

Catholic Studies:

A Brief History

From its modest beginnings in the early 1990s, Catholic Studies at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota has grown over the years into an enterprise with a diverse array of institutes and projects, involving over 1200 alumni and dozens of faculty, and gaining a national and international reputation. It has sparked the founding of over fifty similar Catholic Studies programs and initiatives across the country and around the world. Noted Papal biographer and Church commentator George Weigel opened a recent article in *First Things*, entitled “Homage to Don Briel,” with the following lines: In the history of U.S. Catholic higher education since World War II, three seminal moments stand out: Msgr. John Tracy Ellis’s 1955 article, “American Catholics and the Intellectual Life”; the 1967 Land O’Lakes statement, “The Idea of a Catholic University”; and the day Don J. Briel began the Catholic Studies Program—and the Catholic Studies movement—at the University of St. Thomas in the Twin Cities.¹ Anyone familiar with Catholic higher education will be well aware of the first two of Weigel’s seminal moments. But many may not be familiar with the third. This brief history is an attempt to fill that gap.

To understand the point and the progress of Catholic Studies, it is important to understand both the context of its beginnings and the principles upon which it has gone forward. From the first it has been an organic growth, a creative response to a challenging situation rather than a carefully worked-out blueprint theorized in advance and meticulously put into play. Like all such organic movements, it has had a life of its own and has provoked a response in students, faculty, benefactors, and the wider community that has surprised even those who were leading it.

Like all such movements, it has gone forward under guiding principles rather than under specific bureaucratic structures, and its eventual form has been mapped onto the impetus of its vivid life, rather than the reverse. This has meant that it has been both promising and difficult for some in the wider university culture: promising in the obvious enthusiasm it has generated for the intellectual life in students and faculty with all the consequences such enthusiasm brings—growth in numbers, support from donors and benefactors, and a high morale—and difficult in that it has not always been easy to capture its essence or its life in the normal academic arrangements of the modern university.

If Catholic Studies has been a creative response, the question immediately arises: a response to what? What was the context that spurred its inception and growth? To answer that question, a brief look at the wider picture of higher education, both Catholic and secular, can help.

No one doubts that higher education in America is at a crossroads, perhaps at a point of crisis. Our universities have not lost their importance as centers of training and of credentialing for professional success; but the nature of what the university offers has been undergoing rapid and radical change. The university's structures, from the organization of its departments to residential traditions for students, grew in the soil of a time now past, amid a culture whose practical needs and basic philosophic assumptions were very different from ours. Current demands upon the university, both in terms of the skills it is asked to inculcate and the values by which it is to conduct its business, have put serious pressure on those older arrangements. Colleges and universities have been forced, often reluctantly, to ask themselves basic questions about their point and their purpose.

Until fairly recently, universities were understood to be key societal institutions for developing and passing on the heritage of a whole civilization. They were places of central cultural importance whose task was to give the members of the next generation a way of understanding the world, a formation of character, and a set of proficiencies that would allow them to think and act intelligently in preserving and furthering that heritage. Given such a wide and integrated vision, it was not strange that a college president such as Woodrow Wilson might be thought a suitable candidate to run the whole country.

Under the pressure of various societal changes, our current universities have increasingly claimed to offer a different kind of training: that of technical competence for economic success in a highly sophisticated technological world. The current emphasis on STEM makes sense from this point of view; and the massive rise in the cost of education can be economically justified only if its possessors are equipped with the kind of training that will defray those costs by high salaries. But if technical training and economic success are the purpose of a university education, what exactly is the point of humanities departments? Or of social science departments? What technical abilities can they provide that could possibly be worth the extravagant amounts of money they now cost? If the university is no longer understood to be forming its members in a moral and spiritual vision, what is the point of interrupting the lives of young adults with four years of expensive and sometimes irresponsible residential living when they could just as easily gain the same technical training by other arrangements much less expensively and with less damage to their psyches and their souls? And why do university professors keep insisting on being the only people in the whole of the society who can claim the right to say and do what they want without the possibility of job loss? In an earlier day when a leading university like Harvard could seriously take “*Veritas*” as its motto, when the university was understood by the wider

society to be engaged in the business of truth and the formation of character in accord with that truth, such arrangements made sense. But if technical training is the point, and the wider society has no agreement about what “truth” might mean or even whether it is a useful term, then it must be time to alter radically our universities to make them more economically sensible and socially useful. Such questions are not merely theoretical; they are the practical concerns driving the current revolution in higher education, from non-residential city colleges and universities, to the withering of humanities departments, to online learning projects of all kinds.

Catholic colleges and universities might be thought to be somewhat resistant to these concerns, since the primacy of truth and concern for the development of the whole person are natural outgrowths of a Christian vision of the world. But for complex reasons, it has been difficult for Catholic universities to maintain clarity of purpose and a wider understanding of education in the midst of the strong cultural and economic forces they have had to negotiate. Without giving up their Catholic ethos entirely, most Catholic universities have conformed themselves to the societal pattern by providing the kind of education that would gain them respect among their academic peers and that would map onto the economic expectations of the day. As a result, at many Catholic colleges and universities there has been a fraying of a coherent intellectual vision for the whole of life.

It was the perceived lack of such a cohering vision, and the deleterious effects of that lack upon the minds and spirits of students, that led Don Briel and other like-minded colleagues to put together a program that would allow an encounter with the full riches of the Catholic intellectual and cultural tradition. The project went forward under two basic practical principles. First: that whatever adjustments needed to be made in the face of a changing world, it would be a serious impoverishment for both students and the society at large if the overarching Catholic vision of

reality were set aside by Catholic universities, a vision that was not only exciting, invigorating, and transformational, but that could provide its recipients with a reasonable basis for successfully navigating and contributing to that changing world. Second: It seemed clear that the time had arrived when the inherent clarity and beauty of the Catholic intellectual tradition needed to be perceived anew and chosen willingly rather than simply assumed and imposed. As such, and given the increasing complexity of the society and the university, it would find its most effective form in a posture of invitation, an offering to those students and faculty who wished to participate. It was thought that the times demanded not a university with a vague Catholic flavor, but rather an incarnation within the university of the fullness of the Catholic vision and tradition in all its potency, such that its claims could be encountered and investigated. Their hope was that its influence on the university at large, such as it was, would come from its coherence and excellence, a leavening rather than a legislating effect.

In 1990, Pope John Paul II promulgated the encyclical *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. In that apostolic constitution he pointed to the need for the continuous renewal of Catholic universities. *Ex Corde* underscored the primacy of maintaining the integration of knowledge, a task especially necessary in our time because “the explosion of knowledge in recent decades, together with the rigid compartmentalization of knowledge within individual academic disciplines, makes the task increasingly difficult” (16). The document spoke of the importance of a continued dialogue between faith and reason, of an ethical perspective in study and research, and of ongoing theological reflection. In addition, it noted the value of interdisciplinary studies, which would, when accompanied by the study of philosophy and theology, “enable students to acquire an organic vision of reality and develop a continuing desire for intellectual progress” (20). The eagerness of response among Catholic colleges and universities to *Ex Corde* was mixed, but the

document provided everyone in the field with ample food for thought and a set of principles by which to consider the ongoing renewal of university life and culture.

1993: The Interdisciplinary Program of Catholic Studies

Partly spurred by the vision of Catholic higher education laid out in *Ex Corde*, in the early 1990s, Briel, then a professor of theology at St. Thomas, sought to address the academic fragmentation so rife not only in secular universities, but in Catholic universities and colleges as well. With the growing specialization of subjects, students were finding it increasingly difficult to gain an integrated vision across the various disciplines. Such challenges were not entirely new; in the mid-nineteenth century John Henry Newman had addressed similar concerns in his landmark writings on university education, among them the classic *Idea of a University*. Newman, who might be called one of the intellectual godfathers of Catholic Studies, held that the highest activity of the intellect was not in amassing facts nor in mastering technical processes, as useful as those accomplishments might be. Rather, the human mind showed its excellence by its ability to relate one thing to another, by its virtue of keeping an integrated whole in view and situating all that was being learned in its proper relation to everything else. Newman called the acquisition of this quality the “philosophical habit of mind,” and he held that the first aim of a university was to form such a habit in its students, to provide them the education that would enable them to perceive the integrated relations of all aspects of knowledge. With Newman’s reflections on education, historian Christopher Dawson’s insights concerning the dynamics of Christian culture, and *Ex Corde* as his guiding lights, Briel decided to make an attempt to break with the dominant trend of disciplinary fragmentation and to initiate a project that would invite students into a different kind of educational experience. The new

program took shape in the 1993–94 academic year as Briel gathered a group of willing faculty and set in motion the “Interdisciplinary Program in Catholic Studies.” Its interdisciplinary nature meant that it could be launched with limited resources: faculty teaching Catholic Studies courses would hold appointments in other departments. It was characteristic of the new project’s mode of proceeding that unity was sought in fundamental principles, allowing the specific details of implementation to arise as seemed best. Rather than constructing an ideal curriculum and a completed structure from the beginning, the professors began teaching according to their interest and ability, suiting their classes to the overall ideal. Briel and his colleagues envisioned both a major and a minor in Catholic Studies, but their hopes were fairly modest. They assumed that most students would pursue a minor rather than a major, and they were not expecting large numbers to show interest. The results quickly outpaced their expectations. By the second semester of its operation, more than sixty students were enrolled in Catholic Studies courses, and many were expressing a desire to pursue a Catholic Studies major.

While there was an advantage in an interdisciplinary venture in the matter of faculty resources, along with it came an endemic difficulty faced by all such projects: the program had no settled home. It was pieced together and scattered among a number of departments without a focal point. This could be administratively cumbersome, but more importantly for the success of the project, it impeded the growth of a true community of mind. Unless the intellectual and cultural ideal being articulated by the Catholic Studies professors was incarnated in time and place, in settled relationships and a shared experience such that it could help shape the life of students and faculty, that high ideal would remain largely abstract and unrealized. From this concern came the idea of establishing a Center for Catholic Studies. Given the intrinsic

importance of the Center for the success of the project, it will be worth looking more in depth at the reasons for its development.

1996: The Center for Catholic Studies

As noted above, Catholic Studies was a response to a particular problem afflicting higher education: the problem of the fragmentation of thought, culture, and life. Holding as a first principle the unity of reality, and therefore the unity of all knowledge, Catholic Studies sought to re-integrate those aspects of life and reality that had been pulled apart or neglected in the modern academy and the wider culture. According to the long Catholic educational tradition, a tradition rooted in the thought of pre-Christian Greeks, the only way to educate properly was to address all aspects of the human subject. Just as knowledge was adequately understood as an integrated whole, so the human was rightly approached as a unity of various faculties. Intellectual training was paramount, but the intellect could not be rightly trained unless the will was properly formed. Truth and goodness were not entirely separable categories. The point of education was to bring the student to the full and harmonious expression of his or her humanity.

This meant that Catholic Studies would need to find a way, not only to overcome the fragmentation of disciplines by interdisciplinarity, but also to recover an integrated understanding and practice in other areas: of the mind and the will; of knowledge gained from reason and knowledge received by faith; of individual and communal sources of identity; of the complementarity of liturgy and the sciences; of friendship as a key context for intellectual and moral development. And all needed to be accomplished in the context of a genuine ecclesial community, where the whole of the human was addressed and in which the harmony of life could be seen and experienced.

In 1995 an important step was taken toward the establishment of a Center. David and Barbara Koch, longtime supporters of Catholic education, provided the funds to establish the Koch Chair of Catholic Studies along with a scholarship fund. With this as a founding gift, the Center for Catholic Studies was established early in 1996. Briel was the first holder of the Koch chair and the first Director of the Center.

The Center and all that took place there was emphatically not intended to insulate students from the rest of the university or from the wider culture. It was rather a place where students could embrace an intellectual and moral vision that would prepare them for engagement with the world around them. Briel was insistent that Catholic Studies worked best as a double major, teamed with the humanities, the sciences, education, business and engineering, law and medicine, such that students could enter the professions with a grounding in Catholic life and thought. Most Catholic Studies majors did follow this path, double-majoring in many disciplines. Catholic Studies professor John Boyle described the goal this way: “Our students are not looking for a castle on a hill where they can pull up a drawbridge. They want to be engaged in the world. They want to be engaged from a position of strength, from a position of intellectual seriousness, from a position of moral goodness, from a position of friendship. They want all those things, not so they can live in isolation, but so that they can actually function in the world.”

From this point forward, its fundamental principles firmly in place, the Center began to grow in many directions. Catholic Studies was now offering an integrated set of courses in philosophy and theology, history and literature. This was a good start; but the vision of Briel and his colleagues went beyond the humanities. They were looking for ways to engage the wider university such that the Center could be an integrating instrument for the university as a whole. A number of initiatives were established in order to facilitate that engagement.

The first of its institutes, the John A Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought, was established in 1996, as a collaborative effort between Catholic Studies and the UST School of Business. The Ryan Institute engages business theory and practice with the Catholic social tradition helping students, faculty, and practitioners to understand and live out their vocation as business leaders. The next year the Center began to publish a quarterly journal: *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*. *Logos* gives the Center national and international scope and encourages a wider movement of educational thought and practice. A semester-long Rome program was begun in 1998. In the year 2000 a Masters Program was added. The next year, in a decisive development, the Department of Catholic Studies was approved by the University. In 2003, in cooperation with the new UST Law School, the second of the Center's institutes was established, the Terence Murphy Institute for Law and Public Policy. In 2004, a Catholic Women's floor was established in Dowling Hall; the year following, a Catholic Men's floor was begun in Ireland Hall. These dormitory experiences allowed an ease of friendship and a context of shared faith. In addition to the dormitory experiences, the same years saw the establishment of a Catholic Men's House and a Catholic Women's House. Then in 2006 came the third institute, the Habiger Institute for Catholic Leadership, which help connect these residential activities with the work of the Department of Catholic Studies as well as develop an undergraduate leadership program and a Latino outreach project.

With these developments, Catholic Studies has largely taken its current institutional form. While all of them provide important contributions to what Catholic Studies is today, the founding of the Rome program furnishes insight into the heart of what the Catholic Studies project has hoped to accomplish.

The Rome Program

Briel had envisioned a Roman experience from the beginning as an essential part of the Catholic Studies vision. There were numerous reasons for this. First, a semester in Rome would help students gain a wider understanding of the world beyond their doors, and to gain a richer social, cultural, and intellectual set of perspectives. For another, Catholic Studies had understood the ecclesial dimension of Catholic education to be of the first importance; a Roman experience would acquaint students with the heart of the Church, and enable them to encounter the Catholic world as a living international reality. A third reason was perhaps the most imperative. The integrative educational vision carried by Catholic Studies needed to find a lived expression that students could experience first-hand. This was possible to a limited degree on the main campus, but a semester in Rome, rightly designed, could be the occasion of a more transformative engagement with the Catholic educational tradition – intellectual, cultural, and spiritual – in all its attractive potency.

The seminal thought behind this integrative idea came, not surprisingly, from Newman. In his writings on university education, Newman had identified two separate but important principles at work in any well-grounded Christian educational institution, what he called the “university principle” and the “collegiate principle.” In Newman’s view, the university principle addressed the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge, while the collegiate principle assured a more intimate nexus of close relationships within which that knowledge could be properly digested, where the entire person could gain formation, and where the spiritual and moral lives of students could be addressed and integrated with their intellectual work. Newman thought that while a college was not necessary for a university’s *essence* - for its being - it was necessary for its *integrity* - for its well-being. Without the right kind of collegiate environment, a university

education would lose its proper human shape, and would tend to go astray, moving either toward the bare acquisition of knowledge for power and a resulting fall into pride, or toward a dreamy sentimental aestheticism. Briel agreed. He had long thought that the specifically collegiate dimension of Catholic higher education, carried for so long by founding religious orders, was disappearing. He hoped that a semester in Rome would provide the opportunity for students to integrate the university and collegiate principles in a shared experience of life, study, and friendship.

If both the university and the collegiate expression of education were to be present in the Rome semester, it was necessary to establish each effectively. Both soon fell into place. In the fall of 1998 Catholic Studies established a relationship with the Pontifical University of St. Thomas (the Angelicum). Catholic Studies students take classes at the Angelicum, where they meet other students from around the world and gain the benefit of the Dominican university tradition. Then, through a gift from the Bernardi family, a residence was purchased in central Rome not far from the Piazza del Popolo. The Bernardi residence has proven an excellent expression of the collegiate principle, and a beloved home for the Catholic Studies Rome students. The residence, a townhouse that had once been a convent, has a large chapel, a dining area, rooms for students, and a rooftop patio. At Bernardi the students share a rich life: they study together, pray together, and share many of their meals together, while every day they make their way through central Rome to their classes at the Angelicum and mix with the wider world. For many students the Rome semester has proven a decisive experience. They return from their time in Rome with a clearer understanding of the Church and its place in history, with a better integrative grasp of the whole of their university education, and often with a significant deepening of their faith.

Conclusion

Today, housed in its headquarters on campus in Sitzmann Hall, Catholic Studies has become an established and many-sided operation. The Department and Center sponsor a constant stream of programs, speakers, fora, faculty seminars, and publications, organizing and participating in major conferences both locally and internationally. Through its various activities and initiatives, through the achievements of its faculty, and through the testimony of the lives of its students and alumni, Catholic Studies has achieved a national and international reputation as a place of promising and innovative Catholic education.

We give the last word of this short history to Don Briel who captured in the last days of his life the animating principle behind Catholic Studies that ultimately this work is not ours but God's. "In George Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest*, the priest, nearing death, says, '*Tout est grace.*'—'All is grace, everything is grace.' This not only explains the history of Catholic Studies—because it has been a graced work, not simply the initiative but the set of people, the witness—but it is a reminder that all things, if properly perceived, can be the occasion of transformation. And that is really the hope."

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¹ <http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/offices/mission/pdf/cu25.pdf>