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2013: The Catholic Academy

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 11, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

We complete our series of looking ahead to the year 2013 by examining the Catholic Academy. Yesterday, the USCCB announced suggestions for the further implementation of Ex Corde Ecclesiae, the result of its ten-year review. They announced the establishment of a working group consisting of bishops and university presidents that will focus on four areas:

1. On going dialogue between bishops and university presidents as to how to cooperate in advancing the mission of the Church;
2. Hiring for mission;
3. Forming trustees, faculty and staff regarding Catholic identity;
4. Addressing the need for improved, accurate and deeper theological and catechetical knowledge through curricular and pastoral means.

The phrase ?Catholic identity? causes some to worry, especially on the left, because they foolishly cede the concept to groups like the Cardinal Newman Society who wish to use it as a cudgel to advance their particular ideological agenda. This is ironic: Identity politics originally emerged on the left, did it not? And, I was always suspicious of it because the word usually means ?sameness? and I actually find people who are complicated to be better evangelizers, more morally astute people, and more interesting intellectuals. (I recall the great line of Leon Wieseltier in his short book ?Against Identity? is which he wrote: ?I hear it said of a man that he leads a double life and I think to myself, ?Just two???)

But, I would like to see those of us who range ourselves on the Catholic left embrace the idea of Catholic identity as our own, and point out the true radicalness of its meaning. Catholic identity cannot be reduced to banning pro-choice speakers from campus. It cannot only mean we have a few more people in our campus chapels than at secular schools or that the moral behavior of our students ? or our faculty ? is a tad more exemplary. Catholic identity must be more than an ?add-on.?

The challenge of a Catholic university today is, as Professor David Schindler wrote in his book ?Heart of the World, Center of the Church?:

?[A]s Catholic, the Catholic university has its origin and most fundamental mission in the universal call to holiness affirmed with special emphasis at the Second Vatican Council. As a university, the Catholic university must carry out this fundamental mission with specific reference to the intelligence. Therefore, to be at once Catholic and a university, the Catholic university must devote itself above all else to what may be called a sanctity of the intelligence?.to think through, and carry out, the implications for the mind of the call to holiness.?

Schindler?s argument is a direct refutation of the view of Catholic academic life espoused by those who signed the Land O? Lakes statement in 1967 which emphasized the institutional autonomy of the modern Catholic university. (I confess, when I read the word ?autonomy? these days, I grow suspicious!) ?The Catholic university adds to the basic idea of a modern university distinctive characteristics which round out and fulfill that idea,? read the Land O? Lakes statement, which, in its way, illustrates the same ?add-on? quality I find in

the Cardinal Newman Society approach. The same ?add-on? approach can be found in this statement of Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, a man for whom I have the greatest respect but who got this wrong. He wrote, ?One may add descriptive adjectives to this or that university, calling it public or private, Catholic or Protestant, British or American, but the university must first and foremost be a university, or else the thing that the qualifiers qualify is something, but not a university.? It may be that we reduce Catholicism to an adjective in the phrase ?Catholic university? but we, as Catholics, can never forget that for us, Catholic is always the noun which is qualified by other considerations. Hesburgh got the cart before the horse.

I was five years old when the Land O? Lakes statement came out. I suspect had I been a bit older, I would not have perceived its call for institutional autonomy as a problem. But, I have come to see the problems in all such dualistic approaches that posit the university, or the economy, or politics, must be understood first and foremost on their own terms and then modified by our faith. The problem with modern culture, in its intellectual, economic and political manifestations, is prior, more foundational. In exiling the transcendent to the private realm, in reducing religion to a nice add-on, we miss the fundamental differences between a secular worldview and a Catholic one.

Let us turn to the Council for insight, specifically Gaudium et Spes 22: ?The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear. It is not surprising, then, that in Him all the aforementioned truths find their root and attain their crown.? These words are undoubtedly a critical hermeneutical key for Catholic anthropology in the post-conciliar era. They are the most-quoted conciliar text in the various encyclicals of Pope John Paul II. The words are pulled almost exactly from Henri de Lubac. They defeat all dualisms at their core. Catholicism is not an add-on. ?In Him all the aforementioned truths find their root and attain their crown.?

Now, you may say, ?Fine, Michael Sean, let?s only hire Communio theologians for our universities, but my kid studies biology and I don?t see what all this has to do her course of studies!? Quite the contrary. It is true indeed that studying the anatomy of animals in a Catholic laboratory should not yield results different from those that emerge from a secular laboratory. But, only in a Catholic laboratory would the significance of those results be properly placed. I have written frequently in the last year about the danger of scientism. We saw this in the debate about making emergency contraception available to girls as young as 11 years old without a prescription. The medical experts who advise the Department of Health and Human Services recommended that, on purely scientific grounds, such a policy be enacted. The dismal Secretary of HHS, Mrs. Sebelius, agreed. But, President Obama, who is father to a teenage girl and a soon-to-be teenage girl grasped that the medical experts were wrong. They had isolated their data from the human reality: An 11 year old girl who needs emergency contraception needs a whole lot more than a prescription!

Another instance of science claiming to determine its own significance was the pernicious book ?The Bell Curve? which demonstrated with graphs and charts and research out the wazoo that there was a genetic factor in what the scientist authors ascertained was the intellectual differences of the races. I am not in a position to evaluate the ?science? of the book, but I again turn to Wieseltier who wrote at the time: ?There is not a chart in the world that can explain the significance of charts in the world.? That is to say, even with all their data, the authors of ?The Bell Curve? focused on certain studies as authoritative and ignored other human factors that are more difficult to measure than IQ. The conclusions they achieved may have been ?true? in some sense, but they were so obviously and obnoxiously wrong in other senses, and it is a philosophic, or theological, not a scientific determination that gets to decide the difference.

It was announced yesterday that my own alma mater, the Catholic University of America, is going to start a business school. I am glad of it and I hope that CUA, which has been at the forefront of the Catholic identity

discussion, will not be content to have robust classes in ethics for businesspeople. This summer I was speaking with an intellectual whom I had never met but long admired and he said to me, ?Michael Sean, 70% of our economic activity is consumption. That is not sustainable economically, environmentally or morally, and the Catholic Church is the only intellectual tradition that even knows how to ask the right questions in the face of such a challenge.? That is the kind of question a truly Catholic business school needs to ask. I hope that some donor will give CUA buckets of money for the new school, and it will be named after her. But, in case no single donor is forthcoming, I suggest CUA call the new school ?The Dorothy Day School of Business.? It was she who called capitalism a ?filthy, rotten system.? A truly Catholic business school will not only wrestle with economic forecasts, it will wrestle with Gaudium et Spes 22, and all the implications that chapter has for the economic field.

So, I hope that as the USCCB continues its implementation of Ex Corde Ecclesiae, it will not be afraid to go radical, to the core. And, I hope that Catholic university administrators and scholars will realize how challenging the anthropology of Gaudium et Spes 22 is, not only for the theology faculty, but for all the disciplines of a modern university. It seems to me that our modern secular universities offer many things, but comprehension, the ability to see the whole, or as much of the whole as it is given us humans to see, that seems to me to be lost in the modern academy. It is up to the Catholic Academy to recapture that sense of reason which animated the truly great intellectual achievements of the past. It is up to the Catholic Academy to confront the deepest challenges our culture faces, our economic, political, intellectual challenges. And, it is up to the Catholic Academy to tease out what it means to sanctify the intellect, not just to the virtues, important though they are, but to the radical claim that ?only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light,? and to spread that light into every field of intellectual inquiry.

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