THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY, THE COLLEGE AND THE CHURCH

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In one of his more trenchant descriptions of university education, Evelyn Waugh wrote that “As soon as we reach the age when we become intolerable in the home, we are sent away to schools and kept there as long as our parents can afford. If they are really rich, they can keep on educating us all their lives, sending us from university to university all over the world. From their point of view, the advantages of education are direct and wholly delightful. By one simple expedient, they are relieved of the moral responsibility and physical inconvenience of having us about the house.” And he concluded: “When we end up in prison they can say, ‘Well, well, we did all we could. We gave him an excellent education.’” Of course, the anecdote is humorous to the degree to which one recognizes the ambiguity, sometimes even the artificiality of many of the contemporary claims of higher education: that it will prepare one for a career; will enable one to live a moral life; will train students in civic virtue and so on. But what then is the purpose of a university education?

In The Convivio, Dante had argued that the young are subject to a “stupor” or astonishment of the mind which falls on them at the awareness of great and wonderful things. Such a stupor results in two effects: a sense of reverence and a desire to know more. A noble awe and a noble curiosity come to life. But how many of our students have such an experience today? It is surely true that opportunities for stupor among undergraduates have if anything been enhanced, but rarely of the kind that Dante presupposed as most appropriate to their age. And of course in saying this, I think that we have to acknowledge that the fault may lie less with the young who come to us than with those of us who teach them and commit ourselves to the intellectual life.

I would like to speak briefly this morning on the distinctiveness of the Catholic intellectual tradition and of its ecclesial character but that primarily as a preparation for a slightly longer reflection on the present challenges and promise of Catholic higher education. For the last several years, I have spent a considerable amount of time each year in Rome. When there, I am occasionally reminded of a meditation by Barbara Grizutti-Harrison, written as she sat before Bernini’s Fountain of the Four Rivers:

Sitting in the Piazza Navona, eating a gelato, I am reminded of the Trinity: a fountain is an archetype of a self-giving, self-renewing God. It is as absurd to think one has to go to church to think of God in Rome as it is to think one has to go to a museum to see art in Rome. But I am a Roman Catholic. I need and want the necessary discipline of praise, the rhythm—the great swinging movement of dark to light—of the liturgical year, and, most of all, the sacrament of the Eucharist (life’s food and blood). I am not happy when I do not go regularly to Church, and not (I think) because I am oppressed by the consciousness of wrongdoing, but because I am weightier, having missed the opportunity to meditate, express adoration, contrition, thanks and supplication in loving and dignified communion with others.
This reflection reminds us of an essential fact about the Catholic intellectual tradition, and this perhaps more provocative than the recognition of its wholistic and integrating vision of reality. We cannot speak coherently about the Catholic intellectual tradition outside the context of the Catholic community, that is, outside the Church. When Ms. Grizutti-Harrison speaks of the Eucharist as life’s food and blood and of the great swinging movement of the liturgy, she speaks as a Catholic, for whom the great claims of belief and responses of worship form a complex but felt wholeness of being and understanding.

The Catholic intellectual tradition is ultimately inseparable from the deepest insights, convictions and assertions of the Catholic faith and it is in this sense that one must say that without the Church, the Catholic intellectual tradition is not only something relatively trivial, it is ultimately unintelligible. Until relatively recently it would not have been necessary to emphasize this point, but it is now essential to do so. When Flannery O’Connor said that she wrote the way she did because, not though, she was a Catholic, she felt compelled to add that she was, however, “a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness, that thing Jung describes as unhistorical, solitary and guilty.” We are perhaps similarly possessed, and it would be well for us to be particularly attentive to the consequences of this new consciousness. One of its principal consequences is a persistent emphasis on the notion of the intellectual, precisely as intellectual, as the consummate outsider, and by implication, a suggestion that an intellectual must call into question the nature and extent of all authorities and traditions, civil or religious. It is perhaps remarkable that we have come to take this skepticism for granted. As Josef Pieper has pointed out, it is still possible to think of an intellectual even among theologians. However, the moment such a man is appointed a bishop, (one thinks immediately of Walter Kasper or Benedict XVI) he automatically forfeits his claim to be considered among the intellectual class. Why is this necessarily the case? Does a deep personal and institutional commitment to the claims of the Catholic faith inevitably discredit one’s intellectual claims?

As one considers Barbara Grizutti-Harrison’s insistence that to be a Catholic, to participate in the overflowing love of the Trinitarian God, means that one is impelled to participate in the life of the community of the Church, one has to ask Pieper’s questions (which were in fact Goethe’s as well): Does not the risk of the outsider become fatal when the good things of life in question are those things entrusted to the Church, of which no one can partake unless he accepts them with faith and love, unless, that is, he “belongs” without reservation? How can I truly be a member of this mystical community and at the same time insist on maintaining a critical detachment, on being a non-conformist, on preserving my independence….

Pieper reminds us that this apparent non-conformity masks in a real way a conformity to a secular academic establishment and that the roots of the term non-conformity are in the Scriptural warning: *nolite conformari huic saeculo*, be not conformed to this world (Rom 12:2). Pieper expressed this very directly. In our time, he insisted “It does not take a grain of courage to attack the Pope,” “but how would it be for a change, if an intellectual chose to publicly defend, with imagination and verbal skill, the thesis that purity is integral to the proper functioning of a human being?” This would indeed be non-conformity. The Enlightenment
notion of the intellectual as the critic “par excellence” is now simply assumed, and this affects not only the way we conduct research but equally how we teach.

But of course, the roots of the problem are older than the Enlightenment and would require a complex historical account. For now, I want to focus on the implications of this skepticism for the modern university and then to consider its implications for Catholic higher education. What now seems inescapable is the conclusion that the modern university, although remarkably expansive both in enrollments and in budgets, is largely irrelevant within contemporary culture. Of course, its degrees are now presupposed as credentials for economic success and professional advancement but can we any longer maintain the general assumption of the late 19th century that university professors constitute the authoritative high priests of the new secular culture? C. John Sommerville has recently argued, I think rightly, that the modern university’s resolute commitment to an ideological secularism, one which reduces the perennial human questions of meaning and ultimate concern to arbitrary private values has produced a crisis not only of confidence but also of coherence for the university.

There was a time, and that not so long ago, that university faculties were fairly widely consulted about cultural and political issues deemed vital for modern life. Now, at least, in the United States, university faculties are seen to be out of touch with the realities not only of the political order but also of private conviction. Recent American elections have demonstrated this with remarkable clarity. There are a number of sources for this new situation but certainly among them is the narrowing of the university’s self-understanding to a constricted specialization of disciplinary concern and methodological interest, all under the rubric of a very narrow notion of secular rationality. Let me cite Sommerville on this point:

If our universities are to become more than professional schools, then rationalism needs to be in dialogue with other ‘traditions of inquiry.’ For the most important matters in life include such matters as hope, depression, trust, purpose and wisdom. If secularism purges such concerns from the curriculum for lack of a way to address them, the public may conclude that the football team really is the most important part of the university. But if they are taken up, we will find ourselves using terms that seem to belong in a religious discourse. We have dodged this issue by saying that true, good, just are all political, meaning that they can’t be discussed but only voted on. But in fact they could be discussed, if our discussions were to recognize a dimension of ultimacy. It will do wonders in drawing attention and respect to our universities.  

Of course, one of the greatest ironies of our time is the slavish imitation of much of Catholic higher education of this increasingly discredited naturalistic model of university life and its rejection of ultimacy. I would like to reflect briefly on this present situation, then turn to the classical account of the Catholic university, especially as expressed by Cardinal Newman, and then briefly consider its implications for contemporary higher education.

I am reminded of Walker Percy’s insistence that we live in an age yet to be named, but we can affirm at least that it is both post-modern and post-Christian: “The present age is demented. It is possessed by a sense of dislocation, a loss of personal identity, an alternating sentimentality and rage which in an individual person, could be characterized as dementia.” Perhaps one primary
expression of this new situation is involved in the reduction of all religious claims to therapeutic explanations. In such a context, all religions are equal and equally invalid. The only remaining value of religion is its instrumental and therapeutic use. But religion has been remarkably resilient in the face of secularism and we now confront the need both to acknowledge the fact that we can neither repress religious commitments and convictions nor escape their political and cultural implications. Again, Sommerville:

The terms we use to describe human affairs are not comfortable within a language of naturalism. We have not seriously attempted their translation into that language since B.F. Skinner gave it up a half century ago. When we say that human is a religious term, we mean that it has coherent meanings in a religious discourse. It relates grammatically to other concepts like ‘purpose,’ ‘creation,’ ‘evil,’ ‘equality,’ ‘concern,’ ‘beauty,’ and ‘wealth,’ which will bog down any naturalistic analysis. All these terms have recognized uses within religious discourse. If we want to use them at all (and clearly we must) it will be hard to avoid religious associations. If universities rule out all such discussions as soon as they recognize them as religious (involving even Plato, for instance), then serious discussions will migrate to some other venue.8

Several years ago both in a widely publicized lecture delivered at Georgetown University and later in a paper delivered before a meeting of local scholars, the archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal George, argued that a university without a unifying vision is simply a high-class trade school. Many seemed puzzled by this remark, assuming that he was referring to a general erosion of university standards that put higher education at the level of vocational training. But as he later pointed out, high-class trade schools are "very important institutions," and he did not hesitate to list Harvard and Yale among them. But he went on to add that "if they have lost... any kind of truly integrating vision, then in fact they are there to serve an individual sense of mission, an individual purpose, and the demands of individual disciplines which are left un-integrated, except in the desire of students themselves and the academic vocation of those who feel accountable to their discipline...."9 The classical ideal of university education presupposed that its ultimate goal was to train students to see things whole. In contrast, the trade school was marked by a new emphasis on the university as a mere "carrier of disciplines." As such, it simply presides over a set of disciplinary guilds, each anxious to protect its autonomy and increase its relative influence.

Alasdair MacIntyre has also insisted on this integrating task of the university, whether secular or religious, arguing that the primary end of the university is to promote the self-transformation of its students so that they “become able to exercise a full range of powers of understanding and judgment.” This presupposes not only a degree of competence within a particular field but also a formation which assists students to recognize what MacIntyre calls those “perplexities” which are not reducible to simple formulas. As Dante had insisted, students, and indeed faculty, need to be reminded of the wonder at a recognition of what is not understood; that truth is not reducible to a puzzle to be solved by rigorous, specialized research. MacIntyre suggested that especially as faculty, “We need to remind ourselves of something that experience on university committees irritattingly often confirms, that it is possible to have become a highly distinguished historian, say, or physicist, and yet remain a fool.”10 The increased focus on narrow specialization which had its source in the natural sciences but quickly became normative for much of the university’s
self understanding has now begun to influence applied fields as well. If Warren Bennis and James O'Toole are correct, business schools are now equally committed to the hiring of a new generation of narrow specialists in rather sharp contrast to the practice of other professional schools such as law and medicine.

It may be useful to reconsider the specific character of the older model of university the loss of which Cardinal George lamented, and especially useful to reconsider it in its Catholic expression, for many Catholic academics have recently argued that the university is essentially secular both in its operation and in its end and that its Catholic claims merely adds a value rather than changes its essential character. Cardinal Newman's reflections on university education continue to be useful to us here. Over a century ago, the increasing specialization of university studies and professional life, the new model of the university as a carrier of disciplines, seemed to him highly problematic. In *The Idea of a University*, he insisted that society as a whole required something more than specialized competence and narrow interests, even though they might increasingly provide the means for material and intellectual advancement. "For if we are defined solely by this narrow specialization," he wrote, "it is the common failing of human nature, to be impressed with petty views and interests, to underrate the importance of all in which we are not concerned, and to carry our partial notions into areas where they are inapplicable, to act in short, as so many unconnected units displacing and repelling one another." But this common human failing is now in large measure institutionalized in our colleges and universities and helps to explain the tendency to describe students as educational consumers. The loss of a common, integrating vision is not without its consequences for the individual as well as for society at large.

Similarly, Christopher Dawson had warned that if we were to avoid a basic conformity imposed by modern secular culture it would be "necessary to view the cultural situation as a whole and to see the Christian way of life not as a number of isolated precepts imposed by ecclesiastical authority but as a cosmos of spiritual relations embracing heaven and earth and uniting the order of social and moral life with the order of divine grace." It is in this sense that David Schindler insists that the modern Catholic university's fundamental mission is to participate in the Second Vatican Council's universal call to holiness. "As a university," he argued, "the Catholic university must carry out this fundamental mission in specific reference to the intelligence."

Newman, too, was not content to leave the university and the Church in a condition of radical dissociation, each jealously guarding its own privileges and pretensions and this despite the fact that when he spoke of the university he assumed that it does have, at least theoretically, an essentially secular task. But this character is not immune from the Church's critique and confirmation. For, as he stated in the preface, the Church is necessary to the university's very integrity. He insisted that the Church fears no knowledge, but she purifies all; she represses no element of our nature, but cultivates the whole. Their relations are neither infinitely subtle nor really fully stable for history is rarely in a state of equilibrium. In a famous passage in the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Newman described the complex relations of reason and Church authority in Catholic Christendom and compared the Church to a moral factory in which reason might find its full expression and authenticity, not by being destroyed but in being refined "by an incessant noisy process, of the raw material of human nature, so excellent, so dangerous, so capable of divine purposes."
Although Newman's theory of education accepted the intrinsic excellence of both orders of reality, he was equally aware of the potential for collision between them, not on the grounds of their essential incompatibility, for truth cannot contradict truth, but because especially in our own day, the supernatural has been all but replaced by the natural. The "long reign of the unseen shadowy world" has been overturned "by the mere exhibition of the visible"  

But Newman had dedicated his life to the affirmation of the rationality of faith in a modern culture increasingly prone to dismiss its claims. And so, although the Idea is an eloquent tribute to the inherent dignity and majesty of liberal learning, Newman was very much aware of the fact that "considered in its religious aspect, it concurs with Christianity a certain way, and then diverges from it; and consequently proves in the event, sometimes its serviceable ally, sometimes from its very resemblance to it, an insidious and dangerous foe."  

It was in this sense that he described their dialectical relationship in terms strikingly different from the modern account of their apparently benign isolation. For Newman saw that there was an inherent danger in the relations of these two orders of reality. He argued that liberal knowledge has a “tendency to impress us with a mere philosophical theory of life and conduct, in the place of Revelation.” He insisted that truth has two attributes, beauty and power, and that if one followed either to its furthest extent and true limit, one could be “led by either road to the Eternal and Infinite, to the intimations of conscience and the announcements of the Church.” However, … satisfy yourself with what is only visibly or intelligibly excellent, as you are likely to do, and you will make present utility and natural beauty the practical test of truth, and the sufficient object of the intellect. It is not that you will at once reject Catholicism, but you will measure and proportion it to an earthly standard. You will throw its highest and most momentous disclosures into the background, you will deny its principles, explain away its doctrines, rearrange its precepts, and make light of its practices, even while you profess it. Knowledge, viewed as knowledge, exerts a subtle influence in throwing us back upon ourselves, and making us our own center, and our minds the measure of all things.  

Surely Newman was correct to warn us of the modern danger that knowledge, viewed as knowledge, tends to make us our own center. Newman was a psychological realist, and unlike the therapeutic dissociation of university and Church in contemporary culture, he insisted on their vital interrelation. But like any genuine relation, the vitality of their interaction is expressed in a real tension. Newman did not hesitate to use the language of warfare to describe their occasional but regular collisions. He insisted that the Catholic system alone provided a forum for the resolution of the tensions between faith and reason and he insisted that the mind was not, in fact, most fertile and creative when least challenged but rather when it confronts the demands of a strong external authority. One of the great ironies of the contemporary academy is that the insistence on the absolute right of academic freedom has produced not a vital debate about rival truth claims but rather a silent tolerance for any and all claims, however trivial. The choice then is not one between a docile and subservient academic submission to ecclesiastical authoritarianism on the one hand and a celebration of the absolute autonomy of disciplinary pretensions on the other, but rather a dynamic interdependence in which competing claims are expressed and adjudicated.
Dawson too had warned that there is much at stake in the struggle between what he called the emerging "unitary" character of modern Western culture and the Christian tradition.

For in this unitary culture, there is little room for the concepts which are fundamental to the Catholic or Christian view—the supernatural, spiritual authority, God and the soul—in fact, the whole notion of the transcendent. So unless students can learn something of Christian culture as a whole—the world of Christian thought and the Christian way of life and the norms of the Christian community—they are placed in a position of cultural estrangement—the social inferiority of the ghetto without its old self-containedness and self-sufficiency.19

But how, in practice, was the ideal of University education to be achieved? Newman had insisted that the university’s specific genius is to teach universal knowledge and this necessarily requires a place, even in the secular university, for theology, at least for natural theology. But he also argued that the university cannot fulfill its mission with integrity without the direct assistance of the Church. He had argued the need for an essential distinction between the university and the college and between the university professor and the college tutor. Each had a fundamental mission and office to perform within the whole but Newman thought that the Church used the college as the “direct and special instrument” to bring the university to its integrity. The university is the great arena of ideas in which the claims of the various disciplines and the pretensions of their professors are carried out in a complex tension of argument and debate. It is the means by which the dynamic circle of knowledge, continually developing and adjusting, is sustained and advanced. The university’s central concern is perhaps most properly understood in terms of theory, or as Newman put it, notions, and it is thus concerned with the development and advancement of ideas. In contrast, the college’s function is more conservative, emphasizing an intellectual and moral stability, embodied in a living tradition. The one, he said “is the sail and the other the ballast; each is insufficient in itself for the pursuit, extension, and inculcation of knowledge; each is useful to the other.”20 To the university he assigned the responsibility for “philosophical discourses, the eloquent sermon, or the well conducted disputation.....” whereas the college is “for the formation of character, intellectual and moral, for the cultivation of the mind, for the improvement of the individual, for the study of literature, for the classics, and those rudimental sciences which strengthen and shape the intellect.”21

The integration of mind which Newman, MacIntyre and Cardinal George all take for granted requires a fundamental integration of the work of the College and the university, the tutor and the professor. But in fact, the modern university has largely abandoned the work of the college and the expectation that it is necessary to provide an intellectual and moral formation of young men and women. Instead, the university has become in Newman’s description a mere caravanserai of ideas, jostling in a marketplace without mutual significance or relation, demanding not debate and resolution but tolerance of a mere diversity.

The temptation of the University, cut off from the college’s active concern for the formation of its students is that it will inevitably degenerate into an arena of abstract and unreal theories. Newman described this temptation and its effects on a popular professor who will be “carried away by his success, and in proportion as his learning is profound, his talent ready, and his
eloquence attractive, will be in danger of falling into some extravagance of doctrine, or even of being betrayed into heresy. The teacher has his own perils as well as the taught; there are in his path such enemies as the pride of intellect, the aberrations of reasoning, and the intoxication of applause.\textsuperscript{22}

In contrast, the tutor’s role in the college is the formation of individual minds, a task which Newman characterizes as one appropriate to a home, a place of intimate and personal relations in which one is known as a unique individual. It is a system which is, to use Newman’s term, real rather than notional. The loss of the residential college has reduced the university to an instrumentalized, abstract system which inevitably excludes a vital engagement with theological claims in favor of the social scientific and instrumental expressions of the new model of religious studies.

MacIntyre offered a touchstone by which one might determine how far a particular university has moved toward the “fragmented condition” which Newman has described.

Ask,” he said, “Would a wonderfully effective undergraduate teacher, not only in terms of her or his discipline, but also in terms of communicating something of how that discipline contributes to and finds its place within an integrated account of the order of things, whose scholarly contribution consisted of perhaps one original published article and some brilliant and instructive reflections on how to teach, receive tenure, promotion to full professor, and honors in that university? And would someone who is either unable or unwilling to teach any but graduate students, and preferably advance graduate students, but who, by the standards of her or his own specialized discipline, is at what they call the cutting-edge of research inquiries, receive tenure, promotion, and honors in that university? If the answers are ‘No’ and ‘Yes,’ then that university is in need of radical reform.\textsuperscript{23}

The interdependence of the university and the college was made clear in a sermon which Newman delivered at the University Church in Dublin on the feast of St. Monica in 1856. In it, Newman reflected on the nature of the university as an \textit{alma mater}. He began with a description of Monica’s motherly concern for the intellectual and moral formation of her son, Augustine, and then he provided a remarkably realistic account of the way in which the young, marked by original sin and formed in an increasingly secular culture, are prone to come to accept as necessary the fundamental disjunction between the intellectual and the moral life, which might at first be lamented. In consequence of the separation, however, faith begins to seem merely a sentimental dream, a sort of childhood remnant of innocence, and they now begin to form their own ideas of things, then change them, then perhaps decide that because of such changes, nothing is true, nothing certain. But he reminded his audience that the Church had a specific purpose in mind in creating the university. It was to reunite things which were in the beginning joined together by God and have been put asunder by man. Some persons will say that I am thinking of confining, distorting, and stunting the growth of the intellect by ecclesiastical supervision. I have no such thought. Nor have I any thought of a compromise, as if religion must give up something, and science something. I wish the intellect to range with the utmost freedom and religion to
enjoy an equal freedom; but what I am stipulating for is that they should be found in one and the same place and exemplified on the same persons. I want to destroy that diversity of centers, which puts everything into confusion by creating a contrariety of influences. I wish the same spots and the same individuals to be at once oracles of philosophy and shrines of devotion. It will not satisfy me, what satisfies so many, to have tow independent systems, intellectual and religious, going at once side by side, by a sort of division of labor and only accidentally brought together. It will not satisfy me if religion is here and science there, and young men converse with science all day and lodge with religion in the evening. It is not touching the evil, to which these remarks have been directed, if young men eat and drink and sleep in one place and think in another. I want the same roof to contain both the intellectual and the moral discipline. Devotion is not a sort of finish given to the sciences; nor is science a sort of feather in the cap, if I may so express myself, an ornament and a set-off to devotion. I want the intellectual layman to be religious and the devout ecclesiastic to be intellectual.\textsuperscript{24}

But the modern university has no such claims to integration and in the absence of the pretension we have the mere trade school. The renewal of the distinctive identity of Catholic higher education may well be critical not merely for its own sake but also for the recovery of an integrating and coherent vision for university education as a whole.

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\textsuperscript{5} Ibid, 133.


\textsuperscript{8} Sommerville, 31-32.

\textsuperscript{9} Francis Cardinal George, “Universities That are Truly Catholic and Truly Academic,” Address of September 22, 1998 to the Inaugural Convocation of Presidents and Faculty Members of Chicago Area Catholic Colleges and Universities.


16. Ibid, 163.

17. Ibid, 165.

18. Ibid.

19. Dawson, Crisis, 146-47.


22. Ibid, 185.

23. MacIntyre, 6