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What Happened to the Catholic University?

I begin with a sampling of dogmatic opinions which I have heard professors and administrators repeatedly assert at the Jesuit University where I teach. Such assertions indicate what has happened to the Catholic university. These assertions, by the way, were not uttered by adjunct faculty, or others just passing through the university. They were pronounced by deans, presidents, and tenured faculty. Here is a sampling:

1. The task of Catholic education, like all schooling, is not to teach *what* to think but to teach *how* to think.
2. Unless something is measurable by the natural or social sciences, it cannot be known.
3. If you want to understand education, study the brain. Science is coming to understand that the human mind is nothing but the central nervous system. The future of education is contained in neuroscience—nothing else.
4. The measure of a moral human being is to follow one's conscience.
5. The purpose of education is simple: to promote social justice.
6. Our aim as faculty is to instill in our students the virtue of tolerance. Without it, we cannot produce leaders for a progressive society.
7. What matters is diversity. In diversity is our strength.
8. As human beings have progressed, they have become more secularized. What does that tell you about the importance of religion?
9. Nobody knows what the truth is. It's sheer hubris to proclaim truth in the classroom. That's not education. That's indoctrination!

Needless to say, one doesn't have to visit my campus to hear these and similar assertions. One can hear these nostrums spoken at almost every university. But that such declarations occur at Catholic universities indicate that, in my judgment, Catholic education today is suffering from an identity-crisis. As the Catholic university has become indifferent to its identity, it has predictably declined. Catholic educators are supposed to have the knowledge and will to defend Catholic wisdom. But for a variety of reasons there have been compromises and confusions seducing Catholic educators to abandon some of the essentials of Catholic wisdom. As a result, they blithely make the statements I mentioned at the start of this lecture.

Do not misunderstand. I am not judging anyone's faith or piety. Strictly speaking, the crisis of which I speak is not a crisis of faith. As Peter Redpath has remarked, the crisis of Christendom is not that we have lost our faith. No, the crisis is that we have lost our minds. We have forgotten St. Thomas Aquinas' observation that reason is the best friend that faith ever had. Modern thought has neglected and disordered reason. Since sound education must inform and enrich the life of a human being, who is a rational animal, when culture disorders our intellect, education fails. We need educators who can address this disorder and correct it. Without a critical mass of educators on Catholic campuses today who have the training and the willingness to defend Catholic wisdom, Catholic education cannot exist. In short, what is needed are educators trained in what I will call "The Catholic worldview." By the Catholic worldview I mean a deposit of wisdom developed over millennia by Catholic thinkers. This is a vision of knowledge confident that faith and reason are friends, not enemies. This is a vision secure in knowing that anything genuinely true is compatible with the Catholic worldview. God is ultimately the source of this wisdom, and since God is Truth, and the author of all truths, anything true is compatible with the Catholic worldview. I believe that the chief principles of this worldview were crystallized and justified in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. The maintenance and integrity of a Catholic university

depends on its palpable commitment to the Catholic worldview. As this commitment has waned, so has the identity of Catholic universities.

To clarify what I'm trying to say, let me define a worldview. A worldview endeavors to understand, as comprehensively as possible, given the limitations of human knowledge, reality and human nature. Accordingly, a worldview involves broad claims about knowledge, reality, human personhood morality, and political life. The Catholic worldview, classically or traditionally, expresses confidence that the human mind can know the external world. As my late friend, John Deely said: this is confidence that our minds can know mind-independent realities, things that exist independently of knowledge, and yet nonetheless can be really known. Such confidence conforms exquisitely with the Catholic worldview, because God has created our minds to grasp that which is intelligible. We may take for granted that we know things, but according to Christian wisdom it is no accident. The word intellect comes from two Latin terms—*intus* (within) and *legere* to read. Intellectual knowledge is akin to reading, the knower's ability to see in an object the intelligibility that God put there. This is why, as Josef Pieper explains in his little book, *The Silence of Saint Thomas*, truth in Christian philosophy must be understood twice: (1) from the standpoint of the human knower, in which our mind conforms to the object known; and (2) from the standpoint of the Divine Knower, in which the natures or intelligibilities in things are put there by God's creative power as expressions of His eternal ideas, determining what things are meant to be. The truth of created things consists in their conformity with the mind of God.

Because the world makes sense, physical science is possible. Hence, as Stanley Jaki, Alfred North Whitehead, Christopher Dawson, and others have observed, this conviction that God purposively created the world so that it makes sense, is the reason physical science emerged in Christian cultures and not out of other societies. Christianity finds nothing disagreeable in scientific method. God could create the universe any way he wanted. Let's run experiments and find out what he did.

Moreover, if physical science is based as it is on causal inference, why can't our cause-effect reasoning give us metaphysical knowledge

as well, including natural reasoning about God's existence and nature? The Catholic worldview, accordingly, is convinced that reason can defend many Christian beliefs and can defend in particular belief in God. Natural reason provides *preambula fidei*, as St. Thomas expressed it. These are truths known independently of faith, which are nonetheless in conformity with faith, and may in religious context even appear in catechism. In other words, metaphysics is possible. And, in general, faith is not divorced from reason; it is indebted to rational support. Christian beliefs like God, immortality, and freedom are demonstrable before the light of natural reason and experience. This confidence in reason to support faith has been a mainstay of Catholic education until recently.

It follows that reality consists of more than matter. God, the infinite spiritual substance, exists. In addition, the Catholic worldview holds that the existence of angels and human souls can be demonstrated. Human life, with its powers of abstract, rational cognition cannot be explained by materialist reductions. Mental life is a mystery that cannot ultimately be captured in the net of physical scientific method. Fourthly, moral life is ordered by an awareness of objectively good and right things. Conscience is not about following one's subjective preferences (what modernists call "values"), but about conforming to what one objectively ought to desire and do. One's moral life ought to be ordered toward the pursuit of real goods (desires which if fulfilled, cannot be bad for a person), as distinct from the pursuit of apparent goods (desires which, if fulfilled, might have the potential to bad for a person). Political life is a further expression of the human person's moral order as a *zōon politikon*, a political animal. There is freedom and dignity in human nature on account of our status as persons, rational agents with free will. We are persons because God is a person (in fact a community of three persons). Accordingly, we are made in his image and likeness. History is a drama in which human persons are expected to become morally admirable, so as to measure up to God's intentions. He will judge us fairly but mercifully. These remarks express the main outline of the Catholic worldview.

Another way to put the Catholic worldview in perspective is to contrast it with the secularist's worldview. Secularism today typically aligns with atheism. Hence, it is skeptical about the possibility of metaphysics, especially with its classical convictions about God, freedom, and immortality. Contrary to Catholic wisdom, secularists tend to regard religion as irrational, the product of emotion, a willfulness to believe something without evidence. With regard to human nature, secularism tends to reduce the human person to an organic machine. Mental life must be activity of the central nervous system, for if secularism allows that mind really exists, and is not reducible to neuronal activity, then it has re-admitted metaphysics (in the form of some kind of mind-body dualism) into its account of human nature. By rejecting metaphysics and by reducing the human person to an animal, it is hard to see how a secularist can believe in an objective morality. Since the secularist's anthropology would rule out free will, he would have to nullify our traditional conception of moral and political life.

This contrast seems clear enough. And yet, when we contemplate the propositions with which I began my lecture, it is somewhat alarming to realize that many of them express platitudes central to secularism. How can this be? How can professors and administrators at a Catholic university blithely commit to judgments that patently contradict the Catholic worldview? The answer lies in ignorance, error, or willful transformation of the identity of the Catholic university. Ignorance often abounds because many faculty today are untrained in the liberal arts, let alone in the subtleties of Christian wisdom. They labor under a caricature of religion and the philosophy of religion. To them religion is an alien landscape. They've landed on this landscape, the Catholic university, without any background preparing them to understand what it is. They are often well-intentioned people, but they don't have the conversance with philosophy and theology to understand the first principles of a Catholic university. Those principles are expressed in the Catholic worldview, which they don't understand.

Then again, some of them are seized by error. Socrates observed that ignorance is relatively easy to remedy, whereas error is not. To

correct ignorance, one fills the absence of knowledge with information. To correct error, one has to laboriously expose why it is wrong, and, subsequently, how it must be replaced with truth. Once the leadership and the faculty are no longer conversant with the first principles of Catholic wisdom, how can they remedy ignorance when it breaks out on campus? Once the leadership and the faculty are no longer trained in justifying and defending Catholic wisdom, how can they diagnose and correct error? Of course, the students suffer from this ignorance and error. We must not lose sight of that sad outcome.

As I stated earlier, many of the educators who populate Catholic universities, including influential professors and administrative leaders, are often well-intentioned, even holy, people. But sadly, many of these well-intentioned souls naively encourage the hiring of faculty and administrators who corrupt the Catholic university. They do this in a spirit of pluralism, rationalizing that their inclusiveness can be demonstrated by letting people who actually despise Catholic wisdom teach in their university classroom. At my own university, I've seen this folly played out time and time again. For example, the Chair of our psychology department, a man who is undoubtedly a devout Catholic, hired an atheist professor some years ago. He publicly congratulated himself for this display of inclusivism and pluralism. Eventually, the atheist professor's influence in the department became so strong, that arguably the department is now populated with apostates and atheists, except for the erstwhile Department Chair, who does not congratulate himself any longer. He is now defensive in his embarrassment that he caused his department to lose its Catholic identity. This kind of episode I have seen repeated across multiple departments. In time, those who are trained to defend Catholic wisdom are effectively marginalized in their influence. They retire and leave the field, and the administrators and faculty who remain don't hire like replacements. In time there is no longer a critical mass of professors to defend Catholic wisdom in the classroom. In fact, the atheists have the critical mass. While the rhetoric in recruitment literature tries to assure prospective students and their

parents that the university self-consciously perpetuates the legacy of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the discerning observer knows this is a fraud.

To bring my discussion to a close, I would like to go back full circle to those dogmatic pronouncements with which I began my lecture. I would like to say something briefly about each of them. These dogmatic pronouncements manifest secular attitudes endemic in today's Catholic universities. They reveal the answer to the question that is the title of my lecture: What happened to the Catholic university? The straightforward answer is that, intentionally or unintentionally, the Catholic university, to a considerable degree, has embraced the secular worldview, thus losing its identity. Let me recall my colleagues' pronouncements. In order that the Catholic worldview have the last word, let me make a brief reply to each.

#1. *The task of Catholic education is not to teach what to think but how to think.* **My reply:** This statement may sound profound, but it actually makes no sense. One cannot determine what method one uses to think intelligently unless one knows the purpose of one's thinking. And to know that purpose, you have to know what you're thinking about.

#2. *Unless something is measurable by the natural or social sciences, it cannot be known.* **My reply:** This proposition, on its own terms, cannot be known, since it is not a judgment that can be verified or falsified by the methods of the empirical sciences. It's a self-refuting claim.

#3. *The future of education is contained in neuroscience, nothing else.* **My reply:** Academics often try to make the incredible seem reasonable by stating it in the language of science. But incredible this statement remains. A neuroscientist can have an exhaustive knowledge of one's brain, but there is no reason to think that that could ever show what one's consciousness is like. Consciousness is personal, private, always involving a subjective point of view. How can a neuroscientist, a third party observer of the brain, access the first person perspective of the knowing subject? I don't see how neuroscience can ever overcome this gulf between first person and third person perspectives.

#4. The measure of a moral human being is to follow one's conscience. **My reply:** As Hannah Arendt makes evident in her report,

“Eichmann in Jerusalem,” evil people can be scrupulous in following the demands of their conscience. If their conscience is malformed by evil, they can’t be moral human beings.

#5. *The purpose of education is social justice.* **My reply:** Certainly, justice as a virtue should be a part of one’s education. Justice is important because a human being is the *zōon politikon* (political animal) that Aristotle described long ago. The individual’s social nature requires that he or she be just, otherwise his life and the life of his community are disordered. Understood in this way, social justice is a redundancy. Justice cannot be applied in one’s life, if one lives in isolation. Whence the expression social justice? Its provenance is in a Marxist (or social constructionist) view of the human condition, according to which justice is a matter of social structures or institutions rather than choices and actions exercised by individual flesh-and-blood persons. “Social justice” is a rhetorical device to smuggle into education an uncritical Marxist or quasi-Marxist account of justice.

#6. *Faculty should aim to instill in their students the virtue of tolerance.* **My reply:** Like justice, the idea of tolerance has been abused and disordered by modern intellectuals, pundits, and educators. Tolerance used to be a property of justice according to which one would get along with people with whom one disagreed on grounds that, if one did not allow such disagreement, the community would suffer even worse outcomes (such as, political or religious strife). But tolerance, in this classical sense, was compatible with actually disagreeing with someone else. Today, however, tolerance indicates that one does not harbor disagreement. To disagree is to be judgmental, and “no judgments” is the watchword of the modern relativist, who masquerades as the paragon of the inclusive and enlightened person. Of course, such relativism cannot be maintained consistently, But in order for this relativism to prevail in the public square, it has to recruit politicians, educators, and culture warriors to excuse political correctness and promote authoritarianism so that society can have order. By this Orwellian twist, tolerance disallows disagreement. In this way, dominant, politically correct or “enlightened” views prevail in the public square, without the demand to debate them.

#7. *What matters is diversity. In diversity is our strength.* **My reply:** On American campuses today diversity is the most vocal mantra. And yet there is virtually no diversity of thought at American universities. Should a Socratic voice enter campus to make the students or faculty uncomfortable by forcing them to confront different or challenging ideas, he or she is condemned as a fascist. In the United States, such controversial intellectuals are sometimes physically assaulted. The students emerge from their “safe spaces” long enough to inflict harm. Nor is tenure a policy to insure diversity—just the opposite. It is a device to give the faculty and administration time to determine whether someone has views that deviate from the status quo. Rank and tenure committees are gatekeepers to keep out the dissenting voices. Homogeneity must triumph at all costs. Furthermore, diversity is often a ploy to advance identity-politics, which divides people into groups and, then, stereotypes the groups. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, diversity of ideas is rare and unwelcome in today’s education establishment.

#8. *The decline of religion, and the corresponding rise of secularism, is a sign of civilizational progress.* **My reply:** Here we have the echoes of Baconian science and Rousseauian progressive politics that resound on university campuses. Baconian science teaches that knowledge resides only in the natural sciences with their power of technical efficiency and technological production. Rousseauian politics teaches that enlightened minds eliminate the vestiges of the past so as to engineer a utopian society. Hence, there is the drive by educators today to deconstruct Western civilization as a sign of enlightened thought.

#9. *Nobody knows what the truth is. Those who claim to teach truth are indoctrinating their students.* **My reply:** Again, we’re on the verge of self-refutation. Besides, I’ve known many professors who indoctrinate their students with this piece of sophistry.

Sadly, the Catholic university is often being led by people who espouse these beliefs. They are the Watchers, the ones in charge. We can only repeat Juvenal’s warning: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* “Who will watch the Watchers?”

The question is what has happened to produce the decline of the Catholic University? Whence the source of the ignorance, error, or malice that has transformed the Catholic university? It is a long story, but I must be brief. What has happened to the Catholic university was prefigured in the fate of other universities. Many prominent Protestant universities withered on the vine in the 20th century as secularism seeped into their campus walls.

Too many Catholic educators are flummoxed by the secular worldview or are intimidated by it, so much so that they actually accept incoherently some of its conclusions. Today so many Catholic educators labor under confusions and sophistries that they cannot provide a convincing or coherent explanation of the Christian worldview. One way to appreciate the content of the Christian worldview is to contrast it with the secularist worldview. I'm generalizing here, and of there are secularists who nuance their position. But as secularism is typically expressed in the public square (that is to say, as secularists actually debate religious thinkers), it differentiates itself from the Christian worldview. With regard to knowledge, secularism tends toward skepticism. Secularists often rely on Hume and Kant to rationalize the limits of knowledge. Their belief that knowledge is limited causes them to doubt whether reason and experience can provide evidential grounds to support religion, specifically whether reason can support our convictions about God, freedom, and immortality. Secularists, as a rule, deny that our knowledge can extend to such objects.

Alvin Plantinga explains that many Christian educators let secularists lead in their schools. As a result, in their effort to be pluralistic and non-judgmental, they risk turning over control of their schools to secularists. {Important: incorporate Bacon and Rousseau a la Koons!—This way you can discuss scientism and progressivism.} Since secularism is a religion, sometimes exercised by zealots, not uncommonly secularists become a fifth column in Christian schools. They have been known to orchestrate a hostile take-over. This is not a far-fetched concern. As a matter of fact, there are many erstwhile Christian schools that re now palpably secularist. American Ivy League schools are cases

in point. Harvard began as a seminary dedicated to preparing men for evangelical service. Thomas Merton, in his classic *The Seven Storey Mountain*, tells of his annoyance, while a student at Columbia, of noticing on buildings and monuments Biblical verses, knowing full-well that God and religion had been effectively exiled from the Columbia classroom. {Don't forget to mention "Swedes and Indians."} Merton, in fact, characterized Columbia as a "big sooty factory." It too began as a seminary. To this day, one can find Biblical inscriptions on buildings and monuments that attest to the school's original religious aims. It is interesting to note that Columbia's secular turn was even palpable during the 1940's when Merton matriculated there. He described it as a "big sooty factory," words intending to connote Blake's condemnation of early industrial England as a place spoiled by "Dark Satanic Mills."

The secularization over the centuries has produced its sad outcome. Francis Canavan, S.J., remarks that today it is possible for a student to go through four or more years of university schooling and never hear God mentioned. This is so, even though America, sociological studies show, is one of the most religious countries in the world. But religion is marginalized in the Academy, as it is in other arms of culture. This fact prompted Peter Berger to observe that, if India is the most religious country in the world, and if Sweden is the least religious, then America is a race of Indians ruled by a race of Swedes. But the Swedes have had their influence on the American Academy, including the Catholic campuses. Canavan astutely observes that this muteness about God has its consequences. The message is conveyed to the student that God is not important for his or her education. After all, isn't school where important things are discussed? If God is neglected wholesale, he must not be important. Canavan thinks that such secular machinations is reinforced by the so-called "separation of Church and State," a mantra for many secularists in America.

Sadly, the incursions of secularism also influence Catholic universities. This secularism advances incrementally, impelling some to prophesy that many, if not most, religious schools will wither on the

vine, going the way of the Ivy League schools. This fate a large number of Protestant schools have already suffered.

My argument is that secularism as a worldview insinuates itself into Catholic universities, influencing actual instruction in the classroom, curricular design, and even campus culture. The influence persists, and without trained faculty and committed leadership to defend boldly Catholic wisdom.

What has happened is something akin to Fabian Socialism. Fabian Socialists argued against the violent revolutionary strategies of the Bolsheviks and Maoists. Instead they recommended almost imperceptible changes in which socialists would infiltrate the traditional institutions of Western society: the schools, the press, the government, the legal profession, even the clergy. By this stealth-strategy, they would eventually achieve a critical mass of socialist activists, sufficient to transform society. In 1948, Norman Thomas said that America would eventually unknowingly adopt socialism under the name of liberalism. Speaking to his generation, Thomas prophesied that the great-grandchildren of those in his audience, would surely be socialists by virtue of the incremental transformations liberalism would cause. Thomas' prediction has arguably come to pass. In 1972 Senator George McGovern ran on a Democratic Party platform of overtly socialist policies. He lost in an epic landslide. But in 2008 Barack Obama took up McGovern's policies and implemented them into his transformation of America. A similar strategy of Fabian Socialism has succeeded in European politics. The hegemony of Brussels bears witness.

My point in this digression is that the transformation of Western society by secularists is analogous to the transformation that has taken place in Catholic universities.

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Summary

The Author notes that Catholic education today is suffering from an identity-crisis. As the Catholic university has become indifferent to its identity, it has predictably declined. Catholic educators are supposed to have the knowledge and will to defend Catholic wisdom. But for a variety of reasons there have been compromises and confusions seducing Catholic educators to abandon some of the essentials of Catholic wisdom. The Author analyzes the thesis that secularism as a worldview insinuates itself into Catholic universities, influencing actual instruction in the classroom, curricular design, and even campus culture. The influence persists, and without trained faculty and committed leadership to defend boldly Catholic wisdom. His point is that the transformation of Western society by secularists is analogous to the transformation that has taken place in Catholic universities.

Key words: Catholic education, Catholic university, identity, Catholic wisdom, secularism