The Catholic University, Theology, and the Curriculum

Cyril O'Regan[1]

Introductory Comments

I am extraordinarily grateful to the Theology Club and the various residence halls for the invitation to speak here with Professor Mark Roche, with whom I will be conversing and also arguing. Mark was my dean[2] for eight years, an extraordinary one. I also count him as a friend. But just as one argues with one's family, one argues with one's friends. (Considering how some of us here argue in and with our families, there are limits to the analogy). Still it is good for all of us to remind ourselves that the university is a place of disagreement. The university in a sense is the symbol of the best of democracy defined by the philosopher-sociologist Jürgen Habermas as the place where the rule is the better argument. Disagreements—sometimes serious disagreements—happen and are most likely to happen when the stakes are viewed by one or the other or both of the parties as high. Despite the studied attempts at defusion by administration, I judge the stakes regarding the current review of Curriculum to be extraordinarily high for the definition and the future of the university. We have not quite reached that pitch of apocalyptic crisis where it is appropriate to recur to the throw-down from *Lord of the Rings* in which Gandalf stands against the unspeakable Balrog in the mines of Moria and, facing it, says with Moses-like staff in hand: Thou shalt not pass! The jig is far from up for our beloved Notre Dame. But let there be no mistake about it, I do believe there is something seriously wrong with the emerging ethos of Notre Dame, which in my view is very much symptomed in what I regard as run-away enthusiasm for irresponsible invention evinced in the core curriculum review. This is a moment for our common reflection of what and who we are and what and who we are becoming, and possibly gather those forces whereby in a real sense *we become who we are*. I mean "we," and

[1] Catherine F. Huisking Endowed Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. Remarks were delivered at "The University, Theology, and the Curriculum" discussion on February 9, 2015 at the University of Notre Dame, along with Mark Roche, Rev. Edmund P. Joyce, C.S.C., Professor of German Language and Literature and Concurrent Professor of Philosophy, member of the university's Decennial Core Curriculum Review Committee, and chair of that larger committee's focus committee on Catholic mission.
[2] Roche was the dean of the College of Arts & Letters from 1997 to 2008.

insofar as I do, I mean "you," the students who have been and are being served by the Core, as much as me and the faculty who are scattered among you this evening. And I think that "you" and "I" are talking about nothing less than different possible futures for Notre Dame and in particular for its Catholic identity.

I begin this reflection by speaking briefly (1) to the notion of Catholic university in the modern period and to the role that theology plays in it, and especially as theology is embodied in the curriculum. (2) I want to give you my perspective on the curriculum review thus far and what I see as its patent secularizing agenda. (3) I will parse Ted Hesburgh's[3] famous phrase "great Catholic university," both in itself and insofar as it bears on individual and communal *becoming who we are* at Notre Dame—which, as Mark will appreciate, is a good German Romantic and Idealist catchphrase.

Catholic University, Theology, and the Curriculum

Despite the fact that the first universities in the West at Bologna, Salamanca, Oxford, and Paris were all Catholic institutions, since the 19th-century the notion of a "Catholic university" has been problematized. In 19th-century England and Germany a Catholic university is thought of as an oxymoron: It is taken as obvious that the free inquiry that is the prerogative of the university simply cannot be harmonized with the most dogmatic and authoritarian of the Christian confessions with its central magisterium. This 19th-century raising of the question of compatibility of university and particular confession was accompanied by the self-conscious formation of the research university in Germany and subsequently in the U.S., and the secularization of the most prestigious universities in the U.S., for example, Harvard and Yale, and in due course most of the denominational colleges in the nation. (This story is told by James Burtchell, C.S.C.[4]). This is the historical and ideological backdrop of the founding of Catholic universities in the U.S. and elsewhere. It applies no less to Notre Dame than my alma mater, University College Dublin. One expects the pressure of the secularizing force to be relentless and more or less permanent.

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[3] Holy Cross priest Thedore (Ted) Hesburgh was president of Notre Dame from 1952 to 1987.

[4] In his book *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches*, first published in June, 1998 by Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Edward Sorin's[5] founding of Notre Dame had any number of motives—for example, the creation of an educated Catholic laity that would not cede the public space to secularists and Protestants—but it was also a *wager* that the "Catholic" qualification of "university" might prove a huge plus rather than, as the secularist would have it, a significant minus. Yes, Catholicism was a *perspective* on reality. The point with Sorin, as it was in an even clearer way with John Henry Newman, was that in principle Catholicism provided the widest angle view of reality imaginable. If defined by faith, which is the correlative of *revelation* (which can neither be anticipated by reason nor exhausted by it), Catholicism demonstrated an openness to reason and culture that was quite unique in Western history. The central purpose of the university is *to reproduce a determinate but non-sectarian form of faith hospitable to the best of reason and culture.* Importantly, however, the hospitality left a space for criticism of bad or imperialist forms of reason (secular reason) and also of the dominant culture. For Newman in particular, the reproduction of these two goods was, in good Catholic fashion, embodied in the curriculum, of which the study of theology (and also philosophy) was constitutive. A faculty of theology was charged with this mission—it was not dispersed. Needless to say there is more to the Catholic character of the university than the curriculum and the teaching of theology and philosophy (and we might as an exercise *think of what these additional dimensions might be*). But the teaching of theology was regarded by Newman in theory, and by Catholic administrators in fact, as both essential and foundational. It provided a rivet upon which you could build into a curriculum other Catholic features and around which you could constellate extra-curricular Catholics elements. The fundamental intuition was that you could add other Catholic goods to the courses provided in Divinity, but you could not nor should not subtract. *Herein lies the rub of the current curriculum review: its irresistible tendency to operate in the logic of subtraction*.

Nonetheless, the institutionalization of the Catholic mission in the second half of the twentieth century in the departments of philosophy and theology—which singles out that theology and philosophy are disciplines of inquiry, investigation, and interpretation—has been remarkably similar. In the curricula of Catholic universities in North America, almost uniformly theology and philosophy have been paired together in the conviction that faith is superlatively worthy of study, that reason in the amplitude and depth of its reach is worthy of study, and also

[5] Holy Cross priest who in 1842 founded Notre Dame.

the wager made that faith and reason—very much appearances often to the contrary—are in the end mutually supporting. (This wager is repeated in the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*). In consequence, for the longest time the minimum curriculum requirement in each has been two courses. I mean minimum: Catholic University of America has four of each. The *raison d'être* of this housing of the mission in two departments makes these departments—and I am speaking especially to the Department of Theology—directly accountable to the president of the university for the Catholic mission. Of course, the purpose of the teaching of theology is not strictly speaking the reproduction of received faith; it is the generation of an educated faith which not only can render a bold account of its witness to revelation, but can comprehend revelation insofar as it can be comprehended, and which deals with the difficulties—interpretive, intellectual, and moral—that faith presents.

Current Curricular Review Process

In summary, I have provided the merest outline of the general vision of a Catholic university and the uniform agreement in Catholic institutions for about 50 years that philosophy and theology are essentially untouchable in curriculum reviews that occur from time to time in Catholic universities and tend in some such reviews to be self-mandated. I also indicated how Notre Dame largely fitted in, and how it—just like all the all the other Catholic schools—has in place departments, with their disciplines and sub-disciplines, to take care in a focal way of the mission of the Catholic university and to illustrate the belonging together of faith and reason, while also recognizing their irreducibility.

This brings me to the current curriculum review and the workings of the review committee under the leadership of two deans[6]—which I believe is something of a break in protocol for chairs of the Core Curriculum Review Committee. For the record I was a member of a preliminary 'think-tank' committee which gave way to the current one, which is charged with making recommendations regarding the core requirements. I confess that my actual experience with the first one and how I perceive the current one is being conducted gives me plenty of cause for concern. In my judgment less than one-third of the people on the original committee were for a radical overhaul of the curriculum, that is, a review that would not spare

[6] John McGreevy of the College of Arts & Letters and Gregory Crawford of the College of Science.

philosophy and theology. In line with a highly activist senior administration, a dean—whose declared position was for radical change—was appointed co-chair of the committee; the constitution of the committee is, arguably, not fairly representative of the more moderate voices of the original committee; the talk of learning goals (faith and reason), which can be completed outside the disciplines of philosophy and theology, gives all the appearances of being a calculated attack on the very notion of disciplines and by implication at least on the respective departments of philosophy and theology. None of this is intended to insult my conversation partner here, or to suggest a lack of open-mindedness regarding the persons appointed to the committee. Mark Roche did not appoint himself, nor did any of the others. But as a rose is a rose, a slant is a slant. And the origins and constitution of the committee cries slant.

Those of us who declare that we worry about a tilt towards a certain set of outcomes regarding theology are routinely palliated by being told that worry is unnecessary: the *process* is ongoing, no verdicts have been delivered, and we are enjoined to set aside suspicion and to trust the process. The process, we are told, requires the broadest of consultation, after which a verdict will come, or, more like it, be handed down (from on high). But we are all left in the dark as to what the fundamental bases of the decision are going to be, whether the voices of those who really know something about Catholic identity will be thrown into the soup with the indifferent and barely tolerant. Thus far, and regrettably, we seem to be dealing with another example of how the administration is able to hold together *the maximum of procedural democracy and the minimum of transparence*. The other capital word of administration is *change*, whose very utterance assumes a mandate for radical despoliation of what is. Its meaning is unspecified. Should one ask for specification, how much (quantitative) and what kind of change are we talking about, one finds oneself in the land of the unwashed, constructed as an apostle of retrenchment and arch-conservatism.

Practically speaking terms such as “process” and “change” are currently being used by administration in tendentious political fashion to gain an unearned advantage in the discussion that is supposed to be ongoing and thoroughly unbiased regarding outcome; they function in my view as slogans in flagrant violation of a university’s proper stewardship of language. If “God” can get questioned in the university, then surely “process” and “change” should also. Has the process been skewed from the outset? And surely if the issue is change, we should be interested in what kind of change, and specifically the range and kind of change envisaged? What is wanted is *thoughtful* process and *thoughtful* change. I and people like me are not Parmenidians intolerant of change; we simply want that change to cohere with the mission and the ethos of Notre Dame being a Catholic university, indeed being the icon of a Catholic university that it currently is.

The Provost and/or the Chairs of the committee could have stemmed the tide of considerable disquiet from the outset by stipulating that philosophy and theology or theology in particular would not be touched due to their or its centrality to the Catholic mission of the university. I think that almost no one would have protested. This would not have excluded the Department of Theology receiving advice from the committee regarding delivery of the Core, and how we must best serve our students becoming the kind of literate Catholics we want them to become. Unfortunately, the *principle of dialogue* has been offended routinely by cavils regarding theology's delivery of these courses expressed in public, and it is being made perfectly clear that "unsatisfactory" performance in delivery might be used against the department when the day of judgment comes.

Now I can understand administration's frustration with individual departments' recalcitrance regarding initiatives that administration deems valuable and even faculty in the departments think worthwhile. I can even remember a few occasions expressing sympathy for Mark in this regard when he was dean. Although he might think it disingenuous I can imagine doing so in the future. Departments can be a cross; but we should remind ourselves so also can administration. Whatever the enthusiasm for reform, not everything in a Core is fungible, and this applies especially to the theology courses targeted for Catholic mission. I think it obvious that knowing your faith and especially its *bases* in scripture and tradition is not the obligation of the entire university, but is rather the particular obligation of the theology department. The expertise of professors in theology lies in their being able to place, exposit, and interpret these bases. There is nothing accidental about this choice of subject matter for the first two courses. These are the twin *bases* of Catholic faith, the two pillars—as it were—upon which it rests. So one should not regard their representation in the curriculum as something adventitious, and as having only historical warrant. Administration is entitled to remonstrate and ask that we do better, and also to produce incentives and disincentives. Personally while I think that the rationales for the two courses are impeccable, in the interests of getting the students to have greater buy-in than they have now, to become more inspired, I would be in favor of making some changes. This is not, however, a matter of satisfying the consumer, and neither we, who are here this evening, nor and especially Notre Dame administration, should adopt this model for understanding the identity of the student. (I invite all of you to ponder what is the best model for thinking of the student: consumer, client, charge, guest, and so forth, and what difference this designation would or could make.)

But as my department engages in some self-criticism, I would invite the Core curriculum committee to follow suit. The ecology of a Catholic university is a fragile one. Thus with respect to it, one has to proceed with caution. At the very least two theology courses have to be regarded as an absolute minimum, and I would in all seriousness request that consideration be given to a third, which the department might deliver with the department of philosophy or other departments (English, Romance Languages, German, anthropology, or sociology, to name a few). Now Core courses cannot be free-floating. The genius of Catholicism is institutionalization. While it is true that institutions sometimes hinder and are of low-energy, as Pope Francis has said repeatedly, institutions are the common site of renewal, because in such institutional structures lies the witness as well as the history of experience that makes pure invention—which he regards usually as fractious and fragmenting—unnecessary. The danger of creation *ex nihilo* is, well—how shall we put it?—*nothing*. And no, to assign courses to a particular department is neither to initiate nor perpetuate a monopoly. The Catholic mission to explore faith, reason, and their relation is a responsibility given to the Department of Theology. Providence always provides, and sometimes provides prodigally. There is a number of professors in other departments who subscribe wholeheartedly to the model of faith seeking understanding. They should be cherished. But any number of them already are. Many of the more obvious suspects have already had their courses cross-listed with Theology at the 4xx level. It is possible that accommodations could be made at the 1xx and 2xx levels.

It is not clear to me that this curriculum committee has given serious consideration to the repercussions consequent to the reduction in the theology requirement and/or its cross-departmental dissipation of mission courses. If there is an actual reduction, we would now be the lowest theology-philosophy requirement of all Catholic Schools (including Jesuit schools). The message received—whether intended or not—is that Notre Dame has opted out the "Catholic" business, in order to be counted as one of the great secular schools. This would represent nothing less than a change of truly historical proportions. On the other hand, if designated "mission" dispersed throughout the university courses replace theology courses coming from the Department of Theology, then this would signal the victory of "religion" in which no commitment is required to the subject matter that you are interpreting. Catholicism comes under the umbrella of "interesting" and becomes a matter of branding. I would suggest that however long it has been in coming, the secularism always nipping at the heels of a Catholic university with a strong desire to be accepted by its peers, is now in the process of being invited in. It will not take long for its colonization effects to become apparent. Complete victory will come with the inevitable fragmentation of mission courses across departments without the rivet of ownership by a particular department. In a kind of radioactive decay cycle, bureaucracy will grow and the initially vague criteria for courses will become no criteria at all. I predict that in due course there will be complaints about evacuation, but this will come far too late. Long gone from view will be the motivating idea behind the two-course theology requirement: that is, it provides a link with the Church because theology is about a *living faith* grounded in the past and oriented toward the future.

Great Catholic University

I think I have made it plain that the current core curriculum review is not off to the best of starts. But I implied that I was not an apocalypticist, but a critic, and critics expect enthusiasm to go awry and words to misfire. Yet is not too late. I want to end with a question: How will the core—on the assumption of some changes—contribute to making Notre Dame "a great Catholic university"? This leads to the prior question: How do we aspirate or breathe the adjective "Catholic" in that now common locution "great Catholic university"? That is, as *you* and I say it, where does the emphasis fall and where should it fall? There is every reason to suppose that Ted Hesburgh not only had great vision, but grasped the grammatical point that both the adjectives "great" and "Catholic" qualified the noun "university." Indeed, there is every reason to suppose that not only did he not think that "great" was more important than "Catholic," but they were not even at the same level. Indeed, this was so much so that "Catholic university" functioned with him, just as for most of the history of Notre Dame, as a complex noun. He saw no reason why a

Catholic university could not be as excellent as the great universities in North America. He never saw that there was a zero-sum game between "academic excellence" and being Catholic, even if the broad society and academic culture saw them as constituting a zero-sum game. He was not naïve; he foresaw tension, but denied that there could be contradiction.

That is where we have been; the issue is where are we now? How does our current administration aspirate "great Catholic university"? I would hazard that the evidence suggests that if "great Catholic university" were to be sounded out in a way that matches the actions of our current administration, the sounding out would be something like "*great* catholic University." "Catholic" is muted and is in danger of being elided. The ghost of the zero-sum game has become, or is in grave danger of becoming, our natural default. Notre Dame has increasingly internalized the logic of our so-called "aspirational peers." "Great" and "Catholic" are now effectively in opposition and are pitted against each other: the higher the Catholic quotient, the less the greatness; the higher the greatness quotient the less the substantive Catholic character. This is defeat or the verge of defeat. In the words of the great literary critic, Northrop Fry, Notre Dame administration is speaking in the mythos of winter. I take it that you young people in the audience with your boundless enthusiasm, good will, and hope for a substantive, thought-through—rather than pick-from-the-menu—Catholic education, live in the mythos of summer. Administration seems to have little recall of what that was and little imagination as to what that would look like.

The Meaning of Greatness

This leads us the related question of what—following Hesburgh—does it mean for a Catholic university to be "great"? Perhaps the common way these days in the university is to identify "great" with the "prestige" afforded you by society at large, by the success of your recruitment of students and faculty, as well—and especially—as to how you are perceived by other universities, especially top line secular universities like Yale, the university at which I taught before I of my own free will came here, attracted by the very things at Notre Dame which administration seem anxious to discard as an embarrassment and a hindrance to their taking their place in the world whose light is provided by another sun altogether than the Son that is the center of our faith. It is not hard to understand why "prestige" would be the natural default. It has the possibility of measurement that greatness does not have. That measurability is the key to prestige is in turn indicated by our current obsession with rankings. If “greatness” is something different than “prestige,” then what is it? If you and I follow Hesburgh—and he learned something from Martin Luther King as well as Sorin—greatness lies in the confidence of who you are and the proud resistance to be other than who you are, the incapacity to be shamed into thinking that somehow (whether the issue is that of race or the university) that you become truly first class by making yourself more like the ones who are the holders (and hoarders) of worth and prestige. Greatness demands resolve, perseverance, and the willingness to pay a price. Greatness here is totally different than the Darwinism of prestige. For a university to be great is for it to celebrate what makes it different, to become what is was meant to be, that is, a unique and capacious lens on all reality that makes Catholic citizens, to be a third option, for these days and for days to come, between vehement sectarianisms and vacuous secularity which has its own manner of violence. To risk the difference for those students, to be a unique gift for all students of Notre Dame both present and future, and to contribute to the way they understand themselves and see the world aright; this is what it is to be great. What is wrong with our current administration, addicted to prestige, embarrassed by its Catholic present and past, is not that it aims too high, it is rather that it aims far too low. You who are the present are the future of this great university: it is a lot to ask, but perhaps you can supply the commitment, the courage, and the perseverance that the current administration of the university now so palpably lacks?