The Apostolate of the Mind: Transformation of Culture through Rethinking the Secular Sciences

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Since the publication of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, but mostly over much of the last two decades, I have had the great privilege of being able to visit and get acquainted with a large number of Catholic universities around the world, in particular many in the United States and Europe. This has given me firsthand experience regarding the debates that raged early on concerning the implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, as well as knowledge of how Catholic universities have decided to implement their understanding of their identities as institutions affiliated with the Church.

Of course, the culture of any university – and the Catholic university has not been an exception – most often tracks the culture of society at large. In the Western world this has meant that the increasing secularization of society has greatly affected Catholic universities.

Thus it was not surprising that Pope John Paul II would have wanted to issue the apostolic exhortation at the time and in response to what was happening at Catholic universities.

Before *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*

What was happening was a cultural transformation aided in some measure by the well-known 1967 Land O’Lakes declaration. At a meeting in Land O’Lakes, Wisconsin, American members of the International Federation of Catholic Universities drafted a statement declaring that “the Catholic university must have a true autonomy
and academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community itself.”¹ This was generally understood as a declaration of independence by Catholic universities from whatever oversight bishops or religious congregations may have had until then. Over the next decades that independence gradually became more consolidated with many bishops and religious congregations willingly or unwillingly reducing or altogether eliminating their positions on the boards of trustees of many universities.

Catholic universities, imitating their secular counterparts, became increasingly secularized, as was happening within the general culture.

The Hope of Ex Corde Ecclesiae

In 1990 Pope John Paul II responded to this situation with the promulgation of the Apostolic Constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, which intended to clarify the relationship of the Church to Catholic universities, not by rejecting calls for autonomy and academic freedom, which *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* maintains and supports, but by defining Catholic universities’ role within the Church as institutions dedicated to the search for truth and the good of humanity.

After Ex Corde Ecclesiae

U.S. Battle for Its Implementation. Of course, anyone involved in Catholic higher education in the United States in the 1990s and early 2000s would recall how difficult the implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* proved to be.² Much of the discussion, unfortunately, missed the richness of the document and dealt, instead, with a reference within the document to Canon 812, requiring that professors of theology receive the *Mandatum* from the local ordinary.³ It was not until almost eleven years later that the U.S. bishops were able to issue “The Application for *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* for the United States.”⁴ With it the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops offered its commitment to *Ex Corde* as a national episcopal conference, but it was up to each
bishop himself to decide whether and how to enforce the norms of the apostolic constitution in his own diocese.\(^5\)

*The Unstoppable Movement toward Greater Secularism.* Regardless of what the pope or bishops might have tried to do, society has continued unabated toward greater secularization, which in turn has meant that Catholic universities have also suffered the same fate, often unaware of the influences that affect their life and culture.

While many universities have, over the years, increased and developed their service and evangelistic efforts through campus ministry, the secular disciplines have most often simply continued to evolve according to their own independent standards. Most universities would correctly see such developments as generally positive, given the need for universities to foster research in such fields. Yet that very process has meant that most academic and professional disciplines would see themselves as far removed from any dialogue with theology and philosophy, and any questions raised by theology and philosophy would be perceived as unwelcome intrusions. The fragmentation of knowledge that prevents such dialogue is in practice an accepted reality within the culture of higher education. Even at universities that see and promote themselves as Catholic, such questions calling for interdisciplinary dialogue, or as we refer to it at my current institution, transdisciplinary dialogue with philosophy and theology, might be rejected by professors trained in the secular disciplines, even though they themselves may profess to be practicing Catholics. Such rejections may not surprise anyone. The following examples, however, clearly indicate real problems insofar as the secular intellectual endeavor has been divorced from the ideal of the all-encompassing pursuit of truth envisioned in *Ex Corde.*

*Legal Education and Practice.* For the teaching and practice of law, in Europe and America, legal education places great emphasis on process and questions of legality. So, for example, in Spain and the European Union in general and, one could argue, increasingly in the United States, what is just is that which is legal, and what is unjust is
that which is illegal. Under such a system, the government that enacts laws is the de facto determiner of what is just and unjust.

As political winds change and governments shift from party to party, laws can be enacted to undo what a previous government had done, and what is considered just one day may be considered unjust the next. Disturbingly, in some European countries people are educated as children to follow the lead of government in determining what is just and unjust simply by accepting as their standard what is legal or illegal. The philosophical anthropology that relegates questions of truth and justice and of the rights of the person to the powers of government is strongly embedded in the legal educational curriculum in Europe. Should not law students be given, instead, some formation concerning more foundational questions of justice and rights? And does that not require a better formation about what it means to be a human person?

Let me illustrate the problem of the rights of the person in this secularized mentality by giving a personal example. When I was first invited to spend my sabbatical year in Avila, I was flown in a few months earlier by the university inviting me so that they could introduce me to the project they wanted me to help develop. During that visit to Spain I also went looking for housing and for a school for my children. After visiting the local Catholic school, I was told that I needed to go to the municipal Commission for Education. There the lady who received me asked me who we were. I told her we were Americans who were going to spend a year in Spain while I was on sabbatical. She asked me where I wanted the children to study, and I told her I wanted them to go to the Catholic school in town, that I had already gone there, and that they had told me that it would not be a problem, as there was room for them. The lady then interrupted me and said it was not up to the school or up to us the parents to decide where the children would go. She said, “We decide where the children study. Sometimes the parents don’t agree with what we decide, but it is better if the parents begin to understand that what we decide is what is best for the children. Is that clear, sir?”
The Spaniard who accompanied me said nothing while the lady and I talked. Once outside he said this was a great example of the intrusion of government in people’s lives and why I should move to Spain to help them. It is the state that grants me the right to educate my children, and it is the state that decides how I do it. Fortunately, through the benevolence of the state, my children were allowed to study at the local Catholic school.

*Business Education.* Here’s another example I have seen play out frequently in business education. Even before the collapse of Enron and its associated scandals, and even more so afterward, business education at Catholic universities, especially those seeking to be truly Catholic, understandably has sought to give pride of place to the Church’s social doctrine. This is articulated in many instances from a standpoint that promotes ethics as much as possible. Yet the questions about the nature of the human person and about truth within the economic and business environment are seldom addressed.

One could ask: Under such conditions, even when ethics is considered to be very important, how does the understanding of ethics taught at Catholic business schools differ from an atheistic, or communist, or socialist vision of business ethics? Truly, it is not enough to be “ethical”; of even greater, more fundamental importance is an openness to the full truth of the human person, but that requires business formation “from within,” in dialogue with philosophy and theology. By saying “from within” I mean to say that it is not enough to have business classes taught with little regard for the Catholic mission of the university, while tacking on some philosophy or theology requirements to the core curriculum. “From within” means that the very nature of the businessperson has to be understood from a philosophical perspective that is in accord with the truth of Christianity. Otherwise, conflicts are bound to emerge. And dialogue does not mean that business education has to be somehow baptized as some kind of fundamentalist approach to
business. It means that there should be real dialogue among the various fields of study.

The Natural Sciences. Now consider this final example from the natural sciences. Even if you leave out Planned Parenthood and the current controversy that has been playing out recently here in the U.S., the use of human embryos is very common in scientific research. During a recent visit to one of the world's most prestigious universities for an international conference of the highest level, it became evident to me that questions about the use of embryos or other ethically fraught practices were to be engaged only when government funding and regulations were in question. But given free rein, scientists around the world seem not to be interested in what is ethical; they are interested in what is technically possible, and how to get there first. Many scientists want to solve the problems they see without the complications raised by ethicists. Such world-class scientists have trained many of our own professors at Catholic universities, who in turn often tend to care little about the ethical questions, and even less about anthropological or epistemological ones, that are relevant to their disciplines. This indifference to fundamental key questions is passed on as a legacy.

The pressure the secular mentality imposes on our thinking is not negligible. Not many years ago, I was told by a number of teaching faculty of biology at a Catholic university that their primary goal was to get undergraduates into medical school, and that any attempts to extend the reach of the university’s Catholic identity into their biology classes would be unwelcome until medical school acceptances had significantly increased. That was their explicit priority, which trumped all else.

Inadequate Responses

The Church has hoped that the engagement of Catholic universities with their peer institutions would bring about a reformulation of the dominant mentality toward a more humane
understanding of the goals of academia. That has not yet happened. In fact, the contrary seems to be the case. More and more our universities seek to imitate their secular counterparts in seemingly innocent ways, such as adding or taking away requirements for a particular major in order to make it more competitive, or by altogether avoiding fundamental questions of Catholic identity in the sciences and professional education.\textsuperscript{11}

Universities seeking to be identified as Catholic often confine their efforts in that regard to maintaining a core curriculum that includes some philosophy and theology. If an institution is to be Catholic, it will certainly have a strong and orthodox core curriculum and a vibrant campus ministry outreach. But quite often the vision of the human person that informs the secular disciplines remains limited by the formation that professors received as students, often at prestigious research universities that are in no way Catholic.

What can a Catholic professor in the sciences or professional programs do when he or she has received no philosophical or theological formation? Perhaps the most one can hope for is that such professors will not disseminate in their classrooms anything contrary to Church teaching; but that is probably too optimistic a hope, given that they very often have no understanding of what the Church teaches and why.

Under these circumstances, often the best that schools strive for is “theologically neutral” teaching. But the positive exclusion of religion is never a neutral act, for this itself necessarily means defining the human person in some way, insofar as it entails the quest for an understanding of humanity without any reference to God.

\textit{University Francisco de Vitoria}

Just over fifteen years ago, the University Francisco de Vitoria in Madrid (UFV) began an educational project that seeks to address these kinds of problems. It is a project that from early on began to rethink what it means to be a university in the modern world, and
how, as Catholic, UFV can best serve the interests of truth and the common good.

Today, UFV serves over 7,000 students, and it includes a medical school, a nursing school, a law school, an architecture school, and many of the other majors commonly found at modern universities. Yet what truly distinguishes it is its approach to the secular disciplines. Instead of following the current trend of avoiding difficult questions within the sciences and professional programs, over ten years ago UFV began to ask departments in the various disciplines to explain how they relate to the overarching quest for truth that is the university mission, and to do so in a way that was methodologically appropriate to each discipline. To help them, the university created a series of documents, beginning with an expanded mission statement.12

Apostolate of the Mind:  
The Place of Academic Formation and Catholic Education

Since the university by its very nature is a place for intellectual formation, UFV decided early on that its Catholic identity could not depend on hanging Catholic symbols on the walls; it could not depend on its pastoral ministry, however active it may be; and it could not depend even on how much theology and philosophy it teaches in its core curriculum. Most students do not go to Catholic universities for theological or philosophical education; in a very high proportion most students at our Catholic universities attend those institutions in order to receive professional formation. It is there, in that formation, that UFV sees the greatest challenge, and where I found the most intriguing response.

At UFV, each department and each professor is encouraged to answer four pivotal questions about their discipline:

(1) What does it mean to be a human within your discipline? That is, what is the human person as an object of study of the science, or as a practitioner or student of the discipline?
(2) What is truth within your discipline? If all human sciences and disciplines in some way seek the truth of something, what is that truth? And how does it relate to the human person?

(3) Given the answers to the two questions above, what ethical implications emerge from your discipline? It is often easy to answer that certain ethical obligations emerge from a particular field, but how are those obligations to be understood if one has a clear understanding of the person and the truth of the discipline?

(4) The final question is the question of meaning. What gives meaning to your discipline? Why do we pursue it? This can lead to ultimate questions and thus to theological ones.

Rethinking the Sciences: How It Is Done

When first engaged, professors were reluctant to answer these questions and frequently suggested that they were not the best qualified to address what seemed to be rather philosophical issues. It seemed easier and more appropriate in chemistry, for example, to teach the periodic table of elements than to engage questions about philosophical anthropology. (Let me make this clear: The goal of this exercise is never to have chemistry professors teaching philosophy; rather, it is to have chemistry professors teaching chemistry from a philosophically sound position that understands the human person, the quest for truth, and the ethical implications that derive from such understanding.)

When professors declined to answer on the basis that such questions were not relevant to the natural sciences as sciences, the university replied by asking them to explain how the human person is not relevant to science. “Of course,” the professors would explain, “it is not that the person is not relevant to science,” but at the same
time they would reiterate the position that they did not feel qualified to answer such questions.

With great perseverance on the part of the university, eventually an important dialogue between faith and reason began, which led a large number of professors in the sciences and professional programs to seek master’s degrees in philosophy in order to be able adequately to answer the four questions. Professors in the sciences and professional programs also began to offer mini-courses throughout a semester in order to help philosophers better understand their fields.

Additionally, a program of mentoring for faculty began a few years ago, so any professor who wishes to work with a peer mentor can rethink his field of study and courses from the perspective of the four questions mentioned above. The system that guides the mentoring program is all written out in a little book titled *In Search of the Unity of Knowledge: A Proposal to Rethink University Disciplines*, which was written by a member of our faculty, Maria Lacalle. This book is basically a manual that walks faculty through the process of rethinking the disciplines, step by step, leading professors to rewrite their syllabi with a more explicit and yet still rigorous approach to truth and science.

The result now is that, in what I judge from my experience to be one of the very rare instances within the world of Catholic universities, UFV is developing a series of educational proposals across the entire university in order systematically to respond to the challenge Pope Benedict set before us to broaden the horizons of reason.

*Mentoring Students: Life as Vocation*

Clearly, these efforts do not end with the professor, but the ultimate goal is aimed at a transforming experience for students, one that goes beyond the typical understanding of a liberal arts education. Instead of simply exposing students to an array of disciplines in the sciences and the humanities, or going after what is currently popular, namely, training them in particular skills of thinking critically and
expressing themselves well – all important objectives – we want to integrate the whole educational experience through a strong commitment from the university to accompany students along the way of their education.

In addition to reapproaching the disciplines from a richer perspective that more fully engages deeper human questions, we have attempted to turn the typical student advising sessions into human encounters. We have invested hundreds of thousands of Euros each year to creating a first-year experience class that places heavy emphasis on a one-on-one component. Each of our 1,500 incoming freshmen have six hour-long sessions with a trained mentor who helps them to rethink and to broaden the horizon of their lives, from the goals of narrow professional formation, to a richer understanding of life and its meaning and purpose. Follow-up work, including more one-on-one sessions, is carried out in the students’ subsequent years at UFV.

Conclusion

Four years ago, at the end of that sabbatical year, I was asked to remain in Spain and to move from Avila to Madrid to help strengthen this project at UFV.

Two things I have learned in the process. The first is that despite the great efforts and achievements made at UFV, the project is still in need of much development. While this or something similar seems essential to confronting what Pope Benedict called the “dictatorship of relativism,” very few people in the Catholic world are sufficiently interested in systematically engaging the program of rethinking the secular disciplines, even though there are many supporters within departments of theology and philosophy, and even the humanities more broadly. In my perception the most receptive individuals within the natural sciences have been a subgroup of Protestant Evangelicals who are seeking a way to integrate faith and reason in a nonfundamentalist, scientifically rigorous manner that is still faithful to a Christian worldview.
The second thing I have learned is that the great divide that often afflicts American higher education, the constant distrust and tension between administrators and faculty, plays a devastating role in the flourishing of Catholic intellectual life at the level *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* envisions. Where I have found strongly committed administrators willing to promote this type of work as something important for the formation of students, I have also found uninterested or confrontational faculty (most often generally opposed to the administrator, not specifically to the proposal). Or where I have found willing faculty, I have found administrators unwilling to see the proposal’s relevance. Only in a very limited number of institutions – and generally very small ones – have I found faculty and administrators agreeing that deep intellectual renewal is essential for Catholic education.

Yet we keep searching for people who see that the transformation of the disciplines from the too-often anthropologically bankrupt contemporary reality in which we currently live is essential for the life of the Church and the well-being of Catholic higher education.

I have repeatedly made the case to my president and others at UFV that the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars represents a privileged grouping of Catholic intellectuals among whom the rethinking project would clearly resonate. Thus I am grateful to be here.

Thank you.

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2 There was great debate within, especially, departments of theology around the U.S., and, at least from my experience, the process was painful for many
who, fearing a stronger hand from the Vatican and the bishops, saw their hard-fought independence potentially declining.

3 Canon 812: “Those who teach theological disciplines in any institutes of higher studies whatsoever must have a mandate from the competent ecclesiastical authority.” See http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/__P2O.HTM.


5 Since each bishop would decide whether and how to implement the norms, the fears of many theology departments likely subsided; ten years later, the implementation was declared a success. See http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/ex-corde-implementation-review-nears-completion1.

6 Thus, for example, Hans Kelsen advocates that the concept of law and rights must be derived fully from basic norms, such as the Constitution, and never from metaphysics or anything separate from legal norms. See his works Pure Theory of Law (Clark, N.J.: The Lawbook Exchange Ltd, 2009); General Theory of Law and State (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1945); and What Is Justice: Justice, Law, and Politics in the Mirror of Science: Collected Essays (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957). Similarly, H. L. A. Hart famously advocated for the now widely accepted view of legal positivism. See H. L. A. Hart, The Concept of Law, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

7 Authors who reject the view that what is legal should be deemed just include Javier Herveda in his ¿Qué es el Derecho? (Pamplona, 2002); Consuelo Martinez-Sicluna in her Del Poder y la Justicia. El sentimiento de la Justicia (Madrid, 2002); and Michel Villey in his Philosophie du droit, Définition et fins du droit, Les moyens de droit (Paris, 2001).

8 There is a vast amount of literature on the subject. The reader may be interested in exploring the excellent work of the John A. Ryan Institute at the Center for Catholic Studies of the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota. Their multiple publications and bibliographies give ample evidence of the use of the social doctrine of the Church in business and business education. See http://www.stthomas.edu/cathstudies/cst/.

9 There are exceptions, of course, and the reader seeking examples may wish to research works by John D. Larrivee and Alejandro A. Cañadas of.
Mount St. Mary’s University in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

10 Consider this example, unrelated to my aforementioned visit: “Once the technology works, he said, infertile women will be able to produce hundreds of eggs, and maybe hundreds of embryos. Using DNA sequencing to analyze their genes, they could pick among them for the healthiest ones.” Antonio Regalado, “Engineering the Perfect Baby,” MIT Technology Review (March 5, 2015), available at: http://www.technologyreview.com/featuredstory/535661/engineering-the-perfect-baby/.

11 I recently heard the president of a prominent Catholic university say that the university had moved from seeking to assist in the integration of immigrants to a new mission: to compete with peer universities in research, presumably to improve its position in the rankings.


13 http://www.catholicscholars.org/_SpecialFiles/InSearchOfTheUnityOfKnowledge.pdf.