

# Neither a Convent nor a Seminary: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition and Faculty Participation in an Institution's Catholic Identity

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## Abstract

This essay proposes a Catholic structure for the intellectual life of faculty that invites participation in ways that honor their diverse backgrounds, even antipathy toward religion, while also demonstrating that identifiable Catholic perspectives, including Catholic social teaching, can provide a useful framework for faculty members to understand their academic roles in support of Catholic identity, no matter their religious backgrounds.

## Introduction

An institution's Catholic identity will depend on the nature of that institution. For example, what one teaches to a group of worshippers within the context of a church program will differ from what one teaches to a group of undergraduate students at a Catholic college. The latter instance is more properly academic in relation to the first. Thus, John Henry Newman argues that a Catholic institution of higher learning "is not a Convent, it is not a Seminary; it is a place to fit [people] of the world for the world."<sup>1</sup>

With due recognition of the role of Student Affairs and Campus Ministry in the formation of our students, we should rephrase Newman's statement as: "What happens inside and outside of the classroom should be distinct but complementary expressions of an institution's Catholic

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<sup>1</sup> John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (1852), <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/idea/> (accessed January 6, 2014).

identity.” As for the role of faculty in relation to an institution’s Catholic identity, Thomas Landy argues, if “colleges and universities describe themselves as Catholic, it seems important that all faculty are seriously encouraged and enabled to take time to understand what that means, although it certainly should not mean that all faculty will thus be expected to *be* Catholic.”<sup>2</sup> Landry helpfully emphasizes that Catholic identity cannot rely solely on Catholic faculty; everyone must be engaged at some level. However, the standard that he proposes is insufficient.

Landy’s advice raises some important questions. While all faculty members need not be Catholic, is only understanding what it means for an institution to be Catholic enough for it to maintain its Catholic identity? Do faculty have no further role in support of Catholic identity? Some of our faculty are not religious, and others, for a variety of reasons, are hostile or indifferent toward religion. Do they have a responsibility for Catholic identity? A familiar approach is that Catholic social teaching can serve as a comfortable entryway for non-Catholic faculty into Catholic identity as its themes align well with secular principles of justice. If pursued no further than cultural compatibility, this strategy limits Catholic identity to one sphere of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition without encouraging engagement with its riches elsewhere. With this approach, an institution risks sending the message that faculty can opt out of other dimensions of Catholic identity: “We’re Catholic, but don’t worry...”

A brief survey of the history of Catholic higher education demonstrates its willingness to adapt “in dialogue with, and discernment of, the signs of the times and diverse cultural expressions.”<sup>3</sup> The increasing diversity of our faculty requires that we do so now by fashioning a framework for Catholic identity that is meaningful to them in their roles as teachers. In this way we fulfill Pope Saint John XXIII’s declaration that the “substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.”<sup>4</sup> The goal of this paper is to present the substance of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition in a manner that attracts widespread faculty participation.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas M. Landy, “Introduction: Yeast and Three Measures of Flour,” in *As Leaven in the World: Catholic Perspectives on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life*, ed. Thomas M. Landy (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2001), xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, “Veritatis Gaudium,” <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/01/29/180129c.html> (accessed April 29, 2021)

<sup>4</sup> Pope Saint John XXIII, “Address on the occasion of the solemn opening of the Most Holy Council,” [https://vatican2voice.org/91docs/opening\\_speech.htm](https://vatican2voice.org/91docs/opening_speech.htm) (accessed April 28, 2021).

## Can There Be a Catholic Academic Culture?

Up through the 1940s, Catholic higher education displayed an identifiable culture that was distinctive from its secular counterparts. Michael Buckley notes that the curricular focus of a typical Catholic college at this time was primarily a custodial one.

Such an institution transmitted a teaching, the common teaching of the *magisterium*. This body of doctrine afforded a criterion by which faculty was selected, curriculum chosen, and morals enforced. Counter-positions within the university were permitted more as token, as a stimulus to study and refutation, rather than as a serious presence and a significant challenge to influence. Such universities were “Catholic” because their elements were Catholic: their teachers were clerical, often religious under vows, with Catholic laymen added as clerics or religious proved insufficient; their students were Catholic, frequently coming from families deeply concerned that the faith of their children be safeguarded from secular universities; their textbooks and libraries were often ecclesiastically censored. These universities were custodial, safeguarding the faith and morals of their students.<sup>5</sup>

After World War II, the G.I. Bill resulted in increased enrollment at all colleges and universities while the Catholic population doubled in size and became more integrated into American society. With these surging numbers came the need to hire more faculty and staff, resulting in more lay persons working at Catholic institutions. Conflicts also emerged between the institutional Church and American Catholic higher education over issues of control. Additionally, there was growing concern that Catholic colleges and universities were not equal in intellectual rigor to their secular counterparts. As John Tracy Ellis noted in 1955, there was “an over-eagerness in Catholic circles for apologetics rather than pure scholarship.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, up to 1960, some sense of a common Catholic culture remained, “including a commitment to liberal arts, character formation and a sense of campus community.”<sup>7</sup> Catholic identity was also easily identifiable through the presence of clerical or professed members of the founding orders or dioceses.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael J. Buckley, *The Catholic University as Promise and Project: Reflections in a Jesuit Idiom* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1998), 133.

<sup>6</sup> John Tracy Ellis, “American Catholics and the Intellectual Life,” *Thought* 30, no. 3 (1955): 355.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Garrett, “The Identity of American Catholic Higher Education: A Historical Overview,” *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice* 10, no. 2 (2013): 238.

The Second Vatican Council produced profound changes in Catholic higher education, with its emphasis on engaging the modern world, the freedom of conscience, and the role of the laity in the mission of the Church. As a result, lay people became increasingly involved in Catholic higher education, including in positions that had once been held by members of the founding religious orders or dioceses. The Council also emphasized the need for better relationships with fellow Christians and other religions.

Though its attention was directed to the entire world, in many ways the Council anticipated the increasing religious and cultural pluralism of American society that would provide new challenges and opportunities for Catholic higher education. In this modern world of demographic changes, increasing cultural and religious pluralism, and scientific inquiry, the custodial model of Catholic higher education was no longer sufficient. It is this period of increasing religious and cultural diversity that sets the context for the Land O'Lakes Statement with its affirmation that a Catholic university must be committed to academic excellence "in the full modern sense of the word," which includes "true autonomy and academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind" and "in which Catholicism is perceptibly present and effectively operative."<sup>8</sup> Despite these twin goals of academic excellence and an operative Catholicism, subsequent critiques have argued that the statement allowed institutions to de-emphasize their Catholic identity.<sup>9</sup>

With its support of academic freedom and scholarly rigor, along with its "four essential characteristics" of Catholic identity and its section on the university community, *Ex corde Ecclesiae* attempts to restore an identifiable Catholic culture to academic life. Its intent is to provide clarity on what constitutes a Catholic college or university, specifically that 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." To safeguard an institution's Catholic vitality, it calls for the "recruitment of adequate university personnel, especially teachers and administrators, who are both willing and able to promote that identity." Additionally, "the number of non-Catholic teachers should

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<sup>8</sup> (Rev.) Theodore M. Hesburgh, CSC, *et al.*, "The Idea of the Catholic University," from the International Federation of Catholic Universities, 1967, <http://archives.nd.edu/episodes/visitors/lol/idea.htm> (accessed September 1, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> For a survey of reactions to the statement's impact, see John Jenkins, "The Document that Changed Catholic Education Forever," *America*, July 11, 2017, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/07/11/document-changed-catholic-education-forever> (accessed May 11, 2021).

not be allowed to constitute a majority within the Institution.”<sup>10</sup> These provisions are also part of the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ “Application for Ex Corde Ecclesiae for the United States.”<sup>11</sup>

As with the Land O’Lakes statement, *Ex corde Ecclesiae* has received a good amount of scrutiny with regard to some of its provisions, with a particular focus on the “mandatum” for theologians. However, the requirement of having a majority of Catholic faculty poses its own challenges. The larger research universities are going to have greater success at attracting the types of applicant pools that can meet this goal rather than small tuition-dependent institutions. Additionally, Catholic self-identification is not necessarily a guarantee of familiarity with the Catholic Intellectual Tradition or even support for an institution’s Catholic identity. Catholics can often be among those most aggrieved with the institutional Church and its teachings.

This brief historical survey of American Catholic higher education highlights the fact that the Catholic culture, which once marked it, is no longer readily discernible. Since the advent of the millennial generation (1981-1996), incoming students identify less and less with organized religion. Leadership scandals continue to plague the Church. Religious and cultural pluralism continues to advance. Amidst these challenges, a focus on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition—with its 2,000-year-old emphasis on the complementarity of faith and reason in the search for truth—has emerged as a focal point for institutions to examine and explore their Catholic identities.

Among the conversations about this tradition is whether or not it provides the foundation for a Catholic intellectual culture. For example, John Garvey contends that a remedy to the “flat, crabbed, cartoonish vision of Catholic higher education” lies in promotion of “a serious Catholic intellectual culture” which can be something “both distinctive and wonderful if we bring the right people into the conversation and if we work really hard at it.”<sup>12</sup> While there is much in Garvey’s

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<sup>10</sup> Pope Saint John Paul II, *Ex corde Ecclesiae*: On Catholic Universities, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apc\\_15081990\\_ex-corde-ecclesiae.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae.html) (accessed June 1, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, “The Application for Ex Corde Ecclesiae for the United States,” <https://www.usccb.org/committees/catholic-education/application-ex-corde-ecclesiae-united-states> (accessed April 30, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> John Garvey, “Intellect and Virtue: The Idea of a Catholic University,” <http://president.cua.edu/inauguration/GarveyInaugurationAddress.cfm> (accessed February 19, 2018).

discussion of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition that is informative and helpful, his vision of the intellectual culture at a Catholic university is too limiting and risks exclusion. For example, how do we assess who the “right people” are with regard to “the conversation”? Does not associating “Catholic” with “right people” risk sending a message that some are more welcome than others? Does this approach not run counter to a tradition that promotes itself as welcoming outside perspectives?

This essay proposes a different approach: that a distinguishing feature of a Catholic college education can be an institutional intellectual culture informed and shaped by the Catholic Intellectual Tradition without necessarily requiring that culture to be “Catholic” in Garvey’s sense or *Ex corde Ecclesiae’s* requirement for a majority Catholic faculty. It offers faculty members of any religious background a formative shape for their intellectual lives without the pressure (real or perceived) of adhering to religious doctrines that may not be their own. This culture has its roots in a theological worldview about God’s relationship to creation.

### **Foundations of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition**

The Catholic worldview holds that all existence is an expression of God’s grace. Grace (*charisma* in Greek) is the gift (*charis* in Greek) of God’s free and unmerited action for the well-being and flourishing of all creation, especially humans. Christian theology describes this action as *agape*: a self-giving love that expects nothing in return. Thus, in the biblical tradition, we are to love “not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (1 Jn 3:18) because “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 Jn 4:16). The definitive manner in which God has manifested *agape* for the purposes of restoring order and wholeness to creation is through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. As a result, God understands, and now shares, in human suffering. Through his willingness to die on the cross for the sake of others, Jesus has also provided a model for Christian life rooted in *agape*. Thus, with Jesus as his frame of reference, Paul writes to the Philippians, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (2:3-4).

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus is also the *logos* of God (1:1). While frequently translated as “Word,” *logos* is more expansive in its meaning. For the Greeks, *logos* referred to “the divine reason implicit

in the cosmos, ordering it and giving it form and meaning.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, to believe that Jesus is the *logos* of God and the one in whom God has now become part of creation is to affirm that there is an order and intelligibility to creation which we can seek to understand through our use of reason. As Thomas Rausch writes, “Christianity honors [creation] as the work of God’s hands. We discover God, not by fleeing the world, but by becoming more fully involved in it.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, Saint Anselm’s dictum, “*Fides quaerens intellectum*”: the unofficial motto for the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

Robert Imbelli reminds us that the Catholic Intellectual Tradition is not limited only to those fields that we identify as “academic.” It is a wide-ranging tradition that includes theology, the humanities, the sciences, and the arts. Accordingly, the “poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., breathes the same air of truthful discovery as do the stupendous revelations of contemporary astronomy.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, he asserts that “one of the salient contributions that the Catholic Intellectual Tradition can make to our contemporary conversation is to resist reducing reason to the merely pragmatic or technical and to restore our sense of wonder at a universe ‘charged with the glory of God.’”<sup>16</sup> Thus, there is room within the Catholic Intellectual Tradition for the breadth of human expression in its attempts to understand the world and our place in it. The following focal points can provide a structure to explore that expression in a manner that allows faculty from a variety of backgrounds to contribute in a manner that enriches the intellectual culture of the academic community.

## Important Focal Points Within the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

### 1. A Sacramental Worldview

The doctrine of the incarnation affirms that, because all creation comes from God, and because God became part of that creation in the person of Jesus, God has become “fully immersed in and committed to

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<sup>13</sup> “Logos,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified May 20, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/logos>.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas P. Rausch, “Catholic Anthropology,” in *Teaching the Tradition*, ed. John J. Piderit S.J. and Melanie M. Morey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 37.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Imbelli, “The Heart has its Reasons.” *C21 Resources* Spring (2013): 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

the material world.”<sup>17</sup> A sacramental worldview within this Catholic theological framework refers to more than the seven sacraments. It refers to the manner by which material things can serve as instruments of grace. Therefore, as Fr. Michael Himes writes, “nothing is by definition profane. Everything is potentially sacramental.”<sup>18</sup> As a result, our encounters with the material world in all its manifestations are opportunities for encounters with God’s grace, and anything that helps us understand the material world better and more deeply draws us closer to God. “Reality,” writes Michael J. Buckley, “is gift, sacred, providential and (most profoundly) of divine communication.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, according to Basil of Caesarea,

You will ... discover that the world was not conceived by chance and without reason, but for a useful end and for the great advantage of all beings, since it is really the school where reasonable souls exercise themselves, the training ground where they learn to know God; since by the sight of visible and sensible things the mind is led, as by a hand, to the contemplation of invisible things.<sup>20</sup>

From this Catholic perspective, the acquisition of knowledge about the world and the heritage of knowledge bequeathed to us by our predecessors has contributed to the common good. Thus, the university provides a setting where academic rigor aids this goal. As Pope Saint John Paul II affirms, a “Catholic University ... is a place of research, where scholars *scrutinize reality* with the methods proper to each academic discipline, and so contribute to the treasury of human knowledge.”<sup>21</sup> In order to scrutinize reality, Fr. Himes argues that it is our task to train our students to become beholders and to model this practice for them because the “Catholic conviction is that if we see what is there to be seen, we will discover grace, the love that undergirds all that exists.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Donald Heinz, *Christmas: Festival of Incarnation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), ix.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Himes. “Finding God in all Things: A Sacramental Worldview and its Effects,” in *Becoming Beholders: Cultivating Sacramental Imagination and Actions in College Classrooms*, ed. Karen E. Eifler and Thomas M. Landy (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 13.

<sup>19</sup> Buckley, *Catholic University*, 84.

<sup>20</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *Hexaemeron*, 1.6, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3201.htm> (accessed January 16, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Pope John Paul II, “Ex corde Ecclesiae.”

<sup>22</sup> Himes, “Finding God,” 15.



## 2. The Complementarity of Faith and Reason

The doctrine of the Incarnation means that there is an order and purpose (a *logos*) to creation that we can explore through the use of reason. The Catholic Intellectual Tradition has also long affirmed that perspectives different from our own, including non-Christian perspectives, can contribute to our understanding of this creation and its maker. Thus, the writers of the Nicene Creed turned to Greek philosophy to describe Jesus the son as *homoousios* with God the Father. Thomas Aquinas adapted the ideas of a “pagan” philosopher to Christian theology, and he read Islamic and Jewish interpreters of Aristotle in the process. Newman’s ideal university is a place that models the Church’s practice of appealing and deferring “to witnesses and authorities external to herself, in those matters in which she thought they had means of forming a judgment.”<sup>23</sup> Within an academic setting, this means that the “most probing questions in every discipline are never deemed to be in opposition to faith, but are welcomed into the conversation on the conviction that ongoing discovery of the intelligibility of the universe will reveal more of the truth about God.”<sup>24</sup> Or as Pope Saint John Paul II begins his encyclical *Fides et ratio*, “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.”<sup>25</sup>

This complementary relationship also provides the basis for an emphasis on the integration of knowledge from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Thus, “all branches of knowledge are connected together, because the subject-matter of knowledge is intimately united in itself, as being the acts and the work of the Creator.”<sup>26</sup> This synthesis that results from the relationship between faith and reason draws one closer to the Truth which is the source of all knowledge. Not surprisingly, American Catholic higher education has retained a strong commitment to core curricula rooted in the liberal arts for this very reason. In this manner, students are exposed to a variety of disciplines, their methods, and how they are related to each other.

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<sup>23</sup> Newman, *Idea of a University*.

<sup>24</sup> Gregory A. Kalscheur, “Revitalizing the Catholic Intellectual Tradition: The Next Critical Challenge for Catholic Higher Education,” *C21 Resources* Spring (2007): 11.

<sup>25</sup> Pope Saint John Paul II, “Fides et ratio,” [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091998\\_fides-et-ratio.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html) (accessed November 11, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> Newman, *Idea of a University*.

### 3. The Social Nature of the Human Person

At the heart of Catholic social teaching is an anthropology that focuses on the inherently social nature of the human person. This perspective “is based on a *relational subjectivity*, that is, in the manner of a free and responsible being who recognizes the necessity of integrating himself in cooperation with his fellow human beings, and who is *capable of communion* with them on the level of knowledge and love.”<sup>27</sup> That is, one “can only grow and realize [one’s] vocation in relation with others.”<sup>28</sup> This relational subjectivity has its origin in the Christian understanding of the Trinity as three persons in perpetual, self-giving, consubstantial communion. Thus, we can only experience the fullness of our humanity when we are in relationship with others. The same is true for the intellectual life, for, as Antonin Sertillanges asserts, “to work in human fashion is to work with the feeling for [others] ... and the solidarity which binds us closely together in a common life.”<sup>29</sup>

Based on this theological anthropology, an academic environment that values beholding, the complementarity of faith and reason, and the integration of knowledge from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, requires opportunities where students learn in community with one another. Thus, Stephen Trainor argues, “The principal advantage of a university as a place of learning is that it brings together in community representatives of the various disciplines, who must learn to work together socially and intellectually in order to adjust the limits of their subjects and cooperate in the pursuit of Truth.”<sup>30</sup> He further notes that the Catholic commitment to tradition means that this community includes “all who have read, studied, and written before us.”<sup>31</sup> That is, each institution has its own communion of saints comprised of the current faculty and students, as well as those faculty who have left legacies at each institution. It also includes the interlocutors within the disciplines, both past and present, as well as the heritages of the founding orders and dioceses.

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<sup>27</sup> Pontifical Council for Peace and Justice, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html) (accessed February 18, 2019).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Antonin G. Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life* (Westminster, MD: Westminster Press, 1960), 12.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen L. Trainor, “A Delicate Balance: The Catholic College in America,” *Change* 38, no. 2 (2006): 18.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

#### 4. Asceticism and Contemplation

In the Christian tradition, contemplation is, as Thomas Merton notes, “a special dimension of inner discipline and experience, a certain integrity and fullness of personal development, which are not compatible with a purely external, alienated, busy-busy existence.”<sup>32</sup> This process is important because a “certain depth of disciplined experience is a necessary ground for fruitful action.”<sup>33</sup> While it is associated with religious life, contemplation is also intrinsic to academics. The intellectual life, Fr. Himes notes, is an inherently ascetic undertaking.<sup>34</sup> To see what is there to be seen requires focused attention, observation, and reflection. As Sertillanges proposes:

Do you want to do intellectual work? Begin by creating within you a zone of silence, a habit of recollection, a will to renunciation and detachment which puts you entirely at the disposal of the work; acquire a state of soul unburdened by desire and self-will which is the state of grace of the intellectual worker. Without that you will do nothing, at least nothing worthwhile.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, Himes further contends, to the list of great religious ascetics we can also add Darwin and other important figures in the natural sciences. “I suggest that there is a profoundly sacramental dimension to all the sciences because they are all a form of training in intellectual self-discipline.”<sup>36</sup>

Bernard Lonergan’s “cognitional enterprise” is useful in this regard to bridge the intellectual with the contemplative. It is comprised of an *empirical* level “on which we sense, perceive, imagine, feel, speak, move;” an *intellectual* level “on which we inquire, come to understand, express what we have understood, work out the presuppositions and implications of our expression;” a *rational* level “on which we reflect, marshal the evidence, pass judgment on the truth or falsity, certainty or probability, of a statement;” and a *responsible* level “on which we are concerned with ourselves, our own operations, our goals, and so deliberate about possible courses of action, evaluate them, decide, and carry out our decisions.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 157.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>34</sup> Himes, “Finding God,” 15.

<sup>35</sup> Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life*, viii.

<sup>36</sup> Himes, “Finding God,” 16.

<sup>37</sup> Bernard Lonergan, “Dimensions of Meaning,” in *Collection*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, vol. 4 of *Collected Works* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 9.

## 5. The Telos of Knowledge

Catholic social teaching emphasizes the common good as both a means that encourages human flourishing and an end to which we should strive through our daily actions in collaboration with others. It is “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment.”<sup>38</sup> In this regard, the acquisition of knowledge is not a value-free undertaking; there is a telos to knowledge beyond its utility in attaining skills or a job. When properly directed, it contributes to the common good. This goal is informed by the integration of knowledge, which brings a variety of perspectives into critical dialogue with one another about concepts, ideas, and contemporary concerns. As David Hollenbach writes:

It is the role of the university—above all of the Catholic university—to retrieve, criticize, and reconstruct understandings of the human good and thus of social justice. The Catholic university should be a place where professors and students bring their received tradition’s understandings of how people should live together into intelligent and critical encounter with understandings held by other peoples with other traditions.<sup>39</sup>

Effective pedagogies that illustrate this potential are engaged learning practices, such as community-based or service learning. By their natures, these pedagogies are not necessarily Catholic although their approaches and goals align with many of the themes of Catholic social teaching. However, as Erin Brigham proposes, a Catholic-structured method for service-learning can be based on Pope Saint John XXIII’s “three stages which should normally be followed in the reduction of social principles into practice” in *Mater et magistra*: see, judge, and act.<sup>40</sup> The seven themes of Catholic social teaching provide useful frameworks for determining learning outcomes in this regard.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes*: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html) (accessed February 15, 2018).

<sup>39</sup> David Hollenbach, “The Catholic Intellectual Tradition, Social Justice, and the University,” *C21 Resources*, Spring (2013): 12.

<sup>40</sup> Erin M. Brigham, *See, Judge, Act: Catholic Social Teaching and Service Learning*, 2nd ed. (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2019), 23-27.

<sup>41</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching,” <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching> (accessed August 24, 2016).

Another goal of the search for knowledge is to shape the character of the seeker. From a Catholic perspective, the personal formation of students is as important as the skills and intellectual habits they acquire. Thus, as Monika Hellwig notes, the “integration of learning in a coherent worldview or philosophy of life is a necessary basis of living a good, productive, well-directed life.”<sup>42</sup> Or, according to Bernard of Clairvaux, when we desire to learn in order to edify others, it is an expression of *agape*, and when we seek knowledge to edify ourselves, it is an act of prudence.<sup>43</sup>

### **Academics and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition**

The preceding section provides theological explanations of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and some of its focal points. Given that most academic disciplines are neither theology nor religion, how, then, might they give expression to an institution’s Catholic identity while maintaining their proper intellectual character? They can contribute to each of the preceding focal points without compromising their disciplinary probity by addressing the following questions:

1. A Sacramental Worldview
  - 1.1. What pedagogies can we employ to encourage students to become beholders? How might the language of “beholding” be employed across disciplines with an integrity that is appropriate to them?
  - 1.2. How can we help students “see what is there to be seen” within the context of the methods proper to our disciplines so as to understand the world and their place in it better and more deeply?
  - 1.3. How can our colleagues in other disciplines contribute to this task in a collaborative manner while remaining committed to the methods proper to their disciplines?
2. The Complementarity of Faith and Reason
  - 2.1. In what ways can we help students understand the contributions of our disciplines to the treasury of human knowledge?

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<sup>42</sup> Monika K. Hellwig, “The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Catholic University,” in *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*, ed. Anthony J. Cernera and Oliver J. Morgan (Fairfield, CT: SHU Press, 2000), 9.

<sup>43</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, “Sermon XXXVI,” in *Cantica Canticorum: Eighty-Six Sermons on the Song of Solomon*, ed. John Mabillon and Samuel J. Eales (London: John Hodges, 1896).

- 2.2. How do we foster an academic climate where, in addition to learning skills and methods, students probe questions of meaning and ultimacy and extend hospitality to the perspectives that other disciplines bring to these questions as part of their intellectual inquiry?
3. The Social Nature of the Human Person
  - 3.1. How can we encourage our students to embrace learning as a process undertaken in collaboration with others?
  - 3.2. How can we introduce students to the intellectual traditions within our disciplines and encourage them to engage with seminal thinkers, both past and present?
  - 3.3. What can we learn from past faculty members who have left legacies at our institutions? How can we honor those legacies?
4. Asceticism and Contemplation
  - 4.1. How can we invite our students to recognize the contemplative nature of academic research as one of investigation, understanding, critical reflection, and responsibility?
5. The Telos of Knowledge
  - 5.1. What settings can we create for our students that invite them to explore the telos of knowledge? In what ways can we expose them to the ways that our disciplines contribute to the common good?
  - 5.2. How can we structure our courses to enable students to see, judge, and act with regard to social and structural injustices?

### **Adding a Charismatic Lens**

While the preceding focal points are proposed as a framework for an intellectual culture informed by the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, the heritage of an institution's founding order or diocese provides a further distinctive means by which to foster that culture. In my institution's instance, we were founded by the Sisters of Mercy. Their particular charism adds the following dimensions to what a Catholic/Mercy-shaped intellectual culture might look like.

The Sisters of Mercy were distinct in their time as a non-cloistered order whose members walked the streets of Dublin (and later many other locations) seeking to attend to the needs of the poor, uneducated, and most vulnerable. Since that time, the animating spirit of the Sisters of Mercy has been to be present to the communities where they serve, to identify those communities' most immediate and pressing needs, and

to fashion institutions to meet those needs. These needs include those of our students.

The Hebrew word that is often translated as “mercy” is *hesed* (also, “steadfast love”). It refers to God’s enduring faithfulness to Israel expressed through the covenant with Abraham: that God would never forsake Israel (Gn 15:9-20). Thus, God has been ever present to Israel guiding its history, freeing it from injustice, and forgiving and restoring it when it had strayed from God. With the Catholic sacramental worldview in mind, when we undertake the work of mercy, we do so as an extension of God’s grace-filled work in the world, particularly for the poor and marginalized. The biblical witness testifies that there is also a telos to mercy: restoration. Mercy seeks restoration where there has been brokenness and injustice. The Jewish tradition provides a useful frame of reference to understand and embrace the work and ends of mercy: *tikkun olam* or “repairing the world.”

Within the mercy tradition, this process also requires that the just ends that we seek for the world also be modeled in our relationships with one another. On this point, Catherine McAuley instructed, “Our exercises of charity performed abroad will have no value before God if there be not established at home a solid foundation of this virtue.”<sup>44</sup> Or, as Mary Sullivan notes, “We are to be and do what we teach. If we wish to teach mercifulness, we must speak and act mercifully towards others.”<sup>45</sup>

From its founding, a fundamental element of the Mercy charism has been a commitment to the spiritual work of mercy to instruct the ignorant. In “The Spirit of the Institute,” Catherine McCauley describes “the relief and instruction of the poor and ignorant as most conducive to our own advancement in perfection.”<sup>46</sup> In Catherine’s time, this undertaking had to do with what we today call religious education. It also focused on advancing the prospects of an underserved population. While its contemporary use is most often pejorative, the word *ignorant* fundamentally means one who lacks knowledge “either in general or with respect to a particular fact or subject.”<sup>47</sup> Where do our students lack

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<sup>44</sup> Mary Teresa Purcel, R.S.M., *Retreat Instructions of Mother Mary Catherine McAuley*, ed. Sisters of Mercy (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1952), 60.

<sup>45</sup> Mary Sullivan, R.S.M., “Catherine McAuley and the Characteristics of Mercy Higher Education,” *The MAST Journal* 16, no. 2 (2006): 23.

<sup>46</sup> Mary C. Sullivan, ed., *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818-1841* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 459.

<sup>47</sup> “ignorant, adj. and n.,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/91234?redirectedFrom=ignorant#eid> (accessed February 8, 2021).

knowledge with regard to religion? My own time as a professor of theology attests that there is much they do not know, including foundational biblical stories. Additionally, a growing antipathy toward religion accompanies this lack of religious knowledge. Some of this distaste results from their impressions of the relationship between religion and science. Many of this generation perceive that the two are at odds with one another. They say that Christianity “seems to reject much of what science tells us about the world.”<sup>48</sup> Additional reasons for their attitudes about religion include, “Learning about evolution when I went away to college,” “Rational thought makes religion go out the window,” and “Lack of any sort of scientific or specific evidence of a creator.”<sup>49</sup> As for meeting the needs of underserved populations, there is much that we can learn here from the Sisters of Mercy, who have extended the work of Catherine McAuley throughout the world.

Since the time of Catherine McAuley, the Sisters of Mercy have also emphasized the need to balance action on behalf of others with contemplation. For in contemplation, the Sisters and their partners will “take delight and seek in it their comfort and refreshment for the labors and fatigues of the Institute.”<sup>50</sup> There are a multitude of distractions that occupy our students’ time. Chief among them is digital media. Our students are “digital natives”; they have never known a time before the internet. More than half use screen media four hours or more on an average day.<sup>51</sup> Thus, a Mercy education can introduce them to the restorative value of contemplation. The growing field of contemplative pedagogy offers just such academic opportunities, from secular methods to those with Catholic foundations.<sup>52</sup>

The addition of our Mercy charism prompts further questions for faculty reflection. What are the immediate needs of our surrounding communities, and how might they inform our teaching? How can our engaged-learning practices illustrate the restorative potential of mercy for our students and for those with whom we partner and work? How

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<sup>48</sup> Barna Group, *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs, and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2018), 61.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Lipka, “Why Some Americans Left Religion Behind,” <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/24/why-americas-nones-left-religion-behind/> (accessed Aug 23, 2019).

<sup>50</sup> *Rule and Constitutions of the Religious Sisters of Mercy* (London: Forgotten Books, 2018), 1.9.3.

<sup>51</sup> Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 13.

<sup>52</sup> See Mary Keator, *Lectio Divina as Contemplative Pedagogy: Re-Appropriating Monastic Practice for the Humanities* (New York: Routledge, 2018).



can we structure an academic experience for our students that attends to where their perceptions have resulted in a lack of knowledge, either in general or with respect to a particular fact or subject? How can reflection serve as a structural feature of the learning experience of our students, whether or not community-based learning is employed?

### Final Thoughts

This proposal may have merit, but is it practical? That is, can a discernibly Catholic intellectual structure invite participation from faculty who hold a variety of perspectives on religion? A faculty retreat with this same goal suggests that it can. In 2018, I hosted six faculty members for a four-day retreat that focused on their vocations as teachers. Each of the days featured a variety of religious and non-religious readings. We used the structure of the *Lectio Divina* for our engagements with the texts, and each day ended with a moderated form of the Examen led by our Jesuit retreat director. The selection of faculty was very deliberate: two each from the humanities, the natural sciences, and the social sciences. Their length of service spanned from less than one year to more than thirty. Their religious affiliation ranged from practicing Catholic to non-Catholic Christian to non-religious. The explicitly Catholic structure for the retreat was explained to each participant in advance so that they were making fully informed choices to participate.

The response to the retreat was overwhelmingly positive. With regard to the use of the structure of the *Lectio Divina*, one participant wrote, “I loved this method. I think the time to reflect was especially important and added to our later discussions. It also made me realize how much the lack of time to contemplate has led to my feeling of disconnect with my work.”<sup>53</sup>

Cynthia Russett argues that those who teach at Catholic institutions of higher learning have inherited an “intellectual apostolate.”<sup>54</sup> That is, we have accepted a call to participate in a mission-centered undertaking that involves, in her estimation, “some combination of work and witness.”<sup>55</sup> A Catholic structure to an institution’s intellectual life can illustrate this vocational dimension. In the case of the faculty, the

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<sup>53</sup> Quoted from the post-retreat evaluation.

<sup>54</sup> Cynthia Russett, “Intersections,” in *As Leaven in the World: Catholic Perspectives on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life*, ed. Thomas M. Landy (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2001), 374.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

work is most often the witness, and the apostolate of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition provides a context for them to reflect on their vocations in service to their institutions' Catholic identities, as well as their students' learning experiences, regardless of their religious affiliations. And this is but one step in the process. Institutions' founding orders and dioceses also provide additional charismatic layers and, as a result, opportunities for enriching the intellectual climate for faculty, staff, administration, and students in ways that are shaped by the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, but with distinctive emphases. The ability of Catholic higher education to read "the signs of the times" throughout its history tells us that this process is worth the effort.