

0318

15 March 2018

Monthly

Year 2

LA CIVILTÀ CATTOLICA

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Dialogue and Proclamation in Catholic Universities

David Hollenbach, SJ

The many Catholic universities spread around the world have an important role in allowing their students to obtain a better understanding of the Christian faith. So, in view of the Synod of Bishops that will be held in October 2018 on the theme, “Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” it is good to look at the way these universities carry out their intellectual and educational work.

One thing that has important implications for the work of Catholic universities is the relationship between dialogue and proclamation: a decisive connection for their contribution to the Church’s call to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the world, especially to the young. Dialogue and proclamation, in fact, are not alternative elements today. They are integrally linked in a credible and successful approach to evangelization today.

The importance of the connection between dialogue and proclamation for the role carried out by Catholic universities can be seen in light of several considerations. First, there are important aspects of the Catholic intellectual tradition that show how much the link between dialogue and proclamation shapes what these institutions can contribute to the mission of the Church. Second, commitment in dialogue will be fundamental in addressing students of today about the importance of religious faith and its role in their existence. Empirical data confirms this, showing that for university students the proclamation is less likely to be received if it is not made in a spirit of dialogue. Finally, the role of dialogue in promoting greater appreciation of the Christian faith has implications for the curricula, research and other programs of Catholic universities today.

A reflection on this argument can help understand the way they offer an aid to the Church in its mission, nurturing the understanding of the Christian faith in the students. It can also indicate how these universities, through their research activity, can contribute to a deeper appreciation of what Christianity offers the intellectual life.

Resources of the Catholic intellectual tradition

The Catholic intellectual tradition brings important resources that allow the Church to respond to the key intellectual challenges of our day. We live in an increasingly interdependent global society. Globalization is occurring economically, politically, culturally and environmentally.¹ It also has religious and educational implications. Religious traditions and communities are interacting in ways that are unprecedented in human history. Catholic higher education possesses intellectual resources that could help Catholicism play an important role in efforts to address this interaction of traditions.

Catholic intellectuals have long sought to explore the relation between their belief in Christ and the diverse cultures the Church is facing. St. Augustine wove together the Gospel with the neo-Platonic and Stoic thought of the late Roman Empire, and St. Thomas Aquinas learned the thought of Aristotle through dialogue with Muslim thinkers like Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroës). Of course, Augustine and Aquinas did not simply accept neo-Platonic and Aristotelian thought without critique. They made important revisions in these Greek and Roman traditions in light of the Gospel. But the Catholic tradition knows from experience that the Gospel and non-Christian traditions need not be simple adversaries.

1. For an in-depth analysis of the diverse dimensions of globalization, cf. D. Held – A. McGrew – D. Goldblatt – J. Perraton, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture*, Stanford (California USA), Stanford University Press, 1999. Similar though not identical dimensions of globalization are analyzed in J. S. Nye – J. D. Donahue (eds.), *Governance in a Globalizing World*, Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2000, in particular in Part One.

Thus in the Catholic intellectual tradition, proclamation and dialogue go hand in hand. As Pope John Paul II put it in *Redemptoris Missio*: “Dialogue is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*; indeed, it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions” (No. 55). The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue recalled Vatican II’s *Nostra Aetate* and its affirmation that “the proclamation of Jesus Christ should itself be carried out in the Gospel spirit of dialogue.”² This emphasis on the dialogic dimension of proclamation reflects what historian John O’Malley has called the “style” of dialogue adopted by the Second Vatican Council.³

This dialogic style has shaped Pope Francis’ way of proclaiming the Gospel during his pontificate. Pope Francis’ reflection on the new evangelization in *Evangelii Gaudium* uses the word “dialogue” some 59 times. Francis describes the style that should characterize our efforts to bring the Gospel to others as a spirit of “accompaniment” and he calls the Church to grow in the “art of accompaniment.” The art of accompaniment, the pope says, “teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. *Exod* 3:5)” with “loving attentiveness” and “true concern for their person” (EG 169 and 199). This is a form of friendship; indeed it is a reflection of the loving friendship that God extends to us in Jesus Christ.

Dialogue and accompaniment are thus ways of making visible the merciful love that God has for us and of proclaiming the good news about how God is with us. It is a way of proclaiming the Gospel marked by humility, listening as well as speaking. Indeed Pope Francis insists that listening is “a profound and indispensable expression” of Christian faith.

A dialogic or relational approach to proclaiming the Gospel to other people calls us to recognize that the deepest truth is God’s embrace and possession of us, not our possession of

2.Cf. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (1991), No. 77, www.vatican.va.

3.Cf. J. W. O’Malley, “The Style of Vatican II,” in *America*, Vol. 188, February 24, 2003, 12-15.

God: we are neither the masters nor owners but the guardians, heralds and servants of this truth.⁴ Thus we are on a “journey” or “pilgrimage” with believers and non-believers, Christians and non-Christians. Indeed Pope Francis uses the term “pilgrim” many times in *Evangelii Gaudium*.

The reciprocal relation of proclamation and dialogue has special relevance for the task of Catholic educational and cultural institutions today. The university is the premier place where diverse worldviews and commitments confront one another and interact intellectually. Thus the Catholic university will be the place where the Catholic tradition carries out dialogue with other traditions and with the intellectual and ethical challenges that arise from challenging new social conditions in a world that is more and more interconnected.

The challenge of addressing students in today’s culture

The reality of religious and cultural pluralism has become particularly evident to today’s students due to the shrinking of our globalizing world. How this pluralism is shaping the receptivity of today’s students to the Gospel deserves special consideration.

First, today’s students have become particularly sensitive to the need for dialogue as an expression of respect for others. For example, they often oppose what they see as efforts to “impose” religious or moral values on another in a way that limits the freedom of that person. Students today quickly see such efforts to share religious or moral values as objectionable forms of proselytization. Nonetheless, we need to recognize how their attitudes have been shaped by the way some religious communities are clashing with each other today, sometimes in quite violent ways.

Today’s students are very aware of the denial of religious freedom occurring in some parts of the world today. They know that lack of respect for religious freedom is a factor in the wars that have killed millions and turned many millions more into

4.Cf. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 146, quoting Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

refugees. Thus they have good grounds for being suspicious of any sign that a religious community is leaning toward intolerance or, worse, toward harmful action against those with different beliefs. This suspicion needs to be counteracted by helping students see that most religious communities are in fact more deeply involved in the promotion of human rights and peace in our world than in fomenting intolerance or conflict.

Today one-fifth of the U.S. public has no religious affiliation, the highest percentage recorded in modern polling. A third of those under 30 have no religious affiliation compared with just one-in-10 of those over 65. Young adults today are much less likely to be affiliated with a religious community than were earlier generations at a similar stage in their lives.⁵ About one-third of those raised Catholic no longer describe themselves as Catholic.

Why has this happened? General cultural openness to religious change among the youth is part of the reason. So is the fact that in the past those who had fallen away from their family traditions were reluctant to admit this even to pollsters, while today they are more ready to do so. Also, it is because Catholic doctrine makes demands that seem particularly burdensome to young people in the context of the culture of today.

If this is the reason, the rise of the number of young people with no religious affiliation could in fact be due to the authentic proclamation of the Gospel with all its demands. On the other hand, it is also possible that the Gospel is being communicated with insufficient attention to the spirit of dialogue and accompaniment that involves listening as well as speaking, learning as well as teaching. A major empirical study of U.S. religious trends by Robert Putnam of Harvard and David Campbell of Notre Dame suggests this may be the

5.Cf. Pew Research Center of Religion and Public Life, “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” October 9, 2012, at www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise; cf. also G. A. Smith – A. Cooperman, “The Factors Driving the Growth of Religious ‘Nones’ in the U.S.” September 14, 2016, at www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/14/the-factors-driving-the-growth-of-religious-nones-in-the-u-s.

case. Putnam and Campbell concluded that the rise of those with no religious affiliation from the 1970s through the 1990s is largely due to the way “religiosity and conservative politics became increasingly aligned,” leading many young Americans to view religion as “judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political.”⁶ If this is right, communicating the Gospel to the Millennial Generation in universities today will call for a more dialogic style.

In a similar way, in Latin America young people are in ever closer contact with followers of other religious traditions. Latin American Catholics today have, for example, more relations with Evangelicals than what occurred in the past. Empirical research shows that they sometimes react to this coexistence of different religious traditions by subtracting themselves from public discussions on faith.⁷ There is no need to be surprised if this kind of privatization of religious belief will lead in the future to the decline of faith itself. It is also well-known that a large number of young African Catholics are joining Evangelical communities, perhaps because they see Catholicism as too restrictive and Evangelical communities as more welcoming.⁸ This suggests that, both in Latin America and Africa as well as in the North Atlantic region, a more dialogic style is needed for ecclesial life and worship.

There is no single exhaustive set of data to explain why many Catholics in the US and less so in Latin America and Africa have been leaving the Church. But statistics show the issue is very serious and that we have to consider new strategies to present the Gospel to the young people if we want to engage them in an active commitment in the life of the Church. This raises central challenges for the Catholic university.

6.R. D. Putnam - D. E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2010, 121. Citing D. Kinnemann – G. Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity... And Why It Matters*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2007.

7.Cf. G. Morello, “Modernidad y Religiosidad en América Latina,” in *Razón y Fe* 118 (2017) 327-338.

8.L. Unah, “Church Crossings: In Nigeria Pentecostal Movements Are Winning Over Young Catholics,” in *America*, 217, November 27, 2017, 18-25.

The first step must be to enable students to see that a serious and respectful intellectual engagement among those who hold different assessments of religious and moral issues is not only possible but is actually put into practice by the Catholic community. Students can be attracted more easily by an ecclesial community that uses the path of dialogic accompaniment to share its beliefs with both students and the surrounding culture. Indeed, it seems that Catholic universities are in fact having a positive effect on the active engagement in the Church by the young people who attend them. A study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) has shown that those who attended Catholic university were notably more likely to attend Mass weekly than peers who did not study at a Catholic institution.⁹ This helps us understand that the young people are attracted to ecclesial communities whose way of life is marked by dialogue and active commitment.

In the university setting we can define this spirit of active engagement with those who differ from us as the “virtue of intellectual solidarity.”¹⁰ This virtue seeks understanding across cultures and moral positions by listening as well as speaking. It requires a genuinely intellectual commitment to understanding others, as well as their moral convictions and deep religious beliefs. It seeks insight into what our society is doing to the most vulnerable and how to transform our increasingly interconnected societies so they serve all members of the human race. Following the call of the Catholic intellectual tradition, the virtue of intellectual solidarity takes commitment to the common good as its guiding principle, particularly in the field of the intellectual life.

This virtue can only be developed in an atmosphere of freedom and intellectual humility. In a pluralistic and divided society, nothing will prevent the development of this virtue more surely than the conviction that one already knows

9.Cf. M. M. Gray – P. Perl, *Sacraments Today: Belief and Practice among U.S. Catholics*, Washington, D.C., Georgetown University 2008, 22.

10.Cf. D. Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, Chap.6.

all that one needs to know. Moving without the dialogue to categorizing other religious traditions as simply false or broad categories of actions as “intrinsically evil” will not manifest the humility required. This does not mean that all religious beliefs are equally true or that all moral ways of life are equally good. But in light of the ways that religious violence and moral self-righteousness are causing conflict and suffering today, great humility is required if we are proclaim the Christian faith in a way that is simultaneously true to the Gospel and persuasive to young people.

Some programmatic and institutional implications

Catholic universities possess distinctive institutional resources that can enable them to address the growing interdependence of global society with creativity. Together with the Catholic tradition that formed them, they should find themselves in a position that is particularly suitable to facing up to the reality of globalization. For example, we should note that the Catholic community sustains a network of universities and colleges that reaches across the entire world. The International Federation of Catholic Universities has 221 members, located in virtually all of the religious and cultural settings around the world.

These numerous institutions could help the Church proclaim the Gospel more effectively if they were to collaborate with each other in the exploration of how the Catholic tradition can help shape the values and institutions of our globalizing world. If multinational companies like the Coca-Cola Company and Exxon-Mobil have learned that success in business calls for simultaneous local inculcation and global networking, Catholic higher education could make significant advances if it were to enhance the collaboration of Catholic universities that already exist around the world.

In addition, Catholic higher education has long been known for its commitment to the liberal arts as the core of the way it helps students develop their understanding of what it is to be fully human. Several decades ago Jesuit scholar Michael Buckley argued that an essential dimension of the humanities and liberal

arts that is central to Catholic higher education should be making students perceive both the heights to which human life can ascend and also the abyss of suffering into which human life can precipitate.

This concern for the degradation of the human person leads the Catholic tradition to the belief that an essential dimension of the humanities and the liberal arts has to be a deep intellectual commitment to understand the reality of justice and injustice. In Buckley's words, this "care to develop a disciplined sensitivity to human misery and exploitation" is central to a Christian humanism shaped by the Gospel.¹¹ Concern for those who suffer will in turn grow into a critical effort to understand how their misery might be alleviated. This commitment can also be attractive for the young people of today.

In our globalizing world, all of this can lead one step further. Following the example of the great, early-modern Catholic pioneers of encounter with the non-European world, like Matteo Ricci, Catholic universities should help students learn what it means to live a fully human life by studying at least some aspects of the vision of humanity to be found in non-Western cultural and religious traditions. Catholic education for our globalizing world cannot be simply education in the traditions of Christianity and Western humanism, indispensable as these surely are. It must also aid students to come to some insights into human flourishing discovered outside the West.

This will have implications for our curricula in ways that are both important and complex. It implies we should be asking ourselves fundamental questions, like what the liberal arts mean in a truly global society. How can we design a liberal arts education that responds to global interaction, pursues adequate depth of knowledge of our own traditions, and avoids the dangers of superficiality and eclecticism? These are intellectual

11. M. J. Buckley, "The University and the Concern for Justice: The Search for a New Humanism," in *Thought* 57 (1982) 223. Cf. also M. J. Buckley, "Christian Humanism and Human Misery: A Challenge to the Jesuit University," in F. M. Lazarus (ed.), *Faith, Discovery, Service: Perspectives on Jesuit Education*, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1992, 77-105.

challenges for all higher education today. Catholic universities around the world could be leaders in the effort to respond to these challenges.

Catholic universities should also be helping open the eyes of students to the suffering and injustices of our world, by developing volunteer and cooperation programs. They should also help young people see how the Christian faith calls them to respond to unjust suffering. Accompanying those in need can lead students to long-term commitment to a vocation of service, aid or policy-making that can make a real difference.

Ensuring that the young people profit from all of this could be an important contribution from the Catholic universities.¹²

12. As this text first went to press, the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* by Pope Francis was announced which focuses on ecclesiastical faculties and universities. There is a need – the pope affirms – for a “radical paradigm shift,” or a “courageous cultural revolution” where the “worldwide network of ecclesiastical faculties and universities is called to bring the decisive contribution as the leaven, the salt and the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and of the living Tradition of the Church that is always open to new situations and new proposals.”