

## Academic Freedom and the Catholic University

by Timothy O'Donnell - August 29, 2007

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Academic freedom is a great good that should be cherished and honored by every university community. This precious heritage of freedom originated in the Christian West and rose initially in the great universities of Europe, which themselves sprang from the cathedral schools of the early Middle Ages. Great universities such as Padua, Bologna, Louvain, Paris, Prague, and Oxford all arose, as Pope John Paul II observed, *ex corde ecclesiae*—out of the heart of the Church.

A Catholic university plays a unique role within the university community in its promotion and defense of academic freedom. As John Paul II wrote: "It is specifically a Catholic university's privileged task to unite existentially by intellectual effort two orders of reality that too frequently tend to be placed in opposition as if they were antithetical: the search for truth, and the certainty of already knowing the font of Truth."

The *magna traditio* of Catholic higher education builds upon the two orders by which we come to know things: faith and reason. These two distinct orders of knowledge each possesses its own autonomous method, but ultimately they converge in their examination of reality. Since, for the Catholic, the two have a common source in God, who is the author of both, Catholics have always held firmly that there is nothing to fear from sound reason in scientific inquiry. Faith and reason, each within its proper sphere, are in service to the truth and therefore complement each other in ways that are mutually reinforcing.

John Paul II taught us in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* that it is the "honor and the responsibility of a Catholic university to consecrate itself without reserve to the cause of truth." It is precisely the faith dimension present within the Catholic university that makes this consecration possible.

Faith, in addition to offering guidance to sound reason, also gives illumination and its own impetus to the discovery of truth and the safeguarding of authentic academic freedom. Reason, for its part, can be of great service in penetrating and explicating the supernatural mysteries proposed by faith. Both faith and reason, the pope observes, are in service to the dignity of man and the good of the Church.

Within the Catholic university, one should never find a truncated view of reality. Rather, there should be an openness to the fullness of truth, wherever it may be, whether that truth bears on God, man, or the created order.

The free pursuit of truth has always been viewed as a most noble undertaking. Freedom, however, is not an absolute right that lives in isolation; rather, it is related intimately to the true and the good. It is only in freedom's relation to the true and the good that authentic freedom can be guaranteed and nurtured. This Catholic vision is not simply a "perspective" or a "view" to be presented as one among many different perspectives. Rather, it is a fundamental grounding vision that gives meaning, direction, and purpose to all that we do. "Because there can be no freedom apart from or in opposition to the truth, the Catholic defense—unyielding and uncompromising—of the absolutely essential demands of man's personal dignity must be considered the way and condition for the very existence of freedom" (*Veritatis Splendor*, 96). Here we can see manifested the inseparable connection between truth and freedom, which is the foundation of *all* freedoms—including academic freedom.

In order to maintain a true sense of academic freedom, it must be nurtured within the confines of what is good and true. Great thinkers and great ideas, which sometimes might be hostile to the Christian tradition—such as Nietzsche or Jean-Paul Sartre—remain important for students to encounter and reflect upon critically. Nevertheless, academic freedom must be lived within the university in such a way that the dignity of man and the human person is always defended, especially from violence and distortion.

Some claim that certain theatrical or film productions of dubious artistic merit and demeaning language are essential for academic freedom—particularly in serving the need, for example, to defend the dignity of women and oppose violence against women. Those certainly are noble goals. One cannot help but observe, however, that there are many ways within the university's commitment to academic freedom in which the dignity of women can be defended and promoted without resorting to offensive language and imagery. For a Catholic university—as well as a secular university—a close examination of John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* or a careful reading of his Apostolic Letter on the Dignity of Women could be pursued, for they touch upon many of the great issues concerning the rights and dignity of women.

It is important to remember that—especially for the Catholic university—having an open mind is not a goal or an end in itself. An open mind is not itself a perfection; rather, it is a mind that is still searching—for truth, the object of the intellect. It is not the purpose of the Catholic university to form students who are open-minded. More accurately, a Catholic university seeks to educate free individuals with discerning minds. We want our students to have a keen intellect, both critical and reflective, that makes use of the lights of faith and sound reason, recognizing their common source.

John Henry Cardinal Newman once said that the education of the young should provide them with a "habit of mind which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom." A discerning mind using principles of sound reason will not be "open," nor claim that everything is good and worthwhile.

The university exists for one specific purpose—to help form and shape the minds of its students in their search for the acquisition of truth. In this noble effort, the cultivation of an appreciation of the good and the beautiful is also crucial, for as John Paul II stated in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the Catholic university's goal is "to help students think rigorously, to act rightly and to serve the cause of humanity better."

A Catholic university's specific task is consecrated to this goal of using the light of faith and sound reason in the service of truth. In uniting these two orders, which characterize so much of what is best in the Catholic tradition—epitomized in the writings of Aquinas and many other Fathers and Doctors of the Church—there is an openness to the fullness of reality that is often lacking in the secular model of the university. Sound philosophy and theology, faithful to the roots of their disciplines, have a crucial role to play within the structure of the university community, particularly in the pursuit and preservation of academic freedom.

Consider an example: A hospital exists for one purpose—the restoration of health. A Catholic hospital certainly would do this as well, in union with the teaching of the Church, inspired by the spirit of the gospel and Christian charity. Sadly, today there are hospitals that provide abortions and sterilizations, and are even willing to euthanize the terminally ill. Such a facility may be considered a hospital by some, but such a hospital could never be considered "Catholic" even if it should have a beautiful chapel, a priest present, and be filled with beautiful religious art.

A Catholic university in our pluralistic society has a specific role to play and a unique contribution to bring to the great problems that are confronting our society and our culture. Four essential elements listed by John Paul II in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* are essential characteristics for the Catholic university to be Catholic:

1. It must have a Christian inspiration—not only on the part of individuals within the university, but on the part of the university community itself.
2. It must be a place where there is a continuing reflection, in light of the Catholic Faith, upon the growing treasury of human knowledge to which it seeks to contribute by its own research.
3. It must be faithful to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church.
4. It must have an institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and the entire human family on their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal that gives the meaning of life.

Far from limiting academic freedom, such a position provides the fundamental structure in which authentic freedom can be lived. This is why the late Holy Father states that in a Catholic university "Catholic ideals, attitudes and principles penetrate and inform university activities in accordance with the proper nature and autonomy of these activities."

John Paul II was in many ways a philosopher pope who remained intimately involved with the academic life of the university. In *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* he defines academic freedom as "the guarantee given to those involved in teaching and research that, within their specific, specialized branch of knowledge, and according to the methods proper to that specific area, they may search for the truth wherever evidence and analysis leads them, and may teach and publish the results of this search, keeping in mind the cited criteria, that is, safeguarding the rights of the individual and of society within the confines of the truth and the common good."

The Catholic university, because of its commitment to academic freedom, sometimes will have "to speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion" but, nevertheless, are "necessary" in order "to safeguard the authentic good of society" (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 32). Such an institution, however, will always promote a culture based on a true Christian anthropology that recognizes the fundamental dignity of the human person.

A university that is not truly guided by the four essential characteristics set forth by the Church may be considered a university in a secular sense, but certainly should *not* claim to be a Catholic university.

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