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Telling the Truth to Power

When the late Pope John Paul II remarks that “truth [is] the fundamental value without which freedom, justice and human dignity are extinguished,” I take this as in part a reflection on his experience in Nazi later Communist dominated Poland. When powerful institutions suppress truth, especially the truth about themselves, they jeopardize the values that are the very reasons for their existence.

Although lacking the coercive power of government, other social institutions, among them medicine and higher education, have acquired dominating status at the beginning of the 21st century. Many universities are wealthy, and the middle class is cautioned to save for college from the moment of a child's birth. Universities promise constant progress in the arts and sciences, and, in conjunction with their medical schools, sometimes even immortality. Finally, they promise character education guiding their students toward virtuous lives.

As *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* reminds us, the Catholic university is a university and therefore a part, though we hope not a completely assimilated part, of university culture. As part of a now powerful cultural institution, it faces the problems of telling itself and its constituencies the truth about its wealth, the promise of its researches, and the character it strives to build in students. Acknowledging these truths, a few of which this paper explores, requires sometimes painful self-recognition. But the paper argues that, mindful of their long history and their transcendent purpose, Catholic colleges and universities are better situated to accept and enjoy the limits of their truly human power.