Where Knowledge and Faith Meet

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Catholic Studies and the Question of Identity

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Catholic Studies programs can provide students with the opportunity to encounter the Catholic intellectual tradition.

During the last few years, much time and effort have been expended on the debates revolving around the question of Catholic mission and identity at most, if not all, of the Jesuit colleges and universities in America. In the course of these debates, tangible signs are sought that clearly identify the institution's Catholic nature, among them Campus Ministry, retreat programs, and service opportunities. Each of these expressions of the institution's Catholicity is essential and important. But the question arises, are they enough? Are these non-academic programs what make the university Catholic? Is the Catholic nature of the university relegated to those activities that do not touch upon the academic mission of the university? If the intellectual life is indeed the heart of the university, then ought not the university's Catholic nature be directly related to that life through a curriculum that reflects the institution's identity?

These questions came to the forefront of my mind recently, as I was walking through the halls of the parochial school that my children attend. There I came across a banner celebrating Catholic Schools Week with the words "Where Knowledge and Faith Meet." This phrase struck a chord since it captured for me an important issue in this on-going debate over identity. Is there a place for faith in the academic life of the university? Perhaps even more radically, can (or should) one's faith inform one's scholarly life? In recent years, such scholars as George Marsden, a historian at the University of Notre Dame and author of The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship, have argued that Christian perspectives should not only have a bearing on scholarship but should also be integrated into academic life. The question is how is this being accomplished. On several Jesuit campuses, as well as other Catholic colleges and universities, Catholic Studies has emerged as a way to achieve such a synthesis, and at the same time contribute to the living out of the institution's religious mission.

At a gathering of those involved in Catholic Studies programs across the nation at John Carroll University in the year 2000, James Turner, Director of the Erasmus Institute, reminded participants that "the most effective way in which Catholic faith can influence scholarship is through explicit employment of the intellectual traditions of the faith." Herein lies an important contribution of Catholic Studies, which involves the study of substantive intellectual traditions. However, one may ask why is there a need for a separate program in Catholic Studies at a Catholic university to highlight this intellectual tradition? To understand this development one must look at the recent history of Catholic higher education in the United States.

Historical Context

During the last three decades of the twentieth-century, Catholic colleges and universities witnessed a gradual loss of a sense of their Catholic distinctiveness and a growing willingness to accept the general social and academic standards of American culture as

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Catholic Studies ensures that students and faculty will have the opportunity to encounter the Catholic intellectual tradition.
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normative. Catholic institutions of higher learning began to view secular universities as the model to be emulated. Along with this shift toward a more secular model, academic disciplines became more specialized, thereby sacrificing the integration of knowledge. The population of the university (faculty, administration, staff, and students) also reflected more religious diversity, along with various degrees of commitment to Catholicism or, for that matter to any faith tradition. New schools of thought challenged long-held academic principles and traditional disciplinary approaches, particularly in the areas of philosophy and theology. The latter often shed dimensions of faith-commitment or were replaced by departments of religious studies.

While there certainly have been benefits associated with many of these changes, Catholic intellectual life, along with Catholic identity, has suffered. The presence of courses that were rooted in the Catholic intellectual tradition became scarce, resulting in graduates from Catholic colleges or universities with little or no understanding of Catholicism. Unfamiliar with the great thinkers and classics of the Catholic intellectual tradition, students were "illiterate" when it came to Catholicism. The very future of the Catholic intellectual tradition was at stake. Consequently, the Catholic college or university has not readily fulfilled its responsibility to transmit this tradition to students by providing students with the opportunity to study and reflect upon this living and influential tradition.

David O'Brien, Loyola Professor of Roman Catholic Studies at Holy Cross College, has acknowledged this failure on the part of Catholic institutions of higher education, stating that the "minimum responsibility of a Catholic university is to acquaint students with the intellectual heritage of Catholicism." Pope John Paul II, in his apostolic constitution, Ex Corde Ecclesiae, highlights this important obligation: "In a Catholic university . . . Catholic ideals, attitudes, and principles penetrate and inform university activities in accordance with the proper nature and autonomy of these activities. In a word, being both a university and Catholic, it must be both a community of scholars representing various branches of human knowledge and an academic institution in which Catholicism is vitally present and operative." Given this situation, many Catholic intellectuals have encouraged the development of Catholic Studies programs to meet the challenge of maintaining institutional Catholic identity. Margaret Steinfeld, editor of Commonweal, has asked quite pointedly, "If this tradition does not have a place in Catholic colleges and universities, what is it that you are doing? What tradition has a better claim?" In an article in Conversations, David O'Brien argued quite cogently for the implementation of Catholic Studies programs as an effective means for maintaining Catholic identity:

We need to develop Catholic Studies programs to provide the institutional base and support for Catholic scholarship and teaching. Support for Catholic intellectual life in Catholic colleges and universities is an institutional responsibility, shared by everyone, and not a matter for the sponsoring religious community, the theology department and campus ministry. The institution shows its support by devoting financial and human resources to theology and campus ministry, but also to Catholic intellectual life, one form of which is Catholic Studies.

Therefore, besides assisting the Catholic university in

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the living out of its mission and identity, Catholic Studies can, as part of that process, contribute to the recovery of Catholic intellectual traditions in the hope of forming contemporary students within the parameters of those traditions, thereby preparing future Catholic scholars. This can only be accomplished, however, if the study of Catholicism is integral to all facets of the curriculum. This is critical because the study of Catholicism needs attention since such a study will initiate a rich dialogue on the place and nature of Catholic intellectual life, which in turn will create an environment whereby those who practice the Catholic vocation to scholarship can be supported and nurtured. In such an academic climate, these programs signal "the beginning of a trend in the way Catholic colleges and universities address their religious identity and pass along Catholic traditions to students."*3

The Nature of Catholic Studies

Some may wonder whether the aims of these programs ought not be the prerogative of theology or religious studies departments. Such a view misunderstands the nature of Catholic Studies itself. Although theology departments offer specific courses on Catholicism, the study of the Catholic Church, its intellectual traditions, and its two thousand year contribution to a wide variety of human enterprises and disciplines extends to other academic disciplines. Religious Studies or Theology simply cannot cover the broad expanse of topics and issues that must be addressed in a Catholic Studies program, nor should such departments solely bear the responsibility. While Catholic Studies does depend on a sound theological formation, these programs "ought not to limit themselves to the theological conversation; instead a successful program requires taking the insights of this revelatory tradition and using it as a prism through which we can encounter these other disciplines." The most successful programs in Catholic Studies are those which remain distinct from, although complementary to, theology or religious studies departments. There is a place and a need, therefore, for a program that casts a wider net over what the Catholic tradition and heritage are and how they interface with human endeavor.

The Roman Catholic Church both as a formal religious institution and as a community of people professing certain shared convictions has a complex and long history. During its two thousand year life, the Church and its members have been involved in virtually every kind of human enterprise. Catholics have lived and worked within the context of many of the world's cultures, in a wide variety of places, among different peoples, intellectual horizons and cultural practices. What they have done in these times and places constitutes a significant subject of study. At the same time, Catholicism has developed certain specific ways of thinking, as well as various points of view about virtually every question that interests the human mind. Catholic Studies as an academic discipline deals with both Catholicism as a subject for investigation and the various ways in which Catholics have fashioned a critique of the world in which they find themselves. In so doing, Catholic Studies seeks to explore a Catholic vision of the world, which necessitates an acknowledgment that Catholic Studies is not limited to the theological disciplines, but rather is, of its very nature, interdisciplinary. Not to pursue Catholic Studies within an interdisciplinary context can lead to "a shriveling of Catholic thought to the theological disciplines or the isolation and malnutrition of Catholic intellectual traditions."*4

Since the Catholic intellectual tradition is integrally linked to virtually every subject, it can provide a natural focus for a program of studies that attempts to integrate academic disciplines and areas of human inquiry around a coherent core. In this way, Catholic Studies can contribute to the integration of knowledge. This is consonant with the tradition of Jesuit education which was developed with a view toward the integration of all faculties, enabling each to make its proper contribution to the formation of a Christian outlook on life. This integration of knowledge is seen as one of the characteristics of Catholic universities by Pope John Paul II in Ex Corde Ecclesiae:

It is necessary to work towards a higher synthesis of knowledge, in which alone lies

*3

*4
the possibility of satisfying that thirst for truth which is profoundly inscribed on the heart of the human person. Aided by the specific contributions of philosophy and theology, university scholars will be engaged in a constant effort to determine the relative place and meaning of each of the various disciplines within the context of a vision of the human person and the world that is enlightened by the Gospel, and therefore by a faith in Christ, the Logos, as the centre of creation and of human history.5

Consequently, in a Catholic Studies program, students can encounter Catholicism, not in isolation, but through a variety of disciplines from philosophy and theology, to literature, art, political science, sociology, communications, and history. In so doing, students view that tradition as a coherent whole, as they consider the role the Church plays in culture and life as the Church interacts with the world in which it finds itself. A Catholic Studies program is "a concentration of students reminding the rest of the university what the whole thing should be about, all of it."6

In this way, Catholic Studies challenges the university to be faithful to its heritage by living its mission at the very heart of its enterprise, that is in the curriculum. Such a curriculum inspires students to engage the Catholic intellectual tradition. By exploring this tradition, along with the vitality of Catholicism, students receive an education that is "both intellectual and faithful."7 By providing courses rooted in the Catholic intellectual tradition, Catholic Studies seeks to inculcate in students an understanding and appreciation of the Catholic intellectual tradition so that the Catholic perspective will continue to be fostered in the future. In essence, what Catholic Studies seeks to do is to prepare Catholic doctors, lawyers, business people, and professionals who will bring a Catholic perspective to bear on the way in which they carry out their chosen professions, the decisions that they make within their professions, and the way in which they live their lives on a daily basis. In this way, Catholic Studies seeks to prepare future leaders of our world who will bring an understanding of the Catholic intellectual tradition to bear on public discourse. This is precisely what Pope John Paul II calls for in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* where he writes that the Catholic university has as a priority "the need to examine and evaluate the predominant values and norms of modern society and culture in a Christian perspective, and the responsibility to try to communicate to society those ethical and religious principles which will give full meaning to human life.8 In so doing, the identity of the Catholic university will be unmistakable.

Beyond the Curriculum

The role of Catholic Studies in assisting institutions in the living out of their Catholic mission should not be limited to curricular initiatives. Just as many of our students, Catholic or not, come to our schools with little or no formal training in Catholic thought, the same can be said of many members of the faculty. Given the specialized training that faculty receive in the major research universities from which they come, they are often not in a position to draw upon the resources of a distinctive Catholic intellectual tradition as they do their own work and teaching within a Catholic college or university. This certainly has a bearing on the extent to which the institution can effectively live out its mission as a Catholic institution. Given this reality, Catholic Studies should engage faculty in genuine dialogue about faith and reason and institutional identity and mission. These dialogues, like the Catholic studies curriculum itself, must be interdisciplinary in nature so as to engage in a broad, wide-ranging conversation across disciplinary lines. Don Briel, Director of the Center for Catholic Studies at the University of St. Thomas has argued effectively that Catholic Studies must play an institutional role within the university as a whole. "Catholic Studies programs do not exist for their own sake but for the larger life of their institutions and the integrity of the Catholic intellectual tradition as a whole."9 Therefore, Catholic Studies programs have a broad responsibility for the sustained dialogue about issues of Catholic faith and culture as well as institutional identity and mission.
Catholic Studies

Should Engage Faculty
in Genuine Dialogue about Faith and Reason
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This broad institutional role in promoting identity and mission can be realized in a variety of ways. Faculty development is one of the avenues by which Catholic Studies can engage individuals in a conversation on issues related to the Catholic intellectual tradition, along with questions of mission and identity. Through such forums faculty can bring their research and disciplinary interests to bear in the dialogue on the Catholic intellectual tradition. Course development grants are another vehicle by which faculty can be drawn into dialogue. Such grants provide faculty with the opportunity to engage in course-related research whose end result is the creation of new courses for the curricular side of Catholic Studies, as well as a deeper appreciation of the Catholic intellectual tradition and the faculty member's responsibility in the transmission of that tradition. The sponsorship of a public lecture series is yet another means by which Catholic Studies can impact the larger life of the institution. Prominent scholars and religious leaders who possess an understanding of the vitality of the Catholic intellectual tradition can create an environment whereby the intellectual discourse that takes place on a campus is invigorated according to Catholic principles. Each of the above initiatives allows Catholic Studies to play a central role within the life of the larger university by initiating conversations about the contemporary relevance of Catholic intellectual life and the effective living out of the institution's mission and identity.

Models in Catholic Studies

In recent years, several Catholic colleges and universities across the nation have established Catholic Studies programs, or have begun to explore the possibility of launching a program. The most prominent and largest of these programs is the Center for Catholic Studies at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul/Minneapolis. Among Jesuit institutions, more than half have Catholic Studies programs. While all of these share some common features, such as their interdisciplinary nature and their emphasis on the Catholic intellectual tradition, each program has its own unique emphasis. Since I know John Carroll's program best, allow me to highlight briefly how our program is structured.

John Carroll established the Institute of Catholic Studies in 1997. The program oversees several initiatives: an undergraduate minor concentration, faculty development forums, sponsorship of a public lecture series, awarding course development grants, and the publication of Prism magazine. The particular
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emphasis of our program, especially the undergraduate concentration, is historical. By emphasizing the historical framework, students are enabled to develop a sense of the historical evolution of a particular theme in Catholic intellectual life, with an assessment of its continuing value for the present and the future. The program hopes to provide students with an understanding of the post-conciliar Church through an examination of those aspects of the Church's past that have shaped its present and will shape its future. The program emphasizes continuity between the present and the past, rather than a sharp break between the pre- and post-Vatican II eras.

The courses in the program, which come from a variety of disciplines, seek to explore and give students insight into the Roman Catholic Church's dynamic interaction with and interpenetration of cultures, traditions, and intellectual life throughout history. Courses such as "Catholic British Authors," "Catholic Social Teaching," "The History of the Papacy," "Church and Medieval Political Thought," "The Divine Comedy," "The Metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas," "Catholic Media and Culture," provide students with an appreciation of the way in which Catholic intellectuals have exercised a formative influence on Western culture in the past and can continue to do so in the future. Equally important, these courses allow students to assess human intellectual activity and experience in the light of the Catholic faith. Maintaining a cohesive, integrated program underlies the courses that are approved for the program, all of which focus on the Catholic intellectual tradition and meet the following criteria:

- examine topics, themes, or questions pertinent to Roman Catholic doctrine and faith in its various expressions; explore the contribution of Catholicism to a particular discipline; emphasize the Church-historical framework of a topic; illuminate the distinctive characteristics of the Catholic tradition within Christianity; and relate the teachings of the Magisterium to dimensions of Catholic intellectual life.

It is expected that faculty who teach courses in the Catholic Studies program use appropriate and effective methods of scholarly analysis and pedagogy as they promote serious reflection on the richness, diversity, and vitality of the Catholic tradition and its intellectual life. Furthermore, faculty are expected to have an appreciation and a respect for Catholicism and its teachings.

Catholic Studies and Identity

Catholic Studies has an important role to play in the enhancement and preservation of the mission and identity of our institutions. However, Catholic Studies programs should not become the sole bearers of the Catholic identity and mission of our universities and colleges. If these programs become the "Catholic piece" of an institution, then the Catholic nature of the university or college will be segregated from the larger life of the institution. Rather, Catholic Studies should be seen as a vehicle for the Catholic nature of the institution to penetrate the entire life of the university, particularly every academic discipline. It is the responsibility of every member of the university or college community -- regardless of specialty, discipline, or background -- to ensure that "Catholicism is vitally present and operative" as Pope John Paul II states in Ex Corde Ecclesiae. Catholic Studies programs can provide the leaven for this to occur.

By inaugurating a Catholic Studies program, a university or college is making explicit its task to provide students with a well-rounded liberal arts education; along with that also comes the responsibility to communicate to students a religious tradition that articulates the foundations for the moral, intellectual, and spiritual perfection of humanity. In so doing, the institution not only allows students to integrate faith and academics, but says in a very explicit way that it takes its obligation to fulfill its mission as a Catholic institution seriously. Whether through a major, minor, or concentration, Catholic Studies ensures that students and faculty will have the opportunity to encounter the Catholic intellectual tradition, thereby making more visible and more meaningful the institution's Catholic mission and identity.
ENDNOTES


2 Quoted in Patricia Lefevere, "Catholic Studies is a Serious Business," *National Catholic Reporter* (October 18, 1998), 28.

3 Pope John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, no.4.


7 Christopher Thompson, "Catholic Studies and the Dialogue Between Faith and the Disciplines," *Prism* 5 (Summer 2000), 32.

8 Turner, 19.


11 Flynn, 22.


14 The Jesuit institutions that I am aware of with Catholic Studies programs are: College of the Holy Cross, Fordham University, Georgetown University, Gonzaga University, John Carroll University, Loyola College (Baltimore), Loyola University Chicago, Loyola University New Orleans, Marquette University, Regis University, St. Louis University, Santa Clara University, Seattle University, University of Detroit-Mercy, University of San Francisco, University of Scranton.

Derika A. Legg could be described as the ultimate all-around student: a campus leader, an academic scholar, and a community activist. Legg, who graduated this spring from Loyola University New Orleans, has received virtually every student award possible. As a testament to her excellence, Legg received the Ignatian Award for Outstanding Female Undergraduate Student at the university's Baccalaureate Mass May 16. The Ignatian Award is presented to a student who is distinguished by her involvement in the life of the campus, represents Loyola with honor and distinction, lives her faith commitment, and maintains a high grade point average.

Legg graduated with a bachelor's degree in three majors: communications, Spanish, and religious studies. She graduated with academic honors, *magna cum laude*, and an impressive 3.8 grade point average. She has also amassed an extensive list of other honors. She was president of Sigma Delta Pi (Spanish honor society), president of Kappa Tau Alpha (communications honor society), and member of Alpha Sigma Nu (Jesuit honor society). The American Advertising Federation (AAF) recognized Legg for excellence and creativity in advertising, and she was named AAF's Most Promising Minority Student.

Legg's involvements are just as lengthy outside the classroom. She competed on the Loyola women's rugby and volleyball varsity teams, in addition to serving as intramural captain and playing eight intramural sports. She has been an account executive for the Loyola Advertising Team, president of the Loyola Ad Club, member of the Loyola University Honors Association, president of the Gamma Phi Beta sorority, and chair of the Loyola University Pack Pride Committee.

Her community involvement includes being creator and director of the tutoring program Esperanza, director of SMILE (Students Moving Into the Lives of the Elderly), participant in the Hunger Relief program, and tutor in the Lourdes program.