Catholic Studies and the Mission of the Catholic University

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"A faith that places itself on the margin of what is human, of what is therefore culture, would be a faith unfaithful to the fullness of what the Word of God manifests and reveals, a decapitated faith, worse still, a faith in the process of self-annihilation"

(John Paul II, Ex corde ecclesiae, 44)

This evening I received a newsletter called “Dimensions” from the Thomas More Center for the Study of Catholic Thought and Culture at Rockhurst University in Kansas. Among other things the newsletter announces upcoming courses in Catholic Studies, including a new course entitled “Catholic-Jewish-Muslim Interaction in the Middle Ages.” Just another indication, it seems, that Catholic Studies is an idea whose time has come.

One of Catholic Studies significant beginnings took place in the early 1990s at the University of Saint Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and today that is virtually the flagship program in Catholic Studies with over 100 students majoring in Catholic Studies, a program in Rome, etc. In addition, for the last two years the Curran Center for American Catholic Studies at Fordham University has hosted a meeting of Catholic Studies programs and the meeting has been attended by a number of representatives of programs at both Catholic and secular institutions. I counted nineteen programs represented, but certainly there are more than that number.

Not all the programs are named such: at Fordham the program is one in American Catholic Studies; at Villanova there is a program in Augustinian Studies and Humanities; at Duke there is the beginning of a Catholic Studies program under the religious studies program; etc. Then there is the Lumen Christi Institute in Chicago, which is independent of the University of Chicago, but in fact influenced by faculty at the University of Chicago. The common denominator seems to be the study of Catholicism as historical fact and, in some cases, a creative and theological orientation.

A number of these programs are undergraduate programs with minors or concentrations in Catholic Studies, but there are also a few, like our own at Seton Hall University, which has a major in Catholic Studies. The major at Seton Hall – often a second major - consists of 36 credits with 6 basic courses and 6 electives. The basics include Introduction to the Catholic Vision, Catholicism and Literature, Catholicism and Art, Catholic Social Teaching. The remaining electives are chosen from concentrations in the Catholic intellectual tradition or the Catholic cultural tradition.

In this article I would like to address the following issues: 1) Catholic Studies and the rise of historical consciousness; 2) Catholic Studies and the loss of a unifying philosophical vision in
Catholic universities; 3) Catholic Studies and the mission of Catholic universities; 4) “Catholicity”: the promise of Catholic Studies; and 5) finally, as an addendum, Centers of Catholic Studies.

1) Catholic Studies and the Rise of Historical Consciousness

Bernard Lonergan in his writings sometimes employed the notion of “vertical finality” to explain the emergence of a new consciousness, a new feeling or awareness that here and there slowly gathers in intensity until a new social movement emerges. The existence of Catholic Studies programs would seem to be an instance of such an emergence. Nor is this kind of an emergence unique in the world of academia. Women’s studies, American studies, African-American studies and various types of cultural studies would seem to be similar emergent trends. Typically, many faculty like to teach in such programs because they go beyond traditional curricular categories and embody current interests and questions.

But why Catholic Studies? And the retort can be simply: Why not? After all, Catholicism has had and continues to have an enormous influence, both in the United States and in many parts of the world. A recent book by Thomas Woods entitled How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization captures for many a deep and lasting influence. Why not study that influence and that history? Nor need that study be uncritical: the flaws of the church as well as its triumphs can be studied in depth.

Such a world of historical study is still catching up with Catholics. As a movement, critical historical study began, chiefly in Germany, in the latter part of the eighteenth century. It focused first on the ancient Greek and Roman classics and then, only gradually, on the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. In fact, one could say that the movement of historical consciousness only caught up with a major part of the Catholic community at the Second Vatican Council with its acceptance of critical historical methods in the study of Scripture, etc. In many ways, Catholic Studies represents only a continuation of that movement of historical consciousness as researchers now study, for example, the immigrant communities that have come to America and have had such a major effect on the common life of America.

In my own area of New Jersey, Seton Hall University is sponsoring tours of local Catholic Churches in Newark, Jersey City and surrounding areas as people seek to reconstruct the roots of their own identity. Such study of “Catholic cultures” is a promising area of historical research. I just returned from Argentina and was struck by a particular brand of Catholicism there, a specific historically conditioned brand of Catholicism with its particular devotions, emphases, etc.

But such facts can be justifiably studied merely from an historical point of view with no intention of having a more immediate influence on contemporary practice. Thus, for example, one can study the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas without invoking Aquinas to shed light on contemporary issues.

When the study of Aquinas was enjoined on all students of philosophy and theology, what was envisaged was the assimilation of the basic tenets of Thomistic thought. But the first concern of historical scholarship is not to set
forth and convince readers or hearers of the profundity of an author's thought, the breadth of his vision, the universal relevance of his conclusions. That sort of thing may be allowed to pad a preface or to fill out a conclusion. But the heart of the matter is elsewhere. It is a long journey through variant readings, shifts in vocabulary, enriching perspectives - all duly documented - that establish as definitively as can be expected what the great man thought on some minor topic within the horizon of his time and place and with no great relevance to other times and places. Only from a long series of such dissertations can the full picture be constructed - a picture as accurate as it is intricate, broad indeed but with endless detail, rich in implications for other times if only one has the time to sort them out, discern the precise import of each, and infer exactly what does and does not follow. (Unpublished lecture,"The Scope of Renewal," The Larkin-Stuart lectures at Trinity College in the University of Toronto, Nov. 15, 1973, p. 2)

So one could say that Catholic Studies is the result of the Enlightenment catching up with Catholics, as with Vatican II and its aftermath a decidedly historical and empirical frame of reference took over from a more classical frame that articulated itself in terms of scholastic philosophy. This is one dimension of the emergence of Catholic Studies in the United States: a greater sensitivity to historical roots and a greater desire among many to uncover those roots. Such Catholic roots are studied both at Catholic universities and secular universities and such a fact leads us to ask how Catholic Studies can be related to the particular mission of Catholic universities.

2) Catholic Studies and the Loss of a Unifying Philosophical Vision

But first I would point to another line from Bernard Lonergan: “Mere history is not theology.” In other words, Catholic studies as history is not enough for the creative side of the Catholic vision, that is, a theology not only rooted in the past but as oriented toward the future and toward the creation of the future. Let me use a bit of history to illustrate this.

For just with the Second Vatican Council historical consciousness began to swamp Catholic universities, at the same time there disappear ed from Catholic universities a unified philosophical framework: and that framework was scholastic philosophy. For without a doubt, what gave a certain unity to the whole Catholic academic enterprise in the early part of the twentieth century was the neo-scholastic philosophy that stood as a framework for a unified Catholic world-view. As Philip Gleason put it in his masterful Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in Twentieth Century America (Oxford University Press, 1995), scholastic philosophy, not theology, was the lynchpin that held the whole academic structure together. Even today, I meet graduates of our Catholic universities who tell me that the most significant element in their undergraduate education was the “metaphysics” or the “logic.” How many credits in philosophy were they required to take in those days? Twenty? Thirty? “That stuff taught you how to think,” they will say to me. And as Gleason brought out in his book, such scholastic philosophy represented an impressive community of thinkers throughout the world – of the caliber of Etienne Gilson, Anton Pegis, Jacques Maritain.

It was, in fact, a very large and important school which at its height supported 25 specialized journals throughout the world and engaged the commitment of thinkers
the quality of whose work makes it impossible to dismiss the whole phenomenon as party-line philosophizing, however much that characterization might apply to many of those who taught it to American collegians. (Gleason, 116)

And the noted scholar, David Tracy, paid tribute to the role such neo-scholastic philosophy in Catholic colleges played in the world of American academics in general. People in this country too easily forget simple things, for example that it was the philosophy departments of Catholic universities that kept philosophy pluralistic in this country. They weren’t taken over, as so many secular departments in this country were until recently, by analytical philosophy. It’s been the philosophy departments of the great church-related, chiefly Catholic, institutions that kept alive philosophical forms that can help one think about religion and give one ways to approach theology. This is an intellectual benefit for the culture as a whole, as well as for the Catholic Church. (America, October 14, 1995, 18)

It was in fact, then, Catholic philosophy that unified the academic mission of Catholic universities in those days, as even psychology courses treated questions of “body and soul” and scholastic terminology seeped into other courses as well.

But it was not to last. The unified Catholic mission of Catholic universities was swamped by modern empirical scientific/historical methods and the questions among committed Catholics in higher education since the 1970s have been: “Have we thrown out the baby with the bathwater?” “How can we avoid relativism?” “Is there any possibility for a unified vision of the whole academic enterprise in the Catholic university?” “Can the mission of the Catholic university ever again influence the academic curriculum?” Bernard Lonergan himself recognized that the dissolution of a classical culture threatened a unified viewpoint among Catholics.

So it is that modern culture is the culture that knows about other cultures, that relates them to one another genetically, that knows all of them to be man-made. Far more open than classicist culture, far better informed, far more discerning, it lacks the convictions of its predecessor, its clear-cut norms, its elemental strength. (A Second Collection, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996, 92)

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the acceptance of historical consciousness in Catholic universities over the past thirty years has not been without theological foundation. For Christianity is an inherently historical religion. It is rooted in particular times and places. And it is also the case that the recognition of the autonomy of the various disciplines, such as historical scholarship, is a direct result of changes in Catholicism’s developing stance with regard to modernity. Where previously there had been a pronounced tendency to stand apart and condemn the whole modern project, the tendency of Vatican II was much more pastoral and discerning. While not plumping for an uncritical embrace of all things modern, the tendency of contemporary Catholicism is to discern the wheat from the chaff, the tinsel from the silver, the counterfeit from the gold.

But how to do that? That’s the trick.
3) Catholic Studies and the Mission of the Catholic University

What then does an historically grounded Catholic Studies have to do with the mission of the Catholic university? Could Catholic Studies conceivably be related to a unified Catholic vision of the academic life of the university and of the world? I think it can.

But to do that it has to have at its disposal an adequate philosophy, a philosophy capable of integrating scholasticism’s intention of linking faith and reason within contemporary culture. It needs a philosophy sophisticated enough to deal with modern historical and scientific methods and capable of integrating such methods into an overall vision of humanity in the world today: a humanity that from a Christian point of view is created in the image and likeness of God and destined for eternal union with God. What is needed is something like Newman’s “science of the sciences,” that is, a philosophical theology that can integrate all the disciplines in the university into a theological vision. Such was Bernard Lonergan’s vision in all of his work: that is, a personally grounded metaphysics capable of integrating, purifying and transforming the disciplines. For that the disciplines - fragmented, each in its own silo - need integrating into a comprehensive and inspiring vision is certainly a felt need, not only by Catholics but also by others in the academic world. And that the various disciplines need some philosophical purifying is also obvious to many. Psychology, sociology or economics that treat the human person merely as an animal responding to stimuli – or less – need to be fit within a more dignified vision of the human person. So also, a contemporary humanism needs to bequeath hope to the contemporary world.

And so there is need for theology and philosophy in a Catholic Studies program: for theology, as the Latin puts it, in oratione directa, that is, in direct speech. Having studied the past, we dare to make direct statements about the present and what’s worth building in the future. There is a role for such statements in the Catholic Studies curriculum: that is, what’s worth learning and what’s worth teaching.

4. From Catholic to Catholicity: the Promise of Catholic Studies

Let me give you an example of what I mean. John Haughey, S.J., at the Woodstock Theological Center, Georgetown University, has initiated a program on the Catholic mission of Catholic universities that focuses on the “catholicity” of the disciplines, and even more, on the “catholicity” of the faculty teaching those disciplines. That is, “catholicity” with a small “c” – whatever heads for wholeness.

The workshops that Haughey convenes typically begin with asking faculty – whether Catholic or not – what brought them into the disciplines they are teaching: a particularly engaging teacher? a moment of insight? a realization that one could contribute in a particular way? This autobiographical account is very important for it engages people in their own reasons for becoming a teacher in this or that area: “the dream” that sparked their academic journey.

A further element in the workshop consists in posing the question: how does what you are doing in your discipline contribute to the common good? What is “the whole” to which your academic work contributes? (Haughey tells the story of the business school teacher who, against reigning
academic preferences, researched the role “vengeance” played in the workplace.) The point is to name the “whole” towards which my work is tending: that towards which my own work, along with others in other fields, contributes.

It is this vision of “catholicity” with a small “c” to which Catholicity with a capital “C” must contribute. It is out of such concern with the wholeness of the disciplines and the public good to which they should be contributing that particular questions for Catholicism can be put: What is the society we are building? What kind of people are we becoming?

The point here is to ask: How can Catholic Studies relate to “catholicity” and vice versa? Could Catholic Studies contribute to such wholeness of vision by detailing the contributions, not only of Catholics but of others, to social justice? By tracing the contributions of others to a more just society in the United States? By focusing on whatever in the various professions contributes to the common good? By outlining the genuine contributions of the human sciences and the humanities to a more dignified vision of the human person?

5) **An Addendum: Centers for Catholic Studies**

At Seton Hall our efforts in Catholic Studies have focused largely on faculty development with faculty from various departments regularly gathering for dialogue on human and religious issues. The focus of these workshops has been the whole interplay and movement from “Catholic” to “catholic” outlined above. These workshops have been well received. One faculty member called them the best academic experience she had had at the university.

But how guarantee that such experiences be regularly available to the faculty? At Seton Hall we have found that the formation of a Center for Catholic Studies gives us the leeway for creating such opportunities for faculty development. The formation of a center allows for funding outside the normal university structures. Not only does the center oversee the running of the undergraduate program, but it allows for efforts at dialogue in various directions. Currently at Seton Hall the Center for Catholic Studies includes the Chesterton Institute for Faith and Culture, the Bernard J. Lonergan Institute, the Institute on Work, and the Micah Program for Senior Executives. All these efforts are interdisciplinary and represent the Church through this Catholic university reaching out to dialogue with various aspects of modern culture. The creation of the Center for Catholic Studies gives us the flexibility to support these other centers and to contribute to a unified vision of the human person within a complex world with its many professions and areas of concern.

SETON HALL UNIVERSITY

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