

“The Idea of the Catholic University in the 21st Century”

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ABSTRACT:

How Beautiful Are the Footsteps of Those Who Bring Good News

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Addressing participants in a plenary session of the Congregation for Catholic Education in Rome, Pope Francis said:

Catholic schools and universities are attended by many non-Christian students as well as non-believers. Catholic educational institutions offer everyone an education aimed at the integral development of the person that responds to right of all people to have access to knowledge and understanding. But they are equally called to offer to all the Christian message — respecting fully the freedom of all and the proper methods of each specific scholastic environment — namely that Jesus Christ is the meaning of life, of the cosmos and of history.

Navigating this terrain is challenging to say the least. Some institutions would say that “it does not matter” whether a faculty member is Catholic or not. A few others would say that it is absolutely essential that their faculty be Catholic. And how is Catholic being defined? It is enough to have been raised Catholic? To be a “nominal” Catholic, one who occasionally goes to Mass? And even if one is personally a “faithful” Catholic with a regular spiritual practice, is that enough?

It appears that the famous “both/and” approach of the Catholic intellectual tradition is very much in order here. Catholic institutions, to be worthy of the name, must be “players” in the dialogue of culture and that means that we have to attend, in equal measure, both to being a context for encounter and open dialogue with people of many faith traditions and none, while at the same time attending to the essential task of nurturing the garden of the Catholic intellectual tradition at our institutions, a tradition that we are privileged to be able to cultivate in a faith based environment. We cannot, for the sake of a misguided approach to inclusion that would replace our historic commitment to the Catholic tradition with the idol a certain style of diversity that will end in little more than relativism. As Pope Francis pointedly notes, we are called to offer to all the Christian message that Jesus Christ is the meaning of life, of cosmos and of history. Practically speaking, this means that the proclamation of the gospel must be robust on our College campuses, not merely in campus ministry and the promotion of social justice, but also in our classrooms, in our research, and in the intellectual life of the institution. We have an obligation to balance proclamation and dialogue, to boldly promote the Catholic intellectual tradition on our campuses, and to do so in a way that fully respects the profound dignity of every human person who comes to us in the search for meaning and a better way of life.

This paper will explore the tension between “proclamation” and “dialogue” and will offer a few constructive proposals for ways in which Catholic institutions might move forward on both fronts.