

Ex Corde Ecclesiae Turns Twenty

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 9, 2010 | Distinctly Catholic

Next Sunday, the Feast of the Assumption, will mark the 20th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter on Catholic colleges and universities, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. The document is most remembered, and was most controversial, on account of its emphasis on Catholic identity, a subject we will consider at greater length tomorrow. Today, I want to look at a separate issue that *Ex Corde* deals with, namely, the role of theology in modern intellectual life. Additionally, all this week, in our Q & A segment, we will be discussing *Ex Corde* and its implementation with a host of prominent Catholic educators.

Paragraph 19 of *Ex Corde* reads: "Theology plays a particularly important role in the search for a synthesis of knowledge as well as in the dialogue between faith and reason. It serves all other disciplines in their search for meaning, not only by helping them to investigate how their discoveries will affect individuals and society but also by bringing a perspective and an orientation not contained within their own methodologies. In turn, interaction with these other disciplines and their discoveries enriches theology, offering it a better understanding of the world today, and making theological research more relevant to current needs. Because of its specific importance among the academic disciplines, every Catholic University should have a faculty, or at least a chair, of theology."

The hyper-specialization of knowledge is one of the characteristics of the modern university, which results both in the increasing balkanization of knowledge and in what Luke Timothy Johnson recently (and precisely and felicitously) described as the "desperately trivial character of much academic scholarship." Young scholars must find ways to get published in obscure academic journals that no one will ever read. While there may be interesting minutiae in the sciences that are also significant, this is rarely the case in the humanities where minutiae remain minutiae, of little significance except insofar as an article about them might help one secure tenure.

The balkanization and hyper-specialization of knowledge has also diminished the usefulness of the modern academy to the society at large. Men and women trained as professors in recent decades tend to lack the capacity of earlier generations of scholars to give a broad, accessible account of their field of study, one that can inform the public at large. I cannot think of an historian who has the contemporary influence that Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wielded in his day, nor of an architect-engineer whose name is known today as Buckminster Fuller's was in his day, and certainly there is no theologian who is a central to the public discourse as Reinhold Niebuhr was to the public discourse of the post-World War II era. There are exceptions, especially in the field of economics, where Paul Krugman, Ben Bernanke, Christina Romer and others all go back and forth between the lecture hall and the public square with ease and with effect, but they are the exception.

But, the gravest problem from this balkanization of knowledge is that many of the graduates of our great universities do not know how to think. I have a friend who attended an Ivy League university in the early 1980s and never had to read a book published before 1850. In what meaningful way does "education" describe those four years? During the debate over the book "The Bell Curve" which claimed to show scientifically that there were racial differences in intelligence, Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of the *New Republic*, challenged the

data not on its methodology but on its significance. In what was one of the most important sentences penned in a long time, Wieseltier wrote: "There is not a chart in the world that can demonstrate the place of charts in the world." You will always need philosophy and theology to explain the role of science, not in itself, where each discipline has its own methodology, but in its relationship to humanity and human concerns. I wrote about this subject, and the way many on the Left are susceptible to a kind of intellectual corruption, a scientism that sees no need for philosophy, in the Tablet and you can read that article [here](#). [1]

Theology was formerly known as "the Queen of the Sciences" and Ex Corde, in its call for theology to play a critical role in the integration of knowledge, and the in guarding the good of humankind on whose behalf knowledge is acquired, seeks to return that once proud title to theology. The on-going task of relativizing the different fields of knowledge to the dignity and good of humankind should certainly be obvious to anyone who lived in the Twentieth Century when science was conscripted by the darkest forces known in the political history of man.

For Catholics, this role of integrating our different areas of knowledge and orienting them to the common good is especially important to resist the temptation to turn theology into a kind of intellectual cherry, used to top the banana splits of our own creation. I think of the work of the Acton Institute or the American Enterprise Institute's Michael Novak's absurd efforts to bless capitalism, comparing the modern corporation to the suffering servant in Isaiah. I think of Professor Robert George's new-fangled Americanism or of the reduction of the Gospel to a social justice message, a reduction that one finds on the left of the political spectrum. As Catholics, we must always, in a sense, begin with theology, because the "I" that engages in politics or economics or science is a baptized "I" and the implications and demands of our baptism must be guarded against those who seek to reduce the Gospel mandate to a political or social agenda.

If the Catholic university world focuses on the demand of Ex Corde 19 to place theology at the center of the intellectual life of our modern Catholic campuses, we will be providing a great service to the world by focusing on this intellectual discipline so essential to the life of the Church. Theology must never be some abstract, remote discipline; it must be part of the life, part of the intellectual constitution, of every Catholic. We have a ways to go, but Ex Corde helped move us along the path.

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[1] <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/article/12579>