A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY IN THE KIMBERLEY

Reflections on a Catholic Identity

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A Faculty That is Unified, Diverse and Free

Those who are not Catholic bring new insights, passions and ideas in order to strengthen, renew and even challenge the established Catholic identity.

The role of Catholic and non-Catholic Staff in a Catholic University

There is an unfortunate and negative belief that Catholic Universities around the world are being compromised by a lack of commitment to Catholic identity. An article in The Atlantic (Jones 2014) refers to rebranding and marketing efforts that seem to push an institution’s Catholic identity to the side in favour of appearing more relevant to today’s prospective students. In First Things (Infantine 2015), a complaint is made that there is a push to weaken the Catholic identity of Jesuit universities. The retired associate vice president of University Relations at Notre Dame (Indiana) identified the chief symptom and cause of weakening Catholic identity as the drop in the number of Catholic faculty (Conklin 2006). He states clearly that, “The Catholic
identity of the University depends upon, and is nurtured by, the continuing presence of a predominant number of Catholic intellectuals.”

The complaints outlined above reflect a general malaise in today’s Catholic Church, namely that many believe that faith, morals, and practice of the faith are weakening. The place of Catholic universities in such a situation means that non-Catholic faculty and staff are subject to a level of scrutiny, which may not otherwise occur. It is the case that John Paul II (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, 2.4.4) stated that, “In order not to endanger the Catholic identity of the University or Institute of Higher Studies, the number of non-Catholic teachers should not be allowed to constitute a majority within the Institution, which is and must remain Catholic.” Against such a background, non-Catholic members of the University may be left wondering what place they have in the University community.

John Paul II is very clear about the Catholic identity of the University and the need to recruit staff who support Catholic faith and values, but he is equally clear about the positive place that non-Catholic staff and faculty have in a Catholic university. He acknowledges the fact that many Catholic universities employ non-Catholic Christians, members of other faiths and people who have no religious belief at all. However, in addition to the fact of their employment, he does clarify the valuable role they play, noting that, “These men and women offer their training and experience in furthering the various academic disciplines or other university tasks” (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, n26).

John Paul II’s thinking on non-Catholic faculty and staff comes in the context of a conviction that a Catholic university is not isolated from the Church but, at the very foundations of its institutional identity, it is related both to the local Church and to the Universal church around the world. This means, among other things, that as an institution, a Catholic university must be in unity with the Church on issues of faith and morals. For example, a Catholic university would lose its essential Catholic character were it to teach and perform abortions or to teach economic theories that ignore the just demands
of the poor. He thus calls Catholic members of the university community to faithfulness to the Church (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, n27). But what of non-Catholics? He refers to Vatican II’s Declaration on Religious Freedom (Dignitatis Humanae, n2), which grounds its position on the inherent dignity of every human being. This dignity in turn grounds the right to religious freedom, which means that all people, including non-Catholics, must be free from coercion, “on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power.” For non-Catholic members of a Catholic university, this means that they are not expected to hold, nor should they be pressured into adopting, Catholic beliefs. What is demanded of them is no more and no less than, “Non-Catholic members are required to respect the Catholic character of the University.” In return, John Paul II commits Catholic universities to respecting the religious [or non-religious] liberty of non-Catholic faculty and staff (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, n27).

It must be said though, that even while Pope John Paul II affirms the value of non-Catholic staff and faculty, it is left to interpretation to explain how non-Catholics are valuable to the Catholic university. In the first place, understanding this value means rejecting an assumption in the “us-and-them” mentality that characterises too many criticisms of the relative number of Catholic teachers in a university. That assumption rests on a polar “either-or” way of thinking, which ascribes full value to a Catholic staff member, and little to no value to a non-Catholic staff member. From a very different perspective, the Second Vatican Council has a more positive vision of what Catholics share with others. Lumen Gentium (n15-16) speaks not primarily in terms of what separates Catholics and non-Catholics but instead of what links together Catholics and non-Catholics. There are other Christians who share a common Baptism, common Scriptures and who are committed to the Scriptures and who celebrate the Sacraments. The Council also speaks of what Catholics share with non-Christians, especially the Jewish people who are honoured as, “the people to whom the testament and the promises were given and from whom Christ was born according to the flesh.” It also spoke positively in terms of what Catholics
share with Muslims, believers in other faiths and even those of good will who have no explicit religious faith.

It is within a context of emphasising what non-Catholics share, rather than what divides them from non-Catholics, that sense can be made of John Paul II’s comments. In a way, the Council and the Pope are making a point that President Ronald Reagan echoed when he assuaged “all-or-nothing” Republicans by saying, “someone who agrees with me 70% of the time doesn’t count as my enemy” (Medved 2007). In other words, even if a non-Catholic does not accept 100% of the Church’s positions on faith and morals, what they do share with Catholics is valuable and a worthy contribution to the life of a Catholic university.

There is another very helpful image from Bishop Alvaro Corrada, formerly of Tyler, in East Texas, now of Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. To explain the spirit of Catholicism, he has used the image of the “river of orthodoxy.” That is, Catholicism is not a single source movement. Like a river, it has many tributaries, some greater, some smaller, some are fast flowing rapids and some are slow and meandering. The river of Catholicism, as he has pointed out, draws from the great streams of Scripture and Tradition. But the Church has also drawn from the tributary streams of cultures, philosophy, law, and even benefited from the insights of other faiths. Thus, to be Catholic, one should not take the exclusivist position and to reject tributaries outright, but instead to discern which ones bring fresh water to the main stream and which ones are stagnant or harmful.

The same principle applies to the people who work for a Catholic university. Even if they have not come from the “River of Catholicism,” the invitation there is for those who want to contribute, as “tributaries,” to bring new insights, new passions and new ideas in order to strengthen, renew and even sometimes challenge the established Catholic identity.

Boston College’s document on Catholic Intellectual Tradition makes a similar point (Boston College, 10). It notes that, “the Catholic intellectual
tradition is neither static nor complete.” It is a dynamic and living tradition that thrives by learning new things in conversation with diverse people and cultures. As the document says, “The desire for truth that lies at the heart of the tradition demands that all assertions of truth, meaning, and purpose be tested by the best evidence against them—evidence that may be presented by anyone, of any or no religious tradition, who is engaged in serious inquiry.”

If we bring together these teachings and insights, it becomes clear that non-Catholic faculty and staff have an integral role in Catholic universities. Through their various backgrounds and through their expertise, they add to the life of the university and ultimately contribute to the fertility and growth of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

One more perspective on non-Catholic faculty and staff may be pertinent. As with any other intellectual tradition, it is very easy for Catholics to become isolated and remote from the world. It may be easy to resist change and development, and the Church was guilty of such resistance for much of the latter second millennium. But that sort of isolation does not represent tradition; it instead represents stagnation. I would argue that non-Catholic staff, who may not share the Catholic faith, but who do share our basic values, add a richness and diversity of thought and ideas which add to the intellectual “gene pool,” if one could call it that. That is, non-Catholic faculty can contribute an intellectual fertility that augments and develops the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. Additionally, one can see non-Catholics serving as supporters of the tradition. But, if so disposed, they can serve as intellectual “sparring partners,” that is those who challenge respectfully; not to hurt the tradition, but to challenge it, call it to improvement and thus build up the tradition.

Academic Freedom

The diversity of staff links into another important issue, that of academic freedom. The critical question is to what extent academics at a Catholic university enjoy “academic freedom.” In the minds of many, being at a Catholic
university constricts academic freedom. However, I would like to clarify the nature of academic freedom at a Catholic university and also advance the idea that a Catholic university, in its very nature, actually protects and fosters academic freedom.

With the spectre of the Galileo affair no doubt in the background, Pope John Paul II (Ex Corde, n29) affirms that human culture and the sciences have their own autonomy, which means that scholars in their own disciplines should enjoy the academic freedom that is proper to the principles and methods of those disciplines. However, the Pope does clarify that such academic freedom should exist “within the confines of the truth and the common good.” To clarify the point, the Pope would include the integrity of Catholic teaching under the mantle of “truth and the common good.”

At a practical level, this point means that scholars within a university community should enjoy full academic freedom, so long as their teaching and research do not either conflict with Catholic faith and values or work against the common human good, rather than for it. It can be taken for granted that this means that, for example, pro-abortion teaching and research has no place in a Catholic university. However, it also means that one would also exclude from a Catholic university research for producing chemical weapons, or business studies that promote the unjust exploitation of workers.

At a theoretical level, Pope John Paul II’s statement makes sense within the context of his other writings on freedom. Unfortunately, “freedom” is often confused with licentiousness or moral anarchy. John Paul II, following Vatican Council II, connects freedom, truth and human dignity.

A Catholic concept of freedom, as pointed out by Vatican II’s Dignitatis Humanae, is “immunity from coercion.” True freedom is thus being unfettered by pressure to act against one’s own convictions. In the Jewish-Christian tradition, that view of freedom comes from humans being made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Thus, our human dignity demands that we share in God’s freedom, by acting according to our own convictions, and not through external
coercion (*Dignitatis Humanae* n2). This idea of freedom from external coercion is brought out well by St. Paul. He clarifies the meaning of freedom by writing, “Are we free to sin, now that we are not under law but grace? Out of the question!” (Rom 6:15) For Paul, freedom was not liberty to sin, but freedom from enslavement. Paul writes that, before experiencing the grace of Christ, people were not free to live their lives as images of God, but they were “slaves to sin.” He also notes that when the Christians were pagans, they were, “enslaved to things that are not really gods at all. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elements spirits?” (Gal 4:8-9).

Accordingly, to capture Christian freedom in one sentence, we can say that St Paul’s idea of freedom is not *freedom to*...; but *freedom from* external forces. This idea can clarify the notions of true freedom, and abused freedom. True freedom is freedom in truth. Good freedom is freedom in goodness.

Inspired by this reality, Pope John Paul II clarifies that true freedom is freedom in truth. If we take the premise that in God we find all truth and goodness, then, as he notes in *Veritatis Splendor*, “genuine freedom is an outstanding manifestation of the divine image in man.” (*Veritatis Splendor* n34). Genuine freedom, a freedom that is true and good, then, is one that is dedicated simply to the pursuit of truth and goodness. It is then, not a freedom that ignores truth, nor does it neglect human values, but, as noted in *Veritatis Splendor*, it is always freedom “in the truth” (*Veritatis Splendor* n64). However, freedom can be abused freedom. This is when one exercises one's freedom with disregard to truth or goodness. More specifically, freedom is abused when we reject God, who is truth and goodness itself.

Thus, for Pope John Paul II, academic freedom at a Catholic university is not freedom *from* the truth, but freedom *for* the truth or *in* the truth. The same goes for Catholic values. That is, academic freedom at a Catholic university must never be free from authentic human values, but always a freedom for promoting and upholding human values.
This vision of academic freedom thus makes freedom a positive value at a Catholic university, and not a burden. The positive value of freedom leads to another point that Catholic universities have as a vocation, that of being guardians of academic freedom against domination or tyranny by the state. The idea of the Church being independent from the State can be seen in Magna Carta. Clause 1 affirms the independence of the Church by stating, “In the first place, we have conceded to God, and by this our present charter, for us and our heirs for ever that the English church shall be free, and shall have her rights entire, and her liberties inviolate; and we wish that it thus be observe[d]” (Schall 2015). Magna Carta’s assertion of the freedom of the Church and its independence from the monarchy may seem odd in today’s context in which it is more common to reject the Church’s influence on the State. Yet, as early as 1215, the independence of the Church made it a body that could protect not only its own interests but also protect those whose various pursuits fell foul of the state. Thus, there was a time when the Church kept the state honest, and vice versa, and the church could be a place of refuge from an oppressive state.

What Magna Carta left implied was made clear in the founding of Catholic universities, which had their genesis in the movement led by Pope Gregory in the 11th Century (Nemo 2006, 41-44). Pope Gregory also asserted the independence of the Church from the state, for example in declaring that the Church, not the civil leaders, should select Church leaders. This position led ultimately to the separation of Church from state, but it also means the freedom of the Church from state interference. This spirit of independence implies an important role for the Catholic university today. It is part of the university’s mission to teach and research in a way that frees students and faculty from state interference. In other words, under the protection of the Church, the Catholic university should be a place of refuge from state tyranny. If one wants a practical sense of that freedom, one can look at the way that Catholic universities operated in Eastern Europe under Soviet domination. They were some of the very few places where academics could operate with authentic freedom.
From another perspective, Liddy (2000, 530-531) points to the “countercultural nature of the university.” That is, academic freedom exists not only for faculty members, but for the university itself. A Catholic university, by being independent and free, can and should run counter to the “prevailing tendencies of social and cultural decline” by being held to more enduring standards of faith, hope and love.

As Lonergan explains (1988, 112), secular universities are inevitably tied to the waxing and waning of civil development and movements. Because a secular university recruits its students and faculty from the prevailing social-cultural context of civil society, the secular university is thus constrained by those same social-cultural standards of society. Having said that, the Catholic university does have its own constraints, but these are not only cultural, but countercultural because a Catholic university is animated by “the supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and charity,” which orient people not just to their society, but to God. As Lonergan wrote (1988, 112),

"Against the perpetuation of explosive tensions that would result from the strict application of retributive justice, there is the power of charity to wipe out old grievances and make a fresh start possible. Against the economic determinism that would result were egoistic practicality given free rein, there is the liberating power of hope that seeks first the kingdom of God. Against the dialectic discernible in the history of philosophy and in the development and decline of civil and cultural communities, there is the liberation of human reason through divine faith: for men of faith are not shifted about with every wind of doctrine."

In fewer words, a Catholic university as a community enjoys its own intellectual academic freedom from the contingencies of the world because its intellectual horizon is wider, deeper and higher than that of the secular university.
That positive view of academic freedom, and the role that Catholic universities have of guarding academic freedom, raise the important question of how today’s Catholic universities can provide a safe haven from government interference. Whether the relevant issues are paternalistic family policies, such as those leading to the Stolen Generations, legal scholarship on Native Title that compromise Indigenous rights or economic rationalist policies that thwart Indigenous development; the Catholic university must be a place where contrary viewpoints are entertained and protected. This publication is not the place to answer a further question, but it should be raised for further consideration, and that is whether a Catholic university should be cautious about accepting government funding. As the proverb declares, “If you take the devil’s dime, you dance the devil’s tune.” While government funding may be attractive and often helpful, the very nature of a Catholic university as an independent body that protects academic freedom means that it should always be vigilant about the conditions or expectations placed on that funding.

**Conclusion**

I trust that this chapter has shown that a diverse faculty and academic freedom are not compromised by the nature of a Catholic University. In fact, it seems clear that academic freedom is in the “intellectual DNA” of a Catholic university and supportive non-Catholic staff are not only welcomed into the Catholic university community, they have a vital, positive role to play.

These points are essential to a Catholic university in the Kimberley. Given the cultural diversity of the land, it seems vital to be able to affirm the diversity of a staff that reflects the character of the community served by the University. At the same time, academic freedom is vital to all Catholic universities. I would suggest it may be even more important in the Kimberley. As I have indicated in prior chapters, part of the University’s mission should be to help Aboriginal people have a voice and to help them create their own unique solutions to their own problems. Such a mission could not be possible in an atmosphere in which
academic freedom is suppressed. Yet, as we have seen, with the qualification that respect should be given to truth, Catholic faith and values, academic freedom is positively encouraged and fostered as part of the very nature of a Catholic university.