



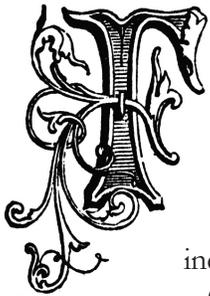
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THE ANGELIC DOCTOR'S PRESCRIPTION FOR CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION¹

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FORTY DAYS AFTER EASTER, THE TIME HAD COME FOR OUR LORD TO RETURN to His Heavenly Father. Before He ascended to Heaven, He commanded His disciples: “Go and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world” (Matthew 28:19-20). Filled then with the great, powerful gifts of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the apostles did as our Lord had commanded, and they did indeed teach the faith they had received from Him.

Our Roman Catholic Church has always considered teaching a priority, not just religious teaching but the discovery and imparting of knowledge in general. For this reason, the Church from the very beginning was intimately linked with the development of the university, a place dedicated to research, study, and teaching. We should be proud to know that almost all of the first universities were either founded directly by the Catholic Church and the initiative of the Holy Father, or at least benefited from their guidance and aid. Of the 52 universities founded before the year 1400, 29 of them were established by the Popes and 10 others were established by both an emperor's or prince's decree together with a papal bull. Great early universities which still exist to this day such as Bologna, Paris, Oxford, Salamanca, Rome, Padua, Cambridge, Lisbon, Prague, Vienna, Heidelberg, Louvain, and Cracow owe their origin or at least their development to the Church. We too in America can think of many well known universities and colleges founded by the Church, by either a diocese or a religious community.

Here in the university, teachers and students join together in a common love of knowledge. As St. Augustine noted, they share in a joy of truth, the *gaudium de veritate*, where they search, discover, and communicate the truth in every field of knowledge.

However, I fear that in recent times many of our Catholic universities have become ill. An evil spirit has infected them, causing them to become blind to their Catholic identity. I have found phrases like, “related to the Catholic Church,” “Church affiliated school,” “an independent school of the Catholic tradition,” and “the compatibility of a Catholic identity with diverse religious and philosophical convictions.” One school, which will remain nameless, was very apologetic:

The college ... is, by tradition and choice, a... liberal arts college serving the Catholic community, American society, and the wider world. To participate in [its] life ... is to accept an invitation to join in dialogue about basic human questions: What is the moral character of learning and teaching? How do we find meaning in life and history? What are our obligations to one another? What is our special responsibility to the world's poor and powerless?

¹ This is the text of the lecture given by Fr. Saunders at Christendom College on January 17, 1997 at a ceremony and banquet formalizing the merger of the Notre Dame Catechetical Institute and Christendom College.

Out of 462 words, Catholic community and Catholicism appear once each in vague terms, but never does one read in their fullest sense Catholic Church, God, Jesus, or Magisterium. While speaking of respecting differences, dialoguing, and being open, never does this statement or any of the others-speak about leading students to a commitment to Christ or a better understanding of their faith. When tuition alone is \$19,700 per year, I think one could add a little more Catholic “spice” to the mission statement.

Another very serious problem in our Catholic schools concerns the teaching faculty, particularly in the area of theology. Richard McBrien of Notre Dame has on several occasions proposed that a magisterium of the theologians exists that is essentially equal to the Church’s magisterium. Moreover, the Church’s magisterium should only propose values which each person can then independently and as the sole arbiter of truth accept or discard.

John Dominic Crossan, a professor of theology at DePaul University who received much publicity in *Time* and *Newsweek* last Easter, in his book *Who Killed Jesus*, asserts that our Lord’s tomb was indeed empty on Easter Sunday because His body had never been buried but had been devoured by wild dogs. In the end, our faith is merely a construction by the early Church. Crossan thus claims to know something that the apostles, and their students like St. Polycarp and St. Ignatius somehow missed. Being a Catholic, would you pay tuition for that kind of teaching?

Three years ago, a colleague was teaching at a prominent Catholic university in Massachusetts where tuition, room and board, and miscellaneous fees hit about \$30,000. On the theology faculty is a professed witch. This orthodox colleague was denied tenure primarily because she was orthodox.

Little wonder that our Holy Father lamented in his great encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (which focused on the teaching of morality):

Today ... it seems necessary to reflect on the whole of the Church’s moral teaching, with the

precise goal of recalling certain fundamental truths of Catholic doctrine which, in the present circumstances, risk being distorted or denied. It is no longer a matter of limited and occasional dissent, but of an overall and systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine. (*Veritatis Splendor* 4)

The reality of the situation is nothing less than this. How then can we restore the vision of Catholic higher education, regain a proper pride in being Catholic institutions of higher learning, and rejuvenate our campuses as faith-filled communities? We can turn to the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas.

Granted, St. Thomas lived at a time when universities were just beginning, the 1200s. Nevertheless, his teachings leave a prescription for the health of any Catholic school of higher education.



St. Thomas Aquinas

First, we must once again affirm that there is a truth, an objective, absolute, immutable truth that rests in God. St. Thomas noted that not only is truth in God, but He is truth itself. No distinction exists between God and His act of understanding. This truth is indeed eternal because the divine intellect is eternal; it is immutable because God Himself is immutable.

Our Lord Jesus Christ perfectly revealed this truth. He is the second person of the Trinity, the Word of God incarnate. In dealing with this subject, St. Thomas recalled the beautiful words of Jesus in the Gospel of John, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Moreover, Christ, true God and true man, showed the dignity of humanity bound up in truth.

The university must be consecrated without reservation to the pursuit of truth. Here scholars investigate reality with methods proper to their own respective disciplines. In so doing, they contribute to the treasury of human knowledge and to our grasp of truth.

However, we must remember the special place of

our faith and the truths of faith. We must clarify these discoveries in the light of Revelation. St. Thomas in the very first question of the *Summa Theologiae* stated:

It was necessary for man's salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God, besides philosophical science built up by human reason.... Hence it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to Him by divine revelation.... Man's whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon the knowledge of this truth. Therefore, in order that the salvation of men might be brought about more fitly and more surely, it was necessary that they should be taught divine truth by divine revelation.

With these truths, questions like, "What is the good?" and "How do I do the good?" are critical. By pursuing this truth, we understand our human nature, find our dignity as an individual made in God's image and likeness, and set our sights on eternal salvation.

These truths of revelation should thereby permeate the workings of a Catholic university. They should be the standard guiding the research and teaching of all disciplines. For instance, scientific research into correcting genetically transmitted diseases is a worthwhile task to benefit humanity; but to do so through *in vitro* fertilization or through fetal experimentation which ignores the sanctity of life is morally impermissible. To study the psychological dimensions of homosexuality is appropriate but to legitimize the lifestyle and to blur, deny, or ignore the moral aspects forsakes the truth.

By holding firm to this concept of truth, we find true freedom, a freedom of living as God's children. Here we find the foundation of justice which secures the dignity of each person, and the protection of his rights and an understanding of his duties. Here we find true academic freedom, which allows us to pursue the right way of living and to gain eternal salvation. If we abandon this concept of truth, we condemn ourselves to lives of licentiousness, irresponsibility, and whim.

Second, given this understanding of truth, the Catholic university must have a special respect for the magisterium of the Church. Catholic theologians must courageously explore the rich depth of the deposit of God's revelation. They must reflect upon the faith in

light of the ever growing treasury of human knowledge. Again, even those university faculty who are not involved in the discipline of theology *per se*, must not conduct their research or teach in a vacuum but rather with the vision of the truth found in the deposit of revelation.

However, St. Thomas would caution that the same faculty must bow humbly before the Magisterium of the Church. St. Thomas highly respected the role of the Magisterium. He asserted, "The universal Church cannot err since she is governed by the Holy Spirit, who is the spirit of Truth." The Magisterium of the Church, particularly in the teaching office of the Holy Father, must preserve, preach, and expound the revelation of God, making His word a living reality. The Church must read the signs of the times, interpret them in light of the Gospel message, and teach so that each member of the faithful can live an authentic Christian life. St. Thomas noted that there were, are and will be evil minded men who pervert the apostolic teachings, Church doctrine, and Sacred Scriptures. Therefore, the Church has the duty to guard against any deviation, error, or defection which could separate the faithful from Christ and cost a soul salvation.



Moreover, St. Thomas emphasized that a special respect must be given for the teaching authority of the Holy Father, "to whom the more important and more difficult questions that arise in the Church are referred" (see *ST* II-II, 1, 10). He insisted that "we must rather abide by the Pope's judgment than by the opinion of any of the theologians." St. Thomas recognized that theologians speculate and debate over various issues which are not yet defined by the Church. However, he warned:

If anyone were obstinately to deny them after they had been defined by the authority of the universal Church, he would be deemed a heretic. This authority resides chiefly in the Sovereign Pontiff. For we read in the *Decretals*: 'Whenever a question of faith is in dispute, I think, that all our brethren and fellow bishops ought to refer the matter to none other than Peter, as being the source of their name and honor, against whose authority neither Jerome nor Augustine nor any of the holy doctors defended their opinion.' (*ST* II-II, 11, 2)

St. Thomas, the Angelic Doctor, was sincere about this teaching and gives it with great humility. This is evidenced in his character. St. Thomas frequently rested his manuscripts on the altar before the tabernacle and prayed before releasing them to the university community. Once he wrote on the mystery of the Holy Eucharist, dealing with a question concerning transubstantiation. He laid his response on the altar and as he prayed, Our Savior appeared to Thomas and He said, “You have written well, Thomas, of the Sacrament of my Body.”

Toward the end of his life, Thomas was kneeling before the altar in ecstasy. The crucifix seemed to have come alive, and Our Lord said, “You have written well of me, Thomas. What reward would you have?” He answered, “Nothing but yourself, Lord.” He was a true, humble servant of the Lord and the Magisterium. With the same disposition, the university community-faculty, administrators, and students-should have a genuine personal fidelity to the Magisterium.

Lastly, given this understanding of truth and respect for the Magisterium, St. Thomas would prescribe a miraculous medicine that would energize the university community but also give it cohesion. St. Thomas would prescribe a devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, whether by offering reverent Masses, having Holy Hours with exposition and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, or simply encouraging prayer before the tabernacle in the university chapel. He is, after all, the saint who wrote those great Eucharistic hymns, *Pange Lingua*, *Tantum Ergo*, and *O Salutaris*.

Without doubt St. Thomas believed in the real presence of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. When he was on his deathbed, Sacred Viaticum was brought to his room and he said, “If in this world there be any knowledge of this Sacrament stronger than that of faith, I wish now to use it in affirming that I firmly believe and know as certain that Jesus Christ, True God and True Man, Son of God and Son of the Virgin Mary, is in this Sacrament.”

Devotion to the Holy Eucharist must be at the heart of the Catholic university. Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament fosters a humility and reverence for God, a hunger and thirst for truth and holiness, a respect for the authority of His Church, and a zeal for building up the Body of Christ here and now. Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament clarifies the Catholic identity of a university,

and binds administrators, faculty, and students together as a microcosm of the Church. Devotion to the Blessed

Sacrament strengthens the conviction of each person to Christ, and gives us the courage to profess the truth. Finally, devotion to the Blessed Sacrament moves us to help alleviate the burdens of our brothers and sisters and build up the Kingdom of God.

The importance of this last prescription and its link to truth and the role of the Magisterium is summed up well in Thomas’s dying words: “I receive Thee, the price of my redemption, for Whose love I have watched, studied, and labored. Thee have I preached, Thee have I taught. Never had I said anything against Thee. If anything was not well said that is to be attributed to my ignorance. Neither do I wish to be obstinate in my opinions, but if I have written anything erroneous concerning this Sacrament or other matters, I submit all to the judgment and correction of the Holy Roman Church, in whose obedience I now pass from this life.”

With our focus on the Holy Eucharist, Catholic higher education will be strong and succeed without succumbing to the pressures of this world. As the verse from *O Salutaris* reads, “Our foes press on from every side, thy aid supply, thy strength bestow.”

This then is the prescription from the Angelic Doctor for Catholic higher education: a commitment to the truth, a respect for the authority of the Magisterium, and devotion to the Most Blessed Sacrament. This prescription will produce a university community animated by the Holy Spirit. Faculty and administrators will be mindful in their duties as true Catholic educators. Students will find a true vision of reality, develop as persons, integrate knowledge with a genuine moral sense, gain a sense of service to society and the Church, and bear witness to their faith in this world.

The best part is, this prescription works and this is what we celebrate tonight. We have gathered for a joyous occasion—the merging of Christendom College, an undergraduate school, with the Notre Dame Institute for Catechetics, a graduate school. Since their founding, both have lived the prescription of the Angelic Doctor. This is clear from the mission statements of these two schools. The Notre Dame Institute states the following: “The mission of the Notre Dame Institute is to educate men and women, principally at the graduate level, according

to the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, so that they can teach and bear witness to the Catholic Faith with extraordinary effectiveness in all situations.” Christendom College presents itself as “a Roman Catholic co-educational liberal arts college institutionally committed to the Magisterium of the Catholic Church in conformity with the Apostolic Constitution Ex Corde Ecclesiae.” Then continuing on, Christendom offers “an education informed throughout by the Catholic Faith in which the students consecrate their intellects and wills to Christ.”

Both mission statements reflect a clear Catholic identity and purpose without apology. Moreover, both faculties take the oath of fidelity to the Magisterium whereby professors promise to preserve communion with the Catholic Church in words and actions, preserve

and hand on the deposit of faith in its entirety, follow and foster the common discipline of the whole Church, and obediently follow the guidance of the Magisterium. This merger then is truly “a marriage made in heaven.” Now we must implore the aid of heaven, and look to the guidance of those great saints like St. Thomas, so that we might be able to do Our Lord’s work. With God’s help, this great school will become a powerful force in restoring all things in Christ. May the good work we now undertake be brought to completion for the glory of God and the good of his Holy Catholic Church.

