

OFFICE OF THE
VICE PRESIDENT

The Catholic
intellectual
tradition
at ACU

A
dialogue
of faith,
reason
and
culture.



ACU

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY



The following reflections are adapted from "The Catholic Intellectual Tradition: A Conversation at Boston College" as per kind permission of Boston College's Church in the 21st Century Centre.

The Catholic intellectual tradition provides the foundation for the life of our university, and yet for many of us it remains an uncertain term. What exactly is the Catholic intellectual tradition? And what difference could growing into a more confident understanding of this term make to the life of our community?

These reflections are offered as stimulus for dialogue and ongoing professional learning at ACU. While our exploration necessarily unfolds against a Christian backdrop, religious belief or knowledge is not a requirement for those who wish to engage with the Catholic intellectual tradition. ACU is a place open to all people of goodwill, who seek to know truth. You are welcome here.

In fact, by virtue of your role at ACU, the Catholic intellectual tradition is already present within the horizon of your professional context and your contribution to the mission of our university. In this sense, tradition implies not only a keen historical appreciation, but also attention to a received, contemporary reality. In its essence, the Catholic intellectual tradition is an ongoing conversation between faith and human reason, formed and reformed through centuries of dialogue with multiple partners. It arises from the nature of the steady and expansive human quest for truth, meaning, purpose and justice, occurring across time, that is part of the inheritance of the whole human family.

What follows, then, is but a starting point; an attempt to try and name some of the voices and themes that have contributed and continue to contribute, to the dialogue through the ages that forms the heart of the Catholic intellectual tradition.

As you read and ponder on the reflections offered, we hope that you may bring your own insights, experiences and values to bear upon the subject matter. Armed with the gifts of your own profession and professional discipline, you are uniquely placed to participate in this grand, ongoing conversation. From the standpoint of Catholic Christian faith, it is when we enter into this dialogue with integrity and respect, that together will be best placed to articulate and give expression to the Catholic intellectual tradition for our time and place. Authentic dialogue which takes faith, reason and human experience seriously, is to be found at the heart of all truly Catholic traditions.

THE 2000-YEAR-OLD CONVERSATION

For Christians, the dialogue between faith and reason, and that between faith and culture, is as old as Christianity's 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.

In the slow process of the Christian 'way' moving from its Jewish community roots out into and beyond the Roman world, all the time attracting Gentile converts, there developed a Christian intellectual tradition or, more accurately, a constellation of traditions composed of such elements as forms of music, architecture, of religious practice and philosophical schools of thought.

The human person, created with the innate capacity for intelligent rational thought, is thus understood to be capable of grasping, to an extent, the mysteries of life and faith. Such an achievement of knowledge, while ongoing, builds upon an accumulated deposit that is several millennia in the making. This dialogic process, bringing to bear human reason upon the reality of faith, ever realising new understandings, refining and reflecting again and again, is foundational to the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

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 a faith response.

By ultimacy, here is simply meant that final horizon, often values based, upon which humans measure their sense of identity, purpose and meaning. Questions such as, 'to what have I given my life's energy?' or 'what is my purpose in life?' disclose this level of ultimate meaning.

While contemplating Paul Gauguin's famous triptych on a human life cycle, Catholic priest and theologian Robert Imbelli SJ draws our attention to three questions in French at the top left-hand corner of the painting: 'Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?'

Gauguin's questions have an ever-new quality, and may be summed up into one question: *Does human life have ultimate meaning and purpose?*

For Imbelli, the Catholic intellectual tradition is the centuries old – and still continuing – conversation *that is always seeking to answer this one great question*. In this way, reason has been intrinsic to the life of the Catholic Church; the search for truth as a manifestation of a desire to know our Creator. 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.

As an example of the Catholic intellectual tradition and its quest to know the truth, the work of St Thomas Aquinas continues to stand as an example of reason being brought to bear upon the data of faith. His pursuit of truth led him into intellectual conversation with a remarkably diverse set of dialogue partners. He chose not only to engage the thought of Aristotle at a time when the Church was deeply suspicious of the ancient philosopher's teaching, but he also entered 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 as much as it provided a blueprint on how to proceed to undertake such engagement.

Nonetheless, intellectually grasping this thing called a "Catholic intellectual tradition" is a challenging process. Nor is it ever a finished engagement. This is because it contains a vast repository of theological thought; philosophising; devotional practices; works of literature, visual art, music, and drama; styles of architecture; legal reasoning; social and political theorising; 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 practice and experience. Thus, while theologians such as Imbelli are able to propose a working definition of the Catholic intellectual tradition, the question remains, can one even begin to synthesise 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?





THE TRADITION AND THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

Today the Catholic university remains the principal home for the conversation that explores and advances the Catholic intellectual tradition. In order 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 nonbelief. 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 (meaning) and that the quest for truth is sparked by the expectation that the universe is intelligible. This proposes that the world beneath our senses, examinable through methods of enquiry such as empiricism or the scientific method, is both intelligible and capable of being grasped by human reason. 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, as Imbelli pointed out, 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 the 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. Thus, because ACU is a Catholic university founded in the Catholic intellectual tradition, all truth seekers are welcome to join together here, to share and forward the values ACU aspires to make present in our world. In its scholarly endeavours, the enquiry for truth at ACU may be characterised through eight qualities:

EIGHT QUALITIES OF INQUIRY

1. 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 characterised 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.
2. A sacramental vision of reality that holds that each discipline offers the potential to reveal something of the sacred. In the Catholic view, grace – God’s loving self-gift to the world in Christ – underlies all of reality. In the words of the Jesuit poet Gerard Manly 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.
3. A commitment to the intellectual integration among disciplines, combined with an appreciation of the integrity and autonomy of individual academic disciplines.
4. A resistance to reductionisms that seek to reduce complex questions and phenomena (such as the human person) to any one simple and glib explanation, and an openness to analogical imagination – a disposition to see things in terms of “both/and” rather than “either/or”.
5. 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. For Christians, God is not available as any other ‘thing’ in the universe, subject to the natural enquiry of science or empiricism. This is simply to say, in Christian theology God is not ultimately able to be fully understood by human intellect alone. As St Augustine wrote, “if you think you have grasped God, it’s not God you have grasped”. Thus, everything the tradition declares about God and truth carries within it the implicit realisation that we are incapable of saying everything about God and truth. Our determinations about reality and all that ‘is’ are provisional, always awaiting new information and insight, to be tested again and again by reason.
6. 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 fulfilment that lies beyond our vision at this moment in time.
7. An awareness that confidence in reason must also be tempered by the recognition that sin can deform reason’s unbiased quest for truth. So, different biases in the enquirer and culture can so easily negatively affect our search for truth, obscuring it beneath facile and self-serving perceptions and responses to reality.
8. A reverence for the dignity of each human being as one created in the image of God and of absolute value. 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. So, in reading this, you the reader are also participating in this ancient dialogical conversation. 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, criticised, reworked, and re-appropriated in response to new questions prompted by a 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. Such a university remains open and sensitive 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 a shared understanding that opens all parties to the possibility of changing their views.

THE ACU EXAMPLE OF THE CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

Universities such as ACU that have been shaped by the Catholic educational tradition exhibit characteristics that are typical of this way of embodying the Catholic spirit. Thus, ACU, drawing upon and deepening the Catholic intellectual tradition, seeks 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 servant-leaders in society. Education in this sense is not a power to be grasped and exercised, but rather a service to be rendered. At ACU we seek to invite students and staff alike to be people who seek to enrich their communities in pursuit of the common good. ACU, as a contemporary Catholic university, aspires to influence and further 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 ACU teaching and learning community's experience. For Catholic Christians, the pursuit of the greater glory of God remains rooted in a worldview that God can be encountered in all creation. The theatre of God's ongoing self-revealing in Jesus Christ through the Spirit is in the unfolding of creation itself. Christians

understand that the Divine Life dwells in the human person and human activity, especially in the search for truth in every discipline, in the desire to learn, and in the call to live justly together.

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, teaching, and administrative service in the context of the largest questions that can be asked about human life and the world in which we live. As mentioned, 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 work, and to participate in community.

In a university animated by the Catholic intellectual tradition and committed to serving the Church and community there is a community where every discipline is open to the striving for truth, value, and meaning that lie 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 researchers explore the deepest questions across disciplinary boundaries in an objective search for answers;
- 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 appearance, and many forebodings and prophecies of contrariness,” as Cardinal John Henry Newman, the great 19th Century scholar, has put it, the unity of truth will ultimately be seen.

THE CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL TRADITION AND THE MISSION OF AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

This oneness or unity of truth is likewise expressed and sought in the ACU mission statement, beginning as it does with the line, “Within the Catholic Intellectual Tradition...” Beginning in this way, the University identifies that the values following in the mission statement – truth, love, human dignity, the pursuit of knowledge and the common good – have a long history of understanding and development. They are not new to the human family, nor are they untested. In this sense, the Catholic intellectual tradition represents the long wisdom of the Catholic and other peoples, who have come to understand what is needed for human flourishing. Centuries of reflection and writing on Truth and Love, human dignity, knowledge and the common good have confirmed that it is these values which, along with others, are crucial for upholding our humanity. Thus, our mission values at ACU, while shared and universal, are also understood through the long historical lens of the Catholic intellectual tradition. These values are both deeply human and deeply religious, speaking to what Christians believe is sacred within and without the person. In this way, the essential unity of what is most deeply human and most deeply Christian is clear. In this, the mission of ACU is very much a formulation of both faith and reason. Further, the identity of the University itself is very much an ongoing development of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. So, as a community of scholarship, learning and corporate service, ACU’s mission seeks to respond to the very oldest and deepest of human longings and questions.

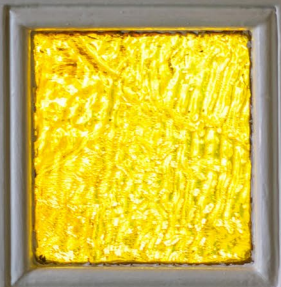
A SHARED LIFE

This reflection began by referring to the Catholic intellectual tradition as “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 Catholic Church is informed by ongoing scholarship, and where the wisdom developed over centuries permeates a university’s core values, curriculum, and search for truth. The true Catholic university, because it is Catholic, is a community of teachers, scholars, students, and administrators sharing an intellectual journey and conversation in the pursuit and service of truth. It is a place open to all people of goodwill, who seek to know truth. You are welcome here.

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