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Garvey's idea of a university

Jerry Filteau | Jun. 21, 2011

John Garvey, president of The Catholic University of America in Washington, welcomes participants to an inaugural symposium April 11 on "Intellect and Virtue: The Idea of a Catholic University." (CUA photos/Ed Pfueller)

WASHINGTON -- A new set of banners, proclaiming ?Intellect and Virtue: The Idea of a Catholic University,? appeared across the campus of The Catholic University of America last January alongside traditional banners with the school?s motto, *Deus lux mea est* (?God is my light?).

For John Garvey, the new banners signaled one of his chief goals as Catholic University president in his inaugural year and years to come: making the bishops? national university a place where intellectual achievement is consciously and explicitly linked not only to traditional secular academic goals and to Catholic faith but also to moral virtue.

The relation of virtue to intellect was a major theme in Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman?s *The Idea of a University*, a collection of lectures and essays by the great English Catholic intellectual in 1854.

Aristotle also, as Garvey pointed out in an interview with *NCR*, considered moral virtue a presupposition for intellectual advancement -- at least in the field of ethics and that of politics, which Aristotle thought of as ethics exercised in the public square (a definition sorely in need of revival today).

Garvey acknowledged tensions between Newman?s idea of a university -- Newman decidedly favored undergraduate liberal arts education as the core of a university and opposed the idea of it being a research institution -- and Catholic University?s long history as the second major U.S. university, after Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, devoted primarily to graduate studies and research.

Since its founding in 1887 -- chiefly as a philosophical and theological graduate school for seminarians across the country, with theology-related graduate studies in fields such as canon law and Greek, Hebrew and Semitic languages -- The Catholic University of America has expanded its curriculum to cover liberal arts, architecture, music, drama, social sciences, law, physics, nursing, social work and a variety of other fields.

It remains distinctive in that roughly half of its students -- considerably more than in most U.S. colleges and

universities -- are in graduate studies.

Catholic University lectures and conferences marking his inaugural year, Garvey told *NCR*, ?have been of two kinds.?

?One kind is about the intellectual life of the university, strictly speaking,? with a series of internationally noted speakers addressing topics as varied as religion and politics, music and faith, Catholic intellectual life in American literature and arts, and ?a mathematical biologist from Harvard speaking about his faith and what that had to do with his work as a scientist,? he said.

?Then we?ve had a series of conferences? on specific issues, he said. He cited a two-day symposium in April on virtue and intellect and Newman?s *The Idea of a University*, and a similar two-day conference in May marking the 120th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII?s landmark encyclical on the condition of labor that marks the start of modern Catholic social teaching.

At the *Rerum Novarum* conference, several speakers highlighted the central role that Catholic University?s faculty have played through most of the 20th century in translating some key elements of Catholic social teaching into the bloodstream of U.S. public policy -- Social Security, a ban on child labor, minimum wage, universal access to affordable health care -- including issues currently facing new challenges in U.S. political life.

Cardinal virtues

In the interview Garvey also highlighted a series of sessions this winter and spring, not really publicized outside the university. He said the faculty had a gathering in December to discuss what their faith had to do with what they taught and how they taught it.

?That?s one piece of it -- people talking about what goes on in classrooms and in their research and scholarship and their teaching of students.

?The other part of it, which I might call the richer part of it, is we?ve been doing a series on the cardinal virtues [prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance] that Catholic University incardinates,? he added.

That series was organized by leaders of student life and campus ministry, he said.

?In January we did the virtue of justice, and we had events organized around Martin Luther King Day. ? In February we focused on the virtue of prudence, in March on the virtue of temperance.?

He said he thought the April session, on fortitude, was especially interesting, because ?we had a most wonderful event, picking out, should I call it, heroes from the students and the staff in particular, people who had overcome great adversity in their lives and succeeded as students, as employees of the university, as parents of children, through their faith. And so we held them up as examples of fortitude.?

In that session, the university honored nine students, faculty and staff, including Glenda Flores, the Guatamala-born manager of custodial services, who as a teenager was left to take care of three younger children when her mother, facing possible death in Guatemala, immigrated to the United States.

Flores, who came to the United States when her mother was diagnosed with cancer in 2000, plans to work on a business management degree in Catholic University?s Metropolitan School of Professional Studies this fall.

?Even though it doesn?t seem to require any explanation, everybody who?s connected with a Catholic university is interested? in how education, faith and virtue interconnect, Garvey said.

?I first started thinking, with my wife, in making decisions about where to educate our own children, and we wanted to send them to Catholic universities, as we did with Catholic schools earlier, because we wanted them to love the Catholic church more when they got out of school than when they started -- to receive the sacraments; to practice the beatitudes; to make friends who shared their Catholic faith; if they fell in love, to find nice Catholic kids that they would share their life with.?

Garvey -- former dean of the law school of Jesuit-run Boston College -- sent all his five children, now grown, to Catholic universities.

?I used to think that these were two different things that we wanted, you know -- intellectual growth and growth in virtue -- like you wanted meat and potatoes to be two different parts of your children?s sides,? he said. ?I now think that they?re actually connected to one another.

?And they?re not connected, though, in the way that academics would think. Academics would think, well, intellect comes first, because you learn what the virtues are? and by knowing them one would want to pursue them, he said.

?I think it?s the other way around,? he said. ?I think growth in the understanding and practice of virtue points us in the right direction of our intellectual understanding,? whether in academics, athletics or other fields of student endeavor.

?I think this is one of the great advantages that Catholic universities have over other opportunities for higher education, that they care about the [moral] formation of their students as people,? he said. ?This really has an essential bearing on their intellectual life.?

Referring to the recent symposium on Newman?s idea of the university and the relation of moral virtue and intellectual life, he said, ?I wouldn?t want to claim that Catholic universities have a monopoly on this way of thinking about the connection between virtue and intellectual life. There are other times, other cultures, other ways of integrating these two things.? He cited Aristotle?s argument that an ethical life is a necessary predisposition to real intellectual understanding of ethics as an example.

?But I think there is a prevailing norm of separation? between moral and intellectual formation in the approach of secular universities as they focus only on the intellectual side, he said. At Catholic University ?we dispute? that notion, he said. ?I think it is actually essential that in education we concern ourselves with both things.?

?I have to say that one of the things I absolutely love about Catholic University is that it is already in so many ways devoted to the pursuit of both of these objectives,? he said. ?I don?t take credit for that. It?s a culture that I came to.?

The alumni, the current students, and the parents who sent them there ?have built this culture, so I?m just a caretaker,? he said -- but he made it obvious that he intends to build aggressively on that heritage.

Garvey also highlighted that among his chief priorities as president will be outreach to generate a stronger Hispanic presence across the university and to make it ?more truly national,? especially by student recruiting efforts in the U.S. West and Southwest.

?I think we do very well attracting local students and students up and down the Atlantic Seaboard,? he said, but ?I think for us in the next decade the problem is going to be, we need to attract more students from California,

Texas, Illinois, Miami, Atlanta. We?re The Catholic University of America, we?re the national university of the Catholic church, and most of America?s Catholics used to live in Boston, New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia.?

Now more Catholics live in places like California, Texas and Florida, he said, and the university needs to ?establish a much bigger footprint in those areas.?

He noted that among current U.S. Catholic youth of college age, roughly half are Hispanic, many of them in the West and Southwest, where Catholic University?s recruitment reach is currently rather sparse. He said he is actively seeking to increase recruitment in those areas.

Student life

?We need to think about what young people want at a university. We need to worry about student life, about residence halls, about dining halls, about recreational opportunities, the student organizations, the [campus] newspaper, the theater, the music, their connections with downtown Washington, their internship opportunities, their varsity and intramural sports. So I?ve given a lot of attention to that,? he said.

When Garvey moved down to Washington he took up residence on campus and began eating regularly with the students at campus dining halls. He also taught an undergraduate course on constitutional law at the university?s Columbus School of Law this past year. He is certainly the first Catholic University president to teach a regular undergraduate course since the 1960s, if not the first one in the history of the university.

He said he is working on ways to encourage relations between graduate and undergraduate students so that the undergraduates will benefit from the large presence of older, more experienced master?s and doctoral candidates on campus. The university?s current enrollment of about 7,000 is divided about half and half -- 3,500 undergraduates and 3,500 graduate students, he said.

Garvey said he is trying to encourage priests and religious engaged in graduate studies at Catholic University to live in the residence halls of the undergraduates so that the undergraduates ?meet, get to know, live side-by-side with, benefit from the example of, become friends with these kinds of teachers and graduate students? whose broader experience can enhance undergraduates? university experience.

He said that whenever he has visited Theological College -- Catholic University?s national seminary, the only one aside from the North American College in Rome that is sponsored by the entire U.S. hierarchy -- he has stressed the need for its seminarians to get to know the university?s undergraduates and become friends and mentors to them.

?What I?ve said to them is, look, Catholic University is paying for half your education [in a 50 percent clerical discount on tuition], and here?s what I want in return -- I want you all to get involved in the life of our students here in our classes, I want you to get to know our undergraduates while you?re living here,? he said.

Unlike most U.S. Catholic colleges and universities, which were established by religious orders rather than by the U.S. bishops, The Catholic University of America ?was operating at a kind of disadvantage, because it didn?t have a founding order with its own charism and a kind of devotion of members of that order,? he said. ?This is one of the reasons we invited the Franciscans to help us with campus ministry.?

Earlier this year Garvey decided to end two-gender dormitories, starting with entering freshmen this coming fall going into newly designated residences only for males or females.

In the symposium on virtue and intellect, two speakers cited studies showing that students living in mixed-gender residences* on college campuses are significantly more likely to drink alcohol on a weekly basis, more

likely to binge drink, more likely to hook up sexually with fellow students of the opposite sex, and more likely to engage in illegal behaviors -- and more likely, in terms of Newman's idea of the relation of virtue to intellect, to suffer academically.

Garvey told *NCR* that his decision to end two-gender dorms was based on his conversations with his own children about their college/university experiences, and he was frankly surprised to learn at the symposium that sociological studies supported what he had learned anecdotally from his own children.

?The binge-drinking results surprised me. My own presumptions were that having young women around [in dual-gender dorms] would have a civilizing effect on young men and would reduce the amount [of binge-drinking]. In fact, it?s just the opposite, it leads to more drinking,? he said.

?I love the students we have here,? he said at the end of the interview. ?They are the nicest young people I?ve ever been around.?

***Editor's Note:** An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated that students in same-gender residence were more likely to engaged in the listed behaviors. We regret that error. The sentence -- that students in mixed-gender residence were more likely to engage in the listed behaviors -- is now correct.

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