

Catholicism, the Intellectual Life, and the Academic Vocation:
Tradition and Renewal

David J. O'Brien
Loyola Professor of Roman Catholic Studies
College of the Holy Cross

PRESENTED TO

C

Welcome also to Holy Cross. I was not present at its creation in 1843 but, through an odd, or oddly providential set of circumstances, I have been here since 1969. I will tell some stories

well as semi-public and private benefactions. Our institutions are expected in return to serve the public interest, the common good, and so are we. Civic, or could we say political, responsibility is a fact and not an option, though we all worry when talk turns to the politics of knowledge. Once again, do I leave civic and political responsibilities behind when I put on my professional robes? Not quite, but on my bulletin board in O’Kane 364 down the hall I post a bumper sticker that reads “TRUST ME---I’m not into Politics or Religion.”

Finally our particular colleges and universities have a third set of responsibilities because they profess to be Catholic, and some make that commitment concrete through vital connections with religious communities of women or men, in our case the Jesuits. Our institutions almost all fiercely defend their institutional autonomy against any effort to exert control from the outside, political or ecclesiastical, but, with the church as with the public, they freely acknowledge genuine responsibilities and attempt to act on them. In our Catholic case our connection to the church can at times seem burdensome, challenging, but at times disrespecting, our professional and civic obligations. So, in our human way, we sometimes minimize its importance in order to avoid conflict. But on our better days we try to turn the Catholic and Jesuit heritage, and our living connections with the church and the Society of Jesus, into assets that enrich our vocations (Tom has just returned from leading a faculty group on an Ignatian pilgrimage through Spain and Italy; one of my young department colleagues said yesterday that the experience far exceeded her expectations. Later I hope to learn how. I have benefited in my own life from multiple connections with Catholic ministries). But, with the church as with the government, collaboration is a two way street and external authorities do not always make it easy for us, and we at times may not make it easy for them.

So this institutional balancing of academic, political and religious responsibilities has a personal counterpart, doesn’t it? Our students in their future will similarly have to balance professional, civic and moral and religious responsibilities, and we hope to help them do that with intelligence and integrity. We hope they will be competent professionals, conscientious citizens, intelligent disciples. And our hope for them expresses our aspirations for ourselves. All of us are at once scholars and teachers, citizens of complicated civic communities, and, in some cases, active participants in communities of faith, in all cases people of conscience and commitment. What the second Vatican Council said of ordinary Catholics could be said with only slight modifications of all of us: “the laity, by their very vocation, seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family, and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven.” (LG par 29). Weaving that web is another name for vocation. I am sure that Tom and the Collegium board hope that we might be better able to do that weaving for having been here together.

Let me say a few words about this weaving as we have thought about it here at Holy Cross. I take as my text the College Mission Statement, whose logic I hope you find helpful.

When we set out fifteen years ago to write a Mission Statement we made several preliminary decisions. First we wanted to develop a statement that actually reflected the experience and especially the aspirations of the people who make up the Holy Cross community. Given our concern at the time to improve the quality of our collegiate governance, we focused in particular

on faculty and professional staff, but we consulted as well with students, alumni, benefactors, trustees and the Jesuit community. After four years of dialogue and pilot planning the statement eventually was approved by vote of our Faculty Assembly and Board of Trustees. Secondly, we made a deliberate decision to avoid questions of uniqueness. We would affirm what we thought we should affirm and, if other colleges and universities made similar affirmations, so much the better. This was not a marketing or boundary-setting device. And third we would honor those three sets of responsibilities, academic, civic and religious, and attend to how those responsibilities were being expressed as invitations by the Church and the Society of Jesus. In retrospect, I think without knowing it, we practiced a kind of academic, social and ecclesiastical solidarity learned directly or indirectly from the second Vatican Council, whose "Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World" has been rightly called the magna carta of contemporary Catholic intellectual life and higher education.

Third, we should

create: "a spirit of dialogue and acceptance of invitations to dialogue" (about knowledge and community)

And their work, their work, their work

liberal learning and with which all of us hope to be engaged. If participants in Tom's Ignatian pilgrimage drop by, I suspect they will report intense reflection on basic human questions, only secondarily dialogue about the presence or absence of Catholic commitments.

For us in Jesuit higher education, there is a characteristic link of meaning and mutual obligation, with special reference to our obligations with those who are impoverished. As one non-religious professor said as we developed the Mission Statement, at this Jesuit school someone is always placing on the table the question of God and the question of the poor. This experience reflects the decision of the Society of Jesus to locate all their ministries within an option for the poor and to think always of faith and justice as inextricably entwined with each other. That commitment finds expression in memories of slain Jesuits in El Salvador, in a remarkable annual pilgrimage of students and staff to Fort Benning, and in a great variety of educational and community service initiatives.

Yet,

historic moments, he delivered a message of hope aimed precisely at the despair Hollenbach sees beneath the surface of academic life. A religious sister and distinguished scholar told me recently that she was a college student on Boston Common when Pope John Paul II first visited our country. In the rain she heard his words “do not surrender to indifference” and they stayed with her as she discerned and eventually practiced her vocation.

So of course the great religious questions belong in the conversation, and our dialogues must always be open to that sense of the whole which opens us to the possibility of our common humanity. This sounds simple enough, but of course it’s not. Many of you may have found your vocation as undergraduates in courses where questions of meaning and value were valued and religious options were respected. But I suspect that in graduate school many were encouraged to leave religion behind. Historian George Marsden has laid out how American higher education at the turn of the last century cut its ties to the churches and moved theology off campus and into the divinity school. James Burtchaell and other critics believe that Catholic colleges and

So, we come to the Catholic plank of the Holy Cross Statement: the need to insure the presence of a vital Catholic intellectual life on and off campus. Perhaps it is not properly located, coming after, and in support of, the wider mission objectives of fundamental questions and broad religious inquiry. But we think the location is right. At the level of college and university

intellectual resources of Catholicism and out into the larger world of modern knowledge, so as to bring each to bear upon the other." In the end, that argument drew Turner to Notre Dame and his development of the Erasmus Institute program of fellowships and conference to encourage scholars to seek assistance with significant issues in the resources of Christian, Jewish and Islamic intellectual traditions.

Just a few weeks ago Protestant historian Nathan Hatch focused precisely on intellectual solidarity as he prepared to leave his position as Provost at Notre Dame to become President of Wake Forest. "While I am deeply aware of the struggles and failures of Catholic institutions and of the powerful secular undertow in academic life, what I find remarkable is how creative and intentional these communities have become in renewing their Catholic identity.....The generosity of American Catholics has propelled many institutions to a competitive academic level, bolstering endowments, facilities, faculty support and financial aid. Catholics and non-Catholics alike are attracted to these academic communities where religion is taken seriously and is studied and practiced intelligently.....Even more, Catholic higher education has an important role to play as the United States and other nations face the uncomfortable realities of the 21st century....Catholic universities have not given up the dream of linking intellectual and moral purpose. They provide a middle ground where vital religious traditions can engage modern thought in a climate of academic freedom....Catholic universities face stiff challenges if they are to prosper as genuinely Catholic and remain accountable to the highest standards of scholarship....Most important they have to recruit Catholic intellectuals and other faculty members who are committed to the august tradition of 'faith seeking understanding'". (Chronicle 5/6/05) That I suppose is where Tom Landy's invitation comes from, and where you come in.

I hope all this suggests that the Collegium invitation, like the Holy Cross invitation, is inclusive, welcoming everyone into the dialogue about fundamental human questions and the academic study of religion, while recognizing our specific responsibility to nourish and sustain a rich Catholic intellectual community. The link is that spirit of solidarity, itself turning on recognition that in the end we are all in the same boat. Thomas Merton is helpful here. The continuity of his life was the active seeking self, a personal, spiritual and intellectual preoccupation that informed his poetry and art as well as his essays and forecast the religious world Catholics would find as they left their subcultures behind and made the modern world their own. Once Merton regarded other "children of the modern world" as corrupted by pride and self-assertion, but later, like Hollenbach two decades later, he feared that they lived at the precipice of meaninglessness. And he knew with all that was in him that there was meaning to be found first of all not in Catholicism but in the God available in solitude in the depths of the human heart and at the heart of the world. Finding God was not easy in the busy marketplace or the hermits cabin. In the years after Vatican II it was especially difficult, Merton thought, because Christian communities that once could be taken for granted had to be rebuilt and renewed. "The times are difficult," he wrote in a Christmas letter toward the end of his life. "They call for courage and faith. Faith is in e5.5(e)5.5(

language of modern man" and there is danger of "driving him deeper into despair, simply by convincing him that we belong to an entirely different world." The monk, Merton argued, would have to speak to those outside the monastery "as brothers, as people who are in very much the same difficulties as he is, as people who suffer much of what he suffers, though we are immensely privileged to be exempt from so many, so very many of his responsibilities and sufferings." Others might go to the people of the world as good Samaritans, but for Merton "myself and my brother in the world are just two men who have fallen among thieves and do our best to get each other out of the ditch."

In that spirit Collegium's invitation may be a sign of the times. This spring the BBC presented a series of reality television presentations about firefighter ~~A~~-holicued,