

The End of the Catholic University:

The exaggerated demise and future promise of Catholic Higher Education

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What might it mean to speak of the end of the Catholic university? After all, by “end” one might be referring to the last thing, the *eschaton*; so perhaps you should settle in for an evening of Jeremiads bewailing the sad fate of the Catholic university and proclaiming its imminent demise. Considering where we are assembled this evening, and more to the point, considering who signs my paychecks, that would be a troubling prospect indeed. Or perhaps one might speak of “end” in the sense of goal or intended purpose: the *telos*. In that case we are in for a talk about the proper *aim* of the Catholic university.

Both of these senses of the term have been in play in the last few years in public discourse about Catholic higher education. Books and articles have been written suggesting that Catholic universities might be hurtling headlong toward their demise, and a great deal of ink has been expended on the question of the mission and identity of such

universities. For my part, I think these two senses of the “end” of the Catholic university do not comprise two questions, but rather two aspects of the very large question of the nature and destiny of Catholic higher education. So I propose this evening to reflect on the enterprise of the Catholic university through the interplay of the two meanings of the term. First: are we to expect the imminent end, the *eschaton*, of the Catholic university? And second: what is the end, the purpose, the *telos*, of the Catholic university?

Perspective

As with any inquiry, the starting point is crucial. And so I begin with a disclaimer and a bit of truth in advertising. First the disclaimer. Many people have written many fine and useful words about the history and philosophy of education, of higher education, of Catholic education, and of Catholic higher education. I am not one of them. I am not a scholar of higher education or of Catholic higher education, nor a historian of universities; I have never published or taught on this topic. This could be a very short lecture.

Next, the truth in advertising: I approach these questions from two sets of dual perspectives. First, I occupy the standpoints of both a professional historian of early Christian theology and a teacher/administrator in a Catholic university. These roles translate very roughly into the equivalents of theorist and practitioner. It has been said that when art critics get together, they speak of genre, style, form, influence, and so on, whereas when painters get together they talk about where to buy the best turpentine. Similarly, I can approach this subject as a matter of intellectual and theoretical interest or as a matter of my livelihood. In truth, I deal more in turpentine than in higher criticism,

and I hope this means that whatever theoretical reflections I might produce are not too abstract, but are informed and tempered by the lived reality of the practice of Catholic higher education.

Second, I am simultaneously an insider and an outsider. I am a card carrying member of the Anglican communion, but have been involved at some level with Roman Catholic higher education for nearly twenty years now, long enough to have supplanted my “outsider” status with at least honorary insider status—but more importantly, long enough to have internalized a sense of sharing in the mission of Catholic higher education in America. When I first entered the University of Notre Dame as a doctoral student in 1983 I adopted something like the attitude of a houseguest: careful not to offend my hosts, anxious not to leave any messes, and politely distant from private family squabbles. That attitude, as it happens, was misplaced—I found, for example, that my views on family squabbles were eagerly solicited, and that no one saw me as an outsider—and in any case, by now I am certainly a full-fledged member of the household, expected to cook meals, do laundry, and, in the last couple of years, mind the children.

End-Time Prophecies

Death By Secularization

I don't want this to descend into an exercise in autobiography, but if you will indulge me briefly, my own initial experience of Catholic higher education is as good a place as any to begin. I entered the graduate theology department of one of America's preeminent Catholic universities and found there an immediate welcome and a remarkable working environment. It was an ecumenical faculty and student body: Catholics, both lay and ordained, worked side by side with Lutherans, Methodists, Mennonites, Jews and Buddhists. No one—no one in the department at least—regarded this as the least bit odd or radical or experimental; it was simply the way theology had to be done if it was going to be true to itself.

I would not know until a few years in, innocent that I was, that behind the congenial academic scene, storm clouds had been brewing. Some of the university's constituents, including some irritable members of other academic departments, had been hoisting warning signals, or, to use a better image, blasting warning trumpets. The Theology department, they said, was not "Catholic" enough. It was losing its Catholic identity; it was not teaching students the Catholic faith; it allowed views to be maintained that were at odds with those of the *magisterium*, the teaching office of the church. It employed—heaven forefend! —a Methodist and a Mennonite to teach ethics. And so on. The department chairman at the time had been given the task of strengthening Catholic identity, and he did so by, among other things, attempting to recruit and hire more Catholic faculty. Academe being what it is, many non-Catholics on the faculty saw in moves like this the death-knell of the scholarly synergy that had made the department such a dynamic and creative place. Others pointed out a deep hypocrisy: was it really

better that a department should hire on the basis of the incidental fact of baptism, when in truth a deeply committed Lutheran or Anglican might be just as sympathetic, or more sympathetic, to the Roman Catholic theological tradition?

So people left. Two of the most prominent scholars on the faculty—both theologically conservative Protestants—accepted prestigious endowed chairs elsewhere. Their departure caused some ripples, but they were replaced, with Catholic faculty. Yet the volume of criticism regularly directed at the theology department did not diminish greatly. And ironically, one of those who left has since converted to Catholicism.

This little vignette presents a common theme, repeated daily in today's Catholic colleges and universities. Departments of Theology and Religious Studies especially though not exclusively—because of their subject matter—are reluctant poster children for what is regarded in some quarters as a pervasive decline in Catholic higher education. For some observers—with varying degrees of historical consciousness and rationality—many Catholic colleges and universities have embarked on a path that, left unblocked, will lead inexorably to a loss of Catholic identity, thence into secularization and the gradual end of a distinctively Catholic university. Catholic colleges and universities, some fear, will soon differ from their secular counterparts only in name.

Fears of this kind are not at all unfounded. Those who harbor them can appeal to a ready example in the history of American higher education. In his superb book *The Soul of the American University*, George Marsden (by the way, an evangelical Protestant teaching history at a Catholic university) traces the history of many of America's elite universities, among them Harvard and Yale, and even the state universities of Michigan and California, from their profoundly religious origins to their current secular orientation.

The path taken was a subtle and gradual one, moving from overtly sectarian origins, rigid curricula and standards of orthodoxy, mandatory chapel attendance, and so on, through a gritty tumbler of American pluralism, democracy and liberal theology that smoothed away the sharp edges of difference. Eventually, of course, the demands of democracy and pluralism came to outweigh those of religious fidelity. Thus the history of university education in America has had a curiously ironic outcome: the Protestant establishment that dominated the American university from its beginning to its heyday in the late nineteenth century turned out in retrospect to have been the vanguard of a movement that brought forth a wholly secularized academy, from which religious perspectives are ruled out as a matter of course. Some universities, as a polite tip of the hat to their religious origins, have retained divinity schools as quasi-independent entities. Outside of such divinity schools, most American academics take it for granted that overtly religious discourse has no place in the college classroom. If it is treated at all, religion may be examined in a self-consciously value-neutral comparative exercise, or perhaps as a specimen under the microscope of the social scientist for its social, political or psychological utility, or lack thereof. But the notion that religious ideas might be weighed seriously as truth claims, or that their explanatory value might be seriously debated in the classroom, is largely out of bounds in the secular academy; matters of religion are relegated to the realm of private opinion and taste.

James Burtchaell, in his book *The Fading of the Light*, asserts that many American Catholic colleges and universities are now beginning to slide down the slippery slope to secularity taken by Harvard, Yale, and scores of others. In their quest to play in the big leagues of American higher education, some Catholic institutions have sold their

birthright for the thin pottage of academic respectability, forfeiting along the way their deep roots in the Catholic faith. The historian Philip Gleason, with less rhetorical flair but more historical acumen, makes a similar case in his excellent work *Contending With Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (1995). For him, it is simply a historical datum that in higher education “Americanization” has, de facto, meant secularization, and, ultimately, disintegration in its most literal sense.

So one matter before us is the question whether the Catholic university now faces its demise—as a distinctive institution—as the ironic price of having become part of the ebb and flow of America’s higher education culture. Virtually all critiques of Catholic higher education, and not only from what might be called the “conservative” side, see this as a clear and present danger, if not as a *fait accompli*. Given what has happened to many formerly Protestant colleges, it is certainly not out of place to wonder whether the day will soon be at hand when Loyola and Tulane will be distinguishable only by their architecture (and their tuition), rather than by their institutional commitments. So in the minds of some, the Catholic university faces what one might call “death by incremental secularization.”

Death by Success

There are other, related reasons to wonder whether we might be seeing the beginning of the end of Catholic universities. One of them has to do with the intimate connection between the rise of American Catholic higher education and the changing social location of American Roman Catholics. Catholics in the nineteenth century were very much outside the mainstream of American higher education. Partly this was a

function of populations. In 1800 there were roughly 50,000 Catholics in the United States, approximately one percent of the population.¹ Through the nineteenth century, Catholic colleges were small, clerically-controlled schools that were square pegs to the round holes of the American educational scene. Typically they offered six and seven year programs, for boys only, and the curricula featured a capstone year of Thomistic philosophical study. They were plagued by enrollment shortages.

Thanks largely to immense immigration, and intensive procreation, by 1920 the American Catholic population had grown to about eighteen million, or from one percent to around one-sixth of the American population, and one-third of its churchgoers. By the 1890s, a small wealthy Catholic elite had begun to emerge, and its presence was felt in increased numbers of Catholic students in elite eastern schools. To illustrate, Harvard had thirty-three Catholics enrolled in 1881, 300 in 1894, and 480 in 1907.²

These elites were the exception, however. Despite their formidable numerical gain, most nineteenth and early twentieth century Catholics were members of the working-class or of the lower middle class, while Protestants by and large controlled the worlds of business and education.

Even where poverty did not restrict access, immigrant Catholic culture did not promote high educational achievement. Most Catholics wanted their children to gain English language ability, technical skills that led to employment, and the continued transmission and preservation of their ethnic and religious values. Such pragmatic and insular educational goals were not the same as the lofty ideal of the liberal arts or the expansion of knowledge through scientific research—conceptions that undergirded successful American universities in those same years.

The founding of the Catholic University of America in 1889 (about which more later) represented a fairly bold attempt by the American bishops to bring Catholic education into alignment with the norms of American higher education—to be a truly *American* Catholic university instead of an immigrant outpost. But tellingly, when the first rector, Bishop John Keane, sought faculty for the new university, he could not find any appropriately educated American Catholics to fill his teaching positions, and had to hire six foreign-born Catholics and two American converts. And remember, this was at a time when several xenophobic groups were peddling the slogan of “no popery” and alleging that foreigners dominated Catholic circles. The suspicion that being Catholic was inimical to being American loomed over the enterprise of Catholic higher education.

The defensive mindset that Catholics often felt compelled to adopt worked itself out in a pronounced tendency to remain aloof from American intellectual culture, repeating doctrinal formulae learned from theological textbooks and shunning higher education. As late as 1947 Cardinal Cushing of Boston could remark that he knew no one in the American Catholic hierarchy whose parents had a college degree.³ Even the mottos and slogans of some Catholic universities reflect the apologetic need to reflect American patriotism: Notre Dame has “God, Country, Notre Dame,” and our own seal at Loyola University New Orleans bears the words “*Deo et Patriae*”—for God and Country.

Catholics were still a highly suspect breed in American higher education in the 1950s, when the staunchly Catholic, or at least staunch, William F. Buckley, wrote his famous *God and Man at Yale* (1951). Buckley, who had the bad manners to suggest that his alma mater had banished Christianity from its academic discourse, was roundly criticized by the (uniformly Protestant) Ivy League establishment of his day. Prominent

among the criticisms was that Buckley, as a Catholic, was simply not equipped to comprehend the tolerant and democratic values of America. Catholics, we all know, were the sorts who propped up monarchies, both political and ecclesial; they feared tolerance and progress, and understood religion only in its authoritarian manifestation. One reviewer even suggested rather snootily that Buckley would have done better to matriculate at Fordham!⁴ To some in the educational elite, Catholic colleges and universities were places whose halls and stairwells were redolent of garlic, where the sons and daughters of immigrants, new to the splendors of American democracy, nibbled furtively at their salami as they learned tax accounting, while priests ensured that no attacks of religious open-mindedness would disturb their dogmatic slumbers.

It seems hard to imagine such an attitude on today's American scene, when Catholics have reached such a social zenith that some have even become Republicans. Some of my Catholic colleagues here have, I am reliably told, walked the ivied halls of Harvard with relative impunity. One of my recent students, a Catholic, is now pursuing joint degrees in Harvard's Divinity School and its School of Government, named, by the way, after John F. Kennedy. It is a new world indeed. Georgetown and Boston College are certainly establishment institutions; and Notre Dame is an American icon, at least when the football team is winning.

In fact, Catholic colleges and universities exploded in number, size and quality from the end of the Second World War into the 1960s. The combination of the war experience (with its unifying effect) and the educational empowerment of many Catholics by the G.I Bill of Rights, along with a number of social and political factors (including the growing power of labor unions), led to a major social advance by American Catholics

beginning in the late 1940s. John Kennedy's election to the presidency in 1960 represented not the high water mark, but only a step along the path of Catholic ascendancy. Astonishingly, polling data from the late 60s and early 70s revealed that Catholics outranked Protestants economically!⁵ The rising tide has both borne along and been generated by Catholic higher education. Catholic colleges and universities benefited from ballooning post-war enrollments, as well as from the largesse of their increasingly affluent constituencies. Further, the great *aggiornamento*, the bringing up to date, of the Roman Catholic Church that was the hallmark of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) urged, among many other things, that Catholics must live and act decisively in the world, and not be captive to a defensive, isolationist mindset with respect to society. Standing on the cultural or political sidelines, then, is no longer a reality, or even an option, for Catholics. And in the latter half of the twentieth century, Catholic universities became major players.

So: Catholics have arrived, and the needs for Catholic universities to bear the torch of a marginalized immigrant group, or to inoculate students against the evils of modernity, or to open the way to upward mobility for their constituents, have happily passed. Perhaps—dare we say it?—Catholic universities have reached their end, their goal. And having *reached* their end, might it be that they are about to *come to* an end? Have they worked themselves out of a job? Are they dead then, their duty all ended? After all, in many respects Catholic universities today represent simply one more choice, one more “brand,” in the vast marketplace of American higher education. Certainly one could infer this from enrollment patterns; more and more students in these colleges and universities come from non-Catholic backgrounds--61.5%, according to a 1991 report of

the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. On the other side, economically disadvantaged, or just plain frugal, Catholic students are likely to avail themselves of the subsidized tuitions of state universities, while as always many high-achieving and wealthy Catholic students opt to enroll at so-called elite secular universities. As long ago as 1965 a writer in the pages of *Commonweal* said, “It seems to me that the time has arrived to raise the question whether the Catholic Church in the United States as an institution, ought to start a massive withdrawal from the business of higher education.”⁶ Perhaps, then, calls for a reassertion of “Catholic identity” are merely whistling in the graveyard of obsolescence. Maybe it is better simply to shrug, and to admit wistfully and without rancor that the day has passed when it is meaningful or useful for a university to identify itself as Catholic, and that a new historical moment lies just ahead.

Death by Authoritarianism

Yet another reason has recently arisen to cause some to despair over the fate of Catholic colleges and universities, and this not from the side of nervous conservatives, nor of jaded pragmatists. Certain juridical aspects of the apostolic constitution on Catholic universities *Ex corde ecclesiae* (From the Heart of the Church) promulgated by John Paul II in 1990, have been seen by not a few as an attempt by the Roman Catholic ecclesiastical hierarchy to exert close control over the intellectual life of American Catholic colleges and universities. This document calls for more participation by bishops in the life of Catholic universities, and while it explicitly recognizes academic freedom (29), the “norms” of the document leave many in the academic community more than a little nervous. Some see in the American implementation of *Ex corde* the potential death

of the kind of free inquiry that must characterize a university, and the rise of an intolerant, censorious atmosphere. The end result, they fear, would be craven institutions whose integrity is compromised, who would be perceived in academe as simply parroting dogma rather than engaging in authentic dialogue. Surely such institutions would soon lose any claim to be true universities.

Again, such fears are not without foundation in the history of Catholic education. Quite apart from such infamous and classic episodes as the suppression of Galileo in 1633, the American scene has its share of cautionary tales. Near the end of the nineteenth century, there was a very positive, optimistic, forward-looking Catholic voice within American higher education. The Catholic University of America, mentioned earlier, was in a profound sense the brainchild of men within a movement that was dubbed “Americanist.” In a nutshell, Americanist Catholics wanted to synthesize Catholic teaching with the sort of intellectual openness and pluralism that was typical of American universities. Their hope was that one could adhere to Catholic tradition while remaining open to the new vistas being laid out by science and biblical criticism, and while imbibing something of the spirit of tolerance that characterized liberal culture.

Scholars like Fr. Edwin Pace of Catholic University and Fr. John Zahm of Notre Dame epitomized this new spirit. Pace taught in the racy new field of experimental psychology, in which he held a doctorate, and Zahm in 1896 wrote a book entitled *Evolution and Dogma*, in which he argued that no real conflict existed between science and religion. The so-called Americanists were a minority in American Catholic circles, and their brand of Catholic education was not popular among conservatives. Kept duly abreast of developments by conservative American Catholics—and this before the advent

of fax machines—Pope Leo XIII promulgated an encyclical to the American church in 1895, pointedly warning that the American model of separation of church and state should not be seen as normative or desirable. In the same year he removed Msgr. Denis O’Connell, rector of the North American College in Rome, and in the next year (1896) he removed Bishop Keane from rectorship of the Catholic University of America. The rout was on. To avoid formal condemnation, Fr. Zahm withdrew his book on evolution in 1898. In 1899 Leo XIII issued *Testem benevolentiae*, which warned specifically against errors being bandied about in the United States.

Soon thereafter, Leo’s successor Pius X in 1907 (*Pacendi dominici gregis*) condemned a loose ensemble of ideas he labeled the heresy of modernism, and established limits on scholarship, especially on the scholarly study of the Bible and attempts to reconcile science and religion. At Catholic University Professor Henry Poels was dismissed because he held to a multi-authorial theory of the Pentateuch, which was emerging as, and has remained, the scholarly consensus. His view contradicted that of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, however, and he was offered the chance to sign an oath stating not only that he would not *teach* such a view, but also that he would not *hold* such a view. Obviously no scholar could sign such an oath in good conscience, and so Poels was sent packing. Few dared come to his defense, and thereafter followed a small avalanche of repudiations by faculty of views that might have been open to charges of modernism.⁷

This decade or so of confrontation and crisis ushered in roughly fifty years of intellectual stagnation in American Catholic intellectual life. So let no one be mistaken: when many present-day American Catholic scholars seem nervous about the

implementation of a papal decree on universities that involves an oath and episcopal oversight, they are not being reactionary or reflexively anti-authoritarian; they are simply being attentive to the narrative of actions that ruined lives, wrecked careers, and for a time rendered American Catholic intellectual life moribund. It is a narrative replete with martyrs.

A Greatly Exaggerated Demise

We have looked at some prophecies of the end: the Catholic university might prove to be on the slippery slope to death by secularization; it may have fallen victim to its own success and become merely vestigial; or it could at this moment be poised on the verge of a new outbreak of authoritarianism that will eviscerate its credibility as a university. I say no, no, and no. Remarkably, I find myself almost preternaturally calm in the face of all these purported catastrophes. Indeed, rumors of the imminent or realized demise of the Catholic university have been greatly exaggerated.

The Persistence of the Saeculum

The threat of secularism is ubiquitous in the history of Christian thought. You cannot swing the historian's equivalent of a dead cat without smacking into someone in some epoch pointing a finger at someone else who was about to throw in his lot with the pagans. In various forms, such a threat has always loomed over any enterprise that would provide education to Christians. Tertullian, a catechist of Carthage at the end of the second century, a time when Christians were first becoming socially visible in the Roman Empire, posed a classic rhetorical question: "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the

academy with the church?”⁸ His answer, for rhetorical purposes at least, was decidedly negative: the Christian Gospel (Jerusalem) had nothing whatever to do with pagan wisdom (Athens); dabbling in pre-Christian philosophy was tantamount to heresy, indeed was the root of *all* heresy. For Tertullian, once one had found the Gospel truth, no further seeking after truth was needed.

By contrast, his near-contemporary in Alexandria, Origen, struggled mightily to affirm that Athens—the world of pagan learning, and specifically of Platonic philosophy—had much indeed to do with Jerusalem, the font of the Church’s wisdom. For him, Christianity had much to gain from pre-Christian and non-Christian culture, and indeed needed its learning. For the record: neither Tertullian nor Origen, arguably the two most influential Christian thinkers prior to the fourth century, have been canonized.

The enterprise of Christian education has always lived in this tension. To seek and find truth, Catholic scholars in every age have had to make use of pagan knowledge. From earliest times, and certainly at the Catholic foundations of the European university, the truth of pagan findings in mathematics, music, geometry, and history was taken for granted. The legacies of Aristotle, Galen, Pythagoras, and Xenophon were givens; the task, always, was to relate Christian truth to these data. One is tempted to say that the Catholic university has always lain poised between Athens and Jerusalem. But in truth, while the Catholic university owes its identity and its deepest loyalties to Jerusalem, it is located decidedly in Athens; its end, as Cardinal Newman argued in the nineteenth century, is the pursuit of universal knowledge. I have been told, annoyingly often, that on the genetic level, humans and chimpanzees are more than 98% identical. The longer I live, the more this has the intuitive ring of truth about it. But granting that this is so,

something similar is true about Catholic and secular universities. On most levels having to do with teaching and learning, with the real meat and potatoes of academe, there is little difference at all between a Catholic university and any other. We have at least a 98% genetic similarity. There is to my knowledge no Catholic organic chemistry, nor Catholic biology or grammar. I feel certain that an astronaut on the launch pad would draw very little comfort from the thought that his or her weight-to-fuel ratio had been calculated according to a different, and distinctively Catholic, form of mathematics.

It is certainly true that radical secularism of the modern stripe is a new element, and that the *saeculum* of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries holds possibilities of thematic godlessness undreamt of by ancient or medieval Christian writers. This should not be lightly dismissed. But the *saeculum* itself, this world in its brokenness and its beauty, is perennial; as long as Christians have sought to be educated, they have faced the danger of adopting or absorbing the non-Christian presuppositions of the surrounding world. Just as my colleagues here at Loyola muck about with retroviruses and unstable compounds, so all scholars regularly handle ideas that can be hazardous. But learning can take place in no other way. Higher education is inherently a dangerous business, because we are pledged to seek truth, and truth often lurks in scary places. But I see no reason to suppose that this historical moment is more propitious than all others for the secularization of a Catholic university.

Further, we must remember that the rapid flight into secularity of formerly Christian American universities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was fueled by a unique set of historical circumstances. The burgeoning of state-sponsored land grant universities after the Civil War created a vast new pool of secular institutions geared to

science and technology, in aid of the great push toward an industrialized American economy. Training largely supplanted moral development as the main desideratum of public higher education. And on the private side, personal fortunes made possible the founding of new universities like Johns Hopkins, Chicago, and Stanford, all based on new educational theories and all staunchly secular in outlook. Leaders like Charles Eliot, president of Harvard from 1869-1909, and Andrew White of Cornell stressed curricula and methods that aimed purely at intellectual development and moved well clear of moral or religious matters. Grant moneys from the big philanthropic foundations like Carnegie were strictly withheld from religiously affiliated colleges and universities. It takes no rocket scientist to ascertain the reason for what can only be described as a stampede of hundreds of colleges and universities to throw off their Protestant denominational ties in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁹ Certainly two constants of the *saeculum* in any age are fashion and money—but I doubt that appeals to either can seduce today’s successful Catholic universities into abandoning their Catholic identity.

The Freedom to Be a University

And what of the notion that Catholic universities might pass on because they have outlived their socio-political utility? As noted earlier, Catholic colleges and universities in America have proved to be a remarkable success story. Spared—partly due to the very cultural marginality that plagued them—from the conformist pressures that moved much of American higher education in an irreversibly secular direction, they have maintained a distinctive and highly visible presence. It is unalterably true that Catholics have arrived:

socially, politically, and economically. But this does not mean that the Catholic university has reached its end, its *eschaton*. Rather, freed from the onerous burden of bearing the torch for a marginalized group, it has been freed to pursue its end, its *telos*. Catholic colleges and universities have not, for a long time now, been outposts of an immigrant church or of a persecuted religion. Catholicism, as Will Herberg pointed out many years ago in his *Catholic, Protestant, Jew*, has become integrated into the vast civil religion of America. Catholic universities (the successful ones, at least) have substantial financial endowments, with professionalized development and marketing operations. They are, in a word, secure, and are now free to lay aside defensive habits of mind and embark on a quest for a deepened sense of identity and mission.

The Failure of Authoritarianism

So, first, I am not sympathetic to the notion that Catholic universities are on their deathbed, or even experiencing the sniffles, from the disease of secularism. And second, I see the success of these universities as simply the end of one chapter and the beginning of a new one, whose writing will be filled with interesting twists and turns. And while I regard it as the most serious impediment to the future success of Catholic universities, I do not see authoritarian intervention as bringing about their end—in either sense of that term.

I feel the pain of my Catholic friends and colleagues here and around the world, some of whom have personally known those who have been censured or condemned. At the same time, we might remember the old saw that generals are always fighting the last war. At the risk of offending some of my Roman Catholic colleagues, it seems to me that

some Catholic academics respond to decrees from Rome or from the American bishops as if they expect to see Pius X, or maybe Torquemada, around the next corner. I am unable to share too much of this anxiety, though I hastily admit to never having been in a position to feel it.

The tides of authoritarianism rise and fall through the ages, but they have shown a marked inability to stop the advance of knowledge. As I wrote these remarks I was in the Mississippi woods, sitting on the porch of a generous friend's cabin, staring at a flowing stream just below. The stream was not especially mighty; it gurgled instead of roaring. Yet all along the visible stretch of water lay evidence of very impressive tree falls and cliff erosion: loud, fearsome events that obstructed the course of the stream, that threatened to stop its progress. Yet without fail the stream found its way around; it carved its own channels and resumed its way. The history of intellectual life is analogous; the list of those whose ideas have been rejected or condemned by the voices of authority is long and distinguished. Yet with a quiet persistence, this great river has worked its way through logjams and cave-ins, and has pursued its persistent course toward truth. And while no one should doubt for a moment the impact or gravity of these impediments, they should not cause us to despair over the long-term fate of the project of Catholic higher education.

The Way Forward, and Not

What might Catholic identity mean for the beginning of this third millennium? American Catholic higher education has come of age. And much of the unease, the

disquiet, the sense of casting about for a sense of identity is analogous to the human crisis of early adulthood. Earlier forms of life have been left behind: the restrictive but comforting authority structures of childhood, and the gawky fits and starts of adolescence with its tragicomic need to be both a distinctive individual and a member of an “in” group. For Catholic colleges and universities and those who support them, a kind of institutional adulthood has come, and with it the need to cast aside mental habits of childhood and adolescence. We, and I say “we” advisedly, can be both heirs to the Catholic intellectual tradition and educational grown-ups. So I propose that having gotten beyond a juvenile, overweening dependence on external authority, as well as an adolescent need constantly to define ourselves with markers of difference or tribal allegiance, we should have our own *aggiornamento*, and go forward with wisdom and self-confidence. Like well-integrated adults, we can be at peace with the narrative that has constituted us—even treasure it—but not be bound by it. So by way of wrapping this all up, I would like to suggest a few markers of a university come of age.

False and True Conservatism

The first of these is an informed conservatism. The term conservative does not bother me; it suggests that we find something in life worth hanging on to. But it has often been observed that what is usually labeled “conservatism” in a tradition aims not so much to recover the foundational or original impetus, but rather to recapture a prior (usually relatively recent) cultural moment. I can illustrate this from my own experiences, both ecclesial and educational. My own church, the Episcopal Church, adopted a revised Book of Common Prayer in 1976. The howls from some quarters were

so loud that their echoes still resound a quarter century later. But in fact the changes, except for an abandonment of Elizabethan English, were largely aimed at recovering much earlier liturgical forms going back to the ancient Christian Church. So the so-called innovators were championing forms of worship going back to deep roots in the apostolic era, while the “conservatives” lobbied for a return to the language and customs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and at bottom wanted back the church of their own youth.

Here at Loyola I played host to a meeting some years ago, and during a question and answer session a man who had sent some of his children to Loyola stood and declared, finger wagging, that his children had graduated from this university with no teaching whatsoever in the Catholic faith. From this it was only a small jump into a full-fledged diatribe about the state of theology and religious studies in today’s Catholic universities. As it happens, five years before this tirade, I had taught his son a semester-long honors course during which we covered in excruciating detail the development of Christian orthodoxy, including a detailed historical and doctrinal study of the first four ecumenical councils and the doctrines of God, the Trinity, and Christ. As I watched this performance I was too busy hoisting my jaw from the floor to register a protest, but I went home wondering how someone could dare to tell such an egregious whopper in public, especially about a university he allegedly supported. But on reflection I realized that from his perspective, the fact that his son had been taught some of the most fundamental doctrines of the Catholic faith—in considerable depth and very entertainingly, I might add—was quite off the point. He had not been taught the cherished forms of piety enshrined in his father’s memory. It was not that I had failed to

teach Catholicism, it was that I had failed to reproduce a particular set of artifacts from Catholic culture.

Similarly, some calls for “re-Catholicizing” Catholic colleges and universities hold as their implicit ideal a cultural artifact of the American nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whether the Baltimore Catechism or a twelve-hour requirement in Thomistic philosophy. Inevitably these calls, however sincere their motivation, come off as sectarian, and driven by concerns that may or may not have much to do with the dynamics of Christian faith.

It seems to me that the way forward for Catholic universities will be marked not by a reflexive, romanticized, and ultimately myopic conservatism that attaches itself to comforting cultural forms, but rather by a deep, critical, searching conservatism that seeks unrelentingly for the inner dynamism that motivates the search for truth. A true conservatism could rediscover the profound diversity and multivocality that characterized the earliest Christian communities. It might even take us back continually to the one from whom Christians take their name and identity: a faithful Jew who, while living faithfully within his tradition, always asked the daring, uncomfortable critical question, always laid bare what lurked beneath conventional pieties and convenient labels.

Catholicity of Education

The second marker of a university come of age is a mature catholicity. While I do not recommend the use of Catholic ecclesiology as a general method or principle to analyze Catholic higher education, I do think that some principles taken from St. Augustine’s fourth-century dispute with the Donatists may be apposite. The Donatists

were the forerunners of a familiar type: they thought themselves to be the last of the true Catholics, and it is no exaggeration but a simple statement of the case that they thought themselves, in fact, more Catholic than the pope.¹⁰ The Church, they thought and taught, must be a community of true and pure believers, characterized by probity of life, and should exclude those whose lives and actions seemed to compromise the faith. So, for example, the sacraments were not legitimate if administered by an unworthy priest. To them, the church was a small ark of salvation, bearing the community of the saved, of the true believers, as its precious cargo on the seas of sinful humanity. Against such views, St. Augustine forcefully asserted that this sectarian view of the Church was inadequate to the Catholic faith. He wrote derisively of the Donatists as frogs, sitting around a pond croaking that they were the only Christians, while in the distance the booming thunder of God announced God's rule over the entire world. The Church on earth, Augustine said, was always a *corpus permixtum*, a mixed body, whose membership in the nature of the case includes many wolves among the sheep; in this sense the Church mirrors the world as it is. Or as James Joyce put it more succinctly, Catholic means "here comes everybody." Our task is not to apply the last judgment prematurely, dividing the sheep from the goats, but rather to work within humble, broken vessels, including the Church, as we await the *eschaton* when God will put all things aright.

I fear that some people, genuinely concerned about the distinctive identity of Catholic colleges and universities, have slipped into a brand of educational Donatism. "Catholic" for them denotes a denomination or sect, one that must at all costs be demarcated from others. The Catholic university for them is, or should be, a kind of sectarian fortress, safe from the assaults of the world; purity of life and purity of doctrine

should characterize the faculty, staff, and administration. But if even the Catholic Church itself is a *corpus permixtum*, how much more so the Catholic university, with its diverse faculty and student body? As John Paul II puts it in *Ex corde ecclesiae*, Catholic universities include “members of other churches, ecclesial communities and religions, and also those who profess no religious belief.”¹¹ I am pleased to say that my friends, colleagues, and partners in mission at Loyola include Protestants, Jews, Buddhists, Sikhs, and those with no particular religious commitments at all.

Such is the real face of today’s Catholic university, and to move forward, those who value its mission must outgrow a sectarian definition of “Catholic.” Catholic is a Greek term meaning universal. The opposite of Catholic is not Protestant but sectarian, particularistic. Catholicism properly conceived is not one wedge of a Christian pie chart, but comprehends all the riches of Christian tradition, and is open to all truth, for God is truth. We cannot afford to use the term Catholic simply as a marker of difference, for in doing so we simply repeat the rhetoric of defensiveness that marked and limited the immigrant church, and reduce Catholic tradition to the history of a sect. I would love to see the Jesuit motto or catchword *magis*, more, be employed in our discourse about universities: we want *more* of the truth, *more* of biblical criticism, *more* dialogue with various spiritual and intellectual paths, for we delight in the truth wherever it arises. As the Loyola week t-shirt declared, “The *magis* the merrier.” Catholicism is not a confession defined by a narrow set of doctrinal propositions; rather, it comprehends the whole, and aspires to realize the fullness of truth. Universities that claim its name can do no less. The Catholic university can and should be the place to realize a true academic freedom, an unfettered catholicity of the mind based on the simplest recognition of

Christian faith, namely, that all truth is God's truth. The end of the catholic university must entail the end of any university: to follow the truth wherever it leads.

A Servant Posture

Another mark of the way forward can be found in what strikes me as the most remarkable and inspiring document to be produced by the Second Vatican Council, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, known by its title *Gaudium et Spes*, Joy and Hope. Allow me to read a few passages from this treatise, completed nearly forty years ago:

Though humankind today is struck with wonder at its own discoveries and its power, it often raises anxious questions about the current trend of the world, about the place and rule of humanity in the universe, about the meaning of its individual and collective strivings, and about the ultimate destiny of reality and of humanity. [...] this council can provide no more eloquent proof of its solidarity with the entire human family than to engage with it in conversation about these various problems. [...] For the human person deserves to be preserved; society deserves to be renewed. Hence the pivotal point of our total presentation will be the human being himself, whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will.¹²

I can imagine no better marching orders for the Catholic identity of a university than these: to educate students from a place consciously in solidarity with, and in the service of, the entire human family and the whole human person. Why should not the Catholic university be the authentic center of an education rooted in the humanities, in the fullest and most ennobling sense of that term: those studies that humanize, that promote the welfare of the human family? For the Catholic university, "humanities" are rooted not in pragmatism, nor mere liberal optimism, nor the social contract, but in the mystery of human beings created in the image and likeness of God. The Catholic

university, to reach its proper end, must engage in a *kenosis*, a self-emptying servanthood, in relation to humanity.¹³ It translates scholarship into service.

A Sacramental Vision

The late Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, among others, has spoken of the world as a sacrament. Indeed, the first pitched battle between Catholic and heretical views in the second century ended with a ringing affirmation of such sacramentality: the world as such, even in its brokenness, is a visible sign of the presence and creative activity of God. This mature sacramental vision surely must inform the project of the Catholic university. For we are rooted in a tradition that sees the world in reverent terms as a created vehicle of grace, not as a set of commodities. Truth, *the* truth, is to be found here. As the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, himself an insider and outsider in the England of his day, put it:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men not now reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Curricular Corollaries

The mature catholicity, servant posture, and sacramental orientation of Catholic colleges and universities manifest themselves in the way teaching and learning take place. First, the serious study of religion and philosophy is, and will always remain, central to the curriculum. I should add here, quickly, that this does not mean that the university should usurp the church's catechetical function. The instruction of the faithful in the rudiments of their faith is a pastoral function of the church. By contrast the university, to the extent that it serves the church, serves it at a critical remove. It subjects all religious claims—Christian and otherwise—to critical scrutiny, testing and refining them in the crucible of the most rigorous scholarly methods. Students and faculty in the Catholic university, whatever their major disciplines, are ever learning to be philosophers, lovers of wisdom, and as both Socrates and Jesus showed, lovers of wisdom always test the limits and claims of authority. To be sure, the study of philosophy and religion in Catholic universities will in the nature of the case be pursued through a Roman Catholic “optic,” a viewpoint or orientation that places it in privileged conversation with a tradition of Catholic theology. But it will always insist on its proper critical freedom in relation to that tradition, for such freedom is the *sine qua non* of a university.

Because it emerges from a tradition that sees all of creation as the good artifact of divine creativity, the Catholic university is perhaps uniquely equipped to overcome a pervasive problem in modern university education: disintegration. Critics of higher education have long lamented the headlong flight of university professors away from teaching and engagement with colleagues in other disciplines, and into recondite

research. As the process goes on, professors, especially at high-powered research institutions, are less and less involved with teaching students, while the academic disciplines burrow themselves into deeper and deeper silos.¹⁴ The idea that a particle physicist and an ancient historian could have intellectually fertile exchanges, or that an accomplished senior faculty member would be personally involved in the learning process of students, have become relics of a world before grant procurement and publication-counting became the coin of the realm. Because of its grounding in a sacramental orientation, however, the Catholic university can be a place of integration, where the notion of a stable truth beyond aggregates of data is not drowned out by post-modern snickering. The Jesuits speak of “finding God in all things”—not merely finding things—and such an educational ethos provides the basis for profound interdisciplinary engagements, as well as a qualitative rather than quantitative valuing of research.

The Catholic university will also by its nature be a place in which classroom learning does not remain in the classroom. As a community of *kenosis*, of self-emptying, it regards learning as a tool for service to humankind. Catholic colleges and universities will not be content to be tools of social and intellectual advancement. Rather, they will be models of “service-learning,” wherein academic learning takes place in conjunction with serving the larger community and promoting the common good.

Will the Catholic university come to an end? Maybe. Everything born into this contingent realm, including one’s own life, bears in itself also the time of its ending. There is no guarantee that the historical phenomenon of Catholic universities will endure.

But the end, the *eschaton*, of the Catholic university lies very far ahead indeed, for it has only begun to realize the true freedom to pursue its end, its *telos*, the joyful and unfettered pursuit of truth.

¹ William P. Leahy, S.J., *Adapting to America. Catholics, Jesuits, and Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 1ff.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ John Tracy Ellis, *American Catholics and the Intellectual Life* (Chicago: Heritage Foundation, 1956), 34.

⁴ Cf. William F. Buckley, Jr., "God and Man at Yale: Twenty-five Years Later," in *A Hymnal: The Controversial Arts* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), 426.

⁵ Leahy, *Adapting to America*, 124.

⁶ Leonard Swidler, "Catholic Colleges: A Modest Proposal," *Commonweal* 29: January 25, 1965, 559.

⁷ For a brief and cogent summary of these events see William P. Leahy, S.J., *Adapting to America: Catholics, Jesuits, and Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 9ff.

⁸ *De praescriptione haereticorum* 7.4.

⁹ Cf. the discussion in Leahy, *Adapting to America*, 15-16.

¹⁰ For analyses of the Donatist movement and Augustine's encounters with it, see W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church*

¹¹ *Ex corde ecclesiae*, 26.

¹² *Gaudium et spes* 3

¹³ Cf. Phillipians 2: 5-8

¹⁴ This and other maladies are amply aired in Page Smith, *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America* (New York: Viking, 1990).