

The Catholic Character of Seattle University's Academic Mission:
Convening a Conversation

Provost's Convocation
April 11, 2008
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Thank you, faculty, friends, and academic colleagues for coming today to this Provost's Convocation. It is good for us to be together as academic colleagues who carry the primary and central responsibility for our education.

Pursing our institutional truth as a Catholic university

I see what we are doing today and what I invite us beyond today to do as exploring freely, openly, and fully the truth of our institution. Each of us is committed to pursuing the truth within our own discipline and as faculty we are guaranteed and use academic freedom to do so. That freedom with which we pursue the truth in our area of professional competence defines us and what we do as educators. As I love to tell students, "The only really new thing about a university education are the professors and their intellectual passions." And I am wont to say to them, "Professors are what make a university worth the price of admission."

What I am proposing today is to explore the truth, not of a discipline or subject matter, but the very truth of Seattle University as an educational institution: a premier independent university of the Northwest, yes; a comprehensive, urban, diverse university, yes, yes, yes; a Jesuit university, yes; and also a Catholic university. Can we who are committed to the pursuit of truth apply that same commitment to the pursuit of our own truth as a Catholic university? My invitation is that we do so by means of a conversation today and by the continuation, deepening, and expansion of that conversation among us as academic colleagues beyond today. What I hope to do today is to convene a conversation and to suggest some questions for that conversation.

It is important that at this time we become more assured of what it means that we are a Catholic university. There was a time when the preponderance both of Catholic professors and Catholic students, as well as many more Jesuits in key positions in the university, assured the Catholic character of our academic mission. The makeup of our faculty, student body, and the number of Jesuits has changed. Being Catholic in our academic mission can no longer be taken for granted based on how many Catholics form our university community. Being a Catholic university now must be an intentional commitment of all of us and we must know or learn what this calls for from us. Otherwise, failing to clarify and to commit ourselves to being a Catholic university, especially in our central academic purpose, would lead us along the way of many originally Protestant universities in our country to being non-religious in any real way. In essence we must replace reliance upon numbers with clarity of purpose.

The first point I want to make is that in the phrase “Catholic university”; the noun is “university”, and the adjective or modifier is “Catholic”. No matter what else you want to say about us, we are first, foremost, and constitutively a university. That’s the kind of thing, the entity or reality we are, and therefore what our essential function is. “Catholic” modifies, qualifies, or says something about how we are a university, a certain modality of being a university. We are a Catholic university, with our own proper and needed autonomy in order to be a Catholic university. This autonomy is explicitly and officially guaranteed by the Catholic Church. No religious person, whether bishop or provincial, has authority in the internal governance of Seattle University as a Catholic university. Our governance is in our own hands. What is in our hands is being a Catholic university, being truly one, knowing what that means, exploring that truth about ourselves, making it real, living it.

The Catholic Church has an official understanding, set of guidelines and norms for being a Catholic university. We need to know and respect them. So important are Catholic universities to the Catholic Church that the title of the official document about them is “From the Heart of the Church”. We are not the Church, we are not a church, but we are a university from the heart of the Catholic Church. It matters to the Catholic Church that we are a university, and it matters to us as a university that we are Catholic. This is part of the pursuit of our truth as an institution that we as academic colleagues need to explore and can explore freely with our commitment not only to truth in general but also to our own truth.

I am not addressing with you the topic of what is the Catholic character of our university as a whole, but rather the more limited but central issue of the Catholic character of our academic mission. I intentionally do not speak, for instance, about the very important matters of our sacramental and liturgical framing of our year, nor do I speak about spiritual retreats, campus ministry service to students and faculty, religious symbols on campus, starting meetings and convocations with prayer, and a hundred other ways the Catholic character of our university as a whole is importantly marked, defined, and made real. These are vitally important to us and to how we are a Catholic university. Ultimately, the overall Catholic character of Seattle University and the Catholic character of its academic program impact one another, are inseparable in lived reality, and support one another. In this Provost's Convocation for academic colleagues I choose to limit myself to what is the Catholic character of what we do academically.

The richer meaning of Catholic

I want to make an appeal for a fresh, less culturally-conditioned understanding of the word "Catholic". We live in a culture, in a time, and within a media-driven understanding that leads many people when they hear the word "Catholic" to think of institution, authority, sexual morality, the exclusion of women from ordination, and clerical sexual abuse. That they do this is understandable. As academics pursuing the truth, we should be the first to acknowledge how much this understanding of "Catholic" is very strongly culturally conditioned and should not be accepted by us as the full truth of what "Catholic" means, especially when it modifies Seattle University as a "Catholic university".

Admittedly "Catholic" does include institution, authority, sexual morality, dogma, the exclusion of women from ordination, and clerical sexual abuse. We would be foolish to deny this and we must include and face these issues in our academic programs. But "Catholic" also means a tradition and vibrant present-day expression of: living communities of peoples of faith; care for the poor, ill, and marginalized; many-faceted spiritualities; a profound intellectual tradition grounded in theology and philosophy and extending to all branches of knowledge; the sacredness of the person, of life, and of the planet; a rich symbolic tradition; forms of prayer and ritual; two

thousand years of artistic and musical expression; gospel values of justice, compassion, and healing; global solidarity; ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue; service and commitment to immigrants; monastic, contemplative, and apostolic religious communities with their special charisms (one of which is the Jesuits); a Catholic tradition that gave birth to universities in the first place and supports the most extensive educational system in the world; and at its heart “Catholic” means Jesus of Nazareth as the model of humanity and the revealer of divinity.

Our challenge in pursuing the truth of the Catholic character of our academic mission is freely, knowledgeably, and critically to embrace this meaning of Catholic. It is our “business” as academic professionals not to accept any concept in its most limited and most culturally-conditioned meaning. It is our “business” in a Catholic university not to accept “Catholic” on those restricted terms either. For a Catholic university nothing less than the full meaning of Catholic is critically acceptable, and the full meaning of Catholic can welcome, include and engage all of us—whatever our faith—as academic professionals.

Convening an open-circle conversation

I propose that we conceive of Seattle University as having at its heart an important conversation that is assisted by faculty knowledgeable of the full understanding of the Catholic tradition and particularly of its intellectual dimension, a conversation into which all faculty of all disciplines and all faiths and persuasions are invited and which depends for its truth on the active participation and contribution of all, a conversation among all of us and into which our students are invited and to which they also contribute. Call this, for lack of a better name, “the Catholic conversation.” We need to acknowledge and build on the initiatives of Catholic conversations, which have already occurred over the last decade.

A good conversation, however, needs to be catalyzed and needs to pose certain questions for discussion. All are invited to the conversation. Its integrity, richness and truth-making depend on all having a chair within the conversational circle and the voice of each being listened to and included. Someone needs to seed and propose the questions for the conversation. If it is to be a knowledgeable conversation it needs an informed person who

knows how to assist and to engage the participants. This means that for us, if “Catholic” is meaningfully to modify how we are a university, there need to be faculty members who know the fuller Catholic tradition and who are able to spark the conversation among us. They do not control the conversation; they catalyze it. They do not dominate the conversation, but allow it to have its own informed development. They make sure there are many chairs in the conversational circle.

I believe the last time this subject came up among us formally was when it was addressed by Dr. Susan Secker. She said—referring in part to observations by Richard McCormick:

“...a Catholic university needs to image itself as an ‘open circle’—sufficiently circumscribed to constitute a community of discourse but open enough to welcome others with different perspectives... there must be at the heart of the campus an ‘open circle’, a community of scholars who are committed to the Catholic tradition, and others who are committed to engaging it, and the religious and moral issues raised by it and by modern society.” (Dr. Secker went on to say.) “I choose to remain at Seattle University because I believe we ARE this kind of Catholic institution. I am confident that the tough questions about the composition of the ‘open circle’, and of those willing to engage it, are not beyond our resolution.”

Her views are my views. Her proposal is—together with my previous point about the fuller understanding of the Catholic tradition—my central proposal to you: to have a knowledgeable conversation as an “open circle” at the heart of our academic engagement with one another and with our students for the sake of our integrity as a Catholic university. It is not the only conversation among us, of course, but it is a necessary one, an ongoing one, a wide-based conversation which influences other conversations, as they also influence it. We should ask ourselves: Do we have faculty members who know the Catholic tradition and, as importantly, know how to enable this kind of free, informed, and open conversation and do we have others who, when invited, will voluntarily join in and engage the conversation?

Questions for the conversation

What might this conversation at Seattle University as a Catholic university be about? What would some of the topics or questions be? It is important to note that a Catholic university can be recognized as much in the questions it asks as by the answers it gives. It is defined by what is the range of questions it is free and impelled to ask. A faith-grounded university does not ask fewer questions than does a secular university, but precisely because of faith it is free to ask and must ask wider, more unlimited, more personal, and more important questions than are usually asked in higher education. Our faith tradition expands rather than constricts the open-circle conversation.

The conversation engages fundamental questions of life, death, life beyond death, God, human origins and destiny, suffering and evil, and sacredness of the human person. It explores tradition, community, love, forgiveness, and sin. Central to the conversation are integral human development, preferential commitment to the poor, justice and globalization, capital punishment, peace, norms for just war, and law and the common good. The conversation extends to inter-religious dialogue, the interplay of faith and science, to evolution, ecology, and indigenous cultures. If we are about “empowering leaders for a just and humane world”, our students must know what is just, what is humane, and have the competencies from science, engineering, mathematics, business, law, nursing, education, communication, social services, etc., to bring about the differences that are just and humane.

To be fully Catholic in engaging these questions, the conversation needs the active partnership of all our professional competencies. It needs to be seeded by persons who can speak from within the Catholic intellectual and doctrinal traditions. The faith-grounded tradition of Seattle University opens the conversation among us as academic colleagues and between us and our students to these questions, engages or catalyzes a real conversation by saying something about them from the Catholic tradition, and welcomes, even requires for its integrity, a pluralism of viewpoints.

The conversation does not have a predetermined outcome or conclusion. It doesn't have to end somewhere, does not have to end in agreement with Catholic doctrine, even though that doctrine does need to be clearly and responsibly presented in the conversation itself. The conversation must be

marked by civility, respect, freedom to articulate one's views, listening to all with a special ear to others in their area of competence, and a fundamental willingness to allow space for exploration of questions that are raised by faith, and in our instance an openness to explore the questions of faith that come from a wide, rich and intellectually challenging Catholic tradition.

The Catholic roots of Jesuit education

I want to make a comment about “Jesuit” and “Catholic”. I know beyond any doubt how much you and I love our Jesuit character as a university, take pride in it, can articulate it, and find our students readily rallying to it. We love being a Jesuit university and we know what we are about in being one.

A problem that arises in this—and it is true not only for us but for all Jesuit universities—is that the very strength and appeal of the Jesuit educational mission can obscure Jesuit education's own Catholic roots and animating power. Jesuit can become a substitute for Catholic! If this is a fault of Jesuits themselves, we apologize for not making it clear who we are, how our educational mission comes from the Catholic tradition, and for not witnessing clearly and positively enough how we are a community within the Catholic Church that gave birth to and approved us and continues to affirm and support us as an apostolic companionship within the Catholic Church. I am told that it is harder to underscore the Catholic character of Jesuit universities than it is of other Catholic universities. I take that as a compliment to the power of the Jesuit educational mission, but it also creates a problem for our Catholic institutional truth as a university. In the conversation that I am promoting among us I ask us to explore and better understand the Catholic roots of our Jesuit educational mission. Let me suggest a few examples of what this would mean.

The Jesuit educational mission emphasizes a particular focus on thinking, logic, reflection, and analysis, with a valuation of the intellect for which we are noted as in the phrase “Jesuit educated” or in our own motto: “Connecting the mind to what matters”. This intellectual emphasis, however, derives from the fact that the original Jesuits who set in motion this prioritization of the intellectual life picked it up from advanced studies in the universities of their day—whether Paris or Bologna, or Oxford—which were the conveyors of the long Catholic intellectual tradition. The

roots of Jesuit intellectual rigor and vibrancy are Catholic: Origen, Augustine, Anselm, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Thomas More, Erasmus, and the influence of Greek and Roman philosophy and rhetoric within the Catholic tradition. The Jesuit intellectual tradition of 475 years and of today with the new Jesuit multicultural, global, and significantly non-European reality, is rooted in and applies to today the Catholic intellectual tradition. Probe the Jesuit mind and you find a Catholic intellectual foundation. In our proposed conversation can we explore these roots and can we help our students know and appreciate them?

Similarly, the Jesuit tradition's emphasis on spirituality, discernment, symbolism and imagination, art, music, poetry, and on "the education of the whole person" are based on the Catholic Church's much longer, deeper, and richly varied tradition of mysticism, prayer, appropriation and transformation of culture, thousand year old spiritualities, glorious art, music, drama, poetry, liturgy, and creativity. As a Catholic university we shortchange ourselves and our students if we do not learn about these deeper Catholic wells of what we so prize in our Jesuit education mission.

To give a final example, our emphasis on justice, humaneness, and the engagement with the world, as in our university's mission of "empowering leaders for a just and human world" is a commitment based on a body of Catholic social teaching that pre-dated the Jesuits. This Catholic social teaching came from the gospel in commitment to and service of the poor, the ill, immigrants, orphans, refugees, laborers, and all victims of injustice. We are proud of our Jesuit emphasis on "faith doing justice", but we need more humbly to acknowledge and more deeply understand the Catholic inspiration of this emphasis both in practice and in social theory.

The point of course is not that everything in our Jesuit educational mission is Catholic in its origins, because it is not, but when our Jesuit educational priorities are in fact more truly and more originally Catholic in inspiration, we should acknowledge and study these roots. We as academics and our students as emerging intellectuals need to know where we get what we know, as we would want as academics to trace the origins of any other concepts or viewpoints we study. Academic integrity requires that we acknowledge and study the Catholic roots of the central characteristics of Jesuit education.

Summary

Let me summarize what I have proposed to you today in this Provost's Convocation on "The Catholic Character of Seattle University's Academic Mission".

- I have claimed that what we are about is applying academic freedom to the exploration of our institutional truth as a Catholic university as we need today as never before to be intentional about being Catholic.
- I have highlighted that we are fundamentally a university but importantly modified by being Catholic, and that when "Catholic" modifies "university" we are dealing with a unique reality in higher education.
- I have limited my subject to the academic dimensions of being a Catholic university rather than discuss other important even essential dimensions of being a Catholic university as a whole.
- I have appealed, as appropriate to our academic endeavor, for a wider, fuller, richer conception of Catholic than is the common, culturally-conditioned, restricted one.
- At the center of my remarks I have proposed the convening of an ongoing open-circle conversation among us and with our students, one that needs to be informed and catalyzed by persons knowledgeable of the Catholic intellectual tradition and that equally requires the voluntary, engaged participation of faculty from all disciplines, faith, and persuasions.
- I have suggested what some of the questions might be in this unique conversation that a Catholic university makes possible, and have indicated some markers of the quality of that conversation.
- Finally, I have attempted to show the Catholic roots of the Jesuit intellectual tradition we so highly prize.

Investing in this conversation

As president of the university there are two further things I need to say. The first is that it is not enough for me to propose this view of the Catholic character of our academic mission and the open-circle conversation on which it depends. Means need to be found, resources dedicated, opportunities provided, free space given, and persons equipped to help us all to carry on this critical, informed conversation. What I envision here is investment in faculty and academic leaders who voluntarily want to enter into and become more informed about the Catholic intellectual tradition particularly as it is relevant to their disciplines. This means providing opportunities for faculty development, in this instance development in exploring the Catholic intellectual tradition. It also means finding and empowering a group of faculty and academic leaders among us who will champion the needed conversation. As president I am committed to make every effort to promote this conversation and to support and fund the faculty members who can convene and catalyze it. In my view it is critical that what might be called “the Catholic conversation” not be an add-on to what we do academically, but that it be central to our writing a new chapter in our academic mission and all that new chapter will imply for our Core Curriculum, our graduate programs, our hiring for mission, and our scholarship, teaching, and service.

A vision for the future

Finally, as president and in my role of articulating a vision for the university, I want to suggest how we might imagine ourselves in five or more years if we are successful in what I have proposed today.

Imagine in five years that twenty-five faculty members have been given the time and the resources on our behalf to plumb the Catholic intellectual tradition relevant to their disciplines and with the support of one another have developed the capacity to invite other faculty into various groups which explore critical issues of our day from a full range of perspectives including the multiple angles of the Catholic tradition.

Imagine in five years a Core Curriculum that is informed by and engages the longer, deeper, and wider Catholic dimensions of our Jesuit educational mission, based in philosophy and theology, but evident in every subject area of a new Core for the new student of the new world.

Imagine in five years that every graduate program includes a component embedded in its curriculum, which makes students aware of those dimensions of the Catholic intellectual tradition appropriate to the graduate subject.

Imagine in five years that all students of Seattle University have learned by example how to bring their faith and deepest persuasions into open, pluralistic conversations with others, and that they graduate knowing their own religious traditions and deepest values, and have the competence to make what they believe or hold make a difference for a world more just and humane.

Imagine our university as the greatest informed resource and forum in our region for the Catholic Church, for ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, and a unique place where the public can engage critical issues from a moral and an inclusively religious perspective.

Finally, imagine yourself as part of this university, engaged in its conversations, enriched by more deeply and truly listening to one another, supporting and respecting one another's deepest beliefs and convictions, positive and glad to be a Catholic university in an informed and inclusive way, clear and free and purposeful about our institutional truth and identity.

Thank you for allowing me, as president, to present to you some of my views on this subject of "The Catholic Character of Seattle University's Academic Mission: Convening a Conversation". I look forward to our dialogue about this most important subject.