

Telling the Truth to Power

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This paper is quite different from that I proposed in the abstract accepted for this conference. My apologies. I had originally thought to critique the wealth and power of American higher education. But as I attempted to draft the paper, I found it simply would not write. As I reread *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and went over the data I thought to present, they provided a picture that did not well sharpen the axe I had intended to grind. Instead they invited me to return to the amateur sociology I had employed in a previous paper. This paper turns out to be a sequel to one I gave at the Culture of Life Conference here at Notre Dame three years ago. That paper argued that, while many institutions of higher education developed a more internally diverse student body – including women, more minority students, and non-traditional age students – the field of higher education has become less diverse with the decline in the number and enrollment in historically black and women's colleges. This paper strikes a happier note in exploring some of the diversity that has developed among Catholic institutions in recent years.

As *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* reminds us, the Catholic university is part of the university culture in whatever time and place it exists. And over time and place, university cultures have differed widely. In the United States today, the university has become a culturally powerful institution. Reflecting on that power means reflecting on the potential for good and evil. Such reflection is too important to be left to professional sociologists or policy types in the higher education establishment. It is a suitable occupation for all of us in higher education, even philosophers.

In this paper I will reflect on three aspects of current American colleges and universities: their wealth, their research, and their impact on the character of students. In each case I will suggest how Catholic institutions have an opportunity to provide a different slant by virtue of their religious character. And I will argue that the increased diversity among Catholic institutions in America provides us with an opportunity to be close to the heart of the church even beyond what *Ex Corde* recognizes.

Wealth

One obvious fact about higher education in America is its collective wealth. The endowment of the twenty-five wealthiest colleges and universities totals over 125 billion dollars. TIAA-CREF, the retirement system serving most college and university employees, boasts assets over 300 billion dollars. A college education is widely taken to be the key to financial success and social mobility. Even more than buying a house and next only to saving for retirement, parents are urged to save for their children's higher education.

The data that follows come from standard sources: *Peterson's Four Year Colleges 2005*, *Barron's College Guide 2005*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. It seems remarkable to me that the data given in these sources contains so many discrepancies, although, given the

obvious contrasts drawn in this paper, the differences are not significant.

I hope no one is surprised that the wealth in higher education is very unevenly distributed. Only one Catholic school (Notre Dame) is among the top 25 in endowment, one more (Boston College) falls in the next 25, and three more occupy places in the top 100 (St. Louis, Georgetown, and Santa Clara). Based on the sources just mentioned, here are some data on Notre Dame: its endowment is 3.1 billion dollars; it has 8300 undergraduates and 3100 graduate and professional students, virtually all full-time; its faculty, again almost all full-time, numbers 760; the AAUP ranking for its faculty compensation is above the eightieth percentile in all ranks. Tuition is \$27,100.

For contrast, here are data on two other Catholic schools. The College of New Rochelle (henceforth CNR) in New York is the largest women's college in the country. Its endowment is 15 million dollars (one-half of one percent of Notre Dame's); between its traditional college and its School of New Resources it enrolls about 4500 full-time undergraduates, 725 part-time undergraduates, 1350 graduate students; the schools together list a full-time faculty of 100; the majority of undergraduates (3750 students) are enrolled in the School of New Resources. 82 percent of these students are African-American; 13 percent are Hispanic. Tuition is \$5,450. Although it does not qualify as an historically Black institution, New Rochelle has one of the largest predominantly African American student bodies.

Alverno College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin is a much smaller school. Its endowment is 18 million dollars; it enrolls 1200 full-time and 750 part-time students; it has a full-time faculty of 100, 46 percent of whom hold a terminal degree; the AAUP ranking for faculty salaries is in the bottom 20th percentile. Tuition is \$13,500. Alverno's claim to excellence is its learning program that requires students to "integrate accomplishment in required areas of knowledge with the achievement of required competence levels in the following 8 core abilities: communication, analysis, problem solving, valuing in decision-making, social interaction, developing a global perspective, effective citizenship, and aesthetic engagement." [Barron's]

The history of CNR and Alverno is typical of almost all Catholic women's colleges. (Saint Mary's, where I am on the faculty, is one of the few exceptions.) These schools have developed from relatively cloistered schools for middle and working class white Catholic women into schools that serve poor African American and other minority women. A recent story in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, recounting the history of Trinity College in Washington, D.C., documents these changes: "All-women's institutions thrived for decades, and by the 1960s – the high point of single sex women's higher education – there were 300 such colleges, 190 of them Roman Catholic. . . . Today 66 women's colleges remain, fewer than 20 of them Catholic institutions." [3/25/05, A26] Beginning in the 1970s with virtually all colleges, including Catholic men's colleges, going coed, there was no longer enrollment to support traditional women's liberal arts education. As *The Chronicle* article makes clear, these changes to serving a different population have not always been welcome. Quoting a disgruntled alumna, "In no way, shape or form' . . . was the institution by then the same one that she had attended. Trinity had become, she asserts in a recent interview, 'a third-rate adult learning center.'"

In *Ex Corde* Pope John Paul offers some response to this unhappy Trinity graduate. “In addition to Catholic Universities, I also turn to the many Catholic Institutions of higher education. According to their nature and proper objectives, they share some or all of the characteristics of a University and they offer their own contribution to the Church and to society, whether through research, education, or professional training. While this document specifically concerns Catholic Universities, it is also meant to include all Catholic institutions of higher education engaged in instilling the Gospel message of Christ in souls and cultures.” [#10] To translate this text into a response, Trinity may have become an adult learning center, but that does not mean it had abandoned higher education and it especially does not mean that it is third rate.

In a notable column in the *New York Times* [“Karl’s New Manifesto,” 5/29/2005], David Brooks reflected on the class structure of American higher education. In the style of Karl Marx’s *Manifesto*, Brooks wrote:

The information age elite exercises artful dominion of the means of production, the education system. The median family income of a Harvard student is \$150,000. According to the Educational Testing Service, only 3 percent of freshmen at the top 146 colleges come from the poorest quarter of the population. The educated class ostentatiously offers financial aid to poor students who attend these colleges and then rigs the admission criteria to ensure that only a small, co-optable portion of them can get in.

The educated class reaps the benefits of the modern economy – seizing for itself most of the income gains of the past decades – and then ruthlessly exploits its position to ensure the continued dominance of its class.

For all the high toned talk of diversity and multiculturalism at well endowed institutions, Brooks documents that they increasingly lack the diversity, especially the class diversity, they espouse. In terms of genuine cultural interaction, many less prestigious schools are doing the heavy lifting. As *Ex Corde* observes: “Through the encounter which it establishes between the unfathomable richness of the salvific message of the Gospel and the variety and immensity of the fields of knowledge in which that richness is incarnated by it, a Catholic University enables the Church to institute an incomparably fertile dialogue with people of every culture.” [#6] I would argue that the elite institutions are not nearly as engaged with the poor, with Hispanic culture or with African American students as are such schools as Trinity, Alverno, and CNR.

This essay focuses on extremes, in this case on extremes of wealth and poverty. I do not take this to mean, no matter how tempting the thought as I bicycle through the ostentatious new campus gateway on Notre Dame Avenue, that this university should abandon its riches to serve the urban poor. It might do more than it does, as almost everyone on this campus would grant. But its mission is providing a Catholic presence among the elite research institutions. It is alone in providing a religious presence among the top 25 in endowment and *U.S. News* ranking, and its presence among the leading research institutions is an irreplaceable and wonderful contribution. Nor do I think that Alverno and CNR should abandon their mission to those disenfranchised by the American educational establishment. They also provide an irreplaceable educational opportunity. There is a healthy and wonderful diversity in Catholic higher education, and it would benefit the church to recognize and celebrate that fact.

More than celebrate this diversity, Catholic institutions should take advantage of it. Notre Dame and other Catholic research universities could offer summer seminar for faculty and students at smaller Catholic institutions providing opportunities for research and specialized learning. They would receive in turn an opportunity to recruit minority students for their graduate programs. The beneficence is not at all a one way street. Especially the small colleges located in major cities such as Washington, D.C. and New York could offer geographically isolated universities such as Notre Dame an urban campus from which to enjoy the opportunities of major American cities. Their setting could also provide a locale for social science studies of race, poverty and ethnic studies. As John Paul put it in Article 7 of the norms to guide Catholic universities: “In order to confront the complex problems facing modern society, and in order to strengthen the Catholic identity of the institutions, regional, national and international cooperation is to be promoted in research, teaching, and other university activities among all Catholic Universities . . . “ [Article 7, Cooperation, #1]

Research

As the late pope rather plainly puts it, the Catholic university is a place of research. [#15] And, as he observes in several places, research has its own imperatives and autonomy. [#29, #46] But the research agenda of the contemporary American university is driven by a lot more than the imperatives of autonomous academic disciplines. Much of the support for research, both basic and applied, comes from outside the university, above all from government and corporations. To my knowledge, the church hierarchy is not a substantial source of research funding. And it seems to me that there is much in the social sciences, especially in economics, that could help the social teaching of the church to come alive in the modern American economy.

Father Theodore Hesburgh, president emeritus of Notre Dame, has famously remarked that the Catholic university is “the place where the church does its thinking.” In the proper and widest sense of church, church as a community of believers, this remark can be well supported. Many of the thoughtful Catholics who now exercise leadership in parishes and diocesan offices are graduates and closely connected with Catholic colleges. But of the priests and bishops, few are. The church as ecclesiastical hierarchy does not seem much engaged with the research activity of Catholic universities. When the bishops do engage, it seems most often to be with concern for the orthodoxy of the theology department or the suitability of theatrical performances. As I argued above, there is great potential for research in the social sciences that could guide creative thought in making the social justice teaching of the church relevant to current economic conditions, to understanding poverty local and worldwide, and to promoting peace and international cooperation.

Building Character

In another recent column in *The New York Times* [“Stressed for Success,” 3/30/2004], David Brooks laments the decline of character education in American colleges. As I think about this issue, I have Tom Wolfe’s novel *I Am Charlotte Simmons* on one side of my desk and on the other a special issue of the *Observer* -- Saint Mary’s and Notre Dame’s student newspaper.

Wolfe's novel paints a picture of morally sordid and intellectually vapid campus life. The *Observer* issue identifies over one hundred agencies at which student volunteers are active. It is popular among the humanities professoriate to bemoan the pre- and actual professionalism of today's students with their accompanying lack of enthusiasm for humanistic studies. As Mark Edmundson puts it in his provocative book *Why Read?*:

The students who enter my classes on day one are generally devotees of spectatorship and consumer-cool. Whether they're sorority-fraternity denizens, piercer-tattooers, gay or straight, black or white, they are, nearly across the board, very, very self-contained. On good days, there's a light, appealing glow; on bad days, shuffling disgruntlement. But there is little fire, little force of spirit or mind in evidence.

The puzzling thing about these descriptions is that they all ring true. The frat parties and drinking into mindlessness go on. So do all of the marvelously helpful things that students do. And some students do both. What is missing is any unity or coherence of institutional character. In both religious and non-religious schools, there are a myriad of volunteer activities involving a high percentage of the student body. Teach for America and Notre Dame's Alliance for Catholic Education program are swamped with applicants. So it seems clear that there is character building on campus, but I would argue that it has been barred from the classroom.

Return to Mark Edmundson's reflection on how humanities professors view their discipline:

Many [literature professors] now see literature . . . as an outmoded form. It's been surpassed by theory, or rendered obsolete with the passage of time. . . .those who are better disposed to literary art tend to an extreme timidity. They find it embarrassing to talk about poetry as something that can redeem a life, or make it worth living. . . . One admires literary works as aesthetic achievement. But on actual experience, they should have no real bearing at all.

Edmundson's book describes his journey from an aesthetic and entertaining view of teaching to an engaged and life changing view of what should happen in the classroom.

If literature and humanities professors are shy about discussing the virtues, social scientists are opposed in principle. The development of the social sciences as independent disciplines involved their separation from the value orientation of moral philosophy. This separation came hard because many of the first social scientists were also social reformers. Albion Small, who founded at Chicago the first graduate department of sociology, wrote "Sociology in its largest scope, and on its methodological side is merely a moral philosophy conscious of its task, and systematically pursuing knowledge of cause and effect within this process of moral evolution. . . . Science is sterile unless it contributes at last to knowledge of what is worth doing." Three years after Small's death in 1929, William Ogburn said in his presidential address to the American Sociological Association: "Sociology as a science is not interested in making the world a better place in which to live, in encouraging beliefs, in spreading information, in dispensing news, in setting forth impressions of life, in leading the multitudes, or in guiding the ship of state. Science is interested in only one thing, to wit, discovering new knowledge." [from Douglas

Sloan, "The Teaching of Ethics in the American Undergraduate Curriculum," in *Ethics Teaching in Higher Education*, ed. D. Callahan and S. Bok (New York, 1980), p. 18]

While character education is happening at American universities, it has been blocked from the classroom by various educational philosophies. And when it enters the classroom it is sometimes in the grip of heavy handed ideologues of the left or right who work to impose some orthodoxy of virtue. However it is a commonplace of ethics, shared by Aristotle and Kant, that genuine virtue requires an intentional understanding of acting virtuously. The virtues of practical life that are developed elsewhere on campus need to be enriched and supported in the classroom. And such enrichment should be natural and intrinsic to our teaching practices.

Taking our teaching seriously inevitably raises moral questions. One cannot teach Plato's dialogues without realizing that they demand a response from the reader. Laying out the arguments of the dialogues to a large audience violates their structure. One cannot read Freud's discussion of a patient's psychic processes without becoming more conscious of one's own. The sheer size of many schools is an obstacle to the kind of teaching that character education requires.

America is engaged in a great effort in mass higher education. No longer catering only to a leisured elite, we have abandoned that part of the original meaning of "liberal arts" that referred to those people who were free to pursue a life of learning because they did not have to work. I take it to be a blessing that most of our students are preparing for a profession. We have a responsibility to show them, however, that their work can be placed in the context of a good life, a life of virtue both on and off the job. They need the discipline of learning both to act well within their professions and also to pursue the concerns of whole human beings.

Historically, Catholic institutions have been critical of the positivism that spawned the fact/value dichotomy. We also have a literary tradition from Dante to Flannery O'Connor (not to put them on exactly the same level) that is not shy about moral concerns. It might be thought odd that there is so little of this reflection in the pope's encyclical. That is due, I think, to something mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Higher education is very much a function of particular times, places, and cultures. The pope is thinking of a European university context in which the students are older than typical American students, general education has been completed in secondary schools and students are pursuing specialized studies, and the percentage of the early twenty-year-olds in advanced education is relatively small. While there is much in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* that applies to the American situation, there is some with limited applicability and several important things left out.

If my fellow academics will excuse my ending on a positive note, there is joy to be had in the truth about American Catholic higher education. It operates across a wide range of the extremely diverse enterprise that is American higher education. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* sees some of this picture. But those of us who see more of it have even more reason to rejoice.