

## “The Idea of the Catholic University in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”

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### ABSTRACT:

#### Realizing the Catholic Identity of a Catholic University

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In Catholic higher education today, there is much discussion about how to maintain a robust and distinctive Catholic identity in our colleges and universities. This topic is an important one because at our universities we see that the trend among our students is towards more secularization and materialism. Many of our students identify as ‘agnostic,’ or ‘spiritual but not religious,’ or as ‘unchurched,’ or ‘nones.’ In many ways, they are indifferent to any institutional religion and unconvinced of any enduring or universal morality.

As for their motives and goals for attending college, they are focused on ‘getting a degree’ not so much on becoming a knowledgeable and educated person. Studies in the humanities, for example, are often seen as irrelevant to students’ career goals, and if such courses are part of a core curriculum, they are perceived as courses to ‘check off’ as completed only to be able to move forward to the more ‘relevant’ courses in the major. In the cyber world they inhabit, our students are primed for quick responses, just the facts, and they most often prefer ‘knowledge’ captured in thirty characters or less.

Many of our faculty, too, are focused only on a specialized area of study in their disciplines, and they are less concerned about how this area of study may contribute to Catholic thought. Often much of their scholarship relates to particular political concerns within their discipline rather than to an understanding of how knowledge may be integrated toward the truth. In fact, in a post-modern world, to many faculty, the very idea of an objective truth or reality, or a metaphysical claim is argued against, and reality and truth are seen as purely subjective, relative, and dependent upon perspective. Not unlike our students, many of our faculty tend towards secularization; they are not committed to the development of or engagement with Catholic intellectual life.

In such a context, we do need to ask: what is the idea of a Catholic University and how can we sustain its Catholic identity? We need to determine how we can bring Catholic intellectual life across the disciplines and place Catholic intellectual life at the heart of the Catholic university. One response for us, at Sacred Heart University, has been to develop a curriculum that focuses on Catholic thought and enduring questions of humanity, and to seek out and cultivate a faculty who recognize the value and vigor of Catholic intellectual life. This presentation will describe how we are doing this—realizing the Catholic identity of our university.

### Engaging the students

Sacred Heart University, a lay staffed, and lay led, comprehensive Catholic University, rooted in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, has determined that one way to distinguish a Catholic

University is first, to place Catholic thought and Catholic thinkers, writers, and artists at the center of an engaging interdisciplinary conversation about fundamental and enduring humanistic questions that have no quick answers, require thoughtful reflection, and foster open inquiry and a free exchange of views and ideas. We call this required common core, The Human Journey Seminars: Great Books in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. The aim of these core seminars is to develop a community of learners and scholars, who, with Catholic thought at the center, engage in conversation about contemporary social issues including topics of race, immigration, climate, gender, sexuality, sexual orientation and other issues. Students are engaged and positive about these seminars and participate in several co-curricular activities related to The Human Journey Seminars.

### **Animating the faculty**

But an engaging curriculum does not take life without a dedicated faculty, and so the most important way to keep Catholic intellectual life at the heart of a Catholic university is to develop a faculty who see Catholic intellectual life as a compelling, exciting enterprise which engenders animating and engaging inquiry about the human person and human experience. The faculty who facilitate these seminars at Sacred Heart University come from a variety of disciplines; many hold doctoral level degrees. Some have published books and articles in peer reviewed journals. While the majority are Catholic, not all are Catholic, but all of them are dedicated and committed to implementing the vision and purpose of these two seminars. They are immersed in conversations about the texts and the pedagogy; they are concerned about the students' human formation within and because of the seminars. These are faculty who attend meetings with energy and passion, who offer colloquia (a co-curricular component of the seminars), who accompany students to films and museums, who attend lectures given by outside speakers, who attend conferences about Catholic thought and imagination, who attend weekly faculty development workshops, and who spend three days of each summer participating in faculty development workshops to sharpen their already formidable talents as seminar teachers—***and who are mostly adjunct faculty***. These are faculty who have been selected and cultivated to facilitate these seminars; they have completed a required training before being assigned the courses. These are faculty who have dedicated themselves to the educational and moral value of these two seminars for our students. They are a community of scholars who recognize that in a world shattered by events like Charlottesville or Barcelona, a Catholic university can offer its students moral clarity, even a moral compass. And as an outcome of their commitment, passion, and energy, these faculty have made the Department of Catholic Studies a vibrant center of Catholic thought and activity on the Sacred Heart University campus.