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THE IDEA OF A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Each August when preparing my homily for the Mass inaugurating the academic year at Notre Dame, I am driven to two things: to think through anew the very idea of a Catholic university; and to find inspiration for the year ahead in the readings of the Sunday. For me the task has always been very rewarding, both spiritually and intellectually. I have found that even the most obscure readings can be mined for profound reflections on the special circumstances in the university community at the time.

The opening Mass is the Mass of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Wisdom, and celebrates the essence of a Catholic university — an intellectual life, a spiritual life, and an ideal of integrating the two. Faith seeking understanding is, in fact, characteristic of the Catholic tradition. It goes back to Job arguing with God about his lot; to the monastic tradition of the Middle Ages; to *fides quaerens intellectum* of St. Anselm; to the founding of the first universities in Salerno, Bologna and Paris; to Thomas Aquinas and his rediscovery of Aristotle; to John Henry Newman and his idea of a university; and to the founding and flourishing of Catholic colleges and universities in our own land. In fact, it is a constant thread in our relationship with God.

Faith seeking understanding is also portrayed artistically in the panoramic mural of the Hesburgh Library at Notre Dame and the groups of individuals it depicts — the apostles and early Christians with Christ at the center, the Hebrew prophets, ancient classic cultures, the eastern world, the medieval era, Byzantium, the Renaissance, and the age of science and exploration. In the university church, Sacred Heart Basilica, we are also surrounded with images of saints and scholars of all ages: Catherine of Alexandria, teacher and philosopher of the fourth century; Cecilia, patroness of musicians; Teresa of Avila of the sixteenth century, intellectual, theologian, reformer, and doctor of the church.

Insofar as men and women of all faiths dedicate themselves to seeking the truth, their work becomes a holy thing. This is true in a special way of the intellectual life, be that in plumbing the depths of the human soul through psychiatry, or in reflecting on the human condition through

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literature, or in exploring the breadth and depth of the universe through science. And it applies to us in a university where, through our teaching, writing, artistic achievement, research, and invention, we participate in discovering God's grand design and in initiating the next generation into the ongoing dialogue.

All these signs and symbols represent why I believe that there is a fundamental rapport between the spiritual and intellectual life and, by extension, an underlying principle for the very idea of a university that is Catholic. This belief has been fostered for me not by a process of pure reasoning but through a lifetime of reflection on experiences in the church, in the academy, and in the home.

I grew up in Cape Town on the second story of the family bakery. My two brothers and I were fortunate to have been raised in a large family setting which included our grandmother and all sorts of cousins, uncles and aunts. My father was Irish, a businessman, a person of integrity with a sense of humor and a great interest in people. My mother was of Italian descent, liberated without being combative, deeply spiritual with a slight air of the mystic. South Africa at that time was politically dominated by certain kinds of condescending colonial English and by Calvinist Afrikaners who referred to Catholics as *die Roomse gevaar* — the Roman danger. We were a minority within a minority, but I certainly did not look upon myself that way at any time. We lived in a mixed neighborhood. On the second floor of the bakery's garage was a large hall which we rented out as a black Christian church. Our house was always full of people: Italians, Irish, Cape Coloureds, Xhosas, English, Afrikaners, Portuguese and Indians; Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Mohammedans; bakers, plumbers, bookkeepers, carpenters, police, doctors, servants, lawyers and priests. Everyone was welcome: many came — some to stay, a few to die. If we objected to the traffic, my mother would simply say, "Then I don't understand what is meant by being a Christian." In this rich environment, filled with contradictions and polarities, the family gave us a great stability and intrinsic belief in our Catholic faith.

My school days go back to the Loretto Convent, the Irish Christian Brothers, and the University of Cape Town. My total theological training started with the penny catechism; then the sixpenny catechism; then the New Testament, almost to the point of knowing it by heart; followed by *Fortifying Youth*, a book published by the Irish Christian Brothers; and finally two massive volumes of Dr. Rumble's *Radio Replies*. I spent a good deal of my youth thinking about doctrinal and moral questions, often trying to analyze them in a mathematical sort of way. Instinctively

I believed that all of theology was already known. Somebody somewhere really understood it all. Perhaps Father Gavan Duffy did — that awesome figure, the Catholic chaplain at the University of Cape Town and the only Jesuit I ever saw in South Africa.

There were practically no Catholics at the University of Cape Town and, subsequently for that matter, in the graduate school at Princeton. Whenever we were together we would find ourselves discussing questions of faith, proofs of the existence of God, the Galileo problem, the matter of evolution, and the validity of holy orders in the Roman tradition versus the Anglican one. Social concerns were really nonexistent — to be sure, there should be equality among the races, but that was not our immediate concern. The arguments against abortion were simple, clear and acknowledged by all. The empowerment of the laity, the ordination of women, and the idea of married priests were concepts so inconceivable that they were not even raised for discussion. I found the arguments against contraception utterly perplexing (and still do). Nevertheless, I assumed that somebody somewhere would be able to explain them to me in due course. Although infallibility was clearly and narrowly defined, there was always the subconscious assumption of what I might call pseudo-infallibility, namely, that the kinds of questions we were discussing could always be answered by a representative of the institutional church. To make the point, let me recall that while a graduate student at Princeton, I decided to see America by motorcycle and on my own. The problem of Galileo was on my mind when I left New Jersey, and by the time I got to Kansas I was so obsessed with it that I finally decided to drop in on the pastor of a local Catholic church in a small town, fully expecting that my questions would be resolved. His reaction to my knock on the door was that he was tired and resting, and he suggested that I ride on to the church in the next town. Prophetic? Perhaps the wise pastor was giving me a more pertinent direction than I could grasp at the time.

In those days we were engaged not only in personal probing of this sort but also in the art of polemics in religion, as two incidents in particular illustrate. The first occurred when I was a university student in Cape Town. An ad in the *Cape Times* announced a lecture by a Protestant minister entitled “The Immaculate Conception: Fact or Fiction.” A few of us at the university, no doubt fortified by Dr. Rumble, decided to attend the lecture and challenge the speaker. We did in fact disrupt the meeting, we were then invited to dinner by the minister, and we subsequently became friends. The second experience occurred when I was a graduate student at Princeton. A small group of us regularly attended

daily Mass at the Aquinas Center. Among us were three luminaries: Marston Morse, a distinguished mathematician at the Institute for Advanced Study; Jacques Maritain, the Thomistic philosopher at the university; and Hugh Taylor, the dean of the graduate school. We were all on very good terms with each other and with the Catholic chaplain, Hugh Halton — a Dominican priest and a brilliant polemicist. After I completed my Ph.D., my wife Jean and I went to New Zealand for a period of three years. When I returned to the faculty at Princeton we found the Catholic community there in utter turmoil. A constant stream of polemics was being aimed by Hugh Halton at the university and its president on issues involving Catholicism and Catholics at the university. This led to a shunning of Marston Morse, Jacques Maritain, and Hugh Taylor, who were denounced from the pulpit as fellow travelers of the university. For all too long Halton had the support of the bishop and also of his order. Eventually he was removed from his position. Subsequently he left the priesthood.

These incidents and others have left their mark on me. Quite specifically, they have reinforced in my mind the fact that, for all its contradictions and polarities, a Catholic university must be inclusive rather than exclusive, and the underlying rhetoric must be inspirational, not strident or polemical.

For whatever reasons, my interest in mathematics was inseparable from my interest in religion. For years I had instinctive beliefs that mathematics was known once and for all, probably discovered by Euclid or Pythagoras. I still have vivid memories of learning algebra and geometry from the Christian Brothers. I can still see in my mind's eye the page in my geometry book with the proof of Pythagoras's theorem. I had an insatiable appetite for solving mathematical problems, even to the point of doing them for fun during my summer vacations. After graduating from the University of Cape Town, I started doctoral studies at Princeton. During my student days I lived at the Graduate College, mixing with doctoral students from all disciplines and from all parts of the world. In retrospect I think that experience was as valuable as, if not more valuable than, the mathematical training which I received at the university. (Parenthetically let me say that I cannot recall a single graduate student or professor in mathematics at Princeton who was a Catholic.) It was not until my second year as a doctoral student that I began to understand that mathematics was an ever-expanding universe. My thesis advisor at Princeton was Emil Artin, one of the great algebraists of the century. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, he offered me no advice in the selection of a thesis topic. I think it was a fluke that I got started

at all. But once I did, a whole new world opened up, to which I would devote a vast amount of time and energy for over thirty years. In the 1950s and 1960s and even the 1970s I had a view of mathematical truth which might be called absolutist, in the sense that I viewed mathematics as the only branch of knowledge in which you could be absolutely sure of what you were talking about. Not even Jean could knock that out of me. It was not until I became provost that I realized that there were areas of life in which strict adherence to pure logical thinking could prove disastrous.

I am not going to write about my specific research except to say that it is in areas intersecting with modern algebra and the theory of numbers. On the broad motivational side, however, I have been fascinated with the mysterious interplay between good mathematics and reality. Consider, for example, the lines, triangles, squares, and circles of Euclid. These are examples of forms that occur to us through our experience in nature. People — mathematicians — then study relationships among all sorts of these forms in increasing degrees of abstraction based only on the intrinsic harmony which is found in the relationships that unfold. Centuries later, some of the relationships derived in a world of total abstraction, in hyperspace, as it were, come back to earth and allow us to explain nature or even to change it. There is an intrinsic harmony then between mathematical forms, nature, and the mind. That is what I find fascinating. That is what I find mysterious. Take yourself back in time and imagine the mathematics of the Babylonians, leading to the discovery of algebra by the Arabs in the Middle Ages, ultimately providing Newton with a framework for the calculus and his force of gravitation which finally explained what held the heavens in their place. To take another example, who could have believed that mathematical logic, as abstract as abstract can be, would unlock the door to an instrument as revolutionary to our society as the computer? So far as I am concerned if these are not visible signs of the hand of God at work then I would like to know what is.

Jean and I came to Notre Dame in 1962 because we liked the emphasis on the spiritual and the intellectual, because of Notre Dame's potential as a great university, because of our cultural identity with Notre Dame, and because of the persuasiveness of Father Hesburgh, Marston Morse, and individuals in the mathematics department at Notre Dame. This was at the time of the Second Vatican Council. Little did we realize what impact the work of the council would have on the growth and development of the university and on our role in shaping its future, not just academically but in all its dimensions. I was a distant observer of the

Second Vatican Council during the 1960s, occasionally wide-eyed at some of the developments, but always protected in my remote mathematical world. Not until the 1970s did I begin to appreciate the real questions that we as a Catholic people had to come to grips with — the empowerment of the laity, the role of women in the church, questions of human sexuality. For the first time I realized what I had already realized twenty years earlier about mathematics; theology, too, was in a process of growth and development. I attribute my growth to various factors — an increased awareness of all these changes in our society, in the church, and especially at Notre Dame; vigorous discussions at the dinner table with our children (four daughters and one son) who were now in their teens; and the invaluable experience of serving as provost under Father Hesburgh, my greatest teacher from whom I gained a sense of vision of the church and of the university.

In reflecting on my experiences as a scholar, as a provost, and as a Catholic, I have come to think that there are these important areas for growth and development among Catholic universities today. First, I believe that it is essential that we take our place among the great and influential universities of our country. From their very inception, Catholic universities in the United States have been tied to the aspirations of American Catholics generally. During the last century and the first half of this century these have been the aspirations of an immigrant people. Now as these aspirations are changing, we must be responsive to new challenges for leadership at a higher level of academe. We must become increasingly influential in our society on the one hand and in the church on the other, through highly creative contributions to the arts and sciences, technology, the professions, and public service. We have a special responsibility to encourage increased participation of Catholics in the intellectual life. For all our advances we still have to ask the rhetorical question posed by John Tracy Ellis in the 1950s: "Where are the Catholic intellectuals?" We must emphasize the fact that the quest for knowledge is part of our search for God and therefore a natural source for sanctifying our lives.

In today's secular society it is at last possible for scientists and people of faith to converse in a civilized way. Unfortunately this is often accomplished by a sort of protocol which keeps science and religion in separate compartments. This has certainly been my own observation from my days as a graduate student at Princeton to the present time. But in a Catholic university we have a special challenge to make sure that the door between the life of the mind and the life of the spirit is kept wide open. In our tradition of faith seeking understanding it is essential that

we be engaged in, and wholeheartedly committed to, the creative process. We cannot simply be reactionary bystanders or critical commentators. We must reverse a cultural condition in our church where caution squelches intellectual curiosity. These are matters at the very heart of our existence as Catholic academic communities. Ideally, such growth needs not only the tolerance but also the enthusiastic encouragement of the institutional church. There will always be tensions between democracy and authority, between teaching and research, between conserving and growing. How we resolve these polarities in our own universities will determine whether we are reactive to society or progressive within it and the extent to which our students and our ideas will influence American and Catholic culture in the twenty-first century.

Our second and more difficult problem, one with which we shall always have to grapple, is how, in a pluralistic society such as ours, we can be ecumenical in spirit while maintaining a predominant presence on the faculty of individuals dedicated to, and excited about, furthering the growth of our institutions as Catholic universities. Without that presence it will simply be a matter of time before our Catholic universities follow the rest of American higher education on the road to secularization. I have no doubt that the surest way to maintain our Catholic identity is through a partnership between our founding religious orders and the laity. In the early American church, laypeople were loyal contributors, passive and defensive, but not partners. Now, thanks in large measure to generations of missionaries and religious, we have a well-educated Catholic population. But since the time of the Second Vatican Council, vocations to the priesthood and religious life have decreased sharply. In some religiously founded colleges their presence has all but disappeared. Whether or not this trend continues, the working hypothesis must be that it will. Already a few Catholic universities are being founded almost entirely through strong lay initiatives. The role of the laity is constantly changing from dependency to shared responsibility, a shared responsibility which embraces women as well as men, theologians as well as scientists, and Catholics of a variety of views as well as individuals of other beliefs.

This third area of growth for Catholic universities, shared responsibility, is indeed crucial. Its potential derives, obviously, from the sheer number and expertise of the laity, and more importantly, from a straightforward, independent, American way of questioning things and looking at the world. But shared responsibility requires active involvement as well as shared consequences. It depends on individuals, not systems. It relies not on structures and rules but on the deep inner conviction of

those who clearly see the intersection of spiritual and intellectual values as important and valid. In the Catholic university, this shared responsibility is marked by generosity of spirit, it respects the academic freedom of each individual, and it welcomes a variety of views and their differing modes of expression. It demands that all of us committed to this academic enterprise, lay and ordained, women and men, Catholics and people of all faiths, must focus not only on our teaching and engaging in research but also on our sustaining and deepening the religious character of our university communities as well as providing for their evolution and continuation.

Fully conscious of the creative polarities these aspirations necessarily involve, I am more convinced than ever that our goals are well worth achieving. Indeed we *must* succeed so that the great heritage of faith seeking understanding continues to enliven and enlarge the intellectual life of the world. Confident of the Holy Spirit's presence among us, we can strive ever onward toward this vibrant vision of the genuine Catholic university, great in every sense of the word.

Note

The lecture I gave upon receiving the University of Dayton's Marianist Award ("A Pilgrim's Progress in a Catholic University," University of Dayton 1988), is one of several sources for this essay; others include the homilies I have delivered at the opening Mass each academic year and, above all, my continuing study and thought in this area.