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The Best of Times, The Worst of Times

Catholic Intellectual Life in Today's Academic Setting

MONIKA K. HELLWIG

The title that lured you here I chose for several reasons. In the first place, I do not write as well as Charles Dickens, and I should be hard put to it to find an opening sentence more apt to the topic. I quote:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

One might look far and wide before finding a sentence that more appropriately captures the sense of American Catholic intellectuals about the condition of Catholic intellectual life in today's academic setting.

It may have occurred to you that this topic is in its own way a tale of two cities, and you may think I had in mind Washington, a place of academic freedom and due process, and Rome, where heads tend with some frequency to roll. Looking further into the allusion, however, I hope it will also occur to you that we are rooted in one city of new beginnings and a fair future, and in another city representing a precious and endangered family inheritance. And then again, the pathways of the mind may have found other allusions to earlier tales of two cities—of Augustine of Hippo and the complex struggle between the City of God and the City of Man, or, even further back, to the symbolic confrontation between Athens and Jerusalem. Each of these analogies offers some useful perspective on the matter under consideration.

There seem to be considerable differences among Catholic intellectuals as to what constitutes good times or bad times for Catholic intellectual life, and that may mean that we have a variety of definitions of Catholic intellectual life itself. This is neither surprising nor, I think, alarming. After four hundred years of tightly closed ranks, strict controls, clear and authoritative definitions, uniform instruction and practice, orthodoxy equated with extensive and detailed verbal formulations, and an isolation that allowed a high degree of triumphalism, Catholic life and thought suffered an earthquake in the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960's. This earthquake, beginning with distant and often ignored subterranean rumblings, has gathered force in successive eruptions. It has rearranged our landscape. Familiar landmarks have collapsed one after the other in a domino pattern, according to temperament, education, and specific role in the Catholic community. Some of us have found this terrifying, and others positively exhilarating. For all of us, however, it is a fact: the landscape has been—and is being—rearranged, and the familiar paths are buried or have become dead ends. We walk as explorers, cartographers, perhaps adventurers, to discover new paths, new con-

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nections, new landmarks. Whether we mourn them or celebrate them, the changes are a fact.

One of the most important consequences of these changes is that we can no longer assume the catholicity of Catholic institutions as something to be taken for granted, something that will take care of itself while each of us attends to the more specialized requirements of our several avocations. This is particularly so because the most pervasive and significant change brought about by the Second Vatican Council, probably not intended by the participant bishops, is that it is no longer possible to define Catholicism by the external referents of institutional structure with the same clarity and completeness as before. We have been thrown back upon the necessity of asking ourselves explicitly what exactly it was that the institutional structures were protecting and preserving. This is a more demanding task, especially for those accustomed to the luxury of taking much of it for granted. The question is in effect whether there is an essence of Catholicism which is not simply Christianity, but which emphasizes certain aspects or interpretations of Christianity that ought to be preserved and further explored in complementarity with the emphases maintained by other Christian traditions. A certain former triumphalism which equated the Catholic church quite simply with the one and only true church tended to make that question superfluous. Recent developments have made it increasingly plain that the question is not superfluous.

What I propose to do here is, first, to suggest constitutive characteristics of the Catholic tradition of Christianity; second, to offer some reflections on the way these characteristics have shaped and might shape Catholic intellectual life in western society; and third, to consider some of the particular challenges of developing and continuing Catholic intellectual life in the context of the contemporary American Catholic university or college setting.

IT IS CHARACTERISTICALLY CATHOLIC TO REGARD CREATIVE ARTISTIC EXPRESSION AS BELONGING TO THE VERY FABRIC OF CHRISTIAN LIFE AND WORSHIP.

Constitutive Characteristics of Catholicism

It is, of course, understood that anything Catholic must first of all be Christian. The Second Vatican Council and its aftermath laid great stress on this with the return to the sources in Scripture and a pervasive concern with ecumenical dialogue and cooperation. But within the Christian heritage, the Catholic community has differentiated itself by certain values and commitments which make a characteristic contribution, and which it would be very sad to lose.

Among these, something that concerns intellectuals in a more particular way is the deep respect that Catholicism has given to the cumulative wisdom of the past. That was one of the principal commitments that distinguished those of the Roman allegiance from the northern Reformers in the sixteenth century, and it has continued to be a dominant characteristic. In our own time it gives us a base from which to enter into mutually helpful dialogue with other traditions, whether it be the Christian Orthodox who treasure the cumulative wisdom of a different historical experience, the Protestant communions who appeal more exclusively to Scripture, or traditions other than the Christian, in which human experience provides the common ground for dialogue.

But this treasuring of the cumulative wisdom of the past has included not only the explicitly religious—theological writings, spirituality traditions, rituals and sacred symbols, customs and structures of the community. The treasuring of the wisdom of the past has also gathered wealth from non-Christian and secular sources: the classical philosophy of the Greeks, selections of the music of tavern and salon, traditions in sculpture and painting, the legal and constitutional experience of the Roman Empire, architectural inspiration from many sources, symbolism from pagan mythologies, and much more. It has long been the custom of the Church to sponsor libraries, schools and museums in which the culture and wisdom of the past are celebrated, preserved, and explored.

The reason for this concern with the treasuring of past achievements of wisdom and culture seems to be related directly to another constitutive characteristic of the Catholic tradition of Christianity: a deep conviction that there is an intrinsic continuity of faith and reason, and a commitment to make it explicit. Already hinted in the New Testament, where Paul makes it the basis of his preaching at the Areopagus and Peter bids his converts

be ready at all times to explain and defend their faith, this conviction was developed in the second century by Christian apologists such as Justin and Athenagoras, in the third by such as Origen of Alexandria, in the fifth by that powerful thinker, Augustine of Hippo, in the sixth by that persevering but unfortunate scholar-administrator, Boethius, in the eleventh by the possibly over optimistic monk and archbishop, Anselm of Canterbury, and by so many others in between. The commitment to make the continuity of faith and reason explicit was, therefore, already well established in the tradition when it was challenged in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with the question of whether dialectic and faith must go their separate ways in isolation from each other, a question resolved resoundingly, though in diverse ways by Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, in favor of integration.

When the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century raised the question again for the best of reasons, the Catholic reply was to own this tradition with the understanding that it must be sifted to eliminate the chaff, but by no means discarded. Out of this came the Catholic apologetics and fundamental theology tradition, but also the tradition of the Jesuit schools with their *Ratio Studiorum* and, later, the dogged commitment to philosophy as an integral part of an American Catholic college curriculum. Still later the answer took the form of a commitment to the integration into the college experience of the physical and social sciences, which over the centuries had separated themselves from philosophy in western tradition.

While such treasuring of past wisdom and such commitment to the continuity of faith and reason are pervasive characteristics of Catholicism, my placing them first may have given too exclusively intellectual an impression. A third, and perhaps most important characteristic of this community and its tradition is certainly what John Henry Cardinal Newman pointed to as the sacramental principle. This means much more than the fact that Catholics since the twelfth century have insisted on seven distinct sacraments while Protestant communions recognize at most two. There is in the history, practice and legislation of the Catholic community constant attention to and cultivation of whatever might recall and mediate the presence and power of the divine in human lives and society. Keenly aware that most people's attention is taken up with the immediate and not readily focused on the transcendent, generation after generation has enshrined the memory of revelatory moments in symbols and rituals, icons and narratives, a calendar of festivals and a galaxy of shrines. We have given distinctive interpretation to the shape of time and space, the structures of society and of consciousness.

This enshrining and embellishing of memories, which we inherited from our Hebrew antecedents, is a way of training the imagination in putting together the elements of experience in ways that see the presence, providence, and exigence of God in all dimensions of human existence, and in all times and circumstances. In practice the sacramental principle can of course degenerate into superstition or even into magical practices, but that is not its true nature. The concern to educate the Christian imagination has made of the Church an enthusiastic patron of the arts and has inspired many of the greatest compositions of literature, music and visual arts. That this is not an exclusively Catholic prerogative is witnessed by Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Handel's *Messiah*, to mention only two of the most obvious examples. But it is characteristically Catholic to regard creative artistic expressions as belonging to the very fabric of Christian life and worship. A certain exuberance of elaboration in ritual and visual representation is quite at home in the Catholic context. Our heaven is well peopled with angels and our history star-spangled with saints, surrounding us with a rather friendly and faith-busy universe. It would be sad indeed if the post-Vatican II church in the western industrialized countries should lose this many-splendored thing in favor of something tamer and more attuned to post-Enlightenment secularism.

The pervasive working of the sacramental principle is not unrelated to a fourth characteristic of Catholicism, namely the understanding that the enterprise of the redemption is a communal one for human society and not simply one concerning individuals taken singly. Because it is a communal enterprise, it concerns all human relationships, including the structures of human society at all levels of complexity, and calls for our concern with social justice issues of all kinds—with peace, with the economy, with race relations and immigration policies, with Third World debt and refugee problems, with farm policies and world hunger. All aspects of public life and policy, whether at national or international level, are pertinent to the redemption.

The understanding of the redemption as communal and inclusive of all aspects of human life also leads to an emphasis on structures and institutions of the church. This has its positive and its negative side. We have perhaps over the centuries come to expect too much from our Catholic institutions. Life inevitably structures itself, but structures can never beget life. Imitating life, however, human social structures of all kinds tend to grow, to become more complex, and then to grow old and stiff and less adaptable to new needs. The tenacity of the structures of the past is likely to haunt any community which has a great respect for the wisdom of the past combined with a conviction that the unity and cooperation of the community pertains to its very essence and purpose.

The importance of unity and community is at the root of Catholic institutions, including all levels of schools as well as all levels of hierarchic organization, and including the structures of the local church as well as those of the universal church. It would be strange indeed if there were not strong tensions and conflicts generated within this network. New needs are bound to make themselves felt and to press against old structures. Local institutional structures can respond more easily and more rapidly, but central institutional structures are concerned with maintaining unity and the predictability of good order and are therefore highly resistant to change. To find oneself in tension with Rome, therefore, in the Catholic church is not always a matter of being un-Catholic or destructive, but may well be a question of being positioned at the growing point, at the very place where the new needs meet the old assumptions.

A fifth aspect of Catholicism that is characteristic and constitutive is its universality of outreach, its striving not to be limited to any class or race, not to be identified with any one nation or culture or language, but to bring all into alliance and community as one People of God. It is true that we have behind us a history

of betrayals of that ideal, and we have about us in this country at this time a church that significantly falls short of such a description. Yet the desire to be truly non-elitist in a radically innovative way is part of the heritage not easily left behind.

The non-elitist thrust of Catholic tradition concerns both the membership and the outward concern for suffering peoples of the world. It concerns both the way in which individuals should relate to one another and the way in which institutions should set their goals and priorities. It has been influential in the growth and focus of Catholic school systems, parishes, hospitals, and community services of all kinds. It should clearly be influential also in Catholic scholarly pursuits and in Catholic publishing enterprises.

Catholic Intellectual Life in Our Society

It has been quite fashionable in recent times to berate Catholic academics and professional people in the United States about the poverty of their intellectual life as measured by the number of their significant publications and the number of doctorates the Catholic universities produce, especially in the sciences. I do not intend to become involved in any way in that debate. What I would like to reflect on instead is what it is that might characterize intellectual life in our society and our times as Catholic.

Though it may seem unnecessary, I should like to make the point that Catholic intellectual life must in the first place be an intellectual life. What I mean by intellectual life is a commitment to disciplined enquiry and search which is open to new vistas and challenges, open to being surprised, open to reshaping theories when the facts leap out to contradict us in existing assumptions. Intellectual life is more than accumulating knowledge from books and retailing it for younger generations; it involves a continuing and unfinished quest to understand, to see patterns and connections.

It is plain enough that there is a negative aspect of the relationship between Catholicism and the intellectual life. The emphasis on community solidarity in the universal church, combined with constant concerns about orthodoxy and respect not only for the wisdom but for the detailed verbal formulations of the past, can all too easily have a dampening effect on scholarship likely to upset existing assumptions and formulations. The examples in the natural sciences are too numerous and notorious to need mention. But problems of this sort also dog the historian whose findings on certain matters bearing on church life and institutions have often been less than welcome to the custodians of orthodoxy. The same is true in varying measures of philosophers, social scientists, and, of course, ethicists, biblical scholars, and theologians.

More pertinent here, however, are the positive aspects of the link between Catholicism and the intellectual life. In the first place these concern the reasons for the pursuit of scholarly endeavors. The continuity of faith and reason makes of scientific research of all kinds an exercise of piety because what is revealed by honest research is also the utterance of the creator, to be revered and contemplated as such. Because there can be no contradiction between the God of creation and God as revealed, between the God of nature and God as redeemer, and because all that is discovered has its own intrinsic value, research in natural sciences can be conducted without anxiety about what it may show, and is worthwhile whether or not it is applauded, and even if it takes a very long time without evident results. The same may be said of research in history, literature, and the social sciences. Continuity between faith and reason means a mutual enrichment and reciprocal clarification between scholarly enterprises and a life of faith should be a common Catholic experience if both faith and scholarship are correctly understood. In a special way this should be so in philosophy, theology, and all types of religious studies.

In our own society and time the characteristic Catholic respect for the cumulative wisdom of the past would seem to have a particularly important contribution to make in larger scholarly circles, where current discoveries, trends and movements are not always considered in sufficient historical depth or developmental context. It seems to me that a significant litmus test of the catholicity of Catholic scholars in their scholarship is whether they look at all issues in the context of the traditions that lie behind them, and are concerned with the wider implications of their own projects and the relationships between their own projects and other academic and practical advances.

This connects also with the characteristic communitarian dimension of Catholicism. While research and scholarly endeavors can be in themselves acts of worship, scholars are not exempt from responsibility for the purposes to which their work might be put. Choices must be made. Some projects serve the human community better than others. Other projects, no matter how tempting, can only lead to uses that inflict suffering and death or are in other ways destructive. It would seem to be an urgent requirement for the catholicity of Catholic scholarly endeavors that they be chosen and directed with the fullest possible awareness and responsibility for the uses to which they will be put in a world crying out for peace, justice and relief from mass suffering of many kinds. It is here also that the non-elitist thrust of Catholicism should have an impact. We, who are generously supported by the hard drudgery and onerous manual labor of others, hold our leisure and privilege in trust for all those others. We may not isolate our work from their needs, if we would be serious about our Catholic commitments.

The sacramental principle in Catholic life seems to suggest an approach to the intellectual which does not confuse it with the rational which is such a small segment of human thinking. The Catholic experience of a rich symbolic environment can and should mean serious attention given to the arts and to the role that artistic works play in shaping human values and human society. But this need not and should not be exclusively the concern of fine arts and literature specialists. It ought surely to impinge in various ways on all fields of enquiry.

With the splendid history that Catholic intellectual life has had over the course of the centuries it seems regrettable that there should be such reluctance to focus on specifically Catholic content such as the natural law tradition in ethics and legal theory, the great medieval thinkers, the architecture of the cathedrals, the Gregorian chant and its influence on subsequent musical devel-

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opments, the Latin hymnody, the literary genre of hagiography, or the context and development of modern papal social encyclicals. Here I mention only a few topics which seem not to get the attention they might rightly claim.

The Contemporary American University Context

What are some of the most pressing challenges to the continuation and development of Catholic intellectual life in the context of the contemporary American university? It is neither my task nor my intent to address the situation of Catholic academics in other than Catholic institutions. From my sporadic contacts I have the impression that they are for the most part more clearly aware of the role they can play than we are. My concern here is with contexts such as our own here at Georgetown University.

It is clear that Catholicism tends inherently toward shaping its environment totally by its own criteria. It is equally clear that this tendency creates conflict in a pluralistic and secularized environment. It has led many of our fellow citizens to fear Catholicism as a pernicious and disruptive force. It led George Bernard Shaw to remark that a Catholic university was a contradiction in terms. (He was clearly not thinking etymologically when he said this.) But a certain polarity is certainly there and will not be banished by simply being ignored.

The thrust towards total integration of knowledge and endeavor which is characteristic of Catholicism is at odds with the requirement of intense and narrow specialization thrust upon us by contemporary developments in the academic disciplines. We are all victims of the post-Renaissance syndrome: speaking collectively and in centuries, we have been too clever and too diligent and have pushed the boundaries of knowledge to lengths at which a full and well-informed synthesis is far beyond the capacity of a single mind. Yet the need to evaluate, harness, and direct human knowledge and the power it gives is no less than before, and may indeed be greater or more urgent. If it is not possible to integrate all knowledge, it must at least be our endeavor in a Catholic context to integrate our own specialization with a coherent sense of purpose and responsibility, and to be open to frequent conversation with colleagues in other disciplines concerning that purpose and responsibility. In other words, we must at least in our own fields of specialization seek to make explicit the continuity of faith and reason.

The respect for the cumulative wisdom of the past should surely lead us in Catholic settings to attend to two things: the specifically Catholic content in particular disciplines, and the inner rationale of traditional curricula which we should be slow to jettison and cautious in adapting. Examples of specific content I have already suggested, and this must be further explored by those competent within particular disciplines. As to the development and adaptation of curricula of studies, something might well be learned by a look at the long-term evolution of Christian higher [illegible] comparison of recent offerings. I have in mind the move from the private initiative of teachers like Justin, Origen and Tertullian in the second and third centuries, to the monastic tradition of scholarship in late patristic times, from there to the experiment of the cathedral schools under the patronage of bishops, and the escape from that patronage when the guilds or *universitates* of scholars put themselves under papal patronage, eventually multiplying their faculties for better interdisciplinary exchange and sequencing of studies, finally emerging into the post-Enlightenment world with charters of incorporation from national governments. The complex history of this development and the impact it had on curricula, and on the relative roles of students and teachers, would seem to have much wisdom to offer to those dealing with curricula in contemporary Catholic higher education.

The realization of the communitarian and non-elitist character of Catholicism in a Catholic university setting is probably the demand to which we have already paid the most attention here at Georgetown University. It should involve a strong sense of community and common purpose among administrators, faculty members, and students. It should mean that faculty members do not neglect creativity, zest, warmth, and dedication in teaching in favor of research and publication. It should involve opportunities for students to become aware of those less fortunate than themselves, to develop compassion and a strong sense of social justice, and to come to accept the social responsibilities commensurate with their privileged place in society. It should mean scholarship help to bring students to the campus whose main obstacle to higher education is their economic status. It should give a strong international thrust to university research and study. It should as far as possible direct scholarly endeavors to global human needs. These things we are in large measure doing, and they are an expression of the Catholicism of the university.

Perhaps the most difficult characteristic of Catholicism to realize in a post-Enlightenment and post-Vatican II American university setting is the sacramental principle. Even among Catholics there is a strong cultural bias against it. We tend to find something outmoded and quaint, even embarrassing, in the visible, tangible and public presentation of our symbolic environment. Yet it would be extraordinarily helpful for the shaping of Catholic rootedness, solidarity, identity, and sense of purpose in personal, academic, professional, and civic life, to make more publicly evident the calendar of the Christian year, the centrality of the eucharistic celebration, and tokens of our pride in our history and our heroes.

What then, in sum, is the burden of my song? It is this. We live in a great tradition which does not, in a pluralistic and secularized setting, perpetuate itself without being carefully and thoughtfully tended. We can upon reflection isolate those characteristics of Catholicism which, while not unique or exclusive, are characteristic and have much to contribute to our society. We can, by taking thought, find the ways in which those characteristics already do or yet might shape our intellectual life, and be incorporated in the special character of a Catholic university or college. These are the best of times because all the possibilities are open to us, and the worst of times only because without our active and strenuous cooperation it might well all fall apart. The project is in our hands.