

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

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### ABSTRACT:

#### What Kind of Community is a Catholic University?

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To refer to a state university is to name its source of funding and the legislative body responsible for its governance. To speak of a liberal arts college is to identify it within an educational tradition that emphasizes a certain curriculum, perhaps even a particular canon of texts. To call a university “Catholic” is to incite conflict between its faculty; it’s simply not the kind of thing one does in polite company.

There is significant disagree over what the adjective Catholic means, or should mean, in the context of twenty-first century higher education. Given the heated debate over the meaning of the word Catholic in this context, this essay will begin with what it means to be a university. I will take my starting point from John Henry Newman’s Idea of a University and John Paul II’s *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and understand a university to be a community of scholars. That a university is a community is significant. A community is a “we”, and different “we’s” arise in different ways. Using Edith Stein’s phenomenological investigations of various social orders, I will argue that we can distinguish the university as a community (*Gemeinschaft* in Stein’s terminology) from the university as an association (*Gesellschaft*) and all of its related bureaucratic functions. As a kind of “we”, associations are functionary; that is, they exist to achieve a goal, membership in them is voluntary and is based on the application process appropriate to the association. On the other hand, communities are organic “we’s” that arise through a shared value-response. This shared value-response, I will argue with Stein, is an essential characteristic of an authentic community, and it marks both the ability and the willingness of its members to contribute to, and to draw from, a common pool of lifepower (*Lebenskraft*). University communities, I will thus argue, consist of groups of people united around a shared response to the value of the scholarly life.

The second part of the essay will return to the question of what makes this kind of community Catholic. I will argue that we can understand communities as having characters in a way analogous to individuals. As the habits and modes of life of an individual create her character, the values to which a community responds and the ways in which the community responds to them constitute the character of a community. I will thus argue, in conclusion, that Catholic universities have a tradition of responding to a quartet of values: truth, beauty, goodness, and the human person. Responding to and promoting these values as an “authentic human community animated by the spirit of Christ” is what makes a university distinctively Catholic (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae* §21).