

## The Catholic Intellectual Tradition: A Brief Introduction

Since its beginnings, St. Mary's University has identified itself as an institution built upon the foundations of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. But what is the Catholic Intellectual Tradition? It is common to view tradition as something that is unchanging and inherited. Traditions, however, are also dynamic; they develop and evolve over time and in changed circumstances. Such is the case with the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

From the earliest days of Christianity, there has been a continuous dialogue between faith, reason, and culture. In the second century of the common era, the Christian apologist, Tertullian, asked: "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" The philosopher and theologian Clement of Alexandria responded to Tertullian's insistence that revelation alone should guide the church, by insisting that the tools of classical learning were not only appropriate but necessary to understand and explain the Christian faith and the world in which it is lived.<sup>1</sup> In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Augustine recognized that faith itself seeks understanding and that all intellectual inquiry leads eventually to questions of ultimacy that invite faith responses. Reason, Augustine insisted, clarifies and uplifts faith and faith calls reason to take full account of the pursuit of the common good and the dignity and destiny of the human person. The most probing questions in any discipline are not to be deemed in opposition to faith, but rather, welcomed into the ongoing dialogue between faith and reason.<sup>2</sup> By the 11<sup>th</sup> century, this conversation between faith and reason came to be centred in the universities. Universities emerged in a number of Cathedral towns to satisfy the thirst for knowledge that had arisen in both the Church and society to address the questions and problems of the day.<sup>3</sup> The scholastic philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas understood faith and reason as gifts from God to be used in the search for truth. Aquinas insisted that the search for truth required rigorous conceptual analysis and careful drawing of distinctions. Aquinas' teaching and writing often took the form of explicit disputation; a topic drawn from the tradition was broached in the form of a question, oppositional responses were given and rebutted, and a counterproposal argued. For Aquinas, spirited but respectful dialogue and debate was an essential part of the process of learning and discovery and an expression of Christian humanism.<sup>4</sup> This view was shared by the nineteenth century churchman and scholar, John Henry Newman. In *The Idea of the University*, Newman wrote that the University "is a place where inquiry is pushed forward, and discoveries verified and perfected, and rashness rendered innocuous, and error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge." "As to the range of University teaching," Newman continued, "certainly the very name of University is inconsistent with restrictions of any kind."<sup>5</sup> Because the Catholic Intellectual Tradition is rooted in the ongoing dialogue between faith and reason, it is necessarily a living tradition that has a capacity for both continuity and change. The knowledge and wisdom of the past is passed on, critically examined, reworked, and reappropriated in response to new questions prompted by new experience and evidence and the new insights and arguments that emerge. In this way, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition has always had and continues to have "a growing edge."<sup>6</sup>

Of course, over the long history of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, there have been times when the relationship between faith and reason has been wrought with conflict and both appeared to stand in opposition to one another. As Newman observed: “There may be momentary collisions, awkward appearances, and many forebodings of contrariety.”<sup>7</sup> At its best, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition has, during such periods, encouraged deeper listening and more careful inquiry on both sides, convinced that in the fullness of time the unity of all truth will be seen. The freedom necessary to ask questions, create knowledge, critically engage the tradition, and pursue the truth has always been recognized as a vital part of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. As Pope John Paul II explained in *Ex Corde Ecclesia*, the special intellectual legacy of the Catholic University is “distinguished by its free search for the whole truth about nature, man, and God.” “The Church, “ *Ex Corde* continues, “recognizes the academic freedom of scholars in each discipline” to act “in accordance with its own principles and proper methods.” Scholars are thus free to “scrutinize reality” in “a rigorous and critical fashion” and “so contribute to the treasury of human knowledge.”<sup>8</sup>

Another defining characteristic of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition has been the importance attached to ongoing conversation between disciplines and corroboration among scholars. Troubled by the increasing fragmentation and compartmentalization of knowledge during his own day, Newman decried those “bigots and fanatics” who scorn “all principles and reported facts which do not belong to their own pursuit.” Such persons become so bound by an “absolute conviction” in the correctness of their own “conclusions” that in their pride, they “distrust” all other claims to knowledge. Tied to “one idea” they are unable “to respect, to consult and to aid each other” and thus become unteachable because they lack the humility to learn from others.<sup>9</sup> For Newman “all knowledge is whole and the separate sciences parts of one” since “all branches of knowledge are connected together for the attainment of truth, which is their common end.”<sup>10</sup> “The various disciplines” *Ex Corde* asserts, are thus to be “brought into dialogue for their mutual enhancement.”<sup>11</sup>

For Newman, the object of a liberal education was the “cultivation” of critical, creative, and curious minds. Such an education is its own reward and its benefits to society cannot be practically quantified in terms of economic growth, prosperity or bottom lines.<sup>12</sup> Its true value is to be found in the most precious and necessary, yet intangible, aspects of life—love of humanity, an appreciation of the beauty of the world, a commitment to community, a longing for justice, and a willingness to serve. As James Heft has asserted, “students are here to learn not only how to make a living, but more importantly, how to make a life worth living.” These are the true and lasting fruits of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. Such an education instills not only an ability to “grasp things as they are” and the “power of discriminating between truth and falsehood;” but also the capacity “of arranging things according to their real value.”<sup>13</sup> The faculty of judgment and a concern with the moral and ethical implications of knowledge are thus integral to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. Because the search for knowledge should serve the human person and the common good, it is to be carried out with an abiding attentiveness to the ethical and moral implications of both its methods and discoveries. “The

cause of the human person,” *Ex Corde* concludes, “will only be served if knowledge is joined to conscience” and a commitment to the betterment of humanity.<sup>14</sup> Through conscientious methodology and active engagement with the societal, ethical, and practical implications of learning, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition upholds intellectual integrity and the responsible use of knowledge for the furtherance of the common good. Individuals formed in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition are called to become responsible citizens and servant leaders committed to using their knowledge and skills for the betterment of the human condition.

*Ex Corde* insists that the Catholic Intellectual Tradition “is open to all human experience and is ready to dialogue with and learn from any culture.”<sup>15</sup> By extension, the Catholic University is to be a diverse and welcoming community in which persons of all cultures, backgrounds, and beliefs are invited to participate in a community of conversation committed to building bridges of understanding that respect the inherent worth and dignity of all persons and seeks to serve the common good of humanity. Diversity and openness are not at odds with the Catholic Intellectual Tradition but a necessary condition for a vital intellectual life that seeks to understand all peoples, cultures, and conditions and in the process discover the different ways in which God is at work in the world. Such an education frees us from the myopia and ignorance that causes us to ‘otherize’ those we do not know or understand. To acknowledge such diversity in all its forms is both an intellectual commitment and a social responsibility in our increasingly complex, global and pluralistic world. For Newman, the liberally educated mind “which has been disciplined to the perfection of its powers, which knows, and thinks while it knows, which has learned to leaven the dense mass of facts and events with the elastic force of reason, such an intellect cannot be partial, cannot be exclusive, cannot be impetuous, cannot be at a loss, cannot but be patient, collected, and majestically calm.”<sup>16</sup>

As we have seen, the two thousand year old Catholic Intellectual Tradition is both rich and multifaceted. It is distinguished by its mission to seek what is true, love what is just, and delight in what is beautiful. It does so in a spirit of openness and inclusion that embraces all sources of knowledge and invites all persons into a continuing conversation that seeks to further understanding, build relationships, uplift the condition of humanity, and care for all of creation. As a community of scholars, students, staff, supporters and alumni grounded in this tradition, St. Mary’s is committed to the on-going pursuit of truth, wisdom and knowledge in a spirit of mutual respect and service that seeks to further the common good.

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## Further Reading

Michael J. Buckley, *The Catholic University as Promise and Project: Reflections in a Jesuit Idiom*. Georgetown: Georgetown University Press 1998.

A.Certera and O. Morgan, eds. *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*. Fairfield, CT: Sacred Heart University Press, 2001.

Jean Ehret & Erwin Mode, *The Challenge of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition: Making a Difference in Contemporary Academic Settings*. Munster: LIT Verlag, 2011.

James Heft, *The Future of Catholic Higher Education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Richard M. Liddy, "The Catholic Intellectual Tradition: Achievement and Challenge," in Thomas M. Landy, ed. *As Leaven in the World: Catholic Perspectives on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life*. Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2001.

Michael J. Himes, "'Finding God in All Things': A Sacramental Worldview and Its Effects," in Thomas M. Landy, *As Leaven in the World: Catholic Perspectives on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life*. Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2001.

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<sup>1</sup> On the views of Tertullian see: Timothy Barnes, *Tertullian: A literary and historical study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Eric F. Osborne, . *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003). On the views of Clement of Alexandria see: Eric F. Osborne, *Clement of Alexandria*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Also see: Eric Osborne, "Early Christian Philosophers: Justin, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian" in Graham Oppy and N.N. Trakakis, *Ancient Philosophy of Religion: The History of Western Religion*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 2014), and . H. B. Timothy, "The Early Christian Apologists and Greek Philosophy, exemplified by Irenaeus, Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria," *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, 4<sup>th</sup> series, vol. 73, no. 17 (1975), 203-204.

<sup>2</sup> Tornau, Christian, "Saint Augustine", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/augustine/>>.

<sup>3</sup> On the origins and mission of the medieval university See: A.B. Cobban, "Reflections on the role of medieval universities in society," in L. Smith & B. Ward (Eds.), *Intellectual life in the Middle Ages* (London: Hambledon Press, 1992) 227-241; F.P. Graves, *A history of education during the Middle Ages and the transition to modern times* (New York: Macmillan, 1922); H. Ridder-Symoens ed., *A history of the university in Europe: Vol. 1. Universities in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1992); J. Van Engen, *Learning institutionalized: Teaching in the medieval university* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002); Ian P. Wel, *Intellectual Culture in Medieval Paris: Theologians and the University* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> On the relationship between faith and reason in Aquinas see: Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Creighton Rosental, *Lessons from Aquinas: Resolution of the Problem of Faith and Reason* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2011); John C. Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). On scholastic method see: Frank Rexforth *Knowledge True and Useful: A Cultural History of Early Scholasticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023). On Christian Humanism see: Dominic F. Doyle, *The Promise of Christian Humanism: Thomas Aquinas on Hope* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Newman, *Idea of the University*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Michael J. Buckley, *The Catholic University as Promise and Project: Reflections in a Jesuit Idiom*, (Georgetown, Georgetown University Press, 1998), 23.

<sup>7</sup> Newman, *Idea of the University*, 474.

<sup>8</sup> John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesia*, sec. 15

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<sup>9</sup> Newman, *Idea of the University*, 43.

<sup>10</sup> Newman, *Idea of the University*, 100.

<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesia*, , sec. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Newman, *Idea of the University*, 10-13.

<sup>13</sup> Newman, *Idea of the University*, 145-6.

<sup>14</sup> John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesia*, sec. 18.

<sup>15</sup> John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesia*, sec. 43. See also: Gerald J. Beyer, *Just Universities: Catholic Social Teaching Confronts Corporatized Higher Education* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Newman, *Idea of the University*, 100.