

“The Catholic University and Its Inherent Promise”

BY MICHAEL BUCKLEY

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The problem of self-identity is not just a problem for the young. It is a problem all the time. Perhaps *the* problem. It should haunt old age, and when it no longer does it should tell you that you are dead.

--Norman Maclean, *Young Men and Fire*

At noon on Sept. 16, 1992, Boston College, led by its president, was at prayer. That the Mass of the Holy Spirit was being celebrated this brilliant autumn afternoon indicated a Catholic university, conscious of its past and faithful to its identity. As the prayers and readings spoke repeatedly of the coming of the Spirit, I found myself wondering: What is this upon which we invoke the unspeakable mystery of God?

The question is not an idle one. Many voices state with increasing urgency that the Catholic university will disappear; that it will repeat the secularizing history of so many of the great universities in the United States; that this evanescence of its religious character is inevitable, disclosing gradually the unfaced irrelevance of the religious to the intellectual; that as the university becomes more authentic, more academically distinguished, its Christian character will proportionately dissipate and disappear.

Many of the greatest universities in the United States and Europe have already written such a history of religious atrophy. One can wander about their campuses and remark the chapels and statues--symbols that speak of a former religious intensity now long since dead. There one can paraphrase something of the cultural diagnosis of Friedrich Nietzsche: "What are these universities now if not the tombs of God--monuments to the death of God within an academic culture?" It would be unwarranted to imagine that we are not liable to the same influences, that we cannot repeat their history. Some 55 years ago, Robert Maynard Hutchins charged that Catholic universities had already



repeated much that was worst in the history of their secularized academic peers. One can wonder if this imitation will not advance into their Catholic identity as well.

No Catholic university is simply a stable fact, a here-and-now-and-always reality, complete in itself. The nature and possibilities of anything human are disclosed only if its temporality is taken very seriously. "Human creations," wrote Sigmund Freud, "are easily destroyed." Both the liabilities inherent in any human project and the contemporary historic readings of the Catholic university, then, should make us peculiarly sensitive to the possibilities that the Catholic university can be destroyed, that it can destroy itself.

If this is true, then one can only read the mission statements of some of these universities with a sense of regret. The very vagueness of the language and the indeterminacy of the general commitments leave one with the sense that the decline in some Catholic institutions may be already advanced, that the conjunction between a vibrant Catholicism and these universities seems increasingly faint, that the vision is fading. Presumably the mission statement is the document in which the university expresses its self-understanding, its character and its dreams--to be confirmed or attenuated through subsequent resource allocations and hiring. A criterion for admission to the faculty should not be religious belief, but quite simply how a prospective instructor sees herself or himself contributing to the purpose of the university as objectified in such a document.

At the Georgetown conference last month, held to examine the recent apostolic constitution on Catholic universities, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, I selected somewhat arbitrarily three such statements from Jesuit universities. There one can find assertions made about education within the Jesuit or Judeo-Christian or Catholic religious tradition. Allegiance is pledged to the "service of faith and the promotion of justice," the generic focus given to all Jesuit apostolic commitments. When one has left deference and set phrases behind, however, these statements do not indicate how this Catholic tradition tells significantly and uniquely upon the educational core of these institutions, nor does "faith and justice" translate precisely into an academic ideal for higher learning. These pages are devoid of any references that would demand, as inescapably appropriate, language about the self-disclosure of God or Christ or theology. I submit that Bowdoin or Smith could and might be willing to say almost as much as I found here: to speak respectfully of their religious traditions, to espouse



"spiritual" development and to include within their commitment to the liberal arts the study of "the religions of the world."

A vital, articulate presence of the content of Catholic faith seems missing from these documents--the faith out of which they issued, which they serve in so many ways and which the university is to bring into dialogue with world culture. The "faith that seeks understanding"--what constitutes the substance and richness of the Creed and inspired 2,000 years of Catholic reflection and life--is reduced to a morality or a general social ethic. One looks in vain for very much beyond American civil religion. The Catholic, Christian character has shaded off into a vacuity that offers neither challenge nor much direction to the education given by the institution.

By no means were all or even the great majority of mission statements from Catholic, Jesuit universities so weak--some are quite strong. On the other hand, these three were not solitary examples. When significant institutions have allowed the Catholic character of their education to be expressed or subsumed by contextual references to a religious heritage, by standard phrases that bespeak this tradition but remain unspecified for American higher education, and by moralisms that any enlightened figure would applaud, then one who admires these institutions and hopes great things from them cannot but suspect some decline.

In response to the possibility of decline, outstanding Catholic educators have attempted to formulate the meaning of the American Catholic University. One can wonder, however, if some articulations do not mask significant retreat. Some describe the Catholic university as one where there is a strong Catholic presence. Others speak of its Catholicity through the activities of campus ministry and the presence of religious and Catholic lay faculty and a requirement in religious studies or in theology. Let me dwell on only one example. The late Timothy S. Healy, S.J., an important, much loved and admired educator framed the issue in this manner: "How does the Church live within a university? How do the two institutions interact on common ground?" In response, Father Healy cast the church and the university as two distinct, interacting institutions: "The Church also lives here [in a Catholic university] in two distinct ways: first, it leads its own life on our grounds; secondly, the Church joins in, shares and influences the life and the work of the university itself" ("Belief and Teaching," *Georgetown Magazine*, January-February 1982). In explaining the latter, Father Healy



maintained that at his university "education remains principally a secular business, and the university is a secular entity with a clear secular job to do. The Church can deeply influence how that secular job is done."

This seems to me seriously inadequate. At best, it presents a vision of the Catholic university in which the religious and the academic, however interrelating and intersecting, are fundamentally extrinsic to one another. In no way does either bring the other to its own intrinsic or inherent completion. Such an understanding of the Catholic university reads like theologically dated theories of "pure nature" and "the supernatural." Father Healy's "two distinct ways" in which the church is to share in an institution could describe the presence of the church within any major secular society, as it "joins in, shares, and influences the life and work" of the city, of San Francisco or the University of Massachusetts.

To understand the genius and the unique academic promise of the Catholic university, however, one cannot make the relationship between knowledge and faith, nature and supernature, "secular" and "sacred," extrinsic to one another, two distinct entities related to one another additionally or influentially. The fundamental proposition of the Catholic university is that the religious and the academic are intrinsically related. What does that mean?

Any movement toward meaning and truth is inchoatively religious. This obviously does not suggest that quantum mechanics or geography is religion. It does mean that the dynamism inherent in all inquiry and knowledge, if not inhibited, is toward ultimacy, toward a completion in which an issue or its resolution finds place in a universe that makes final sense, i.e., in the self-disclosure of God--the truth of the finite. At the same time, the tendencies of faith are inescapably toward the academic. This obviously does not suggest that all "serious religion is scholarship. It does mean that the dynamism inherent in faith--if not inhibited--is toward its own understanding, toward its own self-possession in knowledge. If allowed their full development, the religious intrinsically involves the academic, and the academic intrinsically involves the religious--granted that this development is de facto always imperfectly realized at best or even seriously frustrated.

To grasp the character or promise of the Catholic university one must understand this unique institution as an organic fulfillment of the two drives for knowledge out of which it issues: the drive



of inquiry toward an ultimacy or that comprehensive meaning which is the object of religion; the drive of Christian faith--i.e., of living within the self-giving of God in Christ and in the Spirit--toward the appropriation of this comprehensive experience in understanding. The inherent integrity of the comprehensive faith-experience moving toward intelligence and of finite intelligence moving toward completion, this mutual entailment, is what a Catholic university must affirm and embody, however halting and imperfect its attempts. It is no accident that historically the university issued out of the church.

The Catholic university is to realize this intrinsic relationship of culture and Gospel in the ways in which it is a university: in research and instruction and the conversations that give a peculiar mark to its spirit; in service and symbols and collective life and the richness of an ecumenical Catholic culture; in the intellectual growth of its students and faculty and in the sharing of the diversity of the traditions out of which they come; in the passion for a just society that must characterize its graduates and that will in turn measure the religious and humane quality of their education.

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.

This inherent unity bespeaks the promise of the Catholic university: to allow the dynamism native to each to reach its completion in the other. Rather than truncate the dynamism of knowing through interdicting the religious dimension of life or isolating the religious from the academic, the Catholic university has the resources and the charge to integrate them by allowing each its full development.

This seems to me to constitute the major challenge for contemporary Catholic universities: to become what they are, to realize their identity, to allow what is prescriptive discourse to become descriptive. In this identity is their great promise; in this promise is their identity.

I find such a call the strongest component of the apostolic constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. The Papal introduction in the first 11 paragraphs takes up precisely the point I think crucial, the inherent and dynamic integration of the academic and the religious, phrasing it as a search for truth or a



"universal humanism" that conjoins "faith and reason," or "the riches of revelation and of nature," or "the salvific message of the Gospel and the variety and immensity of the fields of knowledge." The subsequent sections of the apostolic constitution depict the Catholic university as limned in part by the final document of the Second International Congress of Delegates of Catholic Universities, and here the theory seems to me less satisfactory. The list of four characteristics is neither clear nor is its adequacy self-evident [1) Christian inspiration of individuals and university community; 2) continuing reflection in the light of Catholic faith; 3) fidelity to the Christian message; 4) institutional commitment to the service of the people of God (No. 13)]. The university is only inadequately distinguished into the "community of scholars" conceptually distinct from "an academic institution in which Catholicism is vitally present and operative" (No. 14). But in this section also the unitive functions of the university are given an important emphasis: the integration of the disciplines with the aid of philosophy and theology; the dialogic integration between faith and reason, both bearing witness to the unity of truth; the unity of the ethical and scientific, and the synthetic function of theology (Nos. 16-19).

In its call for a much stronger, a much more concrete affirmation of the Catholic university as an organic unity between the Gospel and culture, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*--whatever its other limitations--performs a valuable service. The constitution can be read as an opportune summons by the church for these universities to possess a deeper, more articulate sense of what they are--before the Catholic, Christian character evanesces into direction-less vagueness and finally disappears.

But will such a summons be heard? The dangerously growing alienation from the Holy See within the United States may well make this more difficult than it should be. Many in the Catholic academy have been alienated by what they see as an excessive centralization in the church and--more particularly in the fields of education--by the impositions of mandates, professions of faith and oaths of fidelity, and by repeated reports of the unwarranted use of the present powers of the Holy See to inhibit academic appointments or promotions or public recognitions through honorary degrees. This is admittedly a serious situation, but to cite it as grounds for denying a sympathetic hearing to the central summons of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* would be tragic. This voice and this summons to a more definitive understanding of the Catholic university deserve to be heard.



Michael J. Buckley, S.J., professor of theology at Boston College and director of the Jesuit Institute there, participated in a symposium on Pope John Paul II's 1990 apostolic constitution on Catholic universities (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*), sponsored by Georgetown University on April 25-26. This is an adapted version of Father Buckley's presentation. Georgetown will publish the collected contributions

