Inside the Belly of the Beast: Catholic Studies at Public Colleges and Universities

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Today, institutions of higher education are major generators of socially dominant ideas, images, and fashions. As sociologists might say, they are major "agents of socialization." Empirically speaking, public higher education is almost exclusively—at least in the humanities and social sciences—an agent for the promotion of politically left-wing secular thought.

It should come as little surprise that any philosophy or worldview like Catholicism that qualifies or limits an uncontested understanding of individualism—that, in essence, concurs with John Paul II's claim in Veritatis Splendor that any legitimate exercise of freedom must be oriented to objective truth and sound morality—is going to be subject to prejudice and discrimination within a public higher educational system characterized by a secular monopoly. That no other institution in contemporary American society is subject to the same degree of sustained hostility and rejection as is the case with the Catholic Church can actually be viewed as a sort of backhanded compliment.

Some of the anti-Catholic prejudice and discrimination encountered on the public college campus will be blatant and obvious and others will be less so. All students will be subject, from time to time, to some sort of anti-Catholic bigotry on a campus-wide basis, much of it of a crude and

shameless nature. Perusing through the annual*Reports on Anti-Catholicism* published by the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights makes this perfectly clear. The annual reports are replete with examples that, through various campus venues, blaspheme, mock, denigrate, and distort all aspects of the Catholic faith: plays (e.g. “Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You,” “Corpus Christi”); art exhibits; student newspaper editorials, stories, cartoons; radio programming; and college-wide lectures, forums, and conferences.

Regarding many humanities and social science classrooms, students may well encounter many outrageously false and slanderous historical claims made against the Church and the Catholic population. They may hear the claims that Pope Pius XII conspired with the Nazis to murder Jews; that Christopher Columbus was primarily responsible for the genocide of native American Indian groups; that ethnic working-class Catholic “hard-hats” are naturally bigots and racists; that the Bishops of Catholic America want to “impose their (male) morality” on women denying them their alleged “right” to abort children within the womb; and that “homophobic” orthodox Catholics are responsible for the deaths of those AIDS victims who contracted the disease engaging in homosexual activity.

Students may very well encounter the argument that a Catholic-inspired Western civilization is a generator of cultural death. There is also the likelihood of important Catholic (and Christian and other religious) thinkers being under-represented, not represented or distorted in much of the literature that students are expected to master. Reference here can be made to the important content analysis of school textbooks conducted by New York University psychologist Paul Vitz. Even when the official educational philosophy of a public college is supposedly inclusive “multiculturalism,” there is an excellent chance that there will be no distinctively Catholic contribution to the curriculum due to, variously, the alleged implications of the “separation of

church and state," ignorance of the Catholic intellectual and moral contribution, or simply, outright bigotry. (In many Catholic colleges, the "new" Catholic studies programs intended to keep Catholicism alive on campus will very possibly be staffed by the same type of progressive Catholic scholars who were responsible for the internal secularization of the college in the first place).

There are many ways by which the Catholic tradition contributes to the legitimate calling of the academy. For one thing, the universal thrust of the Catholic sensibility breeds within its faithful adherents a sense of obligation to pursue the truth courageously in a non-politically correct manner and to be fair-minded and even-handed to the student body and others in one's dealing in the academic community, regardless of philosophical commitment. Secondly, Catholic scholarship serves as an important corrective to overly narrow and specialized research and teaching, advocating what might be termed a "realistic interdisciplinary" approach encouraging honest intellectual exchanges between and among the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities (including, prominently, philosophy), and theology.

Thirdly, this correction to over-specialization also entails a movement toward a hierarchal integration which restores philosophy to its proper "command post" position in the scholarly enterprise. Fourthly, in "spanning the ages," Catholicism's memory brings with it the insights of many cultures and historical ages and, as such, helps one to escape the "tyranny of the present" and, conversely, to appreciate the fact that tradition can be dynamic and relevant to the modern age. Fifthly and finally, Catholic social thought brings to the academic plate a host of important natural law concepts (e.g. subsidiarity, solidarity, personalism, the universal purpose of goods) and philosophical anthropological claims regarding the inherent nature, freedom, and responsibility of human beings as social creatures.

It is precisely because it is vitally important for American civilization that Catholics bring the insights of their intellectual and moral heritage to the public square, that I established a Center for Catholic Studies at Nassau Community College of the State University of New York system of higher education (NCC is the largest community college in the nation). Culturally, for one thing, the official educational philosophy of the College had been for some time that of multiculturalism. Structurally, this had led to the creation of academic programs, in varying degrees of comprehensiveness and complexity, in African-American studies, wo-men's studies, Jewish studies, Italian American studies, and Latino studies, to name the most prominent examples.

There were some college trustees who I believed (correctly) would be receptive to my proposal. I was also a tenured, full professor, with all the security and freedom that such a status entails, and also with a long list of publications and other accomplishments in the areas of Catholic studies and the sociology of religion. I believed that there would be some professors, non-Catholics included, in the college with the courage and integrity to support the idea and assist its implementation. Again, this was a useful assumption. I had at least one strong supporter on the State-wide S.U.N.Y. Board of Trustees. Another secular university, the University of Illinois at Chicago, was also starting up a Catholic studies program, making my proposal a tad less "startling."

Despite grumbling from some faculty and some initial ambivalence from key administrators (in fairness, understandable, given the radicalness of my proposal vis-à-vis the reigning norms of the secular academy), the NCC Center for Catholic Studies was established during the Fall, 2000 semester with myself appointed as Director. The previous summer was spent in fruitful meetings with the Academic Vice-President in which it was agreed that the purpose of the Center was academic and intellectual and concerned with

demonstrating how the tradition of Catholic social thought could contribute to the scholarly activities of the college, including debates concerning public and social policy. Conversely put, it was agreed that the Center was not intended to be an agent for evangelization and its focus was not to be catechetical in nature. Furthermore, it was agreed that, while the College would selectively subsidize the Center's activities, the intent was that the Center would come close to financial self-sufficiency.

Two years later and having withstood a challenge made by a "separation of Church and state" group to the Chancellor of the State University of New York, the NCC Center for Catholic Studies is doing better than most, including myself, could have reasonably expected. As of June, 2002, the Center had raised over $22,000, spending approximately half that amount to pay for a host of academic activities open to all, and most of which are free of any charge, taking place on the campus. The Center has sponsored two major conferences, both attracting an audience in excess of two hundred participants.

Another major accomplishment was the sponsoring of a debate on school choice that attracted a group of well over one hundred and that has been frequently aired on the public access educational channel of the local Cable Vision television network. The Center has also offered a Friday afternoon seminar on "Aspects of Catholic Social Thought;" a "Club Hour" series of lectures geared specifically to the student body; a series of non-credit Continuing Education courses and lectures (the only Center activities requiring a fee, and a modest one at that); two rounds of interviews on a radio program that I host, "The Catholic Alternative" which is aired on the college radio station as well as a series of evening lectures.

I have no sure sense of what the future will hold for the NCC Center for Catholic Studies. So much depends on events and developments outside of my control—in the College, surrounding community, in the Church and society-at-large, and with my

family obligations and other personal issues and concerns. What I do know is that the Center's activities—humble as they surely have been to date—have served Nassau Community College, the student body, and the outside community well. Perhaps ultimately the greatest legacy will be that the very existence of the Center inspires other Catholic scholars in public colleges and universities to start their own Catholic studies centers and programs where, perhaps, they can do even more extensive good for academia and society.

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