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A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY
IN THE KIMBERLEY

Reflections on a Catholic Identity

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CONCLUSION

The Identity and Mission of a Catholic University in the Kimberley

Pope John Paul II sees Christian mission as fostering the authentic parts of a culture and advancing that culture from within by the Christian message.

This book has covered a range of issues relevant to a Catholic university in the Kimberley. While some of these issues relate to Catholic universities in general, and some relate to universities that serve Indigenous peoples, the book has focused on those issues that seem most pressing with regard to the nature, mission, and identity of the Broome campus of the University of Notre Dame Australia. The campus would seem to be unique in Australia, given its nature as a full campus (not a study centre) of a Catholic university dedicated to a mission of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. So we have covered the question of what constitutes a university as “Catholic,” the nature of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, the importance and nature of Catholic Social Teaching, the diversity of a Catholic university’s faculty and staff, the encounters of faith and culture in a Catholic university and we lastly covered some reflections on why the
encounter between Catholicism and culture has been thwarted and what the way forward should be.

In this conclusion, I would like to highlight some pivotal points that bear upon the importance and character of a Catholic university in the Kimberley.

Mission

In the first place, the University fulfills a vital role in the Church’s mission of righting the injustices inflicted upon Aboriginal people. This mission has existed since Archbishop Polding condemned the legal fiction of “terra nullius,” which had enabled the seizure of Aboriginal lands and the subjection of Aboriginal people “to the grossest barbarities” (Russell-Mundine 2014, 99). As made clear by Pope John Paul II, the clear message of the contemporary Church to Aboriginal people is that, “The Church still supports you today” (Alice Springs Address, n10), whether this support is in seeking the rights of Aboriginal people to the land on which their community depends, or righting other injustices.

This mission of justice for Aboriginal people is a vital part of a Catholic university’s mission, as noted by Pope John Paul II. As he also explains, a Catholic university’s mission is not just to uncovering truth, but to living out the “meaning of truth,” which leads to a “universal humanism,” through which we uphold “freedom, justice and human dignity” (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, n4, 7, 21, 34). This mission of justice, of course, is a continuation of the Biblical ethics of compassion identified by Nemo (2006, 30). In that Biblical tradition, God rejects the inevitability of evil and calls his followers to take responsibility for suffering and injustice, even when they are not caused by them.

The question is, with the Church committed to so many expressions of care for the poor and the marginalised, why should we use a Catholic university for this mission of justice? I would argue that a university is an ideal vehicle for the Church’s social mission. This is because other social services, such as schools and hospitals, may be of very useful service to Aboriginal people. However, the nature of a university, as an institution that both teaches and learns, allows it to
make an added contribution. Through its research and interaction with students and the community, a university becomes a vehicle not only for its members to give service to Aboriginal people, but also to learn from Aboriginal people, to give them a voice, to empower them and to enable the people themselves to make their own contribution and to serve the Church and wider society. That is, a university does not only serve needs but, in the visions of Pope John Paul II (Ex Corde Ecclesiae) and Cardinal Newman (1852), it also forms leaders. This point is particularly important in the light of social/contributive justice (Economic Justice for All, n71-3). To be clear, I am not saying that universities are the only places in which leadership development can occur. However, with regard to Church mission and the prioritising of resources, a Catholic university provides a special service that can help form Indigenous people from within their own culture and thus help them to make their own dignified (and dignifying) contribution to their own communities and the common good.

The importance of the university and its social mission raise an important challenge. Catholic universities, no less than secular universities, seem to be coming under increased financial pressure. One may ask then, if a Catholic university in the Kimberley is an undue strain on precious resources? After all, such a campus is by nature more expensive to run than a campus in a large city. But one may ask if fiscal responsibility can be pursued to the point of economic rationalisation, with the result that the university is bankrupt of its “mission capital.” Perhaps a Catholic university in the Kimberley helps bring into sharp focus a challenge for many Catholic universities around the world. Fiscal responsibility is always necessary as is the need for good economic stewardship. However, one may ask to what extent resource rationalisation compromises the mission of the university so that in the end, it no longer fulfills the mission of the university, but simply becomes an educational business. That is, is it worth pursuing rigorous accounting if it leads to “mission insolvency”?
From another perspective, the mission of a Catholic University in the Kimberley is a vital and important part of the Church’s mission, as well as being a secular service. As John Paul II pointed out (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, 11), a Catholic university should thus be supported materially by both the Church and the state. But at the same time, he argued that the rights, freedoms and autonomy of the university should be protected. That point raises the question of the extent to which a Catholic university should submit itself to government control. In another context, the experience of the Stolen Generations shows what happens when a Church naively adopts state policy in the pursuit of social mission. A question which should be considered for further research is the issue of government control over the University. At other universities around Australia, myriad complaints are being made about government over-regulation and a paternalistic approach to education policy that is perhaps doing more harm than good to higher education. These issues are exacerbated in the unique environment of a Catholic university in the Kimberley. One may ask, and we shall commit to further research, whether the standardisation of teaching qualifications, student assessments and curricula are helping or harming a university in a context that is far away from Canberra? It is perhaps worth remembering that in late medieval times, when universities were first founded, they were independent of governments, just as the Churches were similarly independent. One may ask then, in our current context, what is the best balance of accountability to government to ensure standards with the autonomy needed to best serve the university’s students?

**God**

As we have seen above, a Catholic university is committed to both God and people. That point may seem obvious until we ask the crucial question, “What sort of God and what sort of people are we conceiving?” A university based on faith in a god of unreason and pure will, a god who despises people and a god who is ethically unconcerned, would be an institution dedicated to self-seeking
profit, disrespect, and exploitation of students, a neglect of students’ traditions and a coercive approach to knowledge and values.

Instead, a Catholic university is based on a God who is pure goodness, a God who affirms and loves his people. As pointed out by Archbishop Costelloe (2013, 3), a Catholic university is explicitly committed to a God who, “is a creating God, a God who is deeply committed to and involved in the world and its history, a God who created human beings as the high point of his creative activity.” This is a God who loves his people so much that he sent them his only divine son to save them (John 3:16). That is, the God to which a Catholic university is dedicated is a God of love and compassion, a God who is on the side of human beings, and who loves people.

As pointed out by Pope Benedict in his Regensburg Address, the Catholic God is a God of reasonableness and in fact, this God is reason itself as its creator. This God thus, is a God who serves people not through coerciveness but through persuasion and a respect of free will.

In addition, a Catholic university is founded upon the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, which, among other things, affirms the dignity of all people, being created as they are in the image and likeness of God (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, n4; Genesis 1:26-27).

Thus, a Catholic university is dedicated to serving people as inherently valuable in themselves. It seeks not to coerce or force them into dogmatic knowledge, but instead seems to form them into personal understanding with respect to their free will and their background cultures. Such a university reaches out to students not for selfish gain but for the mission of sharing God’s love and for sharing the values of God himself as ethical, good, wise and reasonable.

It should be emphasised then, that the Catholic university’s mission to, and affirmation of, Aboriginal people is not just a matter of law or of academic interest. Instead, the university’s mission is rooted in deep Judeo-Christian values and a theological anthropology that sees all people as incomparably valuable, because they are made in the image of God (Gen 1:27). In other words,
for a Catholic university dedicated to Aboriginal people, the dignity of Aboriginal people is seen not just as a “lateral” or “horizontal” dignity based on the recognition of certain human rights or the existence of this or that law. Instead, this dignity is also seen “vertically” with Aboriginal people sharing in the universal human dignity that comes from their relationship with God, their creator and the one in whose image they exist.

The Catholic Intellectual Tradition

The Catholic Intellectual Tradition can be summarised by two perspectives. The first, from Pope John Paul II (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, n1) is that it brings together faith in God and faith in people by uniting “the search for truth, and the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth.” The second is from Bacon’s argument in The Advancement of Learning (1605) that, “God has, in fact, written two books, not just one. Of course, we are all familiar with the first book he wrote, namely Scripture. But he has written a second book called creation.”

In the light of what has been said about God and his relationship with people, I would argue that Bacon’s “Two Books of God” can (and must) be extended to Aboriginal culture, from which we learn much about God and humanity. After all, if it is through their culture that they experience God, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition should find, within Aboriginal experience and wisdom, fertile ground for augmenting and advancing that intellectual tradition.

To highlight some contributions Aboriginal wisdom and culture can make to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, the most important would be the integration of knowledge under the mantle of wisdom. As seen in Ex Corde Ecclesiae (n16, 20), an essential part of this tradition is integrating knowledge in the context of authentic interdisciplinarity which deals not with disintegrated items of knowledge, but with integrated truths, the union of truth and an appreciation for the meaning of truth. As we have seen above, this sort of integration by wisdom, which has been lost to so much scholarship today, can be aided by the Aboriginal Wisdom Tradition, in which it is natural to integrate
knowledge, law and cultural tradition. Moreover, the integration of faith and reason, which is a vital part of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, can be aided by Aboriginal tradition, which overcomes the tendency to separate them in compartmentalised Western scholarship, by uniting them.

Likewise, Aboriginal wisdom can reinforce the ethical dimension of Catholic education. As John Paul II points out (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, n18), the Catholic Intellectual Tradition embraces an approach to knowledge that uses knowledge to explore the meaning of truth and to pursue the ethical implications of such truth. Instead of the isolation of knowledge from ethics that is so common in Western scholarship today, Aboriginal wisdom provides a foundation from which we can realise Pope John Paul II’s vision for Catholic education today.

So, as has been seen above, Aboriginal wisdom can not only be informed by the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, but it can in turn inform, augment and advance that tradition. As Pope Leo XIII indicated (Aeterni Patris), Catholicism has always pursued the legitimate augmentation and perfection of the old with the new. In the Catholic Intellectual Tradition’s encounter with Aboriginal culture and wisdom, we may find the old being augmented and perfected not by the new, but by the older. That is, therefore, Catholic university education in the Kimberley is not only an act of charity. Instead, it means that by listening to Aboriginal people and learning from them, the whole Church can be served.

The mutuality and development of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition also bear upon the diversity and freedom of faculty and staff at a Catholic university. This issue would seem to be even more important given the rich diversity of staff at the University of Notre Dame’s Broome campus. It is vital to note, as explained above, that such diversity is not a burden on the university, but instead it is a valuable resource. After all, Catholic universities introduced the Western world to academic freedom when they were founded. That freedom, being freedom in truth and goodness is still part of the “intellectual DNA” of Catholic universities today (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, n29). Moreover, non-Catholic
faculty and staff, as we have seen above, have a valuable role to play at the Catholic university. They contribute significantly to its richness and fertility.

**Mission to Engage Culture**

An essential part of the mission of a Catholic university in the Kimberley is to engage the local Aboriginal culture. To do so authentically means going beyond the monoculturalist “classicism” and paternalism of the past. The reality is that a “classicist” mindset, as Lonergan called it (1994, xi, 326-27; 1974, 232), cannot communicate with Aboriginal culture, it can only impose its own categorical knowledge and values to Aboriginal people. Thus, to engage Aboriginal people, a Catholic university must rely upon an empirical notion of culture that allows for mutuality in cultural interactions and which fosters a transcultural perspective.

It was in such a light that Pope John Paul II wanted Catholic universities to learn the different cultures of the world. This means that the Church upholds a plurality of cultural traditions (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, n45). To be clear, though, Pope John Paul II did not endorse a value-free cultural relativism. Instead, he highlighted foundational parts of culture, such as, “the meaning of the human person,” human liberty and dignity, personal responsibility and orientation to the transcendent. He also emphasized, “the preeminent value of the family, the primary unit of every human culture.”

Importantly, Pope John Paul II’s approach is what we would call a “transcendental” approach to culture, rather than a “categorical” one. Transcendental values, which are universal, include human meaning, language, art, liberty, human dignity, law, and family. Classicism turns these transcendental values into categorical conceptions, insisting upon, “this language,” “this law,” “this system of government,” “this notion of family” and “this particular concept of dignity.”

It may be difficult for people to appreciate Pope John Paul II’s insight that there is one universal human culture (which pursues transcendent values), but
that there are many human cultures (that live out those transcendent values through the categories of their own local culture). I would respectfully suggest that often the problem is that when people are not genuinely rooted in their own culture, they may have trouble understanding another culture. Conversely, when people have a genuine understanding of their own culture, they are better able to appreciate the qualities of another culture. I would raise, for further consideration, the question of whether a lack of knowledge of people’s own home culture, and its foundations, may be one of the causes of people being unable to appreciate or understand Aboriginal culture.

With respect to a Catholic University in the Kimberley and its encounter with Aboriginal culture, it is vital to recall that Pope John Paul II does not conceive “inculturation” to be a matter of isolating people from their traditional culture and then initiating them into another culture. Rather, he sees Christian mission as upholding and fostering the authentic parts of a culture and advancing that culture from within by the Christian message.

In case such cultural interaction is seen as a harmful novelty, it is worth noting the history of the Catholic tradition. As Pope Paul VI observed (Kampala Homily), the early Church, despite its Jewish origins and early European history, was enriched and advanced by the contributions of Africans, which included Saint Augustine, one of the Church’s greatest teachers and most enduring influences. In the Middle Ages, Saint Thomas Aquinas made arguably the most important contribution to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition by engaging the thought of the pagan Greek Aristotle, the Muslim Averroes and the Jewish Maimonides (Nemo, 2006, 56). In case one cannot see value in engaging Aboriginal wisdom, law and tradition, it is worth being reminded that the Church has always benefitted and grown not just by sharing the message of Jesus, but also by learning from the cultures of the world that God has given us.

In this book, we have seen specific examples of that Aboriginal contribution to learning, which include the integration of knowledge, the foundations of
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ethics and a perspective on economy and leisure which could indeed be vital for the well-being of people in the looming post-industrial society.

Justice

As a campus dedicated to reconciliation and justice, the different forms of justice outlined above are important to the University. Thus, the University is bound to teach and live out the priority of persons over goods, to advocate fundamental fairness in relations and exchanges, to ensure the adequate distribution of resources based on people’s needs and to ensure that all can make their dignified contribution to society.

It is vital, though, to understand that in the Kimberley context, some principles of social justice are especially important. This point is clearer if we recall Noel Pearson’s point (2000) that welfare or justice programs that may be relevant or helpful in white society may be counter-productive or even harmful in Aboriginal contexts.

For a Catholic university in the Kimberley, then, a general concern for social issues should be complemented with a special concern for subsidiarity and the value of land/country for Aboriginal people. Recalling the relative failure of the Northern Territory Intervention and success of June Oscar’s initiatives in the Kimberley (Everingham 2017; Clarke 2016), it would seem that the University should be a strong advocate for subsidiarity, ensuring that Aboriginal people are enabled and empowered to make their own decisions, resolve their own problems and to take control of their futures.

This point segues into the value of land as a social concern for Aboriginal people. As Pope John Paul II observed (Alice Springs Address, n10), the dispossession of Aboriginal people from their land resulted in many, if not most, of the social problems suffered by Aboriginal people today. The deprivation of their land was analogous to the alienation of the Jewish people from theirs. Accordingly, in the spirit of Pope John Paul II’s argument, a key mission of the
University should be the advancement of Aboriginal land rights, upon which the realisation of other principles of social justice would depend.

Where, Why and What Sort of Campus?

As a last point, I would like first to ask the question of whether a Catholic University in the Kimberley would be an institution that exists for the education of Aboriginal people, or is it to be a campus for Aboriginal education?

Concretely, it may be proposed that it would be most cost-effective to send Aboriginal students to Perth or Sydney, and to house and educate them in the larger campuses of the University. I would agree that such a move would be more economically sound. However, it would seem clear that such fiscal responsibility could easily lead to the “mission bankruptcy” of which I wrote earlier. If students were taken physically out of their land, and alienated from their culture, they would find themselves intellectually dispossessed and overwhelmed by an unfamiliar cultural context. The University would find itself in the same place as other well-meaning universities in which, despite the best of intentions, Aboriginal students find themselves culturally dislocated when they are a distinct minority among non-Indigenous students. For that reason, a Catholic University in the Kimberley can educate students from within their culture and form them to the appropriate academic standards without compromising their Aboriginal identity. This mission is important not only for Kimberley locals, but also for Aboriginal students from other parts of Australia who would share a much greater cultural affinity for the Kimberley than for the cultures of the major cities. For this reason, I would also suggest that the Kimberley campus may have an untapped potential as a culturally supportive campus for indigenous students from Torres Strait, Melanesia, South Asia or other regions.

Another perspective on this issue comes from another context in which I discussed the concept of “distance education” (2009, 15). That is, if we consider that traditional models of education see a student taken from their community
and educated elsewhere, a conceptual question arises. “Wherein lies the ‘distance’ in distance education? Is the ‘distance’ between the student and the institution, or between the student and the community one serves or will serve?” That is, we may be familiar with the idea of distance education as creating physical “distance” between a student and their institution. However, “onsite” education can create “distance” between a student and his or her community. This “distance” can be geographical, but it can also be cultural distance or distance from family.

I would suggest then, that education of Aboriginal students can be analogous to the education of seminary students as explained by Cartwright (2014, 103-4),

... distance is inevitable in seminary education. It is a matter of choosing which distance is preferable, distance from faculty (online education) or distance from one’s in-context community (residential education). The online student has the disadvantage of distance with a faculty member, while having a tremendous advantage of proximity to his or her community.

In the Kimberley context, the advantage of a local campus, even the need for one, is to ensure that Aboriginal students as well as academic and other staff, can experience a high standard of higher education without becoming separated, or “distant” from their culture, family, land or community.

The second pressing question is whether a Catholic university in the Kimberley should be vocationally-oriented and technical, with the aim of producing job-ready graduates? Alternatively, should it be committed to a liberal arts education of students in the wisdom of their culture? That question relates to whether a university intends to help students fit in with another culture, or to help students advance their own culture.

On the one hand, we have the seminal vision of Booker T. Washington (1901), whose educational vision saw numerous African-Americans fitted for vocations that provided stable paid employment in American society. On the other hand, there is Pope John Paul II’s emphasis on education for wisdom (Ex
Corde Ecclesiae). With so much poverty among Aboriginal people, it may seem that Washington’s vision may be the better one.

I would argue, though, that the circumstances of African-Americans and Australian Aboriginal people are different and warrant consideration. In the case of African-Americans, they were people who were irretrievably alienated from their homelands and committed, justly or unjustly, to participating in the society of the United States. For them, there was little opportunity other than to adapt to the dominant culture. That reality is one cause of ongoing social ills affecting African-Americans today. But this reality did limit their ability, at the time, to recover the culture of their forebears. As Washington realised at the time, the best advancement for African-Americans was economic security.

Aboriginal Australians, however, despite numerous injustices, still live in or are relatively close to their land and even though their culture has been harmed, it still exists and can be recovered, renewed and advanced. Given the Church’s attitude towards culture, it would seem clear that even if a number of students were to choose vocational degrees, a Catholic University in the Kimberley should also be committed to a liberal arts education that forms students in the richness of their culture. At the very least, this should form the basis for the core curriculum on campus. On all three campuses of the University of Notre Dame Australia, students are required to take studies in philosophy, ethics, and theology. I would suggest that this core curriculum be more directly and explicitly Aboriginal in its orientation. I have noted that the core curriculum course in theology, “Spirituality and Challenges of Reconciliation,” has recently become more Aboriginal in its language, symbolism, understanding of history and the methodology of teaching. Such an approach should also be taken to philosophy and ethics. That is, for philosophy, in addition to the great Western thinkers, students should be initiated into Aboriginal wisdom and ways of thinking. For ethics, in addition to the common ethical theories taught at Western universities, students would be formed in the Kimberley way of ethics.
not being a matter of legalism, punishment or some other moral calculus, but as the setting right of the spirit.

**Conclusion**

In concluding this work, it would seem that the true enemy of Aboriginal people and the mission of a Catholic University in the Kimberley is paternalism. For white people such as this author, it would seem that ridding oneself of paternalism is the key to unlocking a respect for cultures, an appreciation of the concrete needs of people, and the ability not only to teach people of other cultures, but also to be taught by them. At the same time, a mindset like this is also beneficial; by having one apply an empirical notion of culture to another culture, one is better equipped to understand one’s own culture.

This book has many omissions which are neither intentional nor meant to slight any other concerns. This book is the work of a white Catholic theologian who has worked to learn about the people of the Kimberley, the mission of a Catholic university there, and who has tried to explain to people why the University exists in the Kimberley, why it is so important and what its mission, potential, and nature should be.

I am mindful that this book has left one significant gap which demands more research, that of the nature, history, and future of reconciliation. This is a fundamental part of a Catholic University in the Kimberley and I trust that the question will be dealt with in a future publication.
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