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Q & A: Professor John Cavadini

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Distinctly Catholic

We close out our week of asking about *Ex corde Ecclesiae* with Professor John Cavadini, Theology Professor at the University of Notre Dame and McGrath-Cavadini Director, Institute for Church Life.

The question: What is the impact of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* looking back from our vantage point today?

Professor Cavadini:

I have a complex reaction to this question.

On the one hand, I'm tempted to say that the impact of *Ex Corde* has been rather marginal. The Exhortation put an ideal on the table, one of a lively and robust connection between the Church and the colleges and universities that claim to have a relationship of some kind, or an identification of some kind, with the Catholic Church. This ideal, unfortunately in my opinion, became entangled with the juridical question of mandata for theologians. I say "unfortunately," not because I am opposed to the idea, but because the question of the mandatum provided too easy an escape from the searching questions that the well stated ideals of the encyclical posed. Both the university and the Church could, as it were, siphon off the problems onto the personal relationship between individual theologians and the local Ordinary. The only institutional impact was to be glad that the problem was, somehow, "solved." What we ended up with was a series of local versions of a separate peace, which only in a few exceptional places had any institutional impact whatsoever. And in those places, the impact was not due so much to the mandatum per se, but to the fruitful relationship the discussions concerning the mandatum had established between the university and the local bishop.

Having solved the "problem" posed by *Ex Corde*, but never having really confronted the "ideal," Catholic colleges and universities went forward, by and large, without the guidance of the "ideal," without a concrete sense of what they were aiming at. The results are understandable. Our colleges and universities,

but especially the universities with graduate programs, live under the same pressures as the rest of the American academy. We want to compete in that terrain, and by and large the Catholic families who are our main constituency also want us to compete in that terrain. They want the degrees their offspring receive to have enough prestige and credibility to ensure, as they see it, success in life. If you aren't seen as a credible university, as fitting the paradigm of "university," you lose your constituency, even your Catholic constituency, apart from a strident minority. There are bigger Catholic student bodies at some of the prestigious secular universities than there are at many Catholic colleges and universities.

But aren't we supposed to be distinctive? Isn't that what our relationship with the Church should provide? Again, and understandably, universities begin to deal with the problem of how to be both academically credible and Catholic by vesting their Catholic identity in programming that, while certainly an essential part of the Catholic agenda, is actually present in almost any university of top quality. A focus on ethics? on social justice? on educating the whole person? What good university would eschew any of these, and in fact, not feature them? Language about social justice works its way into our mission statements, but language about witnessing to the truth of the Gospel does not, unless it is equated with the former. We seem to accept the going paradigm of academic excellence, and subordinate the "distinctive" element to that. But aren't we then selling ourselves short? Have we really made much progress?

On the other hand, for me, the mere statement of an ideal is already a lot of progress. And it is not surprising if it takes a generation to begin to move towards the cultural renewal that ideals call us to. Can we learn to "live into" this ideal? What does the language of "faith seeking understanding" mean when applied not only to a theology department but to the whole Catholic intellectual endeavor (see section 5)? Are we humble enough to admit we may not know, and to begin seeking? Of the "essential" characteristics of a Catholic university listed by Ex Corde (section 13), do we accept only no. 4, an institutional commitment to service, and not the other three? Including, "fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us from the Church?" Would that ever show up in a mission statement? Can we take responsibility for seeking the "integration" of knowledge (see section 16), and not settle simply for "inter-disciplinarity," essential (section 20) but not the same? The apostolic exhortation, incidentally, only asks for the quest for integration, and not for a settled achievement. Do we regard the relationship with the Church as "essential" to our identities (section 27)? Would the language of section 49 ever find its way into a mission statement?: "By its very nature, each Catholic University ... is a living institutional witness to Christ and his message, so vitally important in cultures marked by secularism ..." And, most importantly, do we reserve the adjudication of how well we are doing on meeting the ideal only to ourselves and not to the Church?

Exclusive focus on the mandatum, at the expense of asking these and similar questions, made us feel that we knew what the answers to these questions were. We knew what "witness to Christ" meant -- it was either social justice, or else too parochial an idea to make it in the mainstream of American academia. Should we really give up that easily? Isn't it not only our responsibility but our strength to find a way to preserve phrases like this from lapsing either into fundamentalism, or to blending in with secularism? Isn't that our job?

For example, have we really fully contemplated what the ideal of the "preferential option for the poor" means? This cannot be reduced merely to a theory of social justice, or simply to the language of justice, apart from reference to the Word of God and to God's love, for the preferential option for the poor is not a statement, in the first instance, about the poor, but about God's gratuitous love. Is it really so foreign to a university to accept this "preference," which is received through submission to the Word of God and in deference to the magisterium which serves the Word of God, as a starting point? It is not reducible to a secular agenda, but would provide "a living institutional witness to Christ and his message," as theological reflection unfolds the connection to human dignity, to the sanctity of life, and the nature of

God, and as the other disciplines can be informed by this ideal as appropriate. Nor is it reducible to a fundamentalist agenda, because it is a "starting point in faith" (initium fidei), the beginning of "seeking to understand," and does not use faith as a self-sufficient end point.

This is just an example meant to help us ask ourselves honestly if we have really done the work of trying to imagine our way into the ideal put on the table by Ex Corde. The good news is -- the ideal is there! Let's start using the language in which the ideal is stated, and learn, little by little, to grow into it. Let's be patient, for we are talking about cultural change, but let's go forward. Let's use our ideal to try to teach the secular academy something it could not come up with on its own, saving it from its own peculiar brand of anti-intellectualism in its refusal to consider faith a dialogue partner, and let's use our ideal, too, to offer an alternative in the life of the mind and heart to fundamentalism. In other words, let's have enough confidence in our ideals to lead! We can do it.

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