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### Forum: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition. Putting the Limits of the Grand Tradition on the Table

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# PUTTING THE LIMITS OF THE GRAND TRADITION ON THE TABLE

Lisa Sowle Cahill

Richard Liddy wonderfully conjures the depth and evolution of a rich Christian tradition. His focus is incarnational Christian symbols and rituals, philosophy, theology and creative literature in Western Europe and North America, yet he reaches toward a growing diversity of Catholic cultures. According to Liddy, all these endeavors are part of “the Catholic intellectual tradition,” because “the human spirit or human mind” is most distinctive of humanity, so “any genuinely human tradition is an intellectual tradition.”

I admire how Liddy brings to life multidimensional Christian experience, but prefer to distinguish more clearly its intellectual aspect, before reuniting the intellectual, moral, aesthetic and spiritual. Indeed, what is most distinctive about humanity is not “mind,” but that we are embodied minds and spirits. Genuinely human traditions do include intellectual inquiry, but they also include moral and political practices, the creation and appreciation of beauty, and spiritual or religious experiences and activities, which are not the same. One might say that Catholic universities are the sites par excellence where the true, the good, the beautiful, and the divine are kept in marvelous interplay. Yet teaching or writing theology is not doing catechesis, gathering for liturgy, engaging in Christian social action or producing Christian art, however much these



Lisa Sowle Cahill

other activities do nourish and benefit from theological inquiry, and even make it possible.

An ancient task of philosophy is to delineate humanity’s quest for the true, the good, and the beautiful. Systematic intellectual inquiry or analysis aims at the *truth* and engages the *intellect* primarily, if not exclusively. Conversely, the *good* is attained by the *will*, the *beautiful* by the *imagination*, and the *divine* by the *love* evoked by God’s self-dis-

closure. All of these have practical dimensions, since they are carried out by embodied persons within human and material relationships.

The *Catholic intellectual tradition*, then, is the intellectual quest for truth, understanding or knowledge in a Catholic (not generically Christian) context, a context bearing Catholic accents in politics, poetry, and prayer. One of the *intellectual* tradition’s most distinctive marks is its quest for objectivity and universality in

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knowledge of the truth. This carries both assets and liabilities. Hence the extreme importance of Liddy's invocation of historical consciousness. The Catholic quest for objective truth is framed and protected by Catholicism's global institutional structure; the requirement of basic doctrinal coherence or "orthodoxy;" and, at the moral or ethical level, the premise that all humans share in common some basic experiences, values, and obligations. A virtue of the Catholic intellectual tradition is resistance to reducing truth to power, and to thoroughgoing relativism regarding human dignity and social justice. It also sets parameters for expressing the truths of creation, the incarnation, the Trinity, and the continuing presence of Christ's Spirit in the church.

But the limits and even vices of this grand tradition must be put on the table. Too often Catholicism has

denied that "traditional" formulations of truth must be revised or rejected, and that general truths can take very different concrete shapes. "The Catholic intellectual tradition" is infected by elitism, exclusivism, and a Eurocentric bias. In fact, the same can be said of Catholic morality, politics, art, and liturgy. Diverse, emerging expressions of Catholicism do not just receive Western "communications"; they interrupt them, challenge them, and reconfigure the tradition. As Liddy insists, "The Catholic intellectual tradition is not a closed 'canon' of Western works only." Openings include feminist theology, liberation theology, and Catholic theologies from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. And all of these quests for intellectual understanding and truth are interactive with their own specific takes on moral and political goodness, artistic beauty, and divine worship.

Recently Boston College art historian Pamela Berger presented research on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem at the Boisi Center for Religion and Public Life. Her aim was to understand the history of this Muslim temple as a site of worship by Muslims, Jews, and Christians over the ages, and particularly of past simultaneous use by Jews and Muslims. She drew on art, iconography, liturgical artifacts, religious texts, and historical scholarship; her thesis has clear political consequences. Her scholarship exemplifies the intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and religious cross-fertilization possible in today's Catholic university, with its new global and inter-religious vista. ■

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## THE MANY WAYS OF BEING CATHOLIC

Eduardo C. Fernández, S.J.

Every year during our intercession, we take our first year masters of divinity students to Mexico City for about a ten day cultural immersion. One of our aims in doing so is to help them learn how to do common theological reflection. Easier said than done! While social analysis, one of its important components, cannot be done without taking into account the cultural, economic, political, and religious aspects of a culture, how do you impress upon students the value of doing it *in situ*? What becomes especially challenging is integrating the more abstract, theoretical dis-

coveries with the experiential ones, whether those which are the fruit of personal encounters with the people of the country, for example, by staying in poor people's homes, engaging in conversation on panels, or by being exposed to their cultural heritage by going on pilgrimage to a shrine dear to them, visiting a museum or an archeological site, or attending an artistic performance.

This was the experience of a Vietnamese American student, someone who himself had come to the U.S. as a boat person, when, after witnessing an amazingly colorful, choreographed folk dance at the national *Bellas Artes* theater, remarked, "Now I get this culture!"

A few hours spent witnessing a distillation of Indigenous, European, and African cultural threads woven together over the course of centuries through dance had been the key, an experiential key, to entering a new cultural world.

One of the most appealing aspects of Richard M. Liddy's essay is that he does not ignore the more artistic, lived experiential aspect of the Catholic intellectual tradition. As the example above with the Vietnamese American student illustrates, there are many ways of knowing. In fact, by hearing a little bit of Liddy's own story, we get a glimpse of how lived Catholicism has influenced him, more specifical-