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Newman's Idea of a University

And its Relevance to Catholic Higher Education

John Henry Newman Banquet Address -

Washington. D.C., November 10, 2001

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John Henry Newman, writing in England in the mid-nineteenth century, proposed a vision of Catholic higher education that takes account of major difficulties that were prevalent in his day and are no less prevalent in ours. Although his proposals are for the most part framed in positive terms, I shall summarize them in contrast to four tendencies that Newman found unacceptable. I shall call these tendencies utilitarianism, fragmentation, secularism, and rationalism.

By utilitarianism Newman meant the philosophical movement associated with the name of Jeremy Bentham. The editors of the *Edinburgh Review*, together with influential figures such as Lord Henry Brougham and Sydney Smith, proposed to dethrone the classics from the position of supremacy they held at Oxford and Cambridge and to replace them with useful knowledge leading to a trade or profession. Newman contended on the contrary that the primary end of education was not the acquisition of useful information or skills needed for a particular occupation in life, but cultivation of the mind. The special fruit of university education, as he saw it, was to produce what he called the

"philosophical habit of mind." The study of the classics, he believed, had proved its capacity to "strengthen, refine, and enrich the intellectual powers" and to enter into the rich heritage that modern Europe had acquired from the providential confluence of biblical revelation and classical civilization.

Newman was convinced that the mental refinement that comes from literary and philosophical training is something good in itself, quite apart from its utility. But he added that, far from being useless, an education of this sort would equip the student to enter many walks of life. Whether one becomes a soldier, a statesman, a lawyer, or a physician, one will need the ability to think clearly, to organize one's knowledge, and to articulate one's ideas so as to deal effectively with the questions at hand. A narrowly professional or vocational program of training would therefore fail the test of pragmatic usefulness, not to mention the additional test of liberal knowledge as its own end.

The second threat was fragmentation. Newman was troubled by the increasing compartmentalization of education. He was not against the multiplication of disciplines. In his Irish University he set up not only a school of arts and sciences but also schools of medicine and engineering. He made provision for a chemical laboratory and an astronomical observatory. All these elements, in his view, had a rightful place in the university as a place of universal learning. But the very multiplicity of disciplines increased the necessity of a principle of order, governing the whole, so that the student would be able to

perceive the significance of each particular branch of knowledge in relation to the rest.

Philosophy, as Newman used the term, was not so much a special discipline as a metadiscipline. Understanding philosophy as the exercise of reason upon knowledge, he maintained that it is unlimited in its horizon. From its own perspective it embraces truth of every kind and locates every method of attaining it. In this way the study of philosophy overcomes the threat of fragmentation.

The third danger was secularism: the exclusion of religious knowledge from higher education. A good share of the blame, Newman believed, fell upon the Evangelicals, who depicted religion not as knowledge but as a matter of feeling and emotion. If religion were no more than this, Newman granted, it could not properly claim to merit a chair in the university. But for him religion was a matter of truth. Through reason and revelation, the mind could attain genuine knowledge about God, and the knowledge so attained could be built into a system.

The university must obviously take account of truths about God that are accessible to all thoughtful persons, such as the articles of natural religion. But it should not omit revealed truth, since divine revelation is necessary to keep reason from going astray. The university, as Newman conceived of it, was not a seminary, and for that reason it would not explore in depth questions of dogmatic and sacramental theology, but it would seek to impart what he called "general religious knowledge." No part

of Catholic truth could properly be excluded from the university.

The absence of theology, Newman contends, would throw the other branches of knowledge out of balance. Eager to fill the void left by that absence, these disciplines would seek to answer by their own methods questions that cannot be rightly answered except by theology. All of us have probably experienced how professors of physics or economics, medicine or psychology--to give a few examples--tend to operate as though their specialization qualified them to give a complete account of reality and of what it means to be human. Theology is needed, therefore, to keep the secular disciplines within their proper limits and the deal with questions that lie beyond their scope.

Rationalism, in Newman's view, was the fourth great threat. ~~The university,~~ as a place of intellectual cultivation, tends to treat the human mind as the measure of all things. Absolutizing its own standards and goals, the university aspires to complete autonomy and becomes a rival of the Church even in the Church's own sphere of competence. To prevent this encroachment, the Church must exercise what Newman calls "a direct and active jurisdiction" over the university. This should not be seen as a hindrance but as a help to the university. Ecclesiastical supervision prevents the university from falling into the kinds of skepticism and unbelief that have plagued seats of learning since the time of Abelard. Because the university cannot fulfill its mission without revealed truth, and because the Church has full authority to teach the contents of revelation, the

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PHONE NO. : 703 536 9585

MAR. 22 2002 04:35PM P5

university must accept the Church's guidance.

Newman was quite aware that the results of science sometimes seemed to conflict with Christian doctrine. He counseled patience and restraint on the part of hierarchical authorities and scientists alike. Both should proceed with the assurance that reconciliation can eventually be attained, for it is impossible that the truth of revelation could be contrary to that of reason and of science.

A decade after writing his *Idea of a University*, Newman had an opportunity to witness a mighty effort of German Catholic university faculties, under the leadership of Ignaz von Döllinger, to assert their autonomy against the magisterium. Similar struggles arise whenever Catholic universities seek to absolutize their own freedom and their own methods. Newman saw this tendency as a normal but regrettable expression of the inherent dynamism of the university as such. The higher authority of the Church was necessary to rescue freedom of thought from what Newman called its own "suicidal excesses."

If Newman were alive today, he would enthusiastically embrace the principles set forth by John Paul II in *Ex corde Ecclesiae*. In that Apostolic Constitution the Holy Father sets forth the same general principles that I have tried to highlight in Newman's treatise. He teaches that university education should not be content to produce an efficient work force for the factory or the market place; it should not exalt technical over the spiritual. He strongly opposes the multiplication of

separate departments and institutes, which he sees as harmful to a rich human formation. He calls for a universal humanism and an organic vision of reality. He likewise holds that Catholic universities have the incomparable advantage of being able to integrate all truth in relation to Christ, the incarnate Logos, whom Christians recognize as the way, the truth, and the life for the whole world. On these and many other points the nineteenth-century English cardinal and the present Polish pope may be said to share a common point of view.

In the United States, Catholic universities have been very apologetic, almost embarrassed, by their obligation to adhere to the faith of the Church. For Newman and for John Paul II, any university that lacks the guidance of Christian revelation and the oversight of the Catholic magisterium is by that very fact impeded in its mission to find and transmit truth. It fails to make use of an important resource that God in his Providence has provided.

Surrounded by powerful institutions constructed on principles of metaphysical and religious agnosticism, the Catholic universities of this nation have too long been on the defensive. They have tried too hard to prove that they are not committed to any truth that cannot be established by objective scientific scholarship. While making certain necessary adaptations to the needs of our own day, they should proudly reaffirm the essentials of their own tradition, so brilliantly synthesized by Newman in his classic work. Shifting the burden

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MAR. 22 2002 04:36PM P7

of proof to their secular counterparts, they should challenge the other universities to defend themselves and to show how they think it possible to cultivate the mind and transmit the fullness of truth if they neglect or marginalize humanistic, philosophical, and theological studies.