

## **Fidelity: The University as Catholic and Lasallian**

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As members of this university, you stand in a great tradition. One of the riches of the Catholic tradition is its history of sponsoring universities ever since the twelfth century, when a charter granted by a pope was thought to be a better guarantee of academic freedom and integrity than one granted by any civil authority. Though most of our schools are no longer chartered by church authority, some thoughtful and well-informed people think this greater freedom is still to be had today on religiously affiliated campuses because political factors may well enter in on state campuses.

Another of the riches of the Catholic tradition is the wealth of experience, dedication, and wisdom carried through the generations and through the centuries by its congregations of vowed religious, in your case the congregation of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. As you know, the dedication of the [De La Salle] Christian Brothers was and is to live an exemplary Christian life and educate young people of modest means in useful skills and professions, always in a Christian context and with a Christian vision. In the post-Vatican II era in the Catholic Church, we have rediscovered in depth what the Brothers always sought to convey in their education, namely the vocation of all the baptized. Because of that rediscovery, there are less vowed religious in our times, and the responsibility for carrying on their various missions falls largely to their lay collaborators.

It is both necessary and urgent, therefore, as never before that all who carry on the work of teaching, counseling, and administration in the Catholic universities reflect often and deeply on what are the conditions of fidelity to the mission – to the mission of a Catholic university, and in particular the mission of this university, in your case the mission of the [De La Salle] Christian Brothers. There are key elements making up this tradition. A principal one is the relation between faith and reason. Unlike some other Christian denominations, the Catholic community through the ages has stressed the continuity of faith and reason. We have maintained that no one should make the act of faith blindly, but rather that all should be helped to assess the grounds of credibility on which it becomes a fully human and responsible act to make the further leap of faith. We have also maintained, and continue to do so, that all should be encouraged to use their reason within the faith, so to speak. In other words, that the meaning and coherence of the faith should be boldly explored. As wisdom by which to live one's life, it should be understood as fully as possible, and known as personally and practically as possible. Finally, we have maintained, and continue to so, that so far as possible all should have such a grasp of their faith that they can apply it in new situations and be guided by it through experiences that could not have been anticipated in their schooling.

Such expectations exert a great exigence on the teachers in Catholic schools. The expectations assume scholarship in support of faith, and indeed scholarship supported by faith. And this applies to all fields from theology and philosophy to mathematics and engineering. There is an assumption that the teacher never stops learning, and that people of various disciplines engage in conversation

together about the work of their disciplines. As we cannot pass on what we do not have, there is an assumption that we reflect on our faith, pray constantly with a searching personal kind of prayer, and continue to read to update and broaden our understanding. Ideally, teachers in any field and any classroom are ready as the occasion arises to engage their students in reflection on ultimate questions arising out of some aspect of the subject being studied or some occurrence in the classroom. And clearly, this is not non-conflictual or non-problematic. Where there is life there is tension – tension between the established ways and understandings, and tension between affirming and challenging. This is true in scholarship, it is true in inter-disciplinary conversation, and it is true in dealing with students. Moreover, it is healthy that such tension arises. It is not a failure of faith; rather, it is precisely a sign of fidelity to the best of the tradition. Nor is it a failure of charity, as long as all involved are respected and appropriately included in the discussion with a view to obtaining a better grasp on the ever-unfolding truth of a question.

Some may be quick to point out that the fidelity that we seek to exercise on our Catholic campuses today must take into account that we now live and teach in a pluralistic setting. Indeed in the higher education world at large, we are in a secular milieu that tries to set our standards according to the common expectations and understanding. It is therefore very important for fidelity to our mission at Catholic universities and colleges that we be clear about our own standards – whence they are derived, what is their content, and how we might adapt them to maintain fidelity in changing circumstances. According to my observations of the Catholic higher education scene, it is not possible to do this without much conversation among ourselves, careful study of the history of the institutions and their sponsoring congregations, continuing study of the Catholic faith and its implications, and solidarity among Catholic institutions. Those of other traditions who choose to collaborate with the work of a Catholic institution can be assumed to do so because they appreciate the values that are operative there, and indeed they are often the most committed to the expressed mission of our schools.

Some examples of what is at issue are the following. Out of our long traditions in education, Catholic schools are convinced that higher education should be integrated around philosophy and theology, cultivating clarity of thought and concern with ultimate issues, and integrating all that is learned or taught around such thought and concern. This runs counter to present trends in higher education, according to which earlier and sharper specialization in academic fields is the order of the day, with the aim of maintaining a competitive edge in scientific and technical advances. We know however from our centuries of experience that people with technical skills but no training in disciplined critical thinking and evaluation by long-term criteria can be very dangerous people, and are usually not creative thinkers even within their specialization. The academy at large, and the major graduate schools more particularly, have a certain hegemony over decisions and directions in their fields. To some extent, we cannot avoid the requirements they create, but we can be thoughtful, united and insistent on what is desirable from a Christian perspective.

Another example of conflict of expectations and values is an extension of the first, namely the emphasis on a liberal arts foundation for professional education of all kinds. It is not only in the disciplines of philosophy and theology that a Christian and fully human vision is formed. All the liberal and fine arts have a very important role to play. They extend and focus the imagination to look beyond what is to what might be, to envision a better life for poor and oppressed peoples, to project possibilities of a more peaceful and more just society, to find ways of making human life

and experience more attuned to the good, the true and the beautiful, to reach for spiritual values and ways in which society might promote them. This is the role of the liberal and fine arts, because they offer contrasts and comparisons. The study of history offers opportunities to see cultures shaping themselves out of certain decisions, to trace consequences and outcomes to which contemporary experience contains some analogies, to observe how societies can recover from tragedies and rebuild, and so forth. The study of literature offers reflections on all sorts of human experiences which we have not personally undergone, introduces the play of human passions in classic and recurring human situations, provides study of characters. Every field that provides glimpses of other cultures is enriching in our appreciation of our own, and our ability to accept the differences in others. This Catholic commitment to building professional education on the liberal arts is one not widely shared in the secular world where there is a tendency to make even these fields a matter for narrow specialization according to certain critical theories.

These emphases in Catholic higher education are related to the conviction that the role of the educator is to form whole and wholesome persons, that the educator is first and foremost a role model, a compassionate friend, one who challenges the young to become all that they can be and are called to be. And this in turn involves a community of faith and learning that does not admit of a boundary line between the two. Wholeness means that all aspect of life and knowledge are integrated and related to the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life. In other words, all aspects are integrated in the faith as a wisdom tradition for practical living. In our Catholic perspective, everything is relevant to the realization of God's reign in all creation. The pursuit of that reign relates us in hope and responsibility to the world, the church, and the future. As Christians we are called to be signs of hope for the world in our personal ideals and life style, in our professional work and fellowship with others, in our civic presence and action, and in our striving to better the world, especially for those least regarded and included.

Some have been surprised in recent official statements of the church at the emphasis placed on concerns of social justice and peace. Catholics have often assumed that the essence of their commitment as baptized Christians is in their individual lives, and that social issues are for those who happen to be inclined that way. The popes and bishops of the twentieth century have been at great pains to correct that perception. The redemption in which we are privileged to participate has to do with all human relationships and therefore with all the structures of human society – its economics, its political affairs, its culture and international relations, its laws and customs, and the way the least powerful among us are treated. It is axiomatic in our tradition that all should be educated and encouraged to be concerned for the common good, and that the common good is realized to the extent that the poorest and weakest have their needs met with dignity and full participation in society.

The educational values and traditions of the Brothers of the Christian Schools are a great heritage and a wonderful contribution to the whole society. Fidelity to that tradition is a high ideal for those who are now carrying on the work of the schools and colleges, and that fidelity is easier to maintain where there is a strong sense of partnership and community in the enterprise. I wish you all success in this coming academic year, and in all your endeavors to build a community of faith and responsibility for the future.

## **Endnotes**

1. This address was delivered in the fall of 1998 at Lewis University in Romeoville, IL.
2. Monika Hellwig (1929-2005), a renowned educator, theologian, and author, was for more than three decades a professor at Georgetown University. She also served as president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU) from 1996-2005. Her doctorate was earned at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC.