

Note on the Text: Fr Ted, Newman and me

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This essay is based on a chapter that I was honored to write back in 1994 for Fr. Ted Hesburgh's book, *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University*. It seeks to give a clear picture of Newman's thinking in *The Idea of a University* and his broader views of Catholic higher education.

I had the honor of knowing and working with the University of Notre Dame's longtime president, Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C., when I served as the first tenured woman in the university's administration. Even so, I tried my best to steer clear of him during the Lenten season, when he gave up cigars and could be crabby.

Like me, Father Ted especially loved Cardinal – now Saint – John Henry Newman — ‘one of my heroes’, he said. Father Ted liked to quote Newman or, more frequently, to paraphrase him, with attribution, in many a presidential talk, as well as in informal remarks he often made earnestly about the unparalleled worth of a Catholic liberal education. Father Ted never claimed to be an expert on Newman or a scholar of his work, but his strong attraction to the man and his writings was always in evidence. It is most appropriate to look at St. John Henry Newman in the same light as Father Ted. Both were devoted Catholic priests and university presidents, and both were among the most influential figures of their time, especially in higher education and in the Catholic Church.

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‘What, Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean?’ The Vision and the Views

I.

For better and for worse, Newman finds a place in every discussion of Catholic higher education – indeed, in any substantive discussion of the modern university. Evoked like the Muse, Newman is often the fall guy, the straw man or the knight in shining armor, depending on the purpose at hand. The common disengagement from the inherently Catholic dimension of Newman’s educational **vision** and the all too common extrication of isolated points from Newman’s **intentionally limited view** in *The Idea of a University* – distortions congealed and fixed by repetition – understandably lead one to reapply Charles Kingsley’s words: ‘What, then, does Dr. Newman mean?’

The confusion is partially Newman’s own, because of what he chose to do in the discourses that make up *The Idea of a University*. That work is not, and was never intended to be, the expression of Newman’s **vision** of Catholic higher education; it is an eloquent, rhetorical sketch of one **view** according to which the University is there being considered, namely its ‘bare and necessary idea’. In his introductory discourse, Newman writes: ‘I am investigating in the abstract, and am determining what is in itself right and true. ... I am here the advocate and the minister of a certain great principle’.

‘Investigating in the abstract’? Anyone who has read Newman beyond *The Idea of a University* knows that a concrete, common sense approach and a developmental method (historical, psychological, autobiographical, spiritual), were Newman’s natural and favored modes of writing, not the abstract investigation of a static idea. His views were always directly related to experience and imagination, and his writings appeal to the whole personality, not just to the mind. He had a horror of the ‘unreal’, a distaste for metaphysics and a love of the personal and the particular. He regarded everything abstract or

‘notional’ as incomplete until it was ‘realized’, made real, however inadequately, in human life. Newman’s practical temper of mind, his principled actions as student, tutor and fellow at Oxford and as founding rector (president) at the Catholic University in Dublin, and the weight and bearing of his major writings lead one to suspect that he must have other views on the higher education of Catholics that are not included in this intentionally ‘bare and necessary idea’ (he himself said: ‘from first to last, education has been my line’).

One might reasonably expect to find commentary on the origins and history of the university; on the legitimacy, limitations and politics of ecclesiastical relations; on the restricted role of the state in church and university matters; on the university’s direct service to the church, its contribution to the intellectual life of the clergy and its application to the newly emerging laity; on participation in governance by lay faculty; on the offering of professional studies, on what we now call life-long learning; on academic freedom; on the university’s encouragement of publication and the professional life of the faculty; on the relation of the University and the College; of the professor, lecturer and tutor; on the personal influence of the teacher; on the relation of the university to the culture in which it finds itself; on structure, staffing and finances. And might it not be reasonable also to expect, from this renowned religious leader and holy man, commentary on the Catholic university’s pastoral role in cultivating morality and religious faith in its students?

Newman considers none of these things in *The Idea of a University*. Newman realized this, and every one of these aspects of university life are addressed and promoted elsewhere in his collected writings (which amount to eighty volumes). The omission of their consideration in the *Idea of a University* is deliberate, not an oversight, or a repudiation of these important dimensions of the life of a Catholic University. Newman uses the distinction that Aristotle makes between a thing’s ‘essence’ and its ‘integrity’ (wholeness, well-being, completeness). The aspects mentioned above are absolutely indispensable elements

for the healthy life and integrity of a Catholic university. The essence of what University means, however – what makes it a university – is exclusively the intellectual enterprise of cultivating in every way possible, theoretically and practically, **all knowledge for its own sake**; this, and only this, is the content of the *Idea of A University*.

The Idea of a University presents a **view** (an angle or a perspective), an aspect of Newman's large-minded **vision** of the dynamic reality and potentiality of higher education for Catholics. The aspect under which the university is here viewed is as an **Idea**. Because that is its aim, his book omits other important considerations that are not general or typical, but rather concrete, particular and varied. What Newman means by the **Idea** of a University, has emerged from history, as he emphasizes in his *Rise and Progress of Universities*; it is an elastic 'type' to which particular institutions correspond, with great diversity and range, in many different cultures and ages. No single university, including his own, could or would ever instantiate it.

Newman's concept of a University functions as an Ideal in the case of an individual institution, but if the institution is only 'true to type', it may already be dead. In addition to its conserving action on the past and its continuity of principles, the institution must also be able to absorb new elements from its particular time and place in history. It must itself be influential and effective, and it must advance the mission of the university in its gestating anticipations of the future.

The great variety of realizations of the **Idea**, each with its distinctive tradition, mission and emphases, defines, elastically, the type or Idea that then emerges from history in our time. Like the particular institutions that contribute to the Idea, all thoughtful approaches to the Idea illuminate it precisely by means of their unique, particular points of view.

If we seek to know more of Newman's capacious vision of a Catholic University, we should explore his other views of it;

these are found in the other two volumes of lectures and essays on university education that he composed while he was the active Rector of the Catholic University of Ireland, and also the volume of sermons preached before the University of Ireland in 1856-57, the year of the opening of its Church. Certainly pertinent are the brilliantly original sermons he preached on the relation of faith and reason when he was tutor and fellow of Oriel College, Oxford, and vicar of the university church there; as well as other essays and sermons, notebooks, diaries and letters. Because Newman was not a 'systematic' writer, *The Idea of a University* benefits from being placed in the context of his other educational writings, and in turn placed in the context of his other major works. Then, and only then, do we get the educational **vision** of one of the most subtle and penetrating Catholic minds of all times, a man universally celebrated as a distinguished churchman, eminent scholar and prolific author.

The relation between religious faith and human understanding, as they originate in nature and are developed by education and practise, was the central intellectual pre-occupation of Newman's long life. This is the living nucleus around which all of his views on university education revolve; it is the kernel from which they germinate and grow. Integral to his vision of a Catholic University is the essential role of an educated Catholic laity in the doctrinal (as well as the ministerial) life of the church; the importance of the formation of conscience which entails intellectual education and an understanding of one's relation to legitimate authority, ecclesial and political; and the 'sacred duty' incumbent on every human being to develop the talent of our minds in accordance with our natural gifts and station in life.

As an intellectual and spiritual pilgrim, Newman was seeking the complete Vision of Truth, even as his eloquent words circled round about what he glimpsed, carefully articulating, one at a time, every partial view.

Now the intellect in its present state, with exceptions which

need not here be specified, does not discern truth intuitively, or as a whole. We know, not by a direct and simple vision, not at a glance, but as it were, by piecemeal and accumulation, by a mental process, by going round an object, by the comparison, the combination, the mutual correction, the continual adaptation of many partial notions, by the employment, concentration, and joint action of the intellectual powers. (Discourse VII)

II

The second part of this essay articulates explicitly my personal **view** of what Newman meant by the Idea of a distinctively Catholic university, when a wider range of his writings are taken into account. Altogether these views help realize that **Idea** of a Catholic University which always eludes us, even as we make progress.

Deep in history, the relationship of **University** and **Catholicity** always and everywhere was tensile, ever seeking, never reaching, the stasis of full and perfect equilibrium. Inherited and inhabited perspectives by means of which to attend to a particular, historical reality, Catholicity and University constitute important horizons of thought and belief, each surrounded by a halo of traditionally sacrosanct principles.

Like a multi-colored marble in a giant bowl, pulled toward then passing through the center, travelling outward toward the limit, breaking through the horizon of a previous circumference, then stopped short and drawn back by the pull of yet another polarity, – just so is the thinking, believing intellect, of both the individual and the community, dynamically centered in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, ‘the still point of the turning world’ (T.S. Eliot).

Restless at heart, the thinking, believing intellect is caught up in the play of seeking and finding, of assumption and discovery, of faith and understanding, of knowledge and mystery. It tacks left

and then right, drawn now by the sway of memory and the lessons of the past, now by the beckoning of imagination and the challenges of invention – ever creating, ever conserving, back and forth again. This is the dance of Sophia, Wisdom, the first born of God, ever at play in the divine presence and delighting to be with the children of Eve.^[LSEP]

Historically centered about the concepts of University and Catholicity are clusters of principles, by which I mean not *a priori* opinions arbitrarily imposed to canonize the status quo but, rather settled communal meanings, recondite sources of traditional wisdom, which, if made explicit and examined, can serve as starting points for thought and conversation, keys for interpretation and understanding, even guides for decision and action. I here observe the historical attachment of three such principles to the concept of ‘**University**’.

First and foremost, the principle of intellect and influence.

University *as a* university is the home of the intellect. A university is true to type if it is concerned essentially and primarily with intellectual cultivation as an end in itself, before it is concerned with professional, vocational, moral and religious education. From Socrates to Simone Weil, the love of learning, the pursuit and contemplation of truth, is regarded as a pearl so precious, so absolute in and of itself, that it is worth selling all of one’s possessions in order to attain it, and to live and die in its service. As such, the life of the mind is not a means to any other end or product or pursuit, however naturally that product or pursuit may be informed by or inform or follow from the intellectual life – the only practical activity fully commensurate with the intellectual life being its own transmission and development, – the teaching or broadcasting of the seeds and fruits of thought in speech, in writing and in culture.

Second, the principle of universality and freedom.

The university welcomes all truth, encourages freedom of inquiry and the advancement of knowledge to the furthest

reaches of the human mind. Correlatively it is self-correcting in its disciplines and methods, its communal life and measure.

Universitas [Universality] implies a radical, non-territorial openness to the complete circle of knowledge, to the checking, balancing, adjusting, rounding insights of all avenues of liberal learning taken together: the sciences, the arts and the humanities, including theology as knowledge.

And thirdly, the principle of community and institution.

Even as it concentrates fully and essentially on the development of the intellect and the imagination, the university recognizes the rootedness of mind in the whole person, of person in community and culture, and of this community and culture in the near and far-reaching communities and cultures of our world, mindful that multicultural and ecumenical differences and dialogues are deeply embedded in history. Now the practical, productive, and applied knowledges of the university take their rightful place concentrically moving out from and serving the nucleus life of the mind: vocational and professional education, moral and religious formation, the residence life of the institution – and all of the human services according to the mission, tradition and resources of a particular institution. As institution, a university establishes libraries and laboratories, museums and conservatories, institutes and centers, seats of administration and chairs of learning – all with the primary aim of assuring the preservation and creative continuance of its inmost life of the mind.

This living idea of University, as the home of intellect and influence, as established intellectual center of the local and global communities, has survived the onslaughts of the epochs, strengthened by the growth, variations and adaptations of its aspects, just as the ideas ‘State’ and ‘Church’ have endured and evolved from antiquity until today – each communally recognized instance, the adumbration of a pattern, true to type and yet ever renewing itself.

It is necessary but not sufficient that a Catholic university be

theistic, that is, that it profess intellectually the existence of a God or gods. This is the order of reason, shining Athens. It is also necessary but not sufficient that a Catholic university be a community in covenant with a personal, self-revealing God. This is the order of reason in relation to faith, **Athens and Sinai**.

It is further necessary but not sufficient that a Catholic university be a Christian community partaking in the relational life and love of the triune God-for-us in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit – a life of self-emptying, suffering and transforming service of others. This is the order of reason in relation to charity, **Athens and Jerusalem**.

Lastly, it is necessary (and still insufficient) that a Catholic university be a community of teacher/scholars whose practise of the intellectual life originates in and is animated by Catholic principles or wellsprings of thought, belief and action. Here are a few of those principles of the Catholic faith, all of which encroach on one another and refuse to be fixed and final: the sacramental or mediational principle, the principle of the unity of faith and reason, the doctrinal or dogmatic principle, the principle of tradition, the ecclesial or ‘communio’ principle, the Petrine principle. This is the order of reason in relation to authority, **Athens and Rome**.

I shall here emphasize only certain aspects of but a few of these principles of **Catholicity** – ones that correlate most directly with these three principles of University.

First, the principle of sacramentality or mediation.

Catholics believe that this visible world is alive with invisible presence and ultimate significance. Because of God’s creation, incarnation and sanctification, the good earth, the bodily, material, physical universe, is holy and mediates grace to us, through such of its elements as water and oil, bread and wine, speech and gesture – in particular through the Incarnate Christ, His visible Church, and seven special, religious sacraments. We

believe that all of human history, past, present and future, our stories and philosophies, our cultures, sciences and religions, as well as the particular circumstances of our everyday lives, are sacred instruments and meeting places of God.

In sign and symbol, word and number; in music, art and dance; with candles and incense, liturgies and devotions; we indirectly but really encounter God and mediate God's presence to one another. The most ordinary, intimate and overlooked sacramental presence of God in our lives is the mediating processes of our own minds: imagination and memory, inference and assent. Reasoning and believing, both processes by which we hold this by means of that, lead us from what is known to what was unknown, from premises to conclusions, from probabilities to certitudes. Inductively and deductively; analogically, hypothetically and dialectically; truth itself, one of the names of God, is mediated to ourselves and to others through the ordinary and disciplined activities of our mind.

I am speaking of **the Catholic principle of the unity of faith and reason** – unity, not identity or co-extension. Because of our belief in the wholeness and dignity of the acting person, in whom the life of faith and of reason is one life, that of the spirit, Catholicism has always held to a peculiarly close relationship between thinking and believing, each an act of the intellect capable of informing and furthering the other. For us, faith is not so much, as with the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, a blind leap into darkness. Rather, faith is, as with Saint Teresa, the ecstasy of knowledge, excess of kindly light, to which the inner eye grows ever more intimately accustomed, eternally. We do not place faith over here as subjective, individual and private, and reason over there as objective, common and public. We believe that the communal faith in which we partake has rational grounds which, even if I do not know, the ecclesial community does (and into which I ought to inquire so that, as with St. Paul, I may know the reason for the hope within) – that our faith has rational grounds and that our reasonings are formed within a

horizon of trust.

We hold that we can believe what we do not understand, which everyone does all the time anyhow, but also the even more astounding truth that we shall not understand unless we believe. We see faith as a way of knowing, as yielding religious truth that is not only a portion, but a condition of general knowledge. 'Faith is the reasoning of the religious mind', writes Newman, in agreement with his saintly predecessors Augustine and Aquinas.

Next, **the dogmatic or doctrinal principle.**

As Catholics, we hold that there is an intellectual content to what we believe, that there are propositional truths that exist independently of our minds and of human reason, and that human beings are not the measure of all things. Through the reception of and adherence to certain credal and conciliar doctrines of faith, which have developed over centuries by means of a living tradition, the proud rationalist and the self-righteous dogmatist in all of us is stopped short and humbled, for we are asked to contemplate truths that we could never have made up or owned as personal possessions. American Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) notes:

The intellect will take its place in a larger context and will cease to be tyrannical ... – and when there is nothing over the intellect, it usually is tyrannical. Anyway, the mind serves best when it is anchored in the word of God. There is no danger then of becoming an intellectual without integrity.

I began with the principle of sacramentality, and I conclude with **the principle of authority**, for these two are among the most distinctive principles of Catholicism, and the ones most invigorating of University. It is in the tensile relation to authority that the intellect is at its best, and authority entirely depends on intellect for its substance and rationality. The creative intellect thrives on conversation and contest with the

authors, the authorities, the authorizations that constitute the resistant realities of our lives. Authorities provide standards and rules, parameters and limits – sometimes in excess – and reason forges ahead, unchecked and progressive – sometimes in excess. Reason and authority were made for each other.

If reason was not tempered by authority, or even by other authorities within the self, we might go mad, or at best end up victims of that peculiar malady that the English writer G.K. Chesterton (1841-1922) ascribes to those who have lost everything but their minds. And whenever authority is not illumined by reason, it quickly becomes arbitrary, tyrannical, coercive and abusive.

Conscience is the first place where authority and reason struggle for equilibrium and are joined by judgement into one. *Ecclesia* is the final place where authority and reason struggle for equilibrium and are joined by judgement into one. The age-old dialectics, of theologians and magisterium, of laity and clergy, of universities and bishops, are illustrations of this compelling play of reason and authority.

In the magnificent final chapter of his *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, [Defense of My Life] Newman articulates in dramatic detail the compatibility and the requirement of authority and reason, each necessary for the well-being of the other.

It is the vast Catholic body itself, and it only, which affords an arena for both combatants in that awful, never-dying duel. It is necessary for the very life of religion ... that the warfare should be incessantly carried on. Every exercise of Infallibility is brought out into act by an intense and varied operation of the Reason, both as its ally and as its opponent, and provokes again, when it has done its work, a re-action of Reason against it; and, as in a civil polity the State exists and endures by means of the rivalry and collision, the encroachments and defeats of its constituent parts, so in like manner Catholic Christendom is no simple exhibition of religious absolutism, but presents a continuous picture of

Authority and Private Judgment, alternately advancing and retreating as the ebb and flow of the tide.

Conclusion

I should like for a Catholic university to be as unapologetically Catholic as it is warmly ecumenical; as proudly intellectual as it is caring and compassionate; as concerned with the individual and communal life of the mind as it is with publications; as valuing of inference, imagination and assent as ways to God, as of social justice; as committed to liberal education as it is to professional education; as eager in the pursuit of truth and of Catholic culture in the arts as it is of moral goodness; as steady in its own convictions and traditions as it is appreciative of diversity; as humbled and gratified by the spiritual work of mercy that is rendered in instructing the ignorant as by the corporal mercy performed in sheltering the homeless. The noble activity of cultivating the life of the mind is the first, though not the only, profession and practice of a Catholic university; that very cultivation is its first and best service to the Church, the Academy and the world.

The greatest threat to the Catholicity of a university is neglect of the intellectual life – not of its products and applications, its services and technologies – but of thought and culture as eminently worthwhile in themselves and as the *raison d'être* of its institutional life. To be a Catholic University is above all else to indwell, to energize, and to celebrate the mediating, sacramental powers of the human mind.

I conclude with an excerpt from a sermon ‘Intellect, the Instrument of Religious Training’, preached by [Saint John Henry] Newman in the University Church, Dublin, on the feast of St. Monica in 1856. Part of this passage was printed for many years on the frontispiece of the University of Notre Dame’s Bulletin of Information:

I wish the intellect to range with the utmost freedom, and religion to enjoy an equal freedom; but what I am

stipulating for is, that they should be found in one and the same place, and exemplified in the same persons. ... I wish the same spots and the same individuals to be at once oracles of philosophy and shrines of devotion. It will not satisfy me, what satisfies so many, to have two independent systems, intellectual and religious, going at once side by side, by a sort of division of labour, and only accidentally brought together. It will not satisfy me, if religion is here, and science there, and [students] converse with science all day, and lodge with religion in the evening. ... I want the same roof to contain both the intellectual and moral discipline. Devotion is not a sort of finish given to the sciences; nor is science a sort of feather in the cap, if I may so express myself, an ornament and set-off to devotion. I want the intellectual layman to be religious, and the devout ecclesiastic to be intellectual.