

John Paul II, Christian faith, and the Soul of the University: Reflections on *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and *Fides et Ratio*¹

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The thesis of this paper is that the renewal of Catholic institutions of higher learning called for by the late philosopher-Pope John Paul II requires revisiting the question of the foundations of the intellectual life in such institutions. Two of the most important writings of John Paul II are central to my reflections on his views regarding the Christian faith as a foundation for intellectual community: first, the 1990 Apostolic Constitution on Catholic universities and colleges, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, which is a seminal statement of Christian higher education; and second, the 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, which in the words of Nicholas Wolterstorff is “a subtle philosophical discourse” that “put[s] in a good word for reason, and for faith as reason’s ally.”² These writings, arguably, shed much light on the theme of this conference, which is to understand both the basis of the university in light of the Christian faith, and, in particular, the current challenges facing Christian universities so as to bring about a renewal of Catholic institutions of higher learning in the third millennium.

My aim is to sketch John Paul’s vision, first, of the nature and mission of a Catholic university and, second, of the ongoing project of Christian intellectual inquiry, especially as it bears upon the twin projects of Christian scholarship and faith/learning integration. Regarding the first, I describe briefly the elements essential to the identity of a Christian institution of higher learning, as well as the role of such universities in faith based, indeed Christ centered cultural transformation. Regarding the second, I sketch two alternative conceptions of intellectual inquiry, namely the modernist and postmodernist conceptions, as well as John Paul’s criticisms of them. In a final section, I will give an outline of his vision of Christian intellectual inquiry and, in turn, the relation between the Christian faith and the intellectual basis of an academic community.

¹ On August 15, 1990, Pope John Paul II issued the apostolic constitution on Catholic higher education, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. This Apostolic Constitution describes the identity and mission of Catholic institutions of higher learning and provides General Norms to assist in realizing its vision. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Encyclical Letter, September 14, 1998. Instead of the standard English translation of the encyclical, I will be using throughout the following new translation: *Restoring Faith in Reason, A New Translation of the Encyclical Letter Faith and Reason of Pope John Paul II*, together with a commentary and discussion, edited by Laurence Paul Hemming and Susan Frank Parsons (London: SCM Press, 2002). Subsequent references both the apostolic constitution and the encyclical will be cited parenthetically in the text.

² For Nicholas Wolterstorff’s review of *Fides et Ratio*, see *Books & Culture*, July/August 1999, 28-30, and for this quote, 28. This review has since been published as “Call to Boldness: A Response to *Fides et Ratio*,” in Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education*, Edited by Clarence W. Joldersma & Gloria Stronks (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 288-294.