

“Guiding Principles and Values in Catholic Higher Education Today: Our Response to the Church’s Invitation to Academic Excellence”

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My task is to reflect on the significance of “Gravissimus Educationis (GE),” now a half century old, the Apostolic Constitution “Ex Corde Ecclesiae” promulgated 25 years ago this year. These two seminal documents set the course for where we are today in Catholic Higher Education. I thought we might ask ourselves not so much what they produced but what work is still left for us today. That is, given this half century of development, where are we today and what yet needs to be accomplished to fulfill the dream or vision of these two documents? Specifically, I'd like to address the issue of academic quality—addressed in GE, and what might truly distinguish the Catholic academic gift to the larger world of academia, a vision alluded to in Ex Corde, but one which has received in my view little attention.

“Gravissimus Educationis” was one of the last documents of the Council. But, like a tidal wave crashing to the shore, it washed away a great deal of debris and left some new challenges in its wake. Anyone reading GE for the first time would marvel at its optimism and its outreach to all men and women of good will. It lacks today's worries about inequality of access, or worries about planetary destruction and the serious worries about the uses of religion.

Like other Vatican II documents, it broke from a parochial vision of the Church, a Church protecting itself against modernism and the ideologies or visions of social construction that plagued the world after the Second World War—socialism, communism, unbridled capitalism—with their narrow and utilitarian view of the human person. As one counter to these, it urged us to build institutions of quality, shaped in large measure by the standards of the day. It urged that our institutions be “noteworthy not so much for their numbers as for their high standards.”

“Gravissimus Educationis” envisioned that we would create true universities. “In its institutions,” it stated, “the Church endeavors systematically to ensure that the treatment of the individual disciplines is consonant with their principles, their own methods, and with a true liberty, of scientific inquiry.” It placed trust in the ability of all truth-seekers to find their way beyond narrow and self-serving visions of society to build a better world for all men and women. It proposed that Catholic higher education could bring to the Church and the world something different, something unique—certainly—something different from what elementary and secondary education should be expected to offer, something different from what secular institutions of higher education can offer.

Perhaps, most surprising of all—given the times—the Council Fathers insisted that our institutions should live up to the standards of the modern academy. “Since the advance of knowledge is secured especially by research into matters of major scientific importance, every effort should be made in Catholic universities and faculties to develop departments for the advancement of scientific research.” They called for universities to accept the standards of the day in research and quality education. In short, GE recognized the unique potential of higher education as a place where the Church can do its thinking, as well as, its listening. Here, in the University, it can enter into real dialogue. This

has been our contribution since Vatican II, we have become places where the Church teaches and is taught, where it speaks and where it listens—and we do so within the standards of the academy.

The debate over what constitutes academic excellence has of course been a continuous one, but one that has received new emphasis and interest with the emergence of world-wide rating systems. Measuring academic quality is under discussion in the literature. So, at this anniversary, we might ask how well have we lived up to the Council's hopes for top quality institutions and how well have we embraced the standards of the modern academy?

Just as in the broader world of academic institutions, Catholic higher education comes in a variety of sizes and shapes. Some serve local communities and local needs. Some concentrate on trades and business, others healthcare and still others on training for various professions like pedagogy. In some places, our institutions are bound by restrictions as to size and structure, who we can recruit and even which faculty we must hire. All of us are in some way or another dependent on national laws and systems that govern how we manage our institution.

And, in a growing number of places, we see Catholic institutions not only serving local and national needs but becoming recognized for their international and global reach—in students, faculty and in the impact of faculty research. They tackle questions at the forefront of the disciplines and the professions. They hire from diverse backgrounds and cultures. They make an effort to avoid a parochial culture that is closed to diverse traditions. They are recognized for the quality of the degrees they offer. Despite our unique, local mission and the range of our academic offerings, we are all subject to a growing consensus of what constitutes real “academic quality.”

Quality, of course, can be measured in a variety of ways. Most often quality is measured by the standing of the students admitted, the credentials of the faculty, often, the success of graduates in placement exams and in jobs. Secular public and private institutions are increasingly being ranked by this narrow band of criteria. While many of us would like to see other indicators such as the impact of the institution on the challenging issues facing society or the commitment to ideas of justice and equality, or the measure of hospitality to under-served populations, the systems that propose to measure quality will for some time be metric and narrow.

Harold Roscosky, a former dean at Harvard University, has had a formidable influence on the academic excellence debate. He asserted recently in the “*Journal of International Higher Education*,” published by Boston College, that the qualities of superior institutions are increasingly clear and shared. Quality institutions are more than simply those which draw top students, or whose faculty have the most publications.

Roscosky offers five characteristics of top quality institutions. He sees these characteristics as necessary for an institution that wishes to be considered world class and top quality, and suggests that these should constitute the measures used for rankings.

1. A true university must demonstrate a measure of shared responsibility. That is, faculties have the major say in what constitutes the curriculum and standards for degree completion. They must have some ability to influence the administration in the affairs of the institution, even though faculties do not control the institution.

2. Quality institutions must value and support academic freedom and a spirit of open inquiry. Faculty and thus their students are inquisitive and ask questions, never assume that handed down formulas are accurate. Rather, they assume that knowledge requires a fresh investigation of older beliefs.
3. Quality institutions rely on merit regarding who enters and who advances to graduation. The same goes for faculty who advances in rank. Quality institutions have an element of elitism.
4. Top quality institutions are recognized as playing a significant role in preserving culture, expanding knowledge and promoting participation in the civic order. They serve a civic goal of producing quality public servants and professionals.
5. Finally, in institutions of quality, we see a great deal of human contact and interaction. That is, student-teacher interactions are placed at the center of the learning process and recognized as a major component for forming character, as well as, minds. This is possible because the institution is not given over to excessively large classes, becoming rather a factory producing graduates.

What we see the world over is that, as countries reform their systems, attempt to advance the ranking of their institutions, they move, if even tentatively, in the direction of these five standards or characteristics. They give more control over content to the faculty. They agree to merit in selection of faculty and promotion. If they desire their institutions to be competitive, with increased amounts of research, they limit the number of students they must deal with, and offer rewards through promotion standards that are merit based.

As Catholic universities, we must increasingly demonstrate these same characteristics. And, on each continent, we see mounting reputations and an acceptance of Catholic institutions as places of genuine quality precisely because these same values are prized and put in place.

“Gravissimus Educationis” and “Ex Corde Ecclesiae,” call us to something more, however. The genuinely Catholic institution has two additional characteristics (or obligations). First, fidelity to the Church’s vision of higher education requires a conscientious effort to form students in mind and heart, character and spirit, that is, the whole person. The curriculum and program in a Catholic university must have more than a secular aim. Our programs and their co-curricular offerings, such as service-learning programs, social organizations, arts programs that expanding the students’ horizons constitute what educators call an “informal curriculum” which plays as important a role in the lives of students as the formal curriculum.

The second characteristic that the Church insists upon is that a Catholic institution must be an instrument of service and must become a community dedicated to that purpose, just as it is dedicated to the search for truth. Service to those who cannot share in the riches of a tertiary education is an especially important feature of this service to the common good and especially those who are marginalized and poor.

These two characteristics unfortunately did not make it to Roskovsky's list, nor to most lists that are used to rank institutions. Though they are not part of the secular understanding of a quality university, they must be part of our understanding of what constitutes quality. We serve not only the polis, the state, and the economic and social interests of students, but also those who are less privileged and who are disadvantaged and unable to access the benefits of higher education or education at all.

There is a second matter of what I call “unfinished business” which I believe we must address. This issue concerns our need to become more explicit with regard to what constitutes the unique offering of the Catholic university to the world of scholarship. St. John Paul II put his finger on the precise nature of this challenge when he wrote in “*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*” that there is a tension felt by each of our institutions, a false tension, but a tension nevertheless, between the search for truth to which we are committed as institutions and already knowing the font of truth to which we are committed as Christians and from which our Catholic institutions take their inspiration.” Do Catholic universities offer something unique or important to the academy itself? Is there a “Catholic” academic approach, or style, or starting point?

Before the Council, many have noted, Catholic institutions operated under a world view, an assumption of how truth ought to be pursued, how knowledge ought to be organized. The academic enterprise in a Catholic institution was grounded and guided by neo-scholasticism. It permeated and shaped not only theology and philosophy, but was the lense through which we viewed problems in the social sciences, the arts and was THE Catholic approach to nearly every facet of intellectual inquiry. This neo-scholastic world collapsed after the Council as Catholic institutions hired experts from secular institutions, as we entered into rigorous debate with peers from a variety of disciplines and perspectives, and as Catholic theologians and philosophers entered into real dialogue with their counterparts outside of this system.

As we know well, and at the risk of over-simplification, the culture and the dominant beliefs and assumptions in the academy today hold that truth is elusive and only partially discoverable. Moreover, truth is only discoverable through the scientific method, which begins with an examination of observable data and insists on verifiable, replicable results. This reduces knowledge to what we can see and examine with our senses. Most important, it insists on neutrality with regard to moral claims.

On the other hand, the Catholic university has as its starting point an assumption--quite unlike the assumption of the secular academy--that faith, which cannot be proven, is nevertheless necessary for the pursuit of truth. And, reason and methods of investigation are needed to keep those faith-claims from leading into error. Faith and reason are mutually supportive of this quest for truth and essential for arriving at sound and justifiable conclusions, especially when it comes to questions of justice and equity. Secular institution of higher learning insists on academic freedom, the pursuit of academic excellence and the necessity of neutrality in moral discourse. We share this insistence on academic freedom and the pursuit of excellence, but we do not share the belief that moral neutrality is sufficient, and may even be problematic-- even blinding or misleading--when it comes to building a more just and humane world.

As many of us in this room believe, this has led to the modern university to become a place of vague values, a place subject to political and social pressures, which lead to arbitrary decisions, to academic fads. The leadership of secular institutions must remain neutral on many critical questions and thus “teach” moral neutrality when competing religious and moral positions are present. Even as important issues in society rage—issues like the environment, crime and punishments, justice and peace—these academic leaders must remain silent or neutral. We are not subject to such restrictions and artificial neutrality.

For many decades, Catholic institutions have been on the defensive. Can an institution that binds itself to a set of faith-based propositions be truly free in the academic sense? Can it be a real university? Now, the shoe is on the other foot, in my humble opinion. Can a secular, positivist, and so-

called value-free examination of social and moral problems offer a society anything but a lack of clarity, confusion and disillusionment? When it comes to the social and moral problems of secular society, clarity of thought and direction is essential, and expected from those whose purpose is to study, reflect and address problems. Can it be anything but disappointing when young people are searching for moral clarity and their university has no position on the important issues of the day?

I would like to suggest that we could be more clear about what it is we do offer, what constitutes the mind of the Catholic University, its starting point or points, the basis on which it will do its academic work, that is, the principles which will guide its intellectual life. In a recent, excellent article in "The Journal of Catholic Higher Education," Fr. John Jenkins, President of the University of Notre Dame, in the United States, tackles the question of the very role and promise of Catholic universities in our time.

He begins by noting that many critics inside the Church and the Catholic academy have lamented that the university, like the Church, had in the past century built a unique and important framework for its intellectual contribution and style out of a single philosophical approach, neo-scholasticism. It was Pope Leo XII's encyclical, "Aeterni Patris," that proposed that the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas become the official system. Even today, Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict the XVI have been Thomists. "Aeterni Patris" was designed to shore up Catholic teaching against modernism, a collection of false theoretical movements of the 19th and 20th century. "Aeterni Patris" inspired many great Neoscholastic thinkers, and these in turn led to the great achievements of Vatican II. As Jenkins points out: Neoscholasticism came to have real intellectual vitality—think of Congar, Hans Kung, Karl Rahner, Delubac, and St John Paul II. During the last century, this gave the Catholic intellectual world and Catholic university an intellectual coherence, distinctiveness and clarity that appears to be gone today. What we offered society, in other words, was a coherent system of thought, one available to those who appreciated the clarity and precision of Thomism. We found ourselves speaking mostly to ourselves, however.

At least two developments began to tear into this once unrivaled terrain. The first was the social encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII, the same Pope who fixed neoscholastic thought as THE way to understand reality. His tackling of the major issues of the day in terms that drew on experience of the worker changed the way theology addressed the issue. Later encyclicals expanded the treasury of Catholic social teaching, down to the most recent Encyclical, which seems to be welcomed by everyone except threatened financial interests, "Laudato Si".

The second intellectual development that toppled Thomism's single hold on Catholic intellectual life, was the Liberation Theology movement. As you know, this movement introduced a new way of doing theology, one tied to experience, especially with, by and of the poor. Together with its cousin, the Social Encyclicals of the Popes, and fueled by the openness of Vatican II's documents calling for an insertion into the world and its problems, we no longer have a unique philosophical or intellectual system guiding the soul of the Catholic University, its intellectual life and spirit.

Jenkins asks: "Is there an alternative?" That is, can Catholic Universities claim that there is a unique "Catholic approach" to the issues of the day, a Catholic way of proceeding in academic studies? Can we claim that a Catholic university brings something new and unique and needed to the academy? Jenkins, and others, answer affirmatively and point to the clear and distinctive treasury that is our Catholic intellectual heritage, especially as applied in the social arena. Catholic values and teachings,

with their deep theological roots, today guide us and distinguish us in our service to society and promotion of the greater good.

What are these key beliefs and values appropriated from this tradition that mark the Catholic university? Let me mention six.

We stand for and assume (1) the dignity and value of human life; (2) the primacy of the common good in the social order and the need for solidarity among all peoples, (3) the central role of the family in society, (4) the sanctity of creation and necessity it be cared for and not merely appropriated, (5) the proper limits of military action and the use of lethal force in conflict resolution, (6) the value of artistic expression in all cultures. This is simply a beginning list, something to be expanded and precisely described as our manifesto, our creed, our intellectual foundation and starting point.

Not all faculties have to adhere to these teachings and values. But, these and other values, which we can add, provide a framework and a value proposition that gives the Catholic university its distinctive character and witness value. These values can and should guide curriculum formation, program development and the formation of students. Taken together, they constitute an antidote to the often nihilistic and cynical approach of the post-modern academic.

It strikes me that what is important about a set of values such as these is that they are not “closed” positions. Our teaching on the environment, on war and the use of new weaponry, on the family and its forms, are all open to further study, debate and scrutiny. Such explicit “starting points” may leave some uncomfortable, especially those who insist on a monolithic or uniform approach to truth, or to those who fear a new set of obligations imposed from “without.” But, the values and assumptions just articulated are indeed justifiable in the philosophical and theological realm. They give us a unique identity and a way of connecting with colleagues in other religions, and with other philosophical systems. These fundamental commitments also give direction to what research we prize, what programs we support, what we do in the curriculum, what awards we bestow—while allowing for expansion and differences of opinion.

To sum up, our world today is shaped more and more by rival systems and views—in academic discourse, in politics and economics, in culture. The Catholic intellectual heritage allows for vigorous debate but it stands for clear principles that flow from our core beliefs and teaching—the Trinity, our Redemption in Christ, the Incarnation—but the values emanating from these core beliefs are accessible to all men and women of good will.

The characteristics that mark great universities: academic freedom, merit in admission and faculty advancement, shared responsibility for decision-making in the academic arena, and the importance of human contact between teacher and student, plus our own care for the whole person and service to society and Church keep us focused on building the kind of institution that GE dreamed of. The repository of values that have been articulated in Catholic Social Thought can be for us a way to distinguish our contribution to the world of academia, to science and humanities and the professions.

As we close the anniversary celebration of “Gravissimus Educationis” and “Ex Corde Ecclesiae,” it is clear to me we have made considerable progress toward realizing the dream of the Council Fathers, and much work yet to do. We should not be discouraged as higher education becomes more competitive and the world more exacting. I think we have something unique and needed to offer. The

next document should not come from the Church, but from us who might more clearly, resolutely and precisely claim the principles that guide our intellectual project.

Thank you.