

# **Catholic University of America**

## ***Symposium, in celebration of the inauguration of John Garvey as President of The Catholic University of America***

### **Intellect and Virtue: The Idea of a Catholic University**

#### **Virtue and Faith Life**

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The practice of celebrating the inauguration of an academic leader with a symposium is a fitting corrective to the tendency to view senior university officers simply as institutional managers and fundraisers. There is little risk of regarding your president Dr John Garvey in that restricted way, for his career is a testament to engagement with matters of both intellectual and public policy interest.

I note that in another context Dr Garvey wrote of:

“[the] qualities that mark a great educational institution [as being]: a commitment to truth, a spirit of free inquiry, an inclusive community, and a love of justice that is personal and not just intellectual”.

He has also spoken of the proper, indeed the necessary interplay of faith, reason and practice, not just in the life of the individual but in that of institutions that face the public square. Again this is something to be celebrated, which is precisely what this symposium is doing. Sharing these values and commitments I am very happy, and honored, to be a part of it.

The general title of the symposium refers to the ‘idea of a Catholic university’ and I know that there are a number of senior figures from other Catholic institutions of higher education present today. My own university, St Andrews, was founded by a Bishop and by a

Pontiff, though the latter, Benedict XIII, was an Avignon anti-Pope and so we sought ‘re-certification’ from a duly elected Roman Pontiff shortly thereafter. Six hundred years later St Andrews is no longer a Catholic University but nor has it ever been formally secularized and its college chapels continue to be maintained and used. The oldest of these is that of the College of St Salvator and I want to mention briefly two aspects of its history.

First, the founder Bishop Kennedy set the corner stones of the building with his own hands. An altar had been erected and divine grace was sought for a foundation created “for the praise of God, the strengthening of the Church and the increase of the Christian religion”. In founding a College dedicated to the Holy Saviour, Kennedy wished to bind together faith and learning as these were then represented by the ecclesiastical and the academic orders. Accordingly, he required that the Provost and his senior priests *teach* as well as preach.

Second, he also commissioned from a Paris workshop a figurative mace. The head of it forms an open shrine, containing a figure of the Holy Saviour atop a globe. Below Him are three dungeon entrances, each containing a chained wild-man holding a shield representing the see of St Andrews, Bishop Kennedy and St Salvator's College itself. The figures of a king, a bishop and a burgess represent the three estates of medieval Scotland.

Made in 1461 in a style we would now describe as ‘gothic’, it expresses the medieval vision of the world divided between heaven and earth, with the achievements of faith, culture, learning and law standing above the disorder of human passions and folly.

The makers of such emblems knew more immediately than us the uncertainties and dangers of life; yet they also managed to hold fast to ideals beyond affluence, to have faith in providence, and to embody their convictions in enduring symbols that generations have treasured and which we can still admire.

History provides reminders of the human capacity to rise above misfortune lifted up by spiritual ideas and values. Five centuries later the College chapel and the mace may not

have changed that much and continue to inspire, yet the wider world has undergone a series of transformations that would simply have been unintelligible to Bishop Kennedy and his colleagues. The changes have not just been scientific and technological, immense though those are, but also cultural and intellectual.

Even as Kennedy laid the foundation stones, the high tide of religious culture was ebbing away. The middle-ages represented the most complete harmonisation of Judaeo-Christian belief and Graeco-Roman philosophy, but they were soon followed by centuries in which science came to prominence as the preferred mode of understanding the world and of predicting the course of its future. Secular reason sought to assert itself in the eighteenth century enlightenment in France and in Scotland; but the dominant cultural forces were technological and economic and these led in the following century to the establishment of industrialisation and market capitalism, which in turn has produced - after much social readjustment - the global economy.

What then of the role today of the Catholic university, and of the Catholic academic working within it? If it, or he or she cannot assume a Christian, or even a religious, or even a religion-respecting culture, is the Catholic university simply to be a place of refuge for the remnant? The Catholic Church in the West has declined in numbers of clergy and in active participants. Along with this has gone a rise in materialism, marked at one level by immersion in the worlds of acquisition and appetite, and at another by adoption of the mores of secular society. The latter is a relatively new phenomenon. It is distasteful, and also destructive; and it comes in 'right' and a 'left-wing' versions, and although each appears to have no time for the other, they are united by pretension and craving for approval. It also involves a form of displacement of the attention due to God towards moral causes: in the case of the right towards battling against abortion, euthanasia and homosexuality; in the case of the left towards campaigning on world poverty, minority rights and the environment.

Contrary to what is increasingly assumed by opponents and advocates, Catholicism is not first and foremost about sexual ethics, or abortion, or liturgy, or justice and peace, or environmental stewardship. Rather it is about coming to know, to love and to serve God. Perhaps the rest follows, but it *follows* and does not *lead*, and nor is it an acceptable substitute for faith. That was the mistake of Pelagius: to believe that we can be saved by moral endeavor.

The true Catholic teaching is that without grace we cannot be saved, and that grace is freely given and unmerited, though it can be co-operated with: not by doing what we determine to be good, but by doing what we discern to be the command of God. And to determine this we need to engage in discussion with others, sharing and probing convictions. Such engagement is likely at times to be vigorous and robust, but so long as it is in fidelity to the historic faith received and handed on by the apostles, and taught by the Creeds and Councils, and is conducted in charity, then it is as sure as anything in this world could be. So far as Catholic academic life is concerned I think we need to re-consider an older idea of universities, not necessarily fully to embrace it, but at least to move some way back towards it and in doing so to recover a better balance. That older understanding was most profoundly expressed in two texts, both of which originated in public lectures. The first will be familiar to many here, and is quoted in the general title of this symposium: it is John Henry Newman's *Idea of a University*, published in 1852. The second will be less familiar and coming from the pen of a secular agnostic you may be surprised to hear it recommended. It is John Stuart Mill's *Rectorial Address to the students at St Andrews* delivered and published in 1867.

From the perspective of the present, the most striking features of Newman's and Mill's accounts of the nature and value of university education is what they *exclude*. Newman thought that it was not the business of universities to engage in research. He writes:

“a university ... is a place of *teaching* universal *knowledge*. This implies that its object ... is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement of it. If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students”.

Newman was not at all against research but thought that it should be conducted in specially appointed institutes. Mill likewise thought that the fact that certain activities are important for individuals and society does not mean that they should be part of the university curriculum. He writes that a university

“is not a place of professional education. Universities are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men for some special mode of gaining their livelihood. Their object is not to make skilful lawyers, or physicians, or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings. It is very right that there should be public facilities for the study of professions. ... But these things are no part of what every generation owes to the next, as that on which its civilization and worth will principally depend”.

To understand what is going on in these passages it is necessary to remind ourselves of the distinction between *knowledge* and *understanding*, and that between the promotion and enhancement of welfare and the cultivation of the mind. Newman was concerned that as well as coming to know about the particular and the temporary, human beings need to form an understanding of the general and the permanent. And to do that they need to develop powers of abstraction and analogy so as to reunite at an intellectual level what has become diversified at a scientific or technical or practical one. This yields understanding which is both an enduring constituent of human flourishing, and an aid in various forms of practical life. He writes:

“When the intellect has once been properly trained and formed to have a connected view or grasp of things it will display its powers with more or less effect according to its particular quality and capacity in the individual. In the case of most it makes itself felt in the good sense, sobriety of thought, reasonableness, candour, self-command and steadfastness of view which characterize it”.

The Newman/Mill view has implications for the present day. First, we need to distinguish within higher education between the business of cultivating minds and that of conducting research, and again that of training people for specific forms of employment. Second, to specify more precisely and to implement that distinction in practice one needs to confront the claim that university education is for the sake of economic benefit. This is something that academics are generally keen to dispute, institutional managers less so. But to reject the idea that universities are for the sake of economic prosperity is not to exclude such benefit as an anticipated or even desirable secondary effect.

Next, and here academics are more likely to be divided, one needs to challenge the idea that good teaching is impossible unless teachers are also researchers. This notion is open to objection on several scores. First, to keep abreast of one’s subject requires scholarship, which is not the same as the pursuit and attainment of new knowledge, but may well take deeper learning and better judgement. Second, what is pursued under the heading of research is often the mere accumulation of knowledge (if that) without proper regard to the goal of integrated understanding. Third, the mass of it does not even much benefit fellow researchers, since the more that is produced the less is consumed. Fourth, and in general terms, the more academics have the opportunity for research the less they wish to teach undergraduates particularly in the early years.

We need within the Catholic world to engage in an overdue conversation about the value, aims and purposes of education. And an excellent preparation for that discussion

would be a re-reading, or a first reading, of the texts of Mill and Newman. Both were sensitive to the importance of intellectual and moral virtue and Newman saw deeply into the nature of faith.

For the latter, as for Bishop Kennedy, faith calls for discernment of the will of God. This is not something that I think we can pursue alone, for we need to share and test with others both our convictions and our doubts on matters of truth and conduct. This is one of the functions of a university, and to repeat the words of Dr Garvey:

“[the] qualities that mark a great educational institution [are]: a commitment to truth, a spirit of free inquiry, an inclusive community, and a love of justice that is personal and not just intellectual”.