

The Dynamics of the History of Catholic Studies

John F. Boyle

Chair, Department of Catholic Studies

University of St. Thomas

[Address at the Fourth Catholic Studies Colloquium, 2024]

This is not exactly a history of Catholic Studies. We are busy making it and we don't have time to write it. As a medievalist, I think it is too early to write it anyway. I would like to do something a bit different. Catholic Studies is a movement. Christopher Dawson, one of the precursors to Catholic Studies, can be helpful. To crib a Dawson title, this is more "The Spirit of the Catholic Studies movement." Or to use another idea from Dawson, I want to think about the dynamics of the history of Catholic Studies.

There are many precursors, personal and programmatic, of Catholic Studies; but there was a spark that ignited the movement. That spark was St. John Paul II's 1990 Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities, *Ex corde ecclesiae*. The constitution is so very John Paul. No lamentations; no hand wringing. It was a call for the renewal of Catholic Universities. More precisely, to use John Paul's words, a call for continuous renewal, because that is what living realities do. He provides a vision of education that is stunning: big, beautiful, ambitious, and noble.

At the University of St. Thomas, a group of faculty and administrators began thinking about what *Ex corde ecclesiae* might mean concretely on the ground for St. Thomas. The program in Catholic Studies was launched in the Fall of 1993.

John Paul articulates foundational principles for that continuous renewal. I will note three that were particularly important for our thinking at St. Thomas, These principles constitute the dynamism of the Catholic Studies movement.

First, in John Paul's words, "Man finds his fullness in Christ." This fullness is personal, social, and cultural. Therefore it should be especially true of universities.

Second, the university is an organic unity. It is something living, not to be reduced to structures and organization. It is organic, that is it is made up of intrinsic essential organs which work together each fulfilling their proper role. What holds it all together? What is the principle of unity. Robert Maynard Hutchins, the legendary president of the University of Chicago, once quipped that a university is a set of building united by a common heating system. He struggled to understand what held it all together. John Paul has an answer: the incarnate Word. Truth incarnate is what allows each of the parts to flourish together as one.

Third, the university is in the service of the human person. Yes, the university is about the pursuit of truth as John Paul insisted, but that search for the truth is in the service of the fullness of the human person.

These three dynamic principles are inextricably related to each other in reality, and so it must be for the university to flourish.

Catholic Studies is a response to John Paul's call for renewal of Catholic higher education. It is a movement because several dimensions of that call are emerging in different forms in different institutions. But a pattern emerges in the differing forms such that we can identify elements of that dynamism at this point in our history.

Catholic Studies is a place in the university itself to think explicitly about all of this. That won't just happen. It needs to be intentional. That is a role rightly taken up by Catholic Studies.

Let me note some elements of note in Catholic Studies at this point in its history.

First, Catholic Studies is marked by integration. It is an organic vision of things. To use the academic word, it is interdisciplinary; but Catholic Studies is more than interdisciplinary, it is integration, for it expresses the deepest principle of unity in the incarnate Word, the fullness of Truth itself.

The focus can vary. Some programs lean on theology and philosophy; some lean on Catholic Social Thought; some lean on the Incarnation as a cultural force.

The concrete manifestations are many and wonderful and still emerging. There are academic programs: majors, minors, core programs, and study abroad. There is faculty formation in the form of seminars and workshops, speakers with the integrating Catholic Studies focus, and conferences such as the symposia sponsored by the Catholic Studies consortium.

There is student life, what we could describe as the effort to realize Newman's college for the twenty-first century. This takes the form of extracurricular programming, as simple as a dinner from time to time. There is student housing, intentionally focused on the formation of students in the lived reality of Catholic Studies. There are partnerships with Campus Ministry. There is service learning and community engagement.

The desire, of course, is all of the above together as organs in an organic whole. But we do what we can with the resources and opportunities available to us.

My point. As we look back at thirty years of Catholic Studies, we can see that we are at the beginning of something: the renewal of Catholic higher education, the renewal of all Catholic

education, indeed, the renewal of education. Period.

We are in a time of remarkable creativity. We are producing ideas and institutional forms that simply do not fit the modern university. We all experience that feeling that within the structures of the modern university we are all in ill-fitting suits. And that makes sense. We are renewing the reality of Catholic universities. Of course there are head winds. There are always dream killers who have the best of intentions. John Paul is here to remind us: we are about something very great and very important. He is also here to tell us, "Be not afraid."