creative, enlightened and responsible exercise of their freedom. This I take to be a large overriding purpose Catholic education assumes, and it is for this reason that the personal outlook of the faculty member is so important--recognizing students not merely as minds to be sharpened, but as a story to be written, a story they will write, with God's grace, for themselves, a story of a freedom that only they can exercise, but that we can assist them with.

Admittedly, not every faculty member in every discipline will be in a position to contribute equally to this formative educational role. Through the decade of the fifties and early sixties, however, too many universities abandoned altogether any institutional effort to deal with freedom and values, not least because of their inability to establish any institutional consensus regarding values or any coherent philosophy of the human person and of the meaning of human life. But the point I would emphasize is that, given the Christian conception of the person underlying our efforts, an important part of the problematic of



Catholic higher education becomes the pedagogy of freedom. And it is a pedagogy that cannot be left exclusively to officials in the student affairs areas of our colleges and universities, but needs address by the academic faculty and the curriculum of studies. The pedagogy of the calculus or of economics or of Greek is relatively easy; but the pedagogy of freedom--how you understand it, how you assist it to be responsive, how you recognize its developmental stages at different chronological ages, how you enlarge its creativity, how you communicate an experience of its fundamental thrust as one of love rather than of personal aggrandizement--this is one of the fundamental tasks in educating the whole person, which our faculties have a unique opportunity and, indeed, an obligation to our own ideals to assume.

If one's relationship to students forms one of the major axes that orient the life of faculty members, the other axis that shapes both their commitment and their responsibility lies in the pursuit of a specific academic field.

Let me acknowledge from the outset that over the course of the past 25 years, the responsibilities and pressures placed upon the American university professor have enormously complicated their challenge. The literal explosion of knowledge and technology that has taken place, the increasing differentiation of academic disciplines into sub-specialties the zeal for excellence that urges both institutions and individual scholars to heightened research ambitions, the increasing efforts of universities to serve their surrounding communities, and the efforts to assist students in dealing with the extraordinary social changes of these years have placed heavy burdens on faculty lives. Within the context of a Catholic university, there are obviously a number of perspectives in which the faculty member's professionalism in his or her academic discipline can lend distinctive strength to our universities. The presence of strong theology departments in our universities that develop and communicate the meaning of Christian revelation are an obvious source of distinctive strength to the universities as well as to the Church in its developing self-understanding and relationship to the world around it. The declared purpose of Catholic universities to create a forum for an ongoing dialogue between faith and other elements of an evolving human



culture opens a clear arena for faculty members to give distinctive strength to their universities in ways disregarded by most institutions.

What I would like to focus upon, however, is the contribution to the mission of the Catholic universities that the faculty member makes in the primary role he or she plays in the university, namely as scholar, professor, researcher in any of the recognized academic disciplines. Perhaps nothing so clearly defines the expectations and responsibilities and personal commitment of a scholar on our faculty or, for that matter, of a professional manager, in the conduct of our university than the degree of quality and of professional excellence that they contribute to the university's mission. The paradox is that in the process of reflecting upon the Catholic character of our universities, the professional excellence we have achieved is too often seen as, at best irrelevant to our Catholic character and at worst at odds with it.

Thirty years ago those of us who witnessed the staggering investment state governments were devoting to campus facilities, to faculties and programs, believed that the maintenance of our academic standing within the higher educational community was a nearly insurmountable task. By and large, no one today questions whether Catholic colleges and universities are stronger today than ever in their past--academically, managerially, in research capability, in the quality of faculties and graduates. Their question, rather, is whether professional excellence has taken place at the expense of Catholic character and identity. Further struck by the declining number of religious and priests available and by the independence of university governance from ecclesiastical jurisdiction, friends ask not whether Georgetown or St. Louis University, will continue to exist, but whether they will continue to be Catholic--and how Catholic. Of greater concern still are the occasional ecclesiastical disavowals of any interest in how strong a university is (we don't need another Harvard) over against an interest only in how "Catholic" it is. The implication of these questions, of course, is that there is a radical dualism at work in Catholic universities--the one element constituting the professionally academic and managerial excellence of the institution, the other its Catholic character. This latter, its



Catholic character, becomes spontaneously identified with a specific department (Theology) or function (Chaplaincy) or even personage (Priest-President) in the university. This dualistic view creates a special vulnerability in our institutions, because it provides no role in shaping the distinctively Catholic character of the university to the large majority of our faculty, and especially of our non-Catholic faculty, in their fundamental commitment to research and scholarship, and teaching in specialized academic disciplines.

And while it is important to encourage in a special way interdisciplinary research and investigation that have direct relevance to moral values and to public policy issues, such emphases, when identified with our Catholic character, can, ironically, further marginalize the role of disinterested pursuits of academic or managerial excellence.

This tendency to dualistic thinking in reflecting upon Catholic universities is as old as Christianity itself. In a few short pages of his compendium on Catholicism, Notre Dame's Fr. Richard McBrien summarizes Reinhold Niebuhr's analysis of the diverse lenses through which Christianity has historically viewed the relationship of Christ to the world. The first letter of John, the writings of Tertullian, the entire monastic movement in its withdrawal from the world and clear themes in modern Protestantism view Christian life as over against human culture, as the antithesis of human culture. He traces also the less confrontational but nonetheless dualistic strain between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of wrath and sin that is the world, that was a continuing tributary from some of the emphases of St. Paul up through Martin Luther and to a 20th Century expression in Reinbold Niebuhr himself.

My thesis is that insofar as the faculty's dedication to the whole range of intellectual pursuits is almost synonymous with the world's culture, one's understanding of the academic faculty's specific contribution to the Catholic character of universities will be a reflection of one's theological understanding of the relationship between Christian life and human culture, between Church and world, between nature and the supernatural. Obviously, I am not here going to attempt to resolve the titanic theological struggles that have taken place around each of these themes. What I would like to do is to point up the fact that the past 50 years of theology have repeatedly emphasized another theme as old as Christianity itself that



sees Christian life achieving its end in and through the transformations of culture. Before doing this, however, I would like to take my point one step further, and assert that an understanding of the faculty's role is closely related to an understanding of the university itself--and of the transformation it has undergone in recent years.

The single most dramatic change that has taken place in Catholic colleges and universities over the years that span my personal experience of these institutions is the growing professionalism of our faculty and managerial staffs that was manifest particularly in our assimilation of professional standards of appointment and of tenure, of academic freedom and of due process to assure it, and of the confirmation of the autonomy of our institutions from ecclesiastical or religious community jurisdiction through the participation of increasing majorities of lay members of our boards of trustees. Paul FitzGerald, SJ, in his book, *The History of Jesuit Colleges from the years 1920 to 1970*, refers to this as the Americanization of the colleges and universities. However valid this perspective, I prefer to regard the change not in political or nationalistic terms, but to recognize the process as a conscious effort to meet standards of quality, that are not merely American standards, but are standards of professional quality for the academy itself.

The fact is that though "born," as the Holy Father recently expressed it, "from the heart of the Church," the university is a creation of human culture, an element of human culture that possesses its own intrinsic dynamism or nature or laws of evolutionary growth and perfectability that must be respected and actualized if the university is to be itself and fulfill its high promise of contributing to the cultural life of the human family. To a degree, the internal dynamic of the university is the dynamic of the human mind itself--to be self determining in framing its inquiries, to frame hypotheses and explanations, to follow evidence, to critique accepted understanding in order to more adequately express the truth; to conduct one's scholarship in the humble recognition that the deposit of knowledge gained reflects the interdependence and critical judgment exercised among scholars themselves as both a guarantee and a safeguard of quality in one's scholarship. Indeed, it is the mind's own innate desire to understand and its radical responsiveness to forms of evidence that ultimately



shape the imperative of academic freedom and of autonomy that are part of the constituent nature of the university.

On the one hand, therefore, during the 10-year process that led up to the issuance of Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, most college and university people were stirred by the hope that arises from the singular promise of an institution that has achieved a full measure of cultural maturity as a university and is simultaneously Catholic. On the other side of the same coin, however, our deep concern about any repudiation of academic freedom or of institutional autonomy in the document reflected our estimate of the unwarranted tragedy that would result from any conception of Church and culture that might force a choice between our cultural imperatives as universities and our Catholic character.

Both our confidence in the newly established professional strength of our institutions and our concern for the maintenance of the integrity of academic freedom and of institutional autonomy were rooted in the belief that Christian faith and the world's culture, that full professional integrity and Catholic character in a university, are neither antithetical to each other nor evolving on dual but separate tracks. In a sense, the effort to understand the mission of a Catholic university and the effort to understand the academic faculty's specific contribution to Catholic character, are one and the same. Both depend upon some degree of success in theologically articulating what is at root a Christian mystery--the mystery of the Word's entrance into history by assuming, in its totality, human nature--and the consequent mystery of the Church's salvific mission to mankind and its culture.

Perhaps no document of the Church spoke more thematically to the relationship of the Church to the cultural forces operative in the contemporary world than Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes*. Indeed, the positive, affirming tone and content of that document provided the impetus for much of the professionalization that has taken place in our colleges and universities over the past 25 years.

Indeed, the Council deplored as one of the most serious errors of our age the split between "professional activities . . . and religious life." And while the document issues a



ringing affirmation of "the legitimate autonomy of human culture and especially of the sciences," recognizes that men and women are authentic "authors of the culture" and rightly have an increasing sense of "autonomy and responsibility" in this endeavor, this massive affirmation of the creativity and independence and fecundity of human cultural forces, is founded, as the then-General of the Society of Jesus said, "on a mighty act of faith--in the secular, human world as the arena of God's unceasing activity." In a rich series of texts, the Council states and re-states its incarnational perspective on human accomplishment as the "unfolding of the Creator's work" contributing "to the realization in history of the divine plan," an integral part of the Christian's vocation, a gift and calling of the Spirit. This unifying view of the scientific, cultural and religious accomplishments of men and women, the Council, of course, grounds in Christ. "The truth is," the Council says, "that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light." Consequently, that the earthly and the heavenly city penetrate each other is a fact accessible to faith alone." It remains a mystery of human history . . . until the splendor of God's sons is fully revealed."

If there is truth to the historical reading of Christian life as either the antithesis of culture or in paradox to it, these perspectives are incomplete and only find their full meaning when enriched by the mission of Christ and of Christian life as the transformer of culture. "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." (John 3:16-17) This was the motif that predominated in Augustine's *City of God*. In McBrien's words, "The work of culture is the work of grace and the power of grace is expressed in culture . . . this world is itself destined for the Kingdom of God and we are called to facilitate its movement toward the Kingdom."

Perhaps no one expressed more vividly or felt more deeply the transformation of human work and most particularly the work of scholarship that the Incarnation has accomplished for the Christian believer than Teilhard de Chardin. Almost lyrically he says that God "awaits us every instant in our action, in the work of the moment. There is a sense in which he is at the tip of my pen, my spade, my brush, my needle--of my heart and of my thought. By pressing the stroke, the line or the stitch, on which I am engaged, to its ultimate natural



finish, I shall lay hold of that last end towards which my innermost will tends." And even more pointedly to our topic, "I want to dedicate myself body and soul to the sacred duty of research. We must test every barrier, try every path, plumb every abyss. *Nihil intentatum* . . . God wills it, who willed that he should have need of it. You are men, you say? *Plus et ego*."

In more prosaic, but for that reason perhaps more illuminating language, Karl Rahner pointed up that despite the conceptual differences of nature and supernature, of Church and world, natural existence has within the concrete order of total creation, an inner openness to grace . . . it follows from this that everything natural, if fully and freely experienced, accepted and realized as what it really is (i.e., necessarily supernatural in its ultimate goal) is actually at every stage more than purely natural."

Very importantly for our purposes in discussing the activities of Church-related universities, Rahner advises us not to confuse Christian life with ecclesial life: "What is ecclesial represents only a part of what is Christian, and the latter, even where it is not strictly ecclesial, is supernaturally relevant to the salvation of the individual and, above all, to the salvation and sanctification of the world. However much we may value and promote the importance, and even in certain circumstances the obligation, of participation by the laity in ecclesial life, especially in supporting and facilitating the strictly hierarchical apostolate . . . yet what we need above all to say and to appreciate is that the presence of Christianity and its grace does not stop at the point where outward expression of explicitly Christian and ecclesiastical life stops."

"In simple terms," Rahner writes: "wherever in this world of men, in its economic life, in the down-to-earth reality. . . of its organized community life, in the whole length and breadth of individual and social life, right actions are performed, according to reality and decency and humanity, there Christianity is achieved, even if not by that name, whether by acknowledged Christians or by others acting in this way; and hence the strictly Christian task of Christians and especially of lay Christians is fulfilled. This is not all that God demands of Christians, but it is something which he demands of them as Christians and not merely as human beings; and it is the most essential element in the healing and sanctifying of the



world as such."

This may seem an overtly abstract or theological perspective; and yet is it not, in the last analysis, the fundamental reason why the Church has been one of the most ardent supporters of the cultural reality we call the university? Is it not the fundamental reason why the Church has for so long given encouragement, and at times various forms of sponsorship, not just to religious chaplaincies or theology faculties or ethics courses or Newman Clubs--but to Catholic universities--whole faculties that, by the range and diversity and level of their intellectual resources, merit that name?

The reality of the "Christian inspiration" of these universities lies in their being an institutional expression of the Church's belief in the redemptive mission of the Incarnation and its transforming consequences on our human vocation and on human culture.

Obviously, not every faculty member, not even every Christian or Catholic faculty member, need see his or her professional contributions within this faith horizon. After all, the full reality--of the unified God-Man, the full grandeur of the Church's relation to the world--and of our human vocation in Christ--are each mysteries that are grasped only in a glimpse of faith it is not ours to give.

What is important is that the individual professor, whether experiencing that insight of faith or not, be given to understand that his or her apparently secular endeavors that constitute the lifeblood of university activities, are valued not less, but indeed more in the setting of a Catholic university because of their Christian significance in contributing to salvation history.

Perhaps most importantly of all, more widespread focus on this incarnational view of the university's essential thrust toward excellence in the seemingly secular arena can create more solid ground for mutual understanding between Church officials and their neighboring Catholic universities and give new vigor to that "mutual trust, close and consistent cooperation and continuing dialogue" the Holy Father envisioned in his recent "Constitution on Catholic Universities."



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