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## EDITORIAL - TRUTH, FREEDOM AND THE CATHOLIC ACADEMY

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ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN A CATHOLIC COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY HAS A THREEFOLD foundation: the duty of all men to seek the truth, especially in what concerns God and His Church,<sup>1</sup> the nature of the university as such, and, since the nature of the university does not exist “as such,” the existential conditions under which the institution was founded.

1. No society or individual can impose truth on an individual. The knowledge of truth can occur only because of a voluntary and free internal act of assent to truth which “imposes itself on the mind of man only in virtue of its own truth, which wins over the mind with both gentleness and power” (*Dignitatis humanae*, #1). Both the nature of knowledge and the solemn duty to seek the truth, as well as the dignity of man, demand the freedom from external coercion and restraint in the pursuit by the individual.

The systematic and critical examination of truth, which is particularly at home in the university, is born out of a reverence for truth as well as out of a more explicit recognition of the duty to pursue the truth which is often given but obscurely and dimly. Such activity, therefore, starts with what is given, aims at its clarification and accepts what follows from an unprejudiced inquiry. By its very nature it is opposed to a so-called critical approach which is born of a general attitude of skepticism and distrust towards what is given and which assumes that the individual is the “measure of all things.”

Academic freedom cannot be reduced to freedom from external restraint and freedom from external coercion. By its very nature the knowledge of truth engages the inner dimension of man.

While knowledge and assent to the truth are inner acts, they are possible only in virtue of a reality which is external to the mind and which stands related to it as an authority validating the claim to truth of what is presented to the mind of man. Thus, *the most fundamental dimension of academic freedom is the inner freedom to submit and become subject to the truth of reality.*

This inner freedom must be explicitly recognized since “there are many who, under the pretext of freedom, seem inclined to reject all submission to authority and make light of the duty of obedience.” It is for this reason that the Second Vatican Council urges everyone, “especially those responsible for educating others, to try to form men with a respect for the moral order who will obey lawful authority and be lovers of true freedom - men that is, who will form their own judgments in the light of truth...” (*Dignitatis humanae*, # 8)

2. Man’s social nature and condition play an important role in the acquisition and growth in knowledge of reality. The value of truth as well as the sense of human dignity which follows its possession engender gratitude and promote a sense of solidarity with the members of the community who have shared their knowledge. The worth and the rank of discovered truth in turn not only engender a spontaneous desire to share but ground the conviction that

truth is universal and should be pursued and embraced by all men. The independence of truth from subjective, social and historical dynamisms is furthermore the indispensable basis and demand for justice among men. Truth is thus a metaphysical basis for a community of persons and, as a thematic object worthy of pursuit for its own sake, it has the power of drawing men together.

The spontaneous gathering of “lovers and seekers” of wisdom can become the basis for a corporate entity, an academy or university, which comes into existence when its members make a commitment to pursue truth in a formal, systematic and critical fashion.

A number of philosophers, each of whom holds the immortality of the soul, for example, may *de facto* constitute an intimate group and enjoy the sense of community, but they do not yet constitute a corporate entity in which certain truths are not merely held in common but are subscribed to as the basis for a formal bond. The subscription to the formal bond constitutes a *de jure* relationship in which the corporate entity and its members have a right to demand compliance with the commitment as a basis of membership. While entry into this community is a free internal decision of each individual, it creates objectively binding claims which must be observed by the members. The rejection of these truth implies a real separation from the corporate entity.

An academy or university is in this sense a community of scholars formally dedicated to the acquisition and transmission of knowledge of being along the “path” or method determined by the formal aspect of the being under investigation. Contemporary expressions such “professional competence” or “scholarly standards of a discipline” presuppose at least a tacit recognition of certain truths about being which establish the methodology of a discipline.

Here it must be noted that an abstract “pursuit of truth” cannot be the basis for a real academic corporate entity. In order to come into real, and not merely a “paper” or “legal” existence, the academic entity must be built on a corporate commitment of its constituting members to a specific truth or body of truths. This point needs particular stress since a widely accepted notion of academic freedom would have it that not even the university may demand of its faculty that it subscribe to any particular truth.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the university could, in this view, demand professional competence and integrity of its fac-

ulty, but the freedom demanded by the “search for truth” would mean that not even the university could demand of it any commitment to a particular truth or body of truths.

The corporate commitment to certain truths does not as such constrain freedom but establishes the basis for inquiry and discussion into an object. There can be no community of research, inquiry and discussion if one member affirms an object and the other denies it.<sup>3</sup>

And finally, the truth to which an individual or university is committed is not a limit to academic freedom but the object and end which makes it meaningful. If someone wills an object and pursues it, it would be nonsensical to say that the object pursued is a limit to one’s freedom.<sup>4</sup> No truths, whether natural or revealed, can be properly considered as a limit to academic freedom. On the contrary, they can only be the objects of a free pursuit.<sup>5</sup>

Certain freedoms as well as certain obligations follow from membership in the academy. *Within* the academy, the scholar must be free to propose theories or hypotheses explaining the accepted and recognized truths. Given the contemporary context it is important to distinguish between hypotheses which explain and hypotheses which explain away. In the latter instance, the proposed hypothesis is such that it denies the given which called for an explanation. As long as a scholar does not deny any of the realities or truths to which the academy made its commitment, he must be accorded the courtesies and freedoms which are based in the dignity of the person and the fact that truth cannot be imposed on persons. Freedom from restraint and coercion external to the academy is in principle demanded by the nature of knowledge and the dignity of man. The academy as a corporate entity has a right to the freedom to maintain the commitments that account for its identity against external pressures and demands.

The obligations of the scholar are grounded in the basic commitment of the institution in which he participates, in the freedom of his colleagues which he is called to respect, and the dignity of the students who have a right for a pursuit of the commitments of the institutions as well as a courteous hearing and objective treatment of their own commitments.

Given the nature of knowledge, every academ-

ic institution should recognize that objective reality, as validating authority for truth, is always external to the individual mind, and everything else being equal, to the academic institution itself. Nevertheless, the institutional commitment to certain truths is always internal.

Hence, no society or individual outside of the academic institution may demand from or impose on it a truth or body of truths under even the justified claim that these truths are objective and eternal. And no university or group of universities may legitimately claim that some university limits academic freedom simply because it freely chooses as object of intellectual inquiry some truth or body of truths that they do not acknowledge. It is a basic violation of academic professionalism to proclaim that an institution which commits itself to some religious truths “limits” academic freedom rather than to attempt a theoretical and academically professional refutation of these religious truths.

Academic freedom is currently and for the most part understood in a cultural context where truth is less and less affirmed as an objective and universally binding authority. At the same time “togetherness” and “community” (even on a global scale) are more and more affirmed. As a consequence there is an increasing tendency to claim membership in a community even while rejecting truths that were common and binding. It follows from this that individuals can consider themselves members of a church, an academy, a religious order or a political party even after having rejected the basic commitments that were constitutive of each community

The “modern university,” if it is to retain an image and sense of corporate identity in the face of growing pluralism among its members, is increasingly forced to recognize the primacy of individual opinion and the right of expression. This accounts, in part, for the *de facto* loss of original institutional commitment in many universities. In the absence of such a commitment, the only criterion for membership is “professional competence” and available positions, with the consequence that the scientific disciplines, which afford some empirical measure for competence, achieve ascendancy in the university, while the humanities become the province of those who promote freedom from objective truth and the primacy of subjective opinion.

In the face of such pluralism in the universities and in society, neither the university itself nor the state

are able to impose a common truth or substantive standard. Neither common culture nor common authority are in a position to establish a common truth. The modern university, therefore, is doomed to a radical pluralism in regard to the most basic questions regarding human existence, its meaning and justification.

3. The Catholic Church is in a unique position of having a divine guarantee for certain truths about both the natural and supernatural realms. The task of an academic institution which commits itself to these truths is to subject them to a rational investigation in order to understand and explain them by way of the respective methods determined by the objects in question.

The secular university which does not recognize these objects cannot raise the charge that the Catholic university is not a university or that it lacks academic integrity and freedom. It cannot do this anymore that the materialist who does not recognize the organic dimension can accuse the biologist of lacking academic integrity.

A university becomes Catholic by virtue of its commitment as an institution to the Magisterium of the Catholic Church on the part of its founders, be this the Church itself, the individual bishops in their dioceses, a religious order, or a group of private individuals without canonical status in the Church.



What does this imply in terms of academic freedom? In the Catholic university, as in any other university, there must also be a freedom of the scholar from external restraint and coercion in his pursuit of truth. And as in the case of every university, it may be demanded of its members that they not reject, in their academic activity, any of the basic commitments of the institution.

In this respect there is no essential difference between academic freedom in a Catholic institution and academic freedom in a secular university. There is, however, a difference in the scope and articulation of each. In the case of the Catholic university, there are in principle more truths that can be pursued, examined, understood,

explained and internally accepted. And there are more corresponding obligations. In the secular university the teacher is not institutionally obliged to take God seriously. In the Catholic university he is. And in the Catholic university, the teacher must take great care to avoid at all times “any action which seems to suggest coercion or dishonest or unworthy persuasion.” (*Dignitatis humanae*, #4) In the secular academy the teacher will have the institutional academic freedom to consider the belief in God as a result of coercion or dishonest or unworthy persuasion.

It may be suggested that an institutional commitment to the truths taught by the Catholic Church need not imply a submission to the hierarchical authority of the Catholic Church.<sup>6</sup> One may raise the question whether the truth about the primacy of Peter is directly relevant or applicable to the academic institution. One may even claim that the hierarchical authority over the academy as such is a violation of its academic character and that even if the Pope himself founds a university, he would have to keep his distance as Pope when it came to the specifically academic work of the university.

To answer this question two steps must be taken. The first deals with one aspect of the nature of a university as such. It can be maintained that the task of the university is to form the mind. In one respect this is certainly correct. The act of knowledge as such does not engage the heart or the will. In another sense, this position seems to fall short. For if man has the duty to seek the truth, truth about reality can impose certain duties on man. For all men are bound “to adhere to the truth once they come to know it and to direct their whole lives in accordance with the demands of truth.” (*Dignitatis humanae*, # 2)

The commitment of the Catholic university to the truths about God, the truth about man and his hidden destiny and the truth about the world as taught by the Church necessarily implies that the academicians are aware of the demands these truths make on every individual. Among the objects of intellectual inquiry at a Catholic university there are some that make demands which deal with the ultimate and transcendent destiny of man. These demands are also truths and must be brought to bear across the whole range of disciplines when they are appropriate. It would be a sterile and perverted rationalism to exclude the existential demand made by

truth and to regard it as a disinterested spectator or, even worse, to treat it as the prize of victory. While it cannot force the commitment of the will and heart in response to the demands of truth, the Catholic university recognizes the importance and actuality of these demands and cultivates an atmosphere of love for the members of its community, especially by introducing and maintaining a religious presence in the community, a presence which flows from but is neither equivalent to nor replaces its Catholic academic mission.

But whatever the subjective certainty of the academician, whatever his intellectual power and moral rectitude, he is not infallible and would be presumptuous to claim a definitive “yea” or “nay” in matters that deal with the spiritual nature and destiny of man. The Catholic Church proposes just such an infallible teaching for intellectual scrutiny.

And second, therefore, when the Catholic institution makes a commitment, in the persons of its founding authorities, to these truths, it necessarily becomes subject to the authority which guarantees them.

Above it was noted that it is always an objective reality external to the act of the mind that is the validating authority for truth. When an individual commits himself to a search for truth he must be ready to submit himself to that validating authority. This applies to natural and especially to divinely revealed truth. In the sphere of natural truth, the objective reality is the impersonal authority that “stands in judgment” determining the truth. Thus, the individual stands in a *de jure* relationship, in a broad but real sense of the word, to objective reality. With divinely revealed truths the *de jure* relationship is much stronger because it is a relationship to a personal authority. Both individual and corporate commitments to divinely revealed truths necessarily imply a *de jure* submission to the personal authority validating these truths.

As a fallible institution, the Catholic university cannot claim a commitment to supernaturally revealed and guaranteed truths without a submission to their authoritative source. If it attempts to do so in the name of its right to pursue truth in freedom from “authority of every kind, lay or clerical, external to the university itself,”<sup>7</sup> it establishes itself as a counter authority. Because no finite being or institution can be the authority guaranteeing divinely revealed truth, such a university constitutes itself as a false authority. In doing this it destroys

its own academic nature at least in relation to the divinely revealed and guaranteed truths. For it can no longer take these truths seriously if it “pursues” them but rejects the very authority which can make them binding. And if commitment to these truths is what makes a university Catholic, such a university ceases to be Catholic when it withdraws submission to the Magisterium of the hierarchical authority of the Catholic Church.

A Catholic university which refuses institutional submission to the teaching authority of the Catholic Church is a contradiction in terms. It is neither Catholic nor is it a university with respect to the supernatural truths which it can only entertain but never pursue. It should be clear that a genuine commitment to divinely revealed and guaranteed truths necessarily implies a submission to the Magisterium, a submission which by its very nature is *de jure* even if it does not include a formal canonical relation.<sup>8</sup>

And finally, the genuine commitment to the highest Truth and the demands that issue from it means that the administration and teachers of the Catholic University will undertake actions and programs which are not strictly speaking academic but which flow naturally and organically from the encountered truth. A serious acceptance of the truth and its demands implies an education of the whole man, not just a cultivation of his reason. The evangelical function of the Catholic university, whether explicit or implicit, flows from its primary academic commitment. The serious reverence for the truth, the love and respect for the student, the cultivation of a social atmosphere that reflects both, will in great probability, enhance the student’s freedom and lead to a response on his part to the demands of truth he encounters with his intellect.

In summary, the freedom from external restraint and coercion and coercion is only a secondary dimen-

sion of academic freedom, grounded in and derived from the more fundamental inner freedom of assent and submission to being as the validating authority for truth. This authority is external to the mind in the sphere of natural truths and especially in the case of divinely revealed truth which is validated by the authority of a personal divine Being. If the personal and corporate commitment to truth is to be a genuine commitment it must necessarily involve a willingness to submit to its vali-

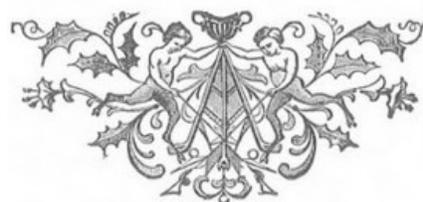
dating authority which in no way limits academic freedom but on the contrary brings it to full actuality and completion. It would be a contradiction in terms for a Catholic university to claim commitment to the truths of the Catholic Church but to refuse submission to her teaching authority. There can be no *de facto* Catholicity in a university which rejects a *de jure* relationship to the Magisterium.

In conclusion, the commitment of the Catholic university is to Christ, the Truth Incarnate, Who came into the world “to bear witness unto the truth.” When Pilate asked “What is truth?” Christ did not engage in an open and untrammelled theoretical discussion but bore a living witness in action - by His passion and death. The secular university would have the same response from the Catholic university, expecting it to give up its Catholic life in silence. And too many institutions have given this caricatured imitation of Christ, forgetting that his Resurrection sealed and confirmed the truth of the teachings He entrusted to His Church. The Catholic university has but to look to the Vicar of Christ and the Bishops in union with him for the answer to the question “What is Truth.” Only thus will it remain in existence - and bear witness to truth.

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*“A Catholic university which refuses institutional submission to the teaching authority of the Catholic Church is a contradiction in terms.”*



## NOTES

1Cf. *Dignitatis humanae*, #1 (Vatican II: The Declaration on Religious Liberty); in: *Vatican II The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, ed.: Austin Flannery, OP, (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1975)

2Cf. John E. Walsh, CSC, “The University and the Church,” in *Academic Freedom and the Catholic University*, edited by Edward Manier and John W. Houck (Notre Dame: Fides Publishers, 1967), p. 106-7: “The university administration, including the professor’s peers and colleagues, must of course make the decision a particular professor’s scholarly and teaching competence. But not even the university world itself would be qualified to sit in judgment on the content of what a scholar teaching in his own field, should or should not teach.”

3Cf. Fredrick Croisson, “Personal Commitment as the Basis of Free Inquiry” in Manier and Houck, *op. cit.*, p. 90: “Commitment ... establishes the universe of discourse and the criteria of evidence. It is only within the commitment that phenomena become evident which can serve as the basis for verification and falsification of hypotheses.”

4Charles Curran, for example, maintains that truth is the only limit to academic freedom. Cf. “Academic Freedom: The Catholic University and Catholic Theology,” in: *Readings in Moral Theology*, No. 3, ed.: Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, SJ, p. 389. The notion that truth is a limit to academic freedom implies that one is speaking of an abstract freedom of speech rather than of academic freedom. Cf. also “The Catholic University in the Modern World”, *College Newsletter*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Mar. 1973, p. 5: “This freedom [of teaching and research] is limited by no other factor than the truth which it pursues.” If freedom is an abstraction, its “limitation” by truth is only a conceptual precision, a more specific determination of what would otherwise be a general and indeterminate concept. When the concept of freedom is rendered more determinate by its designation as “academic,” its ontological object, truth, is not an existential or *real limitation of academic freedom*.

5Cf. S. Thomas Greenburg, *Sapientia Christiana, Impediments to Implementation from Catholic Universities* (San Antonio: ICHE, 1979). In this landmark study Greenburg clearly shows that the term academic freedom must be understood in terms of the existential condition of the university and not in terms of its abstract and unrestricted conceptualization. He correctly maintains that the “nature” of the university does not exist as such but is always realized under certain conditions of being which will differ under certain conditions of being which will differ according to the different commitments that come from the source of the university’s existence.

One frequently finds reference to academic freedom “as understood in the American University.” This notion of academic freedom is proposed as the ideal to be achieved by the Catholic university. This is an indication of the failure to understand that the concretely existing university can come into existence only because its founders made certain commitments. The commitment of neutrality toward religion will necessarily determine academic freedom in a way that will differ from its articulation under a commitment affirming the truths of religion. It is because of this confusion that the 1940 AAUP Statement on academic freedom can be referred to as providing for an exemption from academic freedom for religiously affiliated institutions. The very notion of “limitations of academic freedom because of religious or other aims” is built on the postulate that academic freedom cannot exist in a university that has been created in commitment to the truths of a religion, namely in a Catholic “something” that is not a university.

A typical but important example of this confusion is to be found in the *Statement of Presidents of Leading Catholic Universities of North America on the Schema for a Proposed Document on the Catholic University* (undated but issued sometime in the fall of 1986 and signed by presidents of fourteen institutions). Item #4 reads as follows: “Secularistic critics of Catholic education would find that their most searing critiques of Catholic universities had been confirmed by the Vatican itself. For if the relationship, as defined in this Schema, must necessarily involve control by the Church, then *Catholic universities cannot respect academic freedom*, and cannot enjoy true institutional autonomy” (emphasis added).

Theodore Hesburgh goes so far as to state that the schema “might have made sense in a particular Communist or Hitler-dominated scene, but never in a country where freedom is respected and cherished.” Cf. *America*, Nov. 1, 1986, p. 250).

The fallacy is amazingly simple but beyond certain academicians: I can freely pursue an object; I have no interest in pursuing the object you are pursuing; therefore you cannot be free in your pursuit since I would not be free if it were imposed on me. Does it ever dawn on the secularistic critic to ask a faculty member, committed to the Magisterium, who freely joined a university likewise committed to the same Magisterium, whether he feels that his academic freedom is limited by virtue of such a commitment?

6Cf. Robert J. Henle, “Catholic Universities and the Vatican,” *America*, April 9, 1977, p. 318: “Most impor-

tant of all - and a point not yet fully accepted - is the recognition that a genuinely and substantively Catholic university need have no juridical dependence or relationship to the Vatican or to any ecclesiastical or religious superior." Henle calls this a truly historical breakthrough of the "Rome Document" entitled "The Catholic University in the Modern World." He makes the above statement after somewhat disingenuously reporting that the document was "approved with some reservations" at the plenary session of the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education. He never mentions, that one of the reservations of the Congregations dealt with precisely the question of juridical relations.

7Cf. "Land O'Lakes Statement: The Nature of the Catholic University," a position paper adopted July 20-23, 1967 at Land O'Lakes, Wisconsin, by seminar participants including representatives of more than twenty leading Catholic Universities in America: in: *The Catholic University, A Modern Appraisal*, ed.: Neil G. McCluskey, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970.

8Cf. Greenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 26. Greenburg correctly affirms that the Catholicity of an institution is conditioned by the commitment "to the Church, to its message, to its authority." This commitment may not be "juridically demanded," nevertheless "*the obligation is no less strong for the 'condition of being Catholic.'*"

In its "Observation" on the "Grottaferrata Project", the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education agrees that *fidelity to the message of Christ as it is passed on by the Church* is one of the essential characteristics of the Catholic university and goes on to note: "It follows, therefore, that the Church and above all the Magisterium, can be in a position to judge the faithfulness of such finality"(emphasis added). It is clear that the Church stands as final *judge* of Catholicity of even those institutions which are not canonically erected but which the Congregation identifies in the above "observation" as *de facto* Catholic by virtue of "only a formal and explicit commitment to respect all the essential traits of a Catholic university."

The later "Rome Document," *The Catholic University in the Modern World* again become the object of a Plenary Session of the Sacred Congregation which identifies "inevitable lacunae," one of which calls forth the following declaration: "although the document envisages the existence of university institutions *without statutory bonds linking them to ecclesiastical authority*, it is to be noted that this in no way means that such institutions are removed from those relationships with ecclesiastical hierarchy which must characterize all Catholic institutions."

Ignoring the repeatedly stated position of the Congregation, Henle writes: "The final acceptance of the principle that juridical control by an ecclesiastical authority is not of the essence of a Catholic university is, in my opinion, essential for the future development and in some cases for the very existence of Catholic universities.;" *op. cit.*, p. 318.

Rejection of submission to the Magisterium has been the single most important and decisive element in the opposition of Catholic universities in America to the Vatican, starting with the Land O'Lakes statement in 1967. In its criticism of the recent Vatican *Schema*, the "Statement of Presidents of Leading Catholic Universities of North America" is very emphatic: "We want to emphasize, however, that *the single most important problem in the present document is this recurring insistence that any authentic Catholic University must be under the jurisdictional control of ecclesiastical authorities.*"(emphasis added). The urgency and desperation of this objection was made clear by Hesburgh's almost hysterical claims that the proposed norms would jeopardize Catholic education and that these norms might have made sense in a "Communist or Hitler dominated scene"(*loc. cit.*). Surely he does not mean that it would have made sense for the Vatican to address them to Catholic universities in Communist or Hitlerdominated countries?

Hesburgh's basic thesis is that the vast majority of Catholic universities in America are already *de facto* Catholic; the demand that they become *de jure* Catholic could not make them Catholic (since no externally imposed norm can do so) and would destroy them as universities. It is clear that Hesburgh does not understand that a *de facto* internal commitment to the truths of the Catholic Church necessarily includes a *de jure* relationship to the validating authority of the divinely revealed truths. And conversely, any *de jure* authority of the Church over universities necessarily presupposes their *de facto* commitment freely and internally made to these divinely made truths.

This means of course, the Church norms on Catholic universities are *not binding* unless there is a prior free commitment. In the absence of such, an institution *cannot possibly be Catholic*. If it continues to identify itself as such, it grounds its claim to search for truth on a mendacious act.