

The Catholic intellectual tradition: A conversation at Boston College

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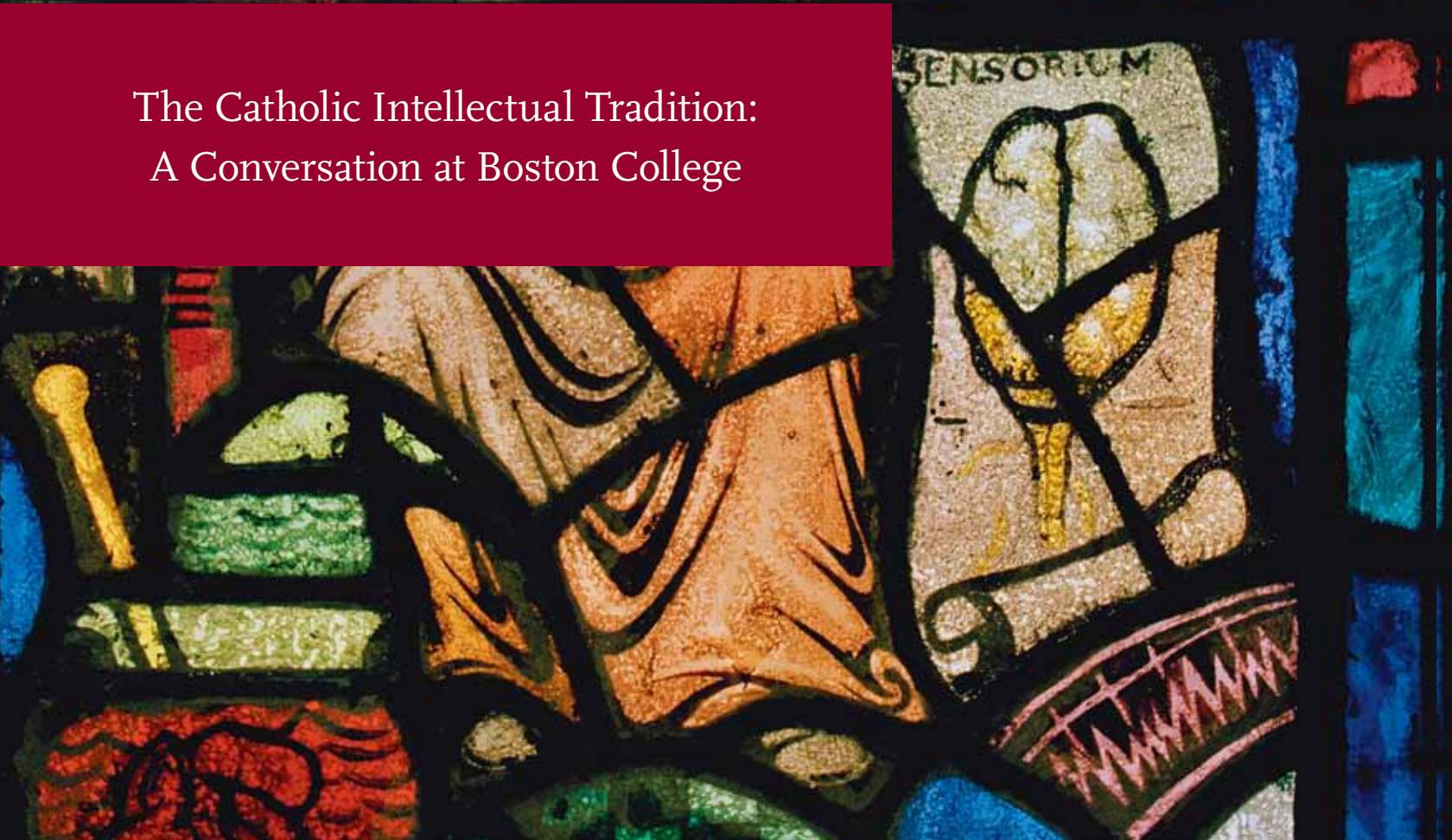
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The Catholic Intellectual Tradition:
A Conversation at Boston College





This document introduces two issues of central importance to Boston College: what is meant by the Catholic intellectual tradition, and how this tradition can be a guiding force in a complex, contemporary university committed to its Jesuit, Catholic heritage.

What follows is intended to serve as a starting point for reading and conversation about the Catholic intellectual tradition among members of the Boston College community—whatever their academic disciplines, personal convictions, or religious beliefs. All are invited to bring their insights, experiences, and intelligence to the expansive search for truth, meaning, and justice that animates both the Catholic intellectual tradition and Boston College.

A 2,000-YEAR-LONG CONVERSATION

FOR CHRISTIANS, THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN FAITH AND culture is as old as their earliest efforts to articulate what it means to be a distinctive faith community. The first Christians—drawn together by their faith in the uniqueness and universal significance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth—were members of Jewish communities living in a Roman political system and influenced by a linguistic and intellectual culture that was largely Greek in origin. As the Christian “way” moved beyond these Jewish communities, attracted Gentile converts, and spread across the Roman world and beyond, a Christian intellectual tradition or, better, a constellation of traditions developed, which were the product of a continuous dialogue between faith and cultures. With the fragmentation of the Christian churches, especially in the 15th and 16th centuries, the Catholic intellectual tradition in the West developed its own characteristics. Since the medieval period, one of its principal venues has been the university, which arose “*ex corde ecclesiae*,” from the heart of the Church.

This dialogue between faith and culture reflects two essential characteristics of the Christian, and especially the Catholic, understanding of human experience: faith necessarily seeks understanding, and all intellectual inquiry leads eventually to questions of ultimacy that invite faith responses. Thus, reason has been intrinsic to the life of the Catholic Church, which sees the search for truth as a manifestation of the Creator: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...all was created through the Word” (John 1:1 and 3). The Greek for “word”—*logos*—has



a second meaning: reason. For the Catholic, thinking is part of believing, and the Catholic view sees no conflict among faith, knowledge, and reason; it looks to how they illuminate one another.

Nowhere is this engagement more clear than in the work of Thomas Aquinas, whose pursuit of truth led him into intellectual conversation with a remarkably diverse set of partners. He chose not only to engage the thought of Aristotle at a time when some in the Church were suspicious of the ancient philosopher’s teachings, but also to enter into dialogue with Muslim and Jewish thinkers, such as Averroes and Maimonides. Aquinas’ passionate engagement with the intellectual pluralism of his times enriched and strengthened the Catholic intellectual tradition.

Nonetheless, getting hold of this “Catholic intellectual tradition” is a challenge. It contains a vast repository of theological thought; philosophizing; devotional practices; works of literature, visual art, music, and drama; styles of architecture; legal reasoning; social and political theorizing; and other forms of cultural expression that have emerged in vastly different parts of the world in the course of 2,000 years of Christian religious experience. Can one even synthesize the meaning of this vast archive, sum up its principles, and make them relevant to contemporary intellectual life in a way that would justify speaking of a tradition? What kind of tradition are we talking about and what role can or should a tradition play in a contemporary university, especially Catholic institutions of higher education?

Despite these questions and others, some Catholic writers



and scholars are convinced that they have been and are dealing with a body of ideas, practices, and ways of thinking rich enough and consistent enough to be called a tradition. More importantly, they believe this tradition and their experience must be brought into regular conversation with significant thinkers in other intellectual and religious traditions to yield new understanding and direction.

THE TRADITION AND THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

TODAY THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY REMAINS THE HOME for the conversation that explores and advances the Catholic intellectual tradition. For the tradition to achieve the wholeness to which it has aspired for two millennia, it must be engaged in the search for truth in every discipline and with all forms of belief and unbelief. It is a living tradition, not static traditionalism, which draws from the riches of the past to give life to the future.

The Catholic intellectual tradition and the contemporary university share two underlying convictions: that to be human is to desire to discover truth, and that the quest for truth is sparked by the expectation that the universe is intelligible. In the Catholic view, these convictions arise from belief in the union of the divine and human in Jesus Christ and the unity of all things in God. From this theological perspective, the Catholic intellectual tradition is based on two fundamental principles: first, that the search for truth in all aspects of life extends to the ultimate search for truth that animates faith; and, second, that faith is a catalyst for inquiry, as faith seeks to understand itself and its relationship to every dimension of



life. Thus, the most probing questions in every discipline are never deemed to be in opposition to faith but are welcomed into the conversation on the conviction that ongoing discovery of the intelligibility of the universe will reveal more of the truth about God. The Catholic intellectual tradition can thrive only with the participation of all who seek the truth, including those whose inquiry leads them to question whether the search reveals purpose, meaning, or God, or to conclude that it does not.

EIGHT QUALITIES OF INQUIRY

THE CATHOLIC TRADITION OF INQUIRY INCLUDES:

- A conviction that faith and reason are mutually illuminating, that they are united in the search for truth, and that people of faith must devote themselves to building a world characterized by an “uncompromising commitment to truth”—a world in which truth is explored and revered “in whatever way it discloses itself,” as theologian Michael Buckley, S.J., has written.
- A sacramental vision of reality that holds that each discipline offers the potential to reveal something of the sacred. In the Christian view, grace—God’s loving self-gift to the world in Christ—underlies all of reality. In the words of the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.” Thus, the search for truth in any discipline can be a sacred and sacramental activity.
- A hopeful commitment to intellectual integration among disciplines, combined with an appreciation for the integrity and autonomy of individual academic disciplines.
- A resistance to reductionism and an openness to analogical imagination—a disposition to see things in terms of “both/and” rather than “either/or.”



- An understanding that confidence in reason's ability to grasp the intelligibility, meaning, and purpose of the universe must be tempered by an awareness of the mystery of God as radically Other than God's creation. As St. Augustine wrote, "If you think you have grasped God, it is not God you have grasped." Anything the tradition declares about God and truth carries the implicit realization that we are incapable of saying everything about God and truth.
- An openness to the mystery inherent in an evolving, unfinished creation. Our search for truth is fed by the hope that God's grace is drawing the universe toward a fulfillment that lies beyond our vision at this moment in time.
- An awareness that confidence in reason must also be tempered by the recognition that sin can deform reason's unbiased quest for truth.
- A reverence for the dignity of each human being as one created in the image of God. Hence, a commitment to justice, to the solidarity of the human family, and to the common good.

DYNAMIC AND OPEN

THE CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL TRADITION IS NEITHER static nor complete. It is a dynamic conversation over time with a highly diverse range of dialectical partners: a conversation made of variant strands and a range of positions. The desire for truth that lies at the heart of the tradition demands that all assertions of truth, meaning, and purpose be tested by the best evidence against them—evidence that may be presented by anyone, of any or no religious tradition, who is engaged in serious inquiry.

The Catholic intellectual tradition's simultaneous capacity for continuity and change gives it a growing edge, allowing

it to develop in new ways even as it retains its firm roots in the foundational Catholic worldview. In the Catholic university, wisdom accumulated in the past is handed on, criticized, reworked, and re-appropriated in response to new questions prompted by new experience, new evidence, new arguments, and new interlocutors.

So, too, a university animated by the Catholic intellectual tradition and committed to contributing to the Church and enhancing Catholic life embraces all who are dedicated to learning from one another, and remains open to contributions that may come in a range of ways. This persuasion challenges a Catholic university to engage all people, cultures, and traditions in authentic conversation—conversation undertaken in the belief that by talking across traditions we can grow in shared understanding that opens all parties to the possibility of changing their views.

THE JESUIT DIFFERENCE

EVERYTHING THAT HAS BEEN STATED ABOUT THE CATHOLIC university might as readily be said about Jesuit institutions of higher education. In addition, colleges and universities that have been shaped by the Jesuit educational tradition exhibit characteristics that are typical of this way of embodying the Catholic spirit. Jesuit schools, which began to spread by the late 1540s and soon became the principal activity of the Society of Jesus, sought to link the intellectual rigor of the medieval university with the humanistic goals of the Renaissance academy to educate and form students who would use their education and talents as leaders in society "for the



greater glory of God.” These institutions stressed a methodical pedagogy, a structured core curriculum, and a commitment to the liberal arts as the key elements of the distinctive model of Jesuit education.

Contemporary Jesuit schools maintain the original commitment to rigorous intellectual development, to personal, moral, and religious formation, and to the discernment of God’s action in all aspects of the student’s experience. The pursuit of the greater glory of God remains rooted in a worldview that God can be encountered in all creation and through all human activity, especially in the search for truth in every discipline, in the desire to learn, and in the call to live justly together. In recent times, the Jesuit mission has been expressed as “the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement.” This restatement implies a commitment both to substantive values—the proclamation of the Gospel and the promotion of justice—and to dialogue, openness to the experience of others, and an effort to incarnate the Gospel in a wide range of cultures. All of these aspects of the Jesuit approach to the Catholic intellectual tradition are expressed in the Boston College mission.

THE CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL TRADITION TODAY

THE CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL TRADITION MANIFESTS ITS catholicity—its striving for wholeness—whenever the university encourages all its members to see their research, study, student formation, and administrative service in the context of the largest questions that can be asked about human life and the world in which we live. These include questions about



the meaning of existence in the face of life’s fragility, about where we have come from and where we are going, and about what it means to lead a good life, to engage in fulfilling relationships, and to participate in community.

A university animated by the Catholic intellectual tradition and committed to serve the Church is an intellectual community where every discipline is open to the striving for truth, value, and meaning that lies at the core of what it is to be human. The tradition is alive:

- when scholars articulate the good they are working toward in their scholarship, and understand their research as contributing to the unity of knowledge;
- when intellectuals explore their deepest questions across disciplinary boundaries in an objective search for answers that lie outside their own specializations;
- when teachers nurture in their students a sense of wonder and a love of learning, both for its own sake and as preparation for a life of service;
- when students are challenged to deepen their own religious faith, and to become people of integrity and generosity; and
- when today’s Catholic university, in reaffirming the Catholic intellectual tradition, becomes a meeting place and bridge between faith and culture and seeks to bring to the modern understanding of the university the richness of the mutually illuminating relationship between religious faith and free intellectual inquiry.

Rooted in the Christian conviction that God, the source of all truth, has become fully human in Jesus Christ, a university animated by the Catholic intellectual tradition promotes



a free, open-ended dialogue between faith and reason, carried on without fear. Over the long history of the tradition, there have been times when this dialogue has been difficult—times when Church teaching and secular scholarly research have stood in tension. During such times, the tradition, at its best, has urged more careful inquiry on both sides, confident that even though “there may be momentary collisions, awkward appearances, and many forebodings and prophecies of contrariety,” as Cardinal John Henry Newman, the great 19th-century scholar, has put it, the unity of truth will ultimately be seen.

A SHARED LIFE

THE METAPHOR FOR THE CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL TRADITION proposed at the beginning of this presentation was “a conversation.” The original meaning of the word *converse* is “to live together,” “to share a life.” A university illuminated by the Catholic intellectual tradition is a place of shared, transformative, intellectual life—a place where the Church, always acknowledging that there is more to learn, is informed by ongoing scholarship, and where the wisdom developed over centuries within the Catholic tradition permeates a university’s core values, curriculum, and search for truth. The true Catholic university, then, is a community of teachers, scholars, students, and administrators sharing an intellectual journey and conversation in the pursuit of truth.



FURTHER READING

The most sustained analysis of the role of the Catholic university in fostering a Catholic intellectual tradition is *The Catholic University as Promise and Project: Reflections in a Jesuit Idiom*, by Michael J. Buckley, S.J. (Georgetown, 1998).

Three essays offer accessible perspectives on what it means to speak of a Catholic intellectual tradition: Richard M. Liddy, “The Catholic Intellectual Tradition: Achievement and Challenge,” in *As Leaven in the World: Catholic Perspectives on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life*, ed. Thomas M. Landy (Sheed and Ward, 2001); William Cahoy, “The Catholic Intellectual Tradition: What Is It? Why Should I Care?,” a talk given to a faculty forum at the College of St. Benedict/St. John’s University, August 20, 2003, <http://www1.csbsju.edu/catholicidentity/values/billcahoy.htm>; and Gregory A. Kalscheur, S.J., “Conversation in Aid of a ‘Conspiracy’ for Truth,” *Boston College Law School Faculty Papers*, 225 (2008), <http://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/lisfp/225>.

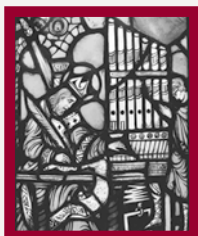
An excellent discussion of how the key theological affirmations of Christian faith create a distinctively Catholic intellectual tradition is “Finding God in All Things”: A Sacramental Worldview and Its Effects,” by Michael J. Himes, in Landy, *As Leaven in the World*.

A collection exploring how the Catholic intellectual tradition might interact with particular disciplines in the contemporary university can be found in *Higher Learning and Catholic Traditions*,

ed. Robert E. Sullivan (Notre Dame University Press, 2001). See also *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*, ed. A. Cernera and O. Morgan (Sacred Heart University Press, 2001). Especially helpful is the essay by Gerald A. McCool, S.J., “The Christian Wisdom Tradition and Enlightenment Reason.”

An essay by the most respected historian of the early Jesuits offers a clear and authoritative discussion of the origins of Jesuit education: John W. O’Malley, S.J., “How the First Jesuits Became Involved in Education,” in *The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum: 400th Anniversary Perspectives*, ed. Vincent J. Duminuco, S.J. (Fordham University Press, 2000).

See also “Resources for Exploring the Jesuit and Catholic Dimensions of the University’s Mission,” <http://www.bc.edu/offices/mission/exploring.html>, where many of the essays mentioned above can be downloaded.







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Boston College's Church in the 21st Century Center seeks to be a catalyst and resource for the renewal of the Catholic Church in the United States by engaging critical issues facing the Catholic community: roles and relationships in the contemporary Church; sexuality in the Catholic tradition and the Catholic community; handing on the faith to young people; and the Catholic intellectual tradition.

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