

# CONTROVERSIAL SITUATIONS AND THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY. SELECTING HONORARY DEGREES RECIPIENTS AND OTHERS INVITED TO SPEAK\*

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## Introduction

The recent and very public controversy that erupted when the University of Notre Dame invited President Obama to give the commencement address and to receive an honorary doctorate in Law makes a discussion about “Honorary degrees and Invitations to Speak” all the more timely, yet, in my opinion, the issue underscores the need to understand who we are as Catholic institutions of higher learning. So, while the invitation is certainly a serious public relations problem for the University, the concern should neither be political, nor limited to this particular event. The discussion should encompass a deeper reflection about the purpose of the university as an institution, and should be aimed at helping all of us entrusted with running Catholic universities, towards becoming more faithful guardians of the patrimony with which we have been entrusted.

Two distinct, though interrelated, principles must frame the conversation. Those are the interplay between, on the one hand, the nature and mission of the Catholic university and, on the other hand, the concept of academic freedom as understood from a Catholic point of view. These principles govern the deeper questions about the search for truth, the role of a university in the intellectual arena, and its responsibility towards society. They are the principles which, for example, at Franciscan University of Steubenville, govern how we decide who should receive honors or be given opportunities to speak. These tenets—mission and freedom—should also help guide all those who are entrusted with directing the work of Catholic universities because they do, in fact, emanate from the nature of the Catholic university as an institution committed to truth.

## The nature and mission of a Catholic University

In gatherings of fellow partners in Catholic higher education, I have often asked colleagues about what they believe is the primary mission of a Catholic university. Most say it is the pursuit of social justice issues or the upholding of the cultural heritage of universities’ various traditions (e.g., Franciscan, Jesuit, Dominican, etc.). Let me be clear, however, at the outset, that this, however admirable, is not the primary purpose that the Church holds for her institutions of higher learning.

Pope Benedict in his address to presidents of Catholic universities had this to say, “Education is integral to the mission of the Church to proclaim the Good News. First and foremost every Catholic educational institution is a place to encounter the living God who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth.”<sup>1</sup> As the Church proposes for us, then, the encounter with Christ is the primary element that defines the educational enterprise.

This statement by Pope Benedict serves as the proper interpretative key to *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*’s declaration that, “the objective of a Catholic University is to assure in an institutional manner a Christian presence in the university world.”<sup>2</sup> This “Christian presence” cannot simply be a proclamation of social justice, for example (an ethically-minded atheist could do that!), or some other worthy, though lesser, goal. The Christian presence that is envisioned in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* is one that is oriented towards the proclamation of the Gospel, or, as Pope Benedict puts it, to be a place “to encounter the living God.” This, then, provides the context for *Ex Corde*’s four *essential* characteristics of a Catholic university:

1. *A Christian inspiration* not only of individuals but of the university community as such;
2. *A continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith* upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research;
3. *Fidelity to the Christian message* as it comes to us through the Church;
4. An institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family *in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Remarks at the Catholic University of America, April 17, 2008

<sup>2</sup> ECE, 13.

<sup>3</sup> ECE, 13. Emphasis added.

All four characteristics are explicit references to the direct contribution a University should make towards the overall mission of the Church to proclaim salvation in Christ.

If a university embraces these characteristics as essential aspects of its mission to bring the Christian message to the academy, then it is not enough to proclaim its Catholicity by just having Mass on campus, no matter how well attended those Masses are. It is not enough to encourage living a virtuous life in the dorms, no matter how well those virtues are lived out. It is not enough to stand up for social justice issues, no matter how important they are. Instead, it is also essential to consider what is taught in the classroom, what is expressed in the auditoriums, what is discussed in seminars, in short, it is essential to consider what happens throughout the entire university as part of a constant effort to consider, to evaluate, and to verify the depth and reasonableness of the Christian proposal in light of human experience. The requirement imposed by the mission of a Catholic university that is not present at secular schools is the conviction of the Church that the claim that Jesus makes—the incarnation of the Son of God in human history, ἐγὼ εἰμι, “I AM”—is in fact reasonable and verifiable. That is the foundation on which we are to judge anything else that happens at a university.

This presents a particular opportunity for the Church, which, at the same time, at Catholic universities challenges the approach we are expected to take in relation to our students and the public, and to some extent, at least, it comes into conflict with the current secular understanding of academic freedom and how we promote dialogue within the university.

### **Academic Freedom**

The current secular understanding of freedom sees academic freedom as an avenue to offer, and even celebrate, anything that can challenge the intellect. The traditional Catholic understanding of freedom, instead, is more carefully nuanced to direct the individual to seek truth in what brings fulfillment.

Let’s take a moment, then, to look at the right application of this fundamental aspect of university life: Both Pope Benedict in his address to presidents of Catholic universities and Pope John Paul II in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* have affirmed the Church’s support for academic freedom. Yet, they have not done so in an unqualified manner. They have offered limits to this freedom. The limits they state, the common good, the rights of the person, and the teaching of the Church, are related to the mission of a Catholic university to, above all, proclaim the fact that in God’s incarnation, humanity has found the summit of Truth. Which limits they impose is a vital question for the integrity of a Catholic university as a place of higher learning. This may lead to the question of whether those imposed limits are valid in the first place. Let us first look at those limits.

The two popes, both great intellectuals in their own right, express the boundaries of academic freedom in the following way. Pope John Paul states that a university,

possesses that institutional autonomy necessary to perform its functions effectively and guarantees its members academic freedom, so long as the rights of the individual person and of the community are preserved within the confines of the truth and the common good.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Pope Benedict states that,

in regard to faculty members at Catholic colleges universities, I wish to reaffirm the great value of academic freedom. In virtue of this freedom you are called to search for the truth wherever careful analysis of evidence leads you. Yet it is also the case that any appeal to the principle of academic freedom in order to justify positions that contradict the faith and the teaching of the Church would obstruct or even betray the university's identity and mission; a mission at the heart of the Church's *munus docendi* and not somehow autonomous or independent of it.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, both popes limit the reach of academic freedom, one by appealing to the right of individuals and the common good, while the other, more explicitly, referring to the *munus docendi* of the Church, declaring it foundational for a Catholic university.

Yet the question of whether those limits are reasonable parameters within a rightly understood academic freedom is at the center of any acceptance of such proposals, and has fueled much of the current debate.<sup>6</sup> It is,

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<sup>4</sup> ECE, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Benedict, Remarks.

<sup>6</sup> The debate has been long. Consider, for example, Annarelli, James John, *Academic Freedom and Catholic Higher Education*, Contributions to the Study of Education, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987); Cafardi, Nicholas P. and Duquesne University.,

therefore, important to turn to the question about the nature of academic freedom to seek an answer to the question of the reasonableness of the limits proposed by the Church.

Because the Church is convinced about the nature of her relationship with Christ, who is font and summit of all truth, all institutions that emerge from within the Church are participants in the work of the proclamation of this truth. Thus, one must understand freedom and the place of dialogue that a university has within society as service to the salvific work of Christ. For a Catholic university, as a key place within the Church for both dialogue with the world and the formation of mature Christians, the attitude should be for openness both towards the discovery of truth, as well as towards the conviction that one has found it in Christ. Ideological considerations, which are bound to emerge within the university campus, must be evaluated first and foremost for their claim to truth. This is what the Church expects of all of us.

THE NOTION OF FREEDOM IN THE TRADITION. At risk of oversimplifying the issue but hoping, nonetheless, to provide a valid path that might be helpful, I would like to point out how the tradition has understood the notion of freedom.<sup>7</sup> There are essentially two major notions of freedom that have developed in Christian tradition. The most popular in modern times is one that defines freedom as the possibility to choose between alternatives (derived principally by William of Ockham, c. 1288 – c 1347). Thus one is truly free when one is given the choice to select. Our American system of government is predicated on the ability of the electorate to choose among a pool of candidates. The possibility of making a choice is considered one of the highest expressions of freedom.

This notion, with its attendant variations, which can vary from one extreme to another (e.g., a democratic ideal, an individualistic approach to choices), contrasts the earlier tradition, which sees freedom as giving the individual the possibility for excellence. St. Augustine, St. Anselm, St. Thomas Aquinas, and most of the patristic tradition would follow this second notion of freedom.<sup>8</sup> It assumes that freedom must be oriented towards the good of the person, opening the horizon towards perfecting the individual and society. The highest ideal, then, is not to have the option to choose, but the option for excellence. This is, in fact, what makes freedom valuable.

Learning and perfecting an art, for example, with its requisite toil, moves the learner towards the perfection of expression. Thus, as the learner of the art improves in the art, he or she is moved towards a greater excellence that provides the ability to create great art. The self-denial that brings mastery to an art or an academic field, or even in life, is a culmination of freedom, and the process of reaching great expertise requires choices that by necessity entail the blocking of future choices. The principle that governs this effort is the perfection of the human person, not the availability of choices. Choices are secondary to the attainment of excellence. This approach to freedom that seeks excellence is what *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* uses to define the Catholic university. Thus, what to the modern eye may seem as limitations to academic freedom (i.e., that some possibilities are denied to the university and its agents), to the Church, by virtue of higher goods—foremost among them the dignity and sanctification of the

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*Academic Freedom in a Pluralistic Society: The Catholic University* ([Pittsburgh]: Duquesne University, 1990); Carron, Malcolm Theodore and Alfred D. Cavanaugh, *Readings in the Philosophy of Education*, 3d ed. ([Detroit]: University of Detroit Press, 1963); Curran, Charles E., *Catholic Higher Education, Theology, and Academic Freedom* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990); Curran, Charles E. and Robert E. Hunt, *Dissent in and for the Church; Theologians and Humanae Vitae* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1970); Curran, Charles E. and Richard A. McCormick, *Dissent in the Church, Readings in Moral Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988); Dore, Paul John, *The Future of Religious Colleges; the Proceedings of the Harvard Conference on the Future of Religious Colleges, October 6-7, 2000* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2002); Finkin, Matthew W. and Robert Post, *For the Common Good: Principles of American Academic Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Hesburgh, Theodore Martin, *The Hesburgh Papers: Higher Values in Higher Education* (Kansas City, Kan.: Andrews and McMeel, 1979); Hunt, John F. and Terrence R. Connelly, *The Responsibility of Dissent: The Church and Academic Freedom* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1970); Manier, Edward, John W. Houck, and University of Notre Dame., *Academic Freedom and the Catholic University* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides Publishers, 1967); May, William W., *Vatican Authority and American Catholic Dissent: The Curran Case and Its Consequences* (New York: Crossroad, 1987); Orsy, Ladislav M., *The Church: Learning and Teaching: Magisterium, Assent, Dissent, Academic Freedom* (Wilmington, Del.: M. Glazier, 1987); Vigilanti, John Anthony, *Academic Freedom and the Adult Student in Catholic Higher Education*, Original ed. (Malabar, Fla.: Krieger Pub. Co., 1992); Worgul, George S., *Issues in Academic Freedom* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1992). See also, Gallin, Alice, *American Catholic Higher Education: Essential Documents, 1967-1990* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992); Morey, Melanie M. and John J. Piderit, *Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> For an indepth treatment of this subject, see Pinckaers, Servais, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995, pp. 327ff).

<sup>8</sup> See St. Augustine's, *De libero arbitrio*, BK II, ch. 19, whose treatment of the subject is pivotal for the patristic tradition. See also, St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 13, aa. 3-6.

person—some limitations are perfectly acceptable. That is to say, universities, as do people, make choices all the time; those choices, however, must be made with the end in mind, the *telos*, the goal that is desired, not simply with the idea of giving choices for the sake of having varied possibilities.

This understanding of freedom is what justifies the limitations that the popes and the Church present to Catholic universities' use of academic freedom. It explains why the limitations on the grounds of the common good and the proclamation of the Gospel are not only acceptable limits, but also necessary guideposts towards a properly understood notion of the human quest for truth and fulfillment. This notion stands in stark contrast to the prevalent assumption that universities in the western world have a duty to maintain an unrestricted flow of information so that the student will have access to all points of view.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND CONTROVERSIAL SPEAKERS AND ACTIVITIES. The secular view of academic freedom often leads to the welcoming of controversial speakers, theater productions, and activists from outside, as well as allowing and nurturing on the inside a professoriate with divergent and opposing views. Additionally, same-sex marriage proponents, reproductive rights activists, the availability of pornography on campus, and people or activities that are at odds with Church teaching, may find a welcome sign at universities precisely because those views imply choices, and thus freedom for the students' intellectual development. The university, the argument goes, must not be a bubble that keeps the student from the maturity that he or she must attain by exploring the possibilities the world offers.

The Catholic university's response, however, must be careful not about denying entrance to many voices, as those are indeed necessary for a proper and mature formation of the student, but about how those voices are presented and understood within the context of the freedom that seeks excellence. Dialogue, even animated and controversial is not, in and of itself, a problem within Catholic academia. On the contrary, debates are often enormously helpful in framing questions and finding solutions. At Franciscan University, for example, we not only allow, but also have actively invited controversial and dissenting speakers to present and engage in debate. What ought to mark a drastic difference in the approach Catholic universities take is that they ought to make it clear that our position is one that seeks to promote the common good, the dignity of the person, and ultimately the salvation of souls, and not simply the free flow of information.

### **Honorary Doctorates and Controversial Speakers**

The commitment that a university makes as a Catholic institution of higher learning to support the salvific message the Church proclaims requires it to evaluate under the same lens those people it might wish to invite as commencement speakers or honorees. The current case of the University of Notre Dame's invitation to President Obama to its commencement exercises serves as an illustration to this point. Franciscan University of Steubenville, while it is not opposed in theory or in practice to inviting controversial speakers to engage in real dialogue with professors and students, would not invite President Obama to campus to receive an honorary doctorate and to address its graduating class—a setting that is obviously neither a dialogue nor a debate. Instead, the commencement proclaims primarily and very publicly that the university officially holds the person who is being honored as a role model for the lives of the new graduates. While there is much to respect about President Obama, Franciscan University would not have made that choice based on the University's understanding of its Catholic identity. The reasons for this stance should be clear. The very fact that as a Catholic university Franciscan seeks to recognize the event of Christ's incarnation as the pivotal point for all human reality, sets for us a series of obligations: First of all, we embrace the principle of ecclesial unity as an absolutely necessary aspect of Franciscan University's existence. Secondly, we recognize the fundamental importance of the proclamation of the Gospel of Life, with its attendant commitment to Catholic social justice, which is grounded on solidarity for those in greatest need—the unborn, and that this recognition, which emanates from the Gospel itself, demands that those who are invited and presented as role models for our students be men and women who, while not perfect, do not ardently, in word and action, act against the excellence the University wishes to inculcate in its students. The invitation of someone who is such a passionate and powerful supporter of the pro-choice position amounts to a betrayal of the principles of excellence that ought to guide Franciscan University. This is not a matter of politics or ideology, but it is a position that we see as something grounded in the University's understanding of its relationship to Christ.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, we at Franciscan make an important distinction between inviting people to discuss or debate issues, and inviting people to present them as role models for our graduates, especially if we honor those guests in a very public forum. That distinction, grounded in our understanding of freedom that seeks truth and the mission of the Catholic University as a privileged place to proclaim the Truth, enables the Catholic university not only to be true to its commitment to society as a locus of inquiry and unbiased exploration, but also as a place where that exploration has brought us to the realization, after full use of the powers of the intellect, that an event two thousand years ago has pointed us in the direction of, and brought us to the culmination of, all true human aspirations. The encounter with this event, God made Man, imposes on the Church, but particularly on the institutions within her committed to education, an obligation to be true to that encounter especially when announcing it to youth and to the world.

Any actions that are taken within the university should be considered in light of its mission as a servant to the truth of God's love, and in accord with the demands of freedom. Without those two elements, the work of a university becomes subject to ideological distortions that do not serve the common good. Trustees and all others entrusted with guiding the work of Catholic universities ought to carefully reflect about these things, and demand of administrators and faculty a clear commitment to seek the truth without bias, and to promote freedom that leads to the perfection of the individual and society.

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