

# The Catholic Intellectual Tradition and the Mission of the University: A Continuing Conversation

## I. Introduction

1. During the 2012 Spring Conversations, the Task Force heard numerous requests for a clearer explanation of the Catholic intellectual tradition, a concept that played such an important role in the initial draft of *The Common Themes of the Mission and Identity of the University of Dayton*. The Task Force was challenged, on the one hand, to provide a simple description for those unfamiliar with the tradition, and on the other hand, to provide a description that respects the tradition's more than 2,000-year history and the many strands of scholarly, literary, and artistic works it comprises. This Appendix offers a starting point for further study of and reflection on the Catholic intellectual tradition and for incorporating this tradition into the University's curriculum and scholarship. A concluding section outlines some initiatives that might be taken to strengthen the Catholic intellectual tradition on campus, and a working bibliography is provided as a resource.
2. The Catholic intellectual tradition shapes a distinctive approach to the University's mission. In 2004 the University began a series of conversations on a new strategic plan and produced, as one of its first statements, *The University of Dayton: A Vision of Excellence*. In this statement the Catholic intellectual tradition is given prominence in defining our identity.

The University of Dayton — Catholic, Marianist, innovative, and transformative — is a leader in higher education and one of the preeminent Catholic universities in the nation. As a Catholic university our commitment to rigorous intellectual inquiry and vigorous dialogue is shaped by the insights of Catholic intellectual traditions that form Catholics and enlighten people of all faiths.

3. These strategic planning conversations continued during the 2005-2006 academic year and culminated with Strategic Plan 2006, which the Board of Trustees approved in October 2006. In this strategic plan, the Catholic intellectual tradition is once again a distinctive approach in the University's mission. Under Goal 2 *Cultivate Outstanding Scholarship, Research, and Artistic Creation*, one of the tactics is to *Cultivate faculty expertise in Catholic intellectual tradition across a wide spectrum of disciplines*. The most important resource for the University is a faculty in all disciplines and professional fields, especially religious studies, philosophy, the other humanities, and other key disciplines who appreciate and are able to draw upon appropriate dimensions of the Catholic intellectual tradition. In addition, the University intends to recruit and develop excellent faculty in the disciplines and professional fields from across the University who are open to learning about the Catholic intellectual tradition and drawing upon it as a resource in their teaching and inquiry.
4. Under Goal 3 of Strategic Plan 2006: *Strengthen and promote the University's distinctive Catholic and Marianist identity*, we see that the "University is firmly committed to advancing its position as a leader in Catholic higher education and as a Catholic leader in higher education. As such, it articulates to people of all faiths the rich resources of Catholic intellectual tradition." One tactic under this goal is to *Develop the University as a first-choice institution for faculty who are nationally and internationally recognized scholars and authorities on issues pertaining to Catholic intellectual tradition*. Recognized scholars in the Catholic intellectual tradition will be attracted to our campus only if there are dynamic and critical intellectual conversations that engage the Catholic intellectual tradition in dialogue with other intellectual traditions in exploring critical issues of our global community and the Church.
5. *The Common Academic Program (CAP) Proposal*, a new design for the University of Dayton undergraduate program approved by the Academic Senate on April 23, 2010, intentionally incorporates "key elements of the Catholic intellectual tradition and its Marianist charism." In the

CAP Proposal the First Year Humanities Commons (courses in religious studies, philosophy, history, and English) collectively “familiarize students with the central concepts and texts of the Catholic intellectual tradition.” The Crossing Boundaries Courses (upper-level courses in Faith Traditions, Practical Ethical Action, Inquiry and Integration) are expected to strengthen the student’s appreciation of the “Catholic intellectual tradition in significant ways.”

6. During this same period of time the University’s divisions of Student Development and Campus Ministry created *Commitment to Community: Catholic and Marianist Learning and Living (C2C)*. Founded in the Catholic intellectual tradition and the Marianist tradition of education, C2C outlines principles and personal and social habits that define the norms of learning and living in the University of Dayton community.
7. As part of Strategic Plan 2006, the University intends to build on its reputation as a Catholic research university by strengthening its graduate programs, centers of advanced study and scholarship, and research programs. These efforts provide another opportunity to more fully integrate the content and the habits of inquiry of the Catholic intellectual tradition into programs of advanced study.
8. The Catholic intellectual tradition is a conversation that has continued for more than two centuries between the Church and the world, a dialogue between the Christian community and the societies and cultures in which it finds itself. The principles, arguments and practices of this tradition have evolved and developed as the Christian community has confronted new issues and questions. As a national Catholic university and as a partner in the worldwide community of Catholic universities, the University of Dayton has the institutional commitment to ensure that the texts, the conceptual frameworks, and habits of inquiry that emerge from this conversation are important resources for its work of learning, scholarship, and service.
9. For these efforts to be successful the University must continue conversations on the Catholic intellectual tradition and undertake a comprehensive and systematic approach to helping our faculty, staff, and students to more deeply understand this tradition. Some faculty and staff have raised concerns that emphasizing the Catholic intellectual tradition borders on proselytism and indoctrination, which they believe have no place in an excellent American university. We want to assure those with this concern that there is widespread agreement that intellectual inquiry at the University of Dayton “must be carried out both with academic freedom and with openness to the transcendent dimension of life. We highly value the free and responsible intellectual inquiry into and the sharing of truth.”<sup>1</sup>
10. Participants in interdisciplinary learning and scholarship often raise questions about the prescriptive assumptions of the individual disciplines and professional fields participating in the joint inquiry. These questions can point out limitations of these prescriptive assumptions and can often lead to the forming of new insights, understandings, and horizons that enrich and broaden the interdisciplinary inquiry. In the same manner, the Catholic intellectual tradition, as an intellectual tradition, can enter into interdisciplinary inquiry with the disciplines and professional fields by raising questions and providing insights that can enrich the inquiry. At the same time, this interdisciplinary inquiry and engagement can present new questions and insights that can enrich the Catholic intellectual tradition and keep the traditions open and with a dynamic “growing edge.”

## **II. Origins Catholic Intellectual Tradition**

11. The Catholic intellectual tradition – a practice of faith seeking understanding and understanding seeking faith – addresses the great human questions, aspirations, and challenges as they unfold across centuries and across cultures. As is evident in the New Testament, this tradition was initiated as the early Christians began to reflect upon and engage the Gospels, their experience of Jesus, in a number

---

<sup>1</sup> Common Themes in the Mission and Identity of the University of Dayton, § 36.

of new cultures. Throughout their history, Christians have wrestled with and drawn upon the best of human knowledge to defend, explain, understand, and better learn to practice their faith.

12. One of the earliest and best examples of such engagement can be found in the work of Clement of Alexandria (c. 150—c. 215) and other Christian intellectuals who studied and made use of the writings of Philo of Alexandria (20 BC—50AD), a Jew. So from early on Christians constructed a complex intellectual tradition from reading works written by members of other faiths. In the early Christian centuries, this most often meant drawing upon Hellenistic thought and culture to produce intellectual accounts of basic Christian beliefs, what it means to be human, what constitutes right human action, and what it means to live the Christian life. This tradition of inquiry led Christians to express their experience of God in Christ and through the Holy Spirit in terms of a Trinitarian monotheism. In the 13th century, Catholic philosophers and theologians engaged and, in some cases, appropriated the work of the Pagan Aristotle, the Jew Maimonides, and the Muslims Avicenna and Averroes to articulate Christian beliefs and practices. In recent centuries, a tradition of Catholic social teaching has emerged that is in serious dialogue with the social, economic, and political thought of the modern world. In recent decades, Catholic scholars have begun serious dialogue with the philosophies of Africa, the near East, and Asia. All of these efforts to draw on diverse intellectual resources demonstrate the tradition's deep commitment to the integrity of rational inquiry and to the pursuit of truths that are ultimately one.
13. This tradition has evolved and developed through conversations with the world of ideas and philosophies, the example of the saints and the contribution of great artists. The tradition has also developed as persons explored the meaning of the tradition for their personal lives and as the Catholic community, in dialogue with others, explored how the tradition can provide insight in addressing important social questions, such as the status of the worker in modern capitalism, the global economy, war and peace, etc.

### **III. A Description of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition**

14. The Catholic intellectual tradition can be viewed from three complementary perspectives: 1) sources, i.e., “classic treasures to be cherished, studied, and handed on”; 2) habits of inquiry that bring faith and reason into fruitful dialogue and are the “outcome of centuries of experience, prayer, action, and critical reflection”; and 3) affirmations of the tradition, i.e., insights, arguments, and doctrines that have come from the centuries of inquiry that have brought faith and reason into fruitful dialogue.<sup>2</sup> The next three sections give brief summaries of each of these perspectives.

#### **The Sources of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition**

15. The sources of the Catholic faith include its classic texts, such as the Old and New Testaments, treatises and sermons of Church Fathers, and the many scholarly and artistic interpretations of these texts. In writing the New Testament, the early Church drew upon Jewish texts and traditions to understand and interpret the life, person, and message of Jesus. Many scholars, councils, documents, and works of art find their place as part of the tradition. A variety of institutions (Christian communities, monasteries, universities, etc.), social practices (worship, personal prayer, scholarship, teaching and learning, etc.), and persons (saints and sinners) have shaped and sustained the Catholic intellectual tradition of inquiry over time.
16. Some classic texts and artistic expressions of the Catholic intellectual tradition are explicitly religious, while others are more generally exercises of the Christian imagination in art and literature. Among these classics are texts of the patristic era, philosophical and theological texts from the early

---

<sup>2</sup> This description modifies one by Monika K. Hellwig, “The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Catholic University,” in *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*, ed. Anthony J. Cernera and Oliver J. Morgan (Fairfield, CT, Sacred Heart University Press, 2000), 3.

Middle Ages up through the Enlightenment to the modern era. Insights and perspectives of the Catholic intellectual tradition are expressed in literature and poetry. As Monika Hellwig indicates:

... certain texts in literature became classics (of the tradition), throwing light on the Christian journey through history, on Christian faith and life and understanding the big issues. Immediately coming to mind are *Piers Plowman*, *The Divine Comedy*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and such modern classics as *Murder in the Cathedral*, *A Man for All Seasons*, and *Four Quartets*. Nor should we exclude from the treasury great Protestant and Orthodox classics like *Paradise Lost*, *The Pilgrims' Progress*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*.<sup>3</sup>

17. It is important that undergraduate education at the University provide a thoughtful historical introduction to some of the major classical texts. Understanding and reflecting on the questions raised by these classic texts can help our students develop an order and integration in their learning.

### **Habits of Inquiry in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition**

18. Over the centuries, people working within the Catholic intellectual tradition have developed certain style or habits of inquiry, which this section briefly describes.
19. **Inquiry in the Catholic intellectual tradition sees reason and faith as integrally related in a common search for truth.** Catholic intellectual tradition develops through an intricate and creative interplay between faith and reason. As important as discursive and logical formulations and critical thinking are, they are not able to approach all that can and ought to be understood. Horizons are expanded, relationships are made possible, and understandings embraced when individuals and communities learn to rely at appropriate times and in thoughtful ways on both faith and reason. As Flannery O'Connor's quote on the Jesse Philips Humanities Center reminds us, "Mystery is not something that is gradually evaporating. It grows along with knowledge."
20. **Inquiry in the Catholic intellectual tradition seeks an integrative perspective on knowledge.** The Catholic intellectual tradition supports both a rigorous search for the truth and appreciation that truth is manifest in a wide variety of disciplines and fields. At a Catholic university, the search for truth is based on the belief that truth is ultimately one and, while it can never be fully grasped, it can more fully be known through human inquiry. In the Catholic tradition of inquiry, both the development of the disciplines and cross-disciplinary research and conversations are required to more fully appreciate and approach the truth. In this process, we come to realize that the most important truths are only partially grasped, and our insight into these truths develops over time.
21. **Inquiry in the Catholic intellectual tradition is pursued in a sacramental spirit.** The Catholic intellectual tradition sees the world as a creation — as a gift of God. The beauty, complexity and mystery of creation reflect God's presence and love. All the events of life, from the most mundane to the most extraordinary, participate in the story of God's work among us. Some draw us more into the mystery of God; some twist our vision or turn us from it. But none exist apart from it. A Catholic understanding of creation discovers in creation not only immanent purpose but also goodness and beauty. Belief in the incarnation entails recognition that the sacred can be expressed and embodied in persons and things and events of this world.
22. **Inquiry in the Catholic intellectual tradition is carried out in a dialogical spirit.** The Catholic intellectual tradition has developed through the interchange of contesting positions and arguments. Inquiry in the Catholic tradition both welcomes the questions and addresses the issues of the ages in a spirit of openness and dialogue — a spirit of fidelity, respect, sincerity, freedom, critical inquiry, and charity. This engagement with the critical questions of our age produces the "growing edge" of the tradition.

---

<sup>3</sup> Hellwig, "The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Catholic University," 5.

23. **Inquiry in the Catholic intellectual tradition has a rich appreciation of both the capability and the limits of rationality.** The Catholic intellectual tradition values the many facets of human rationality, i.e., our ability to perceive, imagine, understand, judge, and act. The Catholic intellectual tradition relies on both analytic rationality and narrative rationality in its search for meaning.<sup>4</sup> The analytic inquirer searches for general patterns of cause and effect and learns to express meanings and insights through discursive arguments. Analytic rationality is marked by the use of logic and its conclusions are judged by coherence, provision of warrants, moral integrity, and reciprocity. Narrative rationality integrates experience through analogy, metaphor, and symbols. Narrative rationality allows the classic texts of the tradition to inspire the imagination, to deepen the emotions, and to provide ways of understanding human meaning and value. Narrative rationality can provide a way into universal meaning because it can disclose meaning in a manner not reducible to the structure of an argument. Utilizing both analytical and narrative rationality allows inquiry in the Catholic intellectual tradition to engage in both a rigorous search for truth and at the same time resist reductionism and use the analogical imagination to see reality in terms of “both/and” rather than “either/or.”
24. The Catholic intellectual tradition also realizes that human rationality has limits. The mysteries of God and God’s creation can never be fully grasped. There is always more to know and to be manifested through inquiry. Human rationality can also be diverted from the truth through sin and human imperfection. A person can fail to be open to new insights because of pride taken in one’s partial and incomplete understanding of the truth or one can fail to critically examine inconsistencies in one’s arguments. The Catholic intellectual tradition’s dialogical spirit allows participants the opportunities to critically address, in a spirit of friendship, partial understandings of the truth and inconsistent arguments.
25. **Inquiry in the Catholic intellectual tradition cultivates practical wisdom and the search for the common good.** The search for truth and wisdom within the Catholic tradition seeks to render truth and wisdom practical and to transform the world into a greater realization of the common good, i.e., the “sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment.”<sup>5</sup> The inquirer in the Catholic tradition endeavors to use knowledge in a way that cultivates the adoption of practical ends, practical judgment, and reflective decision making. Inquirers within the Catholic tradition seek to understand the world so that they can identify, critically evaluate and respond creatively to important signs of the times. Starting with a concept of human flourishing, inquirers are able to define and diagnose problems and issues, thoughtfully discern both more human visions for the future and strategies of change to realize these visions; organize people and resources to implement the strategies of change; and reflectively learn from the consequences of change. Intellectuals in the Catholic tradition have a deep sense of a calling or vocation to use their talents to work to transform society into a greater realization of the common good.

### **Some Major Affirmations of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition**

26. Affirmations of the Catholic intellectual tradition are those insights, arguments, and doctrines that have come from the centuries of inquiry that have brought faith and reason into fruitful dialogue. Some of the affirmations of the tradition that enrich our appreciation of the Catholic texture of the intellectual life include:
27. **Knowledge of the Transcendent:** By openness to truth and beauty, a sense of moral goodness and the search for happiness, the human person is open to the discovery of the transcendent. It is possible to come to certain, but partial, knowledge of the transcendent, which the tradition calls God.

---

<sup>4</sup> This distinction between analytic and narrative rationality is made by Jerome Brunner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 11ff.

<sup>5</sup> *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Second Vatican Council*, § 26

28. **Creation is Intelligible:** God, who is all-good, is seen as the creator of the universe, including all of its spiritual and material elements, and as such has given it an unfolding purpose and filled it with meaning. God has provided the human person with the capacity to search for the truth about the purpose and the evolving order of creation.
29. **Revelation:** In addition to natural reason, God provides divine revelation, another order of knowledge that humans cannot possibly arrive at under their own power. The divine plan of revelation has been gradually communicated to humanity through deeds and words, through stories of creation, through the covenants with Noah and with Abraham and his descendants, as well as the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures.
30. **Centrality of Jesus Christ:** God revealed God's fullness by sending his beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Catholic vision of the intellectual life springs ultimately from the personal revelation of God in Jesus Christ, received in a believing community which has drawn on the resources of theology, philosophy, history, art and literature to elaborate upon and understand that revelation. The mysteries of Christ's life link the human and the divine and open the way for all humanity to explore in multiple ways the implications of the Gospel.
31. **God as Trinity:** God is seen as both a unity and as a community of persons. While there are intimations of this profound mystery in nature and in the Scriptures of Israel's faith, its fullness is revealed in a definitive manner in the incarnation of Jesus, Son of God born of a woman, Mary. God the Father sends his Son, true God and true man, for the salvation of the world. The Father sends through Jesus the Holy Spirit to be God's presence in the Church and the world. God is one and God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
32. **The Church:** The Church is seen as the people of God founded on the word and actions of Jesus Christ, fulfilled by his redeeming cross and Resurrection, and animated by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Church continues to witness to the presence of Christ through celebration of word and sacrament, building the community of believers, and reaching out in mission to the whole human community. The Church is to be a witness to God's presence in the world and to work with persons and groups to bring forth the Reign of God in the world by advancing justice and reconciliation.
33. **Dignity and social nature of the person:** The human person is an image of God. Because the Trinitarian God is a community of persons, this tradition understands persons as both creative agents and social beings. Though clearly recognizing the reality of sin and human destructiveness, this tradition affirms that, through grace informing human capabilities, people are able to enter into partnership with God and one another and thereby to realize their true humanity. People are constituted and sustained by relationships and naturally seek solidarity with others. Society and its institutions serve a common good when they promote persons' flourishing, both as groups and as individuals. The conditions of human flourishing encompass objective qualities of human fulfillment and social harmony, not simply satisfaction of subjective preferences.
34. **The stewardship of creation:** Creation is a gift from God that has been entrusted to the human community and that we have the responsibility to steward. We show our respect for the Creator by our care of creation. Through our stewardship of creation we participate in God's act of creating and sustaining the world. Our work of stewardship must appreciate the complexity and the fragility of the human ecosystem. Concern for the integrity of creation must serve the quality of life of our neighbor, especially the most vulnerable as well as those generations to come.

#### **IV. Conclusion: The Challenge Ahead**

35. For the University of Dayton to faithfully pursue its mission as a national Catholic university in the Marianist tradition of education, members of the University community should understand the

Catholic intellectual tradition and use it to shape all facets of campus life. Several initiatives can be undertaken to enhance the role of the Catholic intellectual tradition in the mission of the University of Dayton.

- 36. Continue the conversation to develop an appreciation of the Catholic intellectual tradition:** One of the major purposes of this Appendix is to invite members of the University community to continue and deepen the conversations that clarify the concept of the Catholic intellectual tradition for the mission of the University. A formal Task Force could be set up for this purpose. The University has established several endowed faculty chairs to contribute to the Catholic intellectual tradition. These chairs should be invited to participate in this conversation.
- 37. Provide opportunities for faculty, staff, and administration to deepen their appreciation of the Catholic intellectual tradition:** These development opportunities could provide insights into how the Catholic intellectual tradition might influence the recruitment of faculty and staff and shape University operations, such as residence life, human resources, stewardship, etc.
- 38. Integrate the Catholic intellectual tradition into the undergraduate curriculum:** Faculty should be provided opportunities and incentives to undertake the work of curriculum design so that the Common Academic Program intentionally incorporates “key elements of the Catholic intellectual tradition.”
- 39. Integrate the Catholic intellectual tradition into graduate studies and interdisciplinary research:** While several initiatives are under way in this area, such as the addition of a course in Business as Vocation to the MBA program, integrating the Catholic intellectual tradition into graduate studies and interdisciplinary research requires greater emphasis.
- 40. Develop an Information Commons for the Catholic intellectual tradition:** Through the University’s investment in information technology to support learning, an information commons for the Catholic intellectual tradition, containing resources, syllabi, teaching notes, etc., could be developed.
- 41. To become a great Catholic university we should give urgency to enabling the Catholic intellectual tradition to shape learning and institutional culture throughout the University of Dayton.**

## Working Bibliography on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

Revised: 25 May 2012

- Cernera, A. & Morgan, O. (Eds.). (2000). *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*. Fairfield, CT: Sacred Heart University Press.
- Ellis, J. (1955). American Catholics and the Intellectual Life. *Thought*, 30 (Autumn), 351-388.
- Gleason, P. (1995). *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Heft, J. (2010). Distinctively Catholic: Keeping the Faith in Higher Education. *Commonweal*, March 26, 2010, 9 -13.
- Hellwig, M. (2000). The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Catholic University. In A. Cernera & O. Morgan, (Eds.), *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition* (pp. 1-18). Fairfield, CT: Sacred Heart University Press.
- Hollenbach, D. (1996). The Catholic University under the Sign of the Cross: Christian Humanism in a Broken World. In M. Himes and S. Pope, *Finding God in all things* (pp 279-298). New York: Crossroad Publishing.
- Holtschneider, D. & Morey, A. (1996). Reclaiming the Catholic Intellectual Tradition: Two Newcomers Look at the 1995 Conference on Catholic Higher Education in the United States. *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education*, 16 (2), 123-133.
- Haughey, J. (2009). *Where is Knowing Going? The Horizons of the Knowing Subject*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- MacIntyre, A. (2006). The End of Education: The Fragmentation of the American University. *Commonweal*, October 20, 2006, 10-14.
- . (2009). *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition*. Lanham, ME: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Marsden, G. (1994). *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . (1997). *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Roche, M. W. (2003). *The Intellectual Appeal of Catholicism and the Idea of a Catholic University*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame.
- Steinfels, M. (1995). The Catholic Intellectual Tradition. *Origins*, 25 (11) 170-175.
- Turner, J. (1998). Catholic Intellectual Traditions and Contemporary Scholarship. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 2 (1), 35-45.
- An extensive bibliography on the Catholic intellectual tradition can be found at <http://www3.villanova.edu/mission/bibliographies/cit.htm>.