The Life of the Mind at a Catholic University

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September 26, 2009

I am grateful to my colleagues in the humanities for this honor, not simply because it is nice to be honored, though of course it is, but also because this particular honor is named for Bernard Nachbahr, who was professor of philosophy here at Loyola and the first Director of the Humanities Center. I never knew professor Nachbahr, since I began teaching at Loyola one year after his death in September 1993, but this is not the first time our paths have crossed. For two years I was the director of the Loyola International Nachbahr Huis, a residence for international students at the Catholic University in Leuven, Belgium, where Loyola students studying at the University live alongside Belgian, Spanish, Italian, Polish, German, Chinese and other international students. A life-sized photograph of professor Nachbahr, who founded the Belgium program as Loyola's first study-abroad program, hangs in the common room of the residence where I spent many hours over the course of those two years, carrying out my duties almost literally in his shadow. I had occasion to meet those who had known Professor Nachbahr and worked with him, who spoke of his commitment to teaching and to the life of the mind and particularly of his conviction that Loyola students would be intellectually enriched not only by studying at one of Europe's great universities but also by living side by side with people from other cultures who were involved in similar intellectual pursuits.

The Catholic University in Leuven is one of the oldest universities in the world still in operation: founded in 1425 in space donated by the city's cloth merchants, and achieving status as a "complete" university, in the medieval sense of the term, in 1432 when the faculty of Theology was added to those of Canon Law, Civil Law, Medicine and the Arts. In the Middle Ages — and to this day in Leuven — a "faculty" was what we would call a "school" or "college": a body of scholar-teachers who are exploring a particular area of human knowledge and practice, and which grants degrees to students who achieve a certain mastery in that area of knowledge and practice. What constitutes a "university," as distinct from a "college," is the presence within one institution of these diverse faculties.

The medieval university, as a gathering together of these faculties, was an audacious gamble that, in the midst of diverse intellectual pursuits, a unity could be found, that there was a common truth that was pursued through the various paths of Theology and Canon Law, Civil Law and Medicine, as well as the Arts. The university was premised on the belief that these diverse faculties were not condemned to pursue only their own particular truths, but could join in a common search for truth that was enhanced, and not diminished, by the very diversity of the questions, methods, authorities, and traditions that they brought to the common table of wisdom's feast. What gave them the confidence to make this gamble was the conviction that behind the world's diversity there was a common source: the God who created the world in its diversity so that finite beings could better reflect the infinity of God's truth. It was this shared faith in the one God that gave the pioneers of the medieval university the confidence that there was a common intellectual project in which they, for all their differences of method and subject matter, could be engaged.

The fruits of this shared faith in the unity of knowledge flowing from the one God can be seen in a not-quite-randomly-chosen sample of alumni of the Catholic University in Leuven. It includes Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, the chief voice of early modern humanism in northern Europe; a Biblical scholar who employed new techniques in producing an important

edition of the Greek New Testament, but also a voice of moderation in the shrill debates engendered by the Protestant Reformation; someone who believed that issues were better settled by intellectual debate than by force of arms, a view that was, alas, not shared by many of his contemporaries. It includes Georges Lemaître, Catholic priest, physicist, and astronomer, who in 1931 first proposed what we now call the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe, and who grounded his views regarding the autonomy of the natural sciences in a distinctively Catholic understanding of how God works in creation. Lemaître wrote that the scientist who is a believer, "knows that not one thing in all creation has been done without God, but. . . knows also that God nowhere takes the place of his creatures." And it includes Gustavo Gutiérrez, who is sometimes called the "father of liberation theology," who in both his writing and his personal witness has pushed and prodded the Church, to which he has always remained faithful, to take notice of the poor and the dispossessed and to take seriously the Biblical truth that God "has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly." A humanist, a scientist, and an activist: united across the centuries and across areas of scholarly pursuit in a common life of the mind, a common labor to understand the diverse and changing world that is created and sustained by God, who is the world's source and goal.

Of course many things have changed at the Catholic University in Leuven since 1425. Even the structures of the University have changed. The five faculties that constituted the medieval University have grown to fourteen, including some that would no doubt baffle the founders of the University, such as the Faculty of Bioscience Engineering or the Faculty of Kinesiology and Rehabilitation Sciences. And with the increasing secularization of Western Europe the shared belief in the unity of knowledge based on shared faith in the one God has been stretched and strained to the point that some are not sure if there *is* a common intellectual project that the various faculties are engaged in, apart from a bland toleration for the quirky intellectual interests of others. The University is under constant pressure to devolve into a "Multiversity." Yet through various twists and turns and stops and starts of history — including being shut down for several decades by the French in the late 18th century, having its library burned to the ground in the First World War, having the new library in turn burned to the ground in the Second World War, and, due to conflict between French-speaking Belgians and Flemish-speaking Belgians, its division in 1968 into two distinct, geographically separate institutions — the University has been a part of that sprawling, messy, sometimes contentious, always exciting conversation that we call the Catholic intellectual tradition.

But why take this time to talk about someone *else's* University, when we have, as of yesterday, our own bright, shiny, new University right here in Baltimore? It is because, with our designation change, Loyola now publicly takes its place alongside the Catholic University Leuven among the ranks of Catholic universities. Of course, we have in fact been a university, constituted by diverse schools within a common institutional structure, since 1980 when the Sellinger School of Business and Management was established as a distinct faculty, with its own academic dean. With the new School of Education we now have three faculties — not quite up to the five with which Leuven began, but close enough that it seemed to many to make sense to call ourselves what we in fact are: Loyola University Maryland.

Of course, a change of name might not mean much. I certainly hope that in this case it will not mean a change in our commitment to undergraduate education or to the moral and spiritual formation of our students, or to our desire and intention to serve the local community of Baltimore. But it must mean *something*. So, what does it mean for Loyola to identify itself as a

university? What does it mean for Loyola to identify itself as a *Catholic* university?

I think it really involves a sharpening and intensification of what we already have been. It means that we see ourselves as part of a tradition of inquiry that extends through the centuries and around the world, a tradition of inquiry that is committed to the diversity of intellectual pursuits: a diversity embodied in a variety of programs of academic and professional education, on the graduate and undergraduate levels, a diversity enabled by high level scholarship in our fields of specialization. But this is also a tradition that is committed to the ultimate unity of that diversity, a commitment that grows from the Catholic tradition's belief that in the one God all truth finds its source and goal. Of course, this commitment and belief is not sufficient to make us a Catholic university, since it is one shared by non-Catholic Christians, as well as Jews and Muslims. For Loyola to be a *Catholic* university means that its commitment to the unity of truth is inflected in a particular way: it is rooted in and framed by a particular tradition of intellectual inquiry stretching from St. Paul through Augustine and Aquinas and Ignatius, and also through Erasmus, Lemaître, and Gutiérrez, down to us today. It is a tradition that is incarnational and sacramental: seeing in the event of God made flesh in Jesus Christ both affirmation of the world as God's good creation, worthy of our time and effort spent in unlocking its mysteries, and a call for the world to be transformed according to the image of Christ so that justice rolls down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

But, you might ask, what about those who are faculty and students at this Catholic university, but whose way of viewing things is not sacramental, or not incarnational, or perhaps not even theistic? As I said before, one thing we can learn from the history of the Catholic University in Leuven is that the Catholic intellectual tradition is sprawling, messy, contentious, but always exciting. And what this means, in part, is that no one person can answer all the important questions. In this particular case, I cannot presume to answer for my non-Catholic or non-Christian or non-theistic colleagues among the students and faculty here at Loyola the important question of how they find their place and make their contribution to this Catholic university. That answer is part of the on-going conversation that is the flesh and blood of the Catholic intellectual tradition.

But I *do* presume by their presence here as students and teachers that they want to contribute to and benefit from the life of the mind as it has been lived and continues to be lived within the context of the Catholic university. I *do* presume that they find compelling the unity-in-diversity that for this institution is undergirded by the Catholic faith. I *do* presume that the Catholic intellectual tradition is a conversation that they want to be a part of.

The greatest danger we face as a Catholic university is in shrinking back from the messiness and occasional contentiousness of this conversation. Part of Bernard Nachbahr's vision for the international student residence that now bears his name was that it would be a place where students, in their life together, could learn from their differences. This is, I think, a very Catholic vision. We will not fail as a Catholic university if we go down in the next *U.S. News and World Report* listing, or if our Lacrosse team fails to beat Hopkins, or even if our average SAT scores dip. The way we will fail as a Catholic university will be if we as teachers and students settle for polite chit chat rather than real conversation about what that identity means; we will fail if we settle for mere tolerance because we are afraid to speak honestly of our differences; we will fail if we sit in our classes and our meeting with our arms folded and our mouths closed and keep our dissenting thoughts to ourselves. For then the conversation stops, the tradition dies, the search for the truth that unites us in our diversity is abandoned. But if our conversation continues about what

it means to be a Catholic university, and if we participate honestly and in good faith, then we will all of us — Catholic or not, Christian or not, theist or not — learn something more about the truth in its diversity and unity.

And isn't that what the life of the mind at a Catholic university is all about?