

**THE CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL TRADITION  
WHAT IS IT? WHY SHOULD I CARE?  
BARRY UNIVERSITY  
November 14, 2008**

I bring you greetings from a former faculty member of Barry now teaching at Saint John's, Dr. Miguel Diaz, who speaks very fondly of Barry—and not just because of the Miami weather. Beyond Miguel's good words and what can be learned from your website, I need to say right up front, that I do not know enough about Barry to connect the Catholic Intellectual Tradition to Barry and its particular history, mission and way of being. However, that connection I cannot make is in many ways the most important part of thinking about this topic. Whatever we might make of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, it needs to take on flesh, to actually live in the specific context and contours of life at Barry, in Miami and the wider community of your students, graduates and friends. This you know. I don't.

This tradition cannot be left merely abstract or generic. The general description can be helpful in the way a map is helpful precisely because it abstracts from all the details of the landscape to give you a sense of the lay of the land. However, no one lives in a map. We live in the concrete here and now of life. That is what makes the whole thing so messy—and so endlessly fascinating. An example of this are the numerous books that track types of Catholic or church-related colleges and universities; Morey and Piderit's *Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis* is perhaps the most recent. It and others offer helpful typologies but they never quite fit the concrete life of one's institution.

Having said all that, I want to move to some general, mapping observations: specifically, two historical reasons that schools like Barry, and Saint John's, and most other Catholic colleges and universities, were founded. These reasons generate the basic mission of these schools—and a basic tension in that mission.

1. Immigrant Catholics were typically outside the mainstream of American life. So Catholics founded schools to help them prepare for participation in the culture around them. Then as now education is the key to acceptance and advancement.
2. In a predominantly Protestant culture Catholics founded schools in order to preserve Catholic culture and identity. Prominent here, particularly in higher education, is the preservation of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

For a number of reasons, Catholics could not count on the state to help them meet either of these goals. For one thing, Catholics were not allowed to attend the early colonial colleges so if they were to get a college education, they had to found their own schools. More enduring—and understandable—the state is not interested in preserving Catholic culture.

Now if you think about this a little, it's clear that there is a tension between these two missions of Catholic colleges and universities. The more successful they were in helping Catholics fit into the mainstream of American life (as they have been), the less distinctive they are likely to be and the less successful they are likely to be in preserving Catholic culture and identity. On the other hand, success in preserving Catholic culture and identity, makes it more likely that Catholics remain a separatist, sub-culture and less a part of the mainstream culture. This tension is very much with us and is a large part of what we need to think through as a community as we try to understand our identity as Catholic institutions and our mission.

I would venture to guess that while the 200-plus Catholic colleges and universities have very different histories and institutional profiles, some large, major research universities, others smaller liberal arts colleges, it is still true for all of us that students have been coming to our schools, parents have entrusted their children to us, and generations of people have invested their time, talent and treasure in these schools because we are Catholic. These schools exist not only

because of a conviction that education is valuable and a key to social advancement, but also because of a conviction that the Catholic Tradition offers something worth preserving, thinking about, and contributing to. If nothing else, it seems to me, we owe it to them to try to understand why they founded these schools, what they hoped to preserve and what they hoped we would preserve.

Which brings us to our topic:

### **The Catholic Intellectual Tradition:**

#### **What is it? Why Should I care?**

These are difficult questions. Especially for 50 minutes. I will begin with the second: Why care? Then we will look more closely at what it is we are asked to care about.

So, Why Should I Care? One reason we should care is because we work at a Catholic educational institution and as Monika Hellwig, theologian and long-time president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, once put it, “most basic to the whole enterprise is the institution’s respect and care for the Catholic intellectual heritage.”<sup>1</sup>

Now right off the bat I need to violate my neat structure and make a point about what it is we’re talking about—or more precisely—what we’re *not* talking about. As most of you undoubtedly know, Catholicism involves a whole host of beliefs and practices, politics and prayers, saints and sinners. We are not here talking about that whole sweep of Catholicism. We are focusing on one aspect: its *Intellectual* Tradition, which is certainly big and sprawling enough.

But for many of you that may only raise in a more pointed way the question: Why should I care? While we can say that we are all involved, directly or indirectly, in an educational

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<sup>1</sup> “The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Catholic University,” in *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*, ed. By Anthony J. Cernera and Oliver J. Morgan (Fairfield, CT: Sacred Heart University Press, 2000), 3.

enterprise, we are not all involved in intellectual work. And even fewer are in intellectual work that obviously intersects with the Catholic Tradition. So why should I care about this if my work is not intellectual, if I'm not a member of the faculty? We have already suggested the first and most important reason: We work at a Catholic place committed in some way or other to preserving, understanding, critiquing and extending the intellectual life of the Catholic community as well as the world at large. In coming to work at this place we have agreed in some way or another to help it succeed in this mission. No organization can long survive, much less succeed, if its members either don't care about its mission or are opposed to it. So it's important that we have some sense of what the place where we work is about. What are we part of? In addition to earning a living, we want our work to be part of something we can be proud of, something that matters. Indeed, the Catholic Tradition says we have a right to that as human beings. So, is this such a place? That's a conversation all can have: cooks, coaches, faculty, accountants, housekeepers or administrators.

Why should I care? Because when all is said and done we – the people who work here – *are* the institution(s). Institutional identity and mission are carried by people not by documents, policies or structures. As I'm sure you have discussed, the Catholic identity of Barry, like so many other Catholic institutions, was carried for generations by the sponsoring communities. As the institutions grew in size and complexity, lay people like me and most of you were invited to help with the work. In doing so we also became bearers of the identity and mission of the institutions. As the number of Dominicans—or Benedictines, Franciscans or Jesuits—diminished, and their presence on campus and in the lives of students lessened our role as bearers of the tradition and character of the place has grown significantly. It is appropriate that we take some time to think about this. What is the Catholic part of our mission all about? How can I be

part of it? What is expected of me as an employee? Do I *want* to be part of this? These and a host of other questions need to be addressed. We care because we all have a stake in this. We need to listen to and learn from each other.

One thing we know for sure is that we can't take our Catholic identity for granted as something taken care of by the Dominicans, by the fact that we have religious buildings, religious symbols, religious words in prominent places, or that we have a Department of Theology. Make no mistake, these are all very important expressions and sustainers of our identity. But by themselves they can be empty. Like any other organization, we can't take our identity for granted as someone else's—anyone else's—responsibility. **We must build it or it won't be built.**<sup>2</sup> If the Catholic Identity of our institutions is not carried by the people who work there, it does not exist. It's that simple. That's why we need to care.

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<sup>2</sup> Part of our maturing as organizations is the realization that we cannot forever be the beneficiaries of an identity built by someone else in which we simply reside. Like the older buildings on many campuses, we inherit something impressive, solid and enduring. But we need to maintain it, renew it and add to it for best use today. So too our Catholic identity and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition that is our part of that identity. We need to maintain it, renew it and add to it for best use today.

The parallel with how we care for our buildings is actually a fruitful metaphor to consider. Think of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and our Catholic Identity as a building: lovingly and carefully constructed but now old. We have three options:

1. We can treat it like old abandoned buildings we see scattered across the country-side. They were once fine and functional, probably sources of pride to their owners, but they are no longer serviceable. They are abandoned and allowed to collapse and disappear with time. We can do the same with our Catholic heritage. Or in a more aggressive approach, we could tear it down to make way for the new, a kind of intellectual urban renewal. So that's one approach: abandon it and let it collapse and disappear over time.
2. A second way of dealing with an old building is to turn it into a museum in the interests of historical and cultural preservation: something like Colonial Williamsburg, restored Native American villages, or historical theme parks. Here the buildings are kept in great shape; preserved as they were in the past as a concrete memory (or a memory in concrete) and as a tribute to those who have gone before. This is certainly important. The effect, though, is to create a nice place to visit—not a place anyone can really live in. We could treat the Catholic Intellectual Tradition that way, as something of a religious-intellectual theme park in tribute to the glories of the past. It may satisfy our historical curiosity but is not anything that can be used for our lives today, not something anyone could actually live in.
3. The third option is what most of us have pursued with campus buildings: adaptive re-use of the old to serve current needs. It requires understanding of the original structures, what are the bearing walls and what are merely cosmetic features, etc. and it requires knowing what is needed for contemporary uses and a great deal of creativity to make these two come together. That is what we as institutions need to do with the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and our Catholic Identity. As with re-doing the buildings, it affects everyone who works in them. To be done well, those who work in the buildings should be consulted about the adaptations. That is why we should care.

One huge question I have successfully avoided thus far is whether all this Catholic stuff is really only for Catholics? Need only Catholics care? No. We should not shift from relying on the Dominicans or other priests and religious to bearing the mission to relying on the Roman Catholics among us. It is not unreasonable to think that the Catholics may care about this identity in a particular way. Nevertheless, it is not just theirs. It is a mistake to shift the responsibility for our *collective* mission to any subset among us. We are in this together. The mission of the institutions is the business of *all* employees. But why should someone who is not a Catholic care? And if they do care, how do they connect and contribute? Isn't it out of place for non-Catholics to tell Catholics about their business? No. Not in this case.

We will say more about the content of this Tradition shortly, so for now let me just say that it is a 2,000-year body of thought, literature and art that has been historically influential and continues to influence the 1.1 billion Catholics in the world. This is a body of knowledge, a set of claims and constructs, that can be studied by anyone, whatever their particular religious commitments. Moreover, if Catholics are to understand their own tradition, they need to do so in dialogue with those who are not themselves Catholic. The diversity of backgrounds, including religious backgrounds, in the faculty, staff and students of Barry is a *strength* of these institutions not a weakness. That affirmation of diversity has become something of a truism in our culture—especially after Tuesday's historic election, in which Florida again played such a big role. What may not be so readily acknowledged, however, is that it is a strength precisely as Catholic. It makes us more Catholic, not less—but more on that later.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As I see it, we need to navigate between two problematic approaches:

1. People other than Catholics (be they Protestant or Orthodox Christians, Members of faith communities other than Christian, or those who are not believers) are “tolerated” because they are needed to do certain jobs but we really wish everyone, especially on the faculty, were Catholic.
2. People other than Catholics are welcome because in the end we don't think one's faith matters or that if it does matter, it is purely private.

Since this is one of the most sensitive issues around any discussion of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and the Catholic Identity of our schools, I would like to offer a non-religious example that I think has some intriguing parallels: **Historically Black Colleges**. A central part of the mission of these schools is preserving, studying, and advancing African-American culture and the issues that pertain in a special way to the African-American community in the United States. This is one of the reasons they exist. In addition to ensuring that African-Americans have access to higher education, they are also to ensure that African-American culture and tradition are not lost in the melting pot, that their voice remains in the conversation. Their success in this is important not only for African-Americans but for our whole society.

The critical point for us here is that the study of this tradition, intellectual engagement with it, is available to those who are not African-American and can be enriched by those who are not African-American. If one taught or worked at one of the historically Black Colleges, it would be important to care about this part of the mission. One might even want to learn about African-American history and culture and the issues that pertain to that community more than if one taught or worked elsewhere.

To be sure, the focus on African-American culture is not all these schools do. They do not have an African-American math or physics—though they might look at how race has played

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This latter position is a coherent one taken by many highly respected private and public schools. Coherent though it be, however, it is not consistent with the Catholic Intellectual tradition or the Catholic identity of these schools. We believe that religious convictions matter deeply, that they are not merely private, and, counter to the first option, that not everyone needs to share those Catholic convictions to be a member of this community. On the contrary, it is precisely because it matters and because we care that all must be welcome.

Let me give an example of how this might work. I once worked with a Lutheran college that had a Buddhist as the person leading their discussions of their Lutheran identity. She was very comfortable at this school and in this role precisely because they *did* care about their religious identity. Because they cared, they took it seriously. And because of that they could take her and her faith seriously. She found that more respectful than being patronized as quaint or a cultural curiosity by people who don't really think faith matters. I would think we aspire to such

a role in the scientific community. But preserving, critiquing and handing on this heritage is something they need to be sure to do amidst all the rest that they do. As institutions they must care about this heritage. If they don't there is no real reason for them to continue. The people who work in those institutions—black or white—need to care about this heritage if the schools are to carry out their mission.

So too with Catholic institutions like Barry and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. This tradition is not a historical artifact that we tend in some sort of museum or curio shop. It is connected to a living community of Roman Catholics around the world, who have a continuing stake in this intellectual tradition. That community feeds and is fed by this intellectual tradition and what institutions like Barry do with it. And—we would like to think—as with the African American voice—that it is important for the wider society in which we live that this Catholic voice not be lost in the melting pot. For example, preserving, understanding and applying the idea of a just war is both true to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and a significant service to American society. We would all be impoverished if that went silent. This is one reason we need to care.

Of course, recognizing this connection to a living community, particularly one with a political structure like that of the Roman Catholic Church, creates all sorts of legitimate worries.

- Who speaks for this community and how?
- What expectations do they have?
- Are they appropriate?
- What sort of pressure can they put on the institution? On me?

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practices of hospitality and respect in our communities. When we fail we are not only failing to be humane or decent (which are significant enough indictments), we are failing to be truly Christian or Catholic.



All important questions and legitimate worries. This is something it would be prudent for us to care about. For that to be more than vague anxiousness, we, particularly as educational institutions, need to cultivate understanding of this Tradition and reasoned, wide-ranging analysis and dialogue about it. If nothing else, so that it can *not* be invoked selectively in support of one particular ideology or another. We must neither run from this tradition nor kowtow to it. But we need to care.

### **The Catholic Intellectual Tradition: What is it?**

OK, let's say we have some sense of why we might care about the Catholic Intellectual Tradition as part of our work in the educational enterprise. What is it that I am supposed to care about? I will attempt to get at this by looking first at the history of the Tradition, particularly as it is embedded in Catholic higher education, and then focusing more explicitly on the guiding concepts or principles that define the tradition. My hope is that the history will give us something tangible to grab on to and the concepts will suggest ways of critiquing and contributing to this living history.

First, a general orientation and a warning. Briefly stated, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition is the 2000-year conversation resulting from the belief that thinking—serious, sustained intellectual reflection—is a good thing and that it needs to be applied to our lives as disciples of Jesus of Nazareth as well as to everything else. There are things in the Christian faith that are worth thinking about and that benefit from serious thinking. Conversely, our intellectual lives, our understanding of human existence in all its vicissitudes, are enriched by including God and the spiritual dimension of life in the things we think about—and, potentially more revolutionary, in the way we think about them.

The warning is that this tradition is big and sprawling and resists definition or characterization—certainly by me and certainly in the time we have.

- There are exceptions and counter examples to just about every claim I will make.
- There are dramatic failures to live up to its principles (the treatment of Galileo comes to mind).
- There are less dramatic daily failures that we have all experienced – and made.

But there are also patterns, characteristics and rationales that persist over time and across cultures that allow us to give a broad and generally accurate account of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

I will not go through a list of notable Catholic thinkers, artists and scientists. Suffice it to say that we are *not* here dealing with people in some cultural backwater. These are the same figures and works one would study if one were doing a standard cultural history of the West—and increasingly the non-west. Moreover, in talking about the Catholic Intellectual Tradition it is important for us to recognize that colleges and universities *are not* and *should not be* the only places for this intellectual life. It occurs in novelists, artists, labor unions (or at least it used to) and business people. It might even occur in a parish here and there. But we are considering it at a University. And the Church does look to its colleges to *practice* a vital intellectual life and to *cultivate* that life in its students.

As Peggy Steinfels, long-time editor of *Commonweal*, has observed, “Catholic intellectual life is central to Catholic identity.” And “Colleges and Universities cannot claim to be Catholic if this tradition is not part of their core understanding and the tradition cannot survive if Catholic colleges and universities do not renew it, maintain it, nourish it, support it and pass it on.”<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret O’Brien Steinfels, “The Catholic Intellectual Tradition,” in *Occasional Papers on Catholic Higher Education*, Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, November, 1995, pp. 5 & 6.

church founds colleges and universities to cultivate this intellectual aspect of its identity. It finds other institutions for other aspects, such as worship, social justice or basic religious instruction. Consequently, we do not fulfill our *religious* mission as colleges, we are not living up to our *Catholic* identity, if our schools fail to be places of vital intellectual inquiry. That is an extremely important point so let me repeat it: We do not fulfill our mission as Catholic, if our schools fail to be places of vital intellectual inquiry.<sup>5</sup>

Jesuit theologian Michael Buckley explains this by saying that the Church needs to foster scientific inquiry because scientific inquiry raises serious questions about ultimacy and because it has a passion for truth.<sup>6</sup> A faith not fed by these scientific questions and this passion for truth is a faith diminished. This is the rationale for the Catholic intellectual life. We need scientists to be good scientists. We need poets, musicians, playwrights and historians to be good at what they do. It is in a special way the mission of schools like Barry to nurture that life among all who work here as well as among our students. And one need not be Catholic to participate in that

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5 If we fail in this, if we fail to nurture such a vital intellectual life, the church is impoverished. Of course, not everyone sees it this way. There are many in both the church and the academy, on both the Catholic side and the Intellectual side, who think these two simply cannot be brought together in any sort of meaningful partnership.

- A. For many, the adjective “catholic” does not add much to the university:
  - 1. Maybe a theology department that addresses certain Catholic issues,
  - 2. Maybe a guest lecturer or two on Catholic topics,
  - 3. Maybe events that include a prayer and other rituals.
- B. For others the Catholic identity adds only problems:
  - 1. The obstruction of a tired, out-moded tradition
  - 2. The interference of ecclesiastical authorities, theological narrowness and moral overreaching.
- C. On the church side some see education, thought, science as a threat to faith.

Sadly, there is much that can be said in defense of all these positions. For the moment I simply want to note that these views are contrary to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. That tradition, as we will discuss more fully later, sees a continuity between faith and reason. It is driven by the fundamental belief that God and Truth are one. Reasoned argument, honestly and rigorously pursued, leads us closer to God, not further away. Far from a threat to faith, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition proposes (and, more importantly, demonstrates or ought to demonstrate) that hard, careful thinking is a source of vitality for the life of faith both for individuals and for the church as a whole. At its best it encourages the free exercise of reason—and when not at its best it needs to be critiqued—for the sake of the tradition and our Catholic Identity.

6 “The Catholic University and the Promise Inherent in its Identity,” in *Catholic Universities in Church and Society: A Dialogue on Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, ed. John P. Langan, SJ & Leo J. O’Donovan, SJ (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1993) 74-89.

mission. One needs to be a good scientist with a passion for truth and an openness to the ultimacy such a passion raises.

But with this we are a good ways into the harmony of faith and reason as a guiding principle. So let's turn to the promised history.

### **Historical Sketch**

The Catholic Intellectual Tradition is essentially a product of the interaction of Christianity and the culture of which it is a part: learning from the culture, shaping the culture, borrowing some things, rejecting some things and modifying many others. Christianity has been involved in this dance with the world from its very beginning, establishing in its first centuries the basic steps that will become the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. A few brief highlights:

- In the first generation the question arose as to whether Gentiles, non-Jews, needed to become Jewish in order to become Christian. After all, Jesus, everyone he called to follow him and all members of the Church were Jews. Put more generally—and way too simplistically—the question was “Is the church open to people of different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds than it was used to?” The answer was yes. In a decision that changed the course of Christianity forever, it was determined that Gentiles did not need to become Jewish but could come into the Church as they were. And when they did, they brought with them their Gentile-Greek ways of thinking which affected how we think about virtually everything we know as Christianity and its intellectual tradition.
- In the second century a group of theologians who were trying to explain Christianity to non-Christian Greek intellectuals argued that the Spirit of the one true God had been at work in Greek culture before the birth of Christ and outside the visible church. Thus in addition to

telling them about what God has done in Jesus, it would be prudent for us to listen to and learn from the thought of these non-Christians. Significantly, this is not just a ploy to convert them but an effort to hear the Spirit as it speaks in their experience—the experience of those who are not Christian.

- In the fourth century, at the Council of Nicaea (325) it was decided that in order to express the ideas of Scripture and Tradition in that time and place, it was necessary to use words and ideas not in Scripture.

Determining what to use from the culture and what to critique is difficult—and we did not always get it right. Accepting the dominant culture's views on slavery and women are but two of the more egregious failures that come to mind. What we must remember however is that these practices were accepted in part at least in order to fit in with the surrounding culture. It was no easier then than now to know when to support and when to critique our culture.

So (to switch metaphors) there emerge from these early, formative centuries a few cornerstones on which the intellectual tradition will be built.

- We need to be open to those who are not like us. We need to think about the culture in which we live.
- We need to use new ideas to understand and communicate the Gospel as we move to new times and places.
- We need to listen to those outside the church to hear what God might be speaking through them.
- And through it all the exercise of reason.

Not a bad start.

As we move out of the Classical era into the Medieval, the church and its clergy are heavily involved in continuing the intellectual tradition as writers, teachers and students. From roughly 600 to 1000 **Monastic schools** were the principal centers of education and learning. The Rule of Benedict in the sixth century establishes a schedule for praying the psalms, which means at least some of the monks needed to know how to read them. It also urges *lectio divina*, a practice of meditative, holy reading. Reading and study thus become part of the monastic life of seeking God. Jean Leclercq captures this spirit well in the title of his magnificent study of monastic culture, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*.<sup>7</sup> The harmony and mutual enrichment of these two sets the tone for the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

To facilitate this reading, monasteries created libraries by copying books. Significantly, they did not just copy religious books, or safe, pious books. They copied just about whatever was available from the classical world. They believed learning was good and that there was something in these books worth preserving and thinking about—even if they did not understand what it might be. Notice the fearlessness and confidence in that simple act of copying. This is the heart of the Tradition we’re claiming here.<sup>8</sup> It was not long before non-monks came to the monasteries as students. If you wanted your children to learn to read, this was the natural place to send them. They had the teachers and they had the books. Out of this, schools developed. Later in this period (600-1000) **Cathedral schools**, maintained by bishops for the education of clergy and usually in urban centers, became increasingly common.

The basic curriculum of all these schools was the **Liberal arts**. These were secular subjects, derived from classical antiquity, that preceded the study of theology or any other

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<sup>7</sup> Trans. Catharine Misrahi, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> The story of this copying and other elements of cultural preservation and transmission by monks is told in a very accessible way by Thomas Cahill in *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

profession (medicine, law, teaching). Traditionally there were seven liberal arts in two sets:

- the **Trivium** of the literary arts—rhetoric, grammar, logic—and
- the **Quadrivium** of the mathematical arts—arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, harmonics.

Notice how this curriculum affirms the idea that secular, humanistic learning is valuable to human flourishing and of service to the life of faith and the quest to know God.

From around 1000 to 1300 some of these cathedral schools evolve into what Rabbi David Novak has referred to as “one of the greatest contributions [the Catholic] tradition—we might say more specifically, the Catholic *Intellectual* tradition—has made to our civilization: the university as [a] ... community of teachers and scholars.”<sup>9</sup> While the relationship to the church was not the same as with the monastic or cathedral schools; the universities were still closely connected to the church and church officials. With the emergence of Renaissance Humanism and much more with the Enlightenment, there was a progressive distancing of Universities from the Church. There is a whole fascinating story here around the connections between the modern university (usually dated to the University of Berlin in 1810) and the philosophical convictions of the Enlightenment—convictions now coming under increasing critique—but we will leave that for now and complete our story with just a word about the U.S.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Comment” in response to Buckley, “The Catholic University and the Promise Inherent in Its Identity,” in *Catholic Universities in Church and Society*,” 100.

As an aside, we might add that the Universities arose in the context of increasing commerce and trade that led to an increased need for trained professionals of all sorts. The established Cathedral schools in the cities adapted to meet this need. In other words, universities from the start have been dealing with the twin goals of knowledge for its own sake and professional or career preparation. This is not a distinctively modern development. Universities have always been tied to the society of which they are a part and to the commercial and political interests of that society as well as the religious interests. Moreover, as independent entities, universities have also been tuition dependent and needed to satisfy student demands.

With this independence came the need to finance themselves, so they charged fees (tuition). This led to pressure to keep students happy—also not a uniquely modern pressure. Students could (and did) migrate from school to school for popular or accommodating teachers. Cambridge began in 1209 when a number of unhappy students moved there from Oxford. In 1229 Oxford benefited from a group students moving from Paris.

<sup>10</sup> For more on this story, the connection of the modern university to the Enlightenment, and some conceptual possibilities opened up by the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment see William Cahoy, “A Sense of Place and the Place of Sense,” in *Professing in the Postmodern Academy: Faculty and the Future of Church-Related Colleges*,

Most of you may know that the early colleges in the country had a church connection of some sort, starting with Harvard in 1636. Catholics were not welcome at these schools and had a difficult time starting schools of their own because of legal restrictions in the English colonies. John Carroll, first bishop of the U.S. (appointed 1790), hoped Catholics could attend the established colleges, but this was not to be. So in 1791 Georgetown was founded to offer higher education to Catholics. Since then there have been hundreds of Catholic colleges and universities founded across the country—including Barry in 1940.

So what is the Catholic Intellectual Tradition? One way to answer that is to say that it is this 2,000 year conversation about the world, our place in it, God’s work in it and our relation to God. It is broader and older by centuries than the university. But for a large part of that history, this tradition, this conversation, has been institutionalized at schools such as Barry.

### **Conceptual Account: Themes of Catholic University Tradition**

Having gotten some sense of this tradition through its history, let’s turn now to a consideration of its guiding principles. In this I follow the general analysis given by Monica Hellwig in various places and forms.<sup>11</sup> She identified 6 such principles. Significantly, Hellwig did not claim – nor do I – that these principles are *uniquely* Catholic. On the contrary, there is much in this Tradition that is shared with other Christians and other religions. Rather, the contention is that while none of these factors are *unique* to Catholicism, they come together in the Catholic Tradition in a way that is *distinctive*; that characterizes Catholicism and its

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ed. Stephen R. Haynes (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2002), pp. 73-111.

<sup>11</sup> What follows relies most directly on “What Can the Roman Catholic Tradition Contribute to Christian Higher Education?” in *Models For Christian Higher Education: Strategies for Success in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Richard T. Hughes & William B. Adrian (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 13-23. A similar presentation can be found in “The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Catholic University,” in *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*, ed. Cernera and Morgan, 1-18.



intellectual tradition. In the end, however, the point is not to identify what makes it different, but what makes it Catholic. If that turns out to be similar to others or different, so be it.

The first and perhaps most significant of the six principles Hellwig identifies is the **Continuity of Faith and Reason**. As noted earlier, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and the colleges and universities to which it gives birth are grounded in the conviction that thinking is a good thing. In the words of John Paul II, the “[churchly] origin of the university . . . expresses [the fact that] . . . the faith . . . the church announces is . . . a faith that demands to . . . be thought out by the intellect.”<sup>12</sup> The theological foundation for this conviction is the belief that God is the source of all Truth (as well as Goodness and Beauty). Since reason seeks the truth it will ultimately bring us closer to God. All knowing has a dynamic toward knowledge of God as source and goal of creation. Sin—tragic and pervasive as it is—has not totally corrupted either creation or our reason. As a result, we need not distrust our knowledge of nature. On the contrary, we must, in the words of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, John Paul II’s reflection on the Catholic University, “search for truth wherever analysis and evidence leads.”<sup>13</sup> Or as Benedict XVI put it in his address to the University of Rome in January, 2008: “On the basis of its origin, the Christian message should always be an encouragement towards truth, and thus a force against the pressure exerted by powers and interests.”<sup>14</sup>

This deep and profound confidence in the creator and in our ability to know characterizes the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. It leads communities of faith such as the Dominicans to found a university as a place to think about anything and everything as part of their life of faith.

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12 John Paul II, “The Church Needs the University,” March 8, 1982, *L’Osservatore Romano*, English edition (May 3, 1982), p. 6.

13 *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 1990, note 15.

14 Lecture by the Holy Father Benedict XVI at the University of Rome, “La Sapienza,” January 17, 2008, p. 5. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2008/january/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080117\\_la-sapienza\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/january/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080117_la-sapienza_en.html).

Needless to say this is a high-risk move, for if mistaken about the convergence of faith and reason, they have sown the seeds of their own destruction. Dangerous though it might be, however, it is also honest. After all, what is the alternative to such fearlessness for people of faith, people who trust that God really is the creator of the world in which we live and the source of Truth. In the end, what can it be but bad faith (with a dash of patronizing arrogance) to think that we need to protect God from our quest for truth?

Hellwig extends the rationale for this understanding of faith and reason with her second characteristic: the **sacramental principle**. This is about more than the seven Catholic sacraments. It is about the understanding of the world that is the context for those sacramental actions. The sacramental principle refers to the sense, pervasive in Catholic life and ritual, that the material stuff of the world—bread, wine, water, oil, but also stars, microbes and the person sitting next to you—all this can be a means for making God present. As such, the world not only *can* be studied it *should* be studied lest we miss part of God’s self-communication. We study the world to know God, to appreciate the glory of creation and the Creator. Hence the ancient idea that God can be studied in two books: the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature. The history of science is replete with people who understood themselves to be pursuing their scientific work as a means of tracking the footprints of God in nature.

Moreover, not only can the *fruits of nature* be studied as sacramental, but *the work of human hands*—and minds—art, literature, music, technology, government all can have a sacramental character, all can be a medium of God’s presence and all are studied in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. Such a sacramental world-view draws on, shapes and stimulates our imagination and our memory. It teaches us to see the reality of the world as good and worth knowing but it also teaches us to see in things and people more than meets the eye.

Such memory and imagination opens up realms of possibility that we might not have known before. In this way memory and imagination, a sacramental world-view, can help free us from the **tyranny of the present**, the tyranny of thinking that the way the world is, is the way it *must* be. Such a narrow understanding can easily lead to despair on the part of those for whom the world is not a good place, or defensiveness on the part of those for whom it is.

As I see it, a big part of our mission as schools in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition is to free our students from this tyranny of the present and the immediate, to open their imaginations to a wider world of possibility—a *sacramental world* in which things are more than meets the eye. In this sense we are to practice the liberal arts as the *liberating* arts: Liberating us from the tyranny of the present and the immediate.

The remembering component of this brings us to a *third* guiding principle: **Tradition** or “Respect for the cumulative Wisdom of those who have come before us.” If this tradition is a 2000-year conversation, it is appropriate, as with any respectful conversation, that those who come in later listen and not rudely disregard those who have already spoken. However, this listening, this respect for tradition does not mean that newcomers cannot speak or that they must say only what has already been said (remember the Council of Nicaea). Rather it is meant to engender humility about our own positions and a readiness to learn from others, the dead as well as the living.

As Socrates demonstrated long ago, such humility and willingness to learn are the necessary conditions for learning. Tradition, learning from those who have gone before, is far more than some antiquarian trivial pursuit. Knowing that the world has not always been the way it is, can, like the sacramental world view, help us resist the tyranny of the present. It may stimulate us to imagine ways the world could be different now. It can help us shape the future

knowledgeably and responsibly. That is what our schools should be doing for our students, for the society in which we live. The Catholic Intellectual Tradition is a significant resource in that work.

Thomas Aquinas, 13<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and theologian—and great Dominican—is a good example of these first three principles in action. Aquinas is heralded by many as the prototypical Catholic thinker in part because of his enormous confidence in the harmony of faith and reason. He was so confident of their convergence that he was absolutely fearless in considering ideas and arguments. Steeped in the tradition, he was an innovator in theology and philosophy. He used Greek philosophers that people thought could not be reconciled with Christianity and even engaged Muslim philosophy. For all sorts of reasons, he has been a dominant figure in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

However, there are two significantly different ways to understand his place in the tradition and our respect for it.

1. One is that we adopt his answers, the results he came to when he wrestled with the religious and secular ideas of his day.
2. The other is that we adopt his method, his questioning intellect, his fearlessness in wrestling with the best ideas and arguments he could find. As 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Karl Rahner put it, we need to have the courage to ask questions, to think with the mind and heart we *actually* have and not with the mind and heart we are *supposed* to have.<sup>15</sup>

This is the tradition of Aquinas. If we learn from him to think fearlessly, with the minds and hearts we have at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we may well come up with different answers than he did in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but we will be sharing his faith in the creator, in the sacramental world and in the harmony of faith and reason. That is the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

Of Hellwig's remaining three principles, I will say little about **Integration** and **Community** so that we might spend more time on **Anti-elitism**.

By **integration** she means the idea that the Catholic Intellectual Tradition seeks to connect the various pieces of what one knows into a coherent whole. It seeks to connect learning with living, raising questions of meaning and purpose, asking always, "How should I live?" It pushes for cross-disciplinary connections and what we have come to call the education of the whole person. As Morey and Piderit put it, Catholic colleges and universities need to teach—and demonstrate—not only how to earn a living but how to live a life.

This plays out in a particular way through the characteristic Catholic affirmation of the **Communal Dimension of Life**, which calls us to think about the common good and the interrelatedness of all that we do. As educators we need to think of the impact of education on students and through them on society. If knowledge is power—and it is—how do we use it responsibly? The Catholic Intellectual Tradition, and education in its spirit, is about more than imparting information or maximizing individual advantage. It also raises ethical questions and offers principles by which to answer them.

The final characteristic of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition we will consider is what Hellwig variously terms its Anti-elitist bent, Universality, Catholicity, or the Inclusiveness that characterizes Catholicism. I know what many of you—especially women—are thinking: Catholicism—Inclusive? Nevertheless, I want to claim the idea of "inclusiveness" as part of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. At the very least, this brings us back to the difficult issue of diversity that must not be avoided in any discussion of Catholic identity. Inclusiveness and diversity come in here around the idea of universality. After all, the very term "catholic" means "universal." With more than a billion Catholics spread across the globe (70% of them in Africa,

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15 "Current Problems in Christology," Theological Investigations (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press 1965) I:153

Latin America, and Asia), one would be hard pressed to find a more culturally and racially diverse religious group—something far more evident in South Florida than Central Minnesota.

While the Catholic Intellectual Tradition is historically European, the last 40 years or so have seen the Catholic Church come to terms with the reality of its global character.<sup>16</sup> The challenge we face is for our intellectual tradition and the schools that cultivate it to be as catholic, as universal and diverse as the global Church of which it is a part.

This brings us to a significant and intriguing connection between the particularity of commitment to Catholic identity and universality. One of the great documents of the Second Vatican Council, *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, makes this point well. Drawing on a tradition that goes back to those theologians of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century whom we discussed earlier, it speaks with confidence of the Spirit of God at work throughout creation and not only in the church. It articulates from *within* the tradition a mandate to engage the world in dialogue, listening and learning as well as speaking and teaching.<sup>17</sup>

It also extends the Christian principle of love of others to enjoin diversity: “Those also have a claim on our respect and charity who think and act differently from us in social, political and religious matters. In fact the more deeply we come to *understand* their ways of thinking through kindness and love, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them”[no.

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16 Indeed, Karl Rahner describes Vatican II as marking the second great turning point in church’s history. The first was the move we described in the first century from the church as a Palestinian-Jewish group to the Greco-Roman-European Gentile group. This second turning point, 19 centuries later, is a shift from a European to a global church, finally becoming the claim of its name: catholic (“Toward a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 40, no. 47 (1979):717-21). More demographically, in 1900 90% of Catholics lived in Europe and North America. In 2000 70% of 1.1 Billion Catholics live in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

17 See especially paragraphs 1-4, 28-45, 53-62.

28]. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* makes clear that this dialogue between church and culture should occur in a special way at catholic colleges and universities.<sup>18</sup>

In this understanding, diversity and openness to others are not at odds with the tradition, are not something we pursue *in spite of* our catholic identity. Quite the contrary, it is *required* if we would be truly catholic. Thus, using the affirmation of Catholic tradition and community to create a ghetto of like-minded people is a *misunderstanding* of the specific tradition of *this* community. Turning in upon ourselves in parochialism or sectarianism, *is a failure to live up to our ideals as a church*. In the end it is a failure to be Catholic, not merely a failure to be humane, relevant or politically correct.

Moreover, it is of the essence of a vigorous intellectual life to be open not only to people but to ideas. Here too there are resources within the Catholic Intellectual Tradition that impel us to such inquiry. For one thing the tradition encourages a vigorous self-criticism. The biblical prohibition against idolatry and its histories of kings and prophets is remarkably consistent in portraying the imperfections of its heroes and the presumptions of its own institutions. *This* tradition, the practices of *this* community, are not simply cheerleading for “everyone and everything that is on one’s side.”<sup>19</sup> It is also critical of its own. Faithfulness to this tradition demands that we pursue the truth vigorously, even about ourselves, and that we not idolize our own constructs. Academically this ought to manifest itself in the cultivation of rigorous intellectual honesty with critical self-examination and humility.

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18 William Shea puts it this way in response to a lecture by Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” “The mediation of culture and Catholicism Taylor advocates is peculiarly the position and task of the Catholic universities and colleges. They serve as the prime instance of it and a test case for it.... But how can it be true to both roots, the Christian gospel and the Enlightenment’s secularized intelligence, and be recognized as legitimate offspring by both.... How can it welcome all and thereby risk intellectual chaos and moral vacuity, on the one hand, and on the other uphold a sacramental and communitarian Catholic viewpoint and thereby risk suspicions of ideological control on research and teaching”[54-55] *A Catholic Modernity*, ed. James L. Heft (Oxford Univ. Press: Oxford, 1999).

19 George Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 54.

Unfortunately, the Catholic Church has far too often failed to live up to its ideals and forgotten its need for these intellectual virtues of listening, humility and self-criticism. It would be **naive to suggest that such failures are all in the past**, that these intellectual virtues are not now and will not in the future be threatened by forces of conformity from within the church and, reluctant as academics are to admit it, from within the academy. Real and frequent as that fight may be, however, the point I want to underscore is that it is a fight *within* the tradition and community of faith. It need not and should not be understood as a fight between *the church*, identified with the forces of conformity, on the one side and *reason*, the forces of secularism, on the other.

The church's failures are evident, but we need not turn away from the tradition to assess them as failures. We should not need lawyers to tell us that sexual abuse of minors is a horrific thing. A strong sense of being located in the tradition and community of the Catholic Church does not turn us in upon ourselves in some smug insular ghetto. Let me re-phrase that: A strong sense of being placed in the tradition and community of the Catholic Church *need* not and *ought* not turn us in upon ourselves in a smug insular ghetto. To be sure, the tradition gives us something to say, something important that the world needs to hear, but it also turns us outward

- to receive others as Christ,
- to engage them in dialogue,
- to be genuinely open to learn from them and
- to be critical of ourselves.

Finally, to argue that there are resources within the tradition for establishing academic virtues is not to say that the tradition has nothing to learn. History shows that the church has learned much from the cultures in which it lives and suggests that it still has much to learn.



Indeed, this is precisely the nature of the dialogue the tradition instructs us to have with the world in which we live. This dialogue, which involves real listening, vulnerability and self-examination, however unsettling it might be, is necessary for the continuing life of the tradition and the community.

It is the privilege and the responsibility of the Catholic college to be the special locus of this dialogue, to exist in the midst of the vulnerability that is its constant companion. Confident that it will be better for it, the Catholic community commissions its colleges—and you and me—to engage in this dialogue in order to understand the world and itself better.

This is the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

It is an ancient and living tradition worth caring about and caring for.

I wish you all blessings abounding  
as you seek to build on the work of your founders  
to make this tradition live here at Barry.

Thank you.