

The Potential of the Catholic University to Evangelize*

J. BRIAN BENESTAD

Assumption College
Worcester, MA

ST. POPE JOHN PAUL II first spoke of the new evangelization in a speech delivered on May 9, 1983, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. In 1992 the pope provided the following explanation of the new evangelization: “[It] begins with the clear and emphatic proclamation of the gospel, which is directed to each and every person. Therefore, it is necessary to awaken again in believers a full relationship with Christ, mankind’s only Savior. Only from a personal relationship with Jesus can an effective relationship develop.”¹ John Paul has also distinguished three stages of evangelization: the initial proclamation of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, continuing evangelization or the ongoing education in the faith of those who are attempting to live out their relationship with Christ, and the reevangelization of those who have drifted away from the practice of the faith.² *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (1990) says that “each Catholic university makes an important contribution to the Church’s work of evangelization. It is a living *institutional* witness to Christ and his

* Presentation given on March 16, 2013 at a meeting on the potential for evangelization and catechesis in Catholic colleges and universities. The USCCB’s Committee on Doctrine was responsible for organizing this meeting between bishops and theologians from six theological societies.

¹ St. Pope John Paul II, *Ad Limina* visit of Bishops of Southern Germany, December 4, 1992.

² St. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 33. I found the references in footnotes one and two in Avery Dulles, *Evangelization for the Third Millenium* (see note 4 below).

message.” During his 2008 visit to the U.S., Pope Benedict XVI said in his speech to educators at the Catholic University of America (CUA), “Fostering personal intimacy with Jesus Christ and communal witness to his loving truth is indispensable in Catholic institutions of learning.” By doing this work, adds the Pope Emeritus, the university participates in the “Church’s primary mission of evangelization.”

The question before us is how the Catholic university fosters intimacy with Jesus Christ and contributes to all three stages of evangelization. “Christian educators,” says Benedict in the CUA speech, “can liberate the young from the limits of positivism, and awaken receptivity to the truth, to God and his goodness.” Intellectual charity “calls the educator to recognize that the profound responsibility to lead the young to truth is nothing less than an act of love.” Benedict says that all educators at a university have the responsibility to lead students to truth and, with the help of prayer, to live the truth which they propose to them. Otherwise stated, the faculty must live the faith they profess, seek the truth in their area of teaching and research, and try to inspire a love of learning in students, a necessary characteristic of an outstanding university. With respect to things specifically Christian, this means, at least, that both professors and students learn, as Ernest Fortin has prescribed, to read the great authors of the Christian tradition “with an open and free mind. The problem lies precisely in achieving the necessary freedom of mind. One does not divest oneself at will of one’s most deeply ingrained prejudices. In this respect, it may be suggested that openness to truth is, not so much the precondition as the outcome and reward of a certain type of inquiry.”³

Benedict further argues that all educators at a Catholic university have a “particular responsibility...to evoke among the young the desire for the act of faith, encouraging them to commit themselves to the ecclesial life that follows from this belief.” While it is not the primary purpose of the Catholic university to elicit acts of faith in students, nevertheless, Cardinal Avery Dulles maintains, a “sound education in conformity with Christian principles can help individuals to receive the faith and

³ Ernest Fortin, “An Academic Approach to the Teaching of Theology,” in *Collected Essays*, vol. 4, *Ever Ancient and Ever New: Ruminations on the City, the Soul, and the Church*, ed. Michael P. Foley (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 203.

grow in it.”⁴ One could say that theologians have a special responsibility to prepare the terrain for the development of faith by leading students to love the truth more than their own opinions or desires. If theologians understand theology to be faith seeking understanding, if they think with the Church and use outstanding, readable books, especially classic texts like St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, college students will have the opportunity to nourish their faith or to believe for the first time. There are many other theological works that would provide a similar experience. I am sure that many theology professors have witnessed their students come to belief or to a stronger or more informed faith while trying to master the academic material.

With respect to the third stage of evangelization, Avery Dulles says, “Reevangelization will involve an overcoming of the separation between the gospel and daily life in family, work, and society” (34). Addressing the separation between faith and life is a task of Catholic social doctrine and ecclesiology. From these courses students will be able to see what it means to integrate faith with their life. Certain literature and church history courses could also provide the same experience, along with ethics courses dealing with the professions of medicine and law, and with the practice of business.

In his meeting with Catholic educators at Catholic University, Pope Benedict XVI asked some probing questions directly pertaining to Catholic identity and indirectly to the status of evangelization.

[D]o we really believe that only in the mystery of the Word made flesh does the mystery of man truly become clear (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 22)? Are we ready to commit our entire self—intellect and will, mind and heart—to God? Do we accept the truth Christ reveals? Is the faith tangible in our universities and schools? Is it given fervent expression liturgically, sacramentally, through prayer, acts of charity, a concern for justice, and respect for God’s creation? Only in this way do we really bear witness to the meaning of who we are and what we uphold.

⁴ Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Evangelization for the Third Millennium* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2009), 68. Parenthetical citations to this work will henceforth be given in the text.

Catholic universities evangelize when university personnel give personal witness by living their faith at work, at home, and in the public square, and when they form a compelling Christian community as an expression of their ecclesial faith. "If the Church is seen as a cordial community of love and mutual support, in which all have but one heart and one soul, it will attract new members almost without trying" (96). Other sources of evangelization are the proclamation of the Word at Mass and in catechetical programs, the example of the Christian community worshiping at Mass and receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The Catholic university evangelizes when it makes Confession widely available, provides sufficient Masses on Sunday and during the week, offers homilies that truly educate students in the practice of the faith, encourages service as a way to practice charity, promotes a concern for justice both within and outside the classroom, and teaches care for the environment as a way to show respect for God's creation. Students need continuous help to extricate themselves from the drinking and hook-up cultures. Faculty and staff need the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of the Catholic faith by such instruments as weekend programs and/or week-long seminars that discuss classic Catholic writings.

Effective publicity is required so that students know where Masses and Confession take place. In response to a question, students in my classes recently told me that they had no idea when and where Confessions take place (Masses and Confessions are advertised). Besides educational homilies, the prayers of the faithful at Mass should, among other things, teach students to integrate faith into their everyday life. For example, one could pray that health-care personnel acquire the virtues necessary to deliver health care to patients or that men and women in the field of business abide by natural law and/or Christian principles. Other things promoting evangelization would be administrators praying in public on formal occasions, faculty beginning class with a prayer, helping the local diocese with its work of evangelization by organizing programs to educate catechists and, if needed, by providing extraordinary ministers of Communion to local hospitals and nursing homes, in addition to a number of other services. A striking example of evangelization is the action taken by the Catholic college presidents in Massachusetts before Election Day last fall. They sent out a letter to their students and to all their alumni asking them to vote no on the ballot

initiative that would have legalized physician-assisted suicide in Massachusetts. Those letters helped defeat the initiative on Election Day by the slim margin of 51 to 49.

All of the above will make faith tangible in Catholic universities, as would requirements that faculty applying for tenure and promotion explain how they have contributed both to the Catholic identity of their institution, inside and outside of the classroom, and to the potential development of a Catholic culture more broadly. Avery Cardinal Dulles's "strongest recommendation is for Catholic universities to make all their departments transmitters and builders of Catholic culture" (75). By culture Dulles means "all the customs and institutions that serve to make life more human. In a more specialized sense, it refers to the exceptional achievements of thought, art, and literature by which people express their loftiest spiritual experiences and insights" (65). To further convey what he means by culture, Dulles quotes (75) from an article by George Weigel:

History is driven, over the long haul, by culture—by what men and women honor, cherish, and worship; by what societies deem to be true and good, and by the language they give to those convictions in language, literature, and the arts; by what individuals and societies are willing to stake their lives on.

A university education contributes to the shaping of the culture by the way it approaches the various disciplines. We have seen how the various forms of relativism taught in our universities have generated a dictatorship of relativism in large swaths of our culture.

Departments in a Catholic university not only provide students with training in a discipline, but also must contribute to their Catholic education and to the promotion of a Catholic culture. It almost goes without saying that the disciplines will always have to be taught on a high level and should make students aware of the principal approaches at the present time to the study of the various disciplines. Sometimes, the reigning self-understanding of the disciplines will have to be modified in order to study a subject with the most profit. For example, philosophy departments should teach love of wisdom, which was so instrumental in Augustine's return to the faith. Reading Cicero's *Hortensius* generat-

ed a love of wisdom in the eighteen-year-old Augustine that eventually brought him to the Christian faith. Philosophy courses should not be taught in such a way as to train students to be the kind of “critical thinkers” who take pride in never arriving at truth. Business schools can teach their students to adhere to Christian principles in their business dealings and to look at management as a way to promote the talents of employees. Pre-med and other health-care programs can inculcate the importance of the virtues in the practice of medicine; pre-medical programs and medical schools have to deal with all the pressing issues of biomedical ethics. English and other language programs can make known high quality Christian authors such as Alessandro Manzoni, Sigrid Undset, Paul Claudel, George Bernanos, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, Flannery O’Connor, and Walker Percy. Good literature has an amazing capacity to present characters at various stages either on their way to God or away from him. Social science departments can avoid value neutrality and deal with questions of justice and the common good. Psychology, in particular, can be based on a better anthropology than the atheistic presuppositions of Freud or the determinism of not a few contemporary psychologists. Departments of economics “will avoid the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and the materialistic determinism of Karl Marx” (73). Science programs should interact with the departments of philosophy and theology and teach science students that there is no inherent conflict between faith and science or faith and reason. (Last semester I team taught a Catholic bioethics course with a professor of biology.) The interaction is crucial, because science by itself cannot generate the moral principles needed to evaluate what it is able to do, such as embryonic stem cell research, or might be able to do in the near future, such as cloning. Counseling programs must be revised so that students are not taught to counsel clients according to a value-free paradigm without a comprehensive view of the good to guide the counseling. In departments of journalism students should learn the importance of accurate reporting that does not slavishly serve the reigning political ideologies. Communication departments should make students aware of the potential bad cultural effects of low-level TV programs that promote a shallow view of life and the acceptability of obscenity and sexual promiscuity. Catholic law schools could deal with the relation of the law to justice and Catholic social doctrine in general. “In the study of

art,” writes Dulles, “religious themes will not be obscured by an exclusive attention to merely formalistic considerations” (73). It is not hard to imagine both the kind of effect a real Catholic education could have on millions of students and the kind of culture they would create as they lived their faith at home, at work, and in the public square. I should also note that with the proper leadership there should be more freedom in Catholic universities than in the leading secular universities to make warranted changes in the study of a discipline.

Giving birth to a Catholic university fully capable of effective evangelization would also require the implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, especially the General Norms. That work depends on the fruitful cooperation among university presidents, provosts, deans, the faculty, and the local bishop. 

