

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

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### **ABSTRACT:**

#### **The Essentials of a Catholic University: Truth and Sacramental Presence**

*Scott Roniger, Loyola Marymount University*

In this paper, I wish to highlight the essence of a Catholic university by distinguishing between the essence itself and the essentials, or per se properties, of a Catholic institution of higher education. I will argue that the essence itself of a Catholic university is the search for and contemplation of truth in all its forms (scientific, literary, historical, philosophical, theological) by scholars and students united in various forms of dialogue and friendship. Such a view of truth and our communal pursuit of it also entails the view that truth is both unified and hierarchical and that our pursuit of it demands that we engage in serious study of the Catholic intellectual tradition while maintaining an open dialogue with contemporary scholars working within other traditions.

Thus, the essence itself of a Catholic university is the scholarly contemplation of the fullness of truth and the sharing of the fruits of that contemplation with others in communities animated by friendship, and I will argue that one of the essential aspects, or per se properties, of a Catholic university is a strong sacramental presence at the heart of the university community. This essential aspect of a Catholic university, while not being of the essence itself, enlivens the community of believers and supports the search for truth, the integration of the many sources of truth, and the intellectual engagement with the mysteries of the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ, and His Church. Within a Catholic university, friendship with God based on the truth of revelation, enlivened by sacraments and sacramentals, is both a source and a summit of intellectual friendships based on the love of wisdom.

In order to make these points manifest, I will compare and contrast the portrayal of Alcibiades in Plato’s Symposium with the passion of Jesus Christ. When Alcibiades bursts onto the scene at the end of Socrates’s speech, he is so drunk that he must be carried by a shrieking flute-girl, and Plato tells us that he was wearing a beautiful wreath on his head, which was to be used to crown Agathon. However, in his drunken stupor, the wreath falls over Alcibiades’s eyes, blinding him to Socrates’s presence. Alcibiades, passions raging, drunk on wine, dominated by sensual pleasure, and a slave to his own vanity, cannot see Socrates; that is, he cannot see truth and the love of wisdom personified by Socrates because his debauchery causes his “beautiful wreath” to blind him to the one who can help him to see and love the truth.

By contrast, Jesus is scourged and crowned with thorns, and he carries his cross to his own crucifixion with the help of Simon of Cyrene. Jesus’s crown of thorns is an important aspect of his passion and death, which take away the sins of the world and enable human beings, cleansed by the grace of sacraments flowing from the side of the crucified Christ, to see and love the truth incarnate. Christ’s crown of thorns enables us to see the truth that he is and thus to know the Father through the grace of the Holy Spirit; it breaks the cycle of lust and pride that blinded Alcibiades and continues to plague us all.