

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

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ABSTRACT:

The Necessity of the Humanities at a Catholic University: A Theological Defense

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From the Jesuit’s *Ratio Studiorum* to John Henry Newman’s *The Idea of a University*, the humanities have played a pivotal role in the idea of a Catholic university. While this remains true today, the Catholic university’s commitment to the humanities is under increased scrutiny in a contemporary context that is ever more skeptical of the value of the liberal arts in general. If the humanities are going to retain their prominence at Catholic universities, then, their centrality needs a more robust defense. Obviously, Catholic universities can advance the kinds of arguments that non-Catholic liberal arts institutions offer in defense of the humanities, either emphasizing the widened job prospects of humanities graduates or highlighting the intrinsic value of studying enduring questions, but neither of these approaches relies on the distinctiveness of Catholic higher education. The strongest, most lasting defense ought to connect the necessity of the humanities with the very idea of a Catholic university itself. To that end, this proposed paper will articulate a theological defense of the humanities in Catholic higher education, connecting a commitment to the humanities with the very nature and purpose of a Catholic university as an institution with a unique and necessary relationship to the larger church.

The paper proceeds in three parts. The first part discusses the idea of a Catholic university today, drawing on Richard Gaillardetz’s “theology of institutions” to connect the role of a Catholic university with the larger mission of the church in a way that acknowledges both the context of secularization shaping North American society and the diversity of Catholic higher education today. The final two parts of the paper then explore how the humanities serve an essential function in the fulfillment of this institutional mission. First, the paper defends the importance of the humanities as a hedge against utilitarian reductionism, arguing that this function opens students to the idea that there is more to life than just making money, thereby inviting them to see human existence against a more transcendent backdrop than the prevailing one that Charles Taylor describes as the “immanent frame.” Second, the paper applies Irenaeus’s insistence that “the glory of God is the human being fully alive” along with Karl Rahner’s notion of the “anonymous Christian” to argue that the promotion of the humanities is theologically justified as an adaptation of the church’s mission in a secular context. The conclusion of the paper then briefly considers the implications of this argument for the idea of a Catholic university today, building on parallels with Newman’s original vision to articulate a strategy for cohesion across the disciplines, from the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences to the professional schools.