

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

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ABSTRACT:

Renewing Christian Humanism: Catholic Higher Education beyond Anthropocentrism and Technological Anti-Humanism

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The idea of “Christian Humanism” – the positive appropriation of all that is good in human thought and production by Christians and Christianity – undergirds many visions of Catholic education, including and especially the Jesuit tradition. In the mid-twentieth century leading up to Vatican II, this humanist vision was named and expressed by a number of key thinkers, including Henri de Lubac, Jacques Maritain, Gabriel Marcel, and John Olin. This humanist vision, however, faded and fractured quickly amid divisions in the church as well as challenges to various aspects of humanism as a Christian or secular enterprise, particularly through ecological critiques of anthropocentrism.

In the meantime, various forms of anti-humanism have arisen, spurred on in particular by technological developments that have undercut the need for human work and interaction in certain sectors. Yuval Noah Harari’s recent book *Homo Deus* has sketched out a vision of dystopia following from these developments; Franklin Foer’s *World Without Mind* has similarly raised questions from a secular perspective about anti-humanism in technology. Certain philosophical trajectories of thought – particularly the work of Michel Foucault and others inspired by it – have contributed to this anti-humanist moment by emphasizing the ways in which human beings are trapped in inescapable power relations.

This paper, then, seeks to argue that Catholic higher education ought to be the place for the renewal and redevelopment of a Christian humanist vision that engages with these challenges. A vibrant defense of Christian humanism is precisely not defensive or reactionary – it is a putting forward of a vision of human flourishing that does not need to be threatening to other creatures or the natural world in the anthropocentric mode that has been rightly critiqued. On the other hand, Christian humanism needs to provide robust arguments in favor of the human particularly against aspects of contemporary technology and society that threaten it. The Catholic university ought to be a place where students are enabled to understand the importance of human dignity and human achievement in a special way – a kind of incubator of Christian humanism that can help to spread its vision within the broader society.

I will focus the latter part of my paper, then, on two aspects of Christian humanism that ought to be at the core of our concerns as Catholic educators. The first of these is the dignity of human work, which has rightly been emphasized by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’*, and yet faces severe challenges from automation and other technological forces. The Catholic university curriculum ought to emphasize the good of work beyond its remunerative aspects along with the idea that there are economic goods that transcend efficiency. The second aspect of Christian humanism that I will highlight as particularly appropriate in today’s educational context is its high valuing of

reason as offering the possibility of mediating between positions and perspectives. Reason's imperfections have been rightly highlighted in postmodern philosophy, but too often in contemporary society it is put aside without being rightly appreciated. The model of faith and reason in the Christian humanist tradition, which prizes reason while acknowledging its shortcomings, can help prepare students for a world in which cries of "fake news!" often substitute for rational inquiry and investigation.