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Responses: Studying Catholicism

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Professor O'Brien's essay considers two institutions that seem to many contemporary people to be mutually antipathetic: the modern university and the Catholic Church. How can they work together?

On too many campuses, especially Jesuit campuses, the rush for academic equality with secular schools from the sixties to the eighties led to building academic departments and programs that looked exactly like those found in rival secular institutions. Today, in most Catholic universities, the nature and character of faculty and curricula are virtually identical to those found in non-religious institutions.

One possibility: by each being true to its inner nature.

The defining activity of the university as university is, in Professor O'Brien's words, "the serious work of research and teaching." Imagining that a contemporary university could be a place where "orthodox faith is taught and dissent is kept within acceptable, and unembarrassing, boundaries" ignores the innate character of modern universities where open inquiry, critical thinking, and diversity of conclusion dominate.

Can such an institution have a Catholic identity or a Catholic character? Indeed it can, if we understand the inner nature of Catholicism to be found not in a formal ecclesiastical hierarchy bent on intellectual dominance and hostile to independent thinking but rather in a people who share a history, a culture, certain convictions, and a specific indwelling and divine spirit that guides and protects them. If, as Fr. Hesburgh argues, the Catholic university should be a "place where the Church does its thinking," it's this kind of Church that can live comfortably within a university setting.

What might such an institution look like? There is indeed today a "yawning chasm" between the parish work of campus ministry and "the research and teaching at the center of university life." And Catholic higher education during the past forty years is largely to blame. On too many campuses, especially Jesuit campuses, the rush for academic equality with secular schools from the sixties to the eighties led to building academic departments and programs that looked exactly like those found in rival secular institutions. Today, in most Catholic universities, the nature and character of faculty and curricula are virtually identical to those found in non-religious institutions. How is the Church to do its thinking in places such as these?

Catholic Studies constitutes an effort to change the current situation. The rationale for Catholic Studies is similar to that which underpins Women's Studies or African-American Studies. The Catholic Church, regarded as a complex historical phenomenon affecting virtually every aspect of human thought and activity, is a subject worthy of sustained, informed, objective study both by the research scholar and the undergraduate student. People working on Catholic Studies should be found in departments of Literature, Fine Arts, History, Sociology, Anthropology, Theology, and Philosophy. At the same time, Catholicism as an intellectual, ideological, and spiritual enterprise has historically generated its own complex critique of the context in which it finds itself. And so Catholic Studies should also be found in such departments as Government, Economics, and Psychology, where a substantive Catholic analysis of both the discipline and its objects can be prosecuted. At Georgetown University a modest program in Catholic Studies has already been initiated. It has led to a Chemistry course on "Creation and Evolution," a Government

course on the writings of Avery Dulles, an Economics course on the economic theory of recent Papal encyclicals, a Philosophy course on Dante and the Imagination, an English literature course on medieval mystical writers, and an interdisciplinary course (Theology and English) on the Catholic Imagination. Student interest in these courses has been strong and sustained. The Catholic Imagination course, designed as an introduction to the program, has filled both times it has been offered.

Curiously, proposing a Catholic Studies curriculum seems to alarm some people. Not, however, secular humanists. People of that persuasion appear to understand both the aims and limits of such a program. But traditional Catholics seem much less easy with the concept, perhaps because the very "Studies" rubric suggests that this is a kind of inquiry which is co-equal with, for example, "American Studies," while they still wish to believe that somehow Catholic universities are in various ways actually studying and teaching Catholicism all over the place. But a deeper anxiety—expressed by some historically informed Catholic intellectuals—is that Catholic Studies is somehow an effort to return to a kind of intellectual life in which every subject gets baptized into a peculiar form in which certain kinds of thinking and creating gain priority and other forms are denigrated. Hilaire Belloc becomes a great modern novelist and Jacques Maritain the only philosopher worth reading. Though both nineteen-fifties figures merit study, this kind of nineteen-fifties Catholic intellectual life is not what Catholic Studies is after. Instead, it seeks the very same kind of open inquiry found already in the pursuit of other topics in the modern university while insisting that similar attention be given to the nature, history, and thinking of Catholicism—something rarely done at the present moment.

If Catholic Studies programs begin to take hold on the campuses of American Catholic universities they will naturally and appropriately initiate two of the important developments that Professor O'Brien regards as essential to the healthy future of Catholic Education, since the evolution of such programs will initiate a demand both for new faculty members dedicated to this specific form of research and teaching as well as for support for the kinds of research that such a faculty engages in. Catholic universities that wish to do the "thinking of the Church" would be well advised to start here.

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