

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 6, 2010 at 10:57am

Q & A: CUA President John Garvey

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Distinctly Catholic

We continue the discussion about Pope Benedict's contributions to the life of the Church with comments from Catholic University's new president John Garvey.

This series on Benedict is undertaken to call attention to a new book about the Holy Father published by the USCCB: Pope Benedict XVI: Essays and Reflections on His Papacy.

The question: What is a significant contribution Pope Benedict has made to the life of the Church?

John Garvey:

"Some today question the Church's involvement in education, wondering whether her resources might be better placed elsewhere....All the Church's activities stem from her awareness that she is the bearer of a message which has its origin in God himself: in his goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal himself and to make known the hidden purpose of his will. God's desire to make himself known, and the innate desire of all human beings to know the truth, provide the context for human inquiry into the meaning of life."

Pope Benedict spoke these words when he visited The Catholic University of America in 2008. I would be hard-pressed to find a better explanation of what we do here. Perhaps it is the world's loss that the former cardinal Archbishop of Munich, citing his pastoral duties, once turned down an invitation from Pope John Paul II to become prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education.

In Catholic colleges and universities we strive not only to pursue knowledge, but also to provide the context in which that pursuit is most profitable — one framed by revelation and situated in the historical reality of the incarnation. We were made in God's image and likeness, and saved by his Son's passion

and resurrection. That means that the truths of our faith are intertwined with our being. We cannot discover the full truth about ourselves in a vacuum, and so our knowledge of human nature in the fields of philosophy, literature, and the arts is fortified by ? in fact it requires ? the context that Catholic educational institutions provide their students and faculty every day.

Pope Benedict believes the same of our study of all other natural and supernatural questions. Our faith, far from causing us to fear what we might find if we pursue the truth, compels us to go ?wherever careful analysis of evidence leads [us].? That is why the Pope used his visit here to praise and reaffirm the ?great value of academic freedom.? This freedom is not about the ?aimless pursuit of novelty?; nor does it require us to ignore the context we are charged to provide. Rightly employed, it will not validate ?positions that contradict the faith and the teaching of the Church.? And orthodoxy in our course materials is not sufficient to establish an institution?s Catholic identity.

Our catholicity requires also that ?each and every aspect of [our] learning communities reverberates within the ecclesial life of faith.?

As he has elsewhere, the Pope used the Greek word diakonia(?service?) to describe the Church?s role in bringing truth to all humanity. To put it in old-fashioned terms, Catholic universities are handmaidens whose role is to render this service to the world.?Set against personal struggles, moral confusion and fragmentation of knowledge, the noble goals of scholarship and education, founded on the unity of truth and in service of the person and the community, become an especially powerful instrument of hope.?

It is this hope that explains why the Church involves herself in higher education, and why institutions like The Catholic University of America exist.

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