

# Comments on “The Nature and Identity of a Catholic University”

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I am thankful for the opportunity to be here with this group of individuals, both on the panel and in the audience, whose opinions I respect in how they have shaped the intellectual climate here at the University, and who are part of a body of knowledge upon which we at a Catholic university depend. I am here not representing the field of theology, which is so well-represented by members of the theology department in Constantin and the School of Ministry, as well as someone who has direct insight into Catholic issues in his role as a journalist.

I'd like to start really by asking the obvious question as to what there is for a scientist to reflect on in this address on the nature of the Catholic faith and the process of debate over ideas and truth at a Catholic university. This question could be turned into something more direct as to say what it is that a student or faculty member experiences by being a scientific member of this Catholic-identified institution as opposed to any other.

I think that for the sciences there are three very relevant questions that emerge from reading and thinking about the identity of a Catholic university. These questions are:

- In our discussion of the bishop's address, how are we as scientists at a Catholic university to understand the reflection on who we are, and what it means to be Catholic enough?
- Is there a way of doing science that is different as it is conducted by scientists of different faiths? Are these scientists identified as being Catholic or working within a Catholic university doing something different from what scientists around the world are doing?
- Is there a way that Catholic colleges and universities by their inclusion of the sciences have reflected on faith in a manner different from those Catholic colleges and universities that do not have departments dedicated to research and teaching on science? Is this integral to their identity, and to the kinds of students and faculty that are part of it?

In beginning with the first question, I believe that some of us in science are asked about whether our scientific teachings are in fact authentic to the Catholic faith. I think that this is explained in the address as somehow equating Catholic identity with orthodoxy of course content, and within science I don't see such listing as being at all consistent or indicative of how the sciences work. In my academic work I have experience with two efforts at trying to list what is orthodox and what is not when it comes to science and our Catholic faith.

The first was something I discussed in a paper co-authored with one of my colleagues in the School of Ministry several years ago. In our paper, titled “Teaching evolution at a Catholic university: the influence of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*” we examined the history of Catholic dialogue between theology and evolutionary theory, and went back to the period immediately post-Darwin but pre *Humani Generis* as described in the book [Negotiating Darwin: The Vatican confronts evolution 1877-1902](#). During this time a list of six evolutionary authors were included as part of the now-abolished *Index of Prohibited Books*. Among these were five individuals who held some formal relationship with the

church who were listed due to the authors' assertion of the potential to produce a general combined theory of evolution and Christianity. The lone biologist, St. George Mivart, was listed not due to his evolutionary writing but as a result of his works describing the punishments of hell. Fortunately in the 20<sup>th</sup> century new ecclesiastical statements replaced piecemeal attempts to define the Catholic view on the search for evolutionary origins.

The second attempt I wish to describe is a contemporary one, although the list of banned individuals is not maintained through a vetting process by an authoritative body of the church. It is, however, maintained by someone who believes in a specific way that Catholics should view science, has made it a goal to discredit scientists who teach evolutionary concepts contrary to a literal view of Genesis. As a reviewer of his paper I had challenged his pretty outrageous assertion by scientific standards—one that advocated a position that correlated the increase in the number of identified genetic disorders to the post-Fall state of mankind, and this in fact being a literal type of “genetic fall” moving from Adam and Eve who were genetically perfect to our present state of genetic imperfection and genetic disease. My disagreement with this scientific account and combination of biblical interpretation with scientific data, as well as the challenge to the author's idea of the only way that Catholics should view the diversity of life, has me on a list among numerous other individuals that the list's author considers “religion bashers who decline to contend with scientific evidence”.

These examples characterize instances which create negative consequences, either by trying to merge newly-revealed scientific theory with theological teaching, or to entirely misinterpret a body of scientific theory in order to reconcile it to creation accounts and reject reasons from science why we know something occurs.

I believe measurement of the sciences according to theological truths can be unfaithful both to theology and to science, and is to be avoided when it comes to identifying ourselves as a Catholic university. If it was any other, it would fall too much into what the Catholic evolutionary biologist Kenneth Miller has rejected as speaking of the “hypothesis of God”, or the use of God as a placeholder for human ignorance. To do so at a Catholic university begets a natural mutual fear among science and faith antithetical to what I believe is spoken of in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, and what is advocated when it comes to the Bishop's description of the identity of a Catholic university.

The model given in the commencement address describes this university's affirmation of commitments to the study and development of the Western tradition of liberal education and the Catholic intellectual tradition, and a commitment to maintaining the dialogue of faith and reason while assuring the proper autonomy of each of the arts, sciences and professions. I think this view informs the answers to my earlier questions concerning the way science is done at a Catholic university, and the way that universities are as a result of having a scientific presence on their campuses.

So, ultimately, as to whether there is a way of doing science that is different as it is conducted by scientists of different faiths, I feel comfortable saying I believe that there is not. A scientist must interact intellectually with many different universities and institutes, and I do not feel that I necessarily do a different kind of science. As a result my students may be present in the world and

faithful to the truths of this science. My students can learn from a tradition which rests on the idea of an understandable world, and the belief in a logic to reality that the human mind can explore and comprehend.

However, what I do feel makes a more profound difference is that which comes from my third question of how all of us are affected when our Catholic identity includes the sciences in an appropriate way. Being a scientist at a Catholic university at its simplest includes the hope of being respected for what we do and how we do it, and knowing that the Catholic faith has not simply allowed us the space that we have, but believes that we can in fact have some of the greatest freedom to teach scientific ideas in an environment that separately cultivates, the historical, philosophical, and, of course, theological dimensions of Western thought. We can know that there is magisterial teaching of the Catholic church, but that there is also opportunity for scientific advancement and engagement with the natural world. It requires, as stated in the address “hard work, humility and profound mutual respect,” and “being open to new questions, new cultures, new circumstances and being willing to learn from them”.

What is interesting about being a scientist at a Catholic university is what happens in those moments of reflection by oneself and conversation with others about our science and the shape of the world. The argument advocated in the Bishop’s address that no one of us can ever have all the answers is what I believe what starts the conversation, and a more concrete and solidified view is what stops it from happening just when it is needed the most.

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