



A REASONED FAITH:

Notes from Catholic Higher Education

A Catholic university is “born from the heart of the Church” explained Pope St. John Paul II in his 1990 letter *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. The depth and meaning of such a provocative statement deserves more astute attention in order to unpack the inherent gift Catholic higher education provides to the faithful. By identifying the central contributions as well as the current challenges facing Catholic universities, this monthly column will highlight the full vigor and value of Catholic higher education. For the past millennium, Catholic universities contributed to the development of culture and the advancement of human knowledge in the central cities throughout Europe and for the past 225 years throughout the United States.

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Throughout their long history, distinctive features set them apart from other institutions of higher education. While some characteristics—perhaps even many—have been shared between these early schools and their current counterparts, two particular features flow from the unique nature of Catholic universities: the unity of knowledge and the complementarity of faith and reason.

The Unity of Knowledge

Authentic Catholic universities seek to integrate knowledge between various academic fields in order to answer the most central questions of human life: *Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?* Rather than compartmentalize knowledge, Catholic universities intentionally aim to illustrate how each discipline’s distinct contribution to



understanding humanity and the cosmos advances a “harmonious witness of all truth” (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 17). Through Catholic higher education, students quench the thirst for truth present in every human heart.

Complementarity of Faith and Reason

Pointing out the intrinsic relationship between faith and reason as “two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth” (*Fides et Ratio* 1), Pope St. John Paul II, clarifies what so many people misunderstand. Faith, on one hand, entails the capacity of the human intellect to assent to truths based on God’s revelation. Reason, on the other hand, encompasses the capacity of the human intellect to attain “knowledge which depends upon sense perception and experience and which advances by the light of the intellect alone” (9). These two approaches to knowledge of the truth are “neither identical nor mutually exclusive” (9). As complementary entities, reason applies to human intellect in understanding the created world, and faith applies to human intellect in accepting the “divine testimony” (13). In Catholic universities, reason never presents itself as an enemy of faith nor is faith the antagonist of reason. According to *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, “Catholic universities are called to explore courageously the riches of Revelation and of nature so that the united endeavor of intelligence and faith will enable people to come to the full measure of their humanity” (5). Therefore, the Catholic post-secondary setting encourages the human intellect to engage the world employing both approaches to knowledge.

The Challenge

A Catholic university’s privileged task is “to unite existentially by intellectual effort two orders of reality that too frequently tend to be placed in opposition as though they were antithetical: the search for truth, and the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth” (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 1). At its core, the Catholic University in its classrooms, clubs, chapels, and hallways facilitates a dialogue between faith and reason that promotes the integration of knowledge in order to “bear witness to the unity of all truth” (17). This central objective of the Catholic university often succumbs to mundane yet real stresses that slowly detract from its inherent identity. The primary challenge facing Catholic higher education today rests on this erosion of genuine dialogue between faith and reason.

The Value

When done right, the Catholic university inspires a “gaudium de veritate...that joy of searching for, discovering and communicating the truth in every field of knowledge” (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 1). It serves as “an Alma Mater of the rising generation” (Bl. Newman, *Idea of the University*, 11), and it joins the Church’s mission to proclaim the Good News and serve the corporal needs of humanity. Catholic higher education, when done right, trains the intellect to search for truth while standing in awe of that which is transcendent; as an indispensable formation of the whole person, it inspires the heart to respond to beauty and creates the capacity to find joy even in the process of striving for it.

— Prof. Ryan Hanning

